

# Rita teaches basketry

"I have been doing basketry ever since I was a little girl," says Rita Pitka Blumenstein, a teacher of basketry at Matanuska-Susitna Community College this spring.

"In my earliest memories I can see my mother and grandmother showing me how to shape the coils. When I was four or five I would take my baskets to the store to trade."

Basketry or "mingqaaliyaraq" as it is called in her native Yupik has been a special part of Mrs. Blumenstein's life. Born at Tununak on Nelson Island where all the women know how to make the grass baskets, Mrs. Blumenstein learned with the other young girls how to pick the blades of "taperrnat" in the fall after the first nip of frost.

One by one the blades of wild rye grass were picked and then bundled to cure and dry. More grass was gathered in the spring, this time whacked off in clumps. The old spring grass, stained and wrinkled by winter, was used to make the inside of the basket coil.

The shiny, supple blades of fall autumn were used to wrap the coil, forming the outer covering of the basket. Not a piece of grass was wasted and even today Mrs. Blumenstein makes baskets that are not only beautiful but technically flawless.

"Mingqaaliyaraq" is an Eskimo art form, but Mrs. Blumenstein says she enjoys sharing it with the 14 Caucasian students enrolled in her "Eskimo Coil Basketry" course at the Palmer community college.

She says it is an honor to teach something of her culture to people who show respect for and interest in the painstaking work. The basketry class was one of some 70 classes offered by the college this semes-

ter.

She took her students on a short field trip during the semester to gather the old spring grass as it began to show through the melting snow. She cautioned that not any grass would do and showed them how to identify the wild rye, supple enough to submit to basketry. When the class is offered again this fall, students will go out with Mrs. Blumenstein in the flats and along beaches to pick the new grass as it begins to wither. Her husband, Bernard Blumenstein, says he always marvels at the transformation of the waving fields of grass into works of art.

The students have also learned how to dye the grass to enhance the designs in their basket sewing. Mrs. Blumenstein shares many of her secrets.

"I try to use natural dyes as much as possible," she says. Onion skins dye the grass yellow. Iris petals or fresh beets turn the blades rich purple. From stink weeds and coffee grounds comes brown, from blueberries comes royal blue. To obtain other colors, Rita shows the inventiveness she learned from her grandmother. Crepe paper and construction paper are bled for their dyes



**RITA PITKA BLUMENSTEIN** works along side her students at Matanuska-Susitna Community College where she teaches "Eskimo Coil Basketry." In the foreground are her students finished products. The largest basket on the right was made by Mrs. Blumenstein.

as is a new sweatshirt. Hershey bar wrappers give up a deep brown dye.

Mrs. Blumenstein has been teaching basketry for the past three years while she continues

to fill orders for custom-made baskets, mats and other basketry items.

She recently returned from Nome where she had spent a week-end teaching basketry to

students and villagers at the request of Kawerak, the non-profit regional corporation, a trip made possible by the Alaska State Council on the Arts.