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Interview with Thomas Fenwick (FA 98)

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TAPE TRANSCRIPTIONCODE
KEY

SEPTEMBER 16, 1977. WAX, KENTUCKY

INFORMANT: Mr. Thomas Fenwick(TF), of Wax Kentucky
Location: J.D.'S STORE, Wax, Kentucky
INTERVIEWERS: Michael Korn (MK), Denis Kiely (DK)MK: He lives in the trailer court there? Mr. Thompson?
Have you seen any of the baskets that he's made?IC
TF: No, I haven't seen any yet. He lives right down the road across the way and down. While he was here I tried to get him to make some baskets for us and he said 'I will' and he never did. Kind o'.. I don't know what his problem is.

MK: Well, why don't we start from the top. Sir, could you give us your name so that we could have that for the record?

TF: Thomas Mayo Fenwick.

MK: And you've lived here in Wax how long?

TF: Been in this country (part of Ky.) about 63 years. I was gone for about 5 years.

MK: So you been here for a while.

TF: Oh yes (laughs). For about 2 or 3 years I worked in a factory in Louisville and for the rest of the time, I come home on the weekend. Then I retired and I stay here.

MK: What kind of work did you do before you retired?

TF: Farm. Farmed tobacco, corn, hay, sugar cane-made alot of sourghum.

MK: It's gettin' to be sourghum time about now, isn't it?

TF: Yes sir, there a-makin' it now, over in Butler county

MK: When we were talking before, you said that you remembered when they used to take the baskets around and trade them. Maybe you could talk alittle bit about that.

IA
TF: Well, they would a-walk-most of the people carried their groceries. They could carry a pretty good bunch of 'em in one. They'd have one over their arm and another up over their shoulders.

MK: Now, where would they primarily sell their baskets?

VIII B
TF: At, uh, Piorma (sp?), Piorma-it was a store an' a post office. It's gone now. It belonged to this fella an' he died then he sold the store an another fella bought it. Curtis owned it for a while an he always bought baskets.

MK: Did they seem to sell pretty good?

TK: Yes sir. They a side room full of baskets just a-waitin' to be bought an' he never had any problem gettin rid of them. Several people around here made their living with baskets.

MK: Did they make their living soley with baskets?

TF: Yea, some of them did. Others, they made baskets and farmed, but many did depend on the baskets.

MK: Well, at that time, what was a standard kind of a price for a basket, say- a bushel basket?

TF: It'd run a quarter, fifty cents, course that was years ago (laughs)

MK: I kind of thought so

TF: One thing I remember in particular, I lived up in Grayson County, an' these two girls, they was about 17 or 18 years old and they made baskets and they were walkin, I guess about two miles to the store, and they was walkin through our field-I was a young feller then and we had a bull in our field. Well they were walkin' along makin' all kinds of noise and I told tem they better not. Well, the ol' bull started pawin the dirt and the younger of them two girls took one look an threw all her baskets in the air an took off a-runnin. You should a-seen her run off across that field. I didn't think she was that ugly. (laughs)

MK: Do you remember any particular names of people who were primarily associated with the baskets around these parts?

TF: The Lances, the Lances-Robert Lance. We all called him Bob. And Horton, Bill Horton. The taylors. Lewis Jaggers, Alvy Jaggers-Ol Alvy, he lived right cross the street here there's a place there where his house burnt down.

MK: And they had a reputation around here as good basket-makers?

TF: Yes sir, they were good. He'd carry the logs in th make their baskets. They made theirs out of the little white oak they got down there. They go find a little white oak there in the woods, get a little sapling about roughly two to six inches through an they'd take an axe an take a chip out of it to see if it would split out right now. An what they didn't cut down, why they just about ruint.

MK: Well you were saying now, once the white oaks were gone, what would they use? A different kind of oak?

TF: Hickory for the handles and the ribs an sassafrass for the splits and water maple that growed on the river. It's a

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IIA

a very slick, slick maple. They didn't have to scrape that-the splits would come out smooth.

