



Broom Maker

Mr. Tippet was born in 1915 in Melugin, in southwest Missouri near the Ozark Mountains. In 1925, he moved to Lottie, Louisiana, with his father, a railroad maintenance foreman. Later, Mr. Tippet and his brother worked for Union Pacific Railroad as maintenance foremen.

Mr. Tippet now lives in Port Allen, Louisiana, makes handmade brooms of red straw that he grows and harvests himself. Mr. learned broom making from a neighbor, Hewitt Bonaventure. Mr. Bonaventure was originally from False River, where people raised broom straw and had been making their own brooms for many years. His wife, a Louisiana native, remembers her Cajun grandparents growing their own broom straw and making brooms in the Little Teche area, tying them with baling wire, and then covering the wire with string. She explains, "These older brooms were round, and they don't cover much territory."

Using an old broom press that he salvaged and restored, Mr. Tippet binds the straw to a wooden handle, and stitches the straw by hand. Some of his pieces have wooden broomsticks, and others use the bundled, full stalks of the broom straw as handles. Mr. Tippet says, "I have always liked old timey things like dipper gourds, and I raise gourds as well as red broom straw near my house."

Local stores do not carry red broom straw seed. The seeds are saved and handed down from one family to the next. Mr. Bonaventure gave a few seeds to Bill Tippet to plant. From this first crop, he saved more seeds and harvested enough straw to make a few brooms. Learning to bind the brooms tightly was the most difficult part, he says. Mr. Bonaventure showed him how to use a rope thrown over a tree branch, and a small stick tied to the rope to tighten the binding. Mr. Tippet explains, "You put the stick on the end of the rope and you wrap that rope around the broom, then you sit on it and pull it tight and just keep working, pull it back and forth, putting tension on the rope to get the broom tight. When the broom is tight enough, a sharpened broomstick is driven into the broom." Mr. Bill uses old broom handles that he has sanded down, stained and varnished. Finally, he puts a hook in each broom handle.

Some of his brooms are the old-fashioned round style, but most are fanned out. Each broom has three layers of straw, and Mr. Tippet uses three templates he made himself to trim the layers to the proper length. The brooms are hand-sewn together. He first used two long needles designed for mattresses. When one broke, he asked a local business to design a pliable needle that would not break easily. They made four needles from an old stainless steel rod, which he uses today. According to Mr. Tippet, it does not take long to sew a broom. He became more knowledgeable about his skill during a visit with Silver Dollar City, Missouri, broom makers. They taught him tricks like how to hide the end of the string.

Mr. Tippet is a member of the Louisiana Crafts Program. He has attended various festivals around the state such as, the Native Crafts Festival from 1986 through 1994, The Magnolia Mound in 1991, and the Natchitoches-NSU Folk Festival.