

BEGIN TO ALEUT

© Lois Chichinoff Thadei (Aleut – Sealaska)

Notes on beginning to weave the bottom and sides of an Aleut Basket

In pre-contact times, Aleut weavers harvested Elymus Mollis off their family's collection sites. Each weaver, and her family, had a series of collection sites. The sites were documented in Potlatch Ceremony. Sites were awarded, traded, inherited or sold. Each site was carefully tended thru annual harvest practices. At contact, the Russian American Company presumed the grasses of the islands were simply wild growth. Grass was burned, trampled by imported grazing stock. Generally considered a weed, the Russians, and their replacements held little regard for the plant, Elymus Mollis, and the job it did in holding the land against the pounding winter surf.

Elymus Mollis growing on the Longbeach Peninsula of Washington State has been invaded by Asian grasses which cannot replicate the duties of the indigenous grass. Erosion of great stretches of beach have been occurring every winter. It's not likely the erosion will be stopped. While Elymus Mollis hold it's own against pounding waves of the winter storms and some oil slicks, it cannot hold it's own against invasive species. So sad.

Here, in Washington State, I wanted teach this weaving to anyone who wished to embrace the significant art form. Jan Cyr, Humming Bird Stands Lodge in Yelm, WA responded. She and many members of the Lodge took up the weaving, including it in their Lodge activity. Such a generous gift.

Part of their commitment to the learning was to follow the curriculum for three months AND also teach what they knew anyone who expressed a desire to learn. Now, we have Aleut weavers throughout Washington. The Newbies also in Mexico, Australia, Alberta and BC Canada, New Orleans, Alaska and the Washington State Governor's Office, too.

As an Aleut weaver, living away from my Unga Island, my traditional home, the gift of inclusion given by the Lodge was a blessing. I was able to pass my small knowledge of the Aleut weaving to others, finally.

HOW IT WORKED

Once Jan Cyr identified participants, I brought beginner kits for them. I wrote a curriculum spanning three months. However, we only met three times during those three months. For a 5 hour day, the newbie weavers absorbed the technology of the weaving stitches to make a small, knob top Aleut Basket. They were all amazing learners.

- Day 1: Learn to cast on, expand the circle by adding warps. Weave to edge of the bottom (using a wooden dowel as a "form"). Homework was to make a new basket bottom every day, for 30 days. Mandate is to always explain what Aleut Weaving is, as they understand it.
- Day 2: Learn to triple twine the turning row, begin working up the wall of a basket. I taught different newbies a stitch, they then shared that stich with others. I did NOT teach all stitches to all weavers. The inherent closeness of the members of the Lodge made trading stitches easy work for the Newbies. Homework was to acquire as many stitches from friends as possible and work up as many basket walls as possible. The height of the wall was equal to the diameter of the bottom. Do this for 30 days. Mandate is to teach anyone interested in learning Aleut Weaving.
- Day 3. Learn to cast off and make a smooth brim. Learn to cast on a knob top, make a stem, expand IT to form the top of a Knob Top Basket that accurately fits it's basket bottom. Homework is to continue weaving AS desired, with a goal of moving into weaving a basket of natural colored waxed linen, no other colors except on the imbrication.

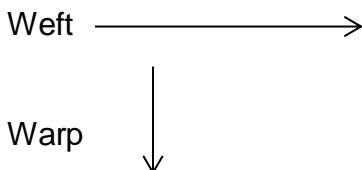
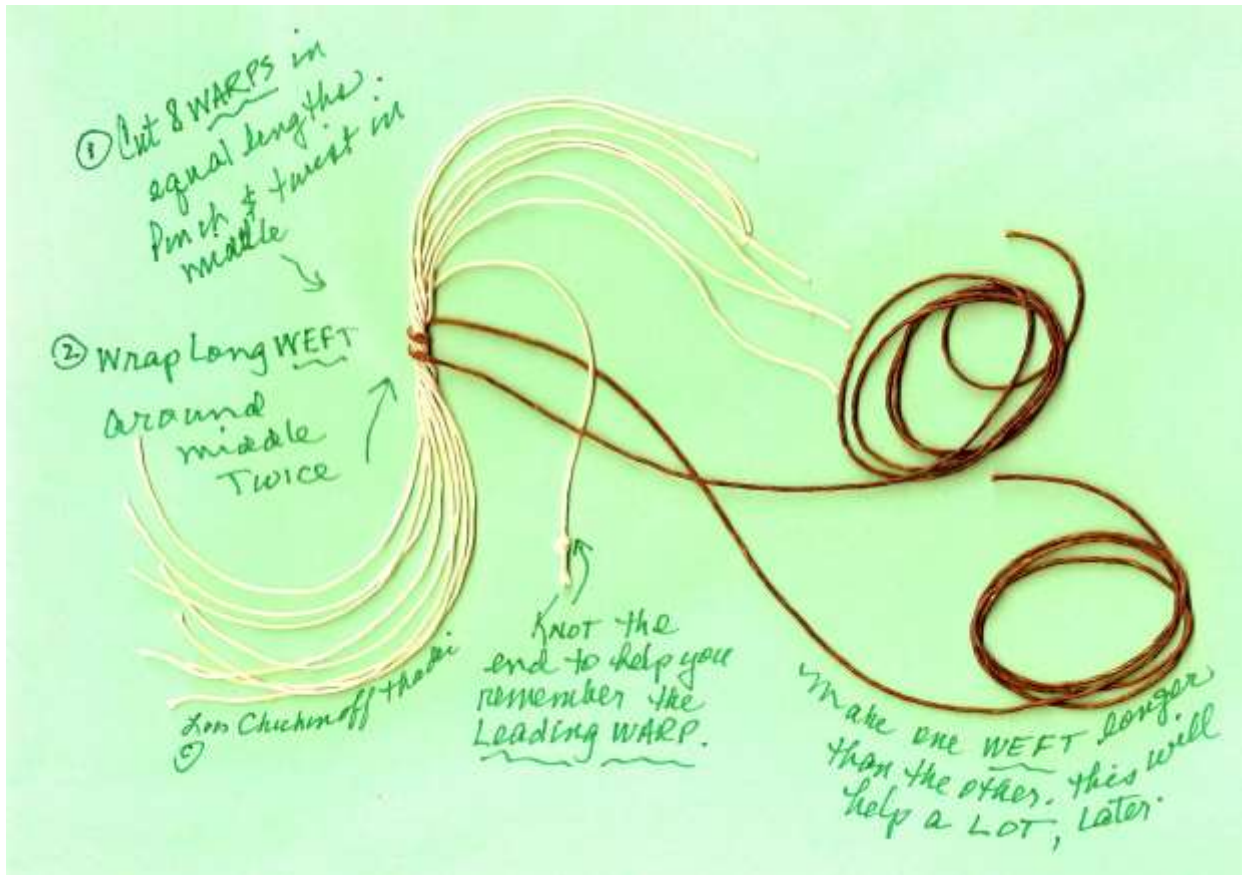
THE TECHNOLOGY OF ALEUT WEAVING

