

Charles Long:

When I grew up, there wasn't any Walmart plastic bags or paper bags. Baskets were made to use. They had to have something to package, carry, store. It was necessity. Baskets came about because of necessity.

Boneda Childress:

People say "I want to make baskets". They sit down and start making them and it's not what they think it is. You gotta have patience, it's nerve wracking, it's hard work. You sit and you try to weave those little bitty splits, you have to get up sometimes and just walk away from them because it get's tedious. There's a lot to it.

Charles Long:

Baskets to me is...they're special, but they're not that special I guess, but some people they go crazy over them and everything.

Leona Waddell:

If people had a knew back then what they know now, they could have sat in and made a fortune. And now, people wants to know who all you know that made baskets and what kind of baskets and all that. Well, see, people didn't think about trying to remember that back then

MUSIC

Fade up *Dance Hall Shuffle*

Dips under

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

I'm precisely one of those people who "wants to know who all" Leona Waddell and other Kentucky basket makers knew back then, and how they learnt, and what's happening today and generally more about the fantastically rich local tradition of this craft. My name is Rachel Hopkin, I'm a graduate student in the folk studies program at WKU and as I've been finding out, basket making has been a notable feature of the Mammoth Cave region of Kentucky since the pioneer era, and this area has produced some of the finest basket-makers in America, Leona Waddell among them.

MUSIC

Fades out

FX:

Leona cutting splits and muttering

Leona Waddell:

This is slow work so you might get bored of watching.

[Rachel Hopkin

I don't think so, it's pretty fascinating.]

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Leona is using a pair of scissors to cut a strip of thin white oak wood into the tiny splits, as they're called, that she will then use to weave the intricate baskets that she's known for.

Leona Waddell:

There's more to this than you'd think. Everyone that I've ever taught yet said they didn't realise, well, that there's that much to it. You know, it's a lot different doing it than watching it done, you know

Rachel Hopkin

Do you remember the first basket you ever made?

Leona Waddell:

Oh. I was born 1928 and I was, well I started helping mama on the baskets when I was about 8 years old. So you can count back how many years that is.

Rachel Hopkin:

Where did your mother learn, did she ever talk about how she learnt?

Leona Waddell:

Well, there's a little basket upstairs that was hers and dad got that for her just before or just after they married, I'm not sure which. And she, I reckon, looked at that and learned to make them. And when she started making them she used an old broken butcher knife to whittle with.

FX

Sound of going up stairs

Leona Waddell:

It's getting close to 100 years old, you see they turn dark after they get so old.

Rachel Hopkin:

So this is the one that your father gave to your mother and that started her off on the basket making.

Leona Waddell:

Yeah.

Rachel Hopkin:

And she just copied it. She didn't learn from anyone?

Leona Waddell:

Yeah. She could look at that and...she could look at a dress in book or something and cut a pattern and make her own dresses. Dad, he wasn't a very good provider so mama, she'd go out and cut her own

timber and drag it in and I would generally make a couple of market baskets, like on a Saturday and we had a guy that had a grocery store and he'd buy them and we could buy groceries. That'd last until about Wednesday and then on Wednesday I'd make one or two more and go back and buy enough stuff to last to the weekend, you know.

Rachel Hopkin:

When did people start to be interested in the baskets more as a kind of work of art instead of ...

Leona Waddell:

Well see back then, like years ago and when I grew up and all that, you didn't get much for them. But you'd be surprised what they bring now. You would not believe what they bring now.

Rachel Hopkin:

What do they bring now?

Leona Waddell:

Mine goes anywhere from 250 to 750 and 800 dollars a basket. Depends on the size of the basket what it brings.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Leona lives with her daughter Jerry and her son in law in Cecilia and there are baskets everywhere you turn in the house.

Leona Waddell:

There's a market basket I made in June and Jerry's birthday's in June and I made this and so she'd seen me making it and of course she knew that her birthday was coming up and she hinted around that I give it to her, so I got it done and give it to her for her birthday. And then my daughter in law, she said "well, I'll give you \$300 and take it home today" but I done promised it and I couldn't. I said "well, I'll make you one" so I ended up making six of them things for Christmas and I got an order for one more.

Rachel Hopkin:

So it sounds like you're getting enough orders to keep you busy.

Leona Waddell:

Oh yes. I wish I could get 'em all caught up. You know, for one time, I'd love to get 'em all caught up.

MUSIC:

More of *Dance Hall Shuffle*

Dips under

Zora Decker:

Well my mother and daddy made baskets when I was small.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Zora Decker is another Kentucky basket-maker. She was born a couple of later than Leona and like Leona, she was brought up during the Depression. I met Zora together with her daughter Boneda Childress at Zora's home in Park City.

Zora Decker:

Daddy used to frame baskets, you know, and he'd get a lot of them framed and then we would eat supper. Me and Ora would be a little bit slow, you know, we was twins, and we'd be a little bit slow and daddy would come in and get after us and say "You'd better get them dishes done and get in there and get a basket. I'm going to whip you if you don't" and so we'd really hurry you know and we'd get them done and we'd get in there and get a basket. We'd all have a basket a piece a working on them when we was little girls.

Rachel Hopkin:

Were you frightened of him?

Zora Decker:

Uh huh.

Rachel Hopkin:

Would he have whipped you?

Zora Decker:

Yeah.

Boneda Childress:

Oh probably. No doubt. Yeah. Back in those older days...

Zora Decker:

They did do stuff like that.

Boneda Childress:

Yeah, they whipped back in those days.

Zora Decker:

They don't do that today.

[All laughing]

Rachel Hopkin:

So she never did that to you?

Boneda Childress:

No. No. Maybe a little smack now and then but nothing physical.

