

on the Main Street of America



The Wells Family and Baskets

by Jewell Wells Nelson and Sherry Wells Ernst

Jewell: Sherry Wells Ernst is a basket maker. The art of basket making began with her father's cousins during the Great Depression. As far as we know, she is alone in carrying on the Wells' art of basket making.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, you could travel Old Highway 66, across Missouri, and see Ozark made baskets dangling from posts and clotheslines in front of general stores, post offices, and gas stations.

Some of the more prominent basket weavers lived near Old Highway 66, from just east of the Phelps County line and west of the county line, through the community once known as Hooker-Basketville. This area became so well known for quality baskets that Basketville was listed in travel tour guides during these years.

Squire and Anna Wells, my parents, Sherry's grandparents, operated a grocery store, gasoline station, cottages and a souvenir stand in the heart of Hooker-Basketville, right beside the moving traffic on Old Highway 66. Every good weather day, one or more members of our family would hang baskets outside for all the Highway 66 travelers to see. It worked. Not only did tourist stop once, but many families repeated visits. It was not unusual for a repeat traveler to make a request for a certain basket bought or seen the year before. If the basket was not available in the store, my father would give the request to one of the local basket makers. The basket would soon be made and shipped promptly to the tourist requesting it.

Most of the baskets sold in our store were made by my father's nephews, Clarence and Raymond Wells, and their wives, Ruth and Alice. Clarence and Raymond were sons of Tommy and Molly Wells.

George Miller was also a basket maker, but fewer of his baskets were sold through our store. Word of mouth has it that George and Clarence were both taught basket making by a Mr. Childers, who came to the area about 1928.

According to Raymond Wells, basket making came upon them out of necessity, not by long range planning. It began in the time of the Great Depression. He said the Wells' families needed food on their tables. There was little food, but the Ozark Mountains produced lots of white oak trees!

Clarence was the first Wells to begin

weaving baskets. He was a natural. He also was the only Wells to continue making baskets full time until ill health took its toll. Clarence and Raymond's brother, Art Wells of Chico, California,

biggest basket orders he ever had. The baskets were to go to the 1939 World's Fair in New York. The towel company put two wash clothes in each basket and they were sold as souvenirs at the

made various sizes of baskets round, square and rectangular, some with and some without lids. They made baskets with handles and baskets without handles. Raymond once said that he and Alice made and sold 38 different kinds of baskets. I am sure Clarence and Ruth equaled that number and perhaps exceeded it. Raymond said he once made a couple of dog basket-beds. He also said he and Alice never lacked for customers, but they often lacked time and energy to do all they wanted to do. Some days they made as many as 20 baskets.

Clarence, Ruth, Raymond and Alice made thousands of sturdy baskets from those white oak trees grown in the Ozark Mountains near Hooker, Missouri. You can bet that many of those very baskets are still being used. Even today, Wells' baskets of the 1930s and 1940s carry picnics, collect church offerings, serve pies, hug babies, are homes for soiled laundry, display flower arrangements, hold today's magazines, and are filled with fresh fruit. Who knows, those two dogs' great-great-great-grandpups may be snuggled in their Wells' basket-beds right now. I toss white paper into a 1940 Clarence Wells made wastebasket that sets beside my desk. It came from my father's store. \$2.00 is the price written in my father's hand on the bottom of the wastebasket. A Raymond Wells' basket holds fruit atop our kitchen counter.

Several years ago, after George Miller had been retired for a time, I asked him if he would make me one of his famous picnic baskets, and he did. It is a deep rectangular basket with a han-



Early 1930s at the Wells' gas station and souvenir shop. Front: Harold Wells, Dallas Wells, Jewell Wells, Sterling Wells. Back: Anna Wells and Squire Wells.

said that Clarence and Ruth made and sold baskets enough to buy a 400 acre farm near Rolla, Missouri, where they retired. Actually, they did not retire fully, but made baskets as long as they were physically able. Prior to their move to the Rolla area, Clarence and Ruth and their children lived beside Old Highway 66 across from the two-room Hooker School. Their basket workshop was their front yard.

