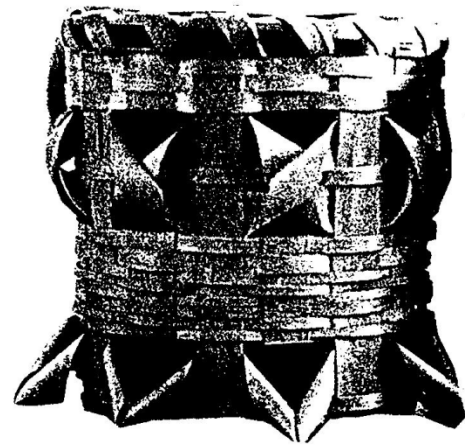




Oneida Cultural Heritage Department

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Black Ash Baskets: An Iroquois Tradition



IROQUOIS BASKETS

Basket making among the Iroquois people dates back centuries. It is one of the best preserved crafts among the Six Nations. In years past, it was a family event. At one time, it was a primary source of support for many families. Baskets were used for many things, including carrying, storage, preparation of foods, and gathering food products.

Most common of the baskets types is the hulling basket used for washing corn after it has been mixed with wood-ash for hulling. A second type of basket is the pack basket, similar to the hulling basket but made with loop holes at the top to take a carrying strap. Also popular are the sieves, the berry picking baskets, and more recent developments have been the rectangular market basket with handles, sewing baskets, picnic baskets, and clothes hampers.

The Oneida people have always made baskets but it was an art from that was dying out.

We were down to a very few basket makers in our community, Mamie Ryan being one of the most noted. However, since her passing, there has been a resurgence of basket making in our Oneida community. In 1996, the Oneida Nations Arts Program, with funding from the Wisconsin Arts Board, Oneida basket maker Linda Elijah from the Six Nations Reserve in Canada came to do some workshops and this ancient art form was reintroduced to the community. Since then, basket classes have been held and small but diligent group crafters has been learning this ancient, traditional craft.

THE WPA COLLECTION II

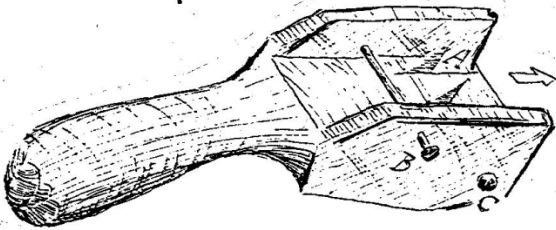
In the fall of 1999, in the basement of the University of Madison, a collection of notebooks were found from Floyd Lounsbury, Works Progress Administration folklore project in 1940. The 167 handwritten notebooks were compiled during the Great Depression and are

filled with firsthand accounts written by Oneida ancestors about Oneida history, folklore, government, and stories.

With the help of Cliff Abbott, and expert on Oneida language and a former student of Lounsbury, the notebooks were returned to the Oneida Cultural Heritage Department. The following is an excerpt on the art of basket making from one of the notebooks written by Oscar Archquette in November of 1940.

November 1940

Baskets were made mostly by women to help support their families. Basket timber is Black Ash. The woman prefer the yellowish looking bark or tree because it makes the best baskets, the splints don't break so easily.



The Black Ash tree is notched to see how thick the grain is, if the grain is this thick then it is okay. It is cut down and pounded with the head of a single bit axe in strips of 1-3/4" to 2" wide and about 8' long. Just the butt end of the tree is used, where there are no knots, it is pounded until the splints are loose from the tree, some woman make baskets of the core of a tree.

When The Splints is gotten, the some wet the splints, before it is dressed smooth and both sides to a thickness of about 1/16". Then the dressed splint is the split into widths needed for a certain kind of basket. They used to have for use, what would call a splint splitter, made in this shape. This splitter is used for making find woven baskets. Handles for baskets is made out of White Ash and Hickory.

The size of tree usually cut for splints is 6" to 8" in diameter. When a basket is finished it is sold by the piece and by the dozen to Green Bay, De Pere, Seymour, and Appleton for groceries, clothing, and money. Baskets were made by the old women.

Very few men make baskets. Today there are about three women that make baskets and three men.

