

**Some Thoughts on Char**  
**By Gene Hickman & Ron Garritson**  
**From T&LR Spring 2006**

There is a lot of conjecture and controversy over what kind of char was used in the Rocky Mountains from 1800-1840. Most believe that cloth was too valuable and rare to be used as char and that other natural materials would have been used. There is little historic documentation to support either side of the issue. However, most of us seem to use, due to the ease of ignition, some type of cloth char. Here are some of our thoughts and our “test” results on char cloth. We tried to address only those types of material that would have been available or around during our time & place in history. Gene Hickman, Ron Garritson, Larry Renney and Greg Muich were the primary “experimenters” with these chars.

All char/charcoal will absorb moisture from the air and your results will vary depending on how dry you kept it. Your results may also vary depending on a lot of variables including technique. There are many other natural materials that many brothers use, but we limited ourselves to what we have in our part of the rocky mountains. There are lots of possibilities for char or charcoal and we would be interested in hearing about your experiences with them on the AMM members Yahoo discussion group. Our hope is to expand this list with your experiences and experiments.

- **Burlap** - Char will catch a spark and readily ignites with burning glass. Holds a coal well and holds up well. We are not sure about the availability of burlap during our time period. A good char.
- **Charcoal** - old charcoal from a fire pit may often be readily lit with a burning glass, but may be much more difficult with flint & steel. There are a lot of variables here with types of wood, density of the wood or how punky it was, how charred it is, and most importantly how much moisture may have been absorbed by the charcoal. Charcoal lying out in an old fire pit usually absorbs lots of moisture. We'd rate this material from poor to good, depending on circumstances and ignition method.
- **Cotton Rope** - Charred end of rope ignited easily with burning glass although it takes practice to get the spark from flint & steel on the end of the rope and it seems, to us at least, to be a little harder to ignite than hemp rope. Holds a coal long and hot. Cotton rope may not have been very readily available in our time period. Very good char.
- **Cottonwood** - Rotted or punkie wood was charred. Results similar to Yucca and Mullen stem, ignites with flint & steel with some effort. Sparks ignited charred wood when sparks showered into a pile of char. Readily ignites with burning glass and holds a coal well. A poor to excellent char depending on ignition method.
- **Denim** - Char will catch a spark and readily ignites with burning glass. Will not hold a coal as long as Monk's cloth. Depending on thickness of the material Char is somewhat fragile. A fair char.
- **Hemp Rope** - Charred end of rope ignited easily with burning glass although it takes practice to get the spark from flint & steel on to the charred end of the rope.

Practice and technique will solve this. Holds a coal long and hot. Can also make excellent tinder when frayed. Good char excellent tinder.

- **Linen or cotton Cloth** - Char will catch a spark and readily ignites with burning glass. Will not hold a coal as long as Monk's cloth or burlap. Usefulness depends on the thickness & weave of the material, therefore Char can be somewhat fragile and not last long. Some fabric used for char is so thin that a heavy breath will blow it apart and the light material will not hold a coal very long. A fair to poor char.
- **Monk's Cloth** – One of the best chars for lighting with flint & steel or burning glass. Heavy loose weave of this cotton fabric makes it easy to catch a spark (increased surface area) and it holds a coal well and holds up well (heavy thick fibers). All of the fabric tested worked best if it was a heavy coarse weave. The increased surface area made it easier to ignite and the heavier weave or thread made it last longer. Rated as the best of the fabric chars tested so far.
- **Mullen Stem** – Very similar to Yucca stem. Charred stem pieces difficult to light or catch a spark from flint & steel, if you are not holding it with or very close to the flint. Charred stem difficult to hold next to flint for lighting, as they disintegrate easily. Showering sparks into pile of stems difficult as sparks seem to cool too much before contacting stems. Charred mullen very easily lit with burning glass. Charred stems burn very hot and last a long time. Useful for starting a fire with burning glass and for extending a coal when using another source of char lit with flint & steel. Kind of a second stage char. Stems make fair spindles in fire making. The spindles are much more brittle or fragile than other spindles, so it takes practice and a soft touch. Char is poor to excellent depending on ignition method.
- **Other Woods** – We have also picked up old partly rotted wood of unknown species and charred or charcoaled it with varying results. The key seems to be that the punkier or dryer and lighter the old wood is the better charcoal it will make for flint and steel fires.
- **Pillow ticking** - Much like denim above.
- **Sage** – Charred old sage wood was used. We would rate it between cottonwood and yucca. Hard to find really punkie sage though as wood is dense, but lots of fibrous bark. A good char depending on ignition method.
- **Willow** – Rotted punkie wood was charred and found to be much like cottonwood.
- **Yucca Stem** – Very similar to Mullen stem. Charred stem pieces difficult to light or catch a spark from flint & steel, if you are not holding it with or very close to the flint. Charred stem difficult to hold next to flint for lighting, as they disintegrate easily with the pressure. Showering sparks into pile of stems difficult as sparks seem to cool too much before contacting stems. Charred yucca very easily lit with burning glass. Charred stems burn very hot and last a long time. One of the “testers” joked that you could probably hold it under water and it would still burn. Useful for starting a fire with burning glass and for extending a coal when using another source of char lit with flint & steel. Kind of a second stage char. Stems very good spindles in fire making, but not as strong as other woods. Spindles being somewhat fragile, although sturdier than mullen, care must be

used in using them. First choice for char ignited with a burning glass. However, Char is poor to excellent depending on ignition method. Rated as the best of the “wood” chars tested so far.