Zora Decker:

She didn't need none.

Rachel Hopkin:

But she wasn't making baskets though was she?

[More laughing]

Boneda Childress:

No that's true [laughter]

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

(Boneda didn't learn to make baskets until after she was grown up and married)

Rachel Hopkin

What did your dad do with the baskets?

Boneda Childress:

He sold them.

Zora Decker:

He sold them.

Boneda Childress:

My granddad sold them.

Zora Decker:

He sold them and bought groceries. One time, mum and dad was wanting some KoolAid and we didn't have any and they just jumped in and made them a basket and took it up to the store and got some KoolAid.

Boneda Childress:

And see, a lot of times, the storekeepers back in those days would trade you out groceries for baskets. You know, back then, it was like what, maybe a dollar for a big bushel.

Zora Decker:

Yeah, or 50 cents. And a nickel for a little small one.

Boneda Childress:

Where now they sell for 50 dollars or 100 dollars. You see mama's 80 and that was back when you was a young girl, wasn't it? So you can imagine.

Zora Decker:
Just a kid.

Rachel Hopkin:
Did you like making the baskets?

Zora Decker:
At times, and times I'd rather have done no telling what.

MUSIC:
More of *Dance Hall Shuffle*
Dips under

Mike Childress:
I'm Michael Allen Childress. Born in 1961, Cub Run, Kentucky. Mom and dad were Clevie and Darlene Childress.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Michael Childress is also Boneda's husband and Zora's son-in-law. The Childresses are one of the best known basket-making families in this region and Michael is an eighth generation basket maker.

Michael Childress:
When I was a kid, we didn't have running water. No phone. Nothing like that and it's what my dad and them done, whenever they wasn't doing something else, they made baskets. And I had 4 sisters and two brothers and the oldest ones, we would all get in the living room and we would spread out and all work different materials for the baskets because that's what dad done then to make a living.

Rachel Hopkin:
And did he ask you to do the baskets or did you express an interest?

Michael Childress:
[laughing]. No. You had to do it. We didn't put them together. We just helped to make stuff to do them. It was kind of like a conveyer belt, you know, an assembly line and that's how we learned. And sometimes he'd have 120, 150 baskets made up through the winter and he'd go out in the spring and peddle them. Back then we had a station wagon and he would fill that thing up to the rim and still tie some on the top. And he'd start out and just before he got back, every one of them would be sold. If you made any money then, it was better than making nothing because you just had to have something to survive, but it wasn't no big money. I remember a lot of times he got a dollar a piece for a gallon and that's a pretty good sized basket. And anybody that's ever made baskets knows it's the hardest dollar you've earned in your life. And I mean it's work.

Rachel Hopkin:
What is the hardest part?

Michael Childress:
Well one of the hardest parts is going and cutting the tree and the material and packing it out because a lot of times, you have to get in down in the holler. It's kind of like a creek bed or something and it's down way over a hill and you'd pack this thing out because there's no other way to get it out. Once you get it all packed out and you get it home, next hardest part would be busting it apart. Of course, a lot of people don't understand what sledgehammers and wedges is. A lot of people used to bust wood. But when you got a tree that's 8-10 inches and 8-10 foot long and you try to drive a wedge in that, sometimes it's like trying to drive it into a rock. You know, you've got some that's so tough you can't get them open. But there's not really an easy part of it but going to sell it. That's the only part I can see [laughing]

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

With Michael and Boneda both coming from basket making families, they formed something of a dynastic basket-making union when they married 30 or so years ago.

Michael Childress:
I'm not bragging but we can make as good a basket as anybody in the country. And we guarantee them for life and you don't find that with nothing hardly and we want them to really enjoy them and life them.

Rachel Hopkin:
You say you guarantee them for life but, I mean up to what point because surely people can...

Michael Childress:
Well you can tell the difference in negligence or, you know, what they do and then if it's something that we've done that's actually come apart. There's a difference and I tell them, that's what I tell them, I say "now, if you go out and cut 'em or something like that I'm not going to replace them or fix them but if it's something that we done that came apart or something wasn't right, we'll fix it" and I have. I've not had very many but I don't have many that tears up because I'm too particular about fixing them. You know, you can tell when a kid's had a hold of it or maybe they've run over it with a car or something like that, and I've had that done once. And she brought it to me and it was caved in and I said "you run over that, didn't you?" "Oh no". And I popped the side out and I said "there it is". [laughing] And she finally admitted and said "yeah, yeah I did. I kind of caught it with my truck tyre.

MUSIC

End of *Dance Hall Shuffle*

FADE UP ON

Dr Middleton chatting about clotted cream

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Dr James Middleton runs the Family Medical Center in Munfordville in Hart County which lies at the heart, please forgive the pun, of the Kentucky basket-making tradition. Dr Middleton is a huge supporter of local crafts and his office, which is where I met him, is chock full with baskets and once we'd stopped discussing the wonders of clotted cream, he showed me around.

James Middleton:

The baskets, a bunch of them were up at Lexington. They had some kind of exhibit up there for the horse crowd, but they got them back this weekend and I haven't had time to get them back up. It's been pretty hectic in here. But here...

Rachel Hopkin:

Oh, so this is the display *without* the ones that went to...

James Middleton:

Yes, yes.

Rachel Hopkin:

It's still a pretty [Dr Middleton laughs] vibrant display. How many baskets do you have altogether?

James Middleton:

I have no idea.

Rachel Hopkin:

What's your involvement in basket making?

James Middleton:

First of all, we've always had Hart County baskets at home. My marble basket when I was a child was a Hart County basket. The basket my mama had out on the clothesline was a Hart County basket and she kept her clothespins in it. We've always had baskets around the house that were garden baskets and we'd use on the place, so baskets, living in Hart County, have always been part of our lives.

