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Ancient Skills for Modern Times

By **CAROLE BRODSKY** The Daily Journal
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Primitive Technology at the County Fair

The Mendocino County Fair and Apple Show opens Friday, and concurrently, the California Wool and Fiber Festival is held at the Boonville Fairgrounds, in the Commercial Building.

Considered one of the nation's premier fiber festivals, fair attendees have the opportunity to take classes and observe demonstrations by wool and fiber artists. Tamara Wilder - a "primitive technologist" and educator who has been teaching ancient living skills for the past 20 years, will be offering a class in knotted net making on Friday, from 1 to 4 p.m.

While attending UC Santa Cruz, Wilder met Steven Edholm, her life partner, who shared her interests and was deeply inspired by naturalist Eustace Conway - the subject of Elizabeth Gilbert's acclaimed biography, "The Last American Man."

The couple found a mentor in renowned ethnobotanist and basketmaker Margaret Mathewson, whose post-doctoral fellowship at the Smithsonian Institute focused on traditional western fiber arts. Through their association, Wilder and Edholm discovered primitive living skills and embarked upon their life's work.

"We were young and fortunate to be living on 300 acres of open land," explains Wilder, and because of their access to the wild, their skills grew exponentially. They began assisting at primitive living workshops.

Primitive technology consists of the first techniques used by humans to assist them with comfort and survival. Using materials found in their



environment, early humans developed skills which form the basis of modern life.

"People who lived 20 to 30 thousand years ago were virtually identical to us," explains Wilder. "We still have the same basic needs - air, water, food, shelter, clothing, energy or fire, and each other. The difference today is that we fulfill these needs by having others provide these resources for us."

Early peoples, says Wilder, would easily survive in today's world. When she teaches elementary school students, she asks what their chances of survival would be if they were teleported back to the Ice Age.

Wilder and Edholm traveled for many years and settled in Mendocino County in 1996. They became expert tanners and wrote what is considered the definitive book on home tanning entitled "Buckskin: The Ancient Art of Braintanning." The couple has been featured on the History Channel's Modern Marvels program demonstrating braintanning, and offers a range of hands-on courses teaching the slaughtering and processing of small animals, creating hides and utilizing an entire carcass to make utilitarian items.

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One of the couple's most rewarding projects has been the creation of a school program which introduces children to primitive technologies and helps them understand how ancient people lived. Students are given opportunities to make string from native fibers and try their hand at hunting using rabbit sticks, hand spears, spear-throwers and the bow and arrow. Fire making with a wooden hand drill is demonstrated, and students grind and drill their own soapstone beads.

"The program hits every discipline," says Wilder. "I explain how early peoples used their brains and hands instead of fur and claws for survival. The hunter/gatherer is a universal heritage from our ancestors. I tell students they would not be here today if their ancestors weren't good at these skills."

Learning primitive technology takes time and patience. "This is challenging, hard work that requires intelligent thinking. Thirty thousand years ago, people were very smart," Wilder says.

Wilder sees children demonstrate natural affinities for a tool or skill. "I was teaching students how to throw the rabbit stick. I kept hearing this thunk' and a student ran over to me and said he'd hit the target 15 times in a row. He said to me, This is my tool."

Wilder is impressed at the impact the program has on students. "This work hits kids deeply," she said. "They actually ask me if this is real." She ran into one of her students leaving for college. He told her he still had his soapstone necklace he made in the sixth grade.

Wilder's program is presented at Oak Manor School, the Waldorf School of Mendocino County and La Vida Charter School. Other adult workshops include making paint from earth pigments and primitive living skills overviews. Their website features many free downloadable articles, a retail tool and book section, workshop schedules and photos from their museum exhibits and replications.

Friday's workshop will focus on creating a basic, knotted net using cotton twine, a netting shuttle and measure. Net making exists in every culture - for fishing, hammocks, capes, hairnets and more. "People figured out how to loop string together independently, all over the world," Wilder said.

Wilder expertly twists and splices fibrous strands of dogbane, gathered from a Santa Rosa field where people have been collecting the plant for 5,000 years. Using a motion every child understands, she rolls the separate fibers back and forth

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against her thigh- and almost magically, produces a strong piece of string.

Crediting partner Steven- who is the driving force behind the research and structural components of their workshops, Wilder happily passes this nearly forgotten wisdom to the next generation. "By learning and practicing these ancient skills, we keep in touch with our roots, our independence and our place in the natural world."

For information visit paleotechnics.com or phone (707) 391-8683.

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