

Tanning leather thongs (*rieme*)



The process of tanning *rieme* is a unique and dying art.

By request of many individuals, I have decided to write down this process. I am 75 years old and wish to preserve this knowledge for future use.

I was taught the craft by Oom Carel "Slaai" Fourie of Fouriesburg. He survived the great drought by tanning *rieme*.

This is how you do it:

Take two cow hides and soak them in water for a week.

Take them out of the water after a week.

Spread them, hair-side up, on a grass lawn.

Coat them with a 2.5cm layer of sand.

Wet the sand every morning with a watering-can. (It must not become muddy).

Check after four days to see if the hairs on the hides are coming off.

If not, continue with the process of soaking the sand.

As soon as the hairs start falling out, scrape it off with the edge of a spade.

Spread the hides on the ground.

Cut the leg areas of the hides away from the inside part.

The hides should now be more or less round in shape.

Cut out circular strands of *rieme* by following the outer edge of the hide (± 3 cm wide).

Suspend the *rieme* $\pm 3 - 4$ metres above ground (from a branch or a pole).

Take a tanning stone weighing ± 40 kg. It should have a hollow on one side.

Fasten a piece of wire around the stone, so that a tanning stick can be inserted between the stone and the wire.



Position the stone underneath the *rieme* on a 200litre drum and fasten the *rieme* above the stone.

You need a tanning stick of \pm 3metres long with which the *rieme* can easily be winded.

Wind up the *rieme* by taking hold of the other end of the stick and walking around the tanning stone.

Continue walking in circles until the stone has lifted off the drum and the *rieme* are tightly winded up. It must wind up as high as possible.

Meanwhile, get someone to remove the drum and roll it away. Pull out the tanning stick and move away fast.

The tanning stone will unwind quite fast until it hangs down from the *rieme*.

Insert the tanning stick again and repeat this process continually for 5 – 6 days.

When the *rieme* start drying out, coat them with raw cow fat.

Repeat the cow fat coating as often as needed.

After 4 – 5 days, the *rieme* will start curing. If not, repeat the process.

When the *rieme* are cured and soft, loosen them and cut into strips of 4 metres long by 2,5cm thick. Store it in a dry place. It must be inspected annually and coated with cow fat to retain its suppleness.

The ideal season for tanning *rieme* in the Eastern Free State is September, because of dry and warm weather conditions.

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