James Middleton walking around clinic:

You can see, that's a dye basket. That's like the baskets that were sold, they put, the tourists would like the ones with the dye on them and have different colours.

Rachel Hopkin:

What kind of reaction do you get from patients?

James Middleton (still walking around):

They like it. They've kind of taken pride in it. At first they came in and looked around and now they talk about "so and so was my great uncle" or something like that you know, so people like to see them.

So we've got different basket makers. Herbert Childress has been long gone. He was a basket maker in the forties, fifties and sixties.

[Fades out from walk around clinic]

James Middleton:

Our earliest actual documentation of Hart County baskets is I have some pictures of the early cave guides before the civil war who were slaves and they would go into Mammoth Cave and they would use a torch to fling up – of course, there was no electricity and no lights and they would take torches and they would throw them around in the cave and it would light up the cave so that people could see and they carried their torches in a Hart County basket and I have pictures of those people made around the late 1850s, sitting with their torches, their little lanterns and their Hart County baskets that they carried their flares in that they would pitch up. So that's our first actual documentation of the use of the baskets. Life is pretty tough in a lot of Hart County and subsistence type farming and to make a little side money, maybe in the wintertime, they would make their baskets and it become a whole family affair. One person would make the ribs, one would make the splits, and one would put them together and a lot of times in the wintertime, they would spend their winter making baskets and they would take the baskets in and exchange them in a local stores for food or for credit at the store or for money. And it became a way of making a living and that's kind of interesting because our basket people associate the baskets with their struggle for existence and being poor and not having anything and having to make baskets. And so to them, they were a little ashamed that their folks had to subsist and make a basket to make a living instead of having more money and now they kind of take it as a thing of pride.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

There's basket after basket after beautiful basket on display here at the Munfordville Family Medical Center. Every patch of wall has a basket if it doesn't have a quilt – another local craft that Dr Middleton supports. There are big baskets, little baskets, picnic baskets, bushel baskets, egg baskets, pie baskets. In fact, there are baskets for just about every purpose you can imagine. You can see photos of a lot of these baskets and their makers at www.wku.edu/folkstudies and they're taken by photographer Amanda HArdeMan. You're listening to WKU Public Radio, I'm Rachel Hopkin and I'm exploring the wonderful heritage of basket making in South Central Kentucky with Dr James Middleton of Munfordville.

James Middleton walking around clinic:

There's a typical Hart County basket, that was found in a barn and those people were using that basket to carry stuff around. A lot of times they were carrying corn to either their cows or a lot of time to their mules. They'd feed the mules when they got in from work and they'd carry a basket of ears of corn to their animals.

Rachel Hopkin:

Okay, so this is an older, larger, very practical sturdy looking basket and it's coloured up, it's quite dark because of its age, I suppose.

James Middleton:

Yeah, that basket's probably 1910 or 20 or something like that and it's just a utilitarian basket and that's what baskets traditionally were before all this stuff started happening in the 20th century.

Rachel Hopkin:

I actually, in a way, those are my favourites. I really like the rustic look.

James Middleton

Yeah yeah. That's just the evolution of basket making. That was a necessity basket and that's to sell to try to get a little bit of money.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

As the 20th century progressed, basket making styles began to change.

James Middleton:

In the 20s and 30s, they begin to try to expand that from just making utilitarian baskets. They would make basket trips. They would load up a wagon and go up into various areas, go up into Indiana or go over into different parts of the state selling their baskets making money. You'd see a wagon just have these things just piled, and it would be kind of like a cloud coming down the road. Then later, as the tourist industry started coming down the road, 31W and 31E were the main thoroughfares from the north to the south and people were going up and down the road and they started selling baskets as decorative baskets on tourist stands and tourists would stop. Then in the late 60s, the interstate highway took over the old tourist arteries, 31W and 31E, so passage through the area...they didn't stop as much, they didn't have tourist stands along the road, and Phyllis George took a project – she was our governor's wife back in the 80s – to try to encourage arts and crafts in Kentucky and one of the areas that she found was the basket makers in this area and Lestel Childress was kind of one of the fellows she found and received some recognition, featured in her book, and then they started having the craft show at Louisville and also at Berea and some of our folks started going there, and those people began promoting Kentucky arts and Kentucky crafts and kind of revived the basket making and it became more of an art and a craft and a recognition for what it truly was.

SEGUE

Fade up on Judy Cook in kitchen:

That's a newspaper print out of dad, and then these over here are prints that someone took pictures and had them blowed up as prints of these different kinds of baskets.

Rachel Hopkin:

Oh yes, so it's kind of like a...

Junior Cook:

A shrine.

Rachel Hopkin:
A shrine to basket making.

Judy Cook:
Yeah.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

I'm in the kitchen of the home of Judy and Junior Cook in Park City and I am again surrounded by baskets. These ones have all made by Judy's parents Lestel and Ollie Childress. Incidentally, Lestel, who died last year, was the great uncle of Mike Childress, who we heard from a little earlier in the programme. Lestel was born in 1927.

Judy Cook:
He was raised in Hart County and work is all they ever knew. They were poor. My mom's parents died when she was 6 and 11 so grandma took mama in and raised her and then when mom become 15 years old, her and daddy sold a basket and bought her wedding dress.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Lestel and Ollie formed a basket making team and they sold their wares to tourists from their shop on 31 W

Judy Cook:
31W was so busy it was nearly bumper to bumper so it was people from all over the United States.

Junior Cook:
Loretta Lynn's sister, Loretta Lynn's a country singer, her sister stopped there, and her mother. And then also some wrestlers that was well known, they stopped.

Judy Cook:
Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs.

Junior Cook:
Anybody out of state.

