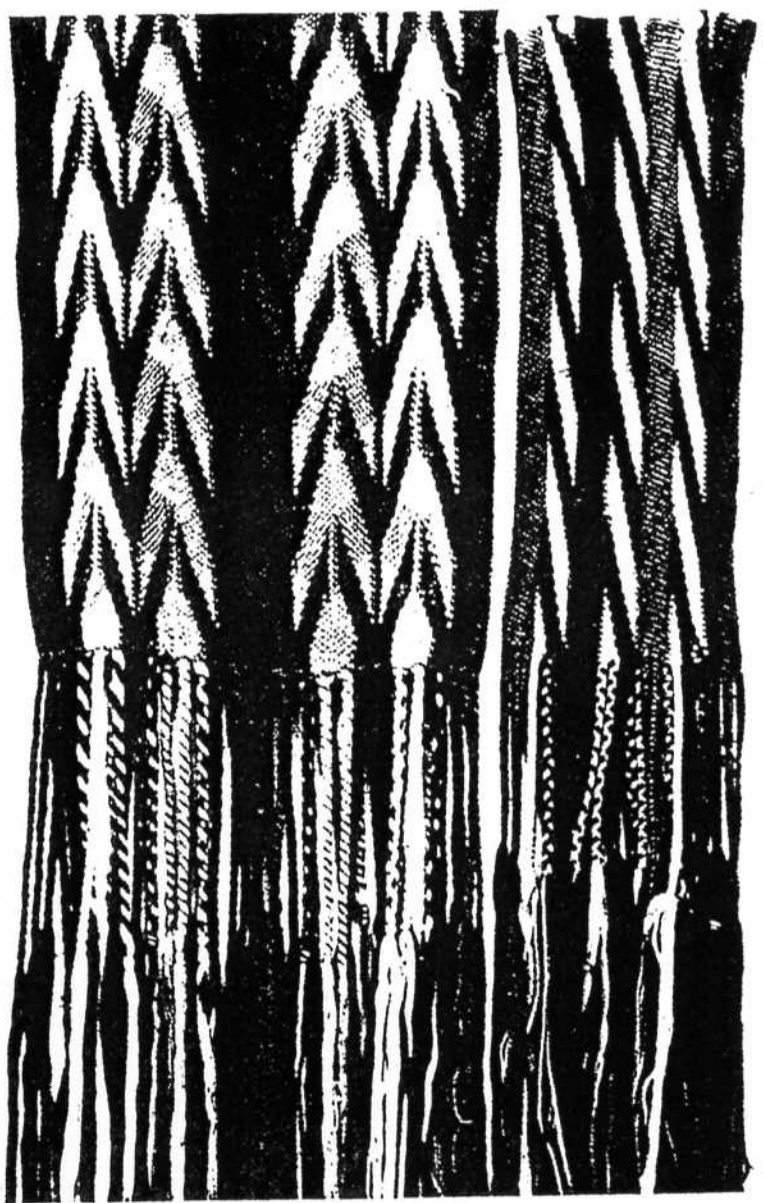


FINGER WEAVING

Part 1

by Richard Conn



Some years ago, I began a series of articles in "American Indian Tradition" on the various kinds of braided sashes. Unfortunately, this magazine went out of business after the first article was published, and the others were never printed. In the time since, people have written to ask for instructions on the material that was to be covered in the unpublished articles. So far I have had to disappoint them. Now, "American Indian Crafts & Culture" has made it possible to start again and, hopefully, to finish. Let's hope this series doesn't prove a jinx to Mr. Stewart. This first article will cover the basic details - how to calculate the amount of yarn, how to arrange it, etc. - and the simple chevron pattern. The next will be concerned with arrow pattern and the process of braiding several bands simultaneously. The final article will explain the flame and reflex patterns and some ways of treating fringe.

Fig. 1 Two finger-woven sashes, Winnebago (left) and Menomini (right). Both designs are variations of the basic technique. Photo courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian.