We used waxed linen instead of the cured Elymus Mollis. It's easier for Newbie fingers to acquire the technology of the stitches. If desired, we always took Newbies on a grass harvest after they expressed a desire to learn to harvest and commit to the 6 to 8 week curing process. Then, learning to weave with the grass was another whole technology to undertake. Here we go, with Linen.

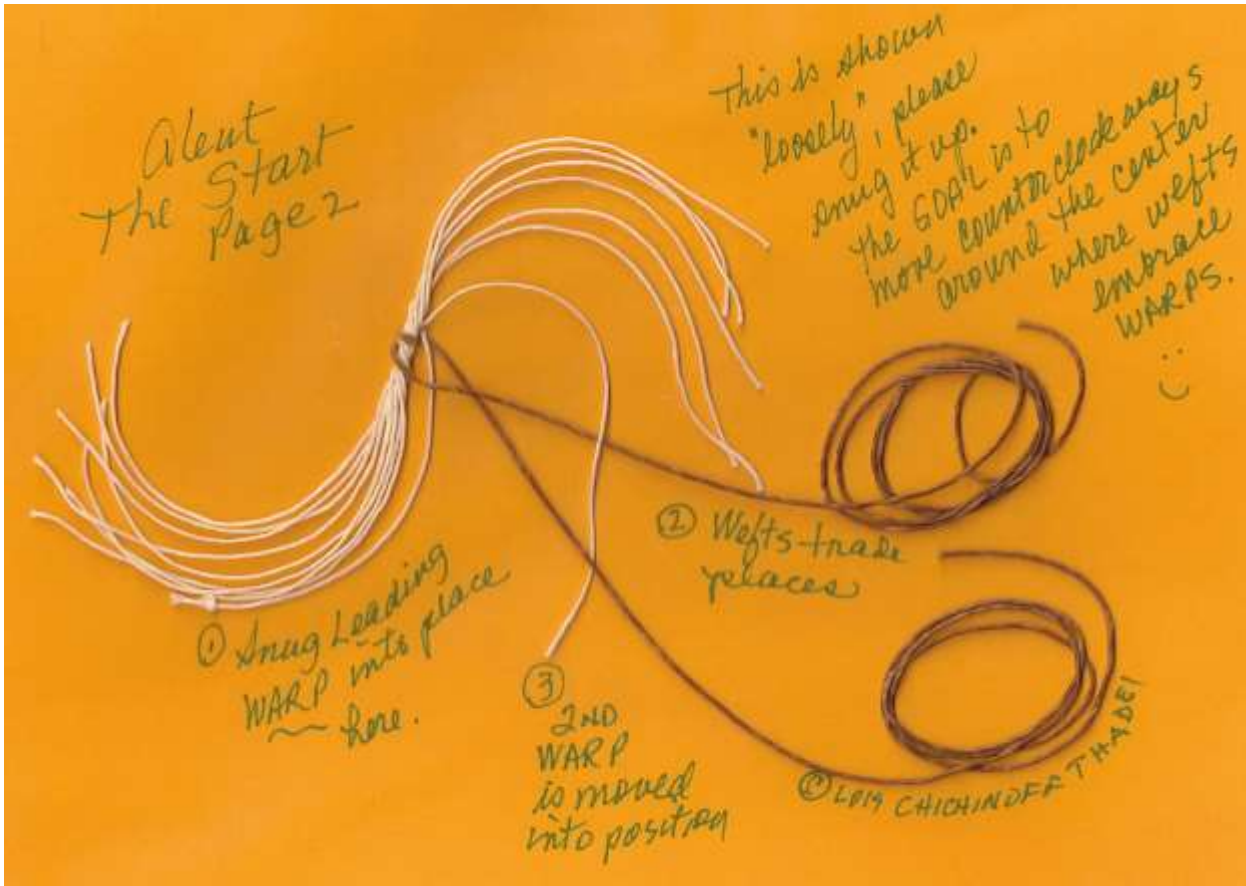
Using imported waxed Irish Linen, new weavers must acquire 3 colors of Waxed Irish Linen. 4 Ply:

1. Cut 8 warps that are 12 inches long using 1st color waxed linen
2. Cut 12 to 16 using 2nd color waxed linen. The number of warps will depend on each weaver's tension. Add new warps evenly around and when ever there is enough space between warps to lay 2 strands of the waxed linen.
3. Cut wefts of a 3rd color waxed linen.

