

Traditions

✕ Cherokee Basketmaking





Cover photograph: Margaret "Redfern" Pitzer of Wichita is one of the most respected Native American artists in Kansas. Her baskets and beadwork have been featured in museums across the United States. She received the 1991 Kansas Governor's Arts Award for her basketry.

Back photograph: Buddy Bates of Augusta puts the finishing touches on an ash splint storage basket.



This reed basket is decorated with the walking hands design which was common among the Eastern Band of the Cherokee.

THE CHEROKEE NATION

The Cherokees are a Native American group who originally lived in the Appalachian region of the southeastern United States. The area they called home now lies within the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, North and South Carolina, Alabama, West Virginia and Georgia. The Cherokees made their livings from horticulture and hunting, and they followed a strict sexual division of labor. Women tended the gardens where they grew crops such as corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and sunflowers. Men hunted in surrounding forests where deer was the principal game. It, along with bear and wild turkey, provided the Cherokees with a major part of their diets.

As was the case with many American Indian groups, the Cherokees were not politically unified. Rather, they recognized themselves as a single people because of a common language and culture. This shared identity allowed them to find unity when threatened from the outside. All Cherokees belonged to one of seven clans. These clans were matrilineal, which means that membership was traced through the mother's side. Since the clans could be found throughout the Cherokee territory, they served to bind the Cherokee people together with ties of mutual kinship.

Clans served other important functions, one of which was the transfer of rights to use property. In a matrilineal system, one is only related to the relatives of one's mother. Thus, a woman's possessions went to her own children, while the man's property was inherited by his sister's children. The mother's brother was the main authority figure in the family and was responsible for disciplining his sister's children.

The village was the focus of Cherokee life. Each village had a council house and a plaza where the people met for social, political, and religious purposes. Most political decisions were reached in the individual village councils as each village was largely autonomous. When decisions had to be made, the village would meet in an assembly and

debate the issue until a consensus was reached. Many of these group decisions concerned the planning of raiding parties. The Cherokee were in a constant state of war with their neighbors, the most notable being the Creeks and the Shawnees. The Cherokee believed that the soul of every person killed in war had to be avenged. This belief led to a state of war that never could be ended.

The Cherokee's way of life began to change in response to their first contact with Europeans. The first European to pass through Cherokee territory was probably the Spanish conquistador Hernando de Soto. In 1540 he entered Cherokee territory in his search for gold. His stay was short and he found no gold, but his and other Spanish expeditions left a legacy of disease in the form of measles and smallpox. Having never had contact with these diseases, the native populations had no resistance and lost large sections of their populations to new illnesses.

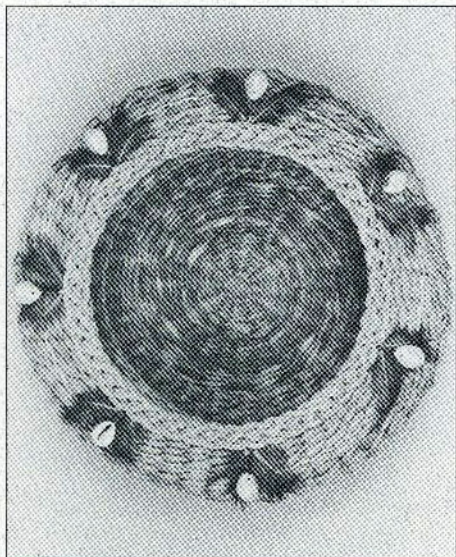
Fortunately, their location farther inland reduced contact with Europeans until the beginning of the eighteenth century. At this time European traders established outposts in Cherokee territory to gain access to the lucrative deerskin trade, which was a major source of leather in the colonies. As time went by, many traders married into the Cherokee tribe.

The trade with people from the English colonies had a major impact on the Cherokee culture. They slowly abandoned producing their own tools in favor of metal products, and the gun replaced the bow and arrow for hunting. Eventually the Cherokee became dependant on outside trade as many of their old skills were lost. The status of men also increased since their activities produced the largest proportion of valuable trade goods.

Sadly, increasing contact with the colonies caused the Cherokee to become entangled in European political struggles. The Seven Years' War (1756-63), also known as the French and Indian War, devastated many villages as the tribes became caught in the conflict involving two great European powers and their Indian allies. The war, along with the famine and disease that were its aftermath, eliminated as much as half of the Cherokee population. The Cherokee also lost their primary hunting grounds in Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. More destruction befell them during the American Revolution when they sided with the British, fearing an American victory would lead to white expansion into their territory.



