

# Porcupine Headdress of the Plains Indian



Abe Conklin, Osage-Ponca, wearing turkey beard roach made by Dennis Hawkins.

by Vern Beilman

No headgear, with the exception of the Sioux war bonnet, so personifies the North American Indian as does the hair roach. Historically, its distribution and use covered virtually all tribes of the Plains, Plateau and Eastern Woodland cultural areas. Watercolors by Bodmer and Catlin in the 1830's reflect the use of the roach at that early date, and contemporary use of the hair roach may be seen in the costumes of the grass dance, straight dance, Oklahoma fancy dance and old time.

It is the intention of this article to describe as thoroughly as possible the construction of the roach for the serious student of Indian material culture. Raw materials used and described conform as closely as possible to those actually used by the Indians. I have substituted certain materials (e.g., carpet thread in lieu of sinew, etc.) where it seemed more practical to do so.

Following are the materials that must be secured in order to complete the construction of the hair roach:

1. Tying board
2. One spool of Coats and Clarks Button and Carpet Thread. Obtain in the same color that the deer hair is dyed
3. Package wrapping cord - approximately 1/16 in. dia.
4. Aluminum tumbler - for joggling porcupine hair
5. Two deer tail for non-hair base or five deer tail for a hair base

6. Porcupine hair - from the Western Yellow Hair Porcupine - order a quantity sufficient to tie 2-1/2 rows, in graduated lengths
7. One cake beeswax
8. One small bottle of pure glycerin - for dipping the bottoms of the porcupine hair
9. Rit or some other commercial dye for the deer hair.

Start your project by first ordering the porcupine and deer hair. When ordering porcupine hair, the main consideration should not necessarily be length (although you must obtain graduated lengths from 4 in. to 7-1/2 - 8 in.), but the uniformity of color. The deer hair ordered should be from the White Tail Deer only. If you acquire porcupine hides the best method I have found to remove the hair from the hide is to soak it for approximately 24 hours. It is best to remove all the quills after removing the hair for your quill projects, or you will have to repeat the soaking process. It will take approximately two to three hides to yield enough hair for a roach.

After getting your order for the hair and/or hides on the way, start constructing the "tie board". Any scrap lumber may be used, although 1 in. clear pine would be preferable. Consult Fig. 1 for construction details.

The deer tails should (continued on next page 4)

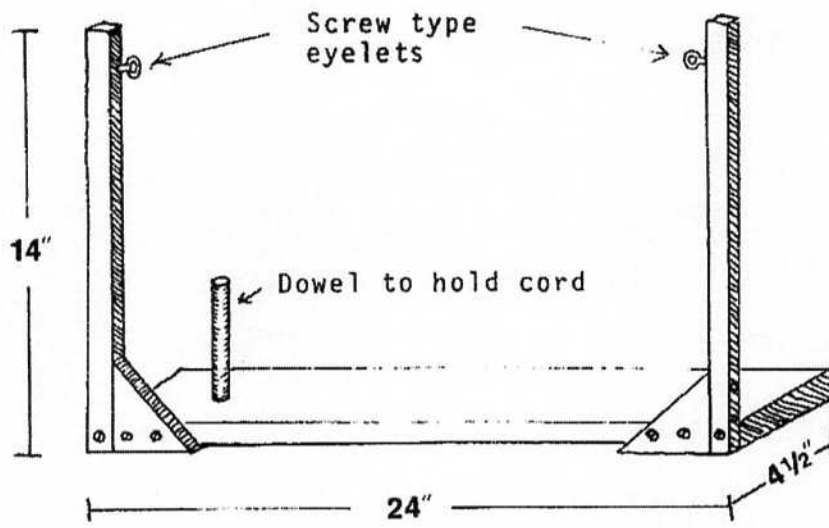


Fig. 1.