Judy Cook:
Anybody out of state just stopped. We was just right on the road.

Junior Cook:
The interstate wasn't yet put in and that was the only way of travelling from Louisville to Nashville was 31W.

Rachel Hopkin:
Can you describe the shop to me?

Judy Cook:

Just a little shack by the side of the road, just very small. We had our quarters that we lived in and then they had all this stuff out in the front. You left it sitting out all night because it was too heavy to pack in and out.

Rachel Hopkin:

And the stuff they sold, was it mainly baskets or was it lots of things?

Judy Cook:

Lots of things. Souvenirs that you see now in stores like bedspreads, salt and pepper shakers, just a variety of everything. Plates. Anything that you see in stores now just about, like little souvenirs. And down the road, about a mile, grandma and granddad had their little souvenir shop and then my uncle George had his.

Rachel Hopkin:

So were they all in competition with each other?

Judy Cook:

Yeah.

Rachel Hopkin:

When did the souvenir shop close?

Judy Cook

Oh, that would have had to have been... the early 60s.

Junior Cook:

No, early 70s.

Judy Cook:

No, honey, listen. We got married in 69 - don't you remember us going and passing. I looked down and seen the little souvenir shop that we passed before we left.

Junior Cook:

Okay. You said early 60s.

Judy Cook:

Yeah.

Junior Cook:

Excuse us. We lived in your mom and dads' house when we got married in 69 and they still had the souvenir shop.

Judy Cook:
Excuse me.

[All laughing]

I know we courted out there in that souvenir shop, didn't we. Oh my.

Rachel Hopkin:
What, you courted amid the baskets?

Junior and Judy Cook:
Yes.

Rachel Hopkin:
Tell me about that.

Junior Cook:
We'd go out in the souvenir shop when they wasn't around and we'd slip a kiss.

Judy Cook:
Daddy and mama were really strict so that's the reason we'd have to sneak around and kiss [laughing].

MUSIC:
Fade up on *You're the best of all the leading brands*
Dips under

Judy Cook:
Daddy was the best basket maker around anywhere.

Rachel Hopkin:
When did he start getting that reputation, do you know.

Judy Cook
It would be back in, his reputation started in this book.

Rachel Hopkin:
And so you're opening and looking at a book called *Kentucky Crafts*

Judy Cook:
Kentucky Crafts

Rachel Hopkin:

By Phyllis George

Judy Cook

Yes, she was the one who got Kentucky booming on the crafts. I don't remember the date

Rachel Hopkin:

It'll probably say in the front of the book.

FX – SOUND OF PAGE TURNING

Rachel Hopkin:

1989

Judy Cook:

Okay. In the later 80s everything, and early 90s, everything was booming. Booming.

Rachel Hopkin:

And you think that was down to Phyllis George.

Judy Cook:

Oh yes. She got daddy to start doing neater baskets.

Rachel Hopkin:

How did that happen, how did they meet and how did she...

Judy Cook:

Mama and daddy went to Frankfort every year, so that's how. She was the governor's wife, Phyllis George was. She talked to him just like you and I are talking. She'd say "Lestel, if you make anything neater..." Daddy was used to making them rough because that's, you know, that's how they started out and she was the one that taught to him to make the little skinny splits, they call 'em, that they weave with. Make 'em narrow and small instead of wide and you can get more money for 'em.

Junior Cook:

He just seemed like he'd go up. \$25 and people still buying them. Then he'd go up another \$25 and they'd still buy them, you know, so...

Judy Cook:

It just blew his mind and then the more he got into it and he could make more... he loved it.

MUSIC:

End of *You're the best of all the leading brands*

FX: Outdoors at Beth Hester and Scott Gilberts'

Beth Hester:

This is our lumbar yard so we get these veneer logs from the local lumbar company and you can see we've got them piled up a few out here, and then we have a woodmeiser saw and we use what we know about traditional splitting and orientation of grain and so forth to saw out as nearly along the grain those big logs.

FADE DOWN on outdoor walkabout

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

This is Beth Hester and a good deal of what she and her husband Scott Gilbert know about the *traditional* aspects of basket making, they learnt from Lestel and Ollie Childress 30 years or so ago. Neither Beth nor Scott come from basket making families but after decades practising the craft, they are both highly accomplished basket makers and they also run a basketry business from Scottsville, Kentucky. The Basket Makers Catalogue, as its called, deals in basket materials and kits and Beth and Scott also run workshops where you can learn, among other things, how to make a traditional Kentucky basket

Beth Hester:

When we identify what is unique about the baskets and the basket making tradition in south central Kentucky, typically one thinks of the material being white oak. There are some willow and honeysuckle basket makers as well, but typically and predominantly white oak and the style of the baskets is predominantly an egg basket. And this would be a basket that's constructed with two hoops as Lestel would say, which would be a round ring for the handle and the same kind of ring which becomes the rim of the basket, and at the intersection of these two hoops the basket is lashed together and this area of the basket is known locally as the burr, or perhaps the ear or the eye of the basket. And into this burr on either side of the basket are inserted ribs that are fairly substantial and have been carved and tapered down with a knife to a sharp point so that they can actually be inserted into the wrapping and upon these ribs then, the fine weavers are woven. The weavers are prepared by scraping, trimming, cutting.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

If you go online to ?????, you can see photos of the typical Kentucky egg baskets that Beth is talking about.

Beth Hester:

One characteristic from the Mammoth Cave area, when you look at the burr that holds the hoop and rim together, you see a particular style of using usually a wider piece of material, and the lashing crosses over and wraps around the rim several times. If you look at baskets, even if they're made from a long tradition of white oak in other areas of the country, what you see is a different style or application of that particular part of the basket.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

So it's the part of the basket where the rim and handle meet – called the burr or the ear or the eye, Beth said, and also the wrapping - that is one distinctive feature of local egg baskets. It's into this part that the ribs of the basket are inserted.