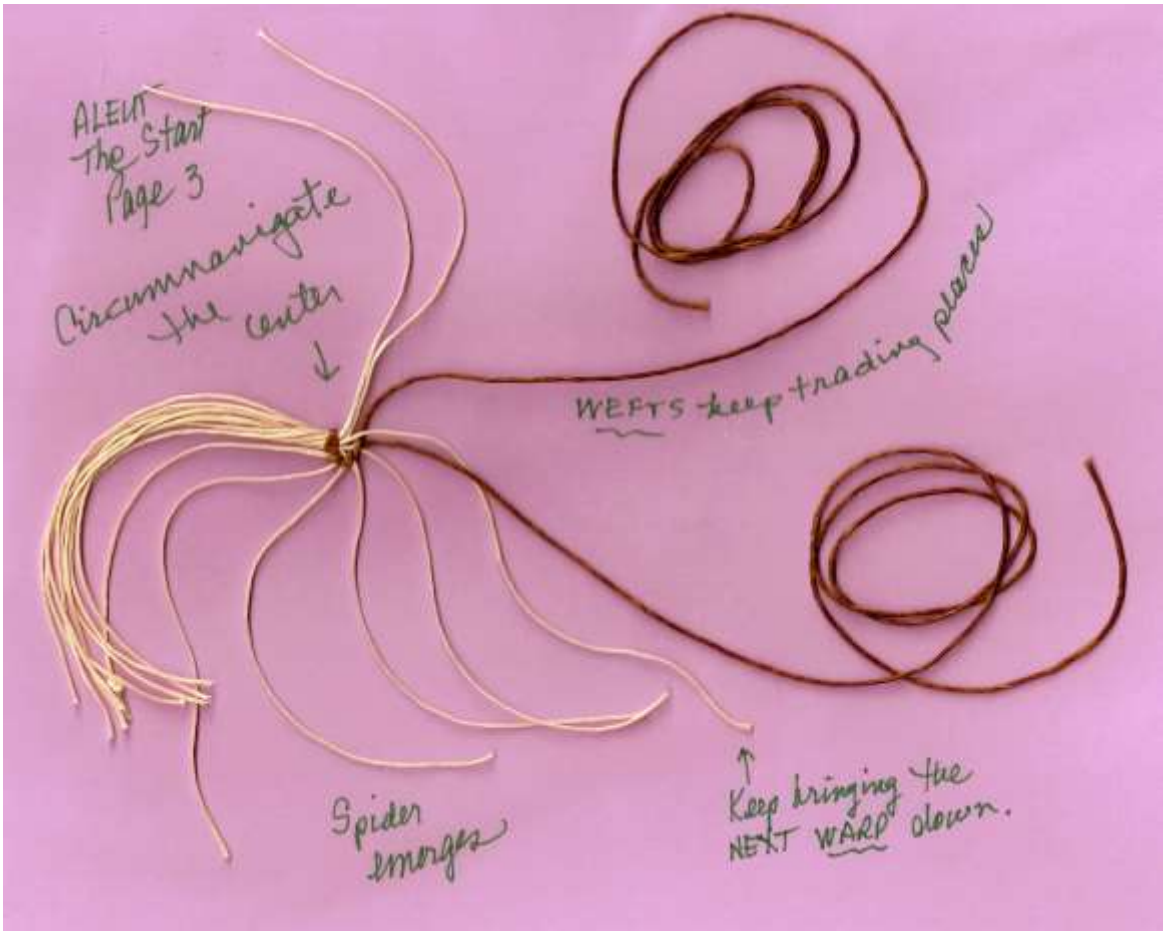
1 Cast on as shown:



