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# SIMSBURY FREE LIBRARY Quarterly

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## John Case of the Fourth Generation in Simsbury Part 2: With Shoemaking Underway, His Tannery Opens

*The first installment of this article dealt with John Case's shoemaking business, as reflected by entries in his first account book. He began his book in 1739 at the age of twenty and continued using it into the 1760s. His entries disclose his multiple business and side ventures. Like all his contemporaries, professionals and ministers included, he farmed. After farming and shoemaking, he gave much of the rest of his time and energy to the tanning of animal hides and skins.*

Leather products were so important in the Connecticut Colony in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century that among the laws published by the General Court in 1702 was "An Act for Regulating of Tanners, Curriers and Cordwainers."<sup>1</sup> It stipulated that butchers would be fined if they gashed an ox, steer or cow hide. Furthermore, any person who engaged in the "mystery or facility of Tanning" without demonstrating his proficiency before his county court and being licensed would be fined £50. The offense of selling an improperly tanned hide merited a £20 fine. A person who practiced "the art or mystery of Currying" would also be subject to fine if he happened to mar a tanned hide or skin while he dressed it.

The Act also required that each town appoint leather sealers, officials who were to inspect and place their seal on all tanned hides before they could be sold. Leather sealers were also to search for shoes, boots or other products made of improperly tanned leather and bring the cordwainer (as shoemakers were called) to justice. Leather sealers themselves were subject to fine if they were derelict in their duties.

Simsbury appointed its first leather sealers, Daniel Foot and James Smith, in 1737.<sup>2</sup> The town probably had no commercial tanning operations before that time, although there was nothing to prohibit a farmer from producing leather for his own family's use. However, tanning was a long, physically demanding, and smelly process, so it was beneficial to have skilled tanners in a town. A tannery gave local farmers a way of profiting from the hides of the cattle that they slaughtered to feed their families and that increasingly some of them were raising to sell for export to the West Indies and to supply the military campaigns of the French and Indian War.<sup>3</sup> Barrels of salted beef, as well as salted pork, found a ready market. The fact that John Case recorded tanning only one pig skin between 1739 and his last tannery entry in 1760 indicates that Simsbury farmers probably concentrated on beef rather than pork production.<sup>4</sup>

John Case's shoe business was operating by 1739, but his tannery business didn't get fully underway until October 1743. His entries for the last three months of 1743 list six customers who bought sides of leather and some smaller pieces from him.<sup>5</sup> While his account book does not say where in Simsbury his tannery was located, it does contain conclusive information about the types of hides and skins he tanned. It also provides evocative hints about his tanning process.

John Case produced leather from his own animals' hides and skins or those that he bought. Quite often, too, customers brought him hides and skins to tan for them. Some authorities write that early tanners kept a part of each hide as remuneration, but Case did not. He simply entered his charge for his work in his book as debit in his customer's account, in keeping with the "money barter" system used at that time. Since in this era the town kept a record of the ear marks and brands that each farmer used to distinguish his

livestock, each hide or skin brought to Case probably bore the farmer's own registered symbol.

The two products that made up the vast majority of Case's tanning business were sole leather and upper leather. The hard, durable sole leather generally came from cowhides, but occasionally from ox or steer hides. Just two entries record bull hides. In a typical transaction, he paid William Eno £1.11.7 for a cowhide weighing fifty and a half pounds. Captain Jonathan Westover sold him a bull hide weighing twenty-seven pounds for £2. Case sold to John Terry a nine pound, three ounce side of sole leather, that is, half a hide, for £5.10.6. To tan his customer's cowhide he charged Justice of the Peace Joseph Willcoxson, £3.10.0. Tanning sole leather was the heaviest, most time consuming leather work he did. To produce good quality sole leather took more than a year.

The lighter, more pliable upper leather, which is always used for the top of shoes, he made from calf skins, kip skins and probably from the few horse hides he acquired. The term "kip" has several meanings and Case used it in at least two senses, usually spelling it "Kepskin" or "Keepskin." Kip generally refers to a skin that is in between the size of a calfskin and a small hide. He also used the term for any sort of small animal, as when he tanned and curried two woodchuck skins for Matthew Adams. Adams's account was debited 15 shillings for that service.

