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## Weaving With Nature's Fibers

By Barbara J. Barton and Renee "Wasson" Dillard



Throughout history, cattails have been used by Michigan's Native peoples to weave mats and other items.

*It is amazing to observe the transformation of plants into fibers that become part of woven masterpieces at the hands of Indigenous weavers throughout the Great Lakes region. Since time immemorial in Michigan and beyond, Native peoples have used the natural fibers of those plants that Aki, or the earth, has provided to make cordage, fabric, bags, mats, and rope.*



A Native woman weaves a rush mat. This photo is believed to have been taken on Sugar Island, c. 1910. (Photo courtesy of the Bay Mills Community History Department.)

A close-up view of the selvage edge of a basswood and wool bag. (All photos of contemporary fiber weaving courtesy of Renee Wasson Dillard, who wove the items pictured.)

**A** rich cultural tradition of natural fiber weaving in Michigan belongs to the Anishinaabek—the Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi. One of those tribes, the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, lives on traditional lands around Little Traverse Bay in Northern Michigan. For generations, the tribe's women have traveled to lakes and forests to gather materials required to create items needed by the village. They harvested those materials in a prayerful manner so that the plants would continue to grow and thrive. Thoughts of future generations guided everything the Native women did.

## A Cultural Tradition

Hand-weaving without the use of a loom is an Indigenous art form used to create *shkaamatan*, or bags; *chiptowinan*,

or straps; and *naakaaniganan*, or mats, among other things. The techniques that were used by the Anishinaabek in Michigan before European contact differ very little from those used today. Natural weaving materials were painstakingly harvested and processed to obtain useable fibers. Geometric patterns were often incorporated into the weaver's work. The patterns each artist envisioned were kept in her head, not written down on paper.

It takes a good thinker to be a weaver, since mathematics are often used to work out beautiful designs. Experience taught the Anishinaabek that certain numbers worked better than others, especially when color was added to a design. While the earliest patterns were stripes, diamonds and other geometrical shapes gradually began to appear, and many more patterns have evolved over time.

Weavers used natural dyes obtained from leaves, roots, flowers, and bark. Once the color was obtained, mortar was added to



ensure it set the dye. Salt, tree fungus, or clay are all examples of natural mortar. Once the dye was made, the fibers could be colored by soaking them in it, which took a long time, or boiling them in it, a much faster process.

There were several colors from which weavers could choose, including red, yellow, green, or the natural color of the fiber itself. The most popular color was red, which could be made from bloodroot, tag alder bark, or lichen and urine. Birch tree leaves provided beautiful yellow dyes and were popular because they could be used fresh or dried. Green dye came from many sources, such as the yellow flowers of goldenrod.

The process of creating bags and cordage began with gathering plants and bark. Harvesting was done at the peak of growth. Once gathered, the materials were dried in the sun and processed to finish the fibers. After the fibers were cleaned and perhaps dyed, they were ready to be stored.

Many plants were used for cordage, including milkweed, dogbane, and nettles. Certain plants proved stronger and more economical to gather, which allowed weavers to collect and process them faster.

## Weaving With Basswood Bark

*Wiigoop*, the inner bark of the basswood tree, was a favorite fiber among the Anishinaabek because it could be harvested in any season. Weavers searched for trees no more than eight inches in diameter and with long, straight trunks and no lower branches, since those trees provided the longest strips of bark. Basswood trees grow that way in thick woods because they have to “reach” for the sunlight high in the canopy.

Once the right tree was found, a cut between one and two inches wide was made at the bottom of the tree and its bark pulled upward as far as it would go. Only one strip was taken from each tree. The inner bark was stripped from the outer bark and then rolled up. The tree would continue to live and develop a long linear scar over time. Consequently, finding an old basswood tree

