

Willow Baskets and Weavers

By Larry Hyslop



Lois Whitney and Leah Brady working with willow

Leah Brady and Lois Whitney are sisters who share a passion for basket weaving. Baskets are fundamental to their Western Shoshone culture. Leah explains that Shoshones used baskets from their birth as cradleboards (which are woven like baskets), and throughout their lives in woven rabbit hair blankets, cooking utensils, and baskets for gathering, storage and carrying. Leah and Lois have displayed their crafts locally at the Great Basin Native Market, in Reno as part of the Great Basin Native Basket Weavers, at the Heard Museum, the California Trail Center, Western Folklife Center and the Smithsonian Folklife Festival along the mall in Washington, DC.

Their basket weaving begins with a most important, and often most difficult, step; collecting the willow stems. A good grove of red willow is a treasure to the two women. An entire year's supply of willow must be gathered between the first frost and spring warm up. The key is how much water is held in the stems. Before the first frost and after spring warm up, too much water is in the stems since the willows are actively growing. They also have to make sure the willows are not too dry, which they test by wrapping the stem end around a finger to see if it breaks.

The grove's location is vitally important. They will not use willows close to the Humboldt River and especially below Carlin for fear of water contaminants. Working willow requires them to place the stem ends in their mouths. They like willows next to smaller streams but not in the water, since that means the stems will contain too much water and be weakened.

Their best groves are often next to gravel roads but they stay away from paved roads due to the salts and chemicals that typically wash off the pavement. Other groves are in hay fields, although they have been fenced out of many past groves. Even a good grove is not consistent since dry years leave dry willows. Often, drier willow stems have "bumps" where insects have burrowed into the wood. The stems usually break easily at these insect bumps.

Thin shoots about three feet long are needed for fine work and weaving threads. These shoots are the product of one year's willow growth. Often, by cutting off shoots one year, the willow regrows stems in that same spot which are then perfect for next year's cuttings. Thicker shoots up to six feet long are needed for larger work and these are multi-year shoots.

Cut stems will remain pliable during the winter months. Willow threads need to be prepared soon after gathering and require extra work. The stems must be split into three sections. Leah and Lois start the split and hold the three sections, using their mouth and both hands to pull apart the stem. The core of each section is then peeled away, leaving a thin wood strip up to three feet long. Next the paper-thin

bark is pulled away, which could later chip off as it dries. Beneath the bark is a green membrane which slowly turns brown as it dries. Sometimes this color is wanted, but usually it is scraped off, leaving only light tan wood. These weaver threads are wetted to make them more pliable before being wrapped around larger willow stems to weave together baskets.

Thicker stems become rods in larger baskets such as cradleboards, winnowing and burden baskets. They are prepared by scraping off the bark and membrane. An authentic willow basket can be ascertained by carefully examining these rods. The willow bark has leaf buds and without bark, these buds still show on the wood as small "eyes". Commercial baskets often use machine-sized reed that does not show eyes.

In earlier times, the membrane was left on some rods for the brown pattern. Today, yarn may be used as color decoration on cradleboard shades (Leah and Lois never dye their willow.) Patterns of slanted lines indicate the baby is a boy, while crossed lines creating diamonds indicate a girl.

A good year's production for Lois and Leah may be only two large baskets, which are usually sold long before they are finished. These sisters describe basket weaving as a passion, a wonderful art form whose creation is soothing to the soul. They are concerned that few young people are making baskets, especially since they feel it teaches the weaver discipline and patience.

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