

Weaving Together Livelihood and Culture in Maine, USA

Gabriel Frey, Marla R. Emery and Suzanne Greenlaw

For Gabriel Frey, making baskets from brown ash trees (*Fraxinus nigra* Marshall; also known as black ash) is a source of interwoven values of family, culture, identity, and income. Among these values, basket making plays a pivotal role in his young family's livelihood. Poverty levels are high in Penobscot County, Maine, USA, where he, his wife, and two small children live. In such rural corners of North America, people have long worked multiple jobs, often without quite meeting their basic needs. Gabriel works as a massage therapist to have a consistent paycheck that puts food on the table. But it is income from selling his baskets that has made it possible for his family to move beyond making ends meet, to thriving and moving ahead financially. With money from baskets, they were able to make a down payment on a home and begin saving to buy a truck. That truck will be another tool for his basket making, serving as an extension of his workshop and allowing Gabriel to transport brown ash logs from the forest and finished baskets to market.

As a member of the Passamaquoddy Tribe,¹ brown ash baskets are an integral part of Gabriel's culture and identity. The ash tree is central to the creation story of the four eastern Wabanaki tribes,² which include the Passamaquoddy. Gabriel relates the story and the fundamental spiritual connection it establishes between the ash tree, the people, and basketmaking:

As a Passamaquoddy, our entire existence is related to the ash tree. In the creation story, there's the mythological character of Glooskap, who is like the teacher, the bringer of knowledge. Before Man existed, Glooskap shot an arrow into an ash tree and when it split open, in the heart of the tree was Man. So that gets to how closely tied to culture basketmaking is.

Gabriel comes from a family of brown ash basketmakers. "In my family, specifically, it's roughly 13 generations," he says. He was surrounded by basketmaking as a child, but it wasn't until he was a young man that he learned to make baskets from his grandfather, Fred Moore. Mr. Moore did many jobs to feed his family of 13 children, including basketmaking, and he impressed its survival value on Gabriel:

G. Frey · S. Greenlaw
4 Sunrise Terrace, Orono, ME 04473, USA

M. R. Emery (✉)
USDA Forest Service, Aiken Center, 81 Carrigan
Drive, Burlington, VT 05405, USA
e-mail: marla.r.emery@gmail.com; memery@fs.fed.us

¹The traditional territory of the Passamaquoddy spans the St. Croix River in the Canadian province of New Brunswick and the U.S. state of Maine.

²The eastern Wabanaki, or People of the Dawn, are comprised of four tribes, whose homelands are in Maine, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia; Maliseet, Micmac, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot.

Growing up, before I made baskets, my grandfather used to tell me that as long as I knew how to make baskets, I would never go hungry.

Indeed, making and selling brown ash baskets has been an important means of survival for families in the Passamaquoddy and other Wabanaki tribes from perhaps as early as the 1700s (Neptune 2008). With European contact, a consumer market for Wabanaki baskets developed. Reduced to a reservation land base and with few other economic opportunities, Wabanaki basketmakers adapted ash baskets to sell across a wide range of markets including farming, fishing, hunting, and tourism. From the 1950s to the 1980s, the brown ash basket market began to collapse as imported baskets and mechanization of the farming and fishing industries led to less demand. Along with an important cultural practice, a critical source of income was being lost. In response, when Gabriel was in his early teens, an organization called the Maine Indian Basketmakers Alliance began to raise awareness of this dying art, working to reinvigorate the basket market in Maine and assure the future of Wabanaki basketmaking by pairing master basketmakers with apprentices.

Of his own transition from being a child in a basketmaking family to being a basketmaker himself, Gabriel says:

I guess it was around when I was 18, he [my grandfather] was diagnosed with emphysema. There was suddenly sort of a check on the calendar. He's not going to be around forever...I have to learn, because it's finite suddenly. So, I went to live with him and spent that time really focusing on learning.

His grandfather taught in a way Gabriel continues to learn from:

He said, "The ash is downstairs. Go make something." So I'd have to go down, do it, and then it was more like you have somebody to bring your work to. They say, "Yeah. What you did here is correct, but this doesn't work," or "Maybe instead of doing it with that side of the grain, do this side." In every way he was teaching, he always said this is what he's done, this is how he makes baskets. "Now you need to figure out how you do it..." So, I obviously understood this years later. Even now, he's been gone for years and he's still teaching me.

It's finding your own voice within the larger tradition.

Gabriel remembers the experience of his initial attempts at basketmaking:

The first time that I picked up the materials and started making something...my hands just knew what to do. And I can only attribute that to the fact that it's generations and generations of doing the same thing.