In 1938 Raymond Wells was working for the WPA and got laid off. His brother, Clarence, had already established a respectable reputation as a basket maker. Raymond learned basket making from Clarence and his wife, Ruth. Raymond said his first six baskets were made from one piece of wood. He sold each basket for \$1.00. That put food on his table and he was into basket making! His wife, Alice, soon began making baskets, too.

None of the Wells basket makers had patterns. They claimed they could just "feel" how a basket should be made.

When a towel company contacted Clarence about making 3,000 small baskets with no handles, he was up to the task. Ruth, Raymond and Alice helped Clarence make one of the

fair. What a great advertisement that was for the Wells basket weavers of Hooker, Missouri! The weavers got 10 cents for each basket.

I can remember various shapes and sizes of baskets my cousins made through the years. Some I inherited after my parents died. The Wells' basket makers made wastebaskets, big clothes hampers with lids and big laundry baskets with handle. They



Wells Station on Old Route 66 in Hooker. Courtesy of Jan and Terry Primas.



Clarence Wells at his shop in Hooker, MO., June 1940. Courtesy of the Mark Twain National Forest Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.

dle across the center and a wooden lid that lifts up at each end. It has a dual purpose in our home: it holds sewing threads and fabrics during off seasons and picnics in season.

Although Clarence made baskets until he was unable to work, Raymond left basket making and began working at Fort Leonard Wood in 1954. He retired from Civil Service. Alice continued to make baskets until she began

working for the Pulaski County Hospital in Waynesville in 1950. After Raymond and Alice retired, they made baskets from time to time, usually for a special gift or special occasions.

The development of Fort Leonard Wood, in the early 1940s, and the four lane "New" Highway 66, later in the 1940s, cut off Hooker-Basketville and slowed the interest of making and buying baskets. Local folks were getting

jobs at Fort Leonard Wood. And tourists were speeding along the new four lane 66 too fast to notice the dangling baskets in front of remaining shops.

Sherry: As a kid growing up, my dad's cousin Raymond Wells and his wife, Alice, gave my family gifts of baskets they had made. As I grew older and learned to appreciate the beauty of the baskets and the intricate way they were made, I wanted to learn how to

make baskets. I affectionately called Raymond and Alice "Uncle" Raymond and "Aunt" Alice, even though Raymond was my second cousin. Raymond and Alice were both nearer my dad Dallas Wells' age than mine.

Raymond and Alice were kind enough to share their time and basket making knowledge with me. We also shared many good meals and happy visits together. Basket making was only part of our relationship.

George Miller was another early bas-

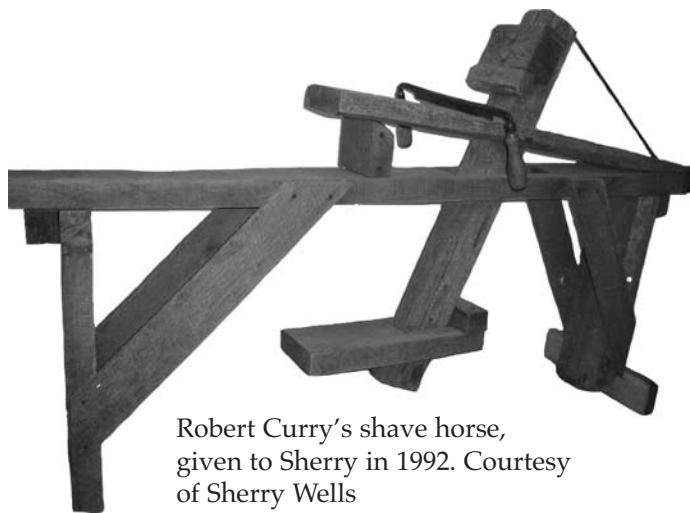


Clarence and Ruth Wells making baskets in backyard across from Hooker Cemetery area. Courtesy of Sherry Wells Ernst.

ket maker in Hooker, Missouri. After Mr. Miller's death, his family gave me his basket making tools. A few of my tools came from Raymond's brother, Clarence, by way of Roger Curry.