Kinds of baskets made are clothes basket, market basket, newspaper basket, wet clothes basket, sewing basket, special basket used for making hull corn soup, and Easter baskets. If a basket is taken good care of, it will easily last fifty years. Some baskets are painted with blood root, cherry bark, slippery elm bark, butternut bark, and sumac or pain made from the above mentioned roots and bark.

The Oneida made baskets before the whites came to this country as far as I can find out. I might say how did they get the splints then? A wooden maul was used for pounding. Baskets were also made for church collections. Market baskets are about 10"x 15" x 7" deep. The splints are dressed with a knife to 3/16 of an inch thick and about an inch wide. Then it is woven. White Ash is used for binding and also for a handle. Baskets for washing or hull corn basket is about 8" x 8" by 10" deep. Splints used are dressed to 3/16" thick, 1/2 inch wide. (Edited for readability)

In another excerpt, Mason Wheelock Talked to Sadler King:

"... I remember that all the Oneidas made baskets. You could hear some one pound the ash timber for splints all over in the woods. They made these baskets and sold it or traded them off for something to eat. I remember going myself into the woods and I looked for a good straight ash tree, so when I found one I cut it down and got started to pound the splints loose. After some time I had got enough for me to carry home. I put this on my back the way other people did. My mother then made baskets.

Stadler King's own account of basket making goes as follows:



I also remember seeing a bunch of woman and some men go by our place. They had axes and baskets of good. In the evening they came back and each one of them was loaded with basket splints. They had pounded these splints with the axes and had it rolled up so they could carry it on their backs. Even the women carried some of the splints, but the men had more. They were all from the same family. It looked rather funny to me as they walked slowly in a bunch, all carrying splints on their backs.

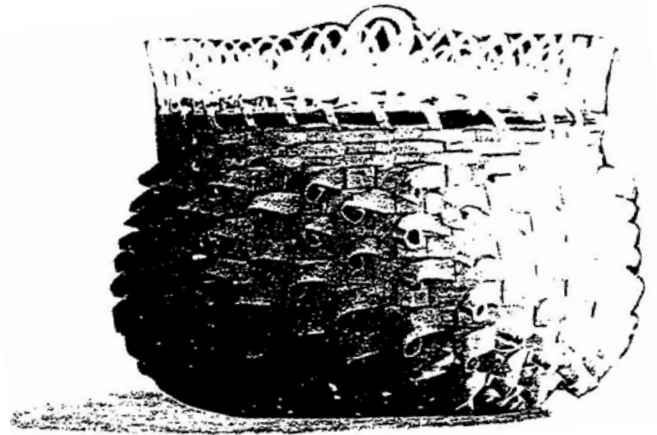
That was a slow way of making money because it all takes time to make baskets. First they went one day to pound these splints and they next day they trimmed the splints with knives and they had to be careful or they would cut the splints with their knives. When this is done, they laid the bottom by interweaving the splints. It would take about three days for one person to make a dozen baskets.

They sold baskets by the dozen. One dozen baskets may be sold for about two dollars a dozen. It would require another day to go and sell these baskets, so that's four days for two dollars. One could not figure how those people made a living but things like groceries were cheap those days they had no extra expense.

Sometimes some women would go together and hire a man with his team to go way out around Black Creek to sell baskets. If they go to farmers to sell baskets they would get things for trade. They farmers would give them potatoes, meat, sugar, beans, and sometimes canned goods were taken in exchange for their baskets. One thing sure there was always good market for baskets because these baskets were well made and strong so they could be used for many things.

Since the burden of support through basket sales is no longer an issue, each generation of basket makers has been free to grow in individual style and creativity while still maintains the use of traditional materials, methods, and styles. Early baskets were made for sturdy, utilitarian purposes and were produced in large quantities for sale to others as well as for personal use. Today many baskets are made exclusively for collectors and museums for display, the focus being more towards decorative and aesthetic.

Considering the incredible effort to create a black ash splint basket, the basket artist, and I don't use the term lightly, has to be highly motivated. Today the process is continued for sheer pleasure and personal satisfaction as well as interest in preservation of our heritage and culture.



SOURCES

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