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American Indian Basketry Magazine exists for the following reasons: to sponsor research and communication in all aspects of the study of American Indian basketry, to inform an interested public, and to support the art of basket making among Native American women and to insure its survival by supporting the basket makers as much as possible. To promote these goals we plan in 1980 to create a non-profit organization for the study of traditional American Indian arts. This will hopefully allow us to expand our activities and to this end we welcome suggestions and all types of support.

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COVER PHOTO: Edna Kash Kash (Princess Edna), Umatilla-Cayuse, wears a fine old cornhusk hat in front of her tule mat lodge just after the turn of the century.

Cornhusk Basketry of the Columbia Plateau Indians

VOL. I, No. 2

Special Issue



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The next issue of *American Indian Basketry Magazine* will be a special on the *Twined Basketry of Western Washington and Vancouver Island* and will include information and photos on Nootka, Makah, Quilleute, Skokomish, Chehalis, Quinault and Clallam basketry. We welcome help with that issue including articles, old and new photos of baskets and basketmakers, and any information that is appropriate to this area. We would like to have photos of all active weavers of twined basketry among these tribes included in this issue.

Issue #1 received an enthusiastic response and we are grateful for those many informative and complimentary letters from around the world. Unfortunately the magazine remains a one man operation and I apologize here to those whose letters I never found time to acknowledge or answer.

The magazine is still not self supporting and we continue to sell it at less than our cost. This is part of the problem and economics of small press specialized publishers who are not part of a large publisher distribution system. We need your support. If your local bookstore, gift shop, or native arts store does not carry *American Indian Basketry Magazine* please show them your copy and ask them to order it. If you can get a store to order 10 or more copies from us we will send you a copy of one of the fine old unpublished basketry photos from our collection.

Special thanks for help with this issue to Mr. & Mrs. Doug Marsh, David & Sheila Burns, Ray and Frankie Snyder, Robert Monroe-Head of Special Collections at the University of Washington Library, the staff of the Smithsonian, and Joel Weinstein.



Earnest Johnson's wife wears a fantastic old cornhusk hat with the ever popular and intricate quail plume design. With her is Fred Dickson. ca. 1910.

Cornhusk Bags and Hats of the Columbia Plateau Indians

J.M. Gogol

The term *cornhusk* in reference to bags and hats woven by Columbia River Plateau Indians has become almost a generic term that includes all types of overlay twined weaving of the area, not excepting even those that predate the use of cornhusks as a substitute for the earlier overlay materials of bear grass or other native grasses over a foundation of native hemp. This type of twined basketry has been native to the region for thousands of years as Oregon archaeologist Luther Cressman proved when he was able to carbon-14 date pieces of twined basketry with false embroidery found in Catlow cave in the deserts of Eastern Oregon to about 9,000 years ago. As a result of his archaeological studies Cressman theorized that the Great Basin supported a large population thousands of years ago when the climate was different and the area

was lush in vegetation and animal life. The climate changed and the area dried into desert forcing an out-migration of people north to the Columbia River and eventually beyond to the Columbia Plateau country. The Columbia Plateau includes the territory that stretches between the Rocky Mountains and the Cascades and from the Columbia River in the south up into British Columbia to the north.

Since the Plateau Indian peoples were, for the most part, gatherers and hunters they needed an assortment of strong and flexible containers to gather as well as to store and transport the roots, berries, and fish they depended on as food source. Thus all the tribes of the area made some sort of twined basketry utilizing the strongest native materials readily available to them. They used a variety of barks, roots, and grasses



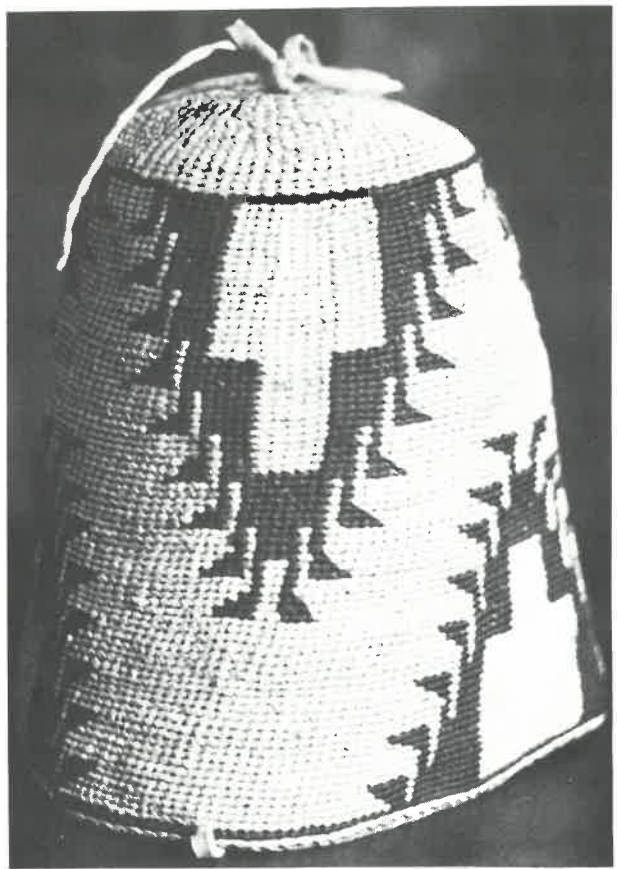
Cayuse woman weaving a cornhusk bag. Photo ca. 1900 by Lee Moorhouse. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution. No. 3073-C-5.

have taken up the weaving of cornhusk bags at a rather late date, perhaps as late as the 19th century, native informants among the Okanagon and Thompson River Indians testifying that they were not made among their peoples until the mid 1800s. The Salish tribes that produced the most and earliest cornhusk work were those living closest to Sahaptins, the Salish Wenatchi for example learning from the Yakimas and in turn influencing the Okanagons. The Salish Colvilles and the Spokans among whom Chief Joseph and his band of exiles from Oklahoma were settled, were obviously influenced by their close Palouse and Nez Perce neighbors. The Salish tribes did have an ancient tradition of twined basketry but it was primarily plain twining with little or no overlay decoration. Most of the finely decorated twined basketry found among them was obtained in trade from the Sahaptin tribes to the south and east of them. The introduction of the horse into the Plateau in the 1700s led to the expansion of the use of the bags as they made excellent saddle bags and their use was spread faster and further throughout the Plateau and beyond.