Roger Curry was a well-known basket maker in Salem, Missouri and a mentor. I took a few basket making classes from him over the years. Mr. Curry gave me Clarence Wells' strip knife. Clarence gave it to him years earlier. Mr. Curry said the strip knife needed to go back to the Wells family. Also, Mr. Curry saw me using George Miller's shave horse and said it was too big for me. He told me to come to his house and he would give me a shave horse that was just my size. And he did. A shave horse holds the wood down so the basket artist can work the wood. I am very grateful for these tools. They have been used by some of the most talented basket making hands anywhere! My tribute to them is to continue to try to measure up somewhat to the level of those great mentors.

MAKING THE BASKETS



Robert Curry's shave horse, given to Sherry in 1992. Courtesy of Sherry Wells

I did not learn my mother's good cooking skills, however, I do follow a certain "recipe" for making baskets: (1) use good utensils; (2) gather the best ingredients; and (3) work for perfection.

Basket making materials

Each region of the country has its own kind of baskets. A basket expert can usually tell where a basket has been made. Various trees, or basket making materials like pine needles, grasses, honeysuckle vines, yucca plants, river cane, reed, etc. give an indication of a basket's origin. Also, the design and style and even the handles of the baskets often differ from region to region.

The Ozark white oak saplings produce some of the best wood for basket making. They are also very available. White oaks grow in every county in Missouri. I have been told that the white oak wood cells have a substance called tyloses that make the wood waterproof and very durable.

Trees grown on the north or east-facing hills grow taller as they reach for

the sun and are not as twisted by the winds. Also, they hold moisture of the last melting snows. Trees with drooping limbs or leaves are not getting enough moisture and should not be used.

The second growth white oak saplings are ideal for baskets. It is best to select a sapling that is about nine inches in diameter. Saplings that grow tall, from reaching to the sun, have a straighter section before the first limb. The first six feet, or until a limb is reached, is the best wood. Where there is a limb there is a knot. If you try to cut through a knot your knife blade may be damaged.

Several years ago Uncle Raymond took me to a hidden place for tree hunting. He called it Basket Hill. Oak trees there have all the qualities needed for good baskets. There is also a bubbling brook that runs through Basket Hill giving trees needed moisture. Before hunting and cutting trees, you must get permission from the landowner. You would not want to be charged with trespassing.

Some basket makers claim to choose trees by the sign of the moon, much like planting a garden, or by certain seasons. Some weavers like to cut trees when the sap is up. Others choose to cut trees when the sap is down. Then there are those basket makers who claim not to cut trees or make baskets during their favorite hunting or fishing season. That is not because of the moon, or season, or sap. It

simply would interfere with their favorite sport.

When going to the hills for a tree, it is wise to have at least one other person along. My strong husband, Dave, is that person when I go looking for a tree.

Turning a tree into basket strips

When Dave and I find a good tree, we bring it to our house and unload it. I learned the hard way that a tree in the woods looks bigger when I get it home! I cut the tree into logs then split the logs into wedges: halves, fourths, eights, and sixteenths, down until I have a board wedge (a wedge small enough to make basket strips). Seldom do you find a tree with grains that are perfectly straight. If the wood is sawed, you go against the grain and the wood will be tougher and smoother for the baskets.

The Wells basket makers pull through the wood, to make a strip with a unique tool much like and often confused with, a spoke shave. There is no gauge on it. The strength of the basket maker determines the thickness of the

strip. A draw knife and a shaving horse are tools that help make the edges of the wood smooth. Next, a strip knife is used to make the narrow strips for basket weaving.



George Miller's drawknife



Close-up of blade on Clarence Wells' strip knife.

