



Marie Billiot Dean

Palmetto Basket Maker

Marie Billiot Dean was a member of the Houma Indian tribe, and lived in Dulac, Louisiana. She was known for her skill in weaving palmetto into hats, baskets, mats, fans, and whisks. She also weaved hats of timothy grass and made dolls of cured Spanish moss. The Catholic, French-speaking Houma Indians are the largest group of Indians in Louisiana. Living mainly in Louisiana's coastal parishes of Terrebonne, Lafourche, Plaquemine, and Jefferson, many maintain traditional lifestyles based on hunting, fishing, and trapping. Indian and French traditions are especially strong in the Dulac area of Terrebonne Parish.

Like most Houma Indians of her generation, Mrs. Dean primarily spoke French. Her twin brother Lawrence Billiot, now deceased, was a boat builder. Her family also included a net maker and a carver of blowguns. She learned palmetto weaving and doll making from her mother. Making her baskets, hats, and dolls is slow work because the moss and palmetto must first be gathered and cured. The palmetto palm grows especially abundant in marshy regions near bayous and swamps. It is traditionally used by the Houmas for building huts as well as for crafts. Mrs. Dean preferred palmetto growing in the wild because the plants grow much bigger. She collected only the heart of the palmetto plant, cut it just before the plant separated into fans. Because if the fans open, the fronds are too stiff to braid.

The fronds are left to dry in the sun from ten days to several weeks. When she was ready to begin a piece, she tore the individual fronds into 1/4 inch strands and began to plait them into strips that could be as long as sixty feet. The number of strands in a braid ranges from three to seven, depending on the style and design of the piece. Mrs. Dean then coiled the braid into a basket or hat, overlapped the edges and sewed the rows together with narrow, colored ribbon. Palmetto baskets and hats are water resistant and very durable.

To make dolls, Mrs. Dean collected Spanish moss from trees near her home, hosed it down in her back yard, and then hung it on a clothesline to dry. When the gray outer coat drops off, the cured black core is ready to fashion into dolls. Only a few strands of moss at a time are used to form and shape the dolls. Marie Dean's dolls sport button

eyes, pigtails tied with cheerful yarn or ribbon, and are usually dressed in palmetto skirts. She also made dolls holding moss infants in their arms as well as Christmas tree ornaments of palmetto.

Mrs. Dean participated in a number of school programs, where she taught students about her culture as well as the basics of palmetto weaving. Roy Parfait, a wood carver, often accompanied her. She participated in numerous museum programs and festivals, including the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival, the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, and the Native Crafts Festival. Mrs. Dean died September 23, 2010.

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