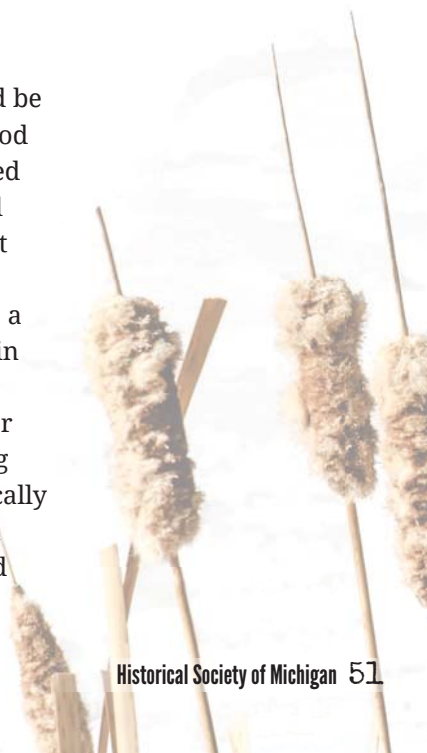


Top: Several basswood bags. Above: Raw basswood fiber and finished cordage.

with such a scar today tells the story of a weaver from long ago.

If the basswood fiber was needed immediately, the coiled inner bark would be boiled in a mixture of water and hardwood ash that produced lye. Clay pots were used in the old days. The basswood was boiled for three or four hours and then left to sit overnight. It had to be rinsed thoroughly to remove the lye. The finished color was a reddish brown, but it could be bleached in the sun to a light tan color.

A second way to process basswood fiber was by “retting” it, which involved letting the material surrounding the fibers basically rot away. The inner bark could be placed in moving water, such as in a stream, and left for up to three months. That method





produced fibers that were milky white and good for dyeing, which was done before they were spun into cordage.

Basswood fiber was spun using a weaver's hand and leg. A bundle of fiber was rubbed between the palm of the hand and the outside lower leg, with a motion going from the knee down toward the ankle. Surprisingly, that remains a very fast method of spinning fiber into cordage. After the basswood reached the fiber stage, it could maintain its softness and pliability for years if kept dry. That work was traditionally done by older women in a communal way.

Basswood was used for nearly everything and was considered the most important *sabaapiins*, or cordage, used by the Anishinaabek. It was finger-woven into cordage that held up garments such as leggings and skirts and also made into tumplines and straps. Essentially, it was used just like *sabaap*, or rope.

## The “People of the Bulrush”

Another important plant for the art of Indigenous fiber-weaving was the *naaknaashkoon*, or bulrush, a tall slender plant that grows in the shallow margins of lakes. While there are several species of bulrushes, the one most sought-after for mat making was the tall soft-stem bulrush that is uniform in width from top to bottom. A shorter species that grows on beaches was also used for mats that were made into bags.

There is an old story that says the people of the Little Traverse Bay Bands were once called *Odawaanshk*, or the “people of the bulrush.” There are many traditional stories about bulrushes and how beautifully they moved in the water. Whenever there were waves or wind, the bulrushes danced.

The timing of the harvest was critical for the collection of bulrushes.

Historically, the plant became ready for gathering when its reddish-brown flowers had ripened and fallen on their side. There was then a two-week window to harvest before the plant became brittle and unusable.

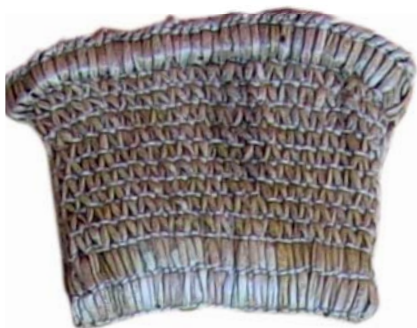
Bulrushes were traditionally cut with a flint knife. The plants were cut by the handful close to their base in water two to three feet deep. The flowers were then removed before bringing the plants to shore, and the long stems were carried in large bundles tied with a fresh stem of bulrush. They were placed upright and stored for two to three weeks in direct sunlight to dry. The bulrushes had to be checked daily for mildew, since any spotting would ruin them for weaving. The stems were then sized and sorted into groups and bundled.

In early times, the last step in the process involved placing the bulrushes back into the water for soaking and then pounding them with a club to make them pliable. (Fiber weavers today simply boil them until they are as pliable as cooked spaghetti.) After the fibers were made pliable, they were hung up to dry and stiffen. Bulrushes could be stored for years if they were kept in a dry space. When a weaver was ready to use them, the rushes were soaked in water and returned to a bendable state.

Bulrushes were chiefly used to make large mats that blanketed the earth and the inner walls of wigwams. They were also used to help transport camp belongings when Indigenous peoples relocated seasonally. Items were wrapped in the mats and carried on a travois pulled by dogs.

