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Interview with George Childress (FA 98)

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[Initials designate the voice of the speaker. They are as follows: L.P., Lyndell Payton; G.C., George Childress]

L.P. Do the hooks [fasten] to the joints there?

G.C. Yeah, right there, and you square them there, you see.

L.P. Then you can make round baskets?

G.C. You can make them any shape.

L.P. How about what kind of timber would you use?

G.C. White oak.

L.P. How about would you...? [Interrupted]

G.C. That is the shape of one there I made.

L.P. [Those little flower baskets.] Yeah. [Yes, I see.]

G.C. You can make them any kind you want to.

L.P. Does the timber have to be very big?

G.C. No, small, but you take timber something like six inches through.

L.P. You would want to have it pretty clear, wouldn't you?

G.C. Yeah, clear from knots.

L.P. What would you use to hew it down with?

G.C. Well, you would use a drawing knife or something like that. I take a knife, just my knife, and make them. You know, a pocket knife, I guess. You all ought to told [should have informed] me on that timber. You want my knife here? -

L.P. You say you can whittle them smooth?

G.C. Of course I can. Smoother you get them the prettier they are.

L.P. They had a man and his stepdaughter over there the other day demonstrating. [They said] you knowed how to make them and they give us a bunch of names, you know, to look the people up. I came over by, you know.

- G.C. My daughter's over at Cave City?
- L.P. No, over by Club Run. Your sister lived over there. She was a Cassinger.
- G.C. Oh, Dolly Cassinger. Was she telling you about me? She can make them.
- L.P. Yeah, said you probably knowed more about it than she did, so she sent me on over here.
- G.C. Ah, well, I haven't got any timber now, you know.
- L.P. Yeah. [Yes, I have noticed.] I was trying to get down on how they was made. These here ribs, you wouldn't trim them down as much as you would the little ribs?
- G.C. The little ribs was trimmed, well [they] was trimmed the same, but you see there is not as much whittling to be done on these. Those hooks has to be whittled down smooth. The smoother you get them the prettier they are.
- L.P. Yeah. [Yes, I see.] [Do] you scrape them down?
- G.C. White oak timber is about the best timber there is.
- L.P. It wouldn't work with much of anything else then, would it?
- G.C. Well, not to do any good. It could be made out of maple but it is not a good timber. It is smooth enough. You don't even have to scrape maple. You got to run those splits out and scrape them down; place a rag across your knee and scrape them down on each side.
- L.P. Yeah. [Yes, that looks interesting.]
- G.C. That is what you have got to do to them.
- L.P. What do you do? Do you put this part plumb around through here? [The splits, that is]
- G.C. Yeah, you just start here, see where my split begun. But you come around here with it. Goes over one and under one all the time.
- L.P. Just like weaving a chair bottom?
- G.C. It's like weaving a chair. I got one sitting here.
- L.P. Well, my momma, I watched her weave chair bottoms.
- G.C. Well, it's the same thing. See, you go over one and under one all the time.

L.P. Yeah [I understand.] Do you ever paint them, or just leave them in the natural finish like that?

G.C. Well, you can spray them with oak color.

L.P. Varnish or something?

G.C. Or varnish, any color you want. See, you can get regular oak to spray them with. That basket over yonder has been sprayed with oak color.

L.P. Yeah. [I thought it looked like it had been.]

G.C. Yeah, it has been sprayed.

L.P. How long would your white oak [be] to start out, about six foot tall or something like that?

G.C. Yeah, from five to six foot, about six foot if you were going to bottom that chair. That's the way it should be, about six foot long. Now five feet is a mighty pretty working timber. It is easier handled.

L.P. Yeah [Yes, I see.]

G.C. You take a piece of timber as long as you, now it would be nice to work. It has got to be bursted out with a froe, and then if you want to use a drawing knife you can. You have seen a drawing knife, haven't you?

L.P. Yeah, we have got a drawing knife, but what do you call a froe?

G.C. I know what, I will get one and bring it in here. [Goes after the froe.] Here is what the timber is ribbed down with right there.

L.P. You call that the froe?

