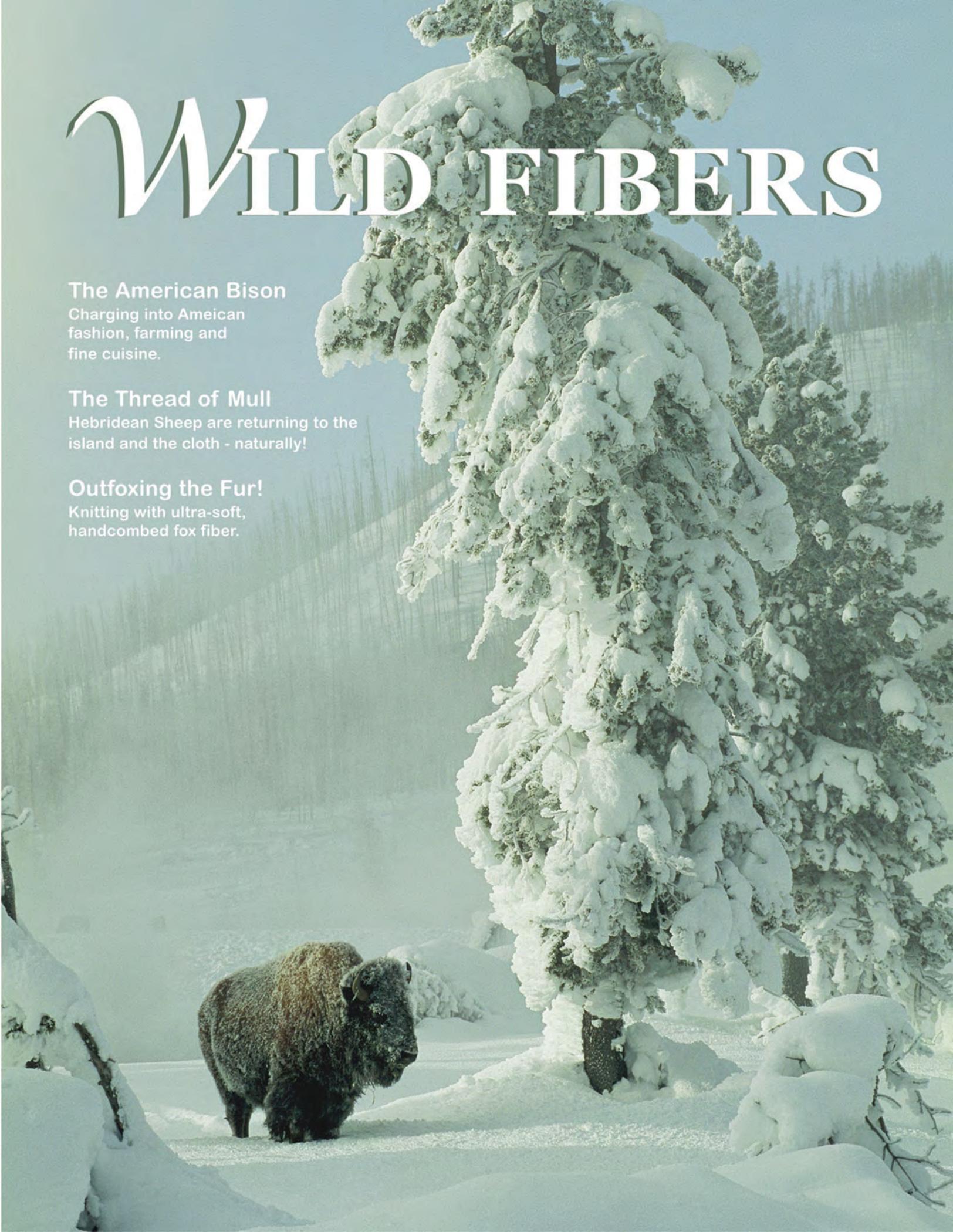


WILD FIBERS

A winter landscape featuring a bison in the foreground, snow-covered evergreen trees, and a misty background.

