

Aleut Basket Weaver Sophie Pletnikoff Just One of 15 Artisans

SPECIAL FOR THE
TUNDRA TIMES

Sophie Pletnikoff, one of perhaps just fifteen people who are thoroughly skilled in the art of Aleut basket weaving, is working as a special instructor at the University of Alaska, Anchorage.

Sophie, who is 65, is the last traditional weaver in Unalaska.

She came into contact with Anchorage Community College as a result of an extended stay in Anchorage for medical reasons. The idea of teaching basketry at the community college was appealing because it offered her something to do while in Anchorage, as well as a chance to earn some extra money.

The college's Arts Affiliates Office pushed the paperwork through quickly. Three days after first hearing of the opportunity, the college started looking for students to take Sophie's class.

Sixty-two Anchorage residents signed up.

Sophie says that all of her

students are attentive and learn quickly. But all of the students agree that Aleut basketry is no simple skill.

Just preparing the materials is extremely time consuming.

Traditional Aleut baskets are made from wild rye grass (*Elymus mollis*). The grass is cut in July or August, bundled and dried until it turns yellow. While it is drying, the grass must be checked for mildew and occasionally soaked in salt water.

Once the grass is properly dried, the stocks are separated into individual blades, then bundled, braided and dried. During the actual weaving process the grass is damp.

In Anchorage, Sophie's students are using raffia. It is easier to get and easier to work with.

According to Ray Hudson, a friend of Sophie's, Aleut basket weaving is not really on the verge of extinction, but is surviving on a very limited level.

"Most people on the chain

would rather work at fishing because that's where the money is," he said.

Today, nearly all Aleut baskets are made for purposes of trade. Most are very small and distinguished by their extremely fine weave. Even the smallest baskets take from two to three weeks to make.

In the middle 1800's the Aleuts made larger, functional baskets, according to Hudson, but that application is long dead.

Today a weaver makes a basket and sells it," he explained. "A visiting doctor or cannery official might see a basket in progress and say, 'I'll buy that when it is finished.'"

Aleut baskets are seldom seen in shops since so many are purchased before they are finished.

On the chain a weaver might sell a small basket for perhaps \$40. Larger baskets might sell for several hundred dollars.



Sophie Pletnikoff



Karen MacCullen



Left, Sophie Pletnikoff; right, Ramona Schall



Left, Nancy Blaine; right, Susan Buterin



Aleut Baskets



Left, Judy Dickson; right, Marilyn Massey