

Weaving ancestral ties

By Nicole Montesano
News-Register writer

All hands are busy plaiting flat strips of wet cedar bark.

"Margaret," a student wails occasionally, as her cedar refuses to cooperate.

Teacher Margaret Mathewson is working on her own basket, but she seldom stands still. She walks around the class answering questions, delivering mini-lectures on plants, and setting up a field trip to gather rushes next week.

A nationally recognized expert on basket-weaving, Mathewson was brought in to teach Grand Ronde Tribal members a series of classes on basket-weaving techniques that were used by their ancestors.

Last month's class focused on cedar bark; a course in March and April covered flat rush bags. Next fall she'll be back to teach class members how to weave hazel and willow baskets, and the series will wrap up with a course on spruce root baskets.

"We were terminated (as a government-recognized Tribe) for so long that none of us Elders know how to do anything," Marie Schmidt explains, as she weaves. "We have to learn. Some of them remember seeing it done, but they hadn't actually done it themselves." On the other hand, she adds, she comes to the class for fun as well as to learn the skills her generation missed.

Mathewson has studied the basket-weaving techniques of several continents, and can easily point out whether a basket woven 100 years ago was done in Native American or European style and what the basket would have been used for. The Tribe is seeking her help identifying baskets in a collection it intends to eventually house in a Tribal museum. But she doesn't call herself an expert.



Photo by Brent Merrill

Tribal members Marion Mercier, Joann Empey, Connie Graves, Marie Schmidt, and Lisa Leno are all participating in Margaret Mathewson's traditional basket weaving classes in Grand Ronde.

"It's a lifetime study," she says. "If anyone says 'I know baskets,' they don't."

Baskets were widely used around the world. On this continent, they were used for storage, gathering, barter, cooking and fishing, among other things. Some were watertight.

Mathewson studied plants first, tagging along on her professor parents' field trips as a child, and later majoring in botany at college. That, however, didn't teach her how to actually use plants, so she branched off into anthropology.

"Basketry kind of came a little bit later," she says, but it grew into a passion. Today she grows and prepares most of her own material, and teaches classes and seminars on a number of ancient skills.

"How anyone could ever get bored, I cannot imagine," she says.

Class member Connie Graves, who has been weaving baskets for about

18 years, says she's excited about "finally learning to make baskets that would have been indigenous to us."

"Weaving is weaving, whether you're Chinese or Native American, but what's ingenious about basket weavers all over the world is that they used what was available to them."

Graves says she lives in a small house where space is at a premium. Baskets hung from the rafters provide some much-needed storage space. Those she doesn't need she gives away to friends and family.

"They become such a labor of love that the idea that someone would give you money (for them) is just insulting," she says.

Lisa Watt, who set up the classes with Mathewson, says the Tribe hopes to create a group of members who can pass on the techniques they've learned.

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PORTLAND CLASSES

TWINING BASKET WEAVING CLASS

by renowned basketweaver
PAT COURTNEY GOLD

Portland Community College
July 10-13 and July 17-20
(4 days/week, 5 hours/day)

Learn Plateau culture and basket twining techniques. The art and culture cannot be separated. This class will work with cattail, tule and commercial fibers. Pat will be showing slides on Plateau culture and basketry, as well as bringing basketry artifacts. Field trips will also be included to The Museum at Warm Springs and another to experience harvesting plant fibers.

Class is limited to 12 people.

Interested weavers, please contact:

MARY SIVAK

PCC, Sylvania Campus

e-mail: msivak@pcc.edu

or

PAT COURTNEY GOLD

P.O. Box 981, Scappoose, OR 97056

e-mail: patcourtneygold@hotmail.com

GRAND RONDE CLASSES

TRADITIONAL GRAND RONDE TWINING STYLES



Margaret Mathewson

Nationally recognized basket expert Margaret Mathewson is conducting a series of classes which started last March. Students will begin each course by using sticks and rope to learn the techniques. Prepared natural materials will be slowly introduced, leading up to the preparation and use of unprepared natural materials such as juncus, rush, tule, hazel and willow. Gathering trips on the reservation will be scheduled, and outside guest speakers will be invited to share their knowledge. An evening of basket identification for the entire community will be announced at a later date as will a conservation workshop to learn how to protect family heirlooms and artifacts.

