Wisconsin Folks: Masters of Tradition

Sandra Peterson was born in Cook County, Illinois in 1958 and but grew up on the Lac du Flambeau reservation in northern Wisconsin, where she and her husband David are members of the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa. She specializes in making birch bark baskets (*wiigwaasii makak*), a key cultural item in Ojibwe culture.

Sandra learned the art of creating birch bark baskets twenty years ago from Jerry Maulson, an elder in the Lac du Flambeau community. "Birch bark containers were traditionally used to collect, store, cook and consume food or other products. Birch bark was also used to make hunting and fishing gear, musical instruments, decorative fans, and to build wigwams for shelter."

Sandra and David "gather all traditional materials used in making a birch bark basket (*wiigwaasii makak*)…During the gathering season, the bark will peel easily from the tree and almost peels itself. We also gather basswood bark to make *wii goob*…We use the *wii goob* in sewing our baskets together. Besides birch bark and basswood bark, we also use splints from black ash and from cedar for rimming."

Sandra makes baskets with either the white or the brown side of the bark facing out. "I have come to the conclusion that it's easier to make a basket the way the bark wants to turn."

Sandra has a special interest and skill in etching her baskets. "Winter bark, a thin layer of dark brown film on the inner side of the bark on which designs can be etched, usually comes off just before and after the gathering cycle begins and ends. Over the years, I have elevated this ancient form of art by etching more intricate and elaborate designs. Etching a single basket can take anywhere from a week to months to complete depending on the size of basket and design."

Sandra taught her apprentice, Jason Peterson, "the many steps that have to be done before you can sit down and actually make a basket" including all the steps to make *wii goob*. Jason's lessons were in the woods, testing for winter bark in April and May and then summer bark in June and July, then inside for construction techniques, "sewing like crazy every possible moment." Jason became interested in basketry by observing family members harvesting bark and assembling baskets. He was motivated to learn because, "I would like to keep traditions alive."

"You really need to love what you're doing to work with bark." Sandra Peterson