

## Notes on Kentucky's Basket Making Traditions

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•• Presentation given to the Scottsville Rotary Club - Feb. 20, 2015

Thank you for coming. And thanks to Todd White for asking me :)

I've been invited here today because my husband, Scott Gilbert, and I have been involved in the basket making tradition of South Central Kentucky since the early 1980s during a time when an interest in the revival of crafts traditions was sweeping America. We were immersed in that movement; we were part of something truly awesome although at the time we didn't think of it that way at all.

As a newly married couple we moved to Allen County and searched for our calling in life. It was only natural for us that our interest would involve hand crafts. We first learned about white oak basket making by watching an episode of Roy Underhill's *The Woodwright Shop* on Public Television. We made a beeline to the Allen Co Public Library to do some research and found a book, *Basketry of the Appalachian Mountains*, by Sue Stephenson.

The first basket we ever owned was given to us by Scott's grandmother, Nannie Bell Owen, who lived on a small farm in Morristown, TN. We later discovered that Mamma Nanny's basket had been made in the 1930s or 40s, for the tourist trade, by the Cherokee.

This basket, and our book from the library inspired us to learn the craft. Scott made some baskets patterned after that Cherokee piece and with this work was accepted into the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen.

Shortly afterwards we met husband and wife Lestel and Ollie Childress of Park City, KY. They were 4th and 5th generation white oak basket makers. I think back on those early days and I am so thankful to have known them. It is such a privilege to be part of this most important craft tradition.

When we met the Childresses, Scott asked Lestel if he would teach him about white oak and Lestel said "son, I'll show you everything I know if you'll promise me that you'll teach my grandkids if they ever want to learn". Scott worked with Lestel off and on for a year before he felt proficient in reading the wood, processing the material and constructing a basket.

This way of learning basket making was outside the norm. Traditionally basketmaking was handed down within ones family or community from one generation to the next. If you were a basket maker, you taught your children. That's just the way it had always been. But, the Childresses and others of their generation knew that their children were not interested in learning the craft--for a variety of reasons. I think Lestel Childress put a lot of hope into Scott Gilbert; he took Scott's promise to heart and Scott and I hope that one day a Childress grandchild or great grand child will come knocking on our door.

Michael Sims, of Scottsville, became a business partner early on. Over the years our business evolved from making and selling handmade baskets to manufacturing handmade white oak handles for basket makers across the country. Hal Bryant, Bryant's Lumber Co., and Larry and Keith Gerald of Gerald Printing Service made Scottsville the perfect place for manufacturing and selling via mail order. For 23 years, Scott and I taught workshops in honeysuckle and in White Oak (*From the Tree to the Basket*) at Historic Rugby on the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee. Today we create patterns and kits, I teach the craft using rattan materials with some of our handmade handles and we supply basket makers around the world with materials through our website, [basketmakerscatalog.com](http://basketmakerscatalog.com). We're also hosting some amazing teachers from around the country to teach workshops in Scottsville--more information is available on our website.

But, enough about us.

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Right now let's step back in time and take a look at the basketmaking families and communities that made up the traditional basket makers here in Kentucky. From Hart County and throughout the Mammoth Cave Region of Kentucky. From the communities of Cub Run, Wax, Big Windy and others.

So, first we'll travel back to the late 1700s and early 1800s. Many of the immigrants who moved to that western area of Hart Co., Kentucky were Scotch-Irish and German. At this time, according to Ollie Childress, we see around 115 families making baskets. These basket makers brought with them the basket making knowledge and traditions from their European ancestors. Traditions of split wood baskets which we still see today in Germany and Ireland. Traditions of willow that remain popular in Germany, Scotland, France, Poland, Ireland and Spain as well.

The basket makers made utilitarian baskets, mainly 'egg baskets' for their own use and for use in barter at the local store. They traded baskets for items they needed. Things like matches, coffee, coal oil, sugar, salt--items they couldn't raise themselves.

They didn't get much in trade for their baskets as baskets were commonplace and perhaps even viewed as disposable.

Basket making families at that time were admittedly people who had limited incomes. In fact, there was a stigma associated with that group. There was not the pride of making a basket that there is today. These folks were called 'ridge runners' and they eked out a living on some pretty poor farm land. Ollie told the story that her step-father, John Jagers, was rather ashamed to be a basket maker. When he'd hear someone coming visit--coming on a horse or on foot down their long drive way, he'd put his baskets away so as not to be seen to be a basket maker.

In spite of this fact, basketmaking was a way of life for many; it allowed them to provide for the family. What a huge resource. Take a tree, a white oak tree, or gather your willow and make baskets that have value.

So we have 115 families coming and going to the local stores and trading baskets. What's a store keeper to do with all these baskets?

Oftentimes a group or individual from "up north" would send boxes of used clothing to the country store, and those groups would request payment in baskets. One of my favorite photographs is from the 1940s--Aunt Let Thompson, Lestel's grandmother was running a store at that time. The photograph is of her and a couple of other women sitting on a bed in a large room and they are surrounded by baskets they've made for trade. These baskets are elaborate fern stands, not traditional egg baskets, obviously made from a picture sent to them in a box of clothes.

It was in one of these boxes of used clothes that Ollie found her wedding dress. What do you think she paid for that dress? Did you guess that she made a little basket in trade? You're right!

