CHAPTER FIVE

Organizing

"Sometimes people must first fortify their base before they sally out to change the world... people always have resources available: intelligence, imagination, language, the skill of their hands, history, a sense of identity, a cultural heritage, pride, a certain piece of land. Sometimes the development process is not so much about change as about the preservation and strengthening of those resources."[1]

Patrick Breslin, in *Cultural Expression and Grassroots Development*

Because the folk arts are normally defined as those traditions which are passed on informally through time within a particular community, we tend to characterize traditional artists as practicing outside institutional settings. We think of them as "non-joiners." It is true that many traditional artists do not describe themselves as artists and few of them have membership in organizations active in the institutionalized art world. But neither do traditional artists and cultures live in isolation from the rest of the world. With more and more frequency, some traditional artists and communities are beginning to come together around common issues and problems to speak and act in a common voice. These issues and problems often cluster around notions of access, visibility, and control—that is, access to resources and broader markets; increased visibility and respect for artists and traditions; and personal or community control over the development and maintenance of cultural traditions.

In concrete terms, these needs are most frequently met through the formation of broad-based coalitions and alliances and technical assistance from a range of service agencies. For those performing artists who wish to reach audiences outside their local community, for instance, technical assistance often focuses on issues of artistic professional development—developing promotional materials, learning business and marketing fundamentals, and gaining access to new venues and audiences—and these are forms of technical assistance most frequently found in arts organizations or agencies.

For craftspeople, however, as Theresa Hoffman's article indicates, issues of access to scarce resources (whether they are natural or human) or broader markets have required the expertise and cooperation of diverse individuals and agencies—from parks and forestry personnel, chambers of commerce, state departments of tourism and economic development to folklorists, museums and others involved in historic preservation and cultural tourism activities. Conference or "gathering" models emphasizing information sharing among artists and other relevant organizations, mentoring and peer exchange have proved to be highly successful models as have the development of artist cooperatives. The development of artists cooperatives has been most prevalent throughout Appalachia, in some Native American communities and throughout areas of Central and South America.

Key issues for many of these artists are not whether to develop, change, or preserve their traditional arts and culture but how to maintain ownership and control of their futures and their culture. And this is perhaps the *key* issue in cultural tourism or preservation efforts. The marketing of the culture or heritage of a particular locale as a strategy for economic development is an increasingly hot topic and practice and one fraught with peril if local participation,

concerns and sense of ownership are not addressed from the beginning. Susan Guyette's book *Planning for Balanced Development* offers useful strategies for eliciting community participation and maintaining community control. Pro-active stances on cultural conservation are important components of success. In the case of South Carolina's sweetgrass basketmakers, innovative arrangements and alliances between business and conservation interests assisted in conserving one of the state's important cultural resources. As Robert Cogswell, director of Folk Arts for the Tennessee Arts Commission has remarked, "The goal of long-range development strategies is to continually strengthen a community's overall cultural tourism environment, and this includes looking after the health of the cultural resources that provide its foundation."[2]

Planning for Balanced Development

Planning for Balanced Development: A Guide for Native American and Rural Communities, by anthropologist/cultural planner Susan Guyette documents a field-tested model of community planning developed by Guyette and the Pueblo of Pojoaque in the creation of the Poeh Center at Pojoaque Pueblo in northern New Mexico. The book outlines a cultural planning process that stresses community participation at all levels of planning and implementation and surveys methods for comprehensive community needs assessment; planning methods for cultural revitalization, business development, and cultural tourism development; in-depth examinations of economic and business development and cultural tourism development which complement cultural revitalization; and the generation and management of resources for sustained community development. It contains a wealth of practical resources, sample forms, lists, and budgets and, as the subtitle suggests, much of the information is applicable to rural as well as Native American communities. For more information, contact Clear Light Publishers, 823 Don Diego, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501, (800) 253-2747.

