

Bentwood Cedar Chest

Artifact Type: Bentwood Cedar Chest

Material: Cedar



Description: The most critical step in making a bentwood chest or box is cutting the kerfs where the future corners would be. If this was not done properly, the integrity of the box could easily be compromised. There were two styles of kerfing, one for utility boxes and one for ceremonial boxes. The V cut method was used for utility boxes such as storing and cooking food. A V shaped kerf would be cut into the board as wide as it is thick. The wood at the corners of this type of bend is thin which makes for easy bending but not as versatile.

In the ceremonial kerfing method, a rounded rectangular groove would be cut and one corner of this kerf would be further rounded in order to fit into the kerf during the bending process. This style required more skill to make, but it produced a much more durable and aesthetically pleasing wrapped corner. The fitting at the fourth corner is a rabbit joint, which is as wide as the kerfed board is thick and half as deep. The other end of this board is left alone to which allowed the board to come together as one.

Steaming was a difficult and time consuming process which required hot rocks used to heat water. After all four corners of the box have been bent and were square, the final corner is connected using tapered cedar pegs. A cedar rope was used to wrap around the box and tightened to prevent the box from losing its square shape. In addition, four sticks of equal length were wedged diagonally inside the box to ensure it did not twist out of shape. The bottom of the cedar box would be secured with tapered cedar pegs from the bottom into the sides of the box. The lid was made to fit tightly over the top to prevent stored food from spoiling. Stale human urine was used to help in the box bending process as well as in the canoe spreading process to help prevent the wood from cracking.

Pitch was often used as a filler to make sure the box was water tight which is necessary in order to utilize the boxes for cooking. The skin from dogfish was ideal to sand the rough wood to a smooth finish.

Food was cooked in these boxes the same way food was cooked in larger water tight baskets.

Water would be placed in the box and was brought to a boil by tossing red hot rocks into the water.



Nisqually Archives Department

4820 She-Nah-Num Drive S.E.

Olympia, WA 98513

Phone: (360) 456-5221