The first step in making a piece of finger weaving is, obviously, to figure out your pattern and then plan how much yarn you will need. I except you will work out the actual design from pieces you have seen, whether in photographs or in the flesh. After you have worked out the pattern and the colors, you should make a full-sized sketch of one unit; that is, one full repeat of the design. With this sketch, you will be sure of what you're going to make and it will also help you figure the yarn correctly.

Most sashes and garters are woven of sweater-weight knitting yarn that comes in hanks of a specified number of yards, marked on the

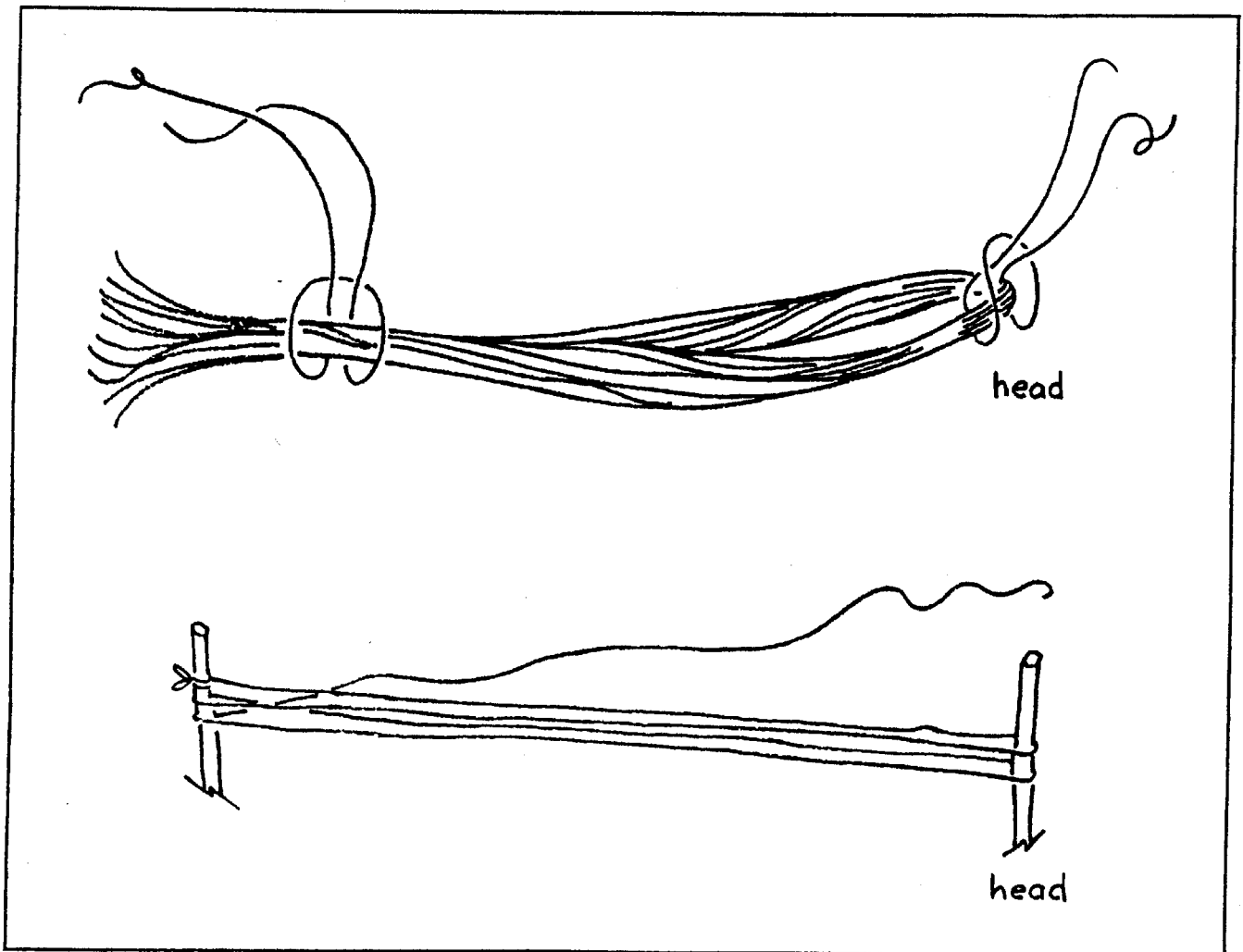
wrapper. Measure your sketch to see how wide your project is to be, and multiply this by twenty-four (since sweater-weight yarn will work out at about twenty-four strands to the inch of width). If you are using finer yarn, you may have to make a practice piece to determine the strand width count. Next, decide on the length of the braided section and add 10% for the "take up" or length you will lose by the strands' lateral movement in braiding. Then add extra length for the fringes on either end and you have the total length. Using your sketch, work out the number of strands required for each color on the basis of twenty-four to the inch. Multiply this by the overall length and you will know how much yarn of each color is required. Then, it's off to the yarn shop.