Amanda Carroll (Yurok), age seven, at the 1995 California Indian Basketweavers Gathering. (Photo by Dugan Aguilar/©1996 Dugan Aguilar and CIBA)

Hanging by a Blade of Grass: Traditional Basketmaking in Maine, South Carolina and California

by Theresa Hoffman

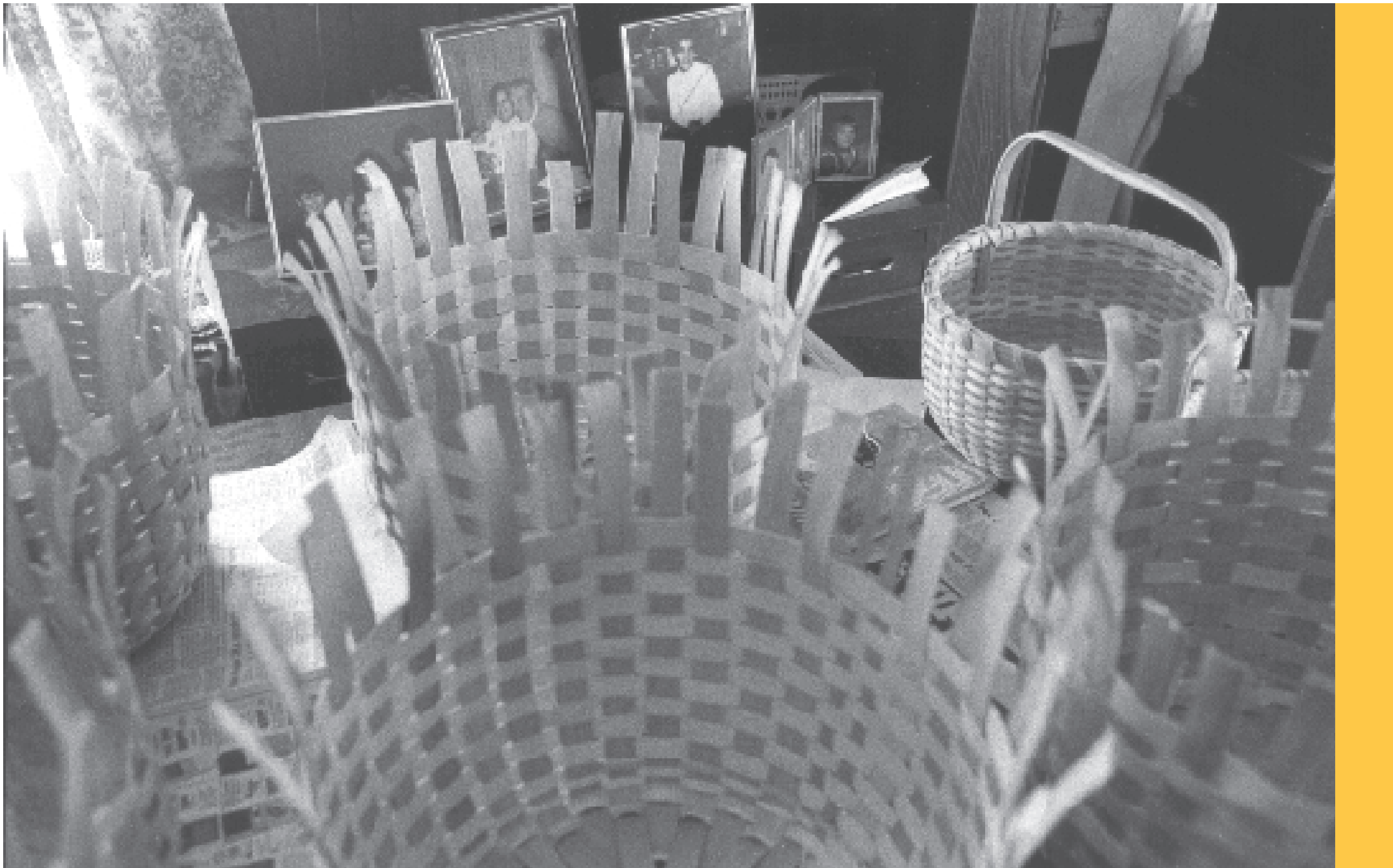
> "Once I become famous, Mama will not have to make any more Indian baskets."
>
> Malledellis Nelson (Penobscot)

The words at left were spoken in 1927 by my great-aunt, an aspiring young native dancer and actress, and they epitomize the perception of native basketry on the Penobscot Indian Reservation at that time. Malledellis' mother (my great-grandmother) was a traditional native woman, a tribal healer who used medicines from the Maine woods, and her basketmaking was practiced to feed her children. For many people on the reservation, basketry was linked with poverty and this negative association helps explain why basketry all but disappeared from our culture in this century. In order to earn a decent living, young people were encouraged to leave the reservation. By 1990, there were fewer than one dozen native basketmakers from four tribes under the age of 60 in the entire state of Maine.