Case bought five "musquash" skins in 1743 from John Terry. This is his version of the Native American name for another indigenous little fur bearing animal that we now call muskrat. He never mentions beavers or raccoons, but these might be some of the small animals that he referred to as "kip."

One of his more interesting notations mentions a wolf. He credited Daniel Hayes Jr. with eleven shillings in 1752 for "a piece of a skin the wolf killed." Panthers and wolves were such a problem in the Connecticut Colony that all towns were obliged by the General Court to pay a bounty for them. Simsbury's early town records list dozens of bounties paid. The town meeting in December 1747 "Voted to pay Lt. David Holcomb out of the town treasury the sum of nine pounds in Bills of Credit of the old Tenor for the killing of three wolves Lately which were killed west of Simsbury town bounds." The next year another of Case's customers, Isaac Messenger, was awarded "five pounds in old Tenor Bills ... for the woolf which he lately killed."

Case bought the occasional deerskin; the same Lt. David Holcomb sold him three of them for £9.5.0 in 1750. Case seems to have used most of the deerskins himself for things like the pair of leather "britches" he paid Hannah Enos to make in 1743 and the three pairs he sold to customers. For some reason he had a rash of sales in deerskins in 1752, when he sold a dozen of them. The most expensive he ever sold was to Daniel Porter in 1754, a "large Buckskin" that went for £12.

Lt. David Holcomb and Thomas Barber 3<sup>rd</sup> each brought him bearskins to be tanned. He charged Barber £1.10.0, but gave no indication how the skin was to be used. How his customers used the dog skins he handled, Case never said either. He bought a dog skin from Matthew Adams and one from Peter Holcomb and tanned one for Holcomb. Lt. David Holcomb had him tan a dog skin and Andrew Robe had him tan two.

His customers favored calfskin or sheepskin for making aprons. Jacob Davis bought a sheepskin for an apron. Davis was obviously a cooper since many of his credits in the account book were for wooden items: a churn, water pail, swill pail, cider barrel and two rakes and for mending a coloring tub. Josiah Loomis, credited with weaving two coverlets and two bags, needed a sheepskin apron, too. Loomis also received credit for four baskets that someone in his household probably wove. Serajah Stratton, a farrier, blacksmith and gunsmith, paid £2 for a calfskin for an apron and Samuel Adams needed both types of skins. In each instance, Case provided the skin but did not actually make the apron.

Two other blacksmiths came to Case for leather for their bellows: Joseph Smith, whose account

included a credit for "New laying plow irons, and Noah Gleason, who had once shod Case's horse. Case didn't specify what type of leather he provided, but he charged Joseph Smith five shillings for "a piece of leather to mend Belowses." Noah Gleason paid £22 for "4 sides of Leather for Bellowses."

Gleason also bought a piece of leather to cover his cartridge box and had Case make him two tumplines. Colonists learned from Native Americans to use tumplines to carry heavy loads. According to author Allan A. MacFarlan, a tumpline is "a strong, soft leather headband ranging from 2 to 3 inches in width with two narrow but strong leather lines from 6 to 8 feet long fastened one on each side of the headband. The headband is placed high on the forehead and the duffle carried on the back, attached by the two leather thongs. Sometimes tumpline users pack with only the tumplines, while others also use the shoulder straps of the pack to carry the load."<sup>6</sup>

The Reverend Mr. Gideon Mills of the First Society's Congregational Church paid Case two shillings for mending his portmanteau. That would be the minister's large traveling case made of stiff leather, probably sole leather, which opened into two compartments. The archaic English word portmanteau is a variation of the French *portmanteau*.

Serajah Stratton came to Case in 1745 for a strap of leather for his drum and again in 1747 for a calf skin for a drumhead. In 1750 Stratton was back for a "turner's strap," probably a belt to turn a lathe.

Case made all manner of straps. He sold quite a number of bell straps, which people used to attach bells around their animals' necks. In this time period farm crops were fenced to keep animals out. Sheep, cows and horses were allowed to forage freely. (Pigs wore yokes so that they couldn't get under fences.) It was much easier to locate an animal that had wandered off if you could hear its bell. In 1749 he noted that he had sold a bell strap worth five shillings to "my Hon<sup>d</sup> grandmother Sarah Case."