Today, making baskets remains a powerfully emotional act of creativity for Gabriel, allowing him to keep his family's tradition alive while moving it forward. He uses time-honored techniques to turn brown ash trees into works of art that satisfy contemporary functional needs and meet the demands of present-day markets. He explains that this, too, is a time-honored practice. Even while there are traditional forms, Wabanaki basketmaking has always evolved. The state of Maine, USA, has a strong tourism industry. Thus, ornamental baskets are the focus of many Wabanaki basketmakers, whose market is made up primarily of vacationers seeking a keepsake of the place they have visited. In contrast, like his grandfather before him, Gabriel makes what are termed utility baskets; containers with a job to do:

My whole philosophy in doing what my grandfather did is that the point of the basket in our culture is it's a container. It has a use and this material is so durable and so strong and has such a life to it, that if I make something I want it to be used...But you know, a large fishing basket is not really something that you're going to use on a subway. So I started taking the traditional form and trying to match it to modern life.

Pack baskets, which his grandfather made, are a case in point. Gabriel notes that pre-European contact, the original 'roads' were rivers and canoes were the original 'vehicles.' The pack basket is an expression of that place and time. As he says:

Take the pack basket form. Its form is unmistakable to the Northeastern woodlands, that flat back with the belly. This is something you wear on your back when you're trapping or you're hunting, so it has the flat shape. But then, you put it in your 'vehicle.' You want to be able to stow it away.



Fig. 1 Brown ash and leather purse made by Gabriel Frey (photo by Suzanne Greenlaw)

[So] the belly was designed to fit in the hull of a canoe. Today, that shape is ubiquitous. When somebody sees it, it's this connection to Nature... That's because it has such a time-honored tradition. So, its connection to place is its form.

While keeping the pack basket form, Gabriel has adapted it to contemporary purposes like a purse. He creates such baskets to be used. It is his hope that when someone buys one of his baskets, they will use it and, in doing so, will feel, and experience Wabanaki culture every day. In return, the income from that basket sale contributes to his family livelihood as it has for generations of basketmakers before him. This act of carrying family tradition and form forward is a profound source of satisfaction for him (Fig. 1).

Keeping that tradition, that's a very powerful thing. But when you can keep that tradition and move it forward, as well, I love that.

Each step of Gabriel's basketmaking process is done by hand. It begins when he goes into the forest in search of a suitable brown ash tree. Generally, he is looking in remote areas away from roads. Once he identifies a tree with the

characteristics he is seeking, he cuts it down and carries it out on his shoulders. Splints for weaving baskets are made by pounding the log to fracture the growth rings so the wood can be peeled away and split into strips for weaving. This process, as well as the finished products, is central to the value for both Gabriel and those who buy his baskets. As Gabriel sees it, when he makes a basket he is creating a refined container that remains inherently the tree, its material reorganized but still strong, still imbued with the spirit of brown ash (Figs. 2, 3 and 4).

Making something that's this refined container from a tree that's standing right there...You're taking it apart from the way it came together, re-organizing the materials and creating something so it's just as strong and beautiful as its other form...That's the inherent beauty of black ash baskets, that's what makes these so special.

Gabriel's basket making and the income he derives from it depend on access to land and brown ash trees. He finds landowners usually are friendly when approached. Farmers can be especially generous, allowing access to brown ash on their land in exchange for one of Gabriel's baskets. However, accelerating loss of farms and closure of access to other lands is making it increasingly difficult to gain access to brown ash. Another threat to Gabriel's craft and the



Fig. 2 Gabriel Frey carries a brown ash log out of the forest (photo by Suzanne Greenlaw)



Fig. 3 Gabriel Frey pounding brown ash to create splints for basket making (photo by Suzanne Greenlaw)



Fig. 4 When pounded, brown ash wood splits at the grown rings (photo by Suzanne Greenlaw)

livelihood it provides is looming on the horizon. The introduced insect, emerald ash borer (EAB; *Agrilus planipennis*) has been decimating brown ash in north central North America since 2002, causing social, cultural, and financial hardships for basket makers in the U.S. Upper Midwest. EAB is moving eastward through brown ash's range. If it reaches Maine and Gabriel is unable to get brown ash by traveling longer distances or purchasing it, he will stop making baskets, with all of the losses that will entail for him and his family. For now, Gabriel is hopeful the many smart people doing good work around EAB will find a solution.

Gabriel hopes to continue making brown ash baskets far into the future. Reflecting on his grandfather's teaching, Gabriel now sees that basketmaking satisfies many types of hunger. While acknowledging its important financial contributions to his own life and that of other Wabanaki basketmakers, for Gabriel brown ash basketmaking ultimately is and should be inseparable from spiritual, emotional, and physical wellbeing:

Beyond the ability to help uplift our people monetarily, there's something in carrying the work of your ancestors forward that is healing...There's something deeply connected from the phrase, "If you can make a basket, you'll never go hungry." I think that's true on every level, including you'll never go spiritually hungry.