Many Indians like Red Heart brand yarn, and it does work up well. You should get wool yarn, as both cotton and all-synthetics aren't very elastic. But, you don't need to buy an expensive wool yarn like Shetland or Argyle. Something from Woolworth's will do very well.

Fig 2 Top: How to insert the head and bottom tie strings. Bottom: How the yarn is wound.

Having your yarn, you are ready to set it up for work. You must find two winding posts and set them the proper distance apart; that is, the overall sash length you figured out before. The winding posts must be two solid objects around which you can wind yarn without slipping. You might clamp two sticks to the edge of a work table, or use two ladderback chairs, or anything else suitable. Tie an end of yarn to one post and start winding back and forth until you have enough strands of the first color. Although it sounds silly to mention it, don't forget that each round trip between posts gives two strands. I have seen people wind off yards of yarn without realizing they had counted only one side. End at the first post, untie your original knot, tie it to the other end and cut off the excess. Repeat for the other colors. Don't worry about having the colors in proper sequence yet.

After the yarn is all wound off and tied, it must be set in order. At the second winding post (the one opposite the knots), insert the head tie string as shown in Fig. 2. This should be a piece of strong cord about two yards long. Then go to the first winding post, untie the knots and cut all the yarn loops open. Then tie a second heavy cord around this yarn bundle as shown in Fig. 2. Next you have to find a