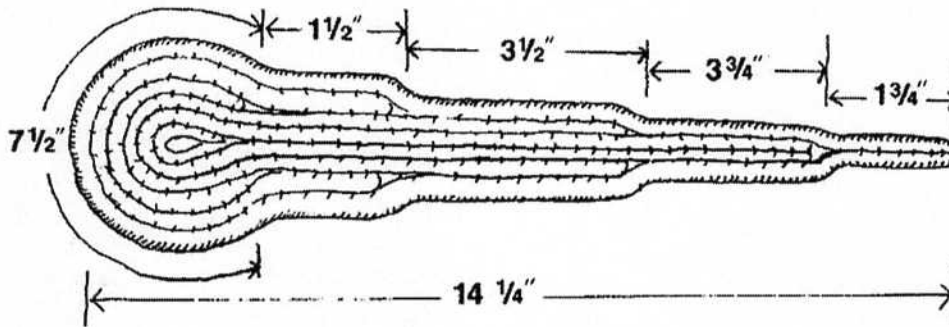


Fig. 2. This figure illustrates construction build-up of a rope type base. Use same principle on hair base.

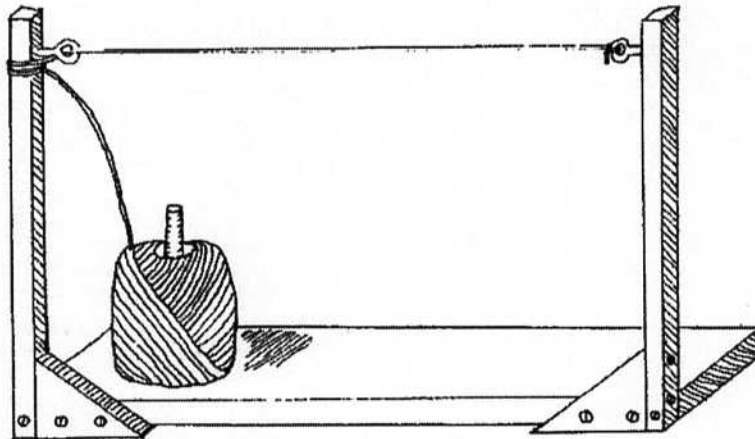


Fig. 3. Wrapping cord (1/16 in. dia.) mounted on tying board — keep well waxed.

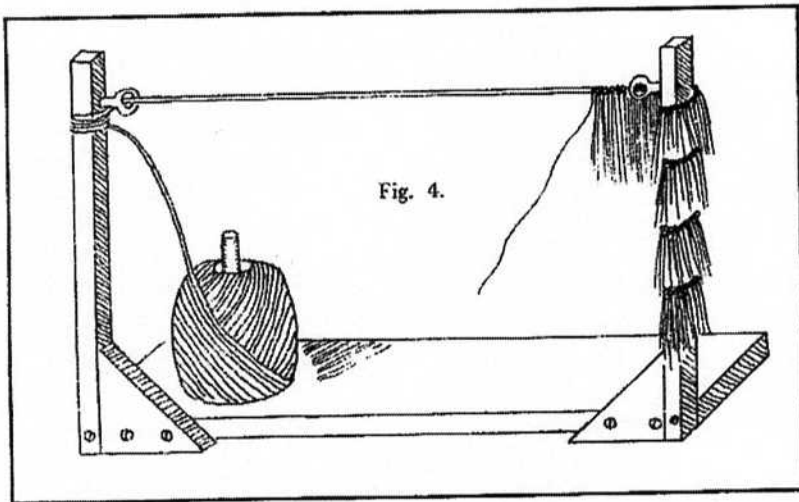


Fig. 4.

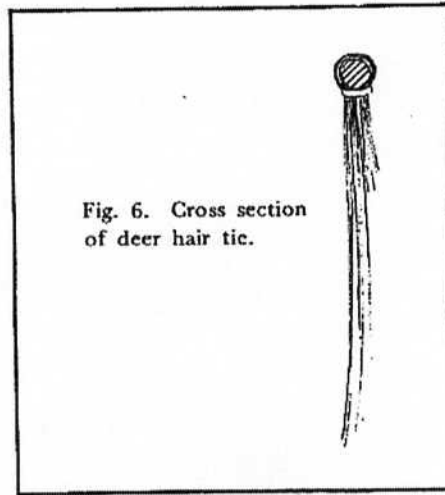


Fig. 6. Cross section of deer hair tie.

