

ARIKARA BASKETRY

Baskets obtained from the Arikara tribe in 1923 were made especially for the Museum by an old woman commonly known as "Snow", a nickname which came to her from the whites when she was a young woman employed at the Congregational Mission. Her proper tribal name is Stesta-kata, which means "yellow-corn". It may be said that many Arikara personal names are derived from corn, as this agricultural product has been for ages so vitally concerned in all the economic life of the tribe.

The first step in the process of basket-making is to get a supply of bark of the large species of willow, the black willow. (*Salix nigra* Marsh). The inner bark is the part which is used, after being freed from the rough outer bark. The bark of this willow turns a dull reddish brown after exposure to the air for a short time. It is the willow bark thus untreated which is used in making the common work-baskets. In making baskets for beauty, as well as utility, decorative designs were produced by the use of colored strips of black willow bark and of uncolored boxelder (*Acer negundo*) bark. Two colors in the willow bark may be obtained: a dull reddish brown which the fresh peeled bark takes by exposure to the air, and black, which is induced by burying the strips of bark in black mud for forty-eight hours. By the use of willow bark alone and untreated they have brown baskets; by the use of untreated willow bark and boxelder bark, designs in white and brown are obtained; by the use of boxelder bark and mud-treated willow bark they obtain designs in white and black. Stesta-kata uses the black mud of an alkali spring near her house, flowing out from a bed of lignite; but she said that the ordinary black mud of river-bottoms serves as well.

Before burying the bark in the mud the basket-maker cuts it into narrow strips ready for plaiting. These strips resemble rawhide thongs. The strips of bark must be kept damp and pliable until they are plaited into baskets.

The common work-baskets of the older women were made of willow bark in the plain, dull, reddish-brown color which it took simply by exposure to the air, but small fancy baskets for containing trinkets and small articles of the household were made in ornamental patterns of the white bark of boxelder and the black-dyed willow bark, as also were the baskets used by girls and young women, which is a

natural human trait.

For the purpose of dyeing the willow bark Stesta-kata first cut it into strips of uniform width. She then wound these strips into loose skeins which she took down to the spring and with her hands dug out a bed for them in the soft, black mud, thoroughly mixing the mud and the skeins, and then leaving them imbedded in the mud for forty-eight hours.

In beginning the making of the common work-basket Stesta-kata chose a willow sapling of the proper size for the rim. This, before peeling, she gently and gradually bent by holding in her hands and pushing against it with her moccasined foot until it was made pliable throughout its length. Then she peeled it and hacked off part of the thickness at the butt to equalize the thickness of the entire length. Next she measured the length it was to be by grasping the sapling near each end while she caused it to curve within her extended arms and against her breast. Holding it thus, she made it of this length and two hand breadths over. That is the standard diameter of a work-basket at its brim. She marked the length thus found on the sapling and cut it off. The measure of two handbreadths over was to make allowance for the joining of the ends of the sapling for the basket rim. The two ends were laid overlapping and then wound with wet sinew. The sinew shrinks in drying and makes a firm joint. Having so joined the ends together, she tossed the rim hoop into the sun to dry.

Then she chose saplings for the "corner posts" of the basket. Four saplings were required for this purpose. Two were bent in a curve, thus , and two bent in angles, thus . The open tops of these bent saplings were attached to the rim before-mentioned, making a frame on which the strips of bark were plaited. The angled saplings were placed within and at right-angles to the direction of the curved saplings. The bark plaiting at the bottom of the basket is protected from touching the ground by the downward curve of two of the saplings, which is entirely outside the plaiting, while the horizontal middle part between the angles made in the other two saplings forms the base of the framework on which the plaiting is done.

The basket-maker measured the "corner posts" by placing her two moccasined feet close together

on the sticks which are to be bent at an angle. The ends of the stick were now bent upward along the legs until they touched the knees. Where they touched the knees determined the place where the sticks were to be cut off, and this height measured the depth of the standard size of the work-basket. In the way herein described the top and bottom diameters and the depth of the standard basket were determined. The measure of the cubic content of such a basket was a hunansadu and was a standard measure of quantity for certain commodities in commerce.

The Arikara generic term for basket is sadu; the name of the largest basket is satwa, while the small, fancy basket is called saciribas.

The satwa is usually made from crack-willow bark alone, without dyeing; therefore it is of a dull reddish-brown color. The saciribas is made from white stripes of boxelder bark plaited with strips of crack willow bark which have been dyed black in the mud treatment.

Stesta-kata says there are seven patterns of plaiting of combination of colored and uncolored bark used by the Arikara. These, together with the plain black dyed willow bark, and the plain reddish-brown undyed yellow, make nine styles of basket. Perhaps we might add to these a style of plain white boxelder-bark also.

The Arikara generic term for yellow is citabatc. Black willow is citab-nanuh, 'many-branched willow' (citabatc, 'willow'; nanuh, 'many-branched'). Citab-nanuh is the species used for basket making. Diamond yellow (*Salix cordata*) is called citab-kusu, 'big yellow' (citabatc, willow; kusu, big); though why it is so called, when the black willow is much larger, is not clear. The sand-bar willow, ritually prescribed for use in making the fish-trap, is called citabpahatu (citabc, willow; pahatu, red). They call it "red willow" because of the reddish bark, which during winter, when the leaves are shed, gives a decided red aspect to the areas of sandbars and banks thickly covered by the growth of this species. The Arikara name of the boxelder is uha'ku.