

Prairie Cashmere — buffalo fur

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by Diane Grant
Staff Writer

What can you do with a dead buffalo? You can eat its meat. Make leather from its hide. Or spin yarn from its hair and fur. Yes, yarn. Not the \$1.99 a skein stuff you find in the dime store. This yarn costs from \$4.88 to \$13.25 an ounce.

Buffalo fur is the soft, downy winter insulation the animals grow in November and shed in the spring. The fur is warm, elastic, lightweight and dense in concentration. It becomes softer with each washing. And it will not shrink. A full grown male buffalo produces about 2 pounds of the brown-gray fur on his body in the winter. A mature female buffalo may carry from 1 to 1½ pounds.

Who would have thought the rugged buffalo could produce a yarn as soft and warm as cashmere? Charlotte Fischer and Bonnie Sivage. These South Dakota women are marketing the product.

No one was using the fur, explained Fischer. It was part of the animal that was discarded. "The tanner burned it off the hide with harsh chemicals and it was destroyed."

So Fischer and Sivage devised a plan to salvage it.

The women became acquainted in Pierre when Fischer was Public Utilities Commission regulator and Sivage a member of the board of regents. In 1983 Fischer resigned from the commission, sold her house and made plans to attend law school. Meanwhile, she and Sivage attended a women's networking group in Pierre.

"We were tossing around business ideas and somehow came up with the buffalo fur idea," said Fischer. "We wanted to do something around buffalo, to honor it as part of South Dakota's heritage. . . . No one had developed the hair and fur into a refined yarn."

Their enthusiasm increased as the concept took shape. Fischer canceled her plans to attend law school, and she and Sivage put their energy and resources into a new company, Bison Bison, the scientific name for North American buffalo. Now, three years down the road, operations are full speed ahead.

Buffalo hides are purchased from Black Hills Packing Company in Rapid City in February and March (the only time the hides contain the fur.) The number is limited to a maximum of 1,000 hides each year.

"We try to get from 400 to 500, depending on the kill," said Fischer.

The hides are taken to a ranch at Scenic where they are cleaned, combed, fluffed and flat-table sheared. The hair and fur are bagged and sent to one of only two dehairing plants in the United States where they are mechanically separated. Then the two products are baled and shipped to spinning mills' in Vermont and Philadelphia. Here the fur is blended with Tussah silk or Tasmanian wool and the hair is blended with New Zealand carpet wool. Both are spun into yarn.

The entire operation occurs just once a year. Sivage remains in Hayes and manages



Practical, durable clothing and blankets made from buffalo fur are being developed and marketed by South Dakotans Bonnie Sivage, left and Charlotte Fischer. (Denver Post photo by Lyn Alweis)

the company finances while Fischer personally supervises each step of the process.

"Because there's so little product—a maximum of 500 pounds—I keep close watch. I retrieved 80 pounds of buffalo fur in one day from the floor of the carting machine room. . . . It pays in the end."

Bison Bison is primarily a seller of yarn, by

the ounce, to weavers, fiber artists, and knitters who create special artistic pieces. However Sivage and Fischer do market finished items. Peg Ireland and Kay Schwandt of Rapid City are commissioned to knit sweaters, scarves and caps. Alice and Howard Griswold, a Michigan couple in their '70s who are known internationally for their weaving expertise, design and weave afghans and stoles.

The finished items retail from \$150 to \$1,000 a piece. Customers, says Fischer, find the garments "luscious, exquisite and exceptionally well-made. The yarn is so soft no one believes it's buffalo."

Since marketing began from a small booth at the 1984 National High School Rodeo Finals, Bison Bison clientele has steadily increased. Ads in Fiber Arts and Handwoven, two trade magazines, bring in yarn orders. Sivage and Fischer display their products at trade shows around the country. And stores in Dallas, Chicago and Boston sell the hand-crafted items. Thirty-five sweaters, retailing for approximately \$500 to \$600 apiece, were sold in 1985. Bison Bison broke even in 1985. Fischer is optimistic about its future.

"I feel real good about 1986. The concept is going to be around, whether we market it or someone else does it. The possibilities are exciting."

For more information, write to Bison Bison, Inc., Box 121, Hayes, S.D. 57537.



Buffalo yarn in its natural dark brown color is combined with white lambswool and other less costly yarns to create these knitted and woven garments. (Staff photo by Bob Carlson)

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