

Hidatsa Fire Making from Gilbert L. Wilson's "The Horse and The Dog in Hidatsa Culture" by Gene Hickman

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The informant here is Buffalo-bird-Woman (*Maxidiwiac*), who many of you may be familiar with from another book "Buffalobird Woman's Garden". Dr. Gilbert spent 1-2 months each year from 1908-1918 among the Hidatsa gathering information on their culture for The American Museum of Natural History.

Buffalo-bird-Woman, is a daughter of Small-ankle, an able and progressive leader of the Hidatsa during the time of the tribes' removal to the Fort Berthold Reservation. She was born in 1839. (Reprints in Anthropology, Vol. 10, 1978). Dr. Gilbert first published these narratives in a number of Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History in 1924. Information for this article came from a reprint of Vol. XV., Part II of those papers. This technique may or may not have been used by the mountain men, but it would certainly seem plausible. It should at least lead to some experimentaion with "puff-balls" in fire making.

...The puff ball was used in making a fire with flint and steel. It was a man's part to make the fire. He cut out a thin slice about as big as the two joints of my first three fingers and thick as a piece of blanket cloth. One side he rubbed well with gun powder, wetted. Every man had a flint case and also carried a steel made like a ring from an old file. This steel he used to make fire and for sharpening his knife also. I have often seen my father make fire with flint and steel. To make a fire he held three things in his hand the piece of puff ball, a piece of flint and the steel shaped like a ring. He used a slice of puff ball the size I have described every time he made a fire. He did not carry many of these slices in his fire case. The steel hung down slung by a buckskin thong to his belt. The puff ball in a little bag or case with the flint...

... To make a fire, my father took a little dried grass in his left hand, laid on it the little slab of puff ball with powder side up, and the flint on that held tight by his thumb. The sparks were struck downward on the puff ball slice which caught with a swi-I-I-sh, and he folded the grass over the burning bit of puff and shook it and waved it to right and left as he held it in both hands till the grass caught fire. As I remember, Small-ankle did not strike the spark upon one whole puff ball, but carried in his fire bag a number of these powder prepared bits of puff ball...Sometimes he used very soft rotten wood instead of a puff ball.

...He gathered the puff balls in the fall when they were ripe. I think he usually gathered three, when ripe, that is when the ball had opened. He cut the slices out with a knife. I do not know how many he cut, however, my father cut the slices not I. I do not know how many slices one puff ball made.

...In very old times, the Hidatsa produced fire with a wooden drill... I know from the old stories that the drill was held in the two palms and twirled back and forth. I have heard they used cottonwood for the base and I think the drill must have been of hard wood, but I do no know certainly.