

# The "Osage" Braid

By MARY M. ATWATER

One of the things I hear very frequently is the complaint that many people would like to weave but are prevented by the cost of a loom.

True enough, a good loom costs more than a couple of dollars—and a poor loom is not worth five cents, but I have little sympathy with the complaint. In the first place the cost of a loom is really not enormous. The most elaborate and expensive hand-loom costs no more than a good radio, and very efficient simple looms cost only half as much. The purchase of a loom is a life-time investment that will return rich dividends in pleasure—and in cash, too—year after year. In my opinion the necessity for the initial investment is a good thing for the craft of weaving, as it deters the faddists who never "stay with" anything constructive, but are here today and somewhere else tomorrow. I am well content with the steady, normal growth of the craft during the last several years since its revival. Weaving is an honest craft, and the faddists have no place in it.

In the second place it does not happen to be true that in order to weave one must have a costly loom—or even any loom at all. The Maoris produce their gorgeous "taniko" fabrics on nothing more elaborate in the way of a loom than two stout stakes driven into the ground. Very beautiful weaving can be done, as many of us know, on a handful of square cards with holes in the corners,—an entirely efficient and ingenious "loom" at the cost of a few cents. And some kinds of weaving can be done without any equipment at all, except for the two hands with which nature has provided most of us.

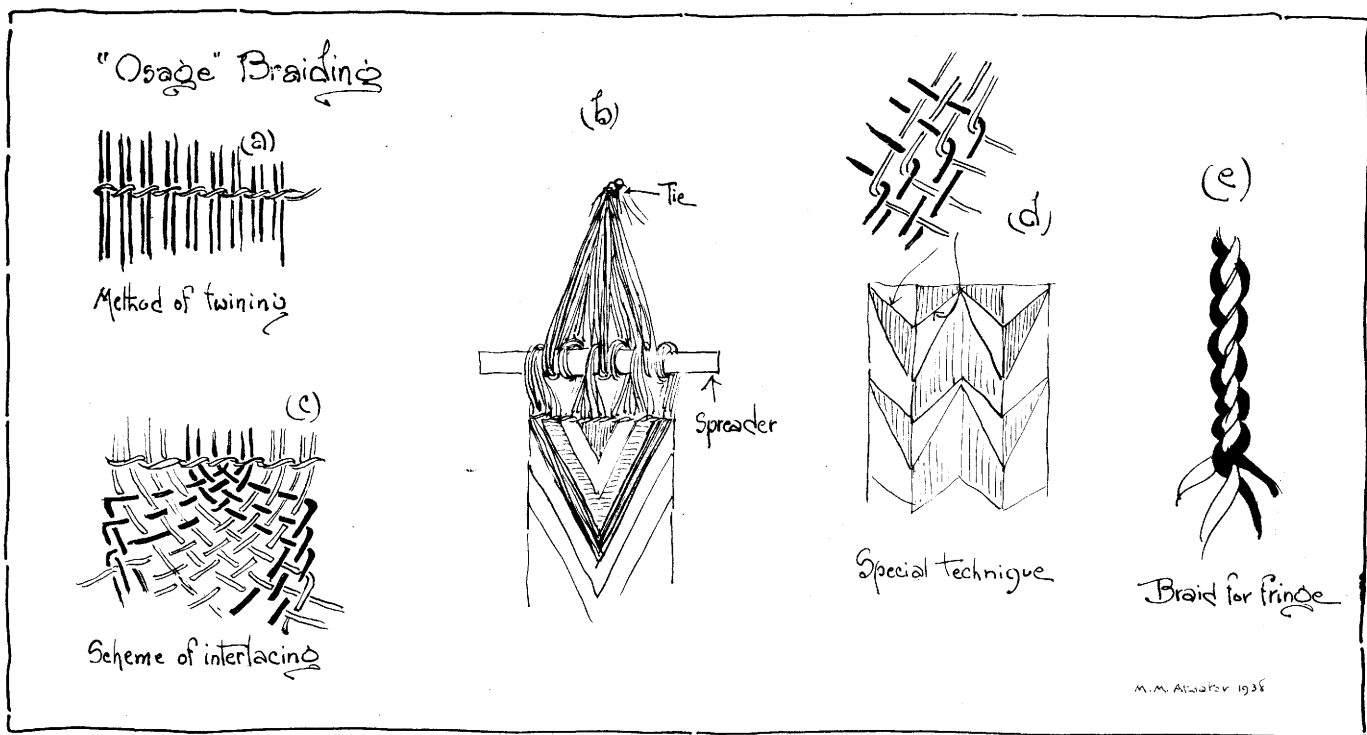
I do not mean that these are forms of weaving one