(continued from page 2) be dyed as follows: Make sure that the hair is clean. This can be accomplished by soaking the tails in a solution of mild soap and lukewarm water. After it has soaked for about fifteen minutes, rinse thoroughly and allow to dry. All tails that will be used in tying the fringe should be dyed at the same time as it is difficult to match colors if done at different times. Use a good commercial dye following the directions on the package. After the tails have been soaked a sufficient time rinse in cool water, spread the tails on a newspaper and allow to dry. Note: Do not cut the deer hair from its base prior to dyeing.

The outline and dimensions of the roach base should be as described in Fig. 2 whether it is made of hair, clothesline rope or woven. The width of a fringe of deer hair will depend on the diameter of the wrapping cord, but will be approximately 1/8 in. to 3/16 in. In order to create the base described you will have to tie

approximately 18 feet of deer hair for a hair base. If clothesline rope is used nine feet will be required.

If you do decide to go for a hair base you should use the shorter and the darker deer hair as this hair will not be used on the inner or outer fringes of the roach. When the deer tail is dyed, the brown and tan hair in the middle of the tail will yield a darker hue than the outer fringes of hair on the tail that had been white. Use the same method of tying your hair base fringes as used on the finished fringes, with the exception that an equal amount of hair will be looped over the wrapping cord on both sides (since this hair will all be cut down to 3/8 in. anyway).

String the tying board with wrapping cord, putting the cord through the eyelet on the left and running it to the right eyelet. Knot the cord on the right eyelet. Wrap the cord around the left vertical board several times

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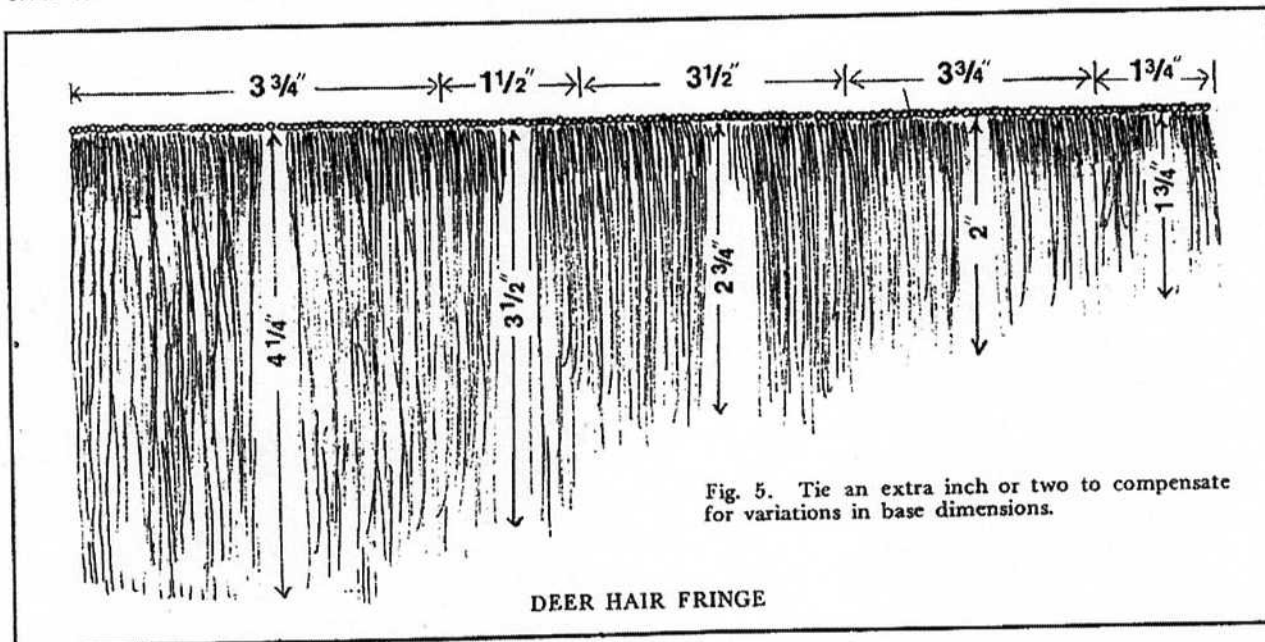


