

Traditional Rope Fenders

Make mine Manila

by Barbara Merry

Illustrations by Benjamin Martinez

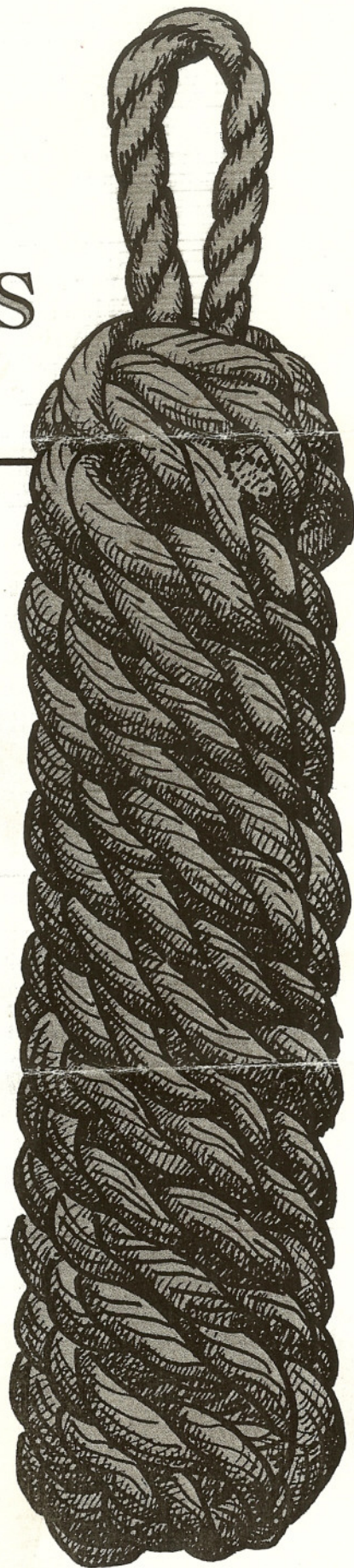
Some items lend themselves well to man's ongoing attempts to upgrade them or make them more cost efficient. I think synthetic Manila rope, for example, still makes the grade. It is durable and chafe-resistant, fairly comfortable in hand, and impervious to rot. It is also inexpensive and has a nice, traditional look about it. But, on the other hand, the white plastic boat fenders that have replaced traditional Manila rope fenders score low. These plastic fenders are so light in weight that they will roll up and out from between the boat and the dock—or, much worse, from between two boats—resulting in dings, scuffed brightwork, and perhaps a few painfully pinched fingers. Yes, I'll grant that these bladder-style fenders are less expensive than a store-bought rope fender nowadays, but let's not forget that you can make a traditional rope fender inexpensively yourself.

We'll begin with a small rope fender measuring 10" long by 3" wide. I admit that this is a little on the small side, but it's easier to manage for a first-time fender builder, since the longer strands needed for larger fenders tangle more. For a larger fender, 12" long and 4" wide, follow these same directions, but use the amounts in parenthesis. Bigger fenders require larger rope and more of it.