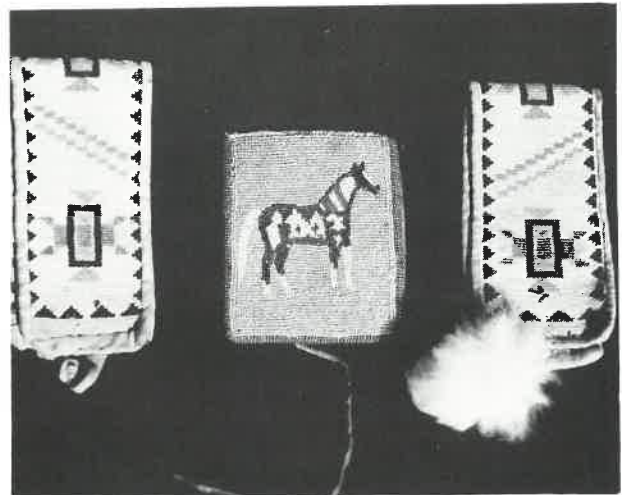
It was the horse which brought the tribes of the eastern part of the Plateau into easier and greater communication and trade with the tribes of the northern plains and by historic times plains type clothing prevailed among the Nez Perce and their neighbors. The one difference was the basketry hat worn by the women of the Plateau. Almost every tribe on the west coast from Alaska to southern California had developed a form of basketry hat and the conical hat of the Plateau tribes is not all that different from those made by the Klamath, Modoc, and Shasta of southern Oregon and northern California. The hats are obviously of ancient vintage though their origins are lost in the past. Today they, along with the fine old cornhusk or beaded bag, are an Indian woman's prized possession, heirlooms to be brought out, displayed, and worn on important festive occasions.

The weaving of a hat is much more difficult than a flat bag or straight sided sally bag because additional warps have to be added evenly throughout the weaving to create the perfect conical shape. Otherwise the hat turns out with warped sides. A fine old hat testifies to the great skills of the weavers of the past.

With the coming of reservation days in the late 1800s and the restricted, more sedentary life that followed, cultural traditions either died or changed and adapted. No longer were bags and baskets needed for gathering and storage, yet reservation life had produced even more leisure time for weaving. Weavers turned to making highly decorative bags as show pieces, and greatly expanded their repertoire to include an



Very fine Plateau cornhusk hat with quail plume design in red yarn, ca. 1900.

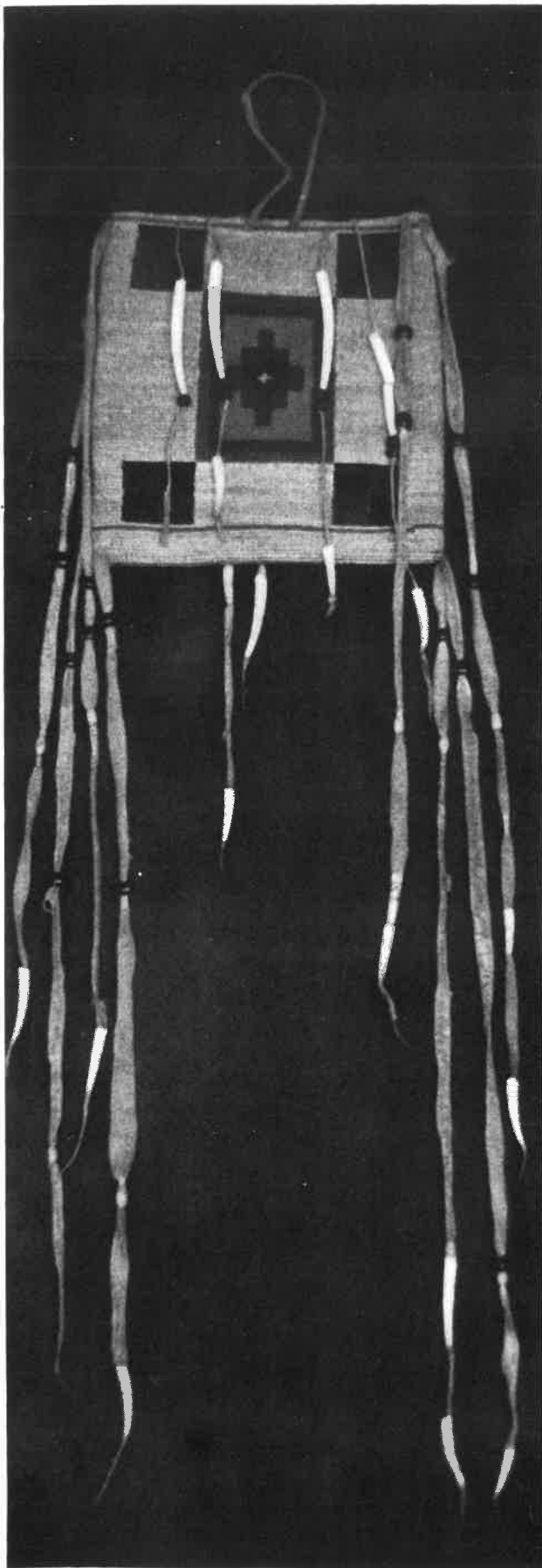


Fine Nez Perce beaded belt pouch with Nez Perce cornhusk armbands that once belonged to Flathead Chief Charlot. Publisher's collection.



Umatilla woman shown weaving a fine large cornhusk bag as she sits in the sun in front of her snow surrounded tule mat lodge, ca. 1900.





incredible variety of cornhusk weavings. Besides the traditional flat and round bags and hats they wove wallets, armbands, belts, vest, headbands, martingales, dress ornaments, and other items that have become rare collector's treasures.



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A very fine weave Plateau wallet of cornhusk and yarn strung with dentalia, ca. 1890.



Plateau Indian girls with one of the finest woven and most artistically executed cornhusk bags ever made. Photo made about 1902 by Dr. E.H. Latham, in the photography collection of the University of Washington. The bag is now in a Yakima private collection.

Art Treasures of the Columbia Plateau Indians

Mary D. Schlick

The county agent's pickup pulled up to a house on the hill above the Warm Springs Indian Agency. An elderly woman came out and led the agent into a shed beside the house to get an old metal suitcase. From this suitcase she chose the family treasures he would take for her to display at the Tygh Valley fair.

There on the back of that pickup were arrayed heirloom textiles that would rival Oriental rugs and fine Navajo weaving as objects of beauty in craftsmanship and design. They were her family's collection of the flat twined bags made of Indian hemp and grass or cornhusk highly prized by the Warm Springs and their neighbors on the plateau of the Columbia and its tributaries.

Little known outside the area except among collectors, the twined weaving of the Indians of the Columbia Plateau deserves recognition for its beauty as well as for its unique role as an indigenous American textile art. No other basketmaker in the world combines the same technique, materials, and design tradition in her creation. Although generally known as "Nez Perce" bags, these works of art were made by women in all the Sahaptin-speaking groups as well as the Wishram and Wasco (Chinook language family) and some of the Interior Salish. The basic weaving techniques employed in creating the bags—twining and false embroidery—were skillfully employed by Plateau women long before Lewis and Clark appeared in their country in the fall of 1805.