Fig. 5. Tie an extra inch or two to compensate for variations in base dimensions.

DEER HAIR FRINGE

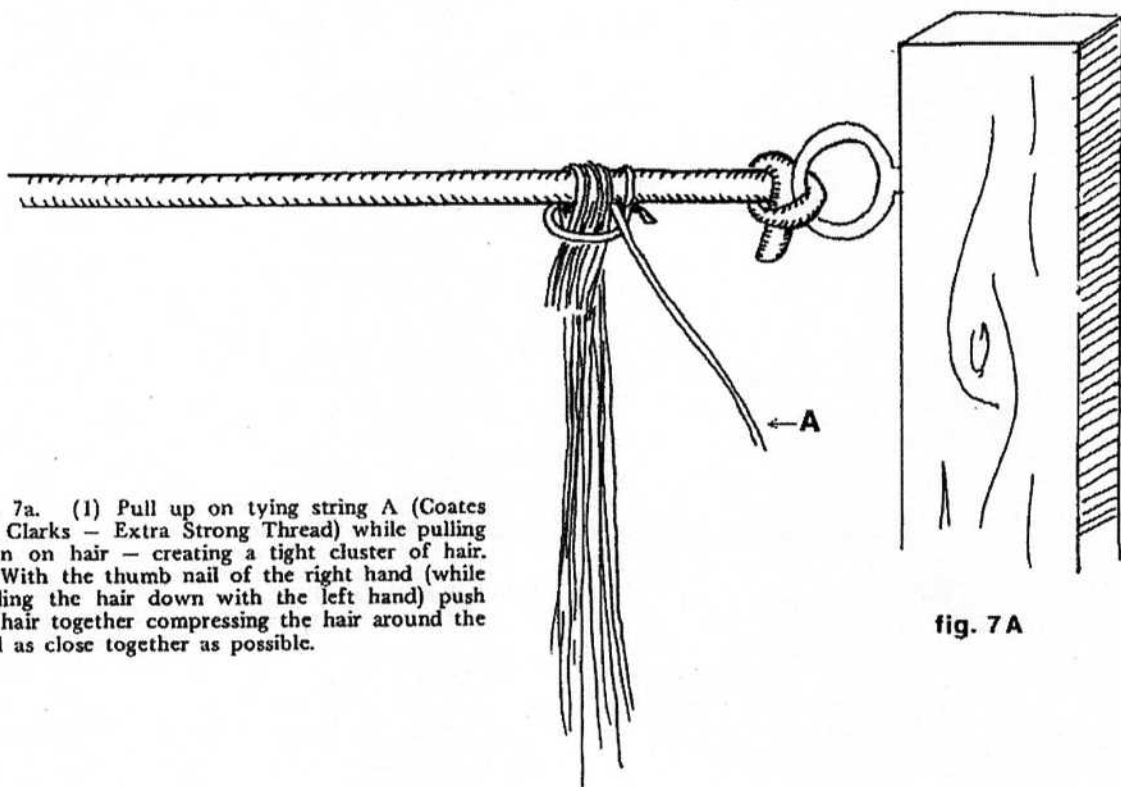


Fig. 7a. (1) Pull up on tying string A (Coates and Clarks - Extra Strong Thread) while pulling down on hair - creating a tight cluster of hair. (2) With the thumb nail of the right hand (while holding the hair down with the left hand) push the hair together compressing the hair around the cord as close together as possible.