Weaving bulrush mats started at the top and worked downward. In the “woodland style” used by the Little Traverse Bay Bands, bulrush was used as the warp—a lengthways thread usually held in parallel lengths—and basswood as the weft—a traverse thread inserted under and over the warp.

Historically, three or four women would work together, weaving in the early mornings and early evenings when dew could be used to moisten the mats. Huts were set up to keep the warm rays of sunshine off the mats. The mats were hung



Variations of basswood and bulrush bags.

inside on frames, and colors and patterns were added. Today, the sacred meanings of those colors and patterns are being understood once again.

## Weaving With Cattails and Cedar

Another important plant used in mat making is the *aapakweyashk*, or the cattail, the strongest of which grow in the wettest environments. During June or early July, the tips of slender cattail leaves start to brown, indicating that they have reached the peak of their growth. That tells a weaver that there are about two to three weeks left to harvest before grubs start to feed in the base of the stalk. Once grubs appear, the leaves can no longer be used because they are damaged. The only cattails that are harvested are the ones that do not have seed heads.

Centuries ago, Indigenous weavers would lay cattails out to dry on-site after they were harvested. The plants took approximately two weeks to completely dry. The leaves had to be separated immediately after they were harvested or they would stick together because the mucilaginous substance exuded by cut plant tissue acts like glue.

Once the cattails had dried, mats were constructed using basswood twine. The selvage edge—the beginning and ending edges of the mat—would be staked out onto the ground. The work of a weaver was done while kneeling or sitting over the mat. A *zhaabnigan*, or bone needle, made from a split rib bone of a large animal such

as moose or elk, was used to stitch the mat together.

To create the needle, the rib was ground down using sand and a rock until one could see the marrow, and then it was split using flint until there were two long, flat pieces of bone. Finally, the side with the marrow was ground down until it became smooth, and a hole was drilled through it.

The bone needle was used to pierce the side of the cattail leaf. The weaver would feed a fistful of cattail leaves onto the needle before pulling it through, and that process would continue over and over again until she reached the end of the row. Then the weaver would start again about five or six inches below that row and continue the process until she reached the bottom.

Cattail mats were used by the Anishinaabek during warmer seasons as outer walls for dwellings. They could also be used as optional roof coverings for summer homes in place of birch bark. The mats provided good insulation and weighed very little, which allowed them to be easily transported between gathering sites.

The Anishinaabek also used *aanaagek*, the bark of cedar, to make mats, most of which were used for ceremonial purposes. The bark was harvested in late spring when it was loose on the tree. It was

Bottom left: A cedar bark bag with basswood embellishment. Below: Bone needles that are used to weave cattail mats.



Right: An assortment of fiber-woven items. Below: Cedar bark baskets.



## A Tradition Lost—and Found Again

The knowledge of weaving with many of nature's fibers—especially bulrushes and cattails—is extraordinarily rare today. Those skills nearly disappeared due to the change in Native dwellings from wigwams and tipi-like structures to colonized square, wooden buildings. Bulrush and cattail mats were no longer needed for insulation, and the shoes that replaced moccasins would have worn out those floor mats very quickly.

Consequently, the mats lost their purpose and the tradition of making them was no longer passed on through the generations. Nevertheless, the art of Native fiber weaving is still shared with Indigenous tribes in Michigan and beyond. Renee “Wasson” Dillard of Harbor Springs may be among the only bulrush mat weavers left in Michigan, and she is sharing this traditional knowledge taught to her by her mother with Indigenous tribes in the Great Lakes State and beyond. 🐾

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traditionally harvested like the bark of basswood, with a single five-inch-wide strip pulled upward from the base of a large tree. The weaver searched for a long, straight trunk and checked the pattern of the bark to make sure it was growing straight.

The inner bark of the cedar was peeled from the outer bark, rolled up, and taken home. Then it was split into thinner strips and stored for one year. There is a red “skin” underneath the bark that had to be peeled off, since sap bleeds from it as the temperature heats and cools. After a year of drying, the sap would have beaded into small, hard yellow balls, which were removed by brushing them off. Cedar bark was plaited to create many different sized mats. Basswood cordage was used to create the selvage edge, which went all the way around the mat to hold it together. Today, those beautiful weavings are still used for sleeping, feasts, and ceremonies.