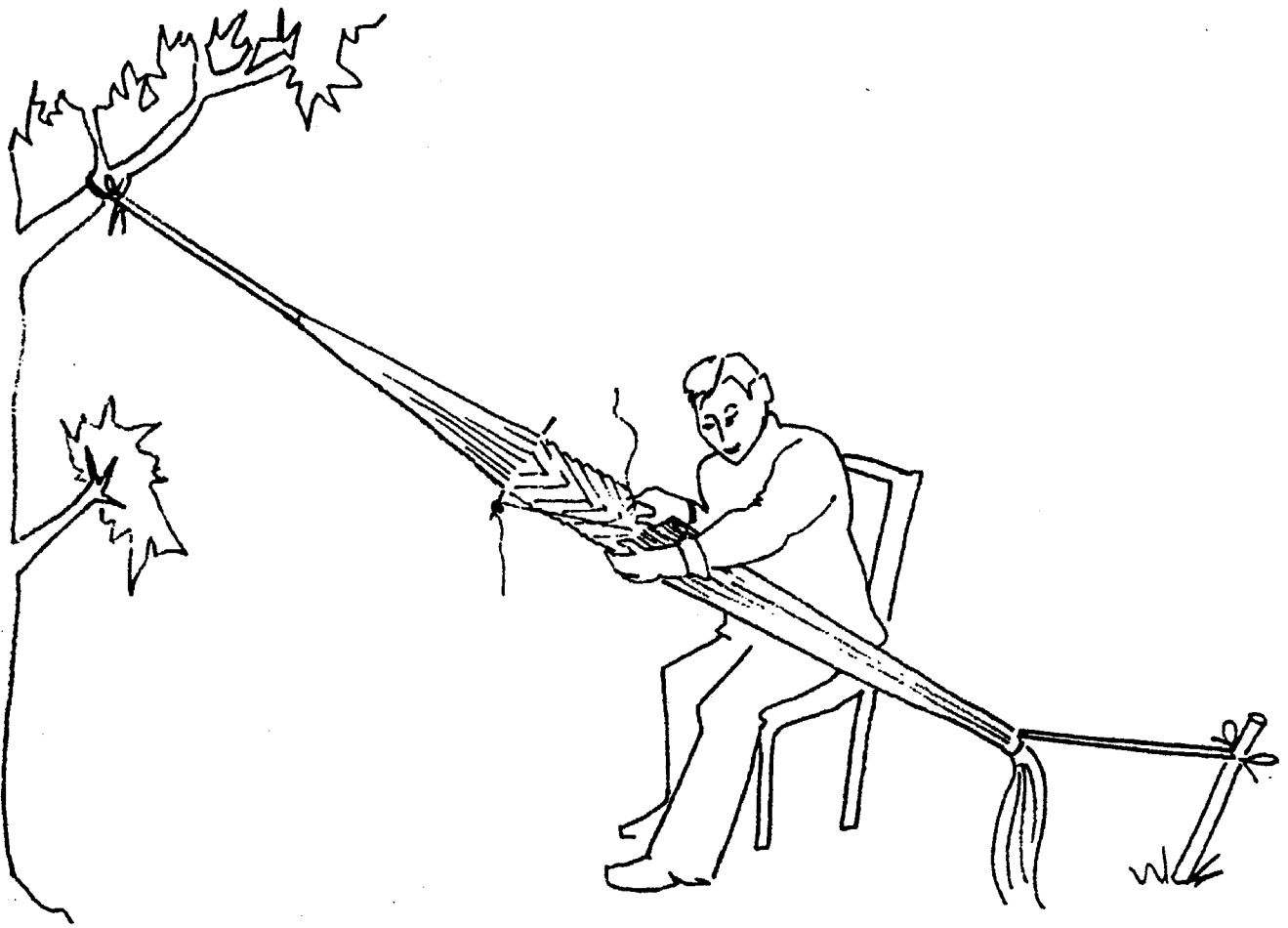


Fig. 3 How to arrange the yarn bundle for working.

convenient place to set up the yarn bundle and work. Personally, I like to work with the yarn at about a 45 degree angle as shown in Fig. 3. Others prefer it more nearly vertical or horizontal.

With the yarn arranged comfortably, you must insert the headstick. This may be a peeled willow shoot, a piece of dowel, or something similar. It should be about three-eighths inch in diameter and eight inches longer than the braiding will be wide. Lift up one strand of the color that goes in the center, measure down from the upper tie a distance equal to the fringe of one end, and loop this strand around the head stick. Continue looping the center color strands around the stick and then check the distance again. Fig. 4 shows how these loops are made. Continue looping the rest of the strands onto the head stick, working alternately on both sides, and arranging the colors in proper order. When all are in place, be sure the head stick is square, and push the strands tightly together.

Finally, check the tension of the yarn bundle. Each strand should be taut, so that it does not sag, but not tight. You should be able to raise or lower any strand several inches without difficulty. Now, you're ready to begin braiding.

At this point, let me ask a favor. Finger weaving is great fun, and the whole point of these articles is to let you in on the enjoyment. But, almost everyone who wants to learn the process is thinking of making an arrow sash. The arrow process isn't easy at first, and you will have more luck with it if you do some practicing with the basic method first. Let me urge you to do one or two pieces in the basic chevron pattern in order to get the feel of the technique before going on to the more complicated patterns. I've seen enthusiastic people insist on beginning with an arrow design, make a mess of it, and give up. This is like learning to drive a diesel truck - too much for the first lesson.