Although no two twined bags are alike, the technique and general design style of bags produced within recent years with new materials are surprisingly similar to the oldest bags in private and museum collections. Some reasons for this may be: the Indians of the Plateau live today in the same part of the country where their ancestors lived; the relatively dry climate has helped preserve the weaving; and the work has been held in high regard by the Indian people, who pass the bags down through the generations.

The weaving is difficult and time consuming; the product is beautiful. Highly prized by the

maker as well as subsequent owners, the bags were made for the weaver's own use or for gifts. They are carried as part of the owner's finest clothing, contributing to her sense of identity and status within the Indian community. Although rarely carried by men except on ceremonial occasions, the bags are shown in some turn-of-the-century formal portraits of Plateau men, again displayed as articles of pride. Passed from one family to another through memorials, weddings, and other trades, they are rarely offered for sale to non-Indians. As with the Warm Springs woman selecting art for the fair exhibit, many Indian families have preserved these heirlooms for their own "generations yet unborn."

Because of these factors, those few weavers creating bags today have many fine examples of the traditional designs of their own people to use for inspiration.

Although some scholars have attributed Plateau designs to influences from the Pacific Coast, the Plains, or from northern California Indians, the age of the art and the relative stability of the design style over time suggest that the weaving has a distinct character in its own right. The Plateau people traveled great distances, but influence from these contacts with other Indians did not eradicate their own culture. Much remains of their old ways, and the distinctive and beautiful twined bags of Indian hemp, strengthened and decorated with false embroidery of grass and, later, cornhusk and yarn, are among the treasured remnants of the very earliest days.

Development of the art

Women living near the river that became known as the Columbia had unique problems to solve: how to protect and transport family belongings during seasonal moves to the river, to the root digging fields, to the mountains for berries, to the winter camps. They needed containers to keep dried roots and other foods

free from dust; to hold the freshly dug roots during digging; to carry small personal objects, clothing and jewelry; to hold the materials for making more containers. These containers needed to be flexible, to take up little space when not in use.

The ancestors of the present day Plateau people discovered the tall plant growing in damp ground, known by the Yakima as *taxos*. They found that this plant, *Apocynum cannabinum*, also Indian hemp, silkweed, dogbane and other common names, produced soft lustrous fibers that could be spun into strong twine. This twine could be used to weave flexible carrying bags. Other fibers were used—the inner bark of the willow, bark of antelope brush, sagebrush—but the hemp was the favorite. To decorate the bag or to construct a dust-tight container, the weaver added an outside layer as she worked. This was woven in by false embroidery. In embroidery, the decoration or outside layer is added after the fabric is constructed. In false embroidery, it is added while weaving. The weaver looped a third weft strand of a flat material such as grass over the outside twist of the twine, completely covering the two original weft strands, but not showing on the inside.

The process of gathering, curing and spinning the hemp is time-consuming and tedious. Similar effort went into preparing grass or other fiber for the false embroidery. Rye grass, bulrush or tule, willow bark, or bear grass were used. By the time the weaver was ready to sit down and begin weaving the bags on her lap, she had put in a lot of effort simply preparing the materials. Illustrations in early books about "primitive" weaving in Virginia and Alaska led several writers erroneously to describe the plateau weaver as suspending her work from a support and weaving downward. Actually, she holds the weaving on her lap, working outward—a much more comfortable position, and she can move her work from place to place with ease.

An elderly Yakima weaver told of helping her grandmother make bags when she was a child, of splitting the grasses for decoration with her teeth to make them even. The older bags were all hemp, with only the designs in grass, she reported. Later she used cornhusks for false embroidery. "They need to be tough, white, and soft in long pieces," she said. She especially prized the corn with variegated kernels, known as Indian corn, for its strength, using the soft interior husks.

The corn stalks were valuable possessions for the weavers. As recently as the early 1970's, a 90-year old Yakima woman complained that a



Yakima conhusk bag with yarn design in the Washington State Museum display at Seatac Airport. Early 20th century.



The late Julia Pimms Sohappy is shown weaving a cornhusk hat in 1973 at Wapato Longhouse on the Yakima Reservation. Photo by Joseph Schlick.



"The Belles of Wishram" exhibiting their prized cornhusk and beaded bags at the turn of the century. Photo courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

farmer leasing her land had destroyed her cornhusks by letting his cattle get into the field she had reserved for her bag materials. The hemp grew along the ditches in the Yakima valley and every weaver knew where to find hemp in her own area which was picked just before the rains came in the fall. A weaver's daughter remembers being told that when the fog rolls in, the stick Indians are out gathering hemp. She described watching the women rubbing the tough hemp stems back and forth with glove-covered hands to free the outside strands, peeling them off and throwing away the stick inside. They then spun the fibers on their bared knees, pulling out the finished twist with their left hand. Writers have described the process as spinning the hemp twine "on the thigh." But Indian women say "knee" is more accurate, and more modest. The long spun strands are then twisted again into two-ply for use.

Examination of a number of flat twined bags show that all Plateau women did not spin in the same direction. Both S- and Z- twists can be found in bags from the same apparent tribal origin. Similarly, most Plateau twining shows the stitch slanting **down** to the right and the false embroidery slanting **up** to the right. However, one fine all hemp and cornhusk bag collected in Toppenish in 1937 is made with stitches in the other direction, as found in Chehalis twining. Perhaps the weaver was left-handed, or that direction was her personal preference, always a factor in variations in artists' techniques.

Even the oldest of the bags made in all but the northern portion of the region were decorated in some way. The long process of preparing materials was brightened for the basketmaker by the prospect of winter days spent weaving new patterns into the hemp bags. Although there were many weavers, every woman did not weave bags. As in any art, there were those especially gifted. One young Yakima woman proudly carries her grandmother's Indian name that means "basketmaker." Her grandmother, although no longer weaving, is known as one of the finest weavers on the reservation.

The form for the bags was predetermined by their use. This freed the weaver to use her own creativity to develop designs appropriate to that form. The challenge was to create a work of art within the traditional outline of the bag, using available materials. Before early traders brought cloth and blankets, and missionaries and early settlers arrived with corn and, later, worsted yarns, designs were executed in grasses and barks, in their natural variations of color and dyed with native materials. Although some of these dyes were fugitive, as demonstrated by the pale, soft colors on some very old bags, they were available in the entire rainbow of hues—the purple of huckleberries and mountain blackberry; blues from larkspur, lichens or duck excrement; green from juniper, sage, snowberry leaves, or slime; yellow from chipped and boiled Oregon grape bark or from wolf moss; orange from the second bark of the alder; red, bright from earth from the Grand Ronde Valley and elsewhere and pale from chokecherries. White

earth was also used, and ashes from animal bones for grey, black from a special mud found near mountain springs. A Rock Creek Indian woman remembers seeing her grandmother chew alder bark to extract the deep red-brown color for dying bear grass.