G.C. Yes, that is the froe.

L.P. You just rip it?

G.C. Yes, you start it here with the timber and prize it either way, not letting it give one way more than it does the other way.

L.P. You hold your timber where it would be regular and come out regular.

G.C. Yeah. Do you just split it?

You must write a paper based on the interviews, or did we agree to this for the Undergrads?

Wendell Payton

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G.C. Let it down where you can run it by the grain, split it the board way first. Then you run it the grain way. When you are going the grain way you are getting it down in splits then. Fact about it [is] you rive it just like you would a board 'till you get it down to the size to make those splits and then you turn to the grain and go by the grain. I made boards and tobacco sticks and a lot of little things like this.

L.P. You never did carry off any of them and sell them back when you was young, did you? [The baskets.]

G.C. Yeah, I got out with them.

L.P. A long ways? On a wagon or something?

G.C. Well, my granddad took an old wagon frame with big spokes coming up as high as this ceiling here. A big wagon frame, see, that they took them off in. Yeah, he would go in the bluegrass country and in through there around Lexington and in through here, down around Bowling Green. Back at that time, you know...[pauses]

L.P. Yeah, they talked about the other day.

G.C. They used horses and mules, you know, and had a bunk that they slept in the wagon, you know. I have seen those wagons. Yeah, we have got up and peddled them many times. Went to Lexington, Tennessee, and...

L.P. You went with them on the trips?

G.C. No, I didn't go with those wagons back in that day, but I have in cars and trucks since then.

L.P. What did they use then? A Model A [or a] Model T car?

G.C. Yeah, if they used cars they did back then, but my dad and granddad used one of these regular road wagons. You have seen these old wagons used on the farm?

L.P. Yeah, we live on the farm. I know what you are talking about.

G.C. Like I told you, but they had a frame and it was big. You could put no telling how many baskets in it, a hundred or two bushels [baskets] and you could put those little ones, you could nest them in them [the larger baskets] you see.

L.P. Came out like a covered wagon on television or something [on that order] ?

G.C. Yeah, that is right, if it had the cover over it, that is what you would call it. But, you see, you built a bunk where they slept up close to the front and made them a seat up there. Then they could get in there and sleep when they stopped on the road like they do now when they camp out there and cook stuff. [food]

- L.P. Yeah, they was talking about the other day, going up into Indiana or Illinois, some of them took two and three days to get up there and back, some of them did.
- G.C. Yeah, I would love for you to have seen those wagons. I was talking about. The spoke would be about one inch and a half through, I guess, and they would come up and bore holes [to join them together] and had a seal going around here [where they joined] and small holes at the top. [These must be strong at the wagon bed.]
- L.P. Was there about two or three stakes going up, or how many was there?
- G.C. Ah, there was dozens of them went up, it was sixteen foot long. [It] took a big place to drive it under.
- L.P. It wouldn't be spread out kind like a hay frame, would it? [used to be.]
- G.C. It would be as wide as the wagon at the bottom. I could take you over here and show you one of the wagons yet.
- L.P. Yeah, I know what a road wagon looks like.
- G.C. As it came up it got more larger, you know, [you had] more room.
- L.P. It got bigger at the top?
- G.C. Spread out. It got a little bigger [and wider] all the time.
- L.P. Did they cover the top with anything?
- G.C. Well, some of them would. Some of them just left the baskets open unless bad weather [came]. Some had tarpaulins if it went to raining, but if you left them open, people could see them. Yeah, that was the way they got there. Back then there was not much traffic. This here road was...
- L.P. Dirt?
- G.C. Just a trot and a dirt path. Do you know what is under the bottom of that road there? [points to the road in front of his house.]
- L.P. No.
- G.C. Slatery that just edges the rock, that is what's under this road, clean through to Bowling Green. That's the reason it has got such a good foundation under it. There is hardly any give away to it.
- L.P. Them could come in all sizes and colors, could they not? [The baskets.]
- G.C. You could make them like that and keep coming on up. Biggest basket I ever saw was five bushel.
- L.P. Five bushel?

G.C.
L.P. Yeah, you talking about a big basket.

L.P.
G.C. Yeah, the biggest basket we have at home is a bushel.

L.P.
G.C. Do you deal in and get them at that place where you are going for people to see?

L.P. No, I don't reckon. He never said nothing about it. He [Dr. Montell] just wanted us to have a project on the way they was made and what all went into one.

G.C. Well, that will help you out in school, doesn't it?

L.P. Yeah. [Yes, it will.]

G.C. You are going to college, aren't you?

L.P. Yeah. [Yes, I am.]

G.C. There was a little basket, let me see if I can find it in here. Back when I was a kid my mother made them. She is eighty-two now. She still makes them, but lives in Louisville. She is still living, but she is weak at making them now.

L.P. Why is part of these big slates and part little ones?

G.C. Well, you frame them finer, [but it] makes them last better to have them a little courser.

L.P. Yeah. [The slates are bigger and harder.]

G.C. They are neater to have them closer.

L.P. Could you put the slates closer if you wanted them closer?

G.C. Finer you have them the closer you can draw them. You can see that yourself.

L.P. You just draw them to suit yourself, then?

G.C. And another thing I will tell you about. After they are made, the splits will season out first, but after the ribs and hooks season they draw and get tighter.

L.P. Yeah. [They draw with time.]

G.C. After they set a while, that basket after it sets a year will get tighter than it is right now.

L.P. Yeah.

G.C. They draw.

L.P. They would draw up where there would nothing go through them?

- G.C. That's right. A lot of times you would retighten them before you would take them out. You could tighten them another round, getting them tighter each time.
- L.P. Did all of them have handles on them, or as you wanted them [made]?
- G.C. No, you can get them either way. You could make the handle only half way down if you wanted to, or two over the top or one on each end of the basket. You can make the basket any shape you want to. Now, it takes a long while to learn how to make them baskets.
- L.P. Yeah, they brought two over there the other day. They said no one could learn it in an hour. I know two or three practiced right there in class but did not make much headway. The hour was all we had.
- G.C. You can learn to make them, but it takes a while. It is like going to a garage, trying to be a mechanic. The longer you fool with it the better you get. It is the same way with those baskets.
- L.P. Well, anything is like that.
- G.C. You could make one perfect if you could take the time.
- L.P. What do they sell for now? Do you care to tell?
- G.C. Ah, ten to twelve dollars.
- L.P. What did they used to sell for?
- G.C. About a dollar and a half for a bushel basket when I was a child.
- L.P. Yeah, everything has gone up.
- G.C. You could buy a sack of flour then for thirty-five cents. I recollect that myself.
- L.P. I heard Momma and Dad talk about it.
- G.C. How old is your mother and daddy?
- L.P. They are sixty-seven and sixty-six.
- G.C. He is older than I am. He could recall further back than I can. What I can recollect so much about it, is back when my Dad used to plow yoke of oxen. He was plowing one day down on the creek, and they got to wanting water. They just took him on in. He could not hold them with a yoke. Ah, the thing then was the old wooden beam plows. You ain't never seen any of them.
- L.P. Double shovel and single shovel; we got some of them.
- G.C. Yeah, they was old, but you take the old wooden beam turning

plow; they was much older. I don't guess you ever did see one of them.

L.P. I have seen a one horse wooden beam turning plow.

G.C. Did you ever see a yoke of steers work?

L.P. No, mules and horses is all I ever have seen.

G.C. The yoke laid across their neck, you know, and there was a bow in them that came down [on the bottom side] and held them up.

L.P. No, we had mules up to eight or ten years ago.

G.C. That's all I used to farm with when I farmed back in Hart County, till we got a tractor.

L.P. Yeah, we got a tractor now. Our old mule died last year.

G.C. Nothing beats a mule in a tobacco patch or a garden.

L.P. You can't hardly plow tobacco with a tractor right.

G.C. No, you plow it too deep.

L.P. You can't get close enough to get the grass out.

G.C. No, you [take a mule that] can edge up to the row and through the dirt right on it.

L.P. No, this year we had to chop grass half of the summer because it was plowed with a tractor along the edge.

G.C. Greatest thing a man ever done was to spray his ground. Do you all do that?

L.P. I have seen it done.

G.C. No, I sprayed mine once. If I live to raise another I am going to double it next year. You get rid of it then. A day's hoeing will pay for it more than you are out. You all have got a pretty good farm, I guess.

L.P. I does very well. He [Dad] got where he don't tend it much any more. He's getting past retirement and kind of slowd down.

G.C. Well, it's time to slow down when you get that age. Been a hard working man, I guess.

L.P. Yeah, he came up from Ohio county.

G.C. Yeah, I been up in that area. There is some good land up in that area. There is some rough parts. You ever notice that a ridge

- runs through here like it does through all our counties and state?
- L.P. Yeah, it is flat on each side.
- G.C. Yeah, the funny thing [is that] on this side is limestone rock and the other is burr. Now, how did it ever divide that way?
- L.P. No. [I don't know.]
- G.C. It is burr on one side and limestone on the other is burr. You take a man like you; after you got your education and could travel and could make baskets; he could make some money. They tell me in the Ozark mountains you can sell them for about any price you want to.
- L.P. Yeah. [I imagine you could name your price.]
- G.C. And wouldn't a man get to see something if he had him a closed-in truck. You see how he could see the sountry and he could put them [baskets] where they wouldn't damage. I have sold them with two boys [as partners]; no telling what they are worth now.
- L.P. You say them are called splits here?
- G.C. Yeah, them are splits and these are ribs and these [here] are hooks.
- L.P. The hooks are the big ones?
- G.C. Yeah, those are the hooks and here is the wrappings.
- L.P. Yeah. [I see.]
- G.C. You start here and go under and over.
- L.P. In a criss cross?
- G.C. And just keep going that way.
- L.P. Does the two end pieces here tie in to?
- G.C. Yeah, that is where the lap was.
- L.P. What do you do, nail them together?
- G.C. Yes,, I nail them with these little nails or I have tied the ends together. They used to tie them with splits, but now they use the nails. It is much neater.
- L.P. What size are those nails? About one inch?
- G.C. Something like that. Small nails are best.
- L.P. I figured big nails would burst the splits.
- G.C. Small nails are what you want. You see, these are not too easy bursted when you get it [thw splits] out.

- L.P. When it is green?
- G.C. When it is damp and after it dries. White oak timber is tough.
- L.P. Do you want to cut your timber in the spring?
- G.C. Cut it anytime, but wait until the sap is down in fall or winter or before it comes up in the spring. I will work better, however, when the sap is up. [It has more moisture at this time.]
- L.P. Do you wet the pieces to bend them?
- G.C. No, bend them dry like they are. Well, they are not very dry when you get them.
- L.P. It is green timber.
- G.C. Moisture in it. Well, I will tell you how it is. You can put it in water and bring the moisture back.
- L.P. That is what I wanted to know. They had to dip it in water before they tied with it.
- G.C. You take split; who was it trying to show you?
- L.P. One old guy from over here at Clarkson. Mr. Logsdon was his name. Walter Logsdon.
- G.C. Walter Logsdon?
- L.P. Yeah, him and his daughter. [No, it was] his step daughter.
- G.C. I have known him all my life. He is old.
- L.P. Yeah. [Yes, he is.]
- G.C. Was he just over there demonstrating for you all?
- L.P. Yeah. [He came down for an hour.]
- G.C. What, did they hire him?
- L.P. I don't know.
- G.C. They offer me to come to Mammoth Cave for a pretty good price, but just had so much to do. I could have went to Washington once.
- L.P. Yeah, he said he went to Washington.
- G.C. Meet the President, if I had went. He could have watched me made baskets.
- L.P. Yeah.
- G.C. But I have been busy in an old crop along about the time to go each

time. Walter Logsdon, I went to school to him when I was a little kid. He was a schoolteacher at Club Run in Hart County. He was a good one. He was a good guy. God, he is getting old, ain't he.

E.P. Yeah was eighty-four, they said the other day. How old are you? About sixty?