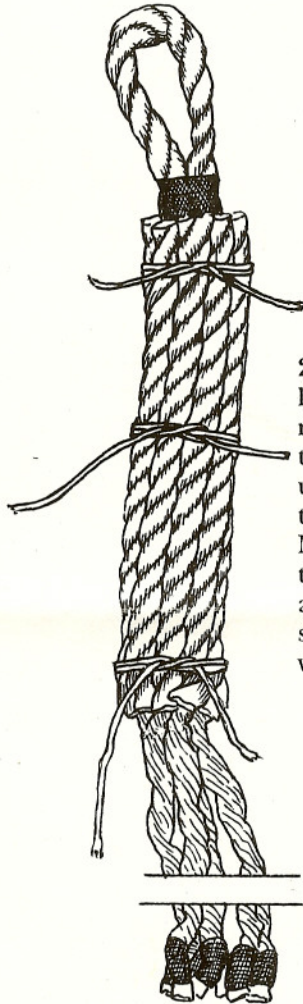
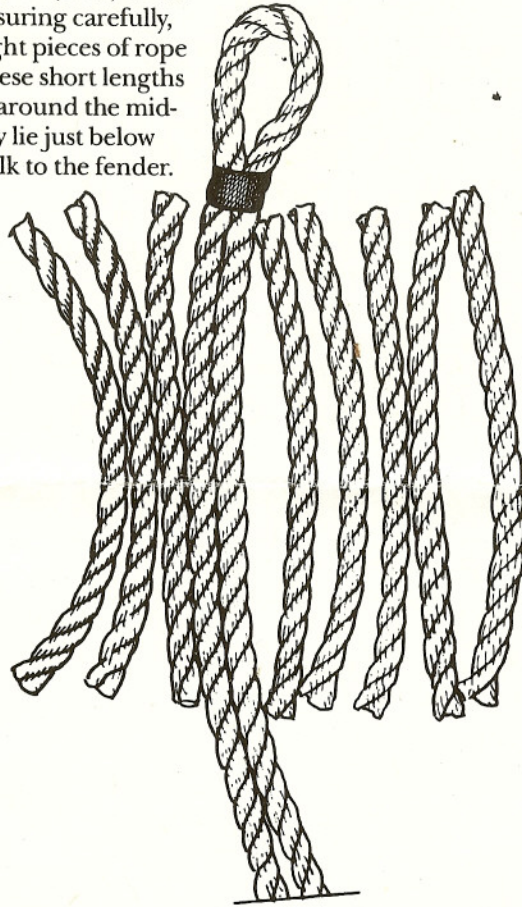
Here's what you'll need:

- 21' of ½" Manila rope (29' of ¾" Manila rope)
- 18' of small stuff, such as No. 21 tarred nylon (21')
- A sharp knife
- Some plastic tape
- A small Swedish fid

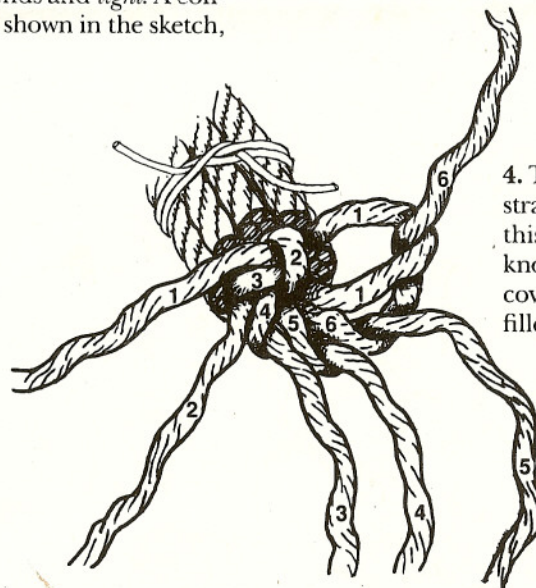
If you'd like to make a white rope fender, I recommend using Wall's Poly Plus rope, in the same sizes as above. Remember that making a rope fender is also a good opportunity for recycling old rope.



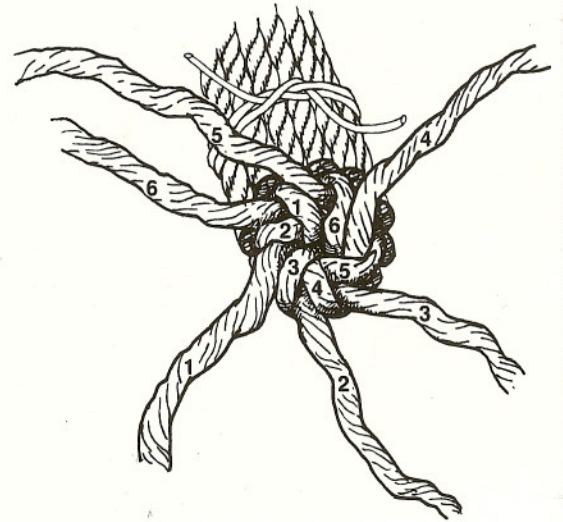
1. Middle a piece of $\frac{1}{2}$ " ($\frac{3}{4}$ ") rope 14' (20') long, and form an eye by wrapping tape around it $2\frac{1}{2}$ " ($3\frac{1}{2}$ ") down from the bight. Measuring carefully, cut an additional eight pieces of rope 9" (11") long. Tie these short lengths of filler rope tightly around the middle piece so that they lie just below the tape and give bulk to the fender.