Maine

Responding to a strongly-felt need to hold on to brown ash basketry, one of the last intact vestiges of native culture in Maine, a dedicated group of some 75 Maine Indian basketmakers, representing Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquody and Penobscot tribes, gathered together to form the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance (MIBA) in 1993. The first meeting, held in 1992, was co-organized by myself (then an apprentice basketmaker) and folklorist Kathleen Mundell of the Maine Arts Commission. In part, that first meeting grew out of the Maine Arts Commission's Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program, and sessions were marked by a spirit of intertribal cooperation and lively talk about the obstacles and goals for preserving basketry traditions.

Through the years, other forces besides negative image have intensified the serious decline of the tradition—poor supply, lack of access to basketmaking materials, and inadequate access to markets being key among them—and MIBA attempts to respond. In 1993, basketmakers like Donald Sanipass (Micmac), who claimed that something was killing the "basket tree," prompted the Alliance to organize the Brown Ash Task Force, a consortium of tribal, state and federal foresters and basketmakers to analyze the ash problem and its negative impact on the tradition. The work of the task force foresters confirmed what basketmakers had known for a decade, that the precious trees, deeply "rooted " in native culture through creation stories, were dying. In addition to emphasis on supply and access to natural resources, an annual basketmakers gathering and festival is held, where basketmakers meet to discuss common issues and market baskets to the public. Marketing projects thus far have produced a poster, brochures, a small basketry exhibit at a local airport, and increased visibility for native basketmakers and traditions in Maine.



Works in progress: brown ash splint baskets by Maliseet basketmaker Jim Tomah. Aroostook County, Maine.
(Photo by Cedric N. Chatterley)

South Carolina

Faced with similar issues, traditional basketmakers elsewhere are organizing to address common problems in a collective manner.[3] Nearly 300 basketmakers in the Mount Pleasant, South Carolina area were quietly practicing their centuries old tradition of sweetgrass basketry, when bulldozers broke the silence in the last decade. Major sources of sweetgrass were literally paved over, in this one of the most rapidly developing areas of the East Coast. A 1988 Sweetgrass Conference in Charleston, co-organized by folklorists Dale Rosengarten, Gary Stanton and basketmaker Henrietta Snype brought basketmakers together with a diverse audience, ranging from land developers to scientists to folklorists, who were either inadvertently threatening or trying to help preserve the heritage. The conference also led to the formation of the Mount Pleasant Sweetgrass Basketmakers Association. " It's ironic," said Mary Jackson, Mount Pleasant Sweetgrass Basketmakers Association President, "increased development has brought more potential customers to our region, but it has also wiped out many of the wetlands that we have historically relied on to supply us with sweetgrass."

Since the conference, with the assistance of local agencies and Clemson University, 10.5 acres of sweetgrass have been planted at three local sites and basketmakers have since harvested their first crops. The unique and relatively rare species of grass has been brought back from the brink of "extinction," at least in the local area. Basket sales stands on Highway 17, equally endangered by development, have been saved by local zoning efforts and foresighted developers who regard this distinctive cultural tradition as a positive contribution to the local economy and ambiance. The airport in Charleston proudly boasts of the sweetgrass heritage of South Carolina, with an impressive exhibit of basketry. In fact, a new awareness by collectors has caused basketry prices to double in the past five years.