MK: The white oak...

TF: They had to scrape that to make it smooth.

MK: How did they scrape that? Do you remember?

TF: Yep. They take a big rag an lay it around the reed an they'd take a sharp pocket knife an cut the edge out of it

MK: You mean they would hold the pocket knife still?

TF: Yea, they'd take a piece out o' it.

MK: So they'd be in a sense planing it down, an scraping it?

TF: Yes sir an if they'd bear too hard on it, it'd break the split in two.

MK: Are folks around here more prone to use oak for baskets?

TF: They use it 'cause it gives more than when they used other stuff.

MK: Getting back to the 'old days', do you remember any more? I remember last week when we first came by, you told us that little story about the two fellows making the run up to Indiana. Could you tell that one again?

TF: Yup. There was... they'd take a load wagon an' cut the bed off it and then they'd take poles, some five or six inches round and place them a couple inches apart an cut these little hickory saplings and put em down about six feet high and so it 'd be about sixteen, twenty feet long and they'd put their baskets in there.

MK: That must've been a sight to see.

TF: Yes, it'd be pretty big an they'd put a roof on it and sleep in there whilst they traveled.

MK: Did you say there was a friend of yours that made the trip?

TF: Yes, John Martin Hickum (sp.) He went on two or three trips with different people. One man, ol' Childress, he'd haul baskets up there. He'd get those little bitty baskets an folks 'd ask who made them an he'd say that it was little bitty kids, seven or eight years old and they can't make 'em any bigger or they'd fall over.

MK: I was gonna ask, when they used to take the baskets in did everybody throw their baskets in or was it just one fella?

TF: He'd buy em as a merchant an when he got a load he'd peddle em.

MK: I see

TF: They'd make a bit o' money...a hundred, hundred an' fifty dollars..

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III B3

They'd a-come back an be pretty well off.

MK: In those days that was a lot of money

TF: Yes sir.

MK: Now I remember a story you told us last week about a trip your friend went on. Could you...

TF: HHmmm,, uh

DK: Bob I think

TF: Bob...maybe John Martin. Both of them. He (Bob) started off with him an got out on the road and he kept sayin he was hungary. Well, he, they got to this grocery and John said you hold the team an(I'll go get some-thing an when he came out he had a box of crackers and a pound of lard. Bob said if that's lynch I'm headin' out and he left him there an walked home.

MK: Do you remember other times when people set out for Indiana.

TF: Yes, the first to leave here with other than a wagon team was an old Model T Ford and Mark Burty. He was some old man.

MK: Is he still around?

TF: No, he's dead.

DK: Now when did the peddling pretty much stop?

TF: Oh hits been about thirty-five years if I remember right. They started doin things by parcel post. Ol' Tommy Alvey, he's dead, he found that there was these places all round Indiana, souvinier stands an the like an he'd mail them up there parcel post. I know one mail carrier, he'd carry them from Wax to Middlestown, about eight miles, he traveled around by horse and then by wagon as far as he could and then he ship em up there parcel post

MK: Do you remember any particular places in Indiana or Illinois that people would talk about as...

TF: Well, there was greenwood, Columbus Indiana, I believe, some parts over there, I don't remember the names, I don't remember where they went to in Illinois, they was one or two places,.

MK: Did you ever hear tell of anyone going up to Ohio?

TF: No, never did hear tell of Ohio, Indiana'd be bout as far as they ever got, you know. They'd sell feed baskets, and egg baskets,

DK: I'd imagine that in those times that would be a rather

III B2

VIII B

long trip. Would take some time.

TF: They'd be gone about six weeks or three months. This one feller, he'd go and he'd mail some an then he'd stay. Just got wore out, I guess.

DK: He must have enjoyed it to some extent.

TF: Well, he liked to make that money.

MK: Well, Mr. Fenwick, you seem to know an awful lot about baskets. You were tellin us last week that you only tried to make one once.