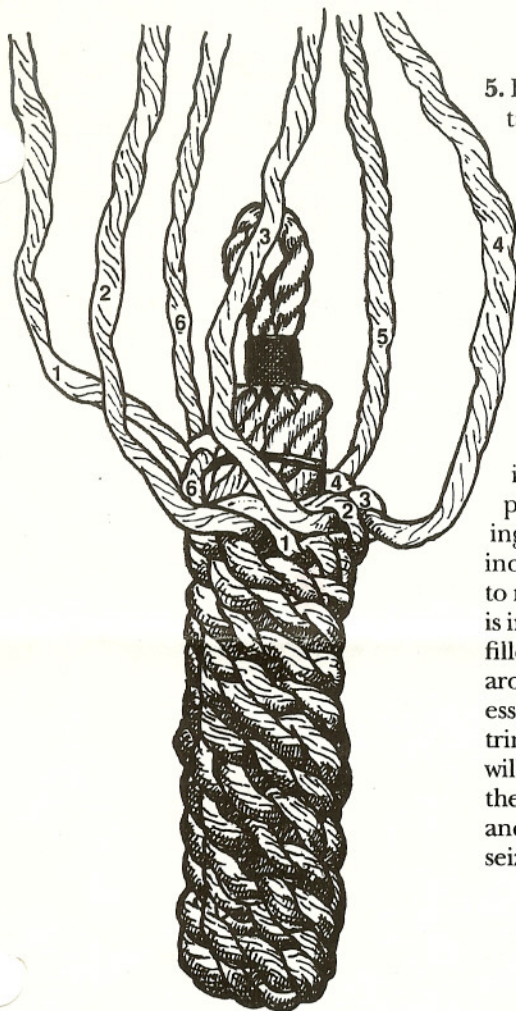
2. Unlay a few inches of the long lengths and wrap each of the six resulting strands with tape to prevent them from unraveling. Now continue unlaying both pieces all the way up to the short, parceled-on filler pieces. Make sure the bottom lashing on those filler pieces is about an inch away from the ends and *tight*. A constrictor knot, as shown in the sketch, works fine.



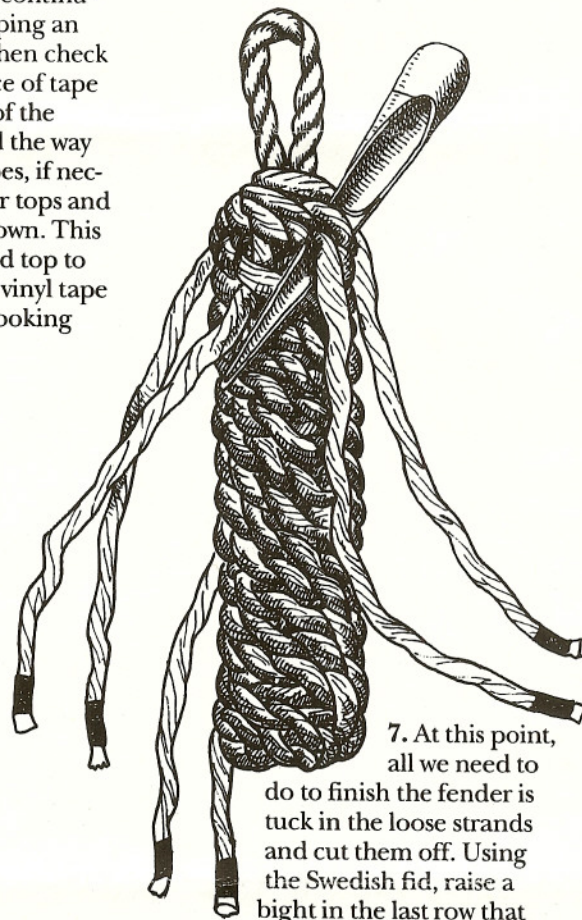
3. Sit in a comfortable chair and firmly clamp the fender between your knees with the strands coming at you out of the center. Arrange them so that they are uniformly spaced and exit in a fairly orderly fashion. Now pick any one strand and place it outside and under the strand to its immediate left. Leave a loop in the strand that you are working on (labeled #1 in the drawing). Give the two strands a good, tight twist, sending the strand you first worked on up toward you. The second strand should end up at the base of the strand to its left. Do not leave a loop this time. Continue twisting pairs around the center until there is only the first loop and one loose strand remaining. Slip the left-over strand from the bottom up through the loop as shown.




