

Grandmother inspired Aleut basketmaker

by Mike Rostad
for the Tundra Times

Kodiak resident Rosabel Morrison was left a very special heirloom by her grandmother, Nadeja Hubley, who was born on Chirikov Island and raised in Unga: a finely made Aleut basket that decorates Morrison's display case and inspires her to take up the art which produced such a treasure.

When Morrison decides to weave an Aleut basket, she sets aside book reading, television viewing, any other form of diversion, and even pressing household chores. The project is time consuming and painstaking, but like all noble efforts, the trouble is worth it.

"You get so engrossed in your weaving that it becomes everything," Morrison said.

Just picking the grass can be a "real Safari" she said. She trudges through any kind of terrain in any kind of weather seeking the grass suitable for a basket.

She may spend an entire day before gathering an armful of grass which, once the complex process has reached completion, is reduced to a small, finely woven vessel.

It's not that there's an insufficient

supply of grass; it's just that Morrison wants only the best and must pass through sheaves and sheaves of inferior textured grass before gathering what she wants.

Before she begins weaving, Morrison cures the grass, a two-week long process that involves sweating and drying.

Grass is wrapped in burlap until sweat flows from its pores. Then it is taken out to dry, and returned to the burlap. This alteration continues until the grass is bone dry.

Morrison says the basket weaver must make sure that no mold sets in. It's possible to ruin a large supply of grass because of the rapid destruction brought on by even a little bit of fungus.

The dried grass is cut into three sections, lengthwise. The middle part of the leaf — the rib — is discarded. The outer edge, the weaver, is what is seen on the outside of the basket. The last strand is called the "king's grass," which is used in making the most delicate baskets.

In order to produce continuity in form and texture, the long blades of grass are graded — placed into bundles according to color and size. If the weaver wished to dye the grass, this

is the time to do it. Morrison explains that the basket weaver can create coloring by boiling ingredients such as onion skin or wild irises in water.

When the concoction cools, the grass is soaked in it.

Prior to weaving the basket, Morrison dampens the grass by dipping it in cold water and enclosing it for two hours in wet paper towels and plastic wrap — anything to keep the moisture in. It's important to keep it moist in order to make it pliable.

Morrison uses her fingers, no needles or yarn, as she shapes and

forms what was once crude, dry stalks of beach rye or swamp grass, into a tiny, intricate work of art.

"The hardest part is making the knob for the top of the lid," Morrison said.

"Most of the stitches have to be dropped in order to make that narrow neck. In broadening the lid, you have to pick up the stitches exactly so that the ribs are even. People wonder why hand-made baskets cost so much," she said. "Once they're aware of the long process involved, maybe they'll understand."



photo by Mike Rostad

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