Assembling the basket

To make the basket, I begin making the bottom of the basket by laying the strips one on top of the other forming spokes into a complete circle. Then, as close as possible to the center of the layered strips, I weave a strip of wood in and out of the layered strips, adding other strips as I work upward. I weave and then let it "draw" or pull together. Then I pull strips as tight as I can as I weave forming the basket. Last, the strip's ends have to be tucked in. Once the basket is woven, the handle goes on. Then the rim of the basket is added. This rim or band on top of the basket is a most important part of that basket. It gets handled and worn more than any other part of the basket. If this rim is not put on well, the whole basket will come apart. Uncle Raymond said white oak baskets made well, if not abused, will last hundreds of years! He also said that no matter how many baskets you make, you are always learning new ways to make them.

Basket Colors

White oak wood is lighter near the bark of the tree and grows darker near and in the center. The natural wood color of baskets is usually preferred by buyers.

I never paint or varnish a basket. To do so would not let the basket "breathe". Also, to paint or varnish a basket is to cover the beauty of the natural colors in the wood. A natural oak wood basket can be washed or hosed off. It must be hung until dry so mold or mildew will not develop on the basket.

Natural stains may be used because they can enhance the wood grain. I use a special stain on some of my baskets that is made from black walnut shells. Teas and coffee can be used to stain oak baskets. However, unstained oak baskets develop their own seasoned

In a letter to Sherry Wells, Dixie Miller Banks remembered her father (George Miller) and his basket making.

My father seemed to always make baskets even though he did have a regular job working on Ft. Wood. He had real strong hands and long fingers that were helped some by his playing the banjo while my mother played the piano. I think this limbered his fingers up for basket making.

He had his own type sawmill. He went into the woods, would look at all the different trees and would decide which one to use. Most had to be tall and no knots on them. He worked with walnut, white oak, cedar and even used vines from grapes (wild) to make some furniture. I even remember his using some cherry wood, which was so pretty. The cedar always spelled so well. He would let the wood set or to season, as he called it, and then cut, split, draw it up and then start making baskets. He also made stools of all kinds. Anyone could go to him and give him just an idea of what they were wanting and in no time he would have it made. I think most people in the Pulaski County area have baskets or stools made by him. We have several in our own home and all the family has their own free ones. That was a real deal to get free Miller baskets.

My mother made Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls and my dad made the baskets and they would take them to the Farmer's Market and sell out of all their products in a couple of hours. Then they would go home and work for another two weeks or so and go back again. They were usually the stars of the markets. A lot of people would help get the baskets out of his truck so he could get started selling.

None of his children ever took up the hobby when he passed away. It looked like fun but we never had the time to put into it as daddy did.

Dixie Miller Banks

colors with use and age.

With a full schedule, I sometimes use reed to make baskets. Reed strips look somewhat like oak strips. Reed strips come in different widths and are flat, round, or half round. Ordering reed is much easier than going to the woods or Basket Hill, cutting trees, and stripping the wood. But the beauty of the Ozark grown sturdy white oak is still my preference for quality baskets.

Basket Stories

MOSES' BASKET: "Basket" is mentioned 38 times in the Bible, according to my concordance. One of the most famous baskets is the baby Moses' basket. "When his mother could hide him no

longer from King Pharaoh, she got him a wicker basket and covered it over with tar and pitch. Then she put him into it and set it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile." Exodus 2:3.

I wonder what ever happened to baby Moses' basket. The importance of well made baskets is that they are durable and can be handed down from generation to generation. It is believed that basket making was around before pottery. First baskets were made lined with clay and mud (or tar and pitch) to make them waterproof. Later carriers may have thought the basket was not needed and made the mud/clay pottery without the basket.

In earlier days, baskets were necessary for utilitarian purposes. Baskets measured pecks and bushels; baskets were used for gathering eggs; for collecting wool; for transporting items big and small.

For a time, baskets, particularly during and following WWII, lost some of their popularity and basket making was not passed along from generation to generation. Now, however, baskets are happily flourishing with the arts and crafts sector of society and in basket parties. Baskets are now more popular for their art, design, and beauty than for utilitarian purposes.

HOT AIR BALLOON/BASKET: A basket with a story is much more interesting than a non-story basket. Here is my story.

