

# asket Weaving

Any basket that is woven of split oak wood is a true folk artifact. While modern mass production has all but replaced baskets with plastic, cardboard and glass containers, it has never developed a method for actually making baskets. The only split oak baskets in existence, and ever likely to be, are handmade.

Marjorie Prewitt of Moberly, Missouri is one of a few people left who still weaves the original split white oak baskets. Sturdy handmade (Prewitt) baskets are becoming more valuable because the demand for them far exceeds the supply. Compared to most other containers, these baskets are light, strong, reusable, and extremely durable. What makes them like this, you ask?

Top grade white oak trees from six to eight inches in diameter are used to make the baskets. If the trees are cut in the fall they can be split any time, but if they are cut in the spring after the sap rises it is best if they are split immediately. When asked if these trees are hard to find, Mrs. Prewitt replied, "Yes, it really is because you have to have a straight tree and one without too many knots and there aren't too many good native white oaks left." She went on to say that you can't always tell a good native white oak just by looking at one. You usually have to split the tree open first before you know for sure whether or not it is going to work. But sometimes you can tell if it has many knots just by the outside.

Earl Westfall, of Higbee, Missouri, Prewitt's older brother, has been making baskets longer than she has. He doesn't make them any longer, but his method of making baskets is slower than the popular method used by other basketmakers, but he says his method produces a sturdier basket. (Mrs. Prewitt's method is the same as Westfall's.) Their "splits", the almost paper thin strips that are woven to make the baskets, are split with the grain out of the rough wood.

Splits used by volume basketmakers are shaved from the wood stock somewhat as a piece of lumber is shaved from a board by a wood plane. After they scrape the splits with a pocket knife, the strips are woven through round ribs, slightly larger in diameter than a lead pencil, that are part of a strong frame.

Years ago, the hand splitting method was used "all the time," Westfall says, but he doesn't know of anyone in the state (except his sister) who uses this method. Westfall said that to split the stock, scrape it, and weave it on a frame requires approximately two days for him to make three baskets.

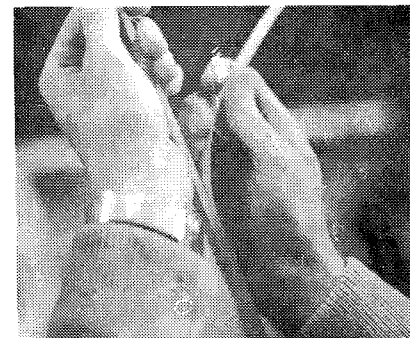
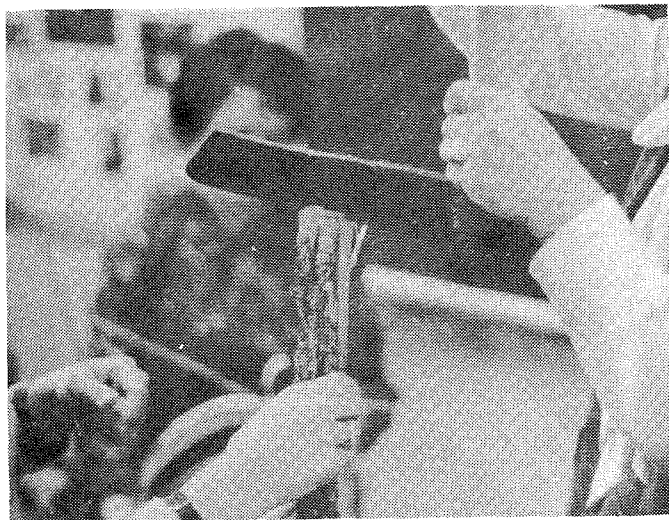
In pioneer America, baskets were used for carrying and storing eggs, fruits, flowers, laundry, and almost everything from berries to babies. Nowadays the few traditional baskets being made in America are bought for nostalgic reasons and used for such things as picnic lunches, sewing supplies, or

magazines. When asked what kind of different baskets she makes, Mrs. Prewitt replied, "Well, when my father made them he made them during the depression years. Making baskets is one thing we did for a living, and all the children helped make them. In those days he made them by certain sizes because farmers used them to carry feed in and they wanted a certain size. We made a peck size, half a bushel, a bushel, and then smaller, which would be half a peck, but now I don't go so much by measurements, just by the size that is handy to use." The different types of baskets are from clothes and picnic baskets to egg and magazine baskets. The bushel basket is the "original old time basket." It holds a bushel and has been popular with farmers.

