

Eunice Neseth—

Kodiak Island's Weaver Extraordinaire

by Joanne B. Mulcahy
For the Tundra Times

When I heard that Kodiak basketweaver Eunice Neseth was in the hospital late this summer, I was concerned. Eunice is sprightly at 78, and it was only a routine heart check-up. But who would gather the last of the tall grass from Holiday beach for the Aleut basketry class? Or entertain the myriad guests who flow through the last house at the edge of Pillar Mountain with a view of Kodiak's bustling boat harbor?

I needn't have worried. When I entered the first floor room of Kodiak Island Hospital, I found Eunice in high spirits surrounded by a cluster of entranced nurses. She had spread tall strips of beach grass, fresh from their burlap wrap, the length of the stark white hospital beds. As her fingers deftly tied together the ends of each strand, I realized with relief that Kodiak Community College would once again fill with students anxious to learn the still vital art of Aleut basketry.

The Aleut tradition is one of the skills that Eunice has learned to impart through a life-long devotion to teaching and preservation of Native culture. For years Eunice has served as one of the Baranof Museum's most dedicated volunteers, cataloguing, writing, and giving tours detailing Kodiak's unique identity and position in the history of Russian America.

Born on Afognak Island, northeast of Kodiak, where she says she grew up "as free as the wind," Eunice is a reservoir of knowledge about the blend of Russian, Scandinavian, and Koniag heritage which characterizes many of Kodiak and Afognak's Natives. Though the Russians

could distinguish between Kodiak's Native peoples, they used the blanket term, "Aleut" for the inhabitants of the Aleutian chain, Kodiak, and the Alaska Peninsula, so the word has become a source of confusion for many people.

If Kodiak's people are not really Aleut, how then did the art of basketweaving become so popular on the Island? And how did this Kodiak resident become one of the most well-known guardians of the tradition?

Eunice ties the last of the golden strands together and leans back in a chair to explain:

"Well, it was in 1956, when Mrs. (Anfesia) Shapsnikoff was visiting Kodiak to see her sons. It was then that we first saw her working on a basket. It was just too beautiful, out of this world, to lose track of altogether, so we talked to her to see if she could come and give us lessons. After that, she kept coming. She was with us 10 different times and I was with her as her helper after I got so I could do it."



Eunice Neseth gathers the high grasses necessary for weaving magnificent Aleut Basketry.

photo by Joanne B. Mulcahy

Mrs. Shapsnikoff was from Unalaska, but the fine work she taught was what Eunice calls Attu weaving. She grows intent as she slides two fingers together, simulating the movement of the hands. "It's economy of motion...nerves

and eyes and everything," she exclaims. Mrs. Shapsnikoff had learned from her mother, who Eunice describes as a "very, very wonderful weaver." Anfesia had described her own work "as canvas against satin" when compared to her mother's artistry.

All that seems long ago now. Eunice picked up the weaving classes in 1973 when Mrs. Shapsnikoff died. She'd had a wealth of teaching experience, from years in the elementary school in Kodiak to instructing French and general science in high school in Dillingham. "I had a special interest in language," she says. "I can 'get by' in about ten languages...you know, enough to read and write letters, and translate."

Eunice sweeps aside a row of medicines to make room for a small basket she's brought in to complete. A stream of people come and go, some with their weaving, others just wanting to visit. Eunice is up, pouring juice and entertaining, always the hostess. Her somewhat unorthodox hospital behavior surprises no one. Eunice's life has been, in many ways, an exercise in veering off the standard path. Becoming expert in a tradition not indigenous to Kodiak, and making it an integral part of the culture fits well with her personality. There is renewed interest on Kodiak in Native traditions, arts, and history in recent years. Eunice has integrated Aleut basket work and made it a vital part of Kodiak life.

Annie Newcombe, one of Eunice's most devoted students, arrives with a bundle of freshly picked grass. Winter lingered so long this year that concern grew about adequate grass supplies. Eunice explains that "we pick grass from the beaches in spring and summer, the kind with a big head on it. Along the beaches is best because that's what they've found in Attu. The old weavers would refuse to use any other kind." The year is now marked for Eunice by the process of preparation. Her description seems dizzying in complexity:

"We prepare it by wrapping it in burlap in a dark place, and then aerating it each day for 10 days. We then separate the inside and outside straws, working those inner straws into a string, a nice, even string. It's not necessary to do that, but we do just because we were taught; that's the orderly way. Some people will not pay attention to that. They scramble the grass around any way they want to. But it's not the Aleut way!"

It's sometimes hard to convince students that the difficult "Aleut way" is the only one, says Eunice. Her aesthetic judgments cling to the traditional methods, but also allow for more recent influences. She picks up a painstakingly detailed miniature basket with a brilliant green woven through the lid. "This is what they call 'false embroidery'. They started using embroidery silk to put

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designs in after the Russians came. Most of the designs come from Russian books, and they take much, much longer!"

The thimble-sized basket Eunice displays is typical of the smaller pieces commonly made today. They're often woven over bottles or other forms. The baskets were originally much larger and served a variety of functions. They were used for storage and for carrying food, and even for cooking. Their present size is due to the time element, she explains. The fine weave speaks of untold hours of eye-straining work, and it's hard to imagine any financial match for the care infused into the baskets.

"It took six years for her to do her very best work. Six years!"

"There's a story told about one woman who was asked to do her very, very best work of one hundred dollars. It took six years for her to do her very best work. Six years!" Eunice marvels.

"For me, it's a personal thing," says Eunice. "It's the satisfaction of creating something beautiful. There's satisfaction in even owning something like that, something that has ceased to exist as a useful thing and still there are people who hang with making it. It's when you han-

dle the grass and watch it progress in color, and notice the texture. What do you say? — it kind of gets to you."

It's all part of a process meshed into Eunice's busy life: gathering the grass, curing and storing, weaving — often while visiting with neighbors and friends — and ultimately, teaching. The final goal is communication of the tradition. "not to let so beautiful a thing be laid aside."

Eunice teaches a course each fall at the Kodiak Community College, but her home always seems to have a kitchen full of informal students, having tea and homemade baked goods.

I was among them this past summer, an experience which left me more than ever amazed at Eunice's dexterous hands. In three days, I had only progressed towards a quarter-sized foundation. But Eunice assures me that it's attitude above even ability which marks a good student. She ought to be a good judge after so many years.

Several years ago, Eunice and other traditional weavers were worried that so few young Native women seemed eager to learn basketmaking. But as one hears more talk of the elders, of the values of their skills and years, that seems to be changing.

The nurse returns with a fresh supply of cranberry juice. The steady flow of visitors has taken a toll on the hospital resources. But not, seemingly, on Eunice's energy.

Despite her concern with passing the tradition onto Native people, Eunice is eager to teach anyone with the patience to learn. A great number and variety of people have found pleasure in the Native art form, each finding different and very personal meaning in the tradition.

It's raining now and Eunice and Annie turn to talk of plans for another grass picking expedition before summer's end. The hospital stay seems a mere inconvenience to Eunice, like the steady stream of rain, something to

work around. She leans back on the bed. A sign of fatigue? Not yet: she's mentally drawing her calendar, fitting the weaving sessions between church dates, sewing engagements, and museum activities.

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Editor's note: Eunice Neseth's work is part of the *Interwoven Expressions* basketry exhibit touring the state through March of 1986. The exhibit opened in Anchorage Sept. 29.



The late Anfesia Shapsnikoff.
Tundra Times photo