Thaddeus Lowe invented the "air balloon", the forerunner of the hot air balloon. Lowe was the first to make a basket with a balloon attached that was moved by gas. On September 24, 1861 Lowe ascended 1,000 feet in his balloon/basket. The basket was lightweight for lifting into the air and, when landing, it did not break. During the Civil War, Lowe's balloon/baskets

were tethered in areas near the enemy with a scout in each basket. From his height, the scout could watch his troops and/or spy on the enemy.

The Fort Leonard Wood Engineers' Museum holds one of my most satisfying accomplishments in baskets. I made a life size replica of Thaddeus Lowe's woven basket. A large section of the museum has a life size diorama of EACH war beginning with the Revolutionary War through and including the Gulf War. My Thaddeus Lowe basket represents the Civil War. This basket and its canopy/balloon is securely



tethered and hung in the museum and displayed with a life size mannequin scouting out his troops and enemies. Check it out!

THE HEN BASKET: Farmers did not always have good setting hens. So they shared hens. A basket designed so a hen could sit in it easily but the handle was made wider near the rim to pre-

vent the hen from reaching around and pecking the carrier.

HERB BASKET: The story of the herb basket is a favorite of mine. It became popular because poor people could not buy spices to season their meats, like the rich folks could. Hence, the herb basket was invented. It was a basket mounted on a pole. The basket was lined with mud or clay and filled with soil. Herbs were planted in the soil. Herbs need lots of sun. The basket on the pole could be moved as the sun moved. this method provided a continuing growth of herbs.

"LEAVE 'ER RIGHT" BASKET: After I was taught by Raymond, Alice, and Roger Curry, I was offered a position as an apprentice in basket making at Silver Dollar City. I continued to learn basket making skills under the supervision of those experienced weavers at Silver Dollar City. I also learned about the "Leave 'er Right" basket. One day a lady picked up one of our baskets. She was admiring it so seriously that her husband interfered. He said, "Leave 'er right there! You don't need another basket!"

DREAM BASKET: My dream basket has a short handle and a large inside space with holes in the bottom (made by leaving holes or space between the strips). You fill the basket with your dreams and, if some dreams get broken, they fall through the holes in the bottom of the basket, leaving room to fill the basket with new dreams.

Jewell Wells Nelson is a retired educator, a freelance writer, wife of Paul and mother of Jay and Scott. They live in Louisville, Kentucky.

Last Split
a tribute to Raymond Wells

The master has left us
he's lashed his last rim
and he pulled his last split
I will sorely miss him.

His workshop now darkened
his tools lying bare
and curls of his draw knife
on the floor are still there

And oh if the walls of
this shop now could speak
'bout the baskets he wove
and how yet he stayed meek

Hung from a nail, is a
hank wrapped in twine
oak aging with color
like perfection of wine

The crisp air is scented
with flannel and oak
and if I am quiet
I can hear how he spoke

His 'cackle' is clearer
for gone now his pain
and his spit-fire teasing
forever will remain

The master has left us
and pulled his last split
he's still much to teach me
if here quiet I'll sit.

Sherry Wells-Ernst 2/15/96

Sherry Wells Ernst is a basket maker, musician, art teacher, wife of Dave and mother of Dallas. They live in Waynesville, Missouri.



The Childers family brought their basket making skills from Cabool to the busier roadside of Old Route 66 in the 1920s. William F. Childers, who taught his son, Henry Jasper, the craft is talking to two customers before the array of baskets. One of the customers, a Mrs. Hansen, took the photograph and mailed it back to Basketville. The Childers were soon joined by members of the Wells family. Photo courtesy of the Elbert I. Childers Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.



Young customers look over the baskets and stools at this roadside stand in Basketville, circa June 1940. Basketville was a well known area attraction and the local craftsmen prospered for almost thirty years. Highway relocation in the 1950s and 1960s diverted traffic and brought an end to the cottage industry. Photo courtesy of the Mark Twain National Forest Collection, Western Historical Manuscript Collection, University of Missouri-Rolla.