Course #3: UPRIGHT OR FLAT HAZEL AND WILLOW TRAYS OR BASKETS
Sept. 27 - Oct. 18 (4 weeks)

Course #4: ROUND SPRUCE ROOT BASKETS WITH DESIGNS
Oct. 25 - Dec. 6 (7 weeks)

Students will be responsible for the cost of materials for each course: \$10/person for reed, tule and rush, \$25/person for cedar and \$40/person for spruce root. The classes will be limited to a maximum of 15 tribal members, on a first-come, first-served basis. Please be sure to make a personal commitment to attend each class. Our goal is to create a group of accomplished Grand Ronde basketweavers who can teach others. If Tribal members express enough interest for classes in Portland and Salem, the Office of Museum Development will consider holding a series in either location beginning in the fall.

To register please call Lisa Watt at 879-2076.

FIBER ARTS of Western North America

Margaret Mathewson is offering to the public a series of courses exploring the textile traditions of the West with special reference to Oregon and the West Coast.

► **JUNE 17-18: TRADITIONAL BASKETRY TOOL KIT** will introduce basic bone, antler, stone and wood working techniques as we make several tools which would have been used in traditional basketry several hundred years ago. Students will make a deer or elk bone awl, an antler needle, and an obsidian or chert shaving knife with replaceable blades and a cedar heartwood handle. Students may also make a sizing tool. More advanced stone shaping techniques will be demonstrated and students may choose to focus their attention in that direction. Natural ornaments for basket rims may also be made out of these versatile materials. Fee: \$90 — includes all materials, tool kits and obsidian to take home.

► **JULY 1-2: NATURAL DYES AND MINERAL PIGMENTS** on wool, rawhide, quills and other natural surfaces. We will learn about plants, lichens and fungi which produce colorful dyes, including native plants and non-native garden varieties. Demonstrations will include native wolf moss to produce yellow on quills, mushrooms to produce red and woad to produce blue, among many others. Non-toxic mordants will be used. Students will make wool samples and learn basic drop spindle spinning. We will also experiment with other fibers. Traditional earth-based paints will also be used to decorate a small folded rawhide container. Natural glues and fixatives will be used including fish and skin glue, pitch, fats, waxes, and plant sap. Fee: \$70 — includes all materials, a spindle, and a rawhide container.

► **JULY 15-16: SPRUCE ROOT MEDALLION** in a style practiced on the West coast by Native peoples from Northern California to Central Oregon. This is a plain twined basketry medallion with single face overlay. We will use prepared spruce roots and peeled willow warps with a star design in Woodwardia fern dyed with alder bark, beargrass, maiden hair fern and other traditional materials. The small medallion will be finished with a hide backing and strung with natural beads and shells. Fee: \$135 — includes all materials prepared.

► **JULY 20-JULY 26 (concurrent sessions):**

BEGINNERS INTENSIVE BASKETRY WEEK includes an introduction to techniques and materials used in traditional basketry in Western North America. Students will learn basic splitting and plaiting with cedar bark; twining and wicker with willow and tule or sweet grass; and coiling with split willow over grass, or cedar root. Basic splitting and trimming techniques will be taught but prepared material will be available as well. Slide shows each evening will cover traditional basketry styles and plants of the major regions of the west including the Southwest, California, the Great Basin, the Plateau and the Northwest Coast. Participants may come for all or part of the week.

INTERMEDIATE INTENSIVE BASKETRY WEEK is a more in-depth look at materials and techniques in traditional Western North American Basketry. Methods of incorporating designs into the basic techniques as well as combinations of techniques in baskets will be studied. Projects include wrapped twining, tight twining with various overlays and braided weaves and borders, diagonal twining with flipped design and three-rod coiling with designs, among others. Students may bring unfinished basketry projects for advice and trouble shooting. This class will be tailored to the individual needs of the participants. Basic knowledge of some basketry is required. These courses will include the preparation and cooking of acorn soup with hot rocks in a basket on the weekend. Fee: \$350 full week; \$120 for any two days — includes materials.

► **AUGUST 5-6: BEADED COILED BASKETRY** in a style produced by Native peoples in Central California including the Pomo, Wappo, Patwin, Paiute, Maidu, Salinan, and Ohlone groups. We will use prepared strands of split willow or sedge root and one-rod construction technique. Students may bring their favorite seed beads with them or use beads in the colors provided (mostly opaque, non-sparkly available). We will have time to make brooch or very tiny basket. Fee: \$140 — includes all materials prepared.

For more information or to register:

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