

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE

SECRET POWERS OF THE ASH TREE by DELLA MAGUIRE

From the moment of birth, to the time of passing, the ash tree has traditionally played a vital role in the lives of many Mi'kmaw families.

My name is Della Maguire. My parents, Abe and Rita Smith, were internationally renowned basket makers who had been taught the art by their parents. Unfortunately, I was not part of that process, as watching my parents making baskets seemed to me 'just a part of life'. Nor did I realize that they were living off the land, skillfully using the environment and that their basket making was a cultural form of art, Mi'kmaq Art!

The art of basket making was passed to my parents, from their parents. My mother admits to pretending she was sick so that she could stay home and make baskets instead of going to school. Basket making is a process and starts with the knowledge of the ash tree. There are a few different species or ancestors of the ash trees that can be found in Mi'kmaw territory,

such as brown, black, and white ash. My parents used white ash while I use both white and black ash.

This is a small portion of a "teaching" conversation I had with my father regarding the ash tree.

- Q: *"Dad, how do you know where the best place ash trees would grow and what would that look like?" With a small grin he says.*
- A: *"By the growth of the woods. If the woods are too thick the grain of the wood will be too thin. You need to go to the open woods and if the woods are too open, then the ash will have thick grains because the ash will grow faster" "Oh my goodness! So little do I know about the art of making baskets? I continue with my questions.*
- Q: *"How did you know what was a good tree?" Without hesitation he says,*



Della Maguire is Mi'kmaq and grew up in a home of constant basket making. Her parents Abe and Rita Smith were known as the finest Mi'kmaq basket-making team in Nova Scotia. "The art of basket making in our Mi'kmaq culture is a dying art" says Della. "My goal is to build on my skills as a basket-maker, continuing on the tradition of the Smith family and become the next emerging artist and a carrier of our Mi'kmaq culture". Della has become a skilled teacher and will begin delivering basket-making course of studies to interested Mi'kmaq communities, thereby helping to preserve our basket-making heritage. Today, Della's intention is to pursue this fading art of basket making with the same pride and appreciation of Mi'kmaq culture that her parents possessed. Della's baskets are sold at "Flight of Fancy" Bear River, Nova Scotia.

A: *"Most of the time you would follow the lines in the bark and if it's straight you can cut it down. "First you cut a little notch in the bottom of the tree to see the grains. Look to see how thick they are and if they are too thick you don't cut it down."*

Q: *"When you went to get ash, would you go in the summer time to stock up for the winter?"*

A: *"No you can cut ash all year round."*

Q: *"Have you gone in the winter time too?"*

A: *"Oh yes, was the response."*

Q: *"When you cut the tree down, then what would you do?"*

A: *"Bring it home," he says with a grin. (Of course I knew that)*

Traditionally storytelling is a cultural form of teaching, and I was honored to have experienced this with my father.

The Mi'kmaq people have a special relationship

with the ash tree and the environment. We have been living off the land and using ash tree materials for centuries, making different kinds of baskets; for fishing, storing, carrying food and material. With the coming of the Europeans fancy baskets were mostly made to be sold or traded.

Legend has it that Glooscap, taking up his great bow, shot arrows into the basket tree known as ash and our people came out singing and dancing. It is difficult to explain how special and powerful the ash tree is. When the ash tree is pounded it comes alive with the fibers heating up, each growth ring separating to produce individual strips that have the durability and flexibility like no other basket material. The addition of a new growth ring each year can support the creation of many ash baskets. Black ash is like a shape shifter, because when it is damp it can form many different, beautiful baskets and ornaments. The ash tree is considered sacred, and has saved lives, for this is how many of our people supported themselves. My father told me he would alternate between the areas where he received permission to cut down an ash tree. Harvesting too many ash trees from one area would allow the wind to alter the environment. The force of the wind would twist the smaller ash trees, so that they would not be good to use for making baskets. Dad's knowledge of resource management was



The story behind this basket goes like this: Caroline Gould always had a pot of tea brewing and it sure was good to have while she taught me the art of basket making. The name of her tea pot was 'Brown Betty' in honour of Caroline I named my basket Brown Betty. Brown Betty is embellished with sweetgrass.

connected to protecting the environment as he protected the quality of the ash tree. It is common knowledge that what aboriginal people take from the land they give thanks, and every part of the product has a use. Reuse, recycle and reduce is and has been part of the Mi'kmaq code of ethics.

My fondest memories growing up were associated with the ash tree, although at the time I had no idea of the connection. I can remember coming home from school, the back yard being filled with apple baskets that Mom had woven, and the sound of the pounding machine coming from

Dad's work shop told me that both my parents were home working. Most summers we would go camping and I would spend my days following the river, fishing and picking berries, while my father would gather the ash wood they needed to fill their many apple basket orders.

My conversation with my father regarding ash trees was the same time I became interested in pursuing this fading art of basket making. So I began my journey as a carrier of our Mi'kmaq culture learning the art of basket making from two Basket Masters, Caroline Gould and her daughter Margaret Pelletier. I set forth

with my inherited skills, my dedication and my duty to pass on the art of basket making.

I am pleased and honoured to be able to write this article about the ash tree, basket making, and how it has contributed to my life as a Mi'kmaq. I consider myself fortunate to come from a long line of basket makers. Families and communities are literally woven together with tradition passed on through storytelling and interactions while basket making. Therefore it is a responsibility to also weave the knowledge that we have regarding our connection to the environment, and to the secret power of the ash tree.