A U.S. Department of Agriculture agronomist¹ suggests that the first corn brought across the continent was probably the flint variety, well adapted to the climate of the Columbia plateau. The newcomers could not have known that this corn would change the technology of an important Indian art form; or that it would have a tougher husk than later varieties, and, incidentally, than the maize that migrated to the southern part of the United States from the Northern Andes. The flint corn would have had the variegated kernels described by the Yakima weaver, the agronomist said.

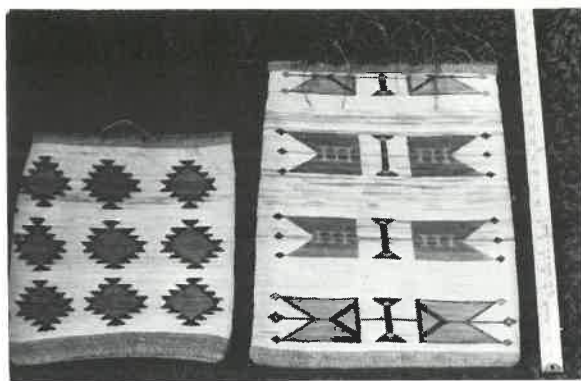
Some Indian women would have had access to cornhusks after the Spaldings and Whitmans came to the Plateau in 1836; more after 1860 when farmers' families began to settle in the Plateau area rather than travel on to the Willamette Valley. However, it would have taken some time for the Indian woman to discover and utilize the new material.

When she did, she discovered also that the easily obtained, strong cornhusk had the added attribute of taking dyes easily. A look inside an early cornhusk bag offers a view of the bright colors and color combinations selected by those 19th century weavers. When shown a needle-point copy of an old bag design, executed in yarn selected to match the original colors, a Yakima man said, "That's too bright for us. That's Mexican."

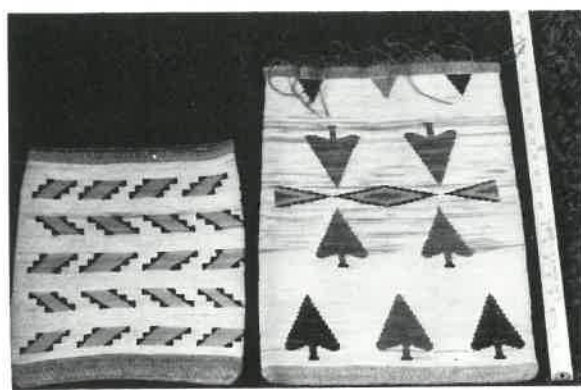
Even before the introduction of corn, it is possible that yarn unraveled from blankets or trader's cloth, or respun from shredded fibers of those materials could have been used to add decorative accents to the bags. Cloth also served as an early source for dye. Later, around 1880, aniline dyes added brighter colors to the repertoire of native hues.

As commercial twine of cotton and other fibers appeared in the Plateau country, this, too, began to take the place of the stronger hand-spun hemp for the portions of the bag that were out of sight. Some bags were constructed entirely of cotton twine with cornhusk false embroidery covering. And, as it became available also in the 1880's worsted wool yarn provided the decorative element, replacing dyed cornhusk. By 1900 Plateau weavers had a variety of materials available for creating their beautiful designs.

Although they long had created aesthetically



Two fine cornhusk bags in the author's collection. The one on the left was not completed when it reached the correctly proportioned size without the final design field at an end.



The opposite sides of the above bags.

pleasing forms and color combinations, it is possible that the growing ease of preparing the materials made it possible for the weavers to include greater elaborations of basic design elements into the works of art. It may be possible to test the hypothesis that more complex designs were created after the acquisition of yarn when we know more about dating the bags.

A study of Plateau twined bags demonstrates the variety of materials available to the weaver from the late 1800's on. Bag designs include all possible combinations of native and commercial materials. One bag in the author's collection is constructed of native hemp warp, native hemp and cotton twine weft. The design is carried out in cornhusk, worsted yarn and strips of cloth. In one color, pink, the cloth strips, yarn, and dyed cornhusk all were used to introduce the color. A Nez Perce bag in the Smithsonian Institution collection, once owned by Buffalo Bill Cody, has wide horizontal lines painted in red, in addition to the woven design.



Idaho Indian cornhusk bag weaver who claimed to be 120 years old. Photo 1949 by Wesley Andrews. Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

Today few artists are creating the twined bags, and most of those are using all commercial materials. False embroidery, if used at all, does not cover the entire bag but is confined to the decorative elements. Many weavers are using the simpler, although also traditional, technique of wrapped twining to create their patterns. To many, this technique is more satisfactory when weaving with a round material such as wool yarn. It takes a flat or dense element, such as corn husk or grass, to cover the background weft in false embroidery with any ease.

The number of weavers of the beautiful twined bags is reported to have declined steadily since the beginning of this century. However, in a 1934 survey of Indian arts and crafts for the Bureau of Indian Affairs conducted by Mrs. Charles Collier, there were cornhusk bag makers listed for the Umatilla, Yakima, and Nez Perce reservations; 61 on the Nez Perce reservation alone. Residents of the same reservations today can offer only a few names of weavers, although interest in learning the art is growing among young women. A common comment is, "When my grandmother wanted me to watch her, I was too busy. Now I wish I

knew how." A Yakima woman who learned to twine in a workshop on the reservation said, "Now I can teach this to my kids."

The Designs

The artistic expression that the twined bag offers the weaver is an intrinsic part of the construction of the bag. Her skill in weaving a fine and even textile affects the work of art almost as much as the design she creates.

The artist has a dual opportunity to express herself when weaving a flat twined bag—the two sides can be different. A bag (no. 3E11, 12) illustrated in the microfiche included with the University of Chicago Press publication *Cornhusk bags of the Plateau Indians*, appears to be identical in forms but not in the colors on the two sides. This is unusual. Generally each side of a twined bag can stand alone as one of the weaver's creations. Often one side will be complex and the other a simpler repeat geometric design, although many bags are seen with two complex, or two simple designs.



Plateau Indian women with one cornhusk and two beaded bags. Photo taken about 1902 by Dr. Latham. Courtesy of the photography collection of the University of Washington.

It may be as described by a Yakima man, that the simpler repeat pattern could be the weaver's "signature." A woman reports that her aunt always wove pine trees into one side of her bags. This recognized use of specific patterns by known weavers appears to be one of the few ways observers can tell where a bag was made. Some well-known designs were considered the personal property of the weaver and her family. Elsie Thomas, one of the last of the Klickitat basket makers, said she never puts animals on her baskets "because my family never used those designs." Another Yakima woman described her grandmother as always using a horse design on her Klickitat baskets. Such use of personal motifs on flat twined bags was also common.

