

George Cobb tapes

Tape 42  
Transcription

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Mrs. Mary Johnston, recorded July 10 1966, Curve Lake

Mrs. Johnston will be 96 in Sept. 1966 and is the oldest resident at Curve Lake Reserve. We started by talking about the quill work on the birch bark boxes. She gets the partly completed box top, showing the head of an Indian. The rim has not yet been attached, so what she has is a flat circular piece of bark. On the reverse side is the white bark that shows on the tree. The side on which she is working is the rich brown of the finished box.

I don't make bead work, just the quill work. You know, we cut out the bark, if it is a round box. This is the top of the box, and we do all that first before we put the rim on. The rim is a little wider than my finger. I have the pattern (of the Indian head, the outline), we have it cut out on paste board. I mark the outline on the bark with the same awl that I use to make the holes for the quills. You know, it's hard when you try to work it quick. You get the ends of the quills in your fingers. We cut the ends of the quills after we get this done. I dye the quills with Dyola Dyes. I have never made my own dyes. After I have finished the top, I sew on the rim, then you start to put the quills over that, and leave enough room to put the grass on, and then it will be all worked with quills. (The bark will not show on the rim, but will be covered with quills, which start on the flat of the top).

The same with this. We line them after, so that the quills don't show on the back. That's the way we work them. And, you know, you have to have certain ways. If you work across the grain of the bark it will split, but if you go like this, straight up, the way the little marks are on the bark, it would never split. Nothing is done to the bark first, it is straight off the tree, and you have to dry it. If you just roll it up as you get it off the tree, it would be dark black, it won't be nice like this. You have to leave it out in the sun as you are pulling it off the tree. You stick your knife in and cut down, and all the bark will come off as far as you cut it. Then just put it to one side to dry, while you take the bark from some of the other trees. Not all the trees are good, some have too many knots, but I can cover some of the knots with my quills.

My son collects the bark now. I used to collect it when my husband was living, but he's dead this 35 years. This is the inside of the bark (that she is working on). The outside is rough and white. Sometimes, when you cut the bark and it is too thin, you don't take it off the tree. This is the best time of year to collect the bark, about the first week in July, we know when we can get the bark, you know, it sticks to the tree (she means that the cambian layer sticks to the tree at this time, and so no harm is done to the tree). It would be about a couple of weeks, you can get the bark off the tree. We have to get enough then to last all the year. I can't get enough, my son went once this spring, about a week ago, no, Monday or Tuesday, my grandson, his son, with a car. And that's what I do all winter, just split my wood and carry it in. I split my own wood, then when the snow blows, I don't have to go out and split it. I live in this room in the winter time, but I cook in the summer kitchen in the summer.

For patterns on the box tops, you can use anything if you think you can mark (draw) it. She now gets a partly finished box with the rim sewn on to the flat top and the circular box made roughly, with the bottom attached. The bottom is sewn on with thread, and I put the quill work on after to cover the join. I don't put the quills in my mouth. I put them on a saucer, to wet them, and take so many out until I have used all them, and then I take them out again and put them on my knee and fix them into the bark. I'd be afraid to put them in my mouth, it's just like as if they crawl, they seem to move along and I'd be afraid to swallow them.

My son gets the quills for me, and my grandson. My daughter who lives in Hiawatha, wants to get some more bark for me. She said she would get me some good bark. A man doesn't know good bark from bad bark.

I used to make these birch bark boxes when I was about 10 years old when we would be in a hurry to get something done for mother to go peddling. We would start at the flowers on them, and then do them up with grass, so that she would have enough to peddle with the farmers. Me and my sister always with my mother, peddling.

We used to have a hand sleigh, with a big box. They used to call it a luggage basket, and it went acrossways on the sleigh, and we tied it so it wouldn't fall off. We would have that full of pork and flour, and then the potatoes and turnips on the back, and that's what we got for the baskets. Some farmers would load us right down for just one basket. We had to come back home with our load, and we'd have enough to go peddling again.

