

ROSS, ELIZABETH

BUCKSKIN VESTS

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In past years when wild deer were plentiful buckskin could be had in considerable quantity and some of the product was sold to traders and to travelers and a large quantity was utilized in the making of moccasins and vests.

Rabbit brains were used in rendering the deer skins soft and pliable and the resulting buckskin was durable and useful for other purposes than those indicated.

The buckskin vests were often decorated with designs which were worked out in colored beads. Not only were such vests warm and comfortable in cold weather, but they imparted a picturesque appearance to those who wore them. The vests were of value, also, for considerable time was required in which to sew on the numerous small beads. Some of those who possessed the well-made and finely decorated vests declined to consider selling them, while those who were willing to sell desired what have been designated as "fancy prices".

The women whose patient fingers had spent many hours in properly placing the vari-colored

beads, felt that the vests were worth more than just a few dollars and in case some of them made vests for others besides those of their own families, they expected larger prices than would have been desired for ordinary home spun vests.

Some of the noted native Cherokee leaders of earlier times owned and wore some highly ornate beaded buckskin vests. In a picture made several years after the close of the Civil War, Captain James Vann, an officer in the Union Indian brigade during most of the period the Civil War, became Assistant Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation and is shown wearing a buckskin vest the front of which was well-covered with ornamental designs. Perhaps the skin from which the buckskin was made for the vest was from a deer slain by the old Indian leader himself.

Another often mentioned Cherokee citizen who possessed and sometimes wore a heavily beaded buckskin vest was Ezekiel Proctor, who is usually referred to as Zeke Proctor, being the same man

who was the central figure in what is often called "the Goingsnake District Court House Battle", a tragic episode of April, 1872.

Proctor was a tall, large and powerful man, in striking contrast to old captain, or "Chief" Vann who was rather small and lame.

Occasionally Zeke Proctor would make a trip to T'hlequah, wearing a broad-brimmed hat, his buckskin vest and carrying a long barreled rifle.

There were other individuals who were to be seen from time to time clad in part in their buckskin vests, but within recent years such vests have seldom been seen. Wild deer are practically extinct now in the Cherokee hills and the few specimens remaining are protected by law and in consequence the buckskin vests are no more.

The backs of the buckskin vests were made of durable cloth and there were pockets in the vests such as may be seen in the usual vest of today.

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It is probable that an occasional buckskin vest, once worn by some inhabitant of the hill country may yet be preserved by relatives.

Note: The Investigator, Miss Ross, gives credit for the information in this manuscript to Ezekiel Harris, a Cherokee citizen, who lived at Tahlequah until his death in the summer of 1937. He was a friend of Mr. S. W. and Miss Elizabeth Ross and told them many interesting incidents about the people of the Tahlequah-Park Hill communities.