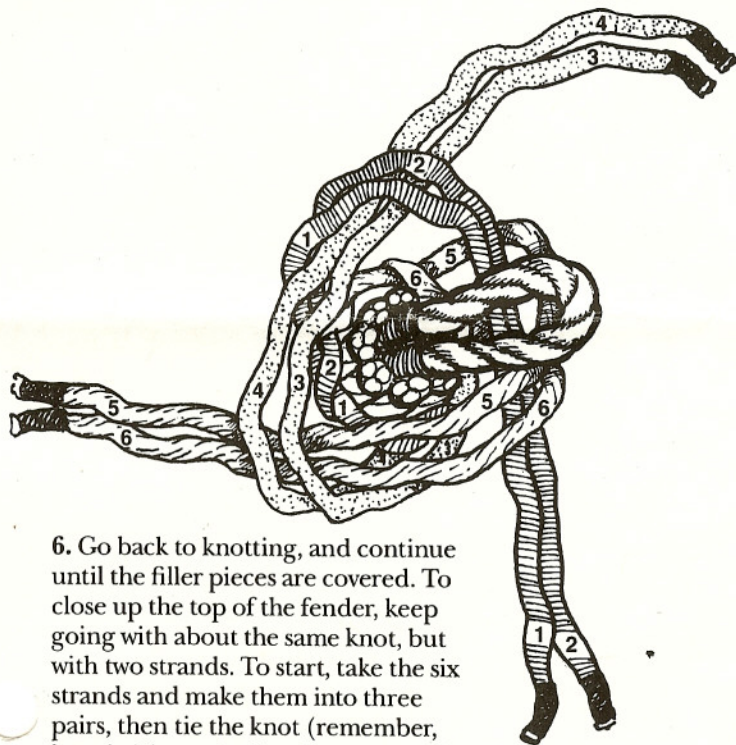
4. Tighten the loop around the strand. Your work should look like this: a nice, circular row of crown knots. What we're doing here is covering the cut ends of the manilla filler ropes.



5. Knot another row of crown knots, taking care not to pull any one strand too tight, as it will cause your work to become distorted. By the second (third) row, you will have covered the ends of the fillers. Continue knotting up the fender, covering the filler pieces. You may find the going easier if you lay the fender across your lap. By now, you will have discovered how quickly the strands tangle up. Tangles are an inherent part of the job, so have patience and keep going, continuing up the fender and stopping an inch or two from the top. Then check to make sure the entire piece of tape is in view and that the tops of the filler ropes are evenly cut all the way around. Tailor the filler ropes, if necessary, by cutting down their tops and trimming their edges, as shown. This will produce a nice, rounded top to the fender. Now, cut off the vinyl tape and replace it with a good-looking seizing of tarred nylon.



7. At this point, all we need to do to finish the fender is tuck in the loose strands and cut them off. Using the Swedish fid, raise a bight in the last row that was knotted. Run the strand that lies just above the bight through the fid. Pull it snug, and remove the fid. Repeat this again in the next row of knots below, tucking the same strand a second time. Then cut off the strand close to the side of the fender. Do the same with each of the five remaining loose strands. Your traditional rope fender is ready for use. 



6. Go back to knotting, and continue until the filler pieces are covered. To close up the top of the fender, keep going with about the same knot, but with two strands. To start, take the six strands and make them into three pairs, then tie the knot (remember, in pairs) just as before, but arrange it so the ends go through their loops from the top leading down. Make the knot of three pairs tight.

Barbara Merry is the author of The Splicing Handbook. She started tying fancy knots years ago, and her expertise led her into doing net work for commercial fishermen and fabricating rope products for industrial applications. She is currently a rigger working in the Point Judith, Rhode Island, area.