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Making a Micmac Basket (1) (2) (3) Ellen Googoo is a 65 year old mother of 18 children (10 of her own and 8 foster children). She lives at Whycomagh where she runs a basket shop. She has been a basketmalcer for 58 years. She started working with the Crooked Knife (Wag az en igin) when she was 7 years old, and she has taught her daughter, Barbara (the Nova Scotia Princess Micmac), how to make splits and from those splits baskets, just as her mother before her taught her. The Crooked Knife is a very important tool in the making of baskets. Years ago, it was the most popular steel tool used among the Indians building bark canoes. It is made from a flat steel file with one side worked down to a cutting edge. The cutting edge is bevel-form, like a drawknife or chisel, with the back face flat. The tang of the file is usually bent into a slight hook and let into the handle, then secured with sinew lashing. Today, wire lashing is used. Held with the cutting edge toward the user, the handle is made to be grasped fingers-up with the thumb of the holding hand laid along the part of the handle projecting away from the user. It is, in effect, a one-hand drawknife. Mrs. Googoo's blade is curved slightly. It was put into a stove until it was red hot, then hammered into the proper curve and plunged into water. The Crooked Knife is not an easy tool to work with, and although Barbara makes some use of it, it is generally used only by the oldest basketweavers. The choice of wood to make splits from is very important. The right wood is not easy to find. It must have good straight grain and no knots. Mrs. Googoo makes splits from black and white ash, white maple and birch. Although white maple gives a fine white color it is not the best of wood. Birch is tougher, ash is the toughest. Ash is used for heavy duty creations like hampers, baby baskets and potato baskets. Softwood is used only when making very tiny baskets because it will bend easily without breaking. The first step is to make from a thin, straight plank of hardwood, splits of the same width and thickness. The plank used was about 3 feet long, 1 inch thick and 2 inches wide. The plank should be thoroughly dampened, and the splits should be kept damp as you keep dividing them. With the Crooked Knife you cut away at the sides of the plank, getting the sides straight and the width even all the way along. (1) You work to a width of 1 inch. Then you "splice" the plank at one end to reveal the grain. (2) Then take the plank on end and using the Crooked Knife as a probe, work the edge of the blade into the grain. Do not try to take off a split as thin as you will finally want it. It is better to take off a split of several thicknesses, and then to find the line of grain of that split, and then to split it yet again. The actual splitting is slow, careful, not at all a tearing. You are bending the two pieces away from one another (3), and that bending gently pulls them apart so that they will run off along the grain exactly as they started. By the time you have the splits very thin (4), there is no real grain • and so you make a grain. It takes a lot of practice before you can get the thinnest splits, even all the way along. If you try to use splits that are cut only on the grain they will be too thick for anything but Bottom Splits. You can't make anything delicate with thick splits. Cape Breton's Magazine/3