The three rod weave design was used for this reed basket and lid by Margaret "Redfern" Pitzer.



Cattail leaves were sometimes used to make temporary baskets for the Cherokee. This particular cattail basket is decorated with seven cowrie shells and feathers to symbolize the seven clan of the Cherokee. The number seven is sacred to the Cherokee.

During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the Cherokees attempted to find their place in the new American republic by actively participating in the “civilizing” programs of the United States government. The Cherokees organized an official government with a charter in 1827. This new government invited missionaries to come and teach the ways of the whites to Indian children. This created many changes in tribal culture. The great Cherokee Sequoyah created a writing system for the native language. Soon Cherokee publications and newspapers were produced.

In the end these efforts were not successful. Settlers from the eastern seaboard continued their westward movement and began to see the Cherokees’ presence as an obstacle to progress. At first the U.S. government offered land to entice the natives to move into territory west of the Mississippi River. In 1827 the Georgia government declared the Cherokee state to be illegal and passed a series of discriminatory laws against the people. Pres. Andrew Jackson’s unwillingness to aid the native peoples only worsened their plight. The final blow came when a minority of Cherokees, who were actively opposed by the vast majority of the Cherokee people, negotiated a treaty for the removal of all members of their tribe to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma). In 1838 most Cherokees were forcibly removed from their homes. In the winter of 1838-39 they were compelled to embark on what has been called the *Trail of Tears*. Lacking food, water, and warm clothing, fully one-fourth to one-third of the Cherokee evacuees died of pneumonia, famine, and exposure. Although most were moved to Oklahoma, some were able to remain in their homeland. This led to the division of the Cherokee Nation into the eastern and western bands.

THE CHEROKEES IN KANSAS

The state of Kansas is closely tied to the period of American history in which Native Americans were relocated from the East to land west of the Mississippi. It was believed that native peoples should be moved west to make room for European American settlement. Between 1829 and 1854 almost thirty tribes were assigned reservations in what would become Kansas Territory. The Cherokees were given eight hundred thousand acres in what is now southeast Kansas, but very few of their members actually lived on the land. The land designated as the Cherokee reservation was known as the Cherokee Neutral Tract. Its use and ownership was later disputed by European American settlers and railroad promoters who struggled to attain the land by any means



Redfern designed this storage basket using the noon day sun and the cross on the hill designs.

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possible. Kansas Territory was opened for settlement in 1854, which once again forced the removal of Native Americans into present-day Oklahoma.

Today people of Cherokee ancestry continue to live in Kansas. The state's close proximity to Oklahoma, which claims a sizable Cherokee population, encourages many Cherokees to maintain residences in Kansas.

THE HISTORY OF CHEROKEE BASKETS

Archaeologists have found evidence of early basketmaking among the Cherokees and their ancestors. Although only basket materials found in dry caves survived, other evidence attests to the skills of early Cherokee basket makers. Impressions of baskets on clay surfaces indicate that the early Cherokees knew of a variety of materials and weaves. Accounts from historical journals noted the beauty of Cherokee baskets.

Baskets were made for many purposes, and therefore they came in all sizes and shapes. The Indians used baskets for gathering and storing grain, and historical accounts document them being used to serve prepared food. Baskets also were used to catch fish and as part of traditional games.

In the beginning, the foundation color of all baskets was the yellow color of the natural cane. Two colors were used to provide decoration. A black or deep brown color came from boiled black walnut roots. A reddish color was produced from the *puccoon* root. Twilling was the basic basket weaving technique historically, and designs were primarily geometric. The Cherokee baskets were rimmed with a thin oak hoop bound with hickory. The complex double weave basket was also a product of the Cherokees.

Traditionally the men helped gather and prepare the materials for basketmaking, but women were the primary basket makers. This makes sense since women were the principal users of baskets when they gathered, stored, prepared, and served food.

BASKETMAKING MATERIALS

Traditionally the Cherokees use cane, white oak, honeysuckle, and hickory bark for basketmaking. It is speculated that the earliest material used was cane that grows along the banks of streams in the southern part of the United States. Some basket makers gather their materials at any time of the year, but others believe that only certain seasons produce materials good for basketmaking. The basket maker looks for cane that is at least two years old. By this time the cane is stronger and is not quite as green in color. It can be stored at this point, as long as it is not allowed to dry out, or it can immediately be cut into splints.

