

Harris Family



Split White Oak Basket Maker

The craft of split oak basketry is in at least its fourth generation in the Harris family. Edward Harris Sr. of Washington, Louisiana, learned this art when he was about seven years old from his grandfather, Robert Robinson. Mr. Harris is not sure from whom his grandfather learned the craft of weaving, but he believes that his father taught him. Carrying on the tradition, Mr. Harris has taught his wife, his sons, a son-in-law, his daughters, and at least twenty-seven

grandchildren split oak basketry. Some just weave; some just market, but most family members are directly involved in both the artistic and commercial aspects of their craft.

As a farmer who worked hard to support his large family on his forty-seven acres of land, Edward Harris had little time to spend on basket making. Occasionally, when he or one of the children ran a little short of cash, Harris would make a few baskets to sell. When he retired, Mr. Harris became heavily involved with his craft. As he explains, "This is something that is hard to learn, but easy after you learn it." Harris begins the life of a basket by searching for a good white oak tree that will split into long, narrow strips. In order to find a strippable tree, Harris uses a wedge and a mallet made from white oak. If the tree strips easily, he cuts it down. The next step is to split the tree into halves, then quarters, and finally, using a pocketknife the quarters are cut into strips, which are one half to one inch in width. These still-green strips are woven into baskets of every imaginable shape and size. These baskets are beautiful, as well as functional, and are practically indestructible. Many members of the family have contributed ideas for basket forms. They create egg, mail, bushel, Easter, bread, laundry, sewing, and even made-to-order baskets.

Mr. Gilbert Harris now represents his family at various festivals. The family has participated at the Natchitoches NSU-Folk Festival, Plantation Day at Magnolia Mound in Baton Rouge, in Beaumont at the Gladys City Spindletop Boom Days, and at other local festivals. In 1992, Edward Harris, Sr. was inducted into the Hall of Master Folk Artists at NSU.

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