People came to Case for various other pieces of equipment for their animals which he fashioned from both sole and upper leather he had tanned. Many customers needed bridles for their horses. He merely sold the leather to some, but made the bridles for others. He charged Widow Mary Eno £1.5.0 for "a bridle and making." Peter Holcomb needed a bridle and a pair of reins. Isaac Goff paid three shillings and six pence for leather for a bridle and collar. John Terry twice bought leather for parts of collars. By 1757 thirty-one individuals had come to him for bridles, collars and reins.

Only one person, Thomas Barber 2<sup>nd</sup>, bought a new saddle from him; he paid £20 for it. John Barber paid Case fifteen shillings for leather and four shillings for half a day's work to mend his saddle. Two customers needed male-straps and one customer needed a crupper to keep his saddle from sliding forward. Jacob Pettibone paid him thirteen shillings for a girth and stirrup leather. Women often rode behind the horseman on a pillion and he mended several of those. Elizabeth Hoskins needed new straps for her pillion.<sup>7</sup>

In his article "Clearing the Trail for Civilization" historian H. A. Warren wrote that travel at this time was by horseback because the roads in this area were too rough for wagons and carriages. Saddle and pillion, he wrote, were regarded by the upper classes as "articles of especial convenience and gentility." "Horses were trained to carry double and it was not uncommon to see father, mother and at least one child mounted on the same horse," he said.<sup>8</sup>

All the hauling of crops and goods that John Case recorded in his account book was done by oxen and cart. Some of the straps that he supplied may have been used in gear for oxen, but he never specified that. For his own oxen he once bought two ox yokes and two pairs of ox bows from James Tuller. From that it can be surmised that he owned two pairs of oxen.

As mentioned earlier, one of the major exports from Connecticut at this time was barrels of salted beef and pork. John Case did a little business in pork, but for a period of time he sold large amounts of beef. Most of his customers were probably buying meat for their own family's use, but those men who bought it in

great quantities must have been exporters. For instance, during the summer of 1747 Samuel Adams Jr. bought 234¼ pounds of beef at eleven pence per pound, paying Case a total of £10.5.0. His beef sales were concentrated in the years 1747 and 1748, suggesting that beef production was a short-term business venture, perhaps to generate a supply of hides to tan.

However, he did make sporadic beef sales in later years. In 1751 Case sold Serajah Stratton "the best piece of beef," weighing seven and a quarter pounds, for almost two shillings a pound. Ashbill Goff also bought five pounds of the "best piece" during the winter of 1751-52, paying 8 shillings, 6 pence. There is no hint as to what cut of beef these men considered the "best piece," but perhaps they were referring to what is now called the tenderloin. On two occasions he sold mutton – six pounds to Josiah Riley and three to the "Messrs. Phelps."

Entries in Case's account book document some of what he did during the process of tanning hides and skins to turn them into sole leather and upper leather. He could have dealt with some fragile and furred skins by tawing rather than tanning them, but there is nothing in the book to indicate this. To prepare a hide or skin to be tanned, Case trimmed legs and neck from the piece and, if it was a large hide, he split it lengthwise into sides. Next he would lay the piece on a rounded beam and scrape away excess tissue from the underside, leaving intact the middle layer of skin called the corium or dermis. For this scraping, blacksmith Serajah Stratton had supplied him with a fleshing knife – a long, curved blade with a handle at each end. When finished scraping, he thoroughly cleaned the piece. One method of cleaning was to put it in a brook or stream for a day or so.

To begin the process of removing the hair from the hide or skin, he soaked it in a solution containing lime. One entry in his book is for "money to buy Lime" from Thomas Barber 3<sup>rd</sup>, whose account was credited with £3. The number of months of soaking needed to loosen the hair depended on the type of hide or skin. He scraped the loosened hair away with a tool similar to the fleshing knife, then removed the lime by soaking the piece in "bate," a solution made of dung. Dog and hen dung were preferred. Case reported a great deal of dung being loaded and carted, but he never distinguished one type from another. (Isaac Goff settled his account in 1753 with twenty cartloads of dung, most of which probably was spread on Case's fields.) In addition to de-liming hides and skins, bate loosened their fibers to prepare them to absorb the tanning ooze. Most necessary in the preparation of upper leather, it also softened them.

