

Willow Bark Basketry

By Jennifer Heller

Willow bark weavers are few and far between. At least that's the conclusion I've come to in twenty-three years of participating in shows and exhibitions. In this period of time I have consistently been informed that few people have seen baskets woven of this fiber. Based on this experience and having found scarce reference to willow bark in basketry books, I've come to find that it is not a widely used basket making material. This is with the exception of the Native American weavers who used it to inject colorful design elements into their work.

Discovered serendipitously while clearing overgrown farmland in the eastern part of Kentucky, willow bark has been my exclusive fiber focus. It's a beautiful material, strong and supple, with a rich honey-brown color and warm, organic essence. When woven finely it is almost cloth-like, exhibiting an undulating, soft bag quality.

When the sap is up and the days are hot I harvest black willow bark from the bottomland along the Kentucky River. Scouting the banks from a boat on the water, I locate two to three trees to satisfy my fiber needs for the year. Looking for trees close to twelve inches in diameter at the base and selecting ones with long straight trunks, free of lower branches and small sprouts, I choose willows far enough from the water's edge so they may be worked from all sides.



In the photo above, three of Jennifer Heller's many designs are shown. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Heller.

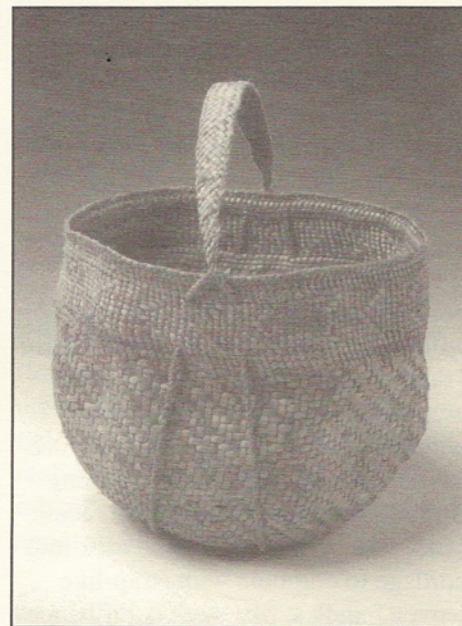
The tree is a living entity and it is important to take it with consciousness. My ritual is to say a small prayer asking it to release it's bark to me, sending it's spirit along to radiate from the woven vessel it becomes. I experience the mixed emotions of the joy of a fresh bark harvest and the sadness of taking the willow from the peaceful riverbank in which it gracefully grows.

Replanting is part of the harvesting process. Willows contain a natural rooting hormone that assists it's propagation, so taking sprouts from harvested trees and setting them into the moist, sandy soil ensures a future tree population. Willows are fast growing and short lived trees, often invasive under the right circumstances. Replanting is probably not necessary, but I believe it is the responsible and respectful thing to do.

To begin removing the bark, the trunk is scored around the base with an ax, allowing entry for a drawknife to begin the prying up of each three to four inch wide strip. Once the cambium layer of bark is loosened, the strip is grabbed by hand and pulled upward until breaking free at the top of the tree. The job of pulling the thirty to forty foot lengths of bark is a vigorous one, demanding much effort and resulting in sore muscles for several days afterwards.

After the stripping job is completed, the more time-consuming process of separating inner bark from outer is begun. This must be done immediately for best results and is accomplished by bending the supple inner bark until the dry outer layer cracks loose. This is peeled away by hand and knife until the entire length of inner bark is revealed. It is then loosely coiled and placed in the sun for several days to dry.

To prepare bark for



Pictured above is another willow bark basket design by Jennifer Heller. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Heller.

weaving, the dried roll is soaked in water until rehydrated. It is then cut with a sharp knife into strips of the desired width and length. These strips are further cleaned of excess bark layers with a knife and soaked again before beginning a basket.

Weaving in the early years simply for the joy of producing simple, functional baskets, my first woven vessels were very crude and primitive containers. Self-taught, I rarely consulted books and never took a workshop. As a result, my work developed slowly by trial and error, but with an individual identity. Over the years I have refined my skills and (continued to page 10)

Jennifer Heller is a studio artist in Berea, Kentucky who has been professionally weaving willow bark baskets and teaching workshops since 1980. She exhibits nationally and is a recipient of several Kentucky Arts Council grants, one of which sent her to Ecuador for a cultural exchange residency in 1999.