Although all designs on the twined bags are created by building up rectangular units, this does not limit some weavers to geometric forms. In a study of 203 bag sides, the author found all but seven were combinations of geometric forms. Of the seven, six were the "tree of life" design reminiscent of Iranian rugs. The seventh was of butterflies. A few weavers have executed naturalistic patterns of dogwood blossoms, conifers, butterflies. The technique would be similar to creating such patterns with needle-point, the stitches build up into a pattern in the same way. However, the tradition among all but a few Plateau groups is in the direction of geometric designs and appears to inhibit development of naturalistic designs. The best of the complex designs built up of geometric elements were observed to be more interesting and more aesthetically pleasing than many of the designs taken more directly from nature. The distinctive work of the Wasco and Wishram, generally executed in wrapped twining, is not meant to be included in this discussion.

In the study, a triangle in some arrangement was the most common form found in the primary design (largest area or largest number of forms). Diamonds were next, and rectangles a distant third. Triangles, then diamonds and lines were most frequently observed as secondary and accent motifs. The truncated cone was counted as a triangle. Other forms observed in any number were zig zag, chevron, rhomboid, cross and "foot" motifs. These findings support those of others studying twined weaving.

Nez Perce girl with cornhusk belt pouch, carrying bag with flap, and large bag. ca. 1920.





A group of Umatilla women in camp with their fine cornhusk bags. Photo courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

However, the study went a step farther than earlier works and noted the format—the overall spacing and placement of the designs—in an attempt to define the Plateau aesthetic tradition.

In the largest number of bag sides, the forms were coordinated into one design giving a unified appearance. These designs had from one to seven related components. Over half of these designs had five components. A typical arrangement would include a large central motif (for example, the eight-pointed star) with smaller motifs in the corners.

Another frequently observed arrangement of design was a repeat motif in horizontal rows and vertical columns. The third most popular format was three design areas arranged vertically.

Symmetry appears to be an important design tradition for flat Plateau bags. A high percentage (78 percent) of the bag designs exhibited horizontal symmetry—correspondence of size, shape and relative position of parts on opposite

sides of a vertical line. Over half of these also exhibited vertical symmetry. Of the designs that were not symmetrical, some were due to uneven execution of design, possibly by a less experienced weaver, or one who changed her mind while making the bag. Others were caused by variations in color or design elements within the symmetrical pattern. A few exhibited well-executed designs but the weaver apparently ran out of materials, or the bag reached the desired size before she completed her planned design. Practicality won out over aesthetics. Only six bag designs included borders, and these were horizontal lines at top and bottom. The practice of beginning and ending the larger root storage bags with several rows of plain twining in the hemp, in effect, produces borders on most of the bags.

Color in twined Plateau bags

The earliest bags were decorated only with grasses in their natural colors of green, yellow,



Indian girl photographed at The Dalles on the Columbia River around 1900. Her horse carries a beaded bag and a most exquisite cornhusk bag. The finely detailed and complicated design indicates that it is perhaps of local Tenino origins. Photo courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

and white—depending on the time of year gathered. A limited study of colors on the Plateau twined bags showed that all hues were used on later bags and in a variety of combinations. Color combinations included from two to seven colors. Red in all its values and intensity was by far the most popular color, observed in 85 percent of the combinations. Blue, then green, were next. Similarly, red and blue was the most popular combination; red and green, second. Blue or green were rarely seen without some form of red in the combination. Bluegreen, yellow, and orange (not necessarily together) were found in a third of the combinations. More than one in five combinations included purple and/or pink. Brown and grey were used less frequently.

Contrasting color combinations usually included contrasts in light and dark, or in hues that accent each other. Forms were frequently outlined with line or step arrangements in darker colors. Some repeated the same pattern in darker or lighter color inside the design. In many bags, these contrasts produced a three-dimensional effect.

Identifying Plateau weaving

The work of the Plateau weavers can be differentiated from work of other Indian groups by the general design aesthetic and by the technique of soft twining and false embroidery. However, unless we know the maker of the bag, we can only guess about its source within the Plateau region.

Tribal members vary in their ability to identify where the bags were made. Many say they can't tell unless they recognize the weaver's design or style. A Yakima woman reports, "Nez Perce bags have an up and down feeling; Warm Springs and Rock Creek are strange and bold; Klickitats, really nice." A man adds, "We (Yakima) use sharp things—mountains, arrows, birds." A Nez Perce woman identified a bag with columns of repeat designs as work of her people. There appeared to be some agreement that Nez Perce designs were bolder, often with black outlines; that Cayuse are well designed, bright and innovative; and Yakima simpler, dignified, primarily geometric.

The meaning of the designs, if there was one, apparently is known to the maker alone; more often than not the design being created solely as an artistic expression. Names of designs usually are used to describe the form only, not to convey meaning.

Inadequate documentation has created a major problem in identifying the source of Plateau twined bags. Many museum and private collectors' records are incomplete, with limited and sometimes only inferential information. A beautiful Plateau cornhusk bag in Canada's National Museum of Man is identified as "Ojibway hemp bag" in a recent book on Canadian Indian art.² Few bags were bought from the weaver herself, the only certain way of knowing the source. These bags traditionally have been so highly prized that they passed from one family to another on the Plateau and knowledge of their origin may be lost also to present Indian owners.

Perhaps it is enough to recognize and enjoy the beauty of these unique works created by anonymous women artists. Much treasured by the families and neighbors of the makers, they deserve greater attention and appreciation from lovers of American art.

Notes

1. Personal communication with Paul H. Harvey, agronomist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Beltsville, Md, May 19, 1978.
2. Pages 52-53 of O.P. Dickason's *Indian Arts in Canada*. Ottawa: Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 1972.

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Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution. No. 2890-B-24.

Rose Frank Shows How To Make A Nez Perce Cornhusk Bag

J.M. Gogol

While visiting with friends from Idaho at the Pendleton Round Up this past September I was pleasantly surprised to hear that one of the best weavers of the Nez Perce tribe was living in Salem, Oregon, where, as I subsequently learned, her husband works at the Chemawa Indian School. When I called her on the phone her very articulate and soothing voice impressed and intrigued me and I looked forward to our first meeting.

Rose Frank was not born into a family of weavers and began to weave rather late in life when in 1959 she became one of the students of the late Ida Blackeagle, master weaver of the Nez Perce. Rose has been active over the last twenty years however, has mastered the craft, and has in turn taught several classes in cornhusk bag weaving to Indian girls at Lapwai on the Nez Perce Reservation. She is a most versatile weaver making cornhusk weavings of all types: flat bags of all sizes, round sally bags, wallets, belts, headbands, and she plans to start weaving her first hat in the near future.