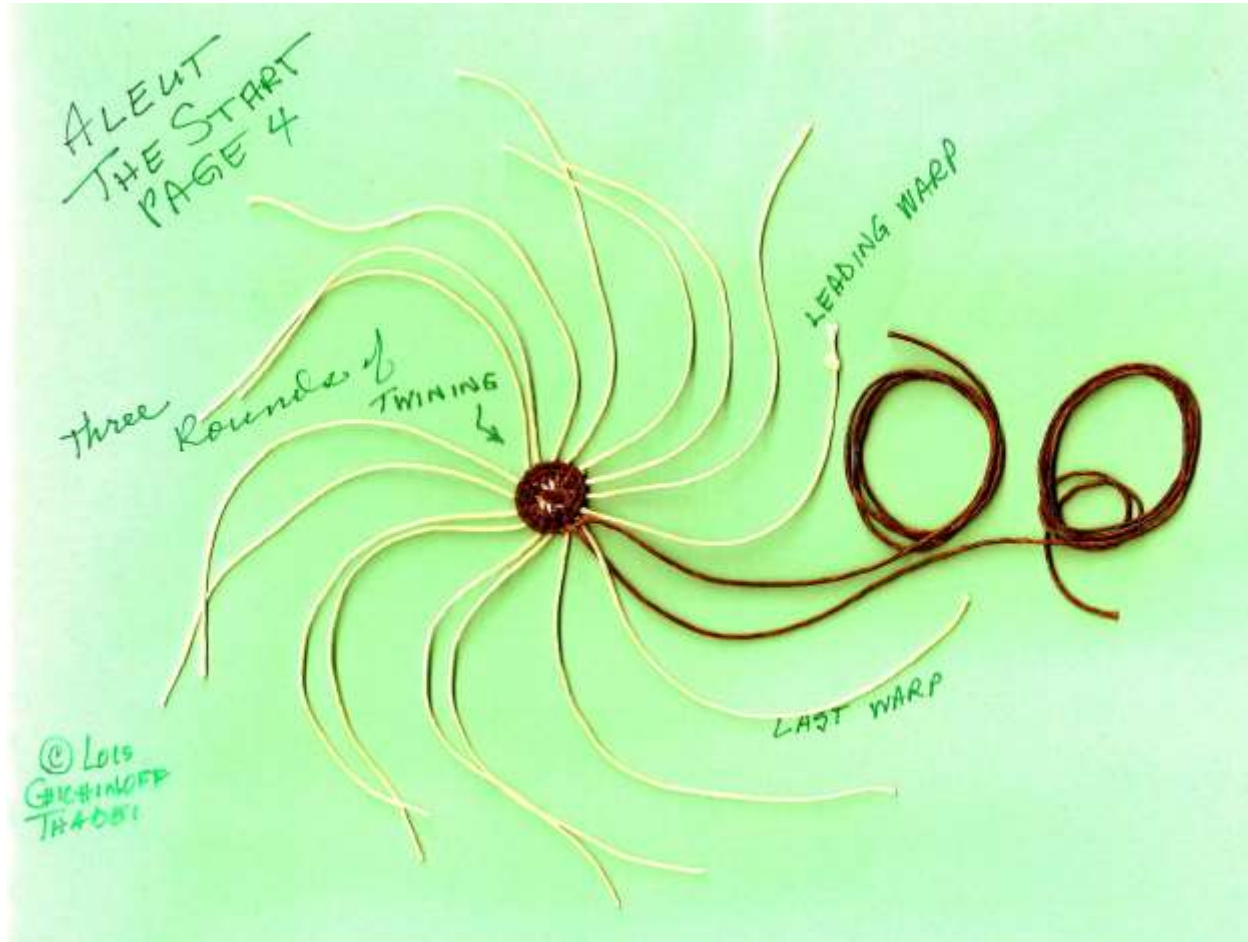
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