The American Bison

Charging into American fashion, farming and fine cuisine.

The Thread of Mull

Hebridean Sheep are returning to the island and the cloth - naturally!

Outfoxing the Fur!

Knitting with ultra-soft, handcombed fox fiber.

The first lady of BUFFALO

Near the Arbuckle Mountains of Oklahoma, in a long brown building where men and women once spent the night twirling to the rhythm of country swing, the steady hum of machinery can now be heard grinding gently in the background. Along a far wall, a series of dark blue machines are slowly creating great clouds of buffalo down - the amazingly soft undercoat of the American buffalo (bison to be correct.) In an eight hour shift, with four de-hairing machines running, only a few precious pounds of this soft, spongy fiber will be ready for processing into yarn. Nearly as soft as cashmere, it's hard to believe that this luscious wool was once discarded as waste. That is until a very determined Texan figured out how to apply 20th century technology into processing the wildest icon of the American West.

During the early 1990s, Ruth Huffman was hard at work designing clothes for an elite clientele in Dallas using her lifelong passion in sewing as a way of earning a living. "I've been sewing my entire life" Ruth says. "But I've never used a pattern. I've just always created things in my mind — right down to the last stitch."

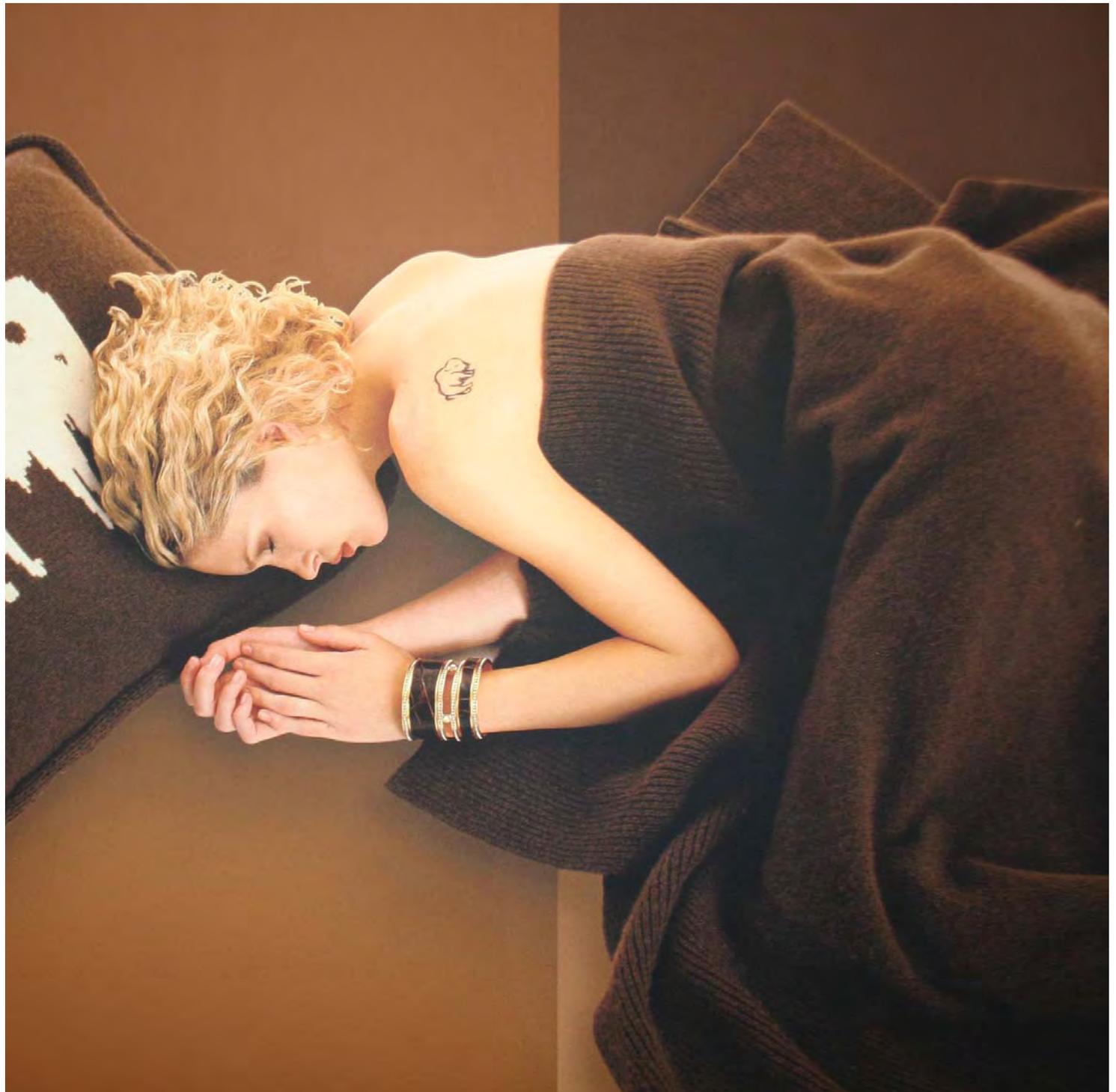
Searching for something different, Ruth purchased a knitting machine, joined a local knitting club and began creating her first line of knitwear. "It was a whole new approach to design, but it really sparked my interest in natural fibers." After several years and some spectacular successes, including a write-up in *Women's Wear Daily* and having two pieces included in the *Survey of Historic Costumes*, (third edition), Ruth stumbled across an article in *National Geographic* about the amazing comeback of the American buffalo. "The buffalo were at the heart of Indian culture and as I read about the various ways it was used by the Indians, I began thinking about the possibilities of its fiber."

