

Red Willow Baskets: The Louis Riel Institute Collection

Metis and Indian women have made woven Red Willow baskets for as long as history has been recorded. The baskets were for both domestic use and commercial sale. They were used to collect berries, fruits and vegetables as well as being used in the home for decorative purposes. Metis women sold these baskets to bring extra income to their families.

The frames of the baskets are constructed of ash wood. The red willow shoots are picked from the new growth in the spring and kept pliable by soaking in water, or are kept frozen until they are to be used. The white wood pieces in the design are created by skinning the bark from the red willow.



Red willow basket made by the Cree family at Turtle Mountain, North Dakota (Louis Riel Institute Collection).



Zipigijigo, wife of Kakopishikung, making red willow baskets at Turtle Mountain near Dunseith, N.D., April 26, 1929 (Photo courtesy of Linus Poitras and the Turtle Mountain Heritage Centre, Belcourt, N.D.)



Basket made by Rose Cree Turtle Mountain



Basket made by Claudia and Svava Spence, Manitoba (Louis Riel Institute Collection)



Basket made by Claudia and Svava Spence, Manitoba (Louis Riel Institute Collection)



A red willow cradle or bassinette, made by unknown Dakota/Metis woman in southwest Manitoba, donated to the Louis Riel Institute by Alex and Don Mathieson.



Basket made by Claudia and Svava Spence, Manitoba (Louis Riel Institute Collection)



Baskets made by Rose and Francis Cree



Basket made by Claudia and Svava Spence, Manitoba (Louis Riel Institute Collection)



Rose Cree at work, Turtle Mountain



A wide variety of baskets.

Some of Rose's red willow baskets are displayed in the Smithsonian. Other willow baskets can be found in museums across the United States, Canada and other countries. Rose was assisted in this work by her husband Francis Eagle Heart Cree. The couple was honored with a Governor's Award for the Arts in 1985. In 2002, they were awarded the National Heritage Fellowship, the country's highest honor in the folk and traditional arts.

They made clothes baskets and cradle baskets - a basket with a hood - wall baskets, round baskets, oval baskets, duck baskets and turtle baskets. They also had a Rabbit basket design. The turtle baskets were always the leading thing in their tribe, the Turtle Mountain Chippewa-Cree.



Francis Cree stripping red willow. Francis had Metis, Cree and Chippewa ancestors and spoke the Michif language. He contributed folklore to several Louis Riel Institute projects.



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