Beth Hester:

And typically if you were looking at a basket that was made in Hart County, Edmondson Country, that area, let's say 50 or so years ago and it was a basket that was made to use on the farm, you would notice, when we look at the ribs across the bottom, they're a bit wider at their widest point and they're flat and then as the ribs come up the sides and get closer to the rim, they are smaller in diameter and often times even round. So I would say those would be basic characteristics – the style that is used for the wrapping, the size and the shape of the ribs and also the overall shape of the basket, some of those are very characteristic for this area of the country.

FX

Fade up on Paul Rich working on a basket

Paul Rich:

I always admired my neighbour's work and I'd go out there and watch him and then I come back here and try to do the same thing

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Around the same time that Beth was learning about baskets from Lestel Childress, Paul Rich was taking an interest in his neighbour's basket making.

Paul Rich:

When I first asked him could I learn, he said "well, can you whittle?" and I said "well, I think so" and I dragged up a piece of wood and I went like that and he said "NO. Keep your knife still and pull your wood" and that was the hardest thing for me to learn, was that. The first basket I made, I got that done and I took it to him and he looked at it and he said 'well' and he looked at it and he said "that's all right. You'll improve." And over time, I did.

Rachel Hopkin:

Do you have that basket in the house?

Paul Rich:

Yeah.

Rachel Hopkin:

Mind the cables.

FX of Paul getting up and moving around.

Paul Rich:

You may not want to see it.

Rachel Hopkin:

No, it's great. It's quite small isn't it? It's about the size of a head really, well, half a head. A child's head.

Paul Rich:

But I really thought I'd done something.

Rachel Hopkin:

I think you did something too, so tell me now, looking back a couple of decades on, what do you see that's wrong with the basket?

Paul Rich:

See, I didn't have enough ribs in it and it's made a whole lot like they made them years ago to use.

Rachel Hopkin:

But it's still a functional basket. It's a bit uneven but it'll do the job. I like it. I like rough.

Paul Rich:

You see, I've got my grandpa's old basket over there. You see how rough it is. He had to walk six or eight miles to the store on Dog Creek and the guy would lay them down on the floor and he'd stand on them and if they wouldn't hold them, he wouldn't buy them. But it was back when my mother was a growing up, you know.

Rachel Hopkin:

But you didn't learn from your family? You didn't learn from your mum?

Paul Rich:

No. I didn't even know mum had made 'em until two years after I got to make 'em, you know.

Rachel Hopkin:

It's funny, I wonder if you had some kind of an unconscious, historic...I don't know, it seems strange that you were attracted to basket making when there was a tradition in your family even though you didn't know about it

Paul Rich

Well I believe it kind of runs in the family anyhow.

SEGUE

Vinnie Rich:

I'm Vinnie Rich

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Vinnie is Paul's wife and she learnt to make baskets about five years ago from Paul.

Vinnie Rich

The advantage that I had with my husband was, when he went to learn, he had to go up and watch him make it and he'd come back and he'd try to do it, where he sat side by side with me and showed me each step that it took to make a basket and we sit out here in the wintertime, we work on baskets thing and it's the most calming thing, I think, that there is that you can sit down and have time to work on a basket and make your own design and everything.

Rachel Hopkin:

How long have you two been married?

Vinnie Rich:

43 years.

Rachel Hopkin:

43 years. So this is... that must be really nice to have something new that you're doing together after...

Vinnie Rich:

Yes it is and one thing we like to do is diversify. We like to make different styles of baskets where the traditional baskets are the egg baskets.

SEGUE

Paul Rich

I've got a lot of pictures of baskets that I've made in that book if you want to go and look at them.

FX of Rachel going to get book

Rachel Hopkin:

Okay, so I'm looking at a photo album which shows...gosh, that's a very elaborate one.

Paul Rich:

Yeah

Rachel Hopkin:

I'm looking at a photo of Paul with a basket that's kind of opening out like flower petals.

Paul Rich:

That's a scallop basket. This is called a moses.

Rachel Hopkin:

Oh and this is for putting a child in, is it?

Paul Rich:

Uh huh. This is a big picnic basket. That's what they call a key basket with a lid.

Rachel Hopkin:

How many baskets do you think you've made?

Paul Rich:

I don't know. I wish I'd of kept count. It's been a lot of them.

Rachel Hopkin:

What's this one?

Paul Rich:

That's what they call a gizzard basket or some people calls them a heiney basket.

Rachel Hopkin:

Honey?

Paul Rich

Heiney [laughing]

Rachel Hopkin:

What's heiney?

Tim Brewster:

A butt basket

Paul Rich:

A butt basket.

Tim Brewster:

It's got that shape to it.

[All laughing]

Rachel Hopkin:

Yeah, yeah it does have that shape, yeah.

Paul Rich:

Now a lot of people will want me to teach them but they want you to get it in this shape and then they just want to weave it.

Rachel Hopkin:

Oh, so they want you to put the frame with all the ribs of the frame, so they just get the easy bit, the decorative bit.

Paul Rich:

But if you learn it all, you've got to go to the woods and cut the timber and bust it out and make your splits. Now I taught Tim all of that.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

The Tim that he's talking about is Tim Brewster.

Tim Brewster:

It was kind of like a little community yard sale, he was setting up and demonstrating and I went to get me a drink and I seen him working over there and I just stopped to watch him and it was really amazing what he was doing.

Paul Rich:

I asked him would he be interested in learning and he - 'yeah'.