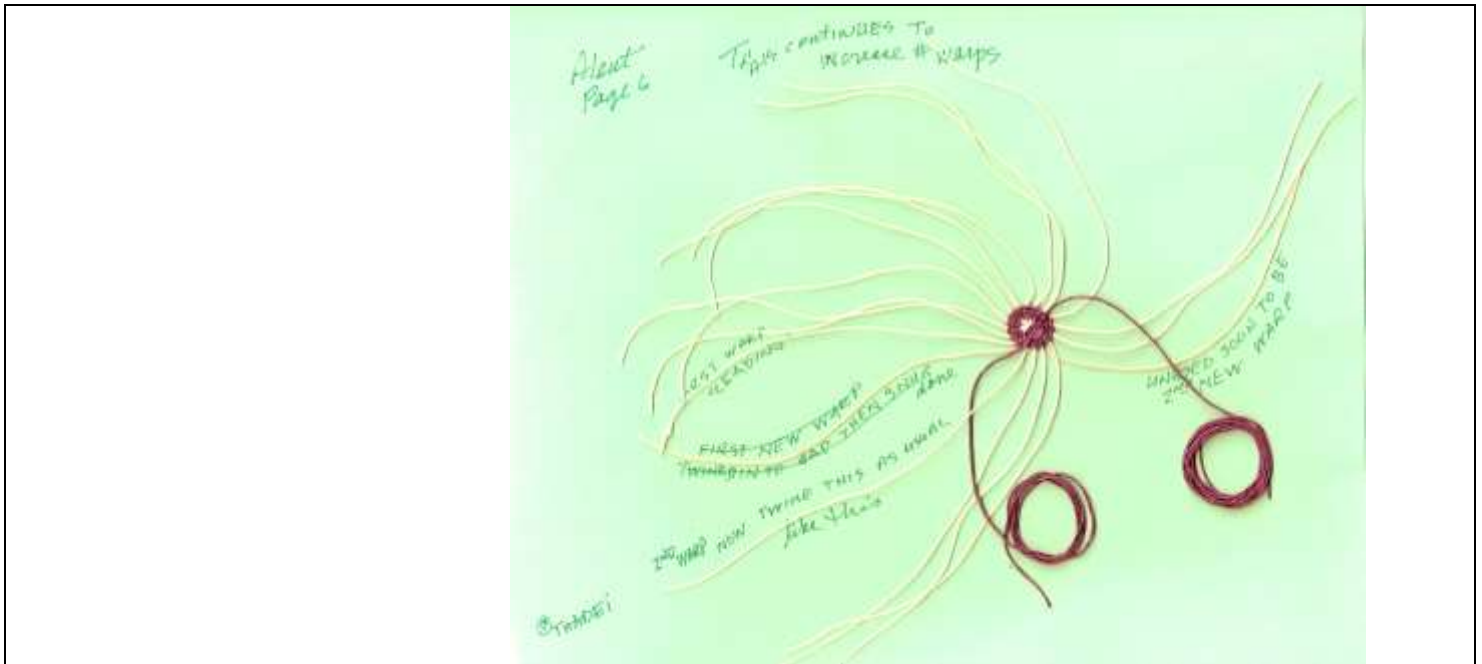
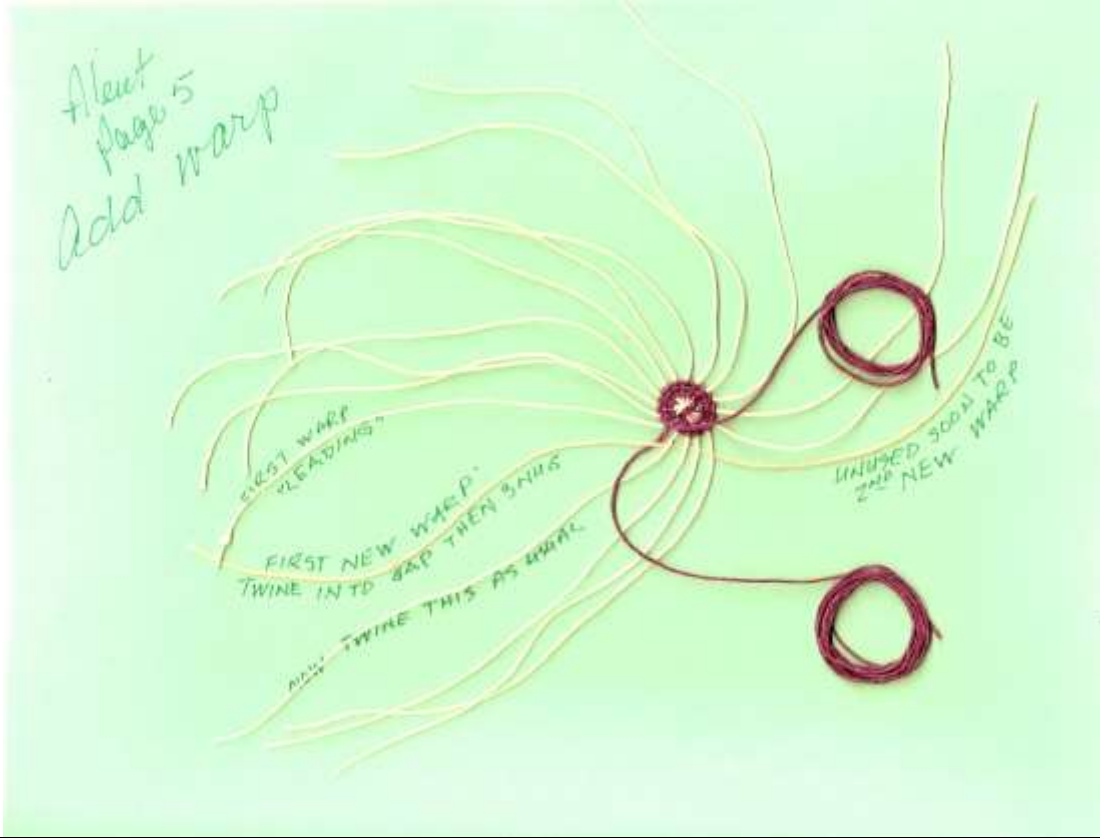
3 Circumnavigate the center of the start.