California

California Indian basketweavers have made great strides since 1991, when the first California Indian Basketweavers Gathering was held. Gathering materials for basketweaving, which include more than one hundred plants for baskets and dyes such as bear grass, sedge, juncus, deer grass, redbud, hazel, ferns, alder, spruce, and many others, is as spiritually significant to Native California culture, as the weaving itself. Native California baskets are made more often for ceremonial and traditional use than for sale and access to materials is a primary concern for basketweavers and crucial to the continuity of the tradition. Yurok/Karuk/Hoopa basketweaver Kathy Wallace remarked, "Basketmaking is more to us than just a craft. It's a tie to our ancestors and to the earth and to the future. We have a lot of responsibility to

Micmac basketmaker Richard Silliboy and apprentice Valentine Polchies return from the woods with brown ash suitable for basketmaking. Aroostook County, Maine. (Photo by Cedric N. Chatterley ©1996)

Fund for Folk Culture
Conferences and Gatherings Program

The Fund for Folk Culture, supported by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts, awards funds and technical assistance to support gatherings and conferences that bring together folk artists, tradition bearers, folk cultural specialists, and others engaged in preservation of grassroots cultural traditions. For example, these grants have made possible an intergenerational gathering of master and novice Missouri fiddlers; a colloquium of community scholars, artists, and folklorists on Franco-American culture in Maine; and a mid-Atlantic regional conference for refugee and immigrant service providers, folklorists, cultural specialists, and community-based mutual assistance organizations (representing Hmong, Cambodian, Afghan, Ethiopian, Guatemalan, and other refugee communities) to explore ways in which culture and traditional art can help stabilize and strengthen their families and communities. Planning grants for nonprofit organizations are generally limited to $5,000; implementation grants to $15,000. Awards of up to $1,500 are available to help provide folklorists or other specialists to give technical assistance in pre-planning stages. Inquiries and proposals are accepted throughout the year. For more information, contact the Fund for Folk Culture, P.O. Box 1566, Santa Fe, New Mexico 87504, (505) 984-2534.

Yup'ik Traditional Dance
City of Saint Mary's Alaska

In 1992, in a high school gymnasium in Emmonak, Alaska, nearly 600 Yup'ik Eskimos of all ages gathered from villages throughout the lower Yukon River region and Russian Siberia for a Yup'ik Eskimo "Yuraryarait" (dance festival). They exchanged gifts in a ceremonial potlatch. Then elders moved to the center of the floor and danced from kneeling positions, moving their arms and torsos to describe songs about hunting, picking berries, or muskrats and beavers popping their heads above the water. The audience encouraged them by calling out "chale!" (encore!). The dancers repeated their movements with greater intensity to the quickening tempo of thunderous large round frame drums.

Concerned about the survival of Yup'ik cultural heritage, the City of St. Mary's first brought together artists in 1982 from nine villages in Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta where traditional dancing was still practiced to participate in a festival designed to pass on dance traditions to younger generations. The success of that event stimulated the creation of dance festivals throughout the lower Yukon River region. St. Mary's sponsored an intervillage festival in 1985. Then, in 1989, the Coastal Yukon Mayor's Association (CYMA), a nonprofit organization serving lower Yukon River area villages, hosted Mountain Village Dance Festival. With NEA Folk & Traditional Arts support, the 1992 festival in Emmonak included dance groups from 12 Yup'ik villages, Nome, and Naukan Yup'ik dance groups from the Russian far east. Another is planned for 1996. It is the CYMA's hope to hold the festival every three or four years rotating each year among different villages.

pass it on." Norma Turner (Western Mono) echoes this sentiment. " In my classes, I talk about culture and I talk about leaving offerings. We need to give thanks [when gathering materials and making baskets] . This is what the old people did."

The California Indian Basketweavers Association (CIBA), founded in 1992, has noted a steady increase in the numbers of basketweavers since their annual gatherings began, and now counts some 400 plus weavers 36 major California tribal affiliations. CIBA has been instrumental in bringing awareness to natural resource access and management issues. With urging from native basketmakers, for example, the U.S. Forest Service has been conducting successful bear grass burns and basketweavers in some areas have encouraged highway officials to cut roadside vegetation, rather than spray excess growth with pesticides. Important sources of basketmaking materials have in some areas, however, already been completely obliterated by development. Basketweavers face constant threats from pesticide spraying in their supply areas, so educating the public about the importance of gathering materials is an ongoing effort.