Tim Brewster:

And this was in July and I kind of just put it off and in December, I told my wife "I should have taken him up on that offer and made some baskets for Christmas for people" and thought that that offer would never come again and it was, I believe, January. He called me, me not even expecting it, and wanted to know if I was still interested and that's when we started working together

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

That was five years ago. Tim became Paul's apprentice under a scheme run by the Kentucky Folklife program – its one of the ways that that organisation helps to sustain local folk traditions.

Paul Rich:

He caught on as quick as anyone I ever seen in my life.

Rachel Hopkin:

And so how did it work, how did you go about learning?

Tim Brewster:

Er, it's just hands on, spending time with each other. I couldn't have picked it up if I hadn't of watched him. Learning to cut a tree? Anyone can cut a tree but picking out what tree you want to cut. And finding the timber is one of the hardest parts. Not every tree will work – and when I say work, I mean rive to where you can make splits to weave with. About any of them you can make framing out, the ribs

and the hoop and the handle. But one out of 15, 1 out of 10 will actually rive to where you can make splits.

Paul Rich:

It's hard to find it around here anymore. It's got so much brass in it. If you don't get every bit of that out when you go to bend it, it'll just break. Like – see it's got to be real good timber to come over real sharp on those little bitty rims there, or it'll just break.

Rachel Hopkin:

Right, so it's bent right back on itself practically. So you're looking, does it have to have a certain, is it moisture that it has to have in it?

Paul Rich:

You work it green.

Rachel Hopkin:

Right.

Tim Brewster:

And we've made several trips to different farms looking for timber and sometimes we don't cut no trees and sometimes we might cut one or, the most we've ever cut is five or six.

Paul Rich:

And see, here's where I'm with a froe and busting it out. And here's where I'm riving it.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT:

Tim explained to me how one works with the tree in order to get the basketmaking material

Tim Brewster:

After you cut your tree down you'll split it usually into quarters and you'll divide the quarters into eighths and you take a knife and you peel the bark off of one side. And when you do that, you have a semi wedge shaped piece of wood and the growth rings are running parallel to each other and you'll start in the centre of the eighth of a piece of wood, or sometimes a sixteenth, depends on how big the tree is and you'll split it right down the centre every time in that growth ring. And ultimately you're trying to get it down to something about as thick as a piece of newspaper if you can get it that far.

Rachel Hopkin:

And I take it, it kind of splits naturally where the rings are, you hope.

Tim Brewster:

Yeah, that's what you're hoping for.

Paul Rich:

It don't do it every time.

Tim Brewster:

And Paul was talking about the brass earlier and I don't know what it is in the tree but it'll be a darker colour, just about the colour of brass and actually when it bends it'll break. I don't know what causes it or what the term for it is, that's what he was talking about brass a while ago.

Rachel Hopkin:

Okay, got it.

Paul Rich:

[FX of wood scraping] There's some right there.

Rachel Hopkin:

Oh so when it's that kind of orangey colour, it'll split when you try and bend it.

Paul Rich:

It'll just break

Rachel Hopkin:

So how do you feel when you've gone to all that trouble to chop down a tree and find it like that?

Tim Brewster:

You get that down in your gut feeling. You know, sometimes you drive a long way, you know, and you'll walk over a farm for an hour or two and you'll finally find a tree that you're happy with and you'll cut it and bring it back home and you know, you done gone a half a day on this tree. Then you bust it and a lot of times when you're busting it you can tell whether it's going to work or not. A lot of times we've split one and that's as far as we went. Knowed it wouldn't work.

Rachel Hopkin:

Damn [laughing]

Tim Brewster:

Yeah, that's sometimes one of the nicer things you'll hear.

MUSIC:

I'll see you in my dreams

Dips under

Charles Long:

They wouldn't teach you how to make baskets.

Charlene Long:

You were only taught if you were a member of the family.

Charles Long:

Because the more baskets that were out there, the less chance they had of selling their baskets.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Charles and Charlene Long were the next people I went to visit in order to find out about the rich heritage of basket making in the south Central region of Kentucky which is the subject of this program that you're listening to on WKU public radio. I'm Rachel Hopkin and unlike the other basket makers I met, Charles and Charlene don't have to worry about finding the right and increasingly rare kind of white oak tree, because the baskets they make are formed of willow and honeysuckle. This is another local traditional type of basketry and it was what was passed down through Charles' family.

Charles Long:

It was all really on my mother's side. Her family made baskets.

Rachel Hopkin:

And she never talked about why she chose willow and honeysuckle and not white oak?

Charlene Long

I took it that it was just what her mother, that's all they made and I guess it was what they learned.

Charles Long:

Then, maybe, material.

Charlene Long:

I would think that it was easier for them to obtain it because if it grew beside the creek or river banks they could get it. If anybody, years ago, if they had willow or most people even now, if they've got willow on their land, they don't like it, they want it gone. And I'd say years ago, the really probably the availability of being able to get the willow and the honeysuckle was a whole lot easier than getting white oak. If you didn't own property, you'd have to get trees from somebody that did and white oak is a tree that not a lot of people wants to give to you.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT:

Charlene Long was wearing a little basket necklace the day I met her. She's passionate about baskets but it took her some time to master the craft after she and Charles married.

Charlene Long:

I tried to learn. Charlie's mother. She just give up on me. She told me I'd never be a basket maker. I end up throwing the bottom away and...

Rachel Hopkin

Did it cause any friction in your relationship?

