

Robertson, Geraldine



Corn Shuck Doll Maker and Basket Weaver

“Busting out” is the beginning of the process that Geraldine Robertson uses to make her baskets, corn shuck dolls, and chair bottoms. “It’s got to be in you to bust a tree,” she explains to visitors. Robertson is proud of her skill and strength when it comes to splitting the white oak she uses for her baskets. She tells how her children come out and check on her progress. “Mama, how’s it doing?” they ask. If it is going well, they are happy and return indoors to play. If it’s not, they ask her to stop; she doesn’t. If she comes to a particularly difficult piece, her children help.

Robertson is pleased to share her craft with anyone interested in learning it. She learned to make corn shuck dolls from her mother and later learned the skills necessary to weave beautiful traditional white oak baskets split by hand from her husband, a craftsman who people used to spend all afternoon with as he caned chairs. Robertson has kept on with the tradition, demonstrating how she splits a piece into a thin strip of wood that’s pliable enough to be woven.

The corn shuck dolls that Robertson makes range from four to eight inches tall. She uses yarn to make their hair and generally dresses them in calico gowns. She sticks to the traditional methods of making corn shuck dolls using corn shucks to shape the heads rather than styrofoam balls. She not only makes individual dolls, but also makes series of dolls to create scenarios such as nativity scenes. These scenarios are created with modern materials like straw, flowers, yarn, and colored ribbon. According to the Folklife Guide, “Corn shuck and apple dolls were widespread in rural areas of the United States and seem to spring from independent invention everywhere as well as from the influence of national craft magazines.”

In the past seven or eight years, Robertson has taken up making pine straw baskets in the evening. Her goal is to make the tiniest pine straw basket she can imagine--one needle thick and maybe only half an inch tall. In the meantime, she enjoys passing on her skills to people of all ages and teaches basket making to groups of school children and senior citizens. She was inducted into the Hall of Master Folk Artists in 2001.