

SHAUNA WHITE BEAR CRAFTS MONTANA-MADE MOCCASINS



“At a young age I enjoyed making dream catchers with my mother,” she relates. “I’ve always been really crafty but it was hard to focus on one thing.”

When she went to work at Carter’s, White Bear was intoxicated by the smell of leather and drawn to the behind-the-scenes craftwork.

“I enjoyed seeing my co-workers repair shoes, bring boots back to life, and make leather goods,” she says. “I had a boyfriend who wanted hunting moccasins to bow hunt, so I gave it a go. Love motivated me—and a beautiful bison hide, that grainy texture is breathtaking.”

Bison hide is not stretched during tanning so the grain is preserved, leaving it five times stronger than cow hide. White Bear will occasionally use deer or elk hide for her moccasins but usually reserves those hides for fringe.

A pair of tipi earrings made by fellow Native artisan Quill Bill dangle from her ears as she stitches a pair of Chukka moccasins, one of the six styles she offers. She deftly glides a proprietary sliding knot that finishes the pair.

Other moccasins feature riveted eyelets for lacing. “I love riveting and adding accents with ribbon or brass,” she says, looking up from her task.

THE WHITE BEAR LEGACY

A timid child, White Bear says she had a hard time pronouncing her ‘Rs,’ which made answering questions about her last name and tribal affiliation particularly distressing. “I first experienced anxiety during school-attendance check. Since my last name begins with a W, I was always last and the teacher would ask; ‘Is that Native? Which tribe?’ You don’t want to be center of attention, you want to blend in. It took a while to appreciate my heritage.”

White Bear first explored her roots at 13, when she and her mother visited her grandmother, a math teacher at the Indian school at Fort Berthold in North Dakota. “When I was 21, I went to the family pow wow; it was an incredible, overwhelming experience. I hadn’t seen my dad for years, but you have aunts, uncles and cousins, and I have a half-brother.”

When the area’s oil boom brought increased crime, she was reticent to return. Now 37, White Bear has never been back, though she has stayed in contact with her father.

Pulling out a family tree, White Bear muses about her lineage. “My auntie says one thing

A pressure gauge hangs above the corner where Shauna White Bear operates her solo enterprise, White Bear Moccasins, in the back of Carter’s Boots & Repair in downtown Bozeman.

“The guys will move it up when I’m cursing and fired up over the moccasins,” she explains.

It’s hard to imagine this soft-spoken young woman losing her cool, but White Bear is passionate about her craft.

“I use a small awl to punch holes, not a hole punch, which is challenging. I’ve had to build up my hand strength,” she explains. Hand stitching, one of her trademarks, also requires manual strength.

“In the beginning I used wax thread, but it will start to fray because Montana is so dry, so I’ve sourced a different thread,” she explains.

Admittedly a lost soul in 2016, White Bear pulled the threads of her life together by starting a creative venture. A registered member of the Arikara nation from North Dakota, she grew up an “urban native” in Washington state.



and my father another... there are names like Black Calf Woman and Strikes Enemy on my grandfather’s side, but there is a French or Scottish woman named Emma Dickens who goes back four generations.”

Relatives from Texas and California have found her; a few have even reached out wanting moccasins. She says she is always eager to learn more about her family.

“Any other White Bears are related to me,” she says and notes one particular person of interest in her family tree, Marley White Bear, an ancestor with lighter skin who may have been adopted.

White Bear says she is deeply grateful to store owner Jeff Carter for taking her in and “letting me flourish.” She adopted a full-time business model in 2018 and now works a full eight-hour day, returning around 8 p.m. to work until at least midnight.

“When I’m in the zone I’ll have music blaring and this whole place is covered (with materials).” A magnificent fox pelt lies on the adjoining table, a gift from a co-worker. She’s considering its use: perhaps to line and cuff a pair of winter moccasins.

“The cool thing about working here is I have access to all this,” she says, picking up a ring of sole samples.

As she uses the heel of a crepe sole to remove dried glue from the Chukkas she’s been crafting, a piece of leather flips up and hits her in the nose

“These are going to the B. Yellowtail Collective,” she says, unfazed by the errant leather.

Started by Bethany Yellowtail of the Cheyenne and Crow tribes in Montana, the B. Yellowtail Collective is an artisan guild based in Los Angeles that promotes indigenous artists.

Touching her heart, White Bear says: “There are 574 federally recognized tribes in the U.S., so we need to realize we’re not all the same. I want my moccasins to be for people from all walks of life. Customizing lets people put their own flair on it, but if someone wanted Crow beadwork that’s not really Crow, I won’t do that; it’s not respectful.”

White Bear recalls a recent encounter: “A pretty white girl with braids came in saying she wanted to be grounded with the earth; she asked what real Natives do for their soles... excuse me, but her wording was wrong. I’m not usually sensitive about that, but people need to understand we’re not mascots; we’re not costumes. Dang that John Wayne with all his movies! People romanticize what a native person is.”

HERITAGE LEATHER

Shauna White Bear hopes her dedication and commitment inspire younger generations.

“Your mind and hands should be used, not wasted,” she advises. “Life is hard, but we are in full control of how to live it.”

White Bear intends to broaden her shoe-making ability and design new styles with the best quality materials. “People tell me ‘I’m spending good money so I expect them to last forever.’ But you can’t just wear leather and not take care of it. You have to condition your moccasins—even the stitching. It’s just like what happens to our skin. Take care of it: The leather will outlive you.” ★



These Gray Trade Cloth Chukka Moccasins are available online at byellowtail.com.

Custom and pre-made moccasins are available at Whitebearmoccasins.com

—CYNTHIA LOGAN