fig. 7A

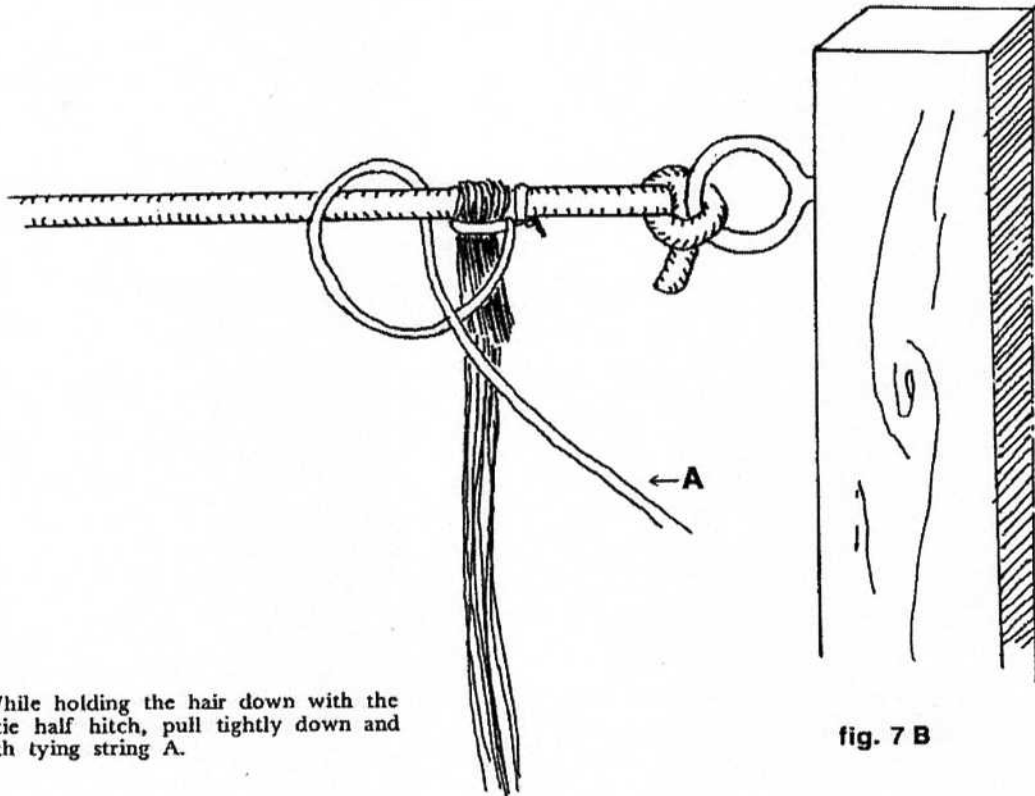


Fig. 7b. While holding the hair down with the left hand, tie half hitch, pull tightly down and then up with tying string A.

fig. 7 B

and make sure that the cord is taut. Consult Fig. 3 to make sure you have it strung correctly. Do not cut the cord because as you progress tying from right to left and fill the whole area, the right hand side can be loosened and the right vertical board can then be wrapped with the tied hair. Loop the cord several times over the left vertical board and resume tying. See Fig. 4 to clarify this point. The whole object here is to have one continuous length of fringe instead of several sections. Note: Keep the line taut and well waxed.

It is best to start tying the deer fringe first for several reasons. Among the most important is gaining proficiency before you start tying the porcupine hair. This requires some skill. Keep in mind when tying hair, not to have an over-abundance for each tie. Too much makes the hair, when tied, look bulky and out of place in a fringe of hair which has lesser amounts. Remember: Better too little than too much.

After you have gained some experience you will be able to judge rather rapidly the amount of hair to use in each tie. I have found that for deer hair, about 45-55 strands of hair worked real well.