[Both laughing]

Charlene Long:

Well no, not like that. She just said “you’ll never be a basket maker”. I wish she could see some of my baskets now. And I mean, I love baskets and I’d sit and watch her when she come and stayed with us at times, I’d come out and I’d help her get her material to make them. And I never forget one time, one of the young men that knew us, we was up here by the neighbour’s, round by his pond getting willows and I had a whole armload of the willow limbs and he said “Charlene. I know those boys are mean but they’re not that mean that you need that many switches” [laughing]. And we laughed and laughed about that. And I said “these is not switches. These is to make baskets”. So I’d come in and I’d help her.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Charlene eventually learnt through a combination of watching her mother in law and working with Charles, who has been making baskets since he was a child

Charles Long:

When I grew up, baskets were not for decoration. There wasn’t any Walmart plastic bags or paper bags. Baskets were made to use. They had to have something to package, carry, store. It was necessity. Baskets came about because of necessity. Most of your baskets now are made for decorations. You get a better basket now than you did back then because if a guy was going to carry corn or potatoes or something in his basket, it didn’t make no difference if it was pretty or not, it had to be sturdy. It had to last. But the people today, when they buy one, they want it to be the best you can do and they want it to shine.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Showing off the shining baskets of this area is what the Mammoth Cave Basket Makers Guild (which formed a few years back) and the Basket-making contest at the Hart County Fair are all about.

Charles Long:

Dr Middleton is the driving force on the basket contest, Hart county, and the guild because there were people making baskets and selling them before they started a guild but he brought them all together as a basket making group.

SEGUE

James Middleton:

Practising medicine in Hart County. This is a poor rural area and I have a lot trouble sometimes with getting my people to take care of themselves and the reason people don’t take care of themselves, many reasons, but one of the reasons is a lack of self respect and a lack of self value. And I was thinking about how can I stimulate my people to better take care of themselves, and I always try to instil pride in them because I think they have a lot to be proudful of. And our culture of baskets, I think, is a beautiful thing and I don’t think these people have ever realised what fabulous artists, what fabulous

traditions they have, so we took on the basket as kind of a project to help build an understanding of what they were and what they have, and we started sponsoring a basket contest at our county fair and trying to help them promote their baskets and in so doing, instill a pride in them. And that's kind of where it got started.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

The basket contest got underway in the early 90s

James Middleton:

I ran ads in the paper. I think we got a radio thing on so we tried to beat the bushes a little bit and I quite frankly got on the phone and called a lot of these people – I knew a lot of them and I called and told them to come in. And we put some money into the thing. We put some prize money. We had the biggest prize in the fair was our basket contest so it was kind of a combination of those that got people to come to it.

SEGUE

Charlene Long:

Dr Middleton called and he said “Charlene, we’d like for you to enter a basket” and it was about 3 or 4 days ‘til the basket contest and I said, “I don’t have any made up” and he said “well can you borrow any that you’ve made?”. So I borrowed some and took them and entered them in the fair [laughing] in the non white oak basket category that year and I took first, second and third prize and that really shocked me. Well Dr Middleton told me, cos he wanted to buy those and I said “you can’t do it because they’re not for sale. They belong to other people.” [more laughing]. And it’s something just to see what’s going to come in and I haven’t been to the State Fair one but they tell me that it’s never nothing like as many baskets entered there as it is at Hart County and we’ve had as many as probably 50 or 60 a few times. I tell everybody that loves baskets “if you want to see a basket contest go to Hart County.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

The Hart County Basket Contest has become a highlight of the basket makers’ year around here. I asked Paul Rich and Tim Brewster if there was much rivalry between them all, or maybe just some friendly rivalry.

Paul Rich:

We’re all friends.

Tim Brewster:

We’re all friends but there’s rivalry the day of the fair.

Rachel Hopkin:

How does that work?

Tim Brewster:

It's real secretive til check in time and then's when the arsenals come out.

Paul Rich:

Yeah, you don't know what each others made or nothing.

Tim Brewster:

Everybody's looking for that purple ribbon that says "best of show"

Paul Rich:

I'll be back in just a minute.

Rachel Hopkin:

Have you competed yet?

Tim Brewster:

Yes

Rachel Hopkin:

How did you do?

Tim Brewster:

I've been everywhere from first place to third place but still not best of show.

Rachel Hopkin:

Well, that's pretty good though.

Tim Brewster:

Uh huh. I had a good teacher

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Many of the winning baskets from the fair are now on display in Dr Middleton's office including a fabulous lidded pie basket which won best of show for Boneda and Michael Childress. That was back in the mid 90s but haven't managed to scoop the top prize again so far.

Michael Childress:

You got a lot of retired people and they can spend the whole year just making up one or two baskets for the show. I work everyday. And sometimes 8 to 10 hours a day I'm gone and I can't just do... you know, if I wanted to just take the time, they wouldn't even want to see what I could bring up there because it could knock the show out.

Leona Waddell:

I've won first place 14 years and best of show several years.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

This is Leona Waddell.

Leona Waddell:

See the best of show, they have kind of to divide that up between the basket makers because if one gets it every year, then the others, you know, don't like that, so they try to let everybody get in on that

Rachel Hopkin

Are you happy that you've been upholding a Kentucky tradition of basket making

Leona Waddell:

Do what now?

Rachel Hopkin

Do you feel like you've been one of the tradition bearers?

Leona Waddell:

Yeah I think I would come up with the best. I might not be the best but I'd come up with them.

Rachel Hopkin:

How many children do you have?

Leona Waddell:

Four

Rachel Hopkin:

Do any of them make baskets?

Leona Waddell:

Well Jerry, my oldest daughter, she's made two. Jerry made this one. That's the first one she made.

Rachel Hopkin:

Oh. Wow.

Leona Waddell

When she made that, she said that's be the nearest thing to cause you to lose your religion [laughing], well, you know, she might say bad words or something, get mad, you know, because she couldn't get it to work right or something.

Rachel Hopkin:

Ok. Ok. So it drove her to distraction.