The process of making baskets is not as easy as it appears. There are a variety of tools used. The tools Prewitt uses



**Marjorie Prewitt demonstrates the hand splitting method.**



**Far left, Marjorie uses the froe to split the white oak. Left, even pressure must be applied while splitting the wood. Above, Marjorie demonstrates hand splitting.**

include: a felling ax, iron sledge, wedge for splitting sticks into quarters and then into eighths, an antique tool called a froe to split the strips smaller and then a variety of pocket knives to get them even thinner.

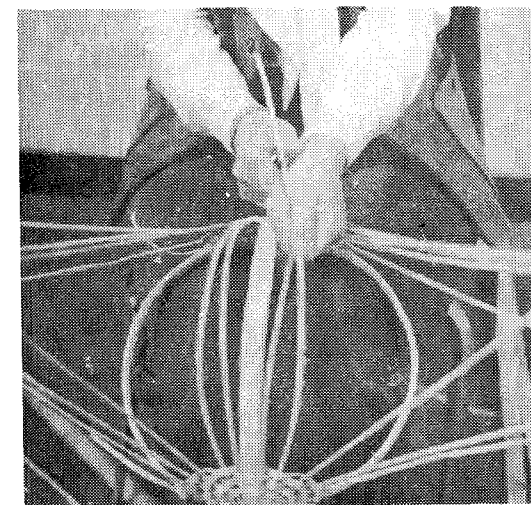
There are three main parts to a basket: the loops, ribs, and strips, or "splits", as the weaver calls them. Loops are the thickest pieces, used to form the loop of the basket as well as providing a handle. Ribs are used to give the basket shape. They provide a "skeleton" to weave on. Splits are the thin strips of wood that are woven between the ribs. Loops and splits come from the lighter-colored portion of a log. Ribs are cut from heartwood.

Prewitt said putting the basket together is the easiest part of making baskets. But further said it would be difficult to teach someone to find the right timber and how to make it down in small parts. She said she makes the parts of the basket beforehand and usually never puts it together all at once because you have to work the timber while it's green.

The first step is to find the right tree and cut it. The process of splitting it into quarters, eighths, sixteenths and further with your wedge and froe. When it is as thin as you can split it, she takes a pocket knife and smooths the splits. You always split the tree by the grain of the wood. The next step is to start shaving and assembling the "hoops" for the frames, making "ribs" and weaving the basket itself together.

Mrs. Prewitt learned how to make baskets as she was growing up. Her father and grandfather both made baskets and the art has been in the family for generations. She makes them mostly as a hobby, but does make them for her own use and uses them as gifts. Mrs. Prewitt said the larger baskets are harder to make because they take a lot more material which amounts to a lot more work. When she has a surplus of baskets, she sells them. The half bushel sells for \$25.00 and the price goes down as the basket gets smaller. Her favorite basket is the peck size because they are fairly easy to make and there is a lot you can do with one that size.

Basket making is a unique craft. Each basket is done by hand, and each basket has its own uniqueness. No basket is the same, unlike those made by machinery where each goes through the line and is made identical. Basket making came into existence on the frontier and only a few exceptional craftsmen remain. This increases the value of Prewitt's and Westfall's baskets and others like them who have continued in the practice of their craft in the face of certain extinction. The future of traditional craftsmanship in America is thus perceived to be uncertain. Let us be thankful some craftsmen haven't given it up and it is still not too late to preserve these crafts. Let us not let the modern technology take over all traditional crafts. They are worth preserving.



**Left, Marjorie starts shaving and assembling the "hoops" for the frame. Above, the frame is nearly complete. Right, Marjorie demonstrates the weaving process.**