Start tying the deer hair from right to left. You will start with the smallest length first. Fig. 5 depicts the graduations and length for the inner and outer rows of deer hair fringe that will be required for the roach.

Deer hair for each individual tie is cut from the tail as needed. Remember to use only the outer edges of deer hair from the tail. Do not use the darker hair as this will result in a multi-hued fringe.

As the deer hair gets closer to the base of the skin its diameter increases so it is not desirable to have equal lengths of deer hair on each side of the cord. (This is the reverse of the concept when tying deer hair for a hair base.) Consult Fig. 6 for a cross-section view of how the deer hair should look for the outer and inner fringes. Figs. 7a, 7b, 7c illustrate the technique of tying both deer hair and porcupine hair to the wrapping cord.

At this point you should have completed tying the deer hair fringes for the outer and inner rows (and the fringe for the hair base if you had decided on one), and are now ready to proceed tying the porcupine fringes.

In order to assure that all porcupine hair is of the same relative length, take a small bunch and put it in an aluminum drinking glass (tumbler). Tap the bottom of the tumbler for several minutes, after which time all hair should have its base at the bottom. It will now be easy to pull from the bunch the longest hairs down to the smallest and group them accordingly. Repeat this process until all the hair has been grouped.

There should be no more than 15-18 porcupine hairs in an individual tie. Prior to tying, the bottom of the hairs should be dipped in glycerin (which may be purchased in any drugstore). If you do not use glycerin or some other heavy oil substance to wet the bottoms

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# A CANADIAN "CROW BELT"

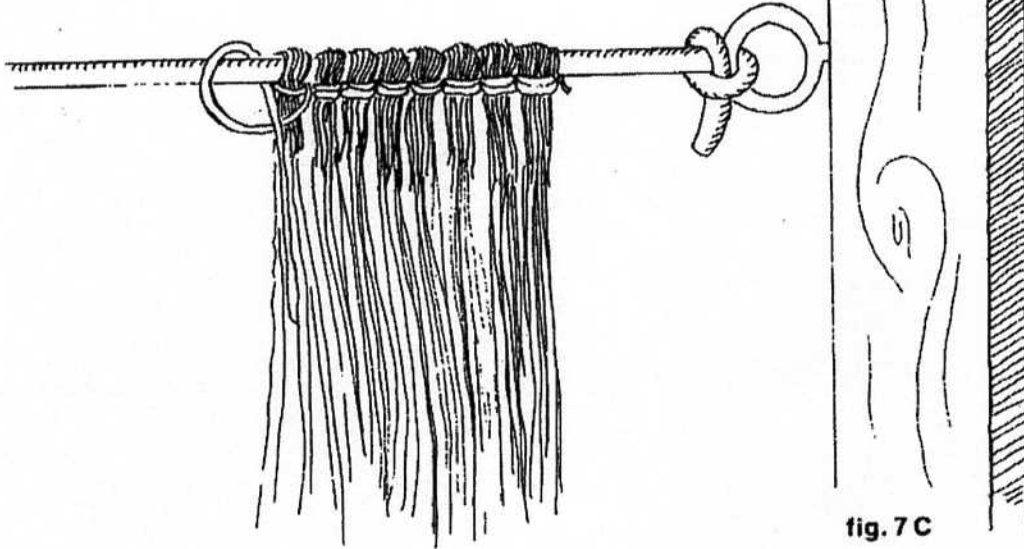
by Michael Johnson

The sketch shows a type of crow belt still seen on the Canadian Plains which strongly resembles the original Prairie crow belt of the 19th century. It lacks the wheel of feathers associated with later bustles farther south, and hence may be an influence from the Woodland people who also adopted the grass dance complex\* in the later 19th century rather than an import from the Plains tribes proper, but this is speculation. The influence of the Santee, who largely removed to Canada, has probably been understated.