The basic materials that Rose uses are those most commonly taken up by weavers of cornhusk bags these days: jute, twine, cornhusks, and colored yarns, all of which replace the native hemp and bear grass used by weavers before the middle of the last century. Although most weavers give as their reason for not using the old native materials their belief that they are now extinct, Indian hemp is still to be found in some abundance along the watercourses of the Columbia River Plateau country, and bear grass is still available in the mountains. These materials, however, have to be found, gathered at a certain time of the year, and painstakingly prepared, all of which used to absorb more time and effort than the actual weaving itself. More than half of the work of weaving a bag is saved by using commercially prepared materials. The cornhusks, of course, aren't available at the local craft store but they are as close as the nearest supermarket. In any case cornhusks are even stronger than the formerly used bear grass, they form a beautiful overlay background material, and they are much easier to prepare and use.

Since the cornhusk forms the surface background of all cornhusk work it is perhaps the most important element and the bags are thus appropriately named. Rose saves the husks of the corn she buys whenever it is available at her local supermarket. She peels off and keeps only the innermost whiter layers which she leaves out in the hot sun to bleach even whiter. Earlier, she tells me, she tried hurrying the process by soaking the husks in bleach but learned that it both weakened the fibers and yellowed the husks. She found out over the years that exposing them to the bleaching rays of the sun was the best method for it bleaches them thoroughly without in any way damaging the fibers. Cornhusks are incredibly tough and one can readily understand why Indian weavers substituted it for the tough narrow fibers of bear grass which has always been fairly difficult to acquire and which in early days was an important trade item on the Columbia River. Bear grass is also difficult to process and hard on the hands, whereas cornhusks are rather easily made ready for weaving after soaking, bleaching, and sizing by cutting into appropriate widths. Since cornhusks are much wider than the narrow bear grass stalks they also make weaving easier and faster. Whenever possible Rose likes to use the husks of Indian corn which she says definitely makes better weaving material than modern hybrid corns.

Cornhusk bags are woven with two weft strands of twine around a warp of jute with the cornhusk and decorative yarn element wrapped around only the outer surface strand of twine so that the cornhusk or design element shows only on the outside. This is called false embroidery. When the cornhusk or yarn is wrapped around both weft strands and warp the process is called wrapped twining, a technique found in many of the older woven cornhusk hats and bags from the Columbia River tribes, from where it seems to have spread north to the Salish tribes of northern Washington and British Columbia. The Nez Perce today use the technique of false embroidery exclusively.

For smaller bags (6-8" wide) Rose uses about 50 warps of jute and up to about 80 warps for



Rose Frank at her kitchen table displays cornhusk and yarn bags, two of which were her first and the other two her most recently completed work.

larger bags, with the larger bags usually using warps of greater thickness. Since the jute comes in various thicknesses the use of smaller sizes produce a finer weave because smaller warps require more warp strands to be used per inch of weaving.

The first step in beginning to weave a cornhusk bag is to take several warp strands whose length should be double the length of the desired bag size. A strand of twine of some length is then wrapped around the middle of the first warp of jute, the second warp is placed against the first and the twine is twisted around it to hold it to the first, and so on until the desired width for the bag is realized. The process is then reversed when the end is reached and the warps are twined again to one another round the width of the bag. Rose does this about 5 or 6 times to form the undecorated base. In older bags this undecorated portion was usually much larger with a base of 25 or more undecorated rows of twining. At the beginning of the sixth row the weaver introduces a strand of cornhusk which has been soaked to give it flexibility, sized to

give it even width, and scraped along its surface to make it thinner. She inserts it behind the warp and wraps the strand of twine around the back of the warp to hold it fast. It is then wrapped around the outer strand of twine and pulled tight against the warp as the weft strands reverse position and are pulled tight in preparation for twining around the next warp. The cornhusk from this point will cover the surface of the bag except at those points where the weaver substitutes a strand of dyed cornhusk or colored yarn to form a design element.

Rose figures that every row of twining on a medium size bag will take her about an hour to complete. We counted almost 200 rows in the bag she had just finished and realized that she had been making less than 50¢ an hour for her time. Most of her work has been made to order for Indian friends in Idaho and she is backlogged with many requests for special projects. She spends most of her time these days weaving and looks forward to the time next year when she and her husband will retire to their homestead on the Nez Perce Reservation in Idaho.



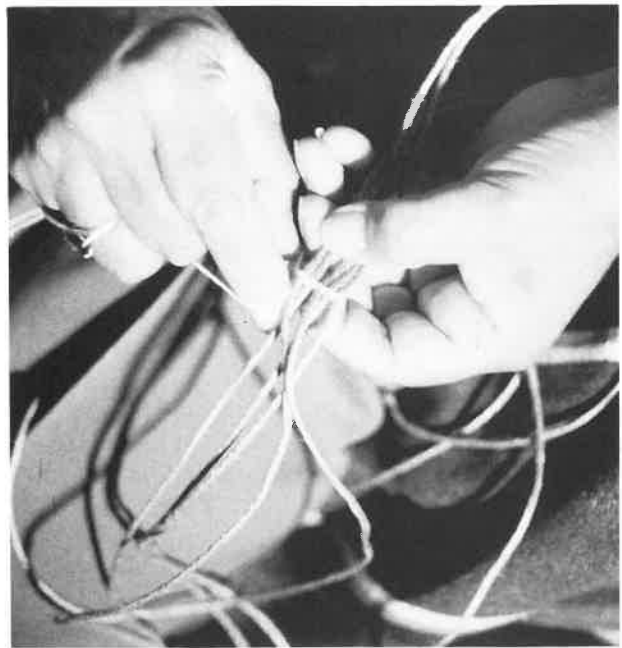
The weaver grasps a single strand of jute at its midpoint and tightly wraps a strand of twine around it.



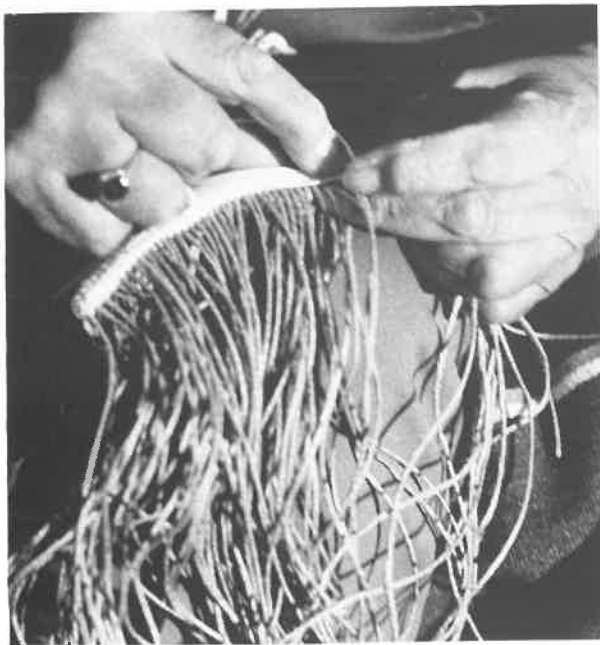
She adds a second warp strand of jute and wraps the weft strings around it so that it is held firmly to the first.



