

# TWINING CEDAR: ANNETTE ISLAND TSIMSHIAN BASKET WEAVING

Sm'algyax and English Bilingual Guide



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## Sm'algyax and English Bilingual Guide



**Written and compiled by:**

Kandi McGilton

**In collaboration with:**

Sarah Booth

**Assisted by:**

David R. Boxley and Theresa Lowther

**Edited By:**

Dawn Biddison, Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, Alaska Office

**Cover art by:**

David R. Boxley in honor of his great grandmother and weaver Dora Bolton

**Special thanks to the artists:**

Delores Churchill  
Holly Churchill  
Kandi McGilton  
Karla Booth  
Annette Topham

**Photography by:**

Wayde Carroll  
Dawn Biddison  
Kandi McGilton  
Holly Churchill

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Title page, left to right: Students and teacher in Metlakatla, Alaska about to harvest red cedar.

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Annette Island style baskets from the collection of Jack Hudson.

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A three-way braid with dyed wefts depicting the braid on the bottom of a plaited basket.

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This page: Delores Churchill demonstrating how to split outer bark from the inner bark.

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# History of Annette Island Weaving

In 1887, a group of Tsimshian people from Metlakatla, British Columbia, established New Metlakatla on Annette Island, Alaska, led by William Duncan. Unlike the arts used for feasts and potlatches that were banned due to a mistaken belief that we could not be Christian and Tsimshian at the same time, basketry survived in Metlakatla. Duncan, the Metlakatlans' spiritual leader, allowed women to continue weaving and their baskets were sold in his trade shop. Their neighbors the Tlingit and Haida made beautiful false embroidery baskets, which inspired weavers on Annette Island. Making distinctive aesthetic choices – twining with red cedar bark in a Z-twist (instead of an S-twist) and using undyed maidenhair fern and canary grass for their false embroidery – Metlakatla weavers created a unique weaving style, different than neighboring tribes and even other Tsimshian. When weavers like Dora Bolton, Lucy Rainman, Flora Mather, and others passed away, there were only a few young weavers who had learned this style of weaving. Somewhere along the way, the chain of transferring knowledge was broken. This guide was written to bridge that gap and give knowledge to others whose passion is to weave as their ancestors did.

## About The Haayk Foundation and Project

The Haayk Foundation is a nonprofit organization located in Metlakatla, Alaska, whose primary goal is to save Sm'algyax, the endangered language of the Tsimshian people. For this project, the Haayk Foundation partnered with the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center to co-develop a project documenting materials, techniques and language of cedar bark basketry for teaching and learning. Haida master weavers Delores Churchill and Holly Churchill with Metlakatla Tsimshian intermediate and student weavers harvested and processed cedar bark, maidenhair fern and canary grass, then twined baskets decorated with false embroidery. Metlakatla elder Sarah Booth, a fluent Sm'algyax speaker, provided basketry language. This guide was written as a language and weaving educational resource and also to pair with a set of instructional videos edited from footage filmed throughout the project, which are available on DVD and online at the Arctic Studies Center's "Sharing Knowledge Alaska" website. Please contact The Haayk Foundation ([www.haaykfoundation.org](http://www.haaykfoundation.org)) for more information.

### Instructional videos:

- (Introduction) Twining Cedar:
  - Annette Island Tsimshian Basket Weaving
- Weaving Terms
- Teachings from Tsimshian Master Weaver Lillian Buchert
- Harvesting Red Cedar Bark
- Preparing Red Cedar Bark
- Harvesting and Preparing Maidenhair Fern
- Harvesting and Preparing Canary Grass
- Weaving a Plaited Bottom
- Weaving a Twined Bottom
- Weaving the Bottom Edge
- Weaving the Sides
- Designs (Patterns)
- Weaving Designs: Overlay
- Weaving Designs:
  - False Embroidery
- Ending: Weaving the Rim

# About our Partners

## Delores Churchill

Delores Churchill is a master Haida weaver from Ketchikan and learned from Tsimshian weavers like Flora Mather. With her apprentice and Haayk Foundation board member Kandi McGilton, Delores taught classes on the traditional way of harvesting and preparing red cedar bark, then on how to weave baskets in the Annette Island style. Students also gathered and prepared maidenhair fern and canary grass for false embroidery designs on their baskets. We would like to thank Delores for being a caretaker of this precious knowledge and for passing it on to her apprentice and students in the workshop.

## Holly Churchill

Holly Churchill, also a renowned Haida weaver, joined Delores in the fall to teach the art of weaving an Annette Island basket. She was a student of Tsimshian weaver Lucy Rainman and, following in her teacher's footsteps, she has taught weaving to several generations of students. We were thrilled that she could join us during this workshop. Holly's expertise in the technical aspects of weaving is greatly valuable to the students as they begin their weaving journey.

## Students

The students Karla Booth, Jamie Thompson, Anna Kitson, Shayla Kitson, Aerial Horne, Naomi Leask, Annette Topham and Kimberlee Anderson were fantastic, quick and eager to learn, and there was an air of pride and excitement around the class. Through this weaving project, they will help preserve not only the weaving style of their great grandmothers, but also aspects of Tsimshian language that have fallen out of use.

## Jack Hudson

Jack Hudson's career started at the beginning of a resurgence of Northwest Coast art. For thirty seven years, he taught Tsimshian art to students of the Annette Island School District. He was also an avid collector of Tsimshian baskets. On weekends, he would go door to door buying baskets of all sizes from weavers like Lucy Rainman, Lillian Buchert, Dora Bolton, Brenda White, Flora Mather, Agnes Buxton and more. To our knowledge, Mr. Hudson has one of the largest collections of Annette Island baskets. We are extremely grateful to him for allowing us to study these baskets during this project.

## Theresa Lowther

Theresa Lowther is a veteran Sm'alg̱yax instructor of more than twenty years in the Prince Rupert School District and was highly involved in the development of Sm'alg̱yax curricula and in the University of Northern British Columbia's Sm'alg̱yax Living Language Talking Dictionary. Though recently retired, she is committed to the survival of her first language and has been a friend and resource to the Haayk Foundation throughout this project and all of our endeavors.

## Sarah Booth

Sarah Booth is a fluent speaker and teacher of Sm'alg̱yax. Born and raised in Metlakatla, she has spent decades teaching the language of the Tsimshian. Her help in preserving these words is the most crucial part of this project, because Sm'alg̱yax is an endangered language. There are estimated to be 40-60 fluent speakers left in the world, all over the age of 65. Sarah is one of five fluent speakers remaining in Metlakatla, Alaska. The words for traditional Tsimshian formline (two dimensional design) have already been lost, and The Haayk Foundation is committed to preventing Annette Island style basketry from suffering the same fate. Without Sarah, this project would not be possible, and we are extremely grateful to her for her time, patience and dedication to helping us make this project a success.

## Merging our Efforts

"We are fighting two battles here, to save a dying art unique to the history of our people and a dying language that makes us who and what we are as Tsimshian people. The Haayk Foundation believes wholeheartedly that the language belongs to all of us and we will do what we can to help it survive for future generations. Partnering with all of these amazing people has been an experience we will never forget and it means more to us than we could ever express."

- Kandi McGilton, Secretary/Treasurer of The Haayk Foundation

**The basketry and the language  
make them uniquely Tsimshian.**

*-DELORES CHURCHILL*