

# THE PORCUPINE ROACH

By Paul Sheppard  
Chief, 1977-78



**F**or the past half century the porcupine hair roach has been the “universal” dance headdress of the male North American Indian who dances at powwows held throughout the land.

Present day differences in roach styles occur between those made on the Northern Plains compared to those manufactured on the Southern Plains. Those from the south stand more erect in front while those from the north tend to lie more flat. The length of the headdress also varies along the same lines. The dancers in the south will have shorter roaches than dancers in the north. The abundance of materials available on the Northern Plains and not in the south may account for this variance in length. Also, northern dancers tend to wear the headdress farther back on the head.

**CONSTRUCTION** – The proper materials must first be obtained in order to make a quality roach. They include: porcupine guard hair, between three to six deer tails, Nymo thread size D, bees-wax and a small skein of 3-ply rug yarn in a standard color (red, black, blue, etc.).

**THE BASE** – The yarn base should be made first because it's size is significant to how much hair will be tied. Braid the yarn using a 3-piece braid, with each piece having two strands of yarn for proper thickness (see Fig. 1). It is important that the braid be flat, not rounded or spiraled. Sew the completed braided strip flat-wise to itself by starting with a circle at least two times around, to then form the completed pattern in Fig 2. The first length should really be about ½” shorter than the desired overall length. As the braided strips are sewn around into place, the base will expand to the right size. When sewing, do two stitches along the edges, not just one stitch down the center of the width (see Fig. 3). It will take five or more braided strips to finish the base. If one strip runs out, simply start a new one at the same place. As the base becomes wider, DO NOT sew all the way through it, just sew the last row to the one row immediately to the inside (Fig. 4).

**TYING THE HAIR** – The distance around the outside edge of the base will be the length of the first row of hair. Make a loom by simply putting two nails as uprights on the ends of a long piece of wood that is at least 10” inches longer than the first row (Fig. 5). The string across the two nails can either be imitation sinew, or Nymo thread size D that has been waxed and then tripled for extra strength. Mark a line at the middle point and the two end points on the loom with a pencil.

Before any guard hair is tied to the loom, it must be separated into bunches according to length. Setting the hair into a drinking glass, tapping it so that the bottoms come even, and then pulling out the longest is the best way to do this. If the hairs are dirty and sticky, they can be cleaned safely with dish soap and water. When done correctly, the separating process will take a lot of time and yield from 10 to 20 piles of different lengths. Place the piles in order from shortest to longest, and then separate EACH pile into two piles of equal amount. Most roaches have two rows of guard hair & a partial row or at least one row & a partial row. To provide for these, halve again only the longer piles and, if a full second row is desired, halve again all of the piles (see Fig.6). This will make the roach appear thicker.

If the base of the hair is dry causing it to split or crack when bent, then it will have to be softened before tying. DO NOT USE WATER. An emollient softener called glycerin, which can be purchased at any drug store, can be used. The actual tying process uses only 6 to 10 individual hairs at a time. Whatever count you use, use it consistently.

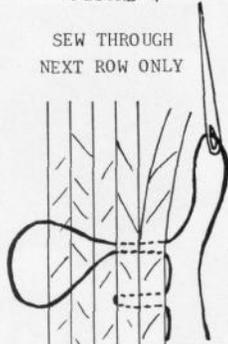
FIGURE 1  
3 PIECE  
FLAT BRAID



FIGURE 3  
BRAIDED  
ROACH BASE



FIGURE 4  
SEW THROUGH  
NEXT ROW ONLY



BRAIDED BASE OF ROACH

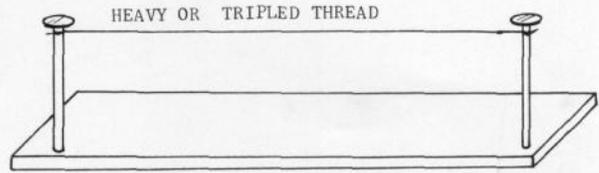
FIGURE 2

spreader ties or scalp lock pass through center hole



Roach ties, 5 1/2" from center hole

FIGURE 5

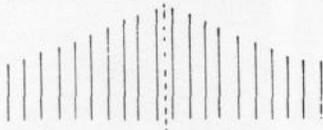


LENGTH NOT TO SCALE

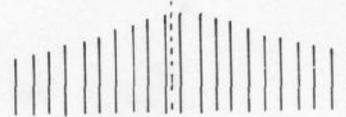
OUNCES OF PORKY HAIR	LENGTH OF FINISHED ROACH
3/4 - 1	10 - 12"
1 - 1 1/4	14 - 16"
1 1/2	18 - 20"



STEP ONE



STEP TWO  
ORIGINAL TEN BUNCHES HALVED



STEP THREE

CENTER TEN BUNCHES  
DIVIDED IN THIRDS

OUTSIDE TEN BUNCHES  
HALVED

FIGURE 6

FOR TWO ROWS AND ONE PARTIAL ROW OF PORKY HAIR

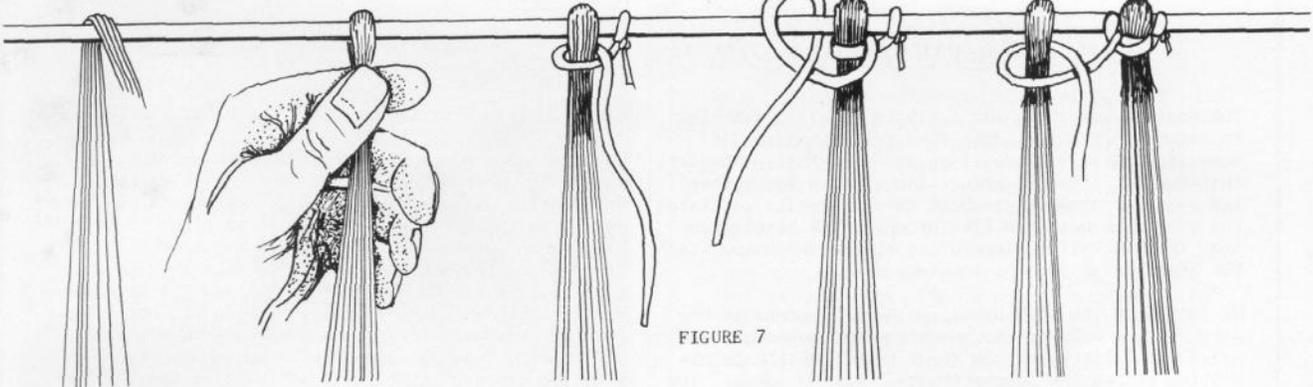


FIGURE 7

SMALL DOWEL GLUED INTO LARGER DOWEL ROACH STICK

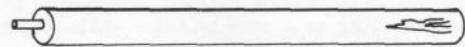


FIGURE 10

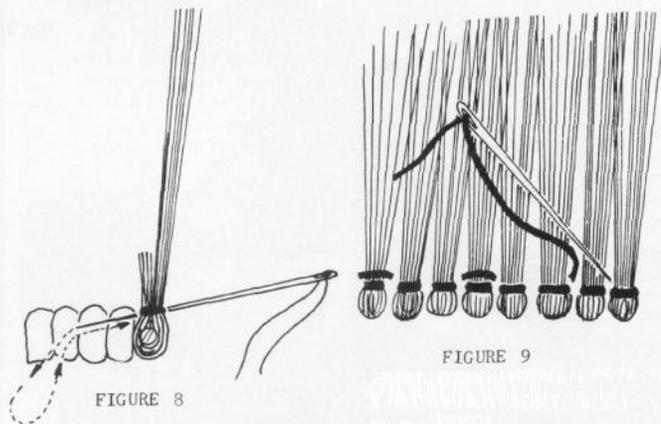


FIGURE 9

FIGURE 8

The headgear is apparently called 'roach' in English because of its resemblance to the roaching or clipping of a horse's mane which was considered stylish in the nineteenth century. The roach headdress of animal hair almost certainly originated in the custom, formerly observed by some Indian men, of cutting all of the hair from the head except for a narrow strip running from the crown to the base of the neck.

Some craftsman use more than twice this amount (12 to 18 hairs) in each bunch, and tie only a single row. It is easiest to start with the longest hairs in the middle and tie outward using shorter and shorter hairs until the end point is reached. Using the Nymo thread size D, tie the first knot at the center of the loom line. Use a small hand shuttle, found at yardage shops, which can hold all of the thread needed to tie from the middle to the end point conveniently in the hand. This shuttle makes the tying process easier, and also makes it necessary to have only two knots, at the center and the end, instead of several knots throughout. The tying process has two steps: wrap around the hair beneath the loom line, and finish it off with a simple half-hitch (see Fig.7). Notice the hair will be bent over the loom line, and held in place with the thumb and forefinger while tying. The bent over short end should be consistently no more than ¼" long.

**ROWS OF DEER TAIL HAIR** – A row of white or dyed deer tail hair from a White Tail Deer is always tied on a string and sewn to the outside base of the headdress. Many roaches have an inner row of deer hair also. The inner row hair color need not match the outer. If hair color other than white is desired, pre-dyed tails can be purchased or they can be dyed with a good commercial dye. On occasion, outer rows of deer hair are tied in two or more colors. For example white deer hair with a ½" red section every two inches.

Tie the deer hair on the same loom. The length of the tied outer row of deer hair needs to be longer (1/2") than the row of poriky hair because the base diameter increases as the rows of hair are sewn on.

The hair must be cut off the tail in small, uniform-

sized bunches one bunch at a time. The length of the deer hair is also a factor. Use the longer hair on the end tail, on the front of the roach. Use the same tying method as with the poriky hair. Also, the white deer hair could be dyed after tying.

**SEWING THE ROWS TO THE BASE** – With all of the hair tied, the rows may now be sewn onto the base. This is done one row at a time, starting with the inner deer hair. This first row must be sewn with the short ends of the hair facing out. While the other rows have the short ends facing in. Again it is easiest to start by sewing the middle of the row to the very front of the base, and then work outward. If the deer hair rows have been dyed a certain color, it would be best to sew them to the base using thread of the same color, but use strong thread and wax it before sewing. Use the stitch shown in Fig. 7 & 8. The outside row of deer hair does not need to be sewn back to the base. It can be sewn to the other rows of hair.

**WRAP IT WITH CARE** – With all of the rows sewn to the base, the roach probably looks like a mess of hair going in all directions. Wetting it with water, placing it on a "roach stick" and wrapping it up with an elastic bandage or cloth strip can easily shape it. A baseball bat (handle end) or 1 ½" diameter dowel stick with a nail hammered on one end makes a good roach stick (Fig. 10). After a day or two of being wrapped up the roach should begin to take shape. Re-wet and wrap again if you are not satisfied with the shape. Be sure to keep the roach WRAPPED UP WHEN NOT IN USE and it will always look good.

