

Weaving Traditions

Basketmaker keeps Salish technique alive as tribal college folk art instructor

STORY BY BETH JUDY | PHOTOS BY ANNE MEDLEY



This page: Eva Boyd holds the first sally bag she made at the age of 10. Facing page: With only ten weeks to learn to make cornhusk bags, students in Boyd's class dye their materials with commercial dyes instead of the traditional ones.

At the foot of Eva Boyd's armchair in her cozy living room in Ronan on the Flathead Reservation lies a pile of white string. There are also circles, orange and burgundy, the size of small plates. Boyd scoops one of these up, a spider with a colored body and many white legs. Grabbing its edge, her strong tapered fingers tug, weave, firm and move on. Slowly, white sides rise from the colored bottom. A basket takes shape. ▶

‘There’s a thing about traditions.
You have to know them or your tribe
is going to go downhill.’

Eva Boyd



The TV is on for company; a cat and dog snooze in the sun. Boyd, 75, points at a soft, colorful basket under the TV. “I made that when I was 10.” Its sturdy bottom is white twine; its sides are stripes of greenish-lilac, two shades of orange and purple. It’s the size of a coffee can. These baskets are in part for collecting berries; coffee-can inserts protect fruit and keep the baskets unstained. Come spring, when she and other Salish tribal members collect bitterroot and camas roots, the inserts aren’t needed. In English, these soft baskets are “sally bags”; in Salish, their name refers to something you sling over your shoulder. Some bags have belt loops sewn on. Traditionally, Boyd says, larger sally bags served as the equivalent of suitcases. Now, most are made of cotton twine and other manufactured materials, but Boyd’s ancestors used natural fibers, especially from dogbane or Indian hemp.

Boyd tells about her first sally bag. Her grandmother, Mary Louise Paul, kept trying to teach her to make them. Boyd lived with her yaya, as maternal grandmothers are called, at Camas Prairie, west of Flathead Lake. The girl started several bags, but didn’t finish them. Finally her yaya said she’d take Eva with her berry-picking only if she finished a bag. The greenish-lilac fabric, Boyd remembers, came from the dump. Her grandmother would collect sweaters there and unravel them and tear discarded cloth into strips. The twine came from a cone the butcher in Ronan gave her because it had blood on it. “Maybe you can wash it,” he said, and they did, her grandmother, her grandmother’s friend, and her, in the clear waters of the Little Bitterroot, on their way back to Camas Prairie in the buggy.

“My grandmother’s friend washed it, then took some,” Boyd remembers. “I was mad, but my yaya said, you have to share.”

Boyd finished her sally bag and got to go berry-picking. Her job was to stand on the back of her yaya’s horse and pull the branches close.

Paul, who was Salish from Washington state, also made baskets from cedar like Boyd does today, but Boyd didn’t learn it from her. “She had all her work

materials and cedar down by the spring next to her house. I don’t know where she got her cedar, maybe friends brought it from the coast.” A child messing up her work was not welcome. “She chased me away.”



This page: Leroy Young Running Crane puts the finishing touches on the buckskin top to his sally bag. Facing page: Basketmaking students learn traditional sally bag production twice a week at Salish Kootenai College.

Boyd left Camas Prairie when she was 13 for St. Ignatius, or Mission, as it’s called; she left Mission when she was 16, and Montana at 20. From 1954 until 1984, she lived in Washington, working, raising four children and building a house. She didn’t make baskets. Then she decided to return. “My heart was always over here.”

She went back to school at Salish Kootenai College, first in secretarial science, then Native American studies. She taught Salish language at Mission Valley schools. And she noticed an absence. No one made baskets anymore. She decided to revive the art. She started again herself. “My fingers just knew,” she remembers.

Now, collectors across the country buy her ▶

‘We have great respect for our elders with this knowledge. It’s almost like talking with a great-aunt or grandmother. You get together and talk. It’s a way of passing on other cultural information and stories.’

Corky Clairmont, artist

baskets, they’ve been exhibited as far away as New Zealand and the state of Montana has recognized Boyd as an American Master of Visual Folk and Traditional Arts. She also teaches basketmaking at Salish Kootenai College. The class fulfills a core traditional arts requirement there. Twice a week, her students work on sally bags and cornhusk bags (the equivalent of purses among Nez Perce and Colville people). Boyd demonstrates how to gather

husks—“Only five or six inner leaves, they’re really soft”—and how to dry them—on a hot day, she uses her van’s dashboard. Dying and weaving comes next. In the summer, she teaches SKC students about gathering and working with cedar.

SKC Art Department head and contemporary artist Corky Clairmont sees learning traditional arts as vital. “They’re part of our understanding of who we are as Indian people.” Providing one’s daily needs from the natural world, he says, takes incredible time and energy. “Transport yourself back, and you understand how social organization came about and what we had to do to survive as a people.”

He continues, “Students also learn the relationship of tribal people to the environment—the things there to use, which are seen as having their own spirit, gifts from Creator so we can survive. That interaction reinforces who our ancestors were.”

Boyd says the same thing differently. “There’s a thing about traditions. You have to know them or your tribe is going to go downhill.”

Her class isn’t all seriousness. Next to her first sally bag sits a wide, upside-down basket. “It’s a hat,” she says, laughing. Her sally bag students start with mop heads, which have fat twined strands. “Something big is easier for your fingers than something small.” The students, horsing around, donned the mop heads as wigs. That inspired Boyd to try a basket hat—though not from a mop head.

Boyd’s instruction, Clairmont says, “goes way beyond putting a basket together.”

“We have great respect for our elders with this knowledge. It’s almost like talking with a great-aunt or grandmother. It relates to close family ties. You get together and talk. It’s a way of passing on other cultural information and stories.”

For example, stories of the past. Of survival—both of people and traditions. Stories of a girl and her yaya.

“This is something that lasts,” Boyd nods.

Beth Judy lives in Missoula.

The Charlie Russell Chew-Choo
LEWISTOWN, MONTANA

The Charlie Russell Chew-Choo glides across the beautiful Judith Basin crossing three trestles, passing ghost towns and slipping through a 2014 ft. tunnel along the way.

- 3 1/2 Hour Train Adventure
- Prime Rib Dinner
- No Host Bar
- Abundant Wildlife

Experience Western Hospitality

On the first Saturday after Labor Day
Come celebrate
With us in the
Chokecherry Capital
of Montana

For Reservations or Train Information
(406) 535.5436 • 1.866.912.3980
www.montanacharlierussellchewchoo.com
408 NE Main Street • Lewistown, Montana 59457

We've done it again.

For the second year in a row, a Montana Western professor has received national recognition.

Delena Norris-Tull, a professor in Montana's premier teacher education program, is the Carnegie Foundation 2010 Montana Professor of the Year.

In 2009, UMW geology professor Rob Thomas became the Baccalaureate Colleges U.S. Professor of the Year.

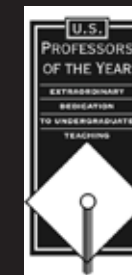
And they say lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice.

Call (406) 683-7331 or visit www.umwestern.edu to learn more about our award-winning institution.

The University of Montana Western



Delena Norris-Tull, the 2010 Montana Professor of the Year.



Montana Western is the only public four-year institution in the country offering Experience One in which students take a single class at a time.

experience One

The C.M. Russell Museum

presents



The Sale to Benefit the C.M. Russell Museum

March 17-19, 2011

With special guest, Ree Drummond, "The Pioneer Woman"

Wall Art Sale

Art in Action

Live Auction

C.M. Russell Museum • 400 13th Street North • Great Falls, MT • 406.727.8787 • www.cmrossell.org