A knife is used to prepare the cane. The foliage end of the cane is removed and the large part of the stalk is split lengthwise into four pieces. The outer surface, which is shiny, is the part of the plant that is used in basketmaking. This part is removed and trimmed along the edge to provide uniform splints. The underside of the splint is scraped, but the shiny side is left natural.

The use of honeysuckle in Cherokee baskets is a more recent development. Honeysuckle was brought to this country from Japan a century ago. The stems are long and flexible. This plant is used most often in small baskets. The best honeysuckle for weaving grows where it has no chance to climb—plants that climb are very crooked. Vines that are one or two years old are appropriate for weaving. To gather honeysuckle the vines are simply broken off near the roots. The leaves and small branches are then removed and discarded. At this point the vines should be coiled and placed in a pan with water. The water is boiled until the bark begins to separate. The vine is then rubbed to remove the bark. Any knots in the vine can be trimmed off.

The Cherokees make very few plain baskets, therefore a good basket maker usually dyes a portion of her materials. Traditionally the basket maker uses natural or vegetable dyes such as black walnut (brown is made from the root or bark), butternut (black is made from the root or bark), bloodroot (a red brown color is made from the root), and yellowroot (yellow is made from the bark and twigs). Dyes are made by boiling the plants. Depending on the desired color and the materials used, the length of time needed to dye materials varies from a few minutes to an entire day. Cane is one of the harder materials to dye, and honeysuckle is one of the easiest.

BASKETMAKING TECHNIQUES

Before beginning a basket, the maker must decide the form the basket will take. Traditionally Cherokee baskets are developed around a circle or a rectangle. The basket's use must be considered when deciding on its form. In general, baskets are symmetrical.

The Cherokee basket maker would traditionally begin her basket soon after the materials were prepared. The sap that was still present in the plant made for more flexible materials. In today's world it is not always possible to use the materials shortly after they have been prepared. If this is the case, the basket maker soaks her materials in water until they are flexible enough to use.

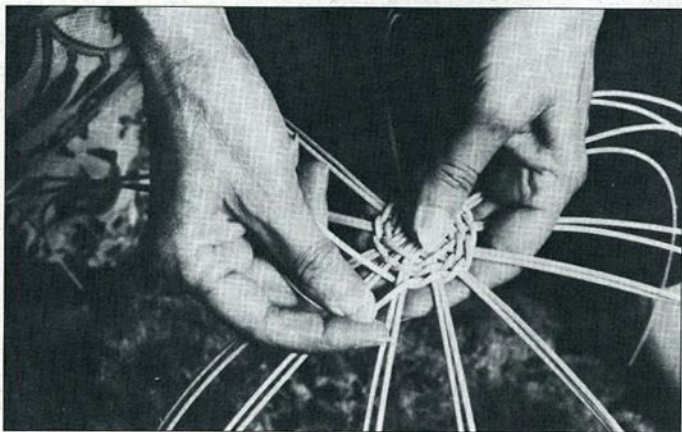
Cherokee baskets are woven rather than coiled. Twilling is the technique used most often in cane baskets. Twill work is created by passing each weft over two or more warps. The warp is the foundation of the weave, and the weft is the element that passes through it. Twilling usually produces a diagonal pattern. There are basically four variations on twilling. The bottom of the basket is made with an over-two-under-two weave. The walls of the basket are made with patterns that use over-three-under-three to over-five-under-five techniques. Twilling produces geometric patterns.

Oak baskets are often made using a technique called plaiting, checkerwork, or a mat weave. For this weave the warp and the weft have the same look and thickness. This type of basket is started by placing the splints side by side to make the warp. The wefts are woven one at a time in an under-and-over motion.

The Cherokee double weave basket, which was once almost extinct, uses the most complex technique. To make a double weave basket, the splints are laid diagonally on the bottom and are continued up the side forming a diagonal twill. When the basket maker reaches the top, the splints are bent over the rim and the weaving is continued at an incline. The weave is therefore continued down the outside of the basket and under the bottom.

Honeysuckle baskets often are made using a wickerwork weave. This type of basket uses a wide inflexible warp and a thinner flexible weft. The weaving technique is simple like plaiting, however, only one of the splints remains stationary. Wickerwork baskets result in a ribbed surface.