TF: Yes, my wife's cousin was a maker, worked on his farm, and on bad days we'd a-sit around and play cards and different things to pass off time and so one time he says "Let's make some baskets" and so we, his dad made baskets so we went down an got some timber and we cut some and got our Barlow knife which cost 50¢ a piece, sharpened our knives up and worked till about ten o'clock that night and next day all day and made three an some lady come along an give us 50¢ a piece for em an that was it.

MK: Were there other members of your family that did basketry?

TF: Well, my sister, youngest sister had six children and they all did it-looked like a line..

MK: An assembly line?

TF: That was it. Each one did somethin different.

MK: There's a good reason for a large family-you can have a basket factory.

TF: You bet, worked good, too.

MK: When pepople would make baskets, was there a particular place? Was it considered indoor work or outdoor work?

TF: Well, in the winter, you'd work indoors-in the house and in the summer you'd a-go out under a shady tree. I kinda liked sittin' around the house myself.

MK: Were there any other members of your family that did basketry?

TF: Well, my dad, he made baskets for a while. Mostly bushel baskets, my aunt too. My mom too. My dad said once, he said, "Mammy", he always called her Maamy He says, "Mammy, you got yours done?" and she said No. I'm busy. An he said "Well we should be getting

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more done with two factories. Yours on the porch an mine under the big Apple tree". If the baskets would be rough, she'd call them cat faces. Yes sir, catfaces.

IA
MK: I just had a question I was going to ask and I forgot. Oh, Yea. In terms of learning to do basketry, was there a...., was there something...how did people pick this up?

TF: I don't know..must've been from the Indians. You know you see a lot of places around here where they make rib baskets, I guess that's where it came from.

MK: There're some people that we talked to that said there's a very distinct difference between a basket made in Kentucky and one made in Tennessee. And Alabama.

TF: I've seen baskets made in Tennessee an they make them a lot nicer.

MK: Oh, Really? How's that?

TF: Well, they make em with narrower splits, pulled tighter, they júst make a better basket. An they cost more too.

IVA
MK: Another person said that they can tell the difference between a basket made by a man and one made by a woman. Can you tell a difference?

TF: I don't believe I could but a woman might make it a little nicer, an take more pains than a feller would. Women take their work a lot more serious.

MK: Are there any people that you can think of who are still alive who can remember this old.....

VIII C
TF: Well, there's old Joe Thompson, and Walker Thompson, the preacher I was a-tellin you about, he's about 87 years old, He's been all around from one church to another.

MK: Was he a circuit preacher?

TF: You might say that. He'd keep one church a while and then someone would want him to go somewheres else and he'd go. I thik the last one he had was Bent Ford Church, back up in the hills there.

MK: Is he still preaching?

TF: Yea, I reckon he is although not like he used to. He goes to places for revivals.

MK: Was basket-making primarily a spare-time activity or

did people do it to have something to use?

VIII DL TF: Well, it depended. They'd do it when they couldn't work on their crops, on the farm like the winter months, and with others, it was a livin like with my brother and my sisiter. You could hire one of em for almost nothing compared to nowadays.

DK: They must have enjoyed it-there must have been something that kept them going.

TF: Oh yea.

MK: What other kinds of things..you mentioned that some folks did it in their spare time. What other kinds of things did people do in their spare time?

TF: Some would whittle...some made axe handles..

MK: How would they make an axe handle?

TF: You'd get a drawing knife, a pocket knife, an get the timber an split it out in big pieces about three or four inches wide an about three feet long an make a handle out of it.

MK: What would they make it out of-Hickory?

TF: Yea, hickory-a good piece of hickory.

MK: Would that be something they'd make to sell or..

TF: They'd sell it or use it themselves. Prices kept a-go in up. Nowadays to get a hand rived axehandle it'd cost you about four or five bucks.

MK: Are there many people around here who..how can I put it.. who still do the old style handicrafts..

