

“It’s important for me to be able to tell this story, because I think now I’m the carrier of the baskets.”

— JULIA PARKER
Indian Cultural Demonstrator



Q&A

WITH A
YOSEMITE
INSIDER

ABOVE Parker poses for a photo while crafting a traditional basket.

A s Yosemite National Park’s longest-tenured current employee, Julia Parker has the important role of communicating Yosemite’s cultural history. Since 1960, Julia has demonstrated basket-weaving techniques at the Yosemite Museum. She has studied under master weavers and become an innovator in her own right, with her handiwork on display at the Smithsonian Institution and in the Queen of England’s collection. Parker has dedicated her life not only to making beautiful works of art, but also to ensuring the important knowledge and skills passed down from her elders continue to flourish today.

Q :: Can you tell us about your background and what brought you to Yosemite?

A :: I was born in Graton, Calif., to the people of the Coast Miwok and Kashia Pomo tribes. When I was 17, I met some people from Yosemite, and they asked me to come here and work. I worked all summer, I climbed the mountains, and I hiked Half Dome. Summer ended, and we all went back to school. When I graduated, my good friend brought me back to Yosemite in the summer of 1947 or 1948. I think I’m probably the oldest one [working] in the Valley; I’m 83.

Q :: How did you start working as an Indian cultural demonstrator for Yosemite National Park?

A :: My grandmother-in-law [Lucy Telles] worked here in the park before she passed away. For about five years or so, there was no story about the first people ... so they asked me. I wasn’t very good at talking to people, but the National Park Service brought me on, and little by little, I began to get more confidence talking and speaking. I just happened to be in a place where the story was needed.

Q :: How did you learn to weave baskets?

A :: My husband took me to his grandmother’s home, where she was doing old-time things like [cooking] acorn in a basket and singing songs in different languages. I saw her doing things by herself, so I went over there and started learning from her. I was so amazed when I saw her cooking her acorn mush in a basket — I just couldn’t get over that.

The first basket I made took a whole year. It was the size of a cereal bowl, with willow and little bit of a crooked redbud pattern. I learned more and more about baskets, then I reached out to the ladies — the basket-weavers — to see if I was doing it right. I studied with a lot of weavers through my lifetime, learning different styles, and I thank them for giving me their time to show me how to make their baskets.

Q :: How is basket-weaving important to Yosemite’s cultural history?

A :: I think this story — what these women did — is a story that should be heard because of the artistic ability they had. They could just take materials and weave them together.

Q :: Tell us the process for gathering the plant materials needed for your baskets. Why is it important for you to share this knowledge?

A :: You have to have a great understanding about the fibers you work with. You have to know when they’re ready, when the bark will stay on the wood, when the bark will peel off the wood. There are so many little things you learn, and each one of us is an individual. It’s important for me to be able to tell this story, because I think now I’m the carrier of the baskets.

Q :: Tell us a little bit about the techniques you use. Is there significance to the designs and materials you choose?

A :: I do both coiling and twining. Twining is the oldest way to set together a basket, and this is the last one I learned, so I’m still working really hard on that. I made large willow acorn baskets that are about three or four feet tall. I’ve made sifting baskets. I’ve learned all kinds of baskets! Little by little, my baskets began to have unique patterns. I began looking at baskets and went through the archives here and looked at patterns, designs, stitches and shapes. We’re not supposed to copy basket patterns, and we’re supposed to use triangles and rectangles and zigzags in our own way, so I began to do that.

Q :: How do you collect the materials needed to make a basket?

A :: You wait for the leaves to turn yellow and fall off, and you also have to know to do song and prayer. I get out and try to collect enough — I learned to just take what I need. Some years you can get a lot, some years you can’t.

Q :: Your daughter Lucy, and your granddaughter Ursula, are both continuing the tradition of basket-weaving in Yosemite.



BELOW In her role as cultural demonstrator, Parker shows visitors of all ages the traditions of her people.



“... I’m sitting among the masters’ work. Everyday they’re telling me, ‘Don’t forget our ways, Julia. Keep talking, keep telling people about it.’ I’ve worked with all kinds of women, and they all tell me to teach, to tell everybody about my baskets and how I make them.”

—Julia Parker
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ABOVE Parker’s grandmother-in-law, Lucy Telles, seated outside the bark house behind the Yosemite Museum, weaving a basket which is now in the museum collection,

What does it mean to you to pass along this knowledge?

A :: Yes, Lucy learned, and my granddaughter, Ursula, is learning and passing it on to her daughter [Naomi], who is 17 years old. I think this is important to Yosemite, because they’re bonded here. These are the plants their grandmothers used. We’re always learning, trying new things. We all go out together [to collect materials], and they learn about the baskets and about having ownership. I’m hoping Lucy will fall into my position someday, because she’d be good. And then Ursula down the line. But I never get tired of it. There’s so much I want to learn and accomplish that I forget about the time.

Q :: At the Yosemite Museum, you interact with visitors on a daily basis. Why do you think it’s important for visitors to learn about basket-weaving? What do you want people to remember after they leave?

A :: I think it’s important for them to learn, because when they’re out walking, they see these plants, and they can say, “That’s what Julia uses in her baskets.” Then they’ll have more caring and more love for the Valley that has protected these plants for us.

I want [visitors] to come through the door not realizing what a basket is, and when they leave, I want them to have a better understanding about the basket and about the plants we have in Yosemite. [Visitors] are really happy to know they learned something, and it makes for a better understanding of the whole Yosemite Valley.

Q :: What do you enjoy most about your job?

A :: I like my work, because I’m sitting among the masters’ work. Everyday they’re telling me, “Don’t forget our ways, Julia. Keep talking, keep telling people about it.” I’ve worked with all kinds of women, and they all tell me to teach, to tell everybody about my baskets and how I make them.

Q :: Yosemite Conservancy is supporting the Sharing Traditions exhibit, which is scheduled to open in Summer 2013.

How would you describe the Conservancy's role in supporting your work?

[The Conservancy] is doing the right thing. We're planning to display our baskets in the Yosemite Museum, and the Conservancy is helping us. They're helping generate a lot more awareness of what Yosemite is and what has come before, even the little things. ■



 See Julia Parker's work on display at the Sharing Traditions: Celebrating Native Basketry Demonstrations in Yosemite 1929-1980. The exhibit will be on display at the Yosemite Museum beginning June 4, 2013.

Learn more about this project on our website: yosemiteconservancy.org/sharing-traditions

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ABOVE RIGHT Maggie Howard behind the Yosemite Museum, circa 1920. **RIGHT** Parker, Yosemite National Park's longest-tenured current employee, has dedicated her life to sharing traditional American Indian culture and crafts with park visitors

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