could do easily on a loom and can do laboriously and unsatisfactorily without a loom or on some make-shift cigar box or what-not,—I mean that these are forms of weaving that not only do not require a loom but that could not be done on a loom if one were available. A make-shift is never very practical, or very much fun, but these forms of weaving are no make-shift; they are entirely honest and efficient forms of the textile craft.

The largest and most interesting group of these loomless weaves is probably the one that includes braiding and plaiting. I have a fancy that this may be the most ancient form of the art of weaving, for it certainly goes much further back than recorded history. Most normal human hands will take to braiding as though by instinct if a few strands of pliable material come between the fingers. Even small children love to braid.

Of course it is impossible in the space of a magazine article to give any general account of an art as old, probably, as man himself, and known to all peoples in all parts of the world, and that includes such different things as the pig-tail most of us wore to school in the pre-bob era, the elaborate mats of the South Sea Islanders, and the amazing double and quadruple plaitings of ancient Peru.

I do want, though, to describe a simple and interesting form of plaiting that will, I believe, give pleasure to readers of THE WEAVER. It is commonly known as "Osage" braiding, because it happens to have come to us from the Osage Indians, who are proficient in the art. However this form of plaiting appears to be known to the Indians of several other tribes, and a similar form of plaiting is practised in the Scandinavian countries. In



fact some people know the same braid under the name of "Swedish weaving," which seems a silly name enough.

The braid is used chiefly for belts and girdles, though sometimes several strips are sewed together for a table cover or for a bag. Girdles made in this fashion are extremely striking and handsome. As made by the Indian girls of the southwest they are usually made of fairly coarse woolen yarn in brilliant colors. No belt-buckle is used with them. They are finished with long braided fringes and are adjusted about the waist by tying the fringe-brands together.

A number of different pattern effects are possible in this technique. The simplest is a chevron figure, done in broad bands of color. A girdle of this kind is shown on illustration No. 1. This piece was done in Bernat's "Peasant" yarn in five colors: black, tan, dark red, blue and bright red, — fourteen strands of each color. The piece is three inches wide, finished. For a wider girdle 18, 22, or 26 ends of a color might be used, or additional colors might be introduced.

The first step in reproducing this piece, as for any weaving, is to make the warp. This warp may be wound between two chairs, but if a warping board is available this is more convenient. It is unnecessary to make a lease. Make the warp two and a half yards long to allow

for generous fringes. First wind seven black yarns, laying them side by side over the pegs to make a flat band. Next, in the same manner, wind seven tan yarns, seven in dark red, seven in blue, fourteen in bright red, seven in blue, seven dark red, seven tan, seven black. (Of course any other colors may be used if preferred).

Now find the center of the warp and tie off the warp in pairs with a twining tie as shown at (a) on the diagram. The tie should, of course, be drawn close, — not left loose as shown, for clearness, on the diagram.

Now remove the warp from the bars, cutting the loops at both ends. Put in a wooden "spreader" a few inches above the tie, as illustrated at (b) on the diagram. The spreader may be any small stick and the warp is simply looped around it. A foot or so beyond the spreader tie the warp securely with a string. This string may be tied to any solid support, and you are ready to begin weaving. The warp may be stretched out for convenience by knotting the free end over the back of the chair on which the weaver sits, but of course this should be done with a tie that can be taken out easily as the end of the warp must be untangled from time to time as the work progresses.