TF: Some.. I can't hardly get a handmade axehandle....I have made a few but I don't think I could sell em. I'd take the board an put it in a crack in a log about 8' long then you sit down an the log and carve...you had a kind of vice to hold your timber to keep it from slipping..then you take your drawing knife to it. There you go...a handle. An there used to be a made who made hoops-tobacco hoops. He had what you'd call a pitch horse which was a 2x8 with four legs on it about 8 feet long with a plave mortised out in it and you put a carved 2x4 in to fit the hole and then you'd put your work in the hole with the 2x4 and push on the board with your feet and it would hold it like a vise.

MK: Did people ever use that kind of horse when they made baskets? How?

TF: They used it in the same way cept they would shave their

II B

splits or ribs on it.

VIII C
MK: You told me last week that it's only been within the last ten or twelve years that there has been a renewed interest in making baskets. Could you talk a little more about that?

TF: Walker Thompson, and Clevy Childress are doing it. The younger fellow is about 40. They've changed some from the old ones. The hearth baskets.

MK: What are they used for? Wood? That's one there, isn't it?

TF: Yea, that there someone made, I guess you'd call it a hat. I don't know who made that. Funny, huh?

MK: Is that oak?

TF: Yes.

MK: Is there any other kind of wood on it?

TF: No- all oak. Been made several years ago.

MK: Why do you say that?

TF: Well, it's so dry, you see. Kind of an old look. New, it'd be white.

DK: When people made baskets a long time ago, did people use schellac or any kind of finish on them?

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TF: Some of them would get that dye, you know like you dye clothes with? And they would dump those splits into the water an dye em whatever color they wanted. You know, get a small bucket, put it on the heatstove till it got hot and then put the splits in it. Color em. Poke berries worked as a good dye too.

MK: Were there any other kinds of natural stains people would use?

TF: Walnut would make a brown color. Some would use that but most used the dye.

MK: Was there a standard that was set? Was there only a certain basket that was colored? Do you understand what I'm getting at?

TF: Well, it would be mainly on the peck baskets.

MK: Not on bushelbaskets?

TF: No, never.

9

IV A1

MK: Do you remember anyone making any other kinds of baskets? I notice that the ones you have here are mostly bushelbaskets. Did you ever see anyone making the square-shaped ones? Like picnicbaskets or pie-baskets or that sort of thing?

TF: Well, my sister made one. We called them marketbaskets. Carry it under your arm to the grocery. Foot and a half long, maybe a foot wide and deep.

DK: Now, I think when we were talking last time, you said that Clevy Childress hadn't been making baskets that long. That you had seen some of the first baskets that he had made, and they weren't quite right.

IV 1, 2

TF: He didn't start off too good. He had been making them rough. He'd been making them rough-alot of people did. I told him if he shape them up a little more, they'd bring more money. The first ones were loose splits and the like. I'd a-dip them in water to shrink them up course when they dried back up, they'd get a-loaded again.

MK: I think you said that there was something too, in terms of the bend of the basket, that he wasn't doing it right.

TF: Yea, he didn't flare them out when he got so close to the hoop. He brought it up straight. Didin't make the ribs a little longer and then pull them in-makes em. gives them better shape. Makes them stouter too, I reckon.

MK: Makes it stronger?

TF: Yea, I think it kinda would. Got more pull to em so that when you put some weight in em; it'd pull down around that.

MK: That would indicate a major consideration as to what a good basket was.

VI

TF: Yes sir. One time this feller bought one of Clevy's first baskets and come back to say that it was too darn round and it rolled like a ball. I told ol Clevy to fix it by putting a weight in the bottom and soak it but he just took out a knife and carved it flat. I wouldn't a-want to been around when any real weight was put in it. A feller gets a basket with a round bottom an fills it full of eggs an sets it down an it starts to rollin...

MK: So much for the eggs.

TF: You bet.

SIDE II

MK: Can you remember anything else about when they used to do that run up to Illinois?

III B5
TF: Well, they'd start out in warm weather-they didn't go in cold weather. Basket men wasn't considered real good people. They'd say that those folks'd steal or rob. They'd be out on the road for a long time.

DK: But I guess some of the people enjