



**Tom Colvin**

***Palmetto and Cane Baskets/Boat Builder***

Tom Colvin acquired his skills as a Choctaw basket weaver from Sanville and Mathilde Johnson, a childless couple, and the last surviving Choctaw in the Lacombe area. Colvin, who is not Native American, met the couple in 1963 while they were selling their baskets along the highway. Mathilde agreed to give Colvin a chance to learn the intricate weaves she knew would otherwise die out with her and her husband. First, Mathilde taught Colvin how to gather the raw materials used in basket weaving; then, she taught him how to strip the palmetto leaves; and finally, he learned the intricate weaves of the traditional baskets.

Over the years, Colvin has completed most of the traditional baskets: the egg basket, the large pack basket, the heart and elbow baskets, sifters, fruit baskets, pocket baskets, sewing baskets, button baskets, match baskets, and lidded lunch baskets. Occasionally, Colvin tackles the most difficult weave of all, the double weave, which holds valuables. Colvin was also taught the art of mixing natural dyes from the yellow dock plant, red oak bark, black gum bark, mulberry, and walnuts, although he now uses a commercial dye for his baskets.

In addition to making beautiful cane and palmetto baskets, Colvin has become an accomplished cabinetmaker and has learned the rare art of carving dugout cypress canoes. Tom Colvin continues many of the traditions of the Choctaw tribe by teaching his craft to others and is especially grateful for the opportunity to meet and teach a young member of the Jena band of Choctaw, George Allen. "I was so glad to teach him because what I learned from the Choctaw, I was able to give back to the Choctaw," says Colvin, who also sells his baskets at regional craft fairs. He says of his craft, "I enjoy making baskets, because I know whatever my fingers are doing, that's what the old people's fingers were doing in the years past."

Though both Sanville and Mathilde Johnson are no longer living, Colvin maintains their tradition through his work, as well as through his publication *Cane and Palmetto Basketry of the Choctaw of St. Tammany Parish* which is a treasure of previously unrecorded Choctaw lore. Colvin currently lives in Franklinton, Louisiana where he crafts his boats and baskets. Mr. Colvin was inducted into the Hall of Master Folk Artists in July 2003.

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