4



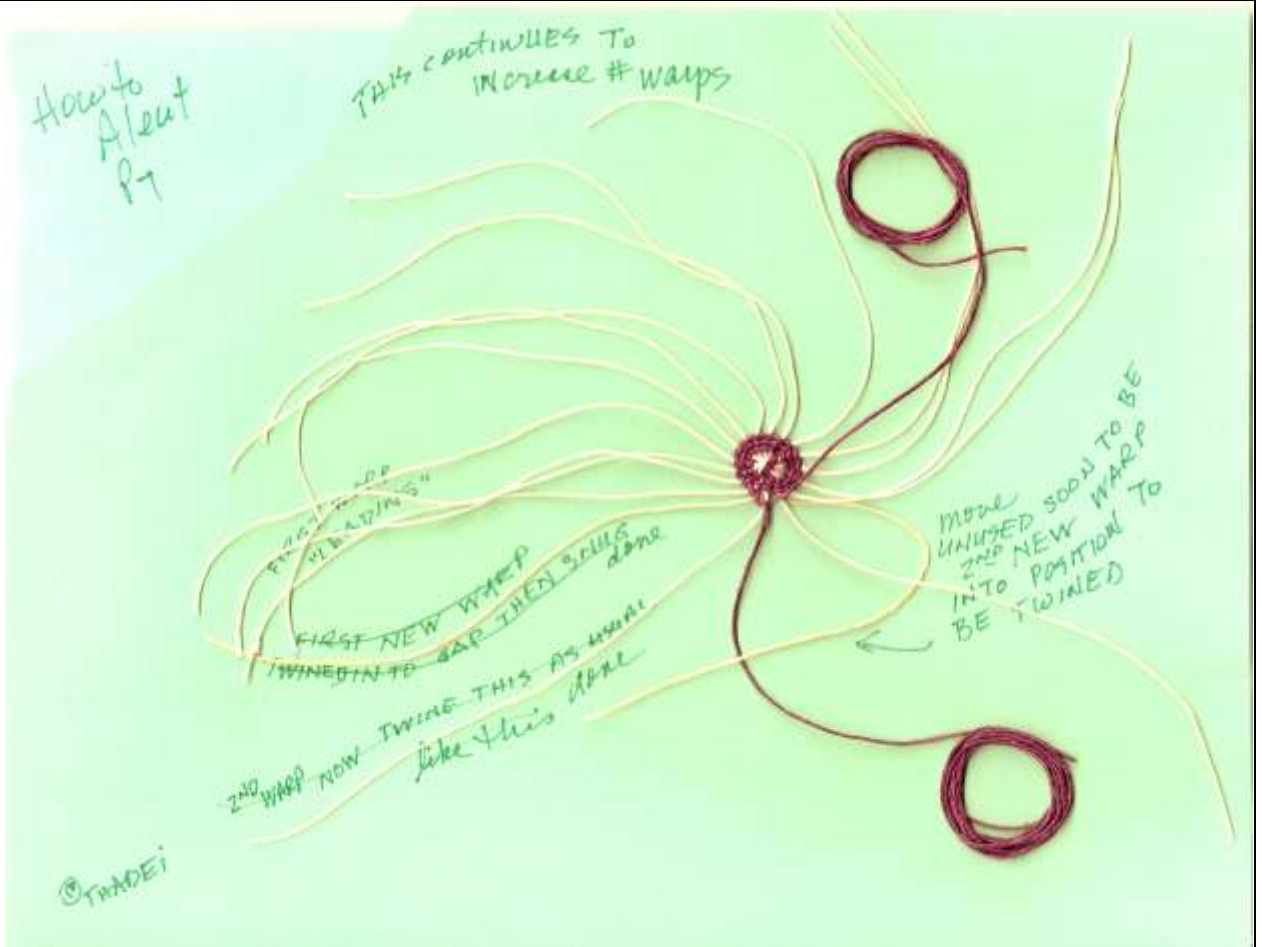
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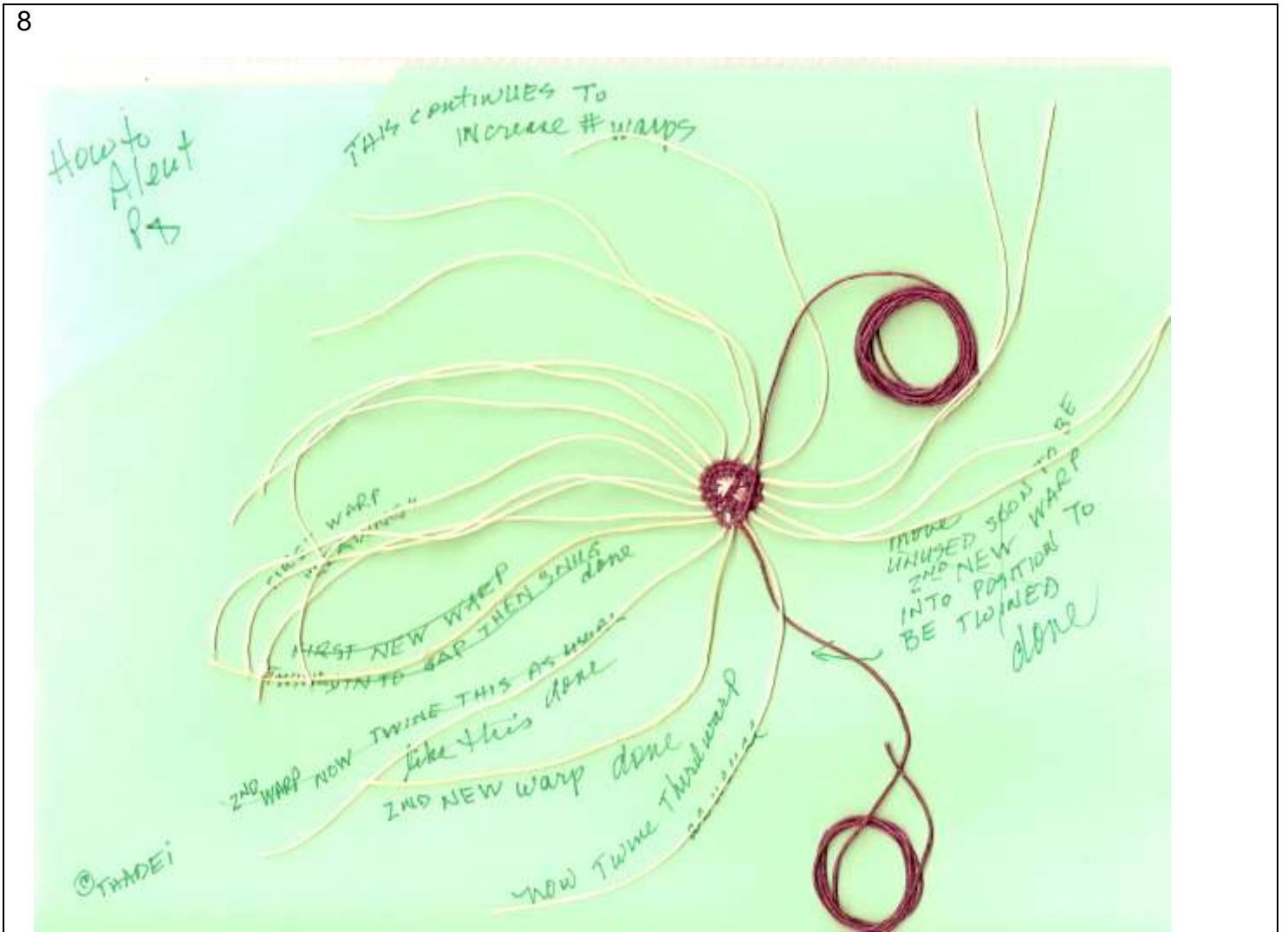
6 This begins to increase the diameter by adding new warps.