The specimen has two conventional trailers decorated with four rows of medium size eagle feathers attached with buckskin thongs through tin cones. The pillow is stiff hide covered with red cloth, with eagle feathers attached; to each side is stitched the cloth belt which is about the waist. The outstanding primary feathers or spikes are attached to a wooden dowel covered with red cloth by flattening the quills around the dowel and binding with sinew and also stitching to the red cloth. There is a strong thong tie between the center of the dowel and the head of the pillow which is tightened to give the required angle at which the spikes will stand out. This can give an upright or downward position of the spikes, or any intermediate position to suit the owner. The tie must be strong, however, to take the required tension.

\*The Woodland and Chippewa, Menomnie, Potawatomi and Santee formalized the complex into the Dream religion.

Fig. 7c. Continue tying per Steps 7a and 7b by adding hair ties to the left of the one previously tied.



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it will be extremely difficult to tie the hair, and in addition it will break or crack if worked dry. The glycerin tends to make the hair flexible, resilient and easy to work. Remember - working the porcupine hair dry is prone to many hardships and weakening of the hairs.

Fig. 8 illustrates the length and graduations of one side of tied porcupine hair. Two complete rows should be tied plus a half row for the front, the reason being that more rows of smaller tied bunches tend to make a better looking roach. After all the hair has been tied you are now ready to stitch it to the base.

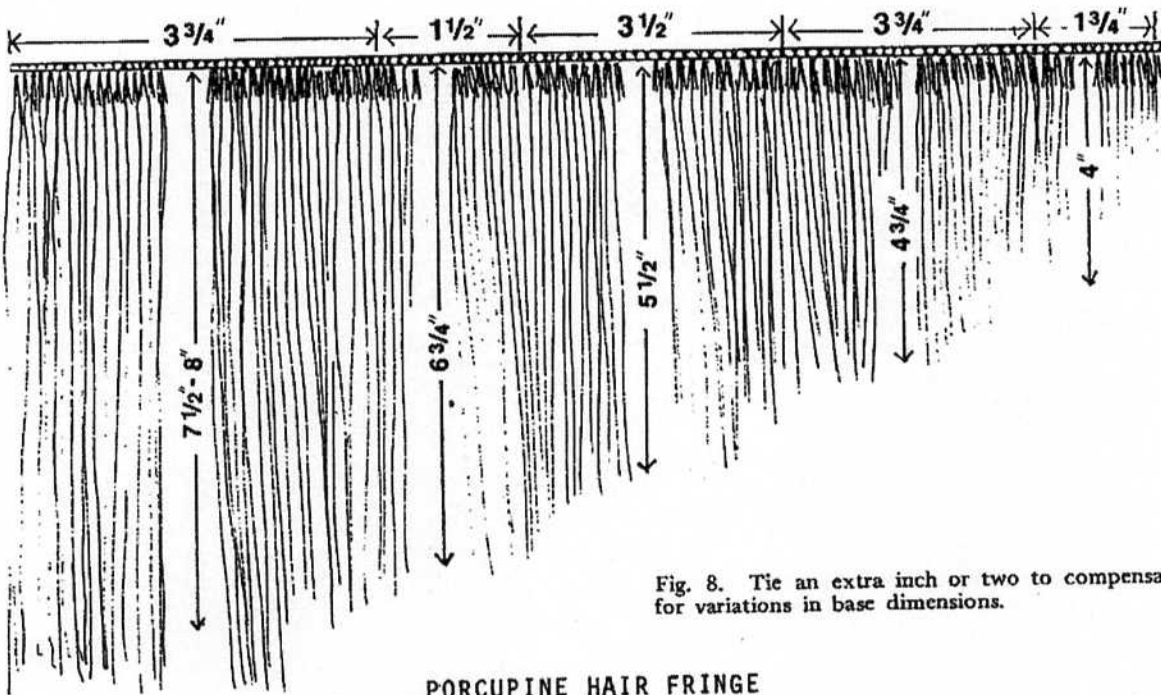


Fig. 8. Tie an extra inch or two to compensate for variations in base dimensions.

PORCUPINE HAIR FRINGE