It was nice. If we had a hill to go down, we'd get on the hand sleigh and my sister would steer. There was one time that mother told us not to break the sleigh, so we both got on. I got on, but she said she could steer it better than I could. I don't know if she let go, anyway, we bumped into the fence, and pig heads and jaw bones, all over the place. Mother spoke to us. "If you break that sleigh, I'll give you a good licking," she said. We picked all those pig heads and jaw bones up, and run down the hill. She didn't catch us till we got home.

When this road was made, it was only a little cow path, for the minister to come on horseback. I remember him coming in. It was me that

was with mother, taking the bark off the sides of the tree, like, if he was coming from that way, we would have the bark chipped off this side, and when he would be going back home, we would have the other side chipped off, so it would be white on the trees facing him. I marked the trail right through on each side. I marked it this way, and then I went over to the other side and marked that. We were at it pretty near all day, me and mother. The minister came in on horseback. He had no trouble then. You know there were so many little roads (paths).

There was a man called Adams, and I forget the others, they were Methodists. We went to the woods once, in February, when they were working on the trap lines. We went way up to Lindsay River. Our gang and my father's brother and his family. They made a big camp (tent) on Lindsay River. That's where they were to trap, and that's where we went. Joe Irons took us in his sleigh and Abraham McKue [McCue] took the other lot. We lived on this side of the camp and there was a fireplace in the middle, and the other family lived on the other side. But one fire for the two families. We lived in cedar bark, they went up there and made a cedar bark camp, and I don't know how they worked it, but they had little wee maples all down through that cedar bark, the bark would be about that wide (about one foot). They came to a point at the top and there was an opening at the top, and the smoke from our fire would go right up.

The two families were living in the one camp (tent) and the one fire did for both. We slept on cedar boughs, you know we used to change the cedar boughs every week. It was nice, well, mother and father had a feather tick under them, and us girls and boys just had the straw tick on top of the cedar boughs. There were a lot [of] us living in the camp (20 altogether). There was Daddy and mother and brother Bill, Liz, Charlotte, Ed, and then me, and then Ellen and then Liza and the baby Tom (short Tom Taylor, now 88). He was only a baby. He was 4 years old. My grandfather was there, my grandmother and my uncle and his wife and there was Margaret, Susan, Hannah, and Noah and Jim, who still lives close to me here, and Abraham. We were all in there.

There was lots of room. We had our water pails there and they had their water pails. The tent was round building. Oh, there it was nice! When the little ones, that's brother Tom and Liza and Abraham and Jim would go out, you could see them steaming. I suppose them in there so long and then go out, the steam would be from the cold air. We never was sick. Grandfather would take us out every two weeks into the bush. He would have his spoon and he would burst the blisters on the balsam. He'd burst so many blisters on the balsam and he'd make us drink it, just out of the spoon. He'd go and burst some more blisters. There were about 5 of us. He'd do that about every three weeks. I suppose it was a spring medicine! We were all health anyway. It was nice, that was the only time we went out camping.

Long ago the Indians made good medicines. They had cough medicines. They'd quit coughing quicker than what they'd get from the white doctor. They made it with sweet flag, and slippery elm and some cedar boughs and prickly ash. They'd boil it. That's the kind of cough medicine that the old Indians used to make. We'd quit coughing quick when we'd drink that. The slippery elm would make the cough loose. We made lots of baskets while we were up there. Mother used to go every week with baskets up to Lindsay. It wasn't very far. She used to walk anyway and walk back again.

They were black ash baskets. Dad would hoop them. There was an old man there that was used to pounding. He'd pound the splint off the lot when he'd take the bark off, just so much. He'd have his knife and hammer it there, and then hammer it on the other side the width of the splint. And that's what he'd pound.

You'd see the splint springing when it was pounding enough. Sometimes he'd go right down to the bottom and all he'd have to do, would be to lift them splints. Then he'd take the bark off again, make another mark with his knife and start to pound again. You know, there is a way that if you go on the wrong side of the splint, the splint don't run off very good. If the splint goes sideways, you have to go on the other side. This is a little garbled, but may indicate that some of the black ash was twisted and the splints did not come off evenly. We had to even the splints before we made the baskets, if it was not good. We just used a jack knife. If they were too thick, we would cut them to split then and put one piece in our mouth and pull them till we got to the end, to make it thinner. Sometimes you would have to split them twice.