Leona Waddell:

And she's got one started in there in the deep freeze but they don't...they say that haven't got the patience to do it, you know, and everybody says that they hate for it to go out because there's getting fewer all the time that makes them.

SEGUE

Michael Childress:

I've got a son, Brandon., and he's making them and actually, he's going on the 9th generation in our family that's made baskets, but he don't really want to do it and a lot of these young ones they don't understand it and never will. That's the thing, and it's been passed down so long in our family, you know, but crafts, like basket stuff, it's a dying art and it's something that don't need to go out because, you know, it's part of our heritage and it needs to stay with us no matter what. But times have changed. It's really changed a lot.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Michael Childress. But all is not yet lost. I did come across some young basket makers including when I was at the home of Charles and Charlene Long.

Charlene Long:

Uh oh, here comes the grand kids. [door opening] Come on in.

Rachel Hopkin:

I'm talking to some very important people about basket making.

Charlene Long:

Here's a basket maker right there.

Rachel Hopkin:

Are you a basket maker?

Charlene Long:

He won first second and third prize at the Hart County fair this last year in the youth thing.

Rachel Hopkin:

You're kidding me. What's your name?

Brandon Long:

Brandon

Charlene Long:

When he was little, before he was this big, "he'd say give me some sticks, mamaw, I want to make a basket".

Charles Long:
He likes that prize money too.

Charlene Long:
He does. It just thrills him to death to earn the prize money.

Rachel Hopkin:
I'll bet, because it's not bad the prize money, is it?

Charlene Long:
No. He walked away with \$175 this last year.

Rachel Hopkin:
Sheesh. That's great.

Charlene Long:
He got \$100 for the first prize, 50 for the second and 25 for the third and he was really tickled with it.

Rachel Hopkin:
How long have you been making baskets for?

Brandon Long:
Two years

Charlene Long:
Brandon was born in 2000 and I think in 2001 we took several, the year that we had several baskets made up and went to the Folklife Fest. We took them and we had them in the backseat of the car and he reached out his car seat and reached over and got him a basket and he was about a year old and he'd say "mine". He kept it. He's still got it. It looks as good today as it did then. He loves a basket and ever since he's really been big enough to talk, he's said he wanted to make a basket.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Tim Brewster also has some good news on the continuing tradition front.

Tim Brewster
My youngest daughter, Cecily, she's 10. She's took a real, I don't know whether it'd be a strong interest in basket making but she wants to help and she wants to do some of the whittling but you're using pretty sharp instruments and I won't hardly let her do that yet but she will weave.

Rachel Hopkin:
This is great because this is how the tradition is still getting passed on.

Tim Brewster:

And I hope she keeps it up.

FX

Noise of Cecily entering the room.

Rachel Hopkin:
Cecily, is that right?

Cecily Brewster:
Hi

Rachel Hopkin:
So Cecily, are you interested in your dad's basketmaking?

Cecily Brewster:
Yes

Rachel Hopkin:
When did you get interested and why?

Cecily Brewster:
I got interested when I was 9 and I liked how he made them because I used to play with them and when I did I could carry stuff in them and I got this one basket he made that I'd carry my kittens in, so that's what got me interested in making baskets and I made my first basket.

Tim Brewster:
I was really proud of her. And she actually entered it in last year's Hart County fair and what was it? First place? She won her a first place ribbon in the beginners' category.

Rachel Hopkin:
Oh that's so cool. Were you pleased?

Cecily Brewster:
Yes.

Rachel Hopkin:
And what have you done with the basket?

Cecily Brewster:
I gave it to Dr Middleton to keep in his office.

Rachel Hopkin:

So do you plan on keeping up basket making?

Cecily Brewster:
Yes.

Rachel Hopkin:
What is it about it that you really like?

Cecily Brewster:
I just like the way they look and how they are and I like taking the time in making them because it's really something you have to focus on instead of just rushing through it.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Out to the mouths of babes, as they say. So there are exceptions but in general there don't seem to be that many young people interested in basket-making. I asked Dr Middleton if this was something he worried about.

Dr Middleton:
I can't worry about it but I hate to see it. I wish we could promote it and as best we try, it is a dying art. It's getting harder to find the materials to make it and our lifestyles are not such that people want to spend the time it takes to make a basket. People are not as home orientated. Basket making was a home, family thing, and that's a passing way of life too so it's kind of representative of our whole loss of our rural culture and our rural way of life that I hate to see. So I don't worry about it, I wish I could stop it, but I feel more remorse and sorrow because there was a lot of good things about that way of life.

Rachel Hopkin:
What were the best things about the basket making tradition?

Dr Middleton:
I think the family working together. I think using products of the land, and kind of living with the land, taking white oak timber and making it something that you had to use with your every day living, I think that's a beautiful thing and these people were living with the land, they weren't consuming the land. I think the beauty of it, the innate ability to create a beautiful thing like that from these people is, it's kind of part of their human nature and they've always been kind of looked on as rough country people but there was a beautiful skill that those people had.

MUSIC

Fade up on *I'll see you in my dreams*
Dips under.

RACHEL HOPKIN SCRIPT

Well, that brings to end this program about the basket making traditions of south central Kentucky. If you go online to www.wku.edu/folkstudies you can see a photographs of some of the basket-makers featured in the program, and their work. They're all taken by photographer Amanda Hardeman. You can also listen agan this program, and others related to Kentucky's folk culture, AND find various links to some basketry websites including that of the Mammoth Cave Basket Makers Guild and the Hart County Fair. I'm Rachel Hopkin and this has been a Sock Monkey production for the public radio service and the Folk Studies and Anthropology Department of Western Kentucky University. Thanks for listening.

Music Ends

Programme ends – Duration 59'