Once a number of pieces had been fleshed, de-haired and bated, it was time to lay them away in a tan pit, which was a square or rectangular hole that could be six to eight feet deep. A United States government report on manufacturing maintains that colonial tanners lined their pits with wood plank.<sup>9</sup> Other authorities say they lined them with impermeable materials. The account book records much timber felled and wood carted, sledged and sawn. It also gives Thomas Barber credits twice in 1748 for fetching and carting loads of clay for Case. The clay must have come from property he owned since there was no charge for it.

Case gave both Hezekiah Humphrey and Isaac Goff credits for helping to "lay away Leather" and Samuel Adams Jr. for "a day about hides." To become leather the hides and skins had to absorb the tannin and other natural chemicals present in bark. Oak bark was favored, but hickory and others could be used for various purposes. Again, Case never indicated which type of bark he harvested for his tannery, but his accounts show many credits given to men for things like "a days work to git bark," "help fetch bark" and "carting a load of bark." He gave Eli Strickland a credit for a day and a half to "shave bark," which might refer to stripping it from felled timber with tools like bark spuds and peeling chisels.<sup>10</sup> Samuel Adams Jr. got credit for "a day to thrash bark." Many early tanners crushed the bark in an animal-driven mill, but it seems that in 1747 Adams smashed it with a threshing flail.

The hides and skins were placed in layers in the tanning pit on a bed of crushed bark with more bark between each layer and on top. Water permeated with bark, the ooze, filled the pit. (In the Connecticut

General Court's "Act for Regulating Tanners...." this liquid was called "wooze" and the smell from the pit probably made delicate people a bit woozy.) Every several months the hides had to be turned and new bark introduced. Perhaps this is how Case made use of the "hook to draw hides" fashioned for him by blacksmith Stratton. He paid Samuel Adams Jr. fifteen shillings for "one day to Bark Leather." Depending on the thickness of the hides they might stay in the tanning pit for more than a year before they were pronounced leather of good quality. Then they were hung in an open shed to slowly dry.

There were several more steps before the leather was ready for use. John Case himself curried most of it, but at times he paid others to do this job. Moses Merrells devoted twenty-four and a half days over a two-year period to currying for Case and earned £37.4.0. Carrier Caleb Moses Jr. earned somewhat less. The carrier took care of shaving the rough-dried hides to the desired, even thickness and stretching and smoothing them. He softened the upper leather with tallow and oils and did any dyeing and polishing needed.

John Case's success as a tanner is reflected in the many hides and skins that customers brought him to tan and curry and in the many sides of leather that they bought from him. Only once did he need to give one of them credit "for the skin I spoiled." All these transactions he recorded in his ledger with ink and quill on sheets of fine English paper folded lengthwise and tied together with thread. The account book has a cover made of fine brown leather, just like the leather that he himself tanned.

By Mary Jane Springman

*The final installment of this article will deal with John Case's farm, cider mill, liquor sales, fabric sales and other interests. It will touch briefly on his involvement in the French and Indian War and give more information about his customers.*