Long ago a white person darsent say anything to an Indian going in his swamp. They wouldn't mind the Indian going in his swamp. They wouldn't mind the Indian visiting their swamps to go and chop down a black ash. The government made the rules of it, that no white man could say anything to an Indian going in his swamp to get his log of splint (black ash). Now Indian can't go near white mans shores, let alone his swamp. There is no black ash on the reserve. We have to buy it. The Mohawks - I don't know where they get their splint. Sometimes they have splint from here to the corner (10 ft.) long and ready to work. We buy them like that, all ready, except for dyeing them. The Mohawk has good dyes, too. Whatever he makes his dyes up, I don't know. Some of it comes ready dyed. We never made our own dyes, but the Mohawks made their own dyes.

We started with the bottom of the basket, every other splint, then you take this one again, and make the bottom, then you take that same one and go right straight across again. We did not have to damp the splint, it would bend nice itself, and we had to scrape the rough stuff off the splint. We did that with the jack knife, all with the knife. We made a twist in the baskets, you know. The top one, that's the one that you twist, that's a double splint on. It is for decoration. We used to make baskets all sizes, even sewing baskets we used to make. They used to sell just as good as work baskets, but they used to be square. Now they make them with a cover on.

Mrs. Irons (her daughter) made hampers this week. Them is her baskets down in the store. They can make good baskets, and the one (daughter) that lives way back, opposite Albert Whetung's, she is very good at baskets. I'd still make baskets if I had splint. When we used to camp at Buckhorn, when my husband was living, we'd go to the swamps and get 5 or 6 logs of splint. He'd go fishing and I'd - He never pounded splint. It was me that pounded all the splint that we used. We wouldn't go no distance till we sell them (the baskets) to the Americans. It was nice I could work when I was young. I pounded splints and scraped them ready for baskets. I still only use a jack knife to make the baskets. We never used a tool, no, no, no, just a jack knife.

When my husband would be hooping them, he had a knife. It was straight and then crooked (it had a hooked end). That's the kind of knife he used, when he used to hoop the baskets. He put the hoop for the handle and put a hoop around. We used hickory for the hoops. It was

the hickory tree that he used to have for hoops. I don't know if the hickory peels yet or not. We used to bind them, with the inside of the hickory bark. We made lunch baskets for Eastwood's on time, and that's what we bound the baskets with and they did not want any other kind of baskets, only the kind that the Johnstons made! Just because of the hickory bark. They were strong. The splint don't last long, it breaks, but this hickory, my goodness, it lasts for years. It holds the whole basket together.

I used to hear stories. I used to hear them long ago, about the way the Mohawks abused the Indians. They used to tell stories, about the wild animals killing each other and then they'd fight like a ground hog and one of those other kind of animals. I forget the name of the animal that killed the ground hog's little family while she was away, having her dinner, I guess. He went to her hole where she had her family and killed every one of them. Then he climbed a tree, and when he saw her going home he started to sing that he had killed the little ground hogs. And the old ground hog started to cry, and said, "that's the one that killed my little babies, I'll get even with him."

She was for her chance, and she got even with him, and when he went home, all his little family was laying outdoors - dead. The ground hog, she started to sing about these little creatures that she killed. And the mother of them called out, "that's the fellow that killed my little ones. I'll get even with him, and she ran to where she heard the ground hog singing, and the ground hog climbed up a tree and the other animal couldn't climb, but the ground hog climbed the tree, and all the other animal could do, was to cry at the bottom of the tree and the ground hog was up in the tree.

I don't know. There was lots of stories. We used to have an old man. We used to call him Grandpa, but he was no relation to us, but we kept him there, you know, when we were small, and it was him that used to tell us the stories.

