**Millie Benjamin Traditional Ojibwe Crafts**

When I was young, my parents lived at Fort Mille Lacs. It was a tourist attraction, and there was an Indian village. We lived there in wigwams. I think that’s where I learned a lot of the old crafts. In fact, I tell people I went to “Clark University.” They say, "I’ve never heard of that."  And I say, "Clark University was my mom and dad, John and Lucy Clark."

My parents made canoes during the summer. They even made the tools they used – they did it the old way. I remember, too, how my mom would get up early in the morning when it was still damp. She’d have us start weaving mats out of bulrushes (which are a kind of plant) because they still had dew on them and were moist and easy to weave. Oh, how I hated to get up in the morning when it was cold! She’d have all of us kids in a line with her at the head and me on the tail end.

We also helped her stretch deer hides to dry and then smoked them. But I never got good at tanning a deer hide. It’s really a smelly process where you soak the hide to get the hair out. To avoid that smell, my dad sharpened one of my mom’s old butcher knives, and she would shave all the hair off right down to the skin. She’d lean the hide over a chair and hold the other end and shave that hair off.

I always watched her shave the hides, and one day she said, "I think you know how now. But don’t cut a hole in it."  So I took her knife, and I just barely touched the hide and a hole popped. That was the end of my hide tanning career. She fired me!

When I grew up, I lived with my mom when I became widowed, and later when she became widowed she lived with me. So my kids always had gramma there to keep us on the right track.

Just as she had taught me, she taught my children everything she knew. My children can make birch bark baskets. They know how to make moccasins and dance outfits. They know how to prepare basswood to make basswood dolls. They know a lot of the crafts that aren’t practiced anymore.

For instance, my daughters can make bulrush mats like I used to, which is a lost art now.  I take the kids out picking bulrushes, and I’m teaching them how to cook the bulrushes. That’s the hard part. A weaver could look at a bulrush mat and figure out how it’s made – it’s just weaving in and out. But it’s the preparation of those bulrushes that is special. It’s what we must know how to do, and I’m sharing it with my kids right now.

I also take my kids out in the woods to pick nettles because I want to make a net. Nettles are plants that sting and hurt if you touch them. But after the frost, nettles lose their sting.  So we go out, even without gloves, and pull nettles out by the root. We let the plant dry, and then we work it so the pulp comes out. All that’s left is the skin, which is so strong you can’t break it. I swear, if you twisted this and made a little rope, you could probably pull a semitruck!

When my mom died, people started coming to me and asking me the questions they would normally ask her. It was a little frightening, because I was scared I would never be able to fit my mom’s moccasins. But I would just think of my mom and what she’d tell them, and it’s not so frightening anymore.