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## Notes

1. *Acts and Laws of His Majesties Colony of Connecticut in New-England* (Boston: Connecticut General Court - Bartholomew Green and John Allen, printers, 1702; Reprinted by the Acorn Club, 1901), 65-66.
2. The town appointed leather sealers in 1737, '38 and '39 then discontinued the practice for three years, so whoever was tanning leather in the late 1730s must have stopped. The leather sealers in John Case's first few years of business were Ensign Brewster Higley, Michael Humphrey and Jonathan Buttolph.
3. The need for military provisions to sell was touched upon in "Goodwin & Bigelow: A Mercantile Venture in Colonial Simsbury" in the Summer/Fall 2001 issue of this publication. John Case's account book coincides with the Goodwin & Bigelow account book in most of the years it covers and many of the two business's customers are the same. This overlap is true to a lesser extent of the other 18<sup>th</sup> century account books studied in this series.
4. John Case posted entries in his first account book into the mid-1760s, but began his second book about 1754. After that time he began accounts for new customers in his second book and gradually transferred continuing customers' accounts there. His second book is apparently lost to history, but this first book is preserved in the Simsbury Historical Society archives.
5. The first customers at John Case's tannery were his uncle Capt. Jonathan Case, Joshua and Daniel Holcomb, Hezekiah Humphrey, Isaac Dewey and Richard Roberts Jr.
6. Allan A. MacFarlan, *Living Like an Indian: A Treasury of North American Indian Crafts and Activities*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publication, 1961), 94. Emory Dean Keoke, Kay Marie Porterfield, *Encyclopedia of American Indian Contributions to the World* (New York: Check Books, an imprint of the Facts of File series, 2002), 279. Both are from Google Books.
7. Terminology used in the 18<sup>th</sup> century for horse tack is found in *The Farrier's and Horseman's Complete Dictionary ....* by Thomas Wallis, published in London in 1759 and available through Google Books.
8. H. A. Warren, "Clearing the Trail for Civilization," *Connecticut Magazine*, vol. 8, no. 2, (1903), 197. Warren quoted from Kilbourn's history of Litchfield County. Google Books.
9. *Census of Manufacturers*, Part 3, United States Bureau of the Census (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1908), 175-76. Google Books.
10. Eric Sloane, *A Museum of Early American Tools*, (New York: Ballentine Books, 1964), 48-49. The Sloane-Stanley Museum in Kent, Connecticut, has a remarkable collection of early American tools such as these.

## The Earthquakes of 1755

John Case wrote the following message on a small piece of paper and attached it with a straight pin to page seventy-four of his account book. The paper has become ragged around the edges over the years and has lost a few words, but the gist of his message is clear.

on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of Nov<sup>m</sup> AD 1755  
 on Tuesday about 5 or 6 of the Clock  
 in the morning was a Very Remarkable  
 Earthquake which began with a [sound]  
 Much Like the Roaring of wind or distant  
 Thunder and was followed with very  
 great shocking and the whole fram[ ]  
 Nature seemed to tremble  
 [A]nd on Saturday Next following about  
 [ ] a Clock at Night was another [ ]  
 [ob]servable

This event became known as the Cape Ann earthquake. Modern seismologists believe the epicenter was about twenty-four miles offshore from Cape Ann, Massachusetts, and they put it between 6.0 and 6.3 on the Richter scale. It damaged more than 1,000 chimneys in Boston alone and may have caused the tsunami in the Leeward Islands in the West Indies. The earthquake inspired numerous religious writings and sermons.

The great earthquake and tsunami that destroyed much of Lisbon, Portugal, took place about two weeks earlier, on November 1, 1755.



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## Index to Customers' Signatures

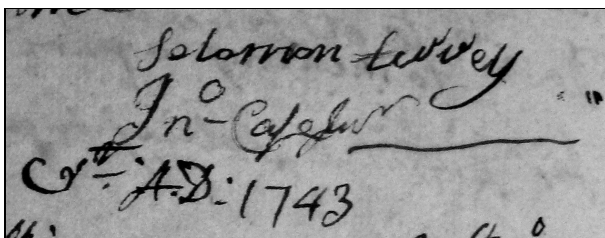
An index listing all 265 customers who had accounts with John Case is available at the Simsbury Historical Society and the Simsbury Free Library. Those who placed their signatures in the book are listed below. Sometimes a signature is the only tangible thing remaining of an 18th-century ancestor.

Joseph Adams, 1752-38  
 Matthew Adams, 1746-31  
 Samuel Adams Jr., 1750-20  
 William Barber, 1756-67  
 Samuel Beman, 1745-27  
 Capt. Jonathan Case, 1753-22  
 Noah Case, 1761-46  
 Rene Cosset, 1751-70  
 Joseph Fowler, 1748-1

Gershom Goff, 1755-39  
 Isaac Goff, 1755, *iii*  
 Abel Gossard, 1755-32  
 Matthew Griffin (mark), 1756-37  
 Henry Grimes, 1753-58, 83  
 Elisha Harrington, 1763-59  
 John Hoskins, 1743-18  
 Jonathan Humphrey Jr., 1746-45  
 Thomas Marvin, 1755-59

Moses Merrells, 1752-42  
 Israel Murrimon, 1757-40  
 John Owen, 1755-50  
 Jacob Pettibone, 1757-44  
 Hezekiah Phelps, 1753-42  
 Abraham Pinney, 1745-4  
 Solomon Terry, 1743-14

*Page numbers are in italics.*



Solomon Terry and John Case signed the reckoning of Terry's account declaring it balanced with no value due to either man. After the death of his father in 1752, Case no longer wrote Junior following his name.