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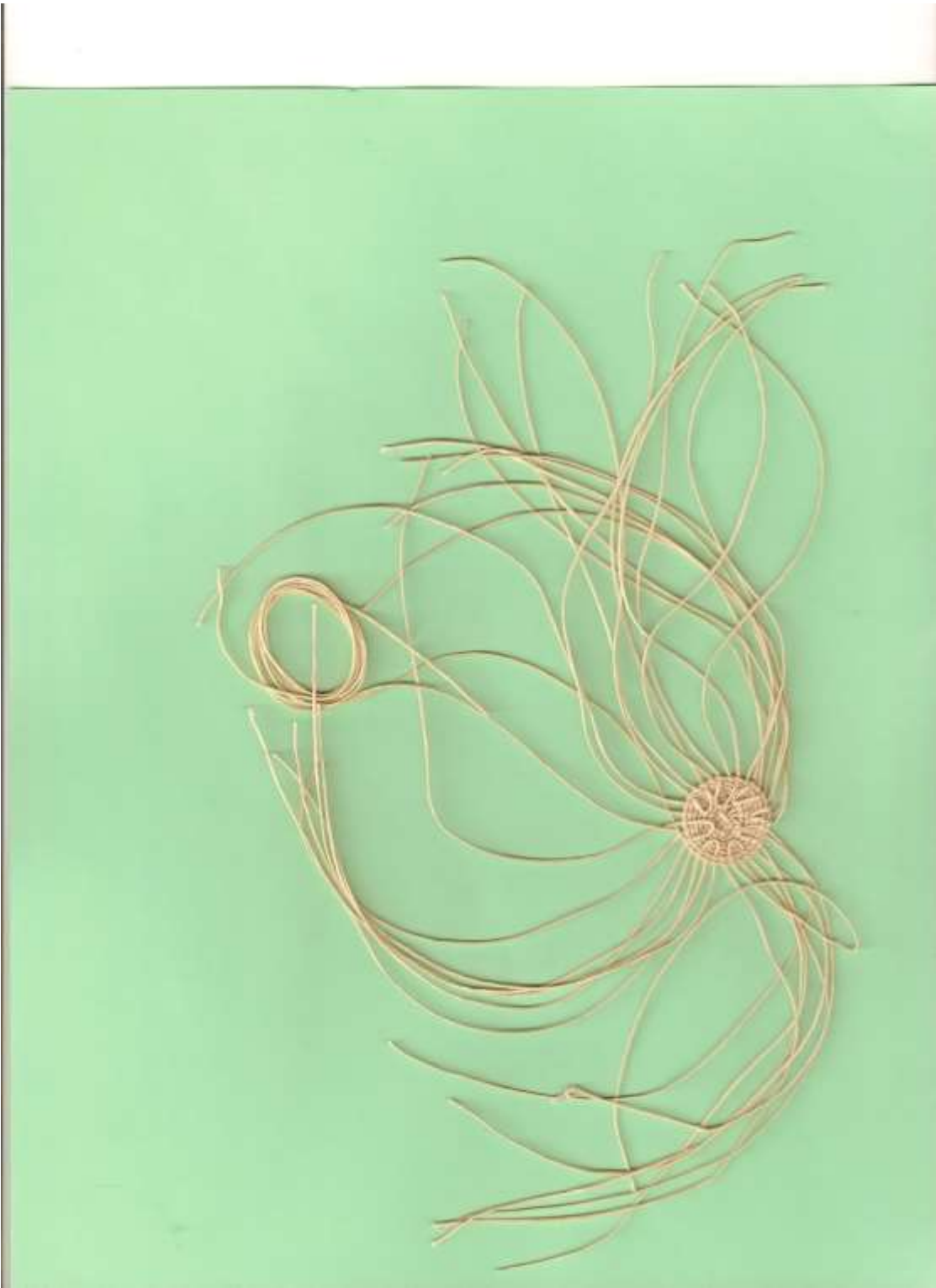


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Another photo of the backside.....



11

Front side of the bottom.... Work in Progress



12 Triple Twine is used to turn the wall crisply. This, for the Eastern Aleuts. Western Aleuts do not use the triple twine to turn the wall. Both use triple to surround a design field. It is also handy as a design element to mark the place you begin weaving after having to set it aside for a while. Even a day makes a change in the tension of your hand weaving. Use the triple twine to make a bit of decoration and no one will notice the change of tension.