G.C. I am sixty-two.

L.P. You getting ready to retire pretty soon?

G.C. Yeah.

L.P. Reckon you will have more time then to make baskets?

G.C. Yeah, I maght make a few more, but it is hard labor. I tell you where it hurts you, in your shoulders and in through your chest. You sit in one position whittling hard all time. Those bushel hooks are hard to tie.

L.P. How long does it take to make a whole one?

G.C. A bushel basket would take me around six hours from the time you get out the timber.

L.P. All this from the time you start?

G.C. Yeah.

L.P. Those little ones, how long does it take to make them? About two hours?

G.C. No, it would take me three hours to make that basket. [Actually] three and four hours. No, you have got to whittle out all that, a lot of people don't see in to that.

L.P. Yeah, I didn't know. Is there as much whittling in this [little one] according as it is the bushel or is it more?

G.C. Well, the bushel is more rougher. You don't have to whittle it down as fine.

L.P. No.

G.C. After I get the framing done on the bushel... I rather work on them than any kind because you can get your fingers between those ribs and those splits. You can weave them in so much better.

L.P. Is there a whole lot of people around here still making baskets?

G.C. No, the older ones are dying out. There are not many left. I don't know of many basket makers. If some younger ones don't take it up it will die out. Some day it is no telling what them baskets will bring. They will be to where you just can't get them at all.

- L.P. Just like antiques.
- G.C. Would not hardly be any wear out to that basket if you kept it dry and did not drag it, and...
- L.P. Would that wear it?
- G.C. It would break your splits.
- L.P. How long would it last if taken care of?
- G.C. It would last you till you was gray headed.
- L.P. Thirty or forty years, then wouldn't it?
- G.C. If you did not do something to break those splits. That one yonder has been made for five or six years and you can't tell any difference in it.
- G.C. Did the little baskets last better than the big ones?
- L.P. There is no wear out to those little ones [the flower baskets], but using them out on the farm, when they get wet will rot them out.
- L.P. Bushel baskets will lose the bottom first.
- G.C. Yeah, that's because they are used out, you see.
- L.P. Yeah. [Yes, I see.]
- G.C. You just make reasonable wages at it, you see. Still, the one who makes something is the man buying them.
- L.P. The middle man.
- G.C. The middle man makes the money.
- L.P. Does he double the price on them?
- G.C. Well, we get a reasonable price when they sell them at Wonder Woods. Have you ever been to Wonder Woods at Mammoth Cave?
- G.C. They sell them there for \$29.95 a piece for a bushel basket. They are the ones making the money.
- L.P. You get about fifteen dollars and they sell them for about thirty?
- G.C. They just double on them. It's that way at Lexington, too. You sell for five and they sell for ten.
- L.P. Yeah. [I see.]
- G.C. I have always said that the man who got out and travels around makes the easy living.

- L.P. Are your drawing knife and the froe the only tools that you need?
- G.C. It is good to have a hand axe to help split the timber; the ends of the timber, but this is the main thing you rive it out with. [The froe.]
- L.P. Why do you hold it out from you and split it?
- G.C. This is [a] dried out piece.
- L.P. Do you [always] hold it on the floor?
- G.C. No, you can sit in a chair. I didn't have one in here. This one is dried out and seasoned out but I will show you how it works. I know this will not come down thin.
- L.P. It is brickal.
- G.C. You just keep on thinning it out until it gets as thin as you want it.
- L.P. About as thin as paper?
- G.C. Yeah. [That's right.]
- L.P. How thin do you need to make your splits?
- G.C. This one needs to be split again, but it is too dry.
- L.P. About as thin as paper?
- G.C. Yeah, that is how it needs to be in moist, tough timber. They are all whittled by the grain.
- L.P. Would it come back in water?
- G.C. Sure would. You need to put it in water the night before you are going to work it the next day. Seem like I have seen you somewhere before. Where are you from, down around Bowling Green?
- L.P. No, I live in Muhlenburg County, fifty miles west of Bowling Green.
- G.C. You ain't married yet, have you?
- L.P. No.