First, then, you should try a single band

of plain braiding. With your yarn in order, pick up an edge strand, pull it loose from the bottom tie, and simply weave it through the rest, going alternately over and under. As it comes out at the other edge, wrap it several times around the head stick. Then go back to the starting point, pick out the next edge strand and do the same. This time, be sure you've alternated with the course above; that is, you are now going over the strands you went under before and vice versa. At the end, unwrap the first working strand from the head stick, and turn it over the second working strand. The first strand must re-enter the work in proper alternation also - if the second working strand went under the last taut strand, the first working strand must go under it as it re-enters the yarn bundle. Wrap the second working strand around the head stick and tuck the first into the bottom tie. Fig. 5 diagrams how this basic weave should look. Just continue the process above, picking up each new working strands at the same

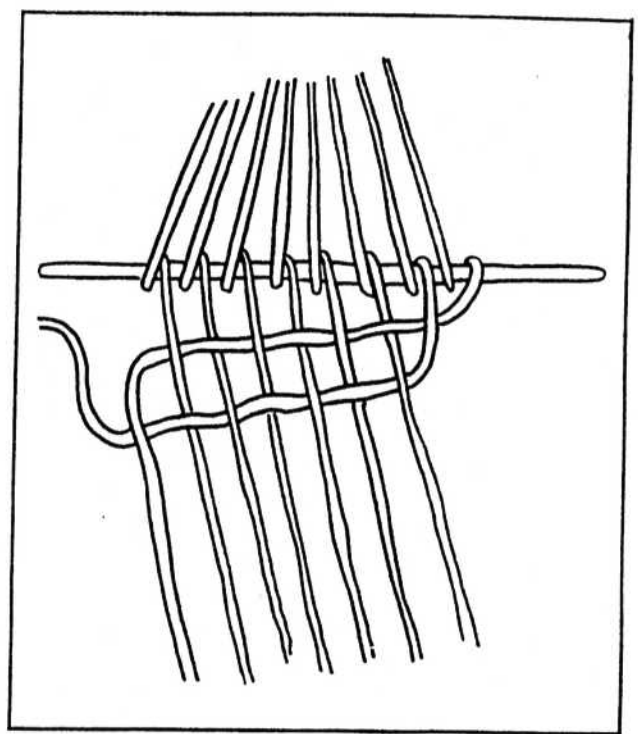


Fig. 4 How to loop strands around the head stick.

