

MAKING FIRE WITH FLINT AND STEEL

by Ron "Sign Talker" Garritson

The art of making fire has been with us a very long time. It has been our companion and friend, but it also has the potential to turn on us and become a most dangerous enemy if we let it get out of our control as we all know.

One of the most common means of making fire since long before the fur trade and on into the today's world of buckskinning is with flint and steel. The four items one needs to make fire with flint and steel are, of course a piece of sharp flint, a high carbon steel striker, char and tinder.

Besides flint, there are other types of rocks/minerals one can use such as pyrite, chert, agate, etc., I use one of these when I don't have a nice chard of English flint.

The steel striker can be obtained from any trader or blacksmith attending any one of the many rendezvous' across the country or at trading posts like Fort Union or Bent's Fort as well as through any of the many reputable buckskinning suppliers. Char you have to make yourself. Some of the best char is made from loose knit 100% cotton material such as Monk's Cloth, and flannel, as well as punky (not crumbly) cottonwood. To make char you need a small tin can with a tight fitting lid. Punch a small hole in the lid, make sure the tin interior is clean and loosely fill with your choice of char material. Your char pieces should be cut in about 2 inch squares. Replace the lid and be sure it has a fairly tight fit. Place it on the fire and let it cook until the smoky gases cease to exit the tin via the small hole. Remove from the fire and set aside until the tin is cool to the touch. If you open the tin too soon, the contents will ignite and be rendered useless. Your char should be nice and black but still intact.

Tinder can be gathered from a number of sources in nature. Dry cheat grass, cattail down, inner bark of dead cottonwood (the papery stuff), tow and ready to use old discarded small bird nests (not eagle or magpie).

Now this is the way I have come to making fire with flint and steel after many years of experimenting with various techniques and methods and this way beyond a doubt has proven to be the fastest and easiest way for me.

Make your self a nice little bird nest of the tinder, the coarser material on the outside and the finer softer material on the inside. Set aside until needed.

Now it's time to make a spark. Too often I have seen folks put their char in the tinder nest and hold the striker over the char and strike the steel with the flint.

The results can be bloody knuckles, wet knees and tinder and wasted time.

This does work, but there is an easier and faster way to land a spark on your

char. Wrap the char around the sharp edge of your flint, hold it in your left hand, or right if you are a lefty, and strike the flint through the char with the steel and your chances of catching a spark on the char the first time are mighty good. You will also want to hold the tinder nest in your left hand under the flint so that the transfer of the char to the nest will be quick. This method is also quite handy if you are in wet conditions and you don't want to get your tinder wet nor be on your knees on the cold wet ground. As soon as the char has caught a spark, transfer the char to the tinder nest and hold the nest cupped above you facing down wind and blow into the nest, each time with gentle increasing force until the nest bursts into flames. You then transfer the flaming nest into your little tipi of dry twigs and sticks that you have pre-prepared, to which you add more kindling until you have obtained the campfire of your desires. Like I said, this works for me. Feel free to experiment on your own to find out what works best for you. I hope this information may be helpful. Take care, keep your powder dry and see you on the trail.

Respectfully,
YMHOS

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Char

- 1 Burlap -
- 2 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.
- 3 Monk's Cloth – One of the best chars for lighting with flint & steel or burning glass. Heavy loose weave of the cotton makes it easy to catch a spark and holds a coal well. An excellent char.
- 4 Yucca Stem – Very similar to Mullen stem. Charred stem pieces difficult to light or catch a spark from flint & steel. 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 yucca very easily lit with burning glass. Charred stems burn hot and long. Useful for starting a fire with burning glass and for extending a coal when lit with flint & steel using another source of char. Stems very good spindles in fire making, but not as strong as other woods.
- 5 Mullen Stem – Very similar to Yucca stem. Charred stem pieces difficult to light or catch a spark from flint & steel. 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 hot and long. Useful for starting a fire with burning glass and for extending a coal when lit with flint & steel using another source of char. Stems make fair spindles in fire making, much more brittle than other spindles.
- 6 "Punkie" Cottonwood – Similar to Yucca and Mullen stem but will light 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.

TINDER

1. Inner fibers of cottonwood bark. This is the papery stuff found on the underside of dead bark. Works better as the outer layer of tinder nest with finer materials lined inside.
2. Dry cheat grass. Ignites quickly. The stuff prairie fires are made of.
3. Dry cattail cobs. the down from the cobs ignite quite well. I use this to line the inside of the tinder nest.
4. Old abandoned bird nests. Ready made tinder nest, just add smoldering char.
5. Tow. Ignites well, but better as the middle layer of the tinder nest.
6. Cottonwood down. Similar to that of the Cattail down.

I use a combination of all of the above in my pre-prepared tinder nests in the following order.

If I find an old bird's nest, the tinder nest is already made.

Cattail and or cottonwood down for the inner layer, the next layer is the dry cheat grass, then the tow, then an outer layer of the inner fibers of the Cottonwood bark (the papery stuff).