

Weaving together the pieces of a lost art

Warm Springs Native revitalizes Wasco basket making

Seven generations later, Pat Courtney Gold, traditional basket weaver of Warm Springs, graciously cradled a "sally bag." She had been studying the intricately woven basket for a week at the Peabody Museum of Harvard University.

The basket was made by a Wasco woman prior to 1804, the year of the Lewis and Clark Expedition.

When they returned to the East Coast, Lewis and Clark took the basket with them.

The first time Gold saw the basket in a picture, the beauty of the design awed her. She promised herself when she became a "good enough" Wasco weaver, she would recreate that design.

That day came, and the Peabody Museum sponsored her trip to study the design of the basket. While there, she not only studied the weaving technique but, through her intuition, slowly realized the significance of the design.

Wasco tribal tradition says that decisions should be based on how they will affect the seventh generation, she explained.

Ironically, Gold realized she was the seventh generation, and the basket had affected her. Furthermore, she discovered that the diamond-shaped zigzags on the basket signify fishing nets, and inside are pictograph faces. The two symbols together represent the meeting of the new generation and traditions of the past, she concluded.

"It was one of the most profound spiritual experiences I've had. The information flowed from the basket to me," she remembered fondly.

Search for a beginning and an end
Just 11 years ago Gold was "turned on" to the Wasco weaving style when she received a phone call from her sister.

"She told me there would be an opportunity to learn how to basket weave in the Wasco tradition," remembers Gold. A non-Indian woman named Mary Schlick, wife to a BIA employee, pieced together the remnants of the Wasco sally bag tradition by talking with elders on various Indian reservations where she had lived.

Without the knowledge of how to begin or end a sally bag, Schlick offered a class in hopes of returning the knowledge to the Wasco people.

"She learned enough from the elders to spark my interest," said Gold of Schlick's class.

In fact Gold's interest was sparked enough to make a career change.

In 1991 she devoted her full attention to the pursuit of Wasco basket weaving, and quit her job as a mathematician.

Before long Schlick solved the mystery of the beginning and the end of a sally bag. One Yakama elder from the north side of the Columbia River named Julia Sohappay had retained the knowledge of how to begin and end a sally bag. Before her death, she was able to share the missing piece.

When the Wasco people relocated to the reservations, the Wasco word for sally bag, "I-schkul-le," stuck but the art was nearly lost.

"We lost about two generations of basket weavers," says Gold.

She estimates the last generation of Wasco who were experts at the craft ended in the 1940s or 1950s.

Bringing it back to life

No one knows for sure where the name sally bag, the traditional geometrical designed basket of the Wasco people, came from.

It seems likely it's the white man's interpretation of the similar sounding Wasco word for basket, "I-schkul-le," hypothesizes Pat Courtney Gold.

Sally bags were used for storage. Gold says pounded dry salmon was often put in the basket when trading with other tribes.

"A 20 pound salmon could be



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FROM CLOCKWISE, TOP LEFT: Pat Courtney Gold stands among cattail grass, a common plant fiber gathered for Wasco basket weaving. **TOP RIGHT:** Gold's basket created for the 2004 Lewis and Clark anniversary. The design was inspired by a Wasco basket acquired by Lewis and Clark in 1804 and presently exhibited in the Peabody Museum of Harvard. On the top of the basket, Gold added a picture story based on the journals of Lewis and Clark. She hopes to utilize the Lewis and Clark Anniversary by sharing with the public a Native American version of the arrival of the Lewis and Clark Expedition. **MIDDLE RIGHT:** Gold weaves a Wasco sally bag, **BOTTOM RIGHT:** Gold processes some dogbane with a seashell, as her ancestors did. **ABOVE CENTER:** Miniature sally bag attached to a necklace designed by Gold. **ABOVE LEFT:** "Yuppie Indians" designed with a traditional weave and a contemporary motif by Gold at the High Desert Museum.

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pounded into a concentrated form," explained Gold, as she indicated the approximate rectangular size with her hands as being about five inches by three inches.

"By doing this, they (the Wasco people) could fit roughly 90 to 100 pounds of salmon in a sally bag," she elaborated.

Sally bags come in a variety of sizes, anywhere from a large 2-gallon to small quart to a cup size. Families created basket designs, used among family members but also open to use by the tribe, said Gold.

Traditional fibers for baskets come mostly from water plants. Some examples are dogbane, cattail, beargrass, sedge, cedar, bull rush or tule. Some are peeled and shredded with a razor edge seashell until soft and fluffy. Afterwards they are twined.

Plant fibers are gathered in the appropriate season, washed and then dried anywhere from three months to a year, depending on the plant.

A 20-minute water soak prepares them for weaving.

Gold says fiber collectors need to be aware of chemical sprays, and of preserving plant populations when har-

vesting. Like the knowledge of the weave, many aspects of fiber processing were lost and had to be rediscovered.

"It was hard for us to continue our traditions on the reservation, when we were a Columbia River based people," acknowledged Gold.

Just four years after Gold's first class in 1995, she and her sister formed the Northwest Native American Basketweaver Association (NNABA). Their mission was to promote, preserve and maintain the tradition of basket weaving.

Tribes on the original Columbia River trade routes were encouraged to participate.

"We wanted to be really inclusive and include all tribes that traded together," said Gold.

Today tribes participate from Oregon, Washington, Idaho, western Montana, Alaska, Alberta (Canada) and southwestern British Columbia (Canada).

NNABA embraces the tradition of baskets mixed with a modern day contemporary twist.

"Current weavers maintain traditions but also want to express new interpre-

tations, by using their traditions to express contemporary views," explained Gold.

Gold realizes basket weaving has always evolved according to what materials were available. Blankets from the fur traders were unraveled and the colorful wool were woven into sally bags. In the 1920s the Wasco people traveled to the Willamette Valley and recycled the cotton twine leftover after agricultural hops were harvested. Old clothes are often shredded and incorporated into baskets.

Gold herself shares a photo of a wall hanging that she created with a traditional weaving method. The weave is done with old dry cleaning bags, colored shopping bags, audiotape, and film canisters hanging from the bottom.

Next year an antique woven barbwire wall hanging, created by Gold, will be exhibited in London.

She has a basket woven from housing wire. These are materials available today.

Other baskets she makes are more traditional but have contemporary designs. One example is the piece called "Yuppie Indians," a basket featuring Native Americans with expensive

clothes. The man's baby blue socks match his tie.

NNABA participants gather for conferences. Elders come and the younger generation hopes to learn from them.

"Often instead of teaching classes, the elders will just sit down and start weaving, as weavers do. If someone wants to learn, they can sit and watch and learn," said Gold.

After Gold and her sister started NNABA, they discovered there were pockets of people who knew the Wasco basket weaving tradition but didn't know who each other were.

"It was so rewarding to find other weavers," said Gold.

Pat Courtney Gold will receive the 2002 Community Spirit Award from the First People's Fund in Denver on December 13. First People's Fund is committed to supporting the creative work of American Indian artists.

Gold resides in Scapoose near the Columbia River, where she practices her art.

Her work can be found at the Museum at Warm Springs, Lillian Pitt Art Gallery, and other galleries throughout the Pacific Northwest. To contact Pat Courtney Gold directly call (503) 543-3584.