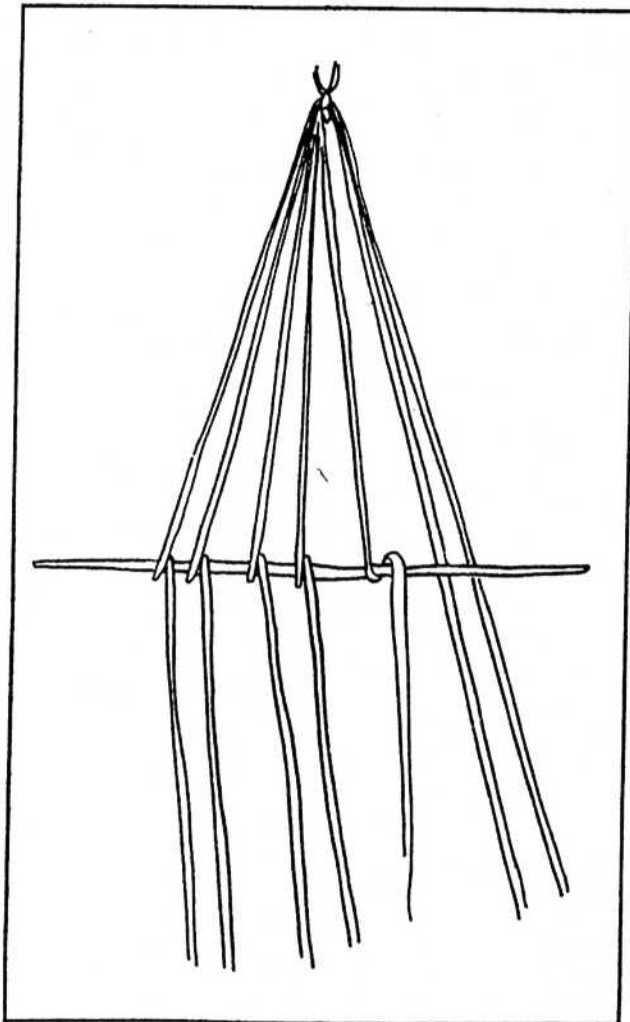


Fig. 5 The single band braiding process. In actual practice, the strands are tight together. Here and in the following figure, they have been opened up for clarity.

edge and putting each old working strand back into the bundle properly, and in a little while, you'll see a pattern forming. Because you are taking up yarn from one side and replacing it on the other, your pattern will have diagonal stripes as in Fig. 1, right.

This single band braiding is very easy. The only problem is making sure the strands alternate correctly. If you do get one strand going the wrong way, your mistake cannot be righted two or three courses later and will only get worse. If you do make a mistake, you must go back and straighten it out.

The next step is a band of double-band braiding - the kind that will make chevron designs. Now you must work with an even number of strands, since the work begins from the center and each half must have the same number of strands. Find the center point and pick up the strand on one side of it - either side. Weave this strand through the opposite side, going over and under and so on until you wrap the strand around the head stick. Then, turn the head stick 180 degrees. The weaving you just did will now be opposite its original place. Take the strand that was on the other side of the first center (it will now be in the same position as the first one you picked up) and weave it through the side opposite it, being sure to pass it under the first taut strand.

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Fig. 6 shows how this looks. I've made one side dark and one light to clarify the operation. Turn the head stick back to its original position, pick up the next center strand from the first side and weave it through the second side; that is, this third working strand goes along just below the first one you did. The fourth will go below the second, and so on. By the way, each crossing of a band with one or more working strands is called a course of weaving. In this case, working strands 1 and 2 are a course since together they crossed the whole band. After the third working strand is in place, the first is turned over it and back into the yarn bundle as before. Again, you must be very careful to get a proper alternation of taut strands as you go. From this point, the process goes on weaving in first one side and then the other of each course. After

Fig 6 A, First half of the first course. B, Second half of the first course. Note that the work has been reserved. C, First half of the second course. The work has been reversed again.