A third warp strand is added with the weft strings wrapped around and holding it fast.



Here five warp strands are held fast by the twining of the weft element, and the process continues through fifty or more warp strands.



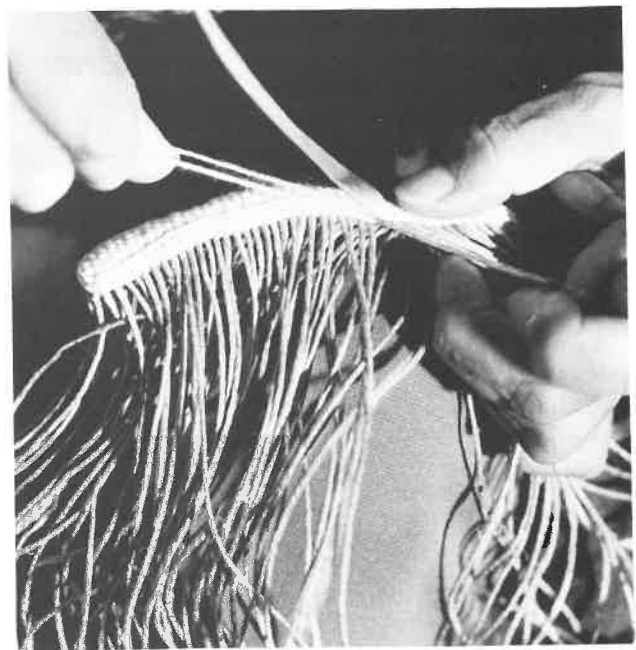
About fifty warps have been twined together with five rows of plain twining.



The weaver has had her cornhusks soaking in a jar of water to make them flexible for weaving.



She takes the cornhusk, cuts it to an even width and scrapes it to an even thickness (thinness is a more appropriate term) with a knife or scissors blade.



She inserts the strand of cornhusk which is held fast between the warp and weft elements when these are pulled tight.



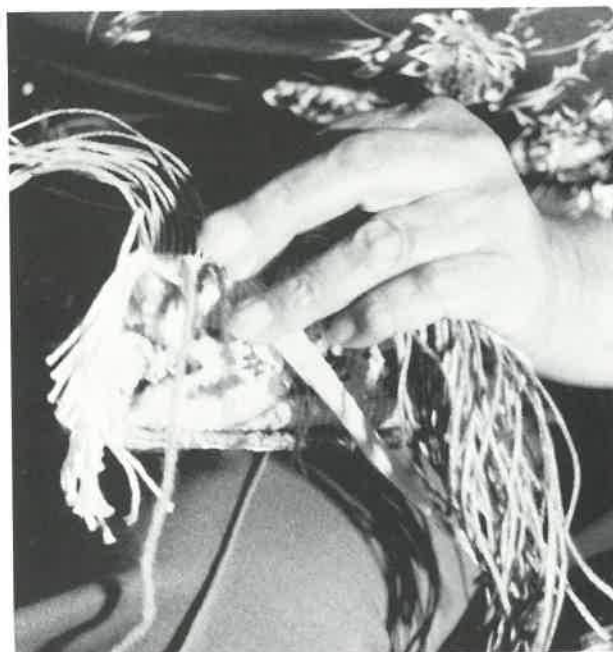
With the cornhusk held fast by the tightening of the wefts around the warp she now wraps the cornhusk around the outer of the weft elements which are then twisted tightly around the warp. The cornhusk is then twisted around the other weft strand which is now on the outside and both are pulled tight around the warp holding the wrapped cornhusk fast and completely covering the outer weft strand.



Over a period of days the cornhusk bag has grown with design elements in colored yarn introduced to replace the cornhusk at various places to create a row of colored design.



The cornhusk continues to be introduced to form the cream colored background.



Here you see the back of the bag with the cornhusk strand being cut free and a strand of yarn introduced for the design. At another time the weaver will use dyed cornhusk rather than yarn for the design, the former being preferred by purists of the art.

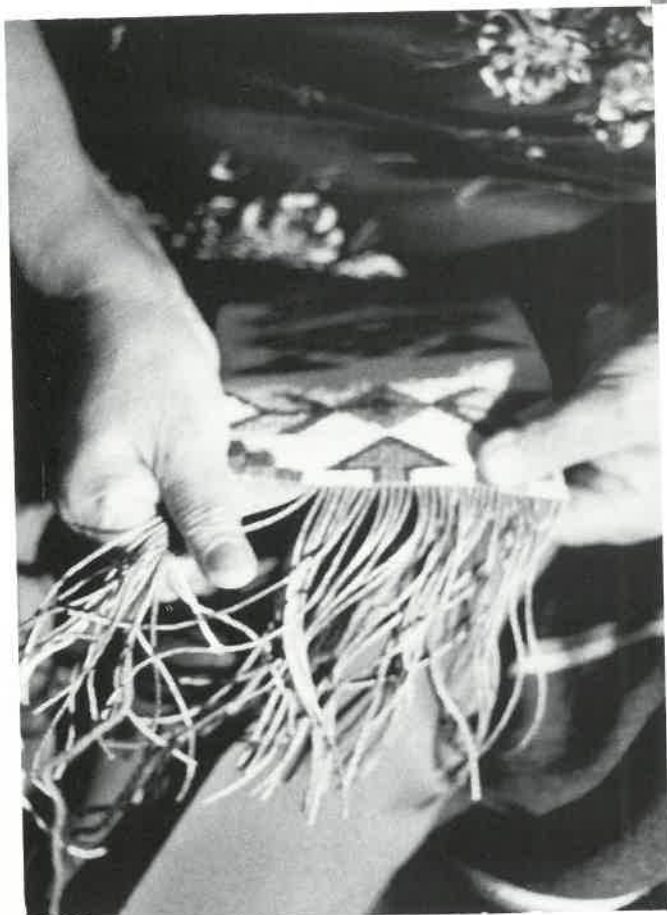


Notice how firmly the weft strands are pulled to keep the weaving tight and even!



