

BASKETRY IN ALASKA.

ALLAN MADISON.

The best woven baskets are made in Alaska. They are soft and water proof. The baskets are made of roots of trees and mountain grass, or bullrushes. The roots are split until the right size is obtained; they are then used as a frame to hold the basket up and to keep it as near the shape as possible. The grass is then woven over the roots. It is gathered in July or August and is dried and bleached in the sun for about two weeks.

Before the natives knew about alkali dyes they made the different colors the best way they could. I will name a few of the many ways they had of coloring their straw, or shauk, which is the Thlinget, or native name for it: The brown or yellow color was made from the rust of iron, and as a darker shade of yellow or brown was needed more rust was added. The black is made by grinding blue slate rock, mixing it with water, and then soaking the straw in it. The blue, purple, and the different shades of red were made from berry juice in which the straw was boiled until the right shade was obtained. This usually took about two days of steady boiling. Now that the Indian uses the white man's dyes the work is much lighter, as much time is saved. However, the old-fashioned baskets, colored with native prepared dyes, are preferred by collectors and bring the highest prices.

The best baskets are made in Attu, one of the Aleutian Islands. The grass grows just the right height in Attu. In South-eastern Alaska the straw has to be cut in places about a foot and a-half long, while in Attu the grass seldom grows any longer than a foot and a-half.

The reason that the baskets made in Alaska cost so much is that the work is finer than that of the baskets made in the states and much more time is required to make them.

In Alaska a woman with no education at all can make a living quite as well as an educated woman. I know this to be a fact, as my grandmother has no education, and still she is living very comfortably at Sitka. I suppose you

wonder how she made a living. It is all through the art of making baskets. Her children helped all they could and when I was old enough to know what to do I learned to make baskets also. I was about five years of age when I made my first basket, and although not very handsome, it is still kept as a remembrance of my first attempt at basket making.

The next thing is the sale of the basket. Each year during the summer months many tourists visit Alaska. Nearly every other day a boat lands a large number of tourists. The average of passengers is about two hundred and seventy-five at a time. During the summer months there are always a lot of tents from the wharf up to the main street. These tents are filled with baskets and various other Indian curios that are made during the cold winter months and are sold to the summer visitors. Most of the weaving is done in the winter, as the basket makers are busy in the summer time selling their baskets, or gathering the grass for the next winter's use.

I think that if some of the tourists who visit Alaska every year could realize what it means to live in Alaska and the time and patience required to make a basket they would be willing to pay the prices asked for them and not try to have the poor Indian women lower the price, which is usually a fair one.

This basket (showing basket) was made by an Indian woman in Alaska, assisted by her daughter, Sadie Durkee, who was formerly a pupil of Chemaewa. It is a regular Thlinget basket, and is made up mostly of roots. The foundation, or background is the natural color of the root. The colors in this basket are regular Indian dyes. The purple is obtained by boiling the straw in berry juice. The red is made in the same way, water being added to make it lighter. The white is the straw after it is bleached, and the yellow is obtained by boiling in iron rust for a short time.

Although I do not have to make baskets to earn a living, I am glad that I know how to make them.