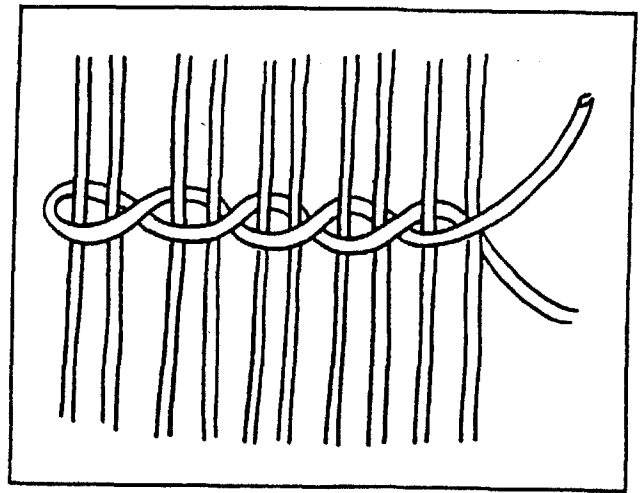
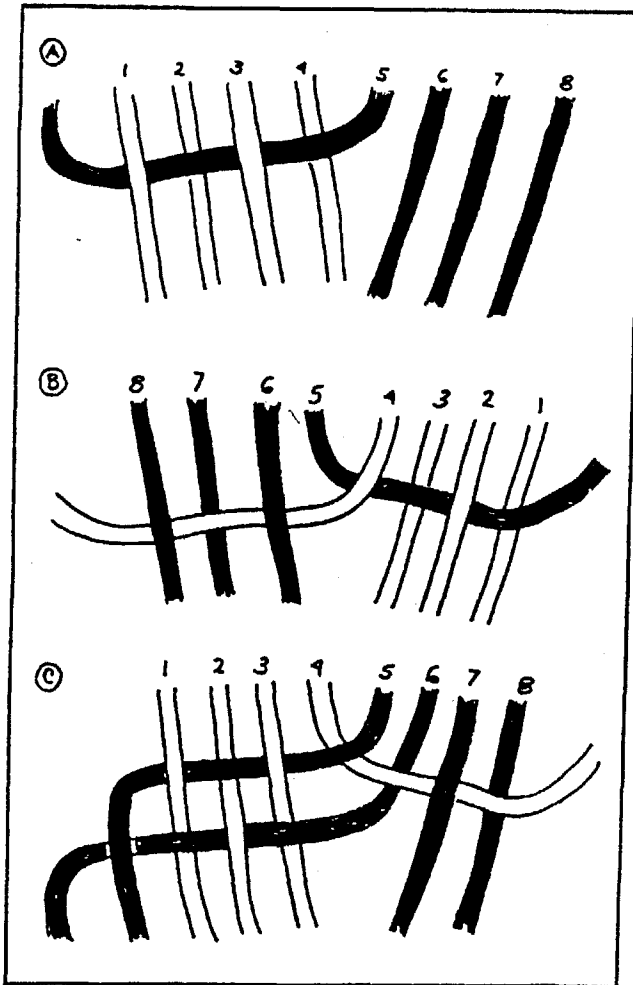


Fig. 7 How to make the twining stitches.

you have done several courses, untie the bottom string and slip all the loose ends back into the yarn bundle.

When you stop work for the evening, it is necessary to hold the last row of weaving tight. For this, you make a tenter bar which can be a stick about one inch in diameter and split lengthwise in two, or it could be two flat sticks of the same size. Place the halves of the tenter bar over the working edge and clamp them together firmly with string or rubber bands. Then untie both ends of the work, roll it up, and it will hold itself securely until you're ready to work some more.

When you have finished your piece of braiding, insert a row of twining stitches at both ends to keep it from unravelling. Fig. 7 shows how these stitches are done. You may use a short piece of yarn, double it around one edge of the sash, twine, and tie at the other edge. You may also use two long pieces and let them add to the fringes at both sides. Some people prefer to do the twining stitches at the upper end right after inserting the head stick. Whether you do or not, be sure to put them in both ends before releasing the tension on the taut strands. With twining in place, untie the yarn and cut open the loops at the upper end.

The basic process makes chevron-like designs. You can vary these according to the colors you choose and by varying the size of the chevrons. For example, one chevron might be ten strand wide, another six, and so on. You may also make chevrons half one color and half a second. To do this, just set up an equal number of the two colors exactly opposite each other on the head stick. The colors will alternate as you braid, so that if you started with color A on the left, it will come out on the right next time, then back to the left, etc. You may also vary chevrons with striping. Here you set up strands of two colors in adjacent pairs. Suppose you wanted a striped chevron eight strands wide. In each half of the work, you would arrange eight strands of the two

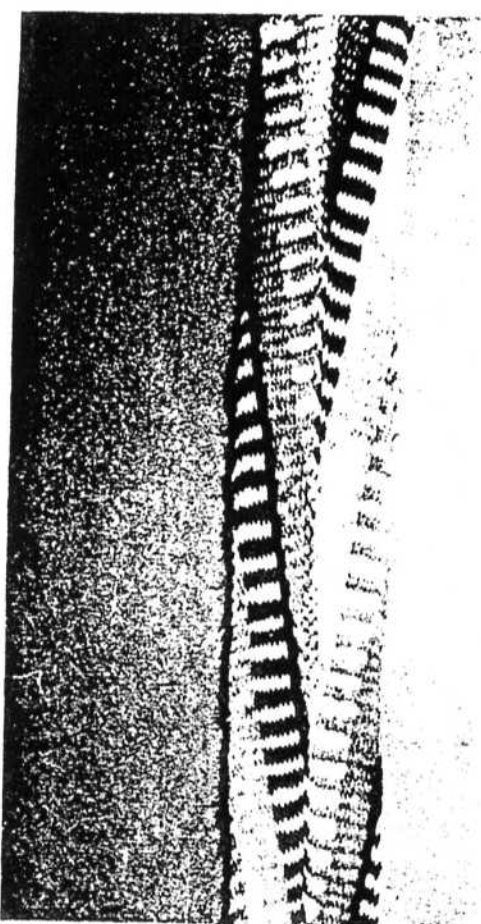
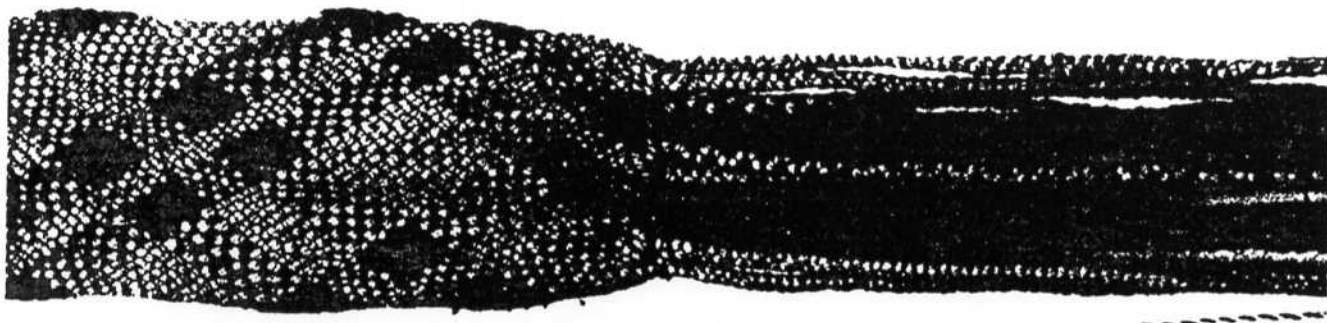


Fig. 8 Chevron sash with striped designs.

colors thus: ABABABAB, making sure the same color was nearest the center on both sides. As you work all of color A will show on the surface in one course and all of color B the next time. Fig. 8 shows how this striping looks.

The preceding directions make what is called a warp-face braid, which means that the working strands hardly ever show on the surface. This is caused by pushing the strands closely together on the head stick before braiding and by keeping the yarn bundle taut. There is another

Fig. 9 Sauk & Fox plain-face sash. Note the checkerboard appearance caused by letting the working strands show. Photo courtesy Museum of the American Indian.



kind of plain finger weaving in which the working strands do appear on the surface and the work resembles Monk's cloth woven diagonally. This is the process used to make the Iroquois sashes and the beaded edges of Osage arrow sashes. Fig. 9 shows an example of this plain-face braiding. To do this kind of finger weaving, space out the strands on the head stick so they just touch and no more, and loosen up the tension on the yarn bundle so the strands hang a little slack. As you work, push each working strand up against the preceding one as tightly as you can. This plain-face braiding is harder to master than the warp-face variety. Tension is the problem, and you will have to practice a bit to get the feel of it.

In the next article, we will take up the arrow pattern. Again, let me urge you to practice the basic process and familiarize yourself with it before attacking the more involved arrow designs. ■

Fig. 10 Ojibwa chevron sash of several bands woven together. Photo courtesy Milwaukee Public Museum.