Unlike nearly every fiber animal, which can be hand-combed or shorn, most buffalo fiber comes from shearing the hides (Technically I don't think anyone would refer to a buffalo as a fiber animal). There are a few exceptions however of people who hand-gather the clumps of down which have been shed and left hanging on branches or caught in the weeds. But sifting through brush and rooting through the dirt is hardly a practical strategy for launching a commercial enterprise — unless you're into truffles. And so, Ruth's first challenge was locating a substantial supply of fiber to see if it could indeed be processed for the commercial market.

It took months of countless phone calls and perseverance but Ruth eventually learned about a thousand pound "stash" of buffalo hair



Full of determination and vision, Texas designer Ruth Huffman, has created a new chapter in fashion using the ultra-soft fiber from America's wildest icon.





that had been sitting for three years in a barn in Colorado. She bought it all. But now the question became “What next? What do you do with a thousand pounds of dirty, stinky, matted, kinky buffalo fiber?”

Buffalo produce five types of fiber ranging from coarse mane and leg hair that can be several inches in length, down to the soft undercoat which grows predominantly on the front of the torso around the hump. Depending upon the age and sex of the animal, some of the undercoat is as fine as commercial grade cashmere (less than 19 microns) and has magnificent elasticity – an uncommon characteristic in non-sheep breeds.

Given the wide range of fibers, Ruth had to find a way to have the buffalo de-haired (a process that removes the coarser guard fibers.) And after more research and serious fiber sleuthing, she connected with Forte Cashmere in Rhode Island who agreed to “try” and process the buffalo. After all, no one had ever tried mechanically de-hairing buffalo and there was no guarantee that a machine designed for cashmere would be effective on a different fiber.

The end result was about 377 pounds of yarn so soft it’s hard to imagine it could come from something so wild. Ruth was thrilled but she was still a long way away from cloaking the Texas elite in bison beauties. “Every type of natural fiber behaves different-

ly. I spent a lot of time just learning the characteristics of the fiber so I would know the right type of garment to design.”

As Ruth’s company, now officially called American Buffalo Designs was getting on its feet, the cashmere industry in the United States was being crippled by the abundance of cheap labor in China, forcing Forte cashmere to close its US manufacturing facility - including the de-hairing machine. With no other commercial options available, Ruth looked into the possibilities of processing the fiber herself.

“I never intended to become a processor — my first passion has always been about the design” Ruth says. “But after visiting Mini-Mills in Prince Edward Island, I realized the importance of having my own mill. There was a lot of trial and error along the way but I now hold two patents on processing buffalo fiber.”

Raw buffalo can be nasty stuff. These animals are wallowers. They will roll around in the dust creating hard clumps of dirt and matted hair making their skin nearly impenetrable to biting insects. They travel through open prairie and densely thicketed woods, collecting cockleburrs and sandburs along the way in addition to an unavoidable amount of manure that gets trapped in their hair. Mill owners used to processing meticulously groomed sheep fleeces would weep with dismay at the condition of most buffalo hair.

Yet when all is said and done, this fiber which was traditionally used for making saddle pads, rope and teepees



is now being transformed into a growing line of high-end fashion wear. One of Ruth's signature pieces, a full length buffalo coat that combines the elegance of Fifth Avenue style with the ruggedness of the prairie sells for several thousand dollars. She also has several styles of capes and wraps, hats and gloves that are guaranteed to keep

morning commute on the Washington metro, than a pair of buffalo socks is what you need. Considered the most popular item from American Buffalo Designs, these socks are long lasting and "out perform" all the rest. They can be tossed in the washing machine and dryer without shrinking - in fact they just get softer. And they'll

Raw buffalo can be nasty stuff. These animals are wallowers. They will roll around in the dust creating hard clumps of dirt and matted hair making their skin nearly impenetrable to biting insects.

you warm, even if you don't intend to go riding in an open carriage like the high society of yesteryear.

A little more than a year ago, Ruth approached Stetson – the king of the cowboy hat industry – to see if they might be interested in producing a line of buffalo hats. According to Al Louiz, Stetson's Vice President of Operations, Stetson's manufactures hats using fibers from all over the world including wild hare from Argentina, wild rabbit from both Portugal and Australia, lots and lots of domestic beaver, and they even have hats made from cashmere, mink and chinchilla as well. Louiz says, "We were really excited about creating hats out of buffalo. I can't think of a more appropriate showcase for buffalo fiber than in a cowboy hat made by Stetson."

After less than a year on the market, the Stetson buffalo hat, (available in three colors and retails for about \$100) has exceeded expectations. As a result, Ruth's contract with Stetson's has been renewed and over the next few months she will personally deliver a new supply of roving to the plant in Dallas.

But if a buffalo coat isn't in your budget, and you are hesitant about donning a cowboy hat for your

keep your feet as warm as toast - just ask Kevin Costner.

A few years back, Ruth was invited to Deadwood, South Dakota for the opening of "Tatonka - The Story of the Bison" a privately owned tourist attraction owned by Costner. It was there that the "first lady of buffalo" met up with one Hollywood's leading men. According to Ruth, "Kevin has been a huge advocate for the buffalo industry and the animal's heritage. He has several items from my collection and enjoys them all."

Buffalo fiber has wonderful insulating qualities. It does an excellent job at keeping out the cold and keeping in the warm; which is why a buffalo can become virtually buried in a snowstorm; their tiny, dense fibers actually trap in all their body heat leaving nothing to escape and melt the fresh snow. "You can't imagine what a field of snow covered buffaloes looks like. It's just a bunch of big white rocks until they stand up and shake the snow off or the wind comes along and blows it all away."

After Ruth's initial "barn sale" inventory was depleted

Opposite page:
Top: Stetson hat made with buffalo
bottom left: (counter-clockwise) Mill, American Buffalo Designs, Wynnewood, OK.

- Skeins of 100% buffalo
- Washed buffalo fiber going through the de-hairing machine
- Freshly washed buffalo hair on drying racks (close-up)
- Wet buffalo hair on drying racks

Below:
Ruth Huffman modeling her signature buffalo coat with a Stetson buffalo hat



she now gets her fiber exclusively from a slaughterhouse in Colorado. "It's just not possible to shear a buffalo" Ruth says. "Before I came along, the fiber was being burned off the hides before tanning or simply thrown away. It was a complete waste product."

From late winter into early spring, Ruth sends a team of specially trained shearers to harvest the fine down from the hides in Colorado. "The buffalo's winter coat contains all the down. It's important that we get the hides from those animals before spring comes and they shed their undercoat."

Despite Ruth's great talent for design, she has currently limited her product line to just one color - rich chocolate brown. "It's a beautiful color and it goes with everything." Ruth is currently working on the commercial processing for creamy white and black. "The poncho we offer with the white buffalo design, honoring the birth of Miracle and the legend of the White

Buffalo Calf is currently made of cashmere - but that will probably change."

In today's world of textiles, which is heavily dominated by seemingly everything synthetic, it's easy to forget how man survived before polyester. And certainly, without the buffalo ... life on the prairie and beyond would have been that much colder.

The winter skin of the buffalo, known as a buffalo robe, was always dressed by the Indian women. The fur traders never bought untanned robes because the white man couldn't compete with the quality of workmanship from the Indians. Different tribes had different methods of dressing the robes but the Crow Indians were considered the finest of all. They immersed the hides in a mixture of water and ashes for a few days to loosen the hair, and then after pinning the skin taut to the ground, they would thoroughly wash it with handfuls of the brains. The women then thinned

the skin by graining it with a bone, usually made from the shoulder blade of the buffalo. And finally, the skins were smoked to make sure they retained their softness whenever they got wet. Even though Ruth readily admits that processing the fleeces is the costliest and most time consuming part of the process; it does seem easier than the methods that were used more than a hundred years ago.

Traditionally, the fiber industry revolves around natural materials from a renewable resource. In fact, part of the appeal for many is that it is "fiber" and not "fur." Yet in today's culture of no-waste mentality, it would be difficult to justify discarding the hides from the 30,000 buffaloes that are annually slaughtered for their meat. Call it recycling or 20th century innovation, but don't call it anything without first thanking Ruth Huffman — the first lady of buffalo.

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Projects for Alpaca and Llama

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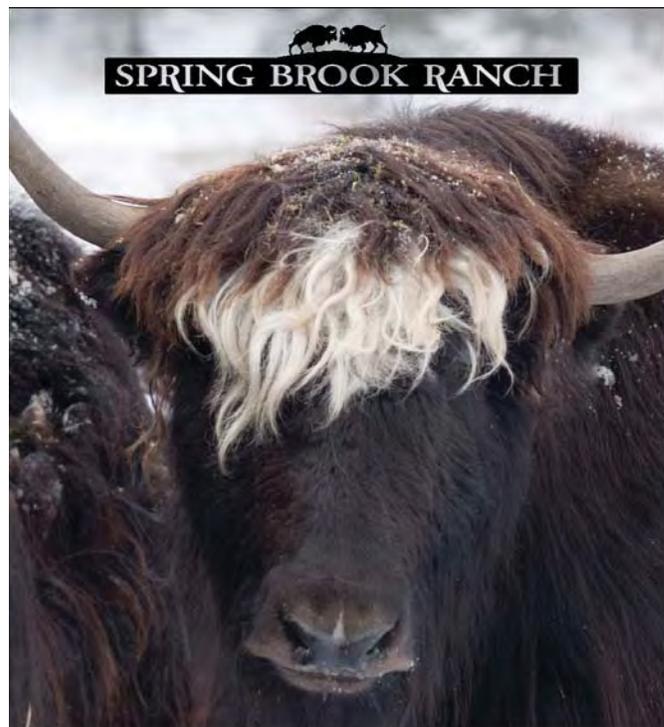
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