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(continued from page 8)

work now with a great deal more attention to design and technique.

Presently, I design by sketching out ideas, using graph paper when needed to calculate patterns. I don't use molds, and the baskets often turn out a bit differently than envisioned, but the excitement of an unplanned execution is stimulating and presses me to become open and flexible, like the willow, and assist it in taking its form. I do a lot of twining, utilizing twill twine and wrap twine techniques within a plain twined field to produce subtle patterning. I also enjoy doing fine twill and plain plaiting. In recent years I've been spinning the bark into cordage to combine with strap-like woven handles. My work is influenced by fine basketry from around the world and most profoundly by Native American basketry. From never consulting books in the beginning to now collecting them, my library is very important to me for inspiration and technique.

I'm not a production weaver, the work is too physically taxing to maintain a full time pace. About twenty-five hours a week can produce an average of two baskets a month. I sell mostly out of galleries and am recently focusing on applying to national fine craft and museum shows.

Early in my basket-making career I experimented with a variety of fibers gathered from my vicinity, but the willow most strongly called to me. I love the search for it along the banks of a quiet river in the cool morning of a summer day, and the fragrance of a freshly pulled strip. After the many years of working with this bark, from the harvest to the processing and final weaving of it, we have developed an intimate connection. As I manipulate it to speak through me, our spirits, essentially, become interwoven and expressed. Together our essences are contained within the woven walls to connect with the one who is drawn to take a willow bark basket into their heart, and perhaps their home.

Ply-Splitting

(continued from page 9)

beautiful miniature cotton and linen baskets, and some charming goddess figures.

Oh, it was so inspiring! Jim gave me one of his baskets, and when I returned home, I immediately started working on some of my own.

Instead of buying new materials while learning, I decided to use up some of rug wool that had been on my studio shelves for years. Everyone who saw my wool baskets immediately turned them upside down and put them on their heads, so then I also started making ply-split hats.

In the meantime, people in England were organizing the First International Ply-Split Braiding Convention, Spliterati-01, and an accompanying exhibition, *Expanding the Girths*. I was awarded a travel grant from the Regional Arts and Culture Council in Portland, and was the only American who signed up. I'm especially grateful that I was able to attend, as my flight was on September 17, 2001, when planes were just getting back in the air after the terrorist attacks. It was a trip full of intense sadness over that destruction, and joy for being able to participate in something so creative. Photos from the exhibition and a description of my experiences at Spliterati, including workshops, are on my web site www.lindahendrickson.com.

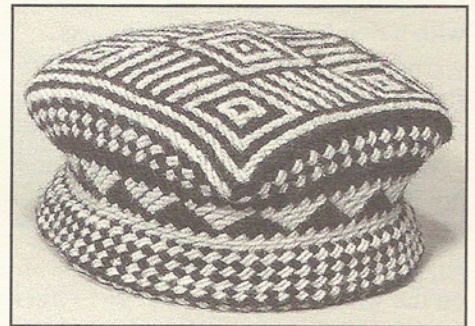
In June, I was awarded a grant from the Portland Handweavers Guild to document cordmaking for ply-splitting, something that has never been done before. During the next year, I will be making sample notebooks with cords made from many different linear elements, and experimenting with the variables mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Upcoming exhibition and workshop

Contemporary Crafts Museum and Gallery here in Portland is organizing the first American exhibition on ply-splitting as a contemporary fiber art. Artists from several countries, whose work was shown at Spliterati—including Peter Collingwood and Kay Sekimachi—have been invited, and we are putting out the call for entries.

I will be teaching a 3-day pre-conference workshop at Covergence 2004 in Denver Colorado, on 3-D ply-splitting. Information is on my website, or at the website of the Handweavers Guild of America, www.weavespindye.org.

If you have any questions about ply-splitting, please feel free to email me at linda@lindahendrickson.com. I will post updated information on my website.



Pictured above is a square basket/hat woven in wool. Ply-split structures used include plain twining, oblique twining, and two-layered oblique interlacing. Photo courtesy of Linda Hendrickson.

Mystery Person

Those eyes...that smile...the energy!
Can you guess who?

Shoe size: 7B

Hobbies: Interacting with friends and family.

Born: Midwest

Resides: Southwest

Hint: I was arrested in a Civil Rights Demonstration.

See page 12
for answer.