Beginning at the right hand edge, pick up one thread of each pair as far as the center. Cross the two threads of



FIGURE No. 1

the pair at the center and draw the end that was originally on the left through the shed made by the fingers and out through the right hand edge. Beginning on the right, pick up a new shed over this first thread.

Now turn the braid over and repeat the process. After picking up the second shed, draw a second thread through from the center, and again pick up a shed. Turn the braid over and repeat for the other side.

Ambidextrous people can braid first to the right and then to the left without turning the work, but for most people the process as described above is more convenient.

When the third thread has been "woven", braid the top one down over and under the other two, to make the edge.

As in any weaving it is important to keep the edge straight and even. It is also important to pick up the threads in correct order when making the shed. If threads are crossed in the pick-up the work will not be smooth and even.

It will be apparent that the threads of the braid are "weft" when drawn through, and change again to "warp" when they reach the edge. The cross threads should be drawn close enough to bring the warp close together over them. This produces the pattern effect, though the scheme of interlacing, as shown at (c) on the diagram, is a simple over and under "tabby."

When the braiding has proceeded for half the length of the girdle, make a twining tie across the end. Now take out the spreader. Tie the finished end of the girdle to the support and start braiding from the original tie in the opposite direction. This forms a diamond figure at the center of the girdle, as shown in illustration No. 1.

If preferred, the braiding may be begun at one end, the first twining being put in about two feet from the end of the warp. When done in this manner the chevrons will run in one direction all the way and there will be no diamond.

This plaiting process is simple enough, but it takes a bit of practise before it becomes easy and before one gets the trick of drawing up the threads evenly. It is also somewhat confusing at first to make the shed *after* weaving a shot of weft instead of before weaving. Moreover it is troublesome—though not fatal—to lose the shed. While braiding hold the shed securely at all times, and when stopping work tie a string through the shed.

If fringes are not desired a neat salvage end may be made by doubling the warp over a strand of weft at the start. The long fringes, however, are handsome and contribute to the gorgeous effect of one of these braided girdles.

Illustration No. 2 shows three samples of different effects, made at the Bacone Indian College, Bacone, Oklahoma. At (a) is shown a wide piece with several repeats of the chevron figure, done in very fine yarn. At (b) and (c) are pieces showing an interesting variation of technique. To produce these arrowhead figures the weft threads are at times looped around each other in the manner illustrated at (d) on the diagram. This technique permits the development of a variety of figures,—the "lightning" figure, for instance on Illustration No. 4.

The two pieces on Illustration No. 3 and Illustration No. 4 are braided from the same side all the way,—not from a center, like the other pieces shown.

Of importance is the finish of the fringes. They should be braided into cords for their entire length. If left unbraided they would become tangled and frayed, and would not be strong enough to tie. The ordinary three-strand braid can be used, but a handsomer braid is the Indian four-strand braid illustrated at (e) on the diagram and shown in the fringes on Illustration No. 1.

To make the four-strand braid proceed as follows: Hold two strands in one hand and two in the other. Take



