

LOOKING BACK

Area has long history of basketmaking

By Claudia Smith

Basket making is one of the oldest arts, and the coiling, weaving and twining of grasses, rushes, black ash or willow have long been methods for making them. Grain stalks were also harvested, dried carefully in the sun and plaited to make light baskets, bee skeps and straw hats for field workers.

The Algonquin people of the area made baskets from black ash that grew in every swamp in Lanark County. In the spring of the year, ash with a good straight grain could be pounded so that it split off in strips which were then cut, sanded smooth, and woven into strong baskets.

Sometimes dyed strips or strips stamped with a coloured pattern were incorporated in the baskets. They also made rectangular gathering baskets that were curved on one side to fit around the waist.

These baskets hung from the neck on a leather strap, leaving the hands free to gather fruit or berries. Pioneer memory tells of Indians trading different-sized baskets for a chicken, some butter or milk or for goods at the general store in Middleville.

In the late 1800s, Indigenous people from the Cornwall area travelled to Hopetown or McDonald's Corners for supplies of good black ash logs. They made baskets at an encampment in Beckwith Township in the late 1800s.

In the spring, women walked to Smiths Falls to sell their handiwork. With efficiently tied loads of baskets on their backs, "their bulky forms looked so strange from a distance that you could hardly tell what was going down the road."



A sampling of the baskets on display at the new Lanark Highlands Basketry Museum.

Photo courtesy of Claudia Smith

In the days before paper and plastic bags, people needed carrying containers for going to the store and to gather produce from the garden. Designed for every need, there were clothes baskets and hampers, lunch baskets, fishing creels, baby baskets, and sewing and herb drying baskets.

If cupboard and closet space was scarce, baskets were used for storage. Food-storage baskets had lids for keeping the flies off. Graceful long-handled baskets full of fresh flowers stood by the altar at the front of churches.

Specially shaped egg baskets were used daily to gather eggs from hen houses. Feather-gathering baskets had lids that could be raised only a small crack to keep feathers that were being gathered for pillows or feather mattresses from blowing away in a breeze.

Wool-drying baskets sat on little legs and large baskets held washed wool that was pulled out through a hole in the top to be carded. Baskets

were used for draining cheese curds and for gathering flowers.

The hamlet of McDonald's Corners now features a Basketry Museum. The curator is skilled basket maker Ankaret Dean, who has been interested in baskets for more than 40 years.

She has travelled the world, studying, collecting and teaching basket making. Her large basket collection is on display with a focus on various basketry techniques.

She is passionate about sharing her knowledge: how to collect and use local basket-making materials such as bark, cattails, roots, rushes, straw, pine needles, willow, cedar and grapevines, and how to use them to make baskets or boxes of any size, placemats, creels, and even decorative fencing.

The Lanark Highlands Basketry Museum is open Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. or by appointment at 613-278-1203. It is a stone's throw away from the McDonald's Corners Farmers' Market on Saturdays.