My grandfather, my father's father, he was good at telling stories, but we never paid no attention to them, so that's why we missed quite a bit, when we did not listen to the old Indians telling stories. The children nowadays, there are very few that goes to churches or Sunday school. The young generation don't care where their children goes, as long as they come home at night. They don't care what mischief they are into. Most of the time, they don't know where they are. They are not like we were. My Goodness! We were about 14 and 15, me and my sister. We used to be in a choir, and you know, we had to practice. So the leader, he lived about as far as to that other house (about 100 yards). We had a little field to cross from our own house. When we come out after practicing, we see Daddy standing there ready for us. Well, we had just to cross the field. He unbuckled his belt, my sister, she was the first to go, and he cut her right across here (her face) with the buckle. Oh! he was cross, he was wicked, I don't know. He didn't do nothing. It was us that had to get the wood all the time. I guess when he went hunting, he'd go and lay down after he'd had his dinner. He'd lay on the shore till evening. he'd come home - nothing with him. Only for mother we be - mother worked hard and she was a white woman, and she got on well to learn how to make baskets. She used to have basket bees. She'd have two or three women, and she'd scrape all the splints, and the other women would make the baskets for her, and them women would make baskets for themselves. Three or four of them would have Whetung, old Whetung, take them to town with a big load of baskets. They'd sell them and if it was Christmas time, mother would fetch a goose home and all the groceries.

She watched the other women making the baskets and that's how she learnt. There was one woman who showed me how to make baskets and I made them. Sometimes I'd have three dozen of school baskets. Mother told me if I made school baskets, you know, school children used to use school baskets, not school bags, to take their lunch. If I made school baskets, Daddy would hoop them, and she would sell them and get me a new dress. Well, I made baskets and it was my oldest sister that got the dress and not me.

Oh, those two were as lazy as - me and my sister would scrub half of the floor. The stove was in the middle of the floor of the house. We'd scrub one side, then mother and the two older girls would go on the clean side and we'd have to clean the other side. Oh, it was lots of work on Saturdays. We had to pick up wood. Father would give us a licking if we didn't have enough wood picked up. He wouldn't let us pick wood on Sunday. That was hard times.

Well - we used to fish through the ice, snow blowing. We just had little cedar boughs for shelter. So after I got married, we lived down towards the lake, and I usn't to do much fishing till after my children grew up. After a couple (of her children) got married, well, I started to fish. Sometimes I'd come home with 12 bass, and if that wasn't enough, he'd make me go back again. We didn't salt those, we were allowed to sell fish at that time. But the government made a law that we weren't allowed to sell fish. I don't know why, whether the government wanted to starve us or not. And we couldn't eat only fish, so we used to go peddling, peddling fish. We'd get flour and potatoes and turnips, meat, and we'd get twice as much for our fish as what we'd get at the store or any place, when we'd trade them for things to eat. This was after my children had grown up. But they never fished. Not like I did. There it was just only me and my husband and my youngest daughter and my youngest boy. They were going to school then.

I used to fish and he'd stay at home and keeping on fire and cooking their meals, dinner, when they'd come home from school and go back again. You know, we called it a nice time, although we did not live as we should have lived. The government kept quite a bit from us. And till this day they are not good to us, to the Indian. They could do a lot more for the Indian than they do. I don't know if they try to starve them or what. They took the hunting away from us, you know the Indian could go any time to the bush and kill a deer, then take it home. Now they just have the limit, if you can't kill when the limit is up, you don't get none. The government is no good. I heard they were trying to get at that Keith Brown (he told a labour meeting in July that he had been threatened over the phone) I don't know for what. You know, he thought a lot of the Indians, I thought. He was playing Indian with the Indians. He had a bit Indian outfit.

Yes, that was a long time ago. (She said that there was mud all round the point before the water levels were raised by the lake dams). You could walk across, but you had to pull through the mud. They used to go across the lake and walk to - there was only one grist mill in Peterborough and that's where the Indians would go. The Indians would go up Big Mud Lake when they knew they were harvesting their wheat, and they would go round picking their wheat, what the harvesters would leave after binding their sheaves. Then they would cut them tops off, put them in bags, and thresh them, like. Move them up and down so that the wind would take the chaff away. Then they would put that clean wheat in a clean bag. They would put it on their back, and they would walk to that one grist mill and trade it for flour.