Southern Arts Federation
Traditional Artists Technical Assistance Project

The newly-created Traditional Artists Technical Assistance Project (TATAP), initiated by the Southern Arts Federation (SAF), emerges from the Underserved Presenters Technical Assistance Project, an ongoing program which assists community-based presenters to develop presenting capabilities and networks. Realizing that assistance to traditional artists goes hand-in-hand with assistance to presenters, SAF staff intends to create a program which can effectively link the needs and interests of both. TATAP helps traditional artists in the South become competitive in the world of performing arts and seeks to bring new exposure to some of the most talented traditional artists the region has to offer. Through an application process, selected traditional artists and groups receive assistance in developing professional promotional materials such as demo recordings, video clips, or photos. Artists attend the Southern Arts Exchange (SAE), the region's performing arts booking conference and showcase, participate in a series of pre-conference workshops, have booth space in the SAE Exhibit Hall where they distribute promotional materials and work with SAF staff to negotiate bookings with presenters. They also perform at the SAE showcase for 200-300 presenters—a chance to show their talent for potential engagements in the upcoming season. SAF staff assist with bookings during the conference and provide follow-up throughout the year. For more information about TATAP, contact:

Southern Arts Federation,
181 14th St, N.E., Suite 400
Atlanta, GA 30309
(404) 874-7244.

Sisters Marie M. Rouse and Elizabeth L. Mazyck at their roadside basket stands, intersection of Highway 17 North and Highway 41, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, 1994. (Photo by Dale Rosengarten)

"For the Milwaukee Art Museum, folk art and self-taught art and the ways we are learning to communicate their origins to our audience have affected how we believe we should treat ALL art... We are suggesting that all art should be equally valued. But by attempting to emphasize the cultural and individual context of all art, we are arguing that the distinctions that go into its making should not be lost."[10]

Russell Bowman, Director
Milwaukee Art Museum

"It is extremely important to keep having Gatherings. The Gathering is a touchstone for good feeling throughout the year. It provides many connections for those concerned with baskets and weaving. It allows for incredible interaction between the old and the young. It helps to keep all involved informed about plant issues—gathering, pesticides, access, and so forth. It lets us see each other's weaving and share ideas and concerns."

Jacquelyn Ross (Pomo)

Anita Bussell (Hupa/Mattole) assists Janey Eslick (Yurok) and Kimberly Peters (Yurok) in the Learner's Circle at the 1992 California Indian Basketweavers Gathering. (Photo by Hank Meals)

Partnerships

The fact that these grassroots cultural organizations were formed is remarkable in itself, given the many obstacles from within the communities. Basketmakers' initial fears ranged from heightened consciousness of the art form bringing competition for materials and sales, to paying sales and employment taxes. Political boundaries existing within the close-knit communities sometimes discourage people from forming groups with other communities, even of similar cultural background. In Maine, the Basketmakers Alliance is the only organization which successfully brings members of all four tribes together to work on common issues. The community fabric in the Mount Pleasant Sweetgrass Basketmakers Association appears to be woven together with faith, as well as sweetgrass. The first steering committee meeting of basketmakers took place in a local church and communication between basketmakers continues to take place there. The California organization, in contrast, draws its membership from tribes spread throughout California who come together to participate in Association activities. Several sub-groups of the Association have formed, such as the Northern California Indian Basketweavers and the Central California Indian Basketweavers, as basketweavers focus on local activities and issues, while maintaining ties with the larger organization and its goals.

Funding for organizational support, critical for the future of these organizations, is typically difficult to locate and sometimes comes from surprising places. Linking artistic and cultural needs to economic or environmental needs demands a holistic approach to fundraising as well as cultural planning. Initial support from the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Arts Program was flexible enough to respond to the localized needs of each group and ranged from annual basketweavers' gatherings in California, to basketry apprenticeships in Maine, to emergency dollars for rebuilding basket sales stands, after Hurricane Hugo in South Carolina. Unprecedented partnerships between the cultural organizations have formed with groups as diverse as Offices of Tourism to Highway Departments to Forest Services. The notion of these cultural groups working together with governmental agencies, where past relationships were poor and oppressive, is entirely new and would have been inconceivable in the past. Because traditional basketmakers cannot obtain supplies at "Basketworld," cooperative relationships with landowners and natural resource experts are a must, in order to ensure that sources of natural materials are nurtured and protected. Private foundations have played an important role in organizational support and to an extent in protection of natural resources. Hopefully, they will continue to play a role, as sources of governmental funding become increasingly rare.

