

# New Life from Ashes: The Tale of the Burnt Bush (*Rhus trilobata*)

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Anyone interested in Southwestern vegetation inevitably makes an acquaintance with squawbush (*Rhus trilobata*). Although the shrub typically grows in pinyon and juniper woodlands it is by no means restricted to such habitats, for it can be found among chaparral and along moist canyons in the lower desert as well as higher in the mountains. When wedged in the edge of a sandstone escarpment squawbush grows barely a foot high, but in more favorable habitats it becomes a vigorous shrub over six feet tall. Deciduous leaves formed by three leaflets typically are borne on irregularly branched brown stems. Sour red fruits decorate it late in the growing season.

To one familiar with the typical complex branching habit of squawbush, the widespread use of the stems in historic Southwestern Indian basketry (Stevenson, 1915, p. 81; Hough, 1897, p. 40; Franciscan Fathers, 1910, p. 292; Ellis and Walpole, 1959) seems incomprehensible. It was not until I lived in the capitol of the Navajo Reservation (Window Rock, Arizona) that I began to understand how the shrub could yield the long straight switches necessary for basketmaking. One autumn day I came across some squawbushes that had been burned to the ground along a bare streak in a sandy arroyo. When I observed the vigorous straight new shoots the following spring, the association between fire and the type of growth suitable for basketry became apparent.

Hunting and gathering populations of the late Archaic (c. 3500 B.P.) from the Grand Canyon of Arizona and southern Utah probably knew that fire stimulates shoot formation in squawbush. A single shoot of squawbush more than six feet (1.8 m) long was incorporated into a split-twig animal figurine from the Grand Canyon (Bohrer, 1969). The specimen was unquestionably made from squawbush as persistent leaf petioles bore evidence of scars of three leaflets and some leaflets were still visible on the twigs wrapping the neck. Animal effigies such as this were speared and placed in caches in remote caves (Schwartz et al., 1958). Some of the late Archaic split-twig figurines in southern Utah were also made of squawbush (Janetski, 1980, p. 87). If those ancient hunters were in the habit of burning vegetation to secure the raw material for their offerings, they may have served themselves in another way. The burned patches of vegetation would foster an increased abundance of game and annual plants like sunflower (*Helianthus*) and bugseed (*Corispermum*) whose seeds were consumed directly (Hogan, 1980, p. 208).

An attitude reflecting the beneficial (rejuvenating) aspects of fire may be embodied in the personification of fire as a woman among a number of the Indian Pueblos. At Cochiti, Nambe, Zuñi, and Isleta the being that takes the form of fire is addressed as "fire, old woman" (Parsons, 1939, p. 178). Even more revealing of the favorable regard of fire is the Tewa hunter's prayer directed to "Fire Flower Woman" (Parsons, 1929, p. 267). The epithet leaps beyond the destructive aspects of fire to the fostering of new life and growth from her ashes. A similar understanding is expressed by a Cochiti deer hunter, who prays "Here, fire the oldest, today let us have deer, all animals" (Parsons 1939, p. 312). The conceptual linkage between fire and fertility is further expressed in the Zuñi supernatural known as Shulawitsi and the Hopi Masauwü. Shulawitsi is the youthful god of fire, hunting, and maize (Parsons, 1939, p. 175). While Masauwü symbolizes fire and death (Parsons, 1939, p. 349), his participation in hunting, planting, and harvesting rituals reminds us of the rejuvenating effects of fire. Though



Split-twig animal figurine made by a hunting and gathering culture about 3500 years ago from a shoot of *Rhus trilobata* more than six feet long. It is suspected that these ancient people (as recently observed with modern Indians) burned *Rhus* bushes to stimulate production of abnormally long and straight "sucker" shoots which could be used for making handcrafted items. Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, Helga Teiwes, photographer. Specimen A-12742.

fire may not always be personified as a woman, the linkage to fertility remains clear.

Two Pueblos have assured that the beneficial effects of burning are perpetuated by incorporating wildfires into community sanctioned ritual. At Zuñi Pueblo during the katsina (a type of supernatural) directed rabbit hunt, the vegetation is fired by katsinas traveling a line to a focal point (Parsons, 1939, p. 759) where hunters help form a circle of fire to kill the rabbits (Curtis, 1926, Vol. 17, p. 149). At Acoma Pueblo, approximately every fifth year near the first of August, a ceremony given by the corn clans involves the impersonators of the fire katsinas. As part of the ritual, katsina impersonators are sent in four directions eight to twelve miles distant to light fires at sunrise and build fires along the return route to a rendezvous (White, 1932, pp. 94-95). The main katsina, Shuracha, coordinates activities a short distance from a spring by kindling a signal fire. At a gathering point within sight of the Pueblo all the costumed impersonators dance. As they approach the village they carry



*Closeup view of the figurine at left. When examined by the author in 1969, identification of this archaeological specimen as *Rhus trilobata* was made on the basis of leaflet scar evidence on persistent leaf petioles. Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, D. Lindsay, photographer.*



*Apache baskets using Rhus trilobata for the foundation rods. To finish the basket on the left, pitch from Pinyon Pine (Pinus edulis) would be worked into the cracks to make it waterproof.*

gifts of melons, beans, and ripe peaches. Shuracha carries a few rabbits and has charred wood projecting from his water jug (Curtis, 1926, Vol. 16, p. 190). The distribution of gifts symbolizes the connection between fire, fruits, and fertility. So that none of the people will misunderstand the actions of the katsina, Shuracha explains that he does not burn to destroy the world, but to heat Mother Earth and make her more fertile (White, 1943, p. 314).

The use of the straight shoots of squawbush for split-twig figurines in the late Archaic provides suggestive evidence of the long use of fire to manipulate vegetation in the Southwest. Although our knowledge of formalized burning practices among Pueblo agriculturalists has been preserved erratically, an attitude toward fire as a fertile force still persists in ritual contexts. Many ecologists and wildlife managers now endorse a land management strategy resembling that of Southwestern hunters and gatherers (Downs, 1966; Dobyns, 1981; Hill, 1938) and more sedentary agriculturalists. The practice known as prescribed burning opens up the forest, promotes the growth of early successional herbs and shrubs, and increases forage for wildlife (Wright, 1974). The sight of new growth of squawbush shooting upward from a bed of ashes may be more common in our Southwestern landscape in the future.

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