

DENVER AND THE WEST

Locals get creative with buffalo hide business

By Nancy Lofholm

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Cigdem Aritan creates buffalo appliques in the workshop of the Buffalo Collection in Hotchkiss. The owner of the store, Julie Littlefield, is dedicated to making the most of buffalo hides, which often end up in landfills. At top are examples of more buffalo-hide artistry in the shop. (Photos by William Woody, Special to The Denver Post)

HOTCHKISS — The stuffed buffalo above the entrance to the Buffalo Collection store casts a wary-looking glass eye over the posh incarnations of some of his fellow bison down below.

There are buffalo-leather couches, chairs and headboards. Buffalo rugs, bedspreads and pillows. Buffalo place mats, coasters and even a buffalo checkerboard. And let's not overlook store owner Julie Littlefield in her buffalo moccasins, buffalo purse and silver buffalo-shaped brooch pinned to a buffalo vest.

Littlefield's enterprise is an attempt to make the most of the iconic buffalo, whose meat is now de rigueur on menus but whose hides are so difficult to handle, they often end up in landfills.

About half the hides of the 150,000 bison killed in this country every year go to dumps. Buffalo hide, with thick mats of hair more than three times as dense as cows', is tough to tan.

It is so pliable, sewing it can be like stitching putty. And tanneries capable of processing buffalo hides have moved overseas or across the Mexican border.

That's why Littlefield is the only commercial manufacturer of upholstered buffalo furniture in the country.



A Checkers game board hand made with buffalo hide sits on display at the Buffalo Collection store in downtown Hotchkiss Colorado. (Special to the Post | William Woody)

This whole bison business began in 1994 when Littlefield, a retired Chicago botanist and businesswoman, saw her first buffalo during a trip to Steamboat Springs.

"It was love at first sight. It's the quintessential American animal. It's the survivor. It's a noble beast," Littlefield said.

She bought a ranch that sprawls over 8,200 rugged acres southwest of Hotchkiss and put a herd of buffalo on it. For a time, she had a business running buffalo and bird hunts on her land and selling buffalo meat. But the waste bothered her.

"I had a stack of hides on the ranch, and I needed to do something with them," Littlefield explained.

The durability of buffalo hide first attracted Littlefield. She used the hides to upholster furniture for guest cabins where visiting hunters were rough on couches and ottomans.

Soon those hunters were asking where they could buy a buffalo couch.

The rest of the story is a stampede of ideas. A small community with a big pool of talent pitched in to make the most of the buffalo.

The Kendall family, which includes three generations of expert braiders and bead workers, makes trim.

"I can do about 6 inches in an hour," said Amber Kendall, 25, pointing to the braided trim on an armchair and helping to explain why price tags on some buffalo pieces are upward of \$9,000.

Another good reason is Jim Wagner, a famous folk painter who divides his time between Hotchkiss and Taos, N.M. Wagner hand-paints wallet-sized buffalo on chamois-colored buffalo chairs.

Cigdem Aritan, an artist-turned-buffalo-seamstress, moved to Hotchkiss from Philadelphia to sew applique vines, leaves and flowers on chair backs. She does boot stitch patterns on others.



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Some of her work is featured on Victorian antiques now elegantly covered in bison.

Donna Doye, the designer of much of the buffalo collection, dreams up everything from the appliqued buffalo headboard to the braid-edged checkerboard.

The actual construction of the furniture is outsourced to the small Blue Ridge Mountain mill town of Hickory, N.C., where craftspeople at Hancock & Moore assemble it by hand. The \$500 pillows, the throws that still dangle buffalo tails, the rugs stitched together through 1,200 hand-punched holes and the purses and other small items are assembled in Hotchkiss.

More buffalo wares are planned. Littlefield and her band of craftspeople are experimenting with buffalo-leather floor tiles and buffalo stair runners. Littlefield is talking with Harley- Davidson about buffalo-leather motorcycle accoutrements. And she is working with a weaver who hopes to teach American Indian women to weave buffalo hair.

The no-waste attitude toward buffalo has expanded Littlefield's vision of sustainability. She has moved into a small solar-powered cabin built of local rock and beetle-killed pine and built three similar cabins she plans to use as models for the types of cozy, efficient homes she believes are perfect for retirees .

And even though Littlefield just turned over title to most of her ranch to her daughter and son-in-law, who will run Herefords rather than buffalo, she has a steady supply of hides from California and Nebraska. She also hopes to get some from Castle Creek, where Jason Stephens, owner of Endless Frontier Ranch and Mile High Bison, purchased much of her herd.

Stephens has the same idea that no part of the buffalo should be wasted. He sells buffalo-hide throws. He also sells skulls and supplies local craftspeople with buffalo bone to make beads.

"It's amazing to see something creative come out of these animals that roam the ranch," Stephens said. "I think she is fast-forwarding and putting a valuable tool to use.

"She's a buffalo pioneer."

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A painted buffalo is seen on a chair made of entirely buffalo hide at the Buffalo Collection store in downtown Hotchkiss Colorado. (Special to the Post | William Woody)