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We also see the era of the peddler beginning. Store keepers and others would load up their wagon and travel up into Illinois and Indiana to sell the baskets. When trucks came along, they traveled by truck. On pre-arrangement, they'd have someone back home ship a load of baskets by train and they'd arrive at a depot somewhere along the way to replenish their supply.

Lestel's grandfather, Lij Tom Childress, was a great peddler. He would often stay overnight in someone's barn and as a token of appreciation would give a small basket to the farmer's youngest child. These came to be known as the baby's basket. :)

Next, we see the Basket Stand phenomenon. By the 1930s as travelers and tourists used the corridor from North to South across America--the Dixie Highway it was called or the Old Louisville Rd--we know it as Highway 31 W--these travelers would find numerous basket stands or souvenir stands along the way, selling white oak baskets, willow baskets, locally handmade chairs, chenille bedspreads. Basket stands flourished in the days before Interstate 65 was built.

Also brokers from Cannon Co. TN began coming around and placing orders.

During this time, with plenty of opportunity for sales, Lestel's parents, along with the children of the family, made hundreds of baskets. His dad actually paid for their farm with basket money--now, that's a lot of baskets when baskets weren't bringing much money at all.

Lestel remembers that when he was a boy, his Dad and Mom took an order for 50 bushel baskets. The baskets were made in one week's time so they'd be ready for the broker to pick up when he came around the following week. Believe they got less than five dollars for each basket.

....As time goes on....The days of the broker waned, basket stands stopped operation with the building of Interstate 65 and many folks got jobs outside their home, or worked "public work" as they called it and basket making as a whole began to decline.

Ollie and Lestel Childress are two of very few people who continued to make baskets even when they took outside jobs. Leona Waddell is another person who for many years sold her work to Curtis Alvey who owned the Basket Barn in Elizabethtown. Curtis' mother had run one of the local stores in the Cub Run area, so he knew all about trading baskets--he also knew about selling them to folks outside the area. Curtis' business kept several basketmakers active--without his store, these folks would have had a hard time selling their work because they, unlike the Childresses, were not interested in or able to market their own work.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Childresses sold their baskets through the Bowling Green Crafts Guild and later became members of the Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen in Berea. They also participated in the newly-formed Kentucky Dept. of the Arts Crafts Marketing Program and through these venues kept the tradition alive and well. They, too, were a huge part of the resurgence of interest in crafts across America in the early 1980s.

Kentucky's basket making tradition is alive and well today and we have several individuals and organizations to thank. Bob Gates, then director of the Kentucky Folklife Program, encouraged many traditional artists, including the basket makers. He documented and honored their work by providing exposure and sales opportunities through various programs sponsored by the Kentucky Historical Society and the Kentucky Arts Council.

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Others deserving our gratitude are Brent Bjorkman, director of the Kentucky Museum, Mark Brown of the Kentucky Arts Council and Dr. Michael Ann Williams, Professor, Folk Studies and Department Head at Western Kentucky University.

Tony VanWinkle and other WKU Folk Studies graduate students conducted incredible fieldwork. You can read Tony's history of the basket makers at [www.mammothcavebasketmakers.com](http://www.mammothcavebasketmakers.com).

In addition, Dr. Jim Middleton of the Family Medical Center in Munfordville, Ky has made a huge contribution through his support as a collector, his sponsorship of the White Oak Contest at the Hart Co. Fair (begun in 1998) and his founding of the Mammoth Cave Basket Maker's Guild.

In the past 3 decades, through concerted efforts of the Ky Folklife Program, the Kentucky Guild and the Kentucky Arts Council, much deserved recognition has come to basket makers in South Central Kentucky.

I was privileged to be awarded an apprenticeship with Lestel Childress in 1993. Both Lestel Childress and Leona Waddell, have received the Governor's Folk Heritage Award (in 2004 and 2012 respectively).

Leona Waddell received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Basketry Association in 2013. NBO unites people interested in basketry by providing education and promoting basket making. They have an awesome website: [www.nationalbasketry.org](http://www.nationalbasketry.org). Scott and I have both served as Board members.

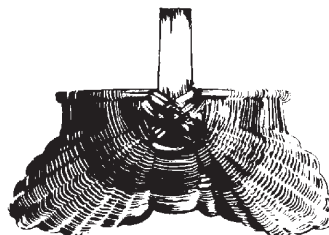
Also in 2013 three Kentucky basketmakers were included in the exhibit *A Measure of the Earth: The Cole-Ware Collection of American Baskets* at the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian. Those Kentuckians are: Leona Waddell of Cecilia, Jennifer Heller-Zurich of Berea, and Scott Gilbert of Scottsville.

I'm proud to be part of this wonderful and generous world of basket makers and thankful for the people and opportunities this connection has brought to our lives through meeting other basket makers, working with students and promoting the art of basketry.

I want to show you a short film, *A Measure of the Earth*, highlighting several of the basket makers whose work is in the Smithsonian Exhibit, one of these is Kentucky's Jennifer Heller-Zurich. This DVD, produced in conjunction with the exhibition, is available on Youtube and also available for sale at [basketmakerscatalog.com](http://basketmakerscatalog.com). It gives insight into the lives of the basket makers and the connection they feel with their materials and their art.

Thank you again for the invitation. I enjoyed the delicious lunch and appreciate the opportunity to share a bit about Kentucky's Basket Making Tradition with you. I'm happy to answer any questions about the baskets I've brought today.

Beth Hester  
The Basket Maker's Catalog



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