For more information…

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Nevada City, CA 95959
(916) 292-0141
CIBA@oro.net

Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance
P.O. Box 3253
Old Town, ME 04468

Mount Pleasant Sweetgrass Basketmakers Association
P.O. Box 761
Mt. Pleasant, SC 29464

Marie M. Rouse working on a basket, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, 1994. (Photo by Dale Rosengarten)

Passing It On

While most Native California basketweavers do not consider economic development important to the maintenance of their weaving heritage, basketmakers in Maine and South Carolina consider market expansion and increased marketing efforts to be critical to the successful continuation of theirs. Although not all Mt. Pleasant basketmakers belong to the Association, the increase in prices for this previously little known art form has benefited all. Prices have also increased in Maine and in both areas, the quality of baskets has risen, as basketmakers find a renewed sense of pride in their culture and realize higher prices for higher quality work. The Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance is currently researching the possibility of marketing baskets in a cooperative effort; as a vehicle for economic self-sufficiency for the organization, as well as for the individual basketmaker.

Intergenerational teaching as a means of cultural preservation is stressed among all three groups and has directly resulted in increased numbers of younger basketmakers. According to Mary Jackson, people are coming back to sweetgrass basketry, passing skills from mother to daughter to granddaughter. These basketmakers are determined to pass on the tradition that their slave ancestors clung to, after having been forced from their West African homeland with little more than their cultural knowledge and skills. In some tribal groups, the basketmaking tradition is literally hanging by a blade of grass. California Indian basketweaver, Michelle Scholfield Noonan (Wintu), learned basketmaking skills from Vivien Hailstone, a Karuk basketweaver, because she could find no more Wintu weavers to teach her. California Indian basketweaver, Lorene Sisquoc (Cahuilla\Apache) said, "There are a lot of hidden people who have the knowledge, but left the tradition. Now they are coming out and seeing us younger people doing it and saying, 'I know how to do that, I can teach you.' "

Basketmakers from the three regions unanimously acknowledge a great need to come together as unified groups of weavers. Basketmakers in Maine and California gather in annual celebrations of the tradition to discuss common issues, socialize and teach. According to CIBA Executive Director, Sara Greensfelder, "The Annual Gatherings are the cornerstone of CIBA." A significant number of new basketmakers participate in the Learners' Circles at CIBA's Annual Gatherings. Their gatherings have been a source of inspiration for basketmakers in the Southwest and Northwest, resulting in a Washington State American Indian Basketweavers Gathering in October, 1995 (as well as the subsequent formation of the Northwest Native American Basketweavers Association) and a Southwest Indian Basketweavers Gathering in May, 1996. Regional Native basketweavers' gatherings are also being planned in the southeast and the Great Lakes. Richard Silliboy (Micmac), MIBA basketmaker, notes, "The Alliance needs to come together more [often]. Basketmakers see something happening and people are coming on board, dealing with issues as a group." Mt. Pleasant basketmaker Henrietta Snype notes, "It's time for another conference. We should be focusing on marketing abroad and other new projects."

Although my great-aunt did star in a silent movie and became a well-known dancer in the U.S. and abroad, my great-grandmother made baskets until she died at the age of 91. Since that time, basketmaking has arisen from the depths of extreme poverty and oppression in Maine to become one of the most respected and sought after folk arts in the country. In 1994, 86-year-old Passamaquody basketmaker Mary Mitchell Gabriel became a recipient of the coveted National Heritage Fellowship, the nation's highest folk art honor given by the National Endowment for the Arts, which came with a $10,000 cash award. Today, baskets made by my great grandmother, my great aunt and me share exhibit space at the Hudson Museum gallery of the University of Maine, made in three different generations, but using the same gauges and blocks; a basketmaking legacy too strong to be wished away.