FIGURE NO. 2

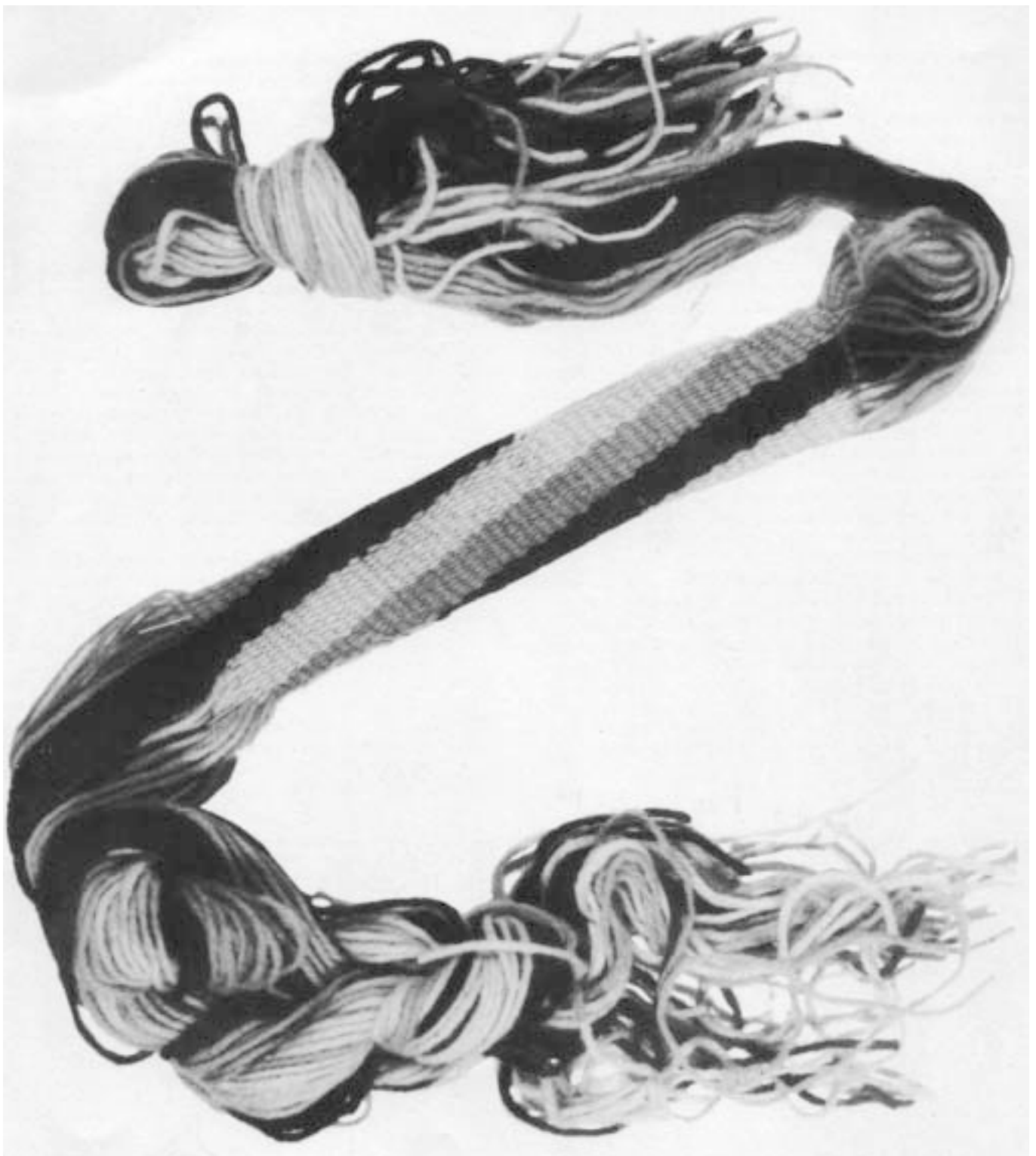


FIGURE No. 3

the upper right hand strand behind the braid and forward between the two left hand strands. Then cross it back to the right. Now take the top left-hand strand behind the braid, between the two right hand strands, and cross it back to the left. Repeat. This goes rapidly when one has the trick. The braid is particularly effective when two strands of one color and two of a different shade are used, — say two black strands and two red ones. Keep the colors together, the two black ones in one hand and the two red ones in the other. They do not change sides as each braider returns to the side from which it started. The effect of the two-color braid is sketched on the diagram.

Sometimes the fringes are twisted together instead of being braided, but unless they are twisted very firmly this finish is not as good as the other.

I do not wish to say that plaiting takes the place of weaving on a loom. Far from it. But it is real weaving; it requires no loom, so that it can be carried about in a knitting bag; it makes no noise, so that it is a pleasant accompaniment to the radio or to conversation; it is amusing to do, and the things made in this fashion are sightly and useful. For these reasons it is worth knowing about, and practising on occasion.

And the Osage braid is only one among hundreds of forms of plaiting, equally interesting and equally useful.

MARY M. ATWATER



FIGURE No. 4