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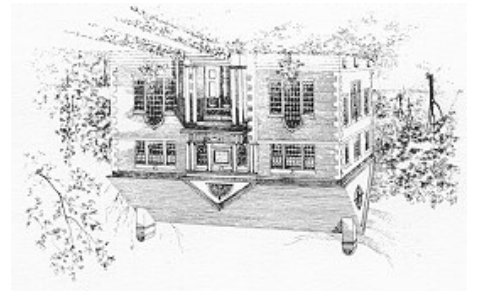
## Simsbury Free Library Fall Events 2013

### September

- Sept. 10 — 11:15 a.m. **Book Club: *Life of Pi*** by Yann Martel. Pi Patel, a zookeeper emigrating from India to North America with animals, survives a shipwreck and is lost at sea for 227 days. What really happened while he drifted on a lifeboat with the large Bengal tiger Richard Parker?
- Sept. 14 — 10:00 a.m. **Genealogy Road Show with Diane LeMay**. A session for those researching a family tree and unable to locate missing ancestors, decipher handwriting, or find French documents; also online research, Massachusetts and French-Canadian research and more. \$5 for non-members.
- Sept. 17 — 1:00 p.m. **Movie: *Life of Pi***, followed by a discussion.
- Sept. 18 — 9:00 a.m. **Bus Trip to the Cedar Hill Cemetery in Hartford**. The trip includes a walking tour of this historic cemetery and lunch at the Lincoln Culinary Institute. The bus will return to the library at 1:30 p.m. Cost is \$35 for members, \$40 for non-members. Advance reservations and payment are required. Please contact the library via e-mail (simsburyfreelibrary@gmail.com) or phone (860-408-1336).
- Sept. 24 — 1:00 p.m. **History Talk: Connecticut History in Four Episodes**. Professor Tom Ratcliff of Central Connecticut State University (CCSU) will discuss the history of Connecticut from 200 million years ago to modern times. **First Lecture:** "The Land and People from Proto-America through the Colonial Era up to 1763." Free for members, \$5 for non-members.
- Sept. 26 — 1:00 p.m. **Foreign Film: *Kon-Tiki***. This Norwegian film tells the story of legendary Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl's attempt to prove his theory that Peruvians could have been the first inhabitants of Polynesia. The film chronicles the epic 101-day journey the explorer and his crew made across the Pacific on a balsa raft in 1947.
- Sept. 28—10:00 a.m. **Genealogy Road Show with Diane LeMay**. Diane will teach you things to remember when using the internet — tools and elements helpful in your research. \$5 for non members.

### October

- Oct. 8 —11:15 a.m. **Bookclub: *Below the Stairs*** by Margaret Powell. This is the remarkable story of an indomitable woman who, though she served in great houses of England, never stopped aiming high.
  - Oct. 12 — 10:00 a.m. **Genealogy Road Show with Diane LeMay**. Diane will continue helping all who are researching their family tree. See the information for the September 14 and September 28 sessions. Free for members, \$5 for non-members.
  - Oct. 15 — 1:00 p.m. **History Talk: Connecticut History in Four Episodes**. Professor Tom Ratcliff of CCSU will discuss the history of Connecticut. **Second Lecture:** "The Provision State: From the Revolution to the New Constitution (1763 - 1818)." Free for members, \$5 for non-members.
  - Oct. 22 — 1:00 p.m. **Movie: *All the King's Men***. Winner of the 1950 Oscars for Best Picture and Best Actor. The movie follows a backwoods Southern lawyer who wins the hearts of his constituents by bucking the corrupt state government. Stay after the movie and compare the movie to the Pulitzer Prize winning novel of the same title.
  - Oct. 24 — 1:00 p.m. **Foreign Film: *Incendies***. Nominee for Best Foreign Language Film, 2013. The film tells the story of twins who make a life-altering discovery following the death of their mother. Upon learning that their absentee father is still very much alive and that they also have a brother they have never met, the pair travels to the Middle East on a mission to untangle their mysterious past.
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*Mary Jane Springman, Editor, SFL Quarterly*

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