

## Kerry, Kenneth



### Split White Oak Basketmaker

Mr. Kenneth Kerry was born in 1943, in Derry, Louisiana. He learned to make white oak baskets by watching and imitating his father, Thad Kerry. His son, Ken, Jr., is presently learning the same techniques for constructing baskets, turkey calls, and knives from his father.

When asked about the process of making split oak baskets, Ken said that the most important thing was to pick the right tree. Trees should be free of knots so they will split straight, and they should be about ten to fifteen years old. Trees should be cut in the summer because they have more sap in them, which makes the wood more flexible and easier to work with and it does not dry out as fast. A tree should be cut no more than a week before basket construction is to begin. If cut earlier, the wood will dry out and it won't split properly.

Mr. Kerry used a knife and his bare hands to split off wooden strips from the tree. The wooden strips are then cut into different sizes, according to their place in the basket. Rib strips, which are strips that form the skeleton of the basket, must be wider than the strips that are used for weaving. Every piece of oak used in the basket must be dressed and kept wet and pliable for easier weaving. This constant need for pliability often causes delays in the weaving process. After weaving each damp strip and packing it down, Mr. Kerry had to wait for it to dry before he could apply the next strip. This delay is necessary if the sides of the basket are to be tight and free from gaps, a medium sized basket takes at least twelve hours to make.

Mr. Kerry had problems finding suitable oak trees and attributed the shortage to the clear cutting of forests by the timber companies, the logging tractors bruise the grain of white oak saplings, and they do not split straight.

Mr. Thad Kerry passed away in 1998, but his son Kenneth Kerry and his grandson Ken, Jr. carry on the tradition of basket making. Three generations of this remarkable family have participated in the Natchitoches/NSU Folk Festival and the Cloutierville Heritage Festival.

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