The weaving technique itself produces beautiful designs in baskets. However, the Cherokees, like many other peoples, use color and varying techniques to further decorate their art form. Most Cherokee baskets have a light background, which is the result of the natural color



To make a basket, twelve spokes are held together while weaving begins. The starting point is at the center of the basket's base.

X 6

of the material used. Many basket makers use black, brown, red, and yellow to create geometric designs. Many of the patterns commonly found in Cherokee baskets have been given names such as *chief's daughter*, *big diamond*, or *broken heart*. If these names had symbolic meanings, this information has been lost to the current generation of basket makers.

CHANGES

Like all folk arts, Cherokee basketmaking has changed over time. Although a modern Cherokee basket can easily be linked to earlier ones, changes in environment, uses of baskets, and the individual creativity of basket makers have all produced subtle changes in the art form.

One of the most noticeable changes is the use of new materials to make baskets. Once the Cherokee lands were restricted in the southeast, the basket makers found themselves living at too high an elevation for river cane to flourish. However, the Cherokees have made agreements with their neighbors to use cane growing outside the Cherokee Nation. On the other hand, when the Cherokees were moved west, cane could not be found and new materials had to be adapted to traditional Cherokee basketmaking. Although many Cherokee basket makers continue to gather and prepare their own materials, materials also can be purchased on the retail market.

At one time the Cherokees and their ancestors made baskets for their own use and enjoyment. Perhaps one of the biggest changes in the tradition of Cherokee basketmaking is that the audience for this art form has broadened. Today collectors who are not Cherokees are primary purchasers of Cherokee baskets. This means that Cherokee basket makers no longer make baskets exclusively for their own communities.

CONCLUSION

As an art form, Cherokee baskets have a long and distinguished history. At one time baskets were made primarily for utilitarian purposes. Today fine Cherokee baskets are considered objects of art. Although they can be appreciated for their aesthetic beauty alone, they are far more meaningful when viewed within their cultural context. Like other folk arts, an understanding of Cherokee basketmaking continues to be passed on from generation to generation.

FURTHER READINGS

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CHEROKEE BASKET INSTRUCTIONS

Materials: Round Reed (No. 2 or No. 3), natural and in desired dyed colors
Water, Scissors

Note: If you are left-handed, reverse all steps to the left instead of the right.

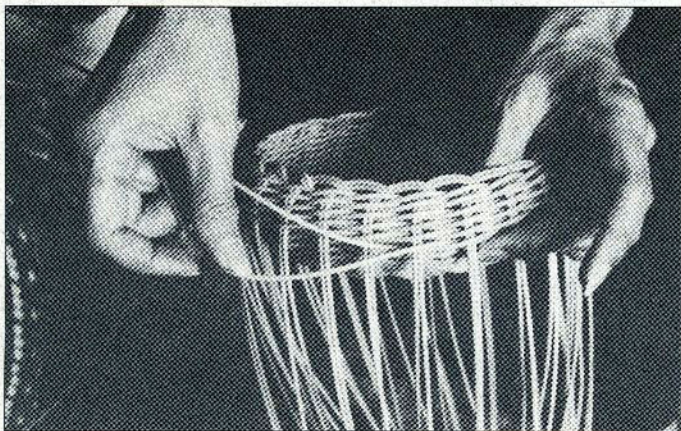
1. Soak your reed in a tub of water. This will make the reed flexible. If the reed becomes stiff while you are working on the basket then submerge it in water.

2. To begin your basket, cut 12 stakes at least 36 inches long. Find the center of the stakes by doubling all 12 together in the middle. Place six stakes in each direction, forming a cross, making sure the stakes in the back are the ones that are vertical (See Fig. 1).

3. Select one long reed from the bundle to be used as a weaver. Begin your basket by using the center of the weaving reed as your starting point, and complete steps one and two as shown (See Fig. 1). This completes your first row and holds the stakes in place to build the basket. Mark the end of the starting stake. Weavers may be added anywhere needed, but all changes to a new step must be made at the starting stake.

4. Continue as shown (See Fig. 2), going all the way around until all four sections have been separated in pairs of 2 stakes each. When these 2 rows are complete, continue weaving (See Fig. 2), keeping the bottom flat and the rows close together.

