

The Skill of Weaving a Basket...

and the hard work that comes with it!

by Lori Thomas



Renee Wasson Dillard shows the class different types of baskets

On March 17-20, 2008, the FCP Cultural Center, Library & Museum held a Black Ash Basket-Making Class with instructor Renee Wasson Dillard, her son Isaac Gene Dillard, and apprentice Melanie Storm, members from the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa of Harbor Springs. They reside in Lake in Clare County, south of Harbor.

Wasson Dillard has been making baskets since she was nine years old. She learned from sitting around watching the adults and elders of the family, and practicing by utilizing the scrap that lay on the floor from their baskets. Her son, Isaac, grew up watching his own mother and he also works with her from beginning to end in the baskets.

It's something that Wasson Dillard has made a living out of now; she travels around showing people how to make baskets of their own and also makes and sells her own variety of ash baskets.

During the first day, Wasson Dillard briefly told the participating class step-by-step how to make a basket. She then went on to tell the class that it wasn't all about just making a basket; they were going to learn first-hand how to find a good black ash tree, chop it down and learn how to make their pieces on their own for future reference.

"This will help the Potawatomi in developing their own people in making ash baskets for the community and those to sell in the gift shop," she stated.

Good black ash can be found in wet swampy areas. Healthy black ash in the winter looks almost like it is a dying tree; the bark also looks flaky. Black ash is very different from white ash. One way to tell is the branches of white ash come right out of the stem and has an 1/8" of stem to the leaves as where in a black ash tree, the leaves come directly out of the stem.

Wasson Dillard briefly talked about the emerald ash borer, a bug that originated from Asia that is endangering the life of ash trees.

This bug was first discovered back in 2002 in Detroit, Mich., and is spreading rapidly throughout the states. The larvae feeds on the inner bark, disrupting its growth. She said that because of this, they try not to harvest the trees between April and June. The best thing to do to make sure that emerald ash borer does not affect the life of the trees in this area is to do a seed conservancy every five years. (For more on emerald ash borer, please visit the website <http://www.emeraldashborer.info/>)

This type of harvesting was not meant to do alone. Wasson Dillard remembers being involved with everybody from her family.

Once you find the tree, you need to

check the growth rings and see if this tree wants to become a basket. You can chop a small wedge out of the tree and check its growth ring.

The growth rings need to be at least a nickel size. If it is not at least nickel size it is important that you pound the wedge back into the tree, as it will heal



After checking the wedge, the next step was to chop the tree down.



It's a deep trek into the woods to look for that perfect black ash tree!

When asked about her time in Crandon teaching the Anishinabek people from this side of the forest she stated, "I was deeply encouraged that young people were involved in the class....(it was spring break) and I have hopes that they built good memories along with their baskets," said Wasson Dillard. "One family had three generations in attendance. That makes me smile. This information belongs to Anishnabek people...and I am proud to offer it to my Potawatomi friends in Wisconsin," she stated. "My son and I look forward to hearing from the participants and help them with any challenges they may come across as they continue weaving. We also hope to stop in and visit when we can; my travels bring me to the area several times a year."

itself like a wound. The tree that is harvested for a basket is usually 40-60 years old. "The spirit of this tree will mingle in with your basket," states Wasson Dillard. The entire tree can be utilized with the lower half being utilized for baskets and the top half of the tree for broom handles and such.

"Weaving is only 25 percent of the basket-making," she stated. As finding a good tree cutting it down and preparing the strips for the basket-making is the remainder of the work. "Splint preparation is what makes it so unique and is the most time-consuming." It is a big process and the hardest part out of all of it is the harvesting and pounding."



Mona Van Zile works on her basket.



All the ladies check to make sure that the wedge shows a nickel size growth...and it does!



Isaac shows Dennis Shepard how to pound the tree to prepare for the splints.



(Left): Mother Dennie Shepard shows her son how to make splints out of the wood he helped locate, chop, carry and pound during the week. (Right): Donna Shepard splints some of the wood as her granddaughter helps her out.