Here a strand of blue yarn is inserted behind the warp and held fast by the weft elements. Like the cornhusks it is then twisted around the outside weft and covers it completely when the weft strings are pulled tight around the warp. She does this five times then cuts the blue yarn, inserts a strand of red yarn for the next part of the design and repeats the process five times until the edge of the rectangular design field is reached where the yarn is cut and replaced by the cornhusk.

A row is completed and the weaver surveys her work. If the design is not up to her standards she may rip out the row or rows and do them over again.



There is a tendency in cornhusk bags for the weave to lean toward the left which if uncorrected will make the design unintentionally lean on a diagonal, as shown in the old Yakima cornhusk bag illustrated earlier. To correct this lean Rose firmly grasps the warp strands and pulls them to her right after she completes the twining of each row. This is a technique she learned from her teacher 20 years earlier, and is why Rose Frank's bags are almost perfectly symmetrical.



Rose Frank in her living room displays a cornhusk wallet she has recently completed and other bags almost finished.



On the table is Rose's just completed cornhusk bag while she holds the first one she ever made 20 years earlier.

Ida Blackeagle, the late Nez Perce cornhusk bag weaver who died in her late 70's several years ago, was one of the great artists and craftspersons of the Northwest. Little known outside of Idaho she was a national treasure who during her lifetime never received the recognition that she deserved. In some countries she would have been declared a national hero, honored with medals, parties and pensions and been invited to dine with presidents and kings. Among the true treasures and heroes of this country are the master basketweavers who work at their ancient native American craft their whole lives long singularly holding out against the extinction of an art form centuries, even millenia, old, stretching as along as 10,000 years into the past. To her credit, besides a body of fine works of art, she left behind as a result of her teaching efforts a number of students, among these Rose Frank who began her apprenticeship in 1959.

J.M.G.

*The late Ida Blackeagle weaving a cornhusk bag with human figure design. She was one of the few weavers to incorporate this motif into her bags. Photos by Betty Derig from **Incredible Idaho**.*





Ah yah toe tuhn my (Mrs. Pablo) shown gathering camas roots with her root digger and ancient cornhusk bag with another on the ground already full. She lived at Kooskia on the Eastern part of the Nez Perce Reservation. Photo, early 1900's, courtesy of the Idaho Historical Society.



Group of Klickitat Indians photographed by Benjamin Gifford at The Dalles in 1900. The woman displays her very fine cornhusk bag with a stylized tree, leaves, and birds. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution. No. 56,801.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Yakima Nation Cultural Heritage Center, a modern architectural complex built in the form of a traditional Yakima tule mat winter lodge, has been completed. Long a dream of many Yakimas the six parts of the complex: restaurant, conference center, theater, gift shop, library, and museum will open at various times during the course of 1980. The museum, scheduled to open in June, will display the Nipo Strongheart collection and present exhibits on traditional Yakima life before the coming of white settlers to the Yakima valley. Our congratulations to those that worked to make this possible!



American Indian Basketry Magazine will publish this spring a separate booklet devoted to the feather baskets of Pomo Indian basketmaker Rose Anderson, shown here with a recently completed coiled feather basket. If you want to be informed of when it will be available, send us a stamped self-addressed envelope.



Indian Artists at Work by Ulli Steltzer. University of Washington Press. Seattle, 1977. \$14.95

If you are interested in Indian baskets and basketmakers you should buy this book. It is a beautifully illustrated collection of photos showing Northwest Coast Indian artist working at their native crafts and includes Nootka, Haida, Kwagutl, Salish and Athabascan basket weavers.

The Care and Feeding of Baskets, a book on basketry conservation by Emily Hartley. 1978. 36 pgs. \$6.00

This is **the** book for those of you who want to know how to care for, clean, and repair old Indian baskets. Emily Hartley who teaches in the Anthropology Dept. of Washington State University writes a detailed analysis of the different types of baskets and how they should be treated. She warns against many of the destructive techniques for cleaning and repair still being promoted by many publications. The book is available from the author, or from THE LEGACY in Seattle.

The Indians of Western Oregon, This Land Was Theirs, by Stephen Dow Beckham. Arago Books, Coos Bay, Oregon, 1977. 236 pgs. \$6.50. Stephen Dow Beckham's book *Requiem For A People*, the tragedy of the uprooting of the Oregon Coast tribes, is one of the great books to have come out of Oregon. This author's newest book is a nicely illustrated history and survey of the culture of the Indians of the Oregon Coast and the Willamette Valley. He is a historian whereas this book deals with the material culture and the information on basketry is not as accurate as it should be. Openwork baskets and cradleboards are pictured and noted to be made of spruce roots whereas the main body of the baskets are young shoots of hazel or willow with only the occasional twining strand made of split spruce root. It is emphasized that basketry hats protected the wearer from the rain, but lacking a brim like far north hats this hardly was their main purpose. Contrary to what the author writes there is relatively little truly fine basketry from the Oregon coast, most of the finer work having been acquired through trade or made by members of those tribes from the California-Oregon border area who had been forcibly moved north to the Siletz and Grand Ronde Indian reservations and integrated there with other local tribes.

The lower photo on pg. 30 of #1 has been identified for us as picturing Dora Hoffer Winnier and her husband, William Winnier. Dora was born in 1898 and married at age 14 in 1912. They were Yakima-Cowlitz and their children and grandchildren live on the Yakima reservation.



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A formal portrait of the Klickitat Indian Waters family taken in Portland in 1904. Chief Waters is shown with his brother the Reverend George Waters who succeeded him as chief on the former's death. Their wives wear fine cornhusk hats and carry a cornhusk and beaded bag.

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AMERICAN INDIAN BASKETRY Magazine No.2

CORNHUSK BASKETRY OF THE COLUMBIA PLATEAU INDIANS

This special issue is devoted to cornhusk bags, wallets, and hats of the Columbia Plateau Indians and features a photo essay on the making of a traditional cornhusk bag by Nez Perce weaver Rose Frank. Other articles analyze the history, distribution, and construction of cornhusk basketry and are illustrated with numerous photos including many historic ones from the turn of the century by such photographers as Benjamin Gifford, Lee Moorhouse, and Dr. E.H. Latham. Examples of Nez Perce, Yakima, Klickitat, Tenino, Umatilla, Cayuse, and Walla Walla weaving are shown in the various photos.

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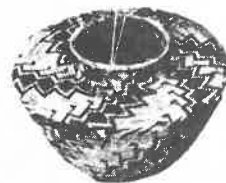
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AMERICAN INDIAN BASKETRY Magazine will publish this spring a separate booklet devoted to the feather basketry of Pomo Indian basketmaker Rose Andersen. If you want to be informed when it will be available send us a stamped self-addressed envelope. We will have space for 4 or 5 advertisements in this book for dealers in Pomo Indian baskets. Write us for rates.