5. When the bottom reaches the desired size, slowly begin pushing the stakes away from you while gently pulling the stakes closely together until the sides of the basket begin to turn up. If a straight-sided basket is desired, keep the stakes an equal distance apart as you continue to weave. If a more rounded basket is desired, allow the stakes to become a little farther apart with each row. To round it again, begin to pull the stakes closer together again as you weave.



A double weave basket is woven up and back down to form two layers of weaving.

X
7

6. After completing 10 rows, add stakes (See Fig. 3). Cut 24 stakes at an angle on the end, half the length of the 12 you started with. Spread each pair of basket stakes apart and push the angled end of 2 new stakes between them. Continue weaving over 2 stakes, using 1 previous stake alongside of one new stake. Continue weaving as before. Stakes should never be allowed to become more than 1 1/4 inches apart, or your basket will be loose and weak. If a larger basket is desired, you will need to continue to add more stakes.

7. To add weavers, place the end of the old weaver inside the basket, behind a set of stakes. Place the end of a new weaver behind the same stakes, forming an X inside the basket (See Fig. 4). Continue to weave as before. The raw ends of the weavers that this step leaves inside the basket may be trimmed off later. If they are trimmed at the same time that they are added, they may come loose.

8. Color may be added for either a solid effect or for a variegated effect. For a variegated effect, cut one natural weaver, and insert one colored weaver (See Fig. 5). The basket may be variegated in two colors by cutting the second natural weaver behind the next pair of stakes and adding a weaver in the second color. For a solid color design, add both of these weavers in the same color.

9. To complete your basket, pull each pair of stakes around the next pair to the right, and to the outside of the basket (See Fig. 6, Step 1). Repeat this with all of the stakes all the way around, pulling them down close to the top of the basket. Finish with the final pair of stakes. Pull each pair of stakes up and around the next pair to the right all the way around the basket, pulling them close to form a braid (See Fig. 6, Step 2). To finish your basket trim off the stakes.

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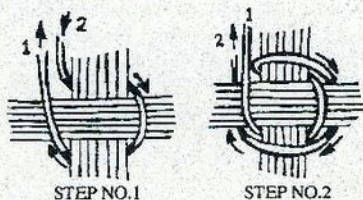


Figure No. 1 Weaving Row One

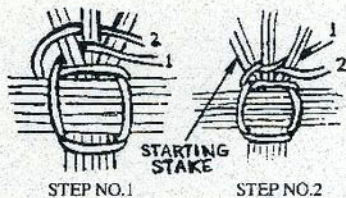


Figure No. 2 Weaving Row Two

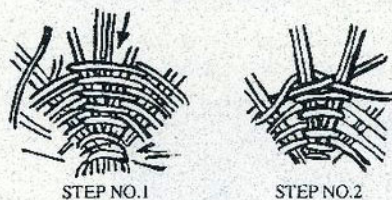


Figure No. 3 Adding Stakes



Figure No. 4 Adding Weavers

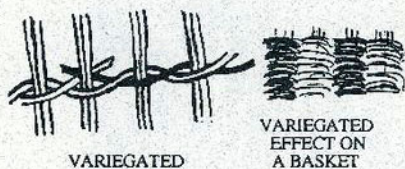
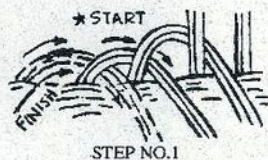


Figure No. 5 Adding Color



STEP NO. 1



STEP NO. 2

Figure No. 6 Braiding the Top

TRADITIONS

Kansas has a rich and diverse folk art heritage. Within the state, artists continue to practice art forms that are passed on from parent to child, worker to worker, and neighbor to neighbor. Knowledge is taught by word of mouth or by example. Our folk arts are traditional in that they are part of an unbroken thread that can be traced back through time. No set time period is necessary, however, for a particular behavior to become part of our folklore. Instead, an art form must have existed long enough to enable variations to develop. Once something is "in tradition" it no longer exists in a standardized form. Instead local variants can be found.

Folk art is community bound. We all belong to many groups or communities throughout our lifetimes. Ethnic, religious, occupational, and familial are but a few of the communities in which we maintain memberships. To provide continuity in our lives, some communities extend over time and distance thereby creating a traditional culture. The folk arts of a group have been selected and supported by a number of people within the community. A folk art is the product of a series of choices made by individuals which in turn have been accepted by the group. Folk culture therefore represents the sum total of a community's choices, linking the present to the past.

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FOR
THE ARTS

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