

## Harris, Edward Sr.



### **Split White Oak Basket Maker**

Ask almost any person in South Louisiana or East Texas who owns a handcrafted white oak basket who wove that particular piece and his or her answer will probably be "One of the members of the Harris family." Yes, the Harris family - a family whose lives are as tightly interwoven by the practice of its traditional craft as are the strips of its beautiful and functional baskets.

The craft of split oak basketry is in at least its fourth generation, in the Harris family. According to patriarch Edward Harris Sr. of Washington, Louisiana, he learned this art when he was about seven years old from his grandfather, Robert Robinson (sometimes spelled Robertson). Mr. Harris notes that he's not sure who his grandfather learned weaving from, 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 very hard to support his large family on his forty-seven acres of land, Edward Harris had little time to spend basket making. Occasionally, when he or one of the children ran a little short of cash, Harris would make a few baskets to sell. Upon his retirement, however, Mr. Harris became completely 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. He gives a tree "one good lick" with the tools that he has carved and created from white oak. If the tree strips easily, he cuts it down. The next step is to split the tree into halves, then quarters. Finally, using a pocket knife, Harris splits it into one half to one inch wide strips. 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. Since so many members of the family contribute ideas, the Harris's have created egg baskets, mail baskets, bushel baskets, Easter baskets, bread baskets, laundry, sewing baskets, and even made-to-order baskets.

Over the last twenty years, the Harris family has participated in and demonstrated their craft at the Natchitoches Folk Festival. Edward and his family have also participated in 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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