Aleut Weaving: Triple Twining

Use this stitch to set up a crisp, clean bend where the bottom ends, and the wall begins.

Also use this stitch to separate twining when you are interrupted, and the new work will be a different tension.

1. Add this Weft, just tuck its end in place.

2. This is the Weft on the Left, carry it over the top of 2 warps, tuck it in the hole with the Weft just added in step 1.

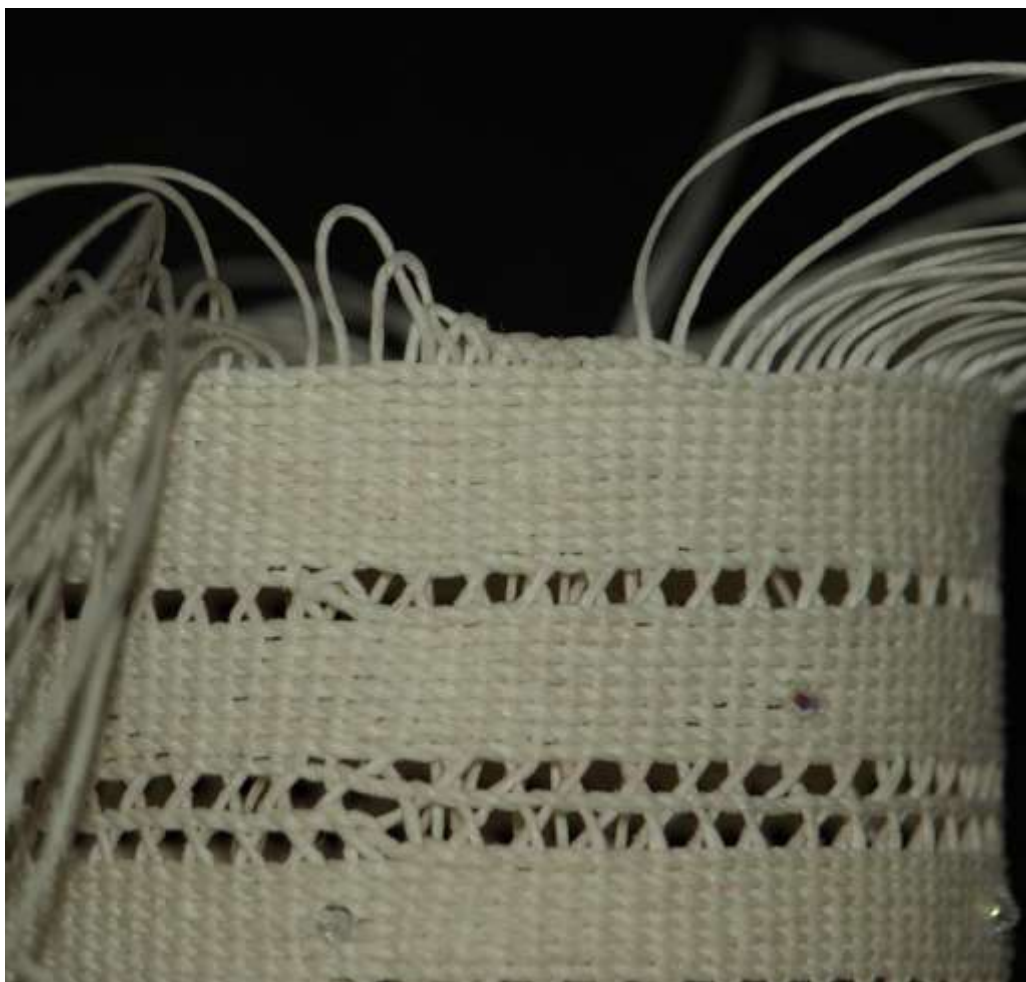
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Now you go make a better guide than this one.

13. Holding the weaving on top of the dowel, at the edge, perform a triple twine, then continue weft rows, packing snugly. Keep the basket “upside down” and twine from left to right.

Aleut baskets have “snow rows”, “x rows”, false embroidery and cross warp for decoration.



14 Casting off is performed with the basket off the dowel and held upright. Cast off from left to right.



15 Here's the inside of the cast off brim.



16

To make a lid. Cast on then twine 3 rows, continue to twine every other warp, effectively reducing the number of warps so they fit around a chop stick. Make the knob as long as 1/3 the height of the wall. The knob is a status decoration. It serves no function. It is impolite to grab a knob to yank the top off a basket. At the bottom of the knob stem, begin increasing the diameter as per the bottom. Return the woven bottom/wall basket to the wooden dowel. Shape the lid over the bottom of the finished basket. It may be convenient to wrap some paper first aid tape twice around the very bottom of the basket, and twine the lid over the tape. It seems to make a close fit, while reducing the likelihood of injuring the completed basket. Make it pristine, neat, nice. This is elegant work.



17

Here's a lid being formed on a completed basket.



18

Paulette Learns Aleut Weaving

Here's Paulette's first month of weaving. Using Waxed Irish Linen, she makes a bottom every day of the month. The different colors help her beginner eyes spot warp, added warp weft strands and keep them in their proper place. Her goal is to become proficient enough to graduate to one color, pale like beach grass and keep all the strands straight.



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If you are interested in further learning, contact Miss Paulette. She will give you her contact information.

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