Then they'd come back again.

And the straw, they used to make straw hats. The Indians used to make straw hats. That's what they done with the straw that they nipped the wheat head off, and they'd tie it so that it wouldn't be scattered around, and that's what they made the hats of.

I never made straw hats. I used to see them though, but I never tried it. Nobody that I know makes them now. They are all young people. There are only about 4 or 5 old ones. They wouldn't remember either. They are not as old as I am. I am the oldest on the reserve. I am 96 in September (1966), and I was into Peterborough today, shopping - 96! Well, you get your things cheaper, you know, there is only one store here, well, there is two now. But, you know, they don't sell like what you get in Peterborough.

I never did any bead work, but I could make a pattern like a star and put that on the cloth, you know, you don't use beads on birch bark. (She goes and gets a small bead purse she has been given. It is chocolate brown and made of buckskin and has a drawstring. It has a star pattern of beads on each side and a looped chain of blue beads round the edge. The loops were sewn to the purse about 1/4 inch apart. There were leather tassels at the ends of the drawstrings.) That was given to me long ago, and it opens out with this thing here. The beadwork is done right on the buckskin. I have had it about 20 years. She was an old woman that came round here that gave me that.

I have never seen or heard of any weaving being done here, it was just the baskets, market baskets and sewing baskets and round baskets with the cover on. Then there were the hampers. I don't know anyone that used birch bark baskets round the house. We just used pots and pans.

When we were camping at the Lindsay River, mother had a pot with a lid on. She'd make her yeast and she'd raise that yeast and make her bread, and that's what she'd have to cook her bread in, that same pot. She would turn it once in a while, turn it around, and there were some little coals on the bottom, under the pot and she would watch them to see if they got cold. She would watch them and she would put more under till that pot would be very near full of raised dough. Then she would put the cover on and get the shovel and shovel coals on the top. Then she would turn the pot once in a while just like if she was browning the sides. She did not bury the pot in the ashes. She just made a hole in the ashes and put some coals in there and set her pot in there and she put coals on the lid. And, you know, it would raise. Oh! she used to make good bread. And that was in the camp!

Our neighbours who lived across the fire, they wouldn't make a bit of bread. If mother had baking done they would watch and that was Daddy's brother. Daddy would take a load of bread and throw it across the fire to them. They would just make a scone, but the scone would be nice and would raise up good when it's made good. (I asked her what they used for yeast. She could not understand the word, which she pronounces 'east'.)

We used to buy the yeast in packages. Mother used to have a yeast tree which she would pick the flowers off and dry them, and then she would steep them. She would say that it was yeast that she picked off the tree. I don't know the name of the tree, but my goodness! she had good bread.

Oh! the old Indians knowed a lot. They knowed a lot. It was the old Indians that learned the white men to fish and hunt. There was one time, there was an Indian, a young Indian. He was lost. He lost his track and he was after killing a moose, and he couldn't find his way so he hung his meat up and rolled himself in that hide. It was a cold night, so they couldn't find him. Here he was, froze into that moose hide. So they found him anyway, I guess, 5 or 6 days after. Then they had to make a big log fire and roll the hide and him to the fire, so that the hide would melt. As soon as it was melted, he was getting out of there. They got him out, but you know, he was pretty weak, but when he had a good meal, he felt alright.

And you know, they hardly ever used guns. It was just bow and arrows. They had a sharp thing stuck into the arrow and that would stick into the deer. My grandfather used to tell me about that. He used to use that, too.

They knew -- how to make a living! They made a good living, too. And they didn't bother the white people, like the white people bothered them, and the Mohawks, they were for (against) the Indians, too. Sometimes the Indians had to paddle to an island and stay all night there, and then go back to their camps on the main shore.

I don't think we are friends with the Mohawks yet, those Mohawks and the Ojibways. I wouldn't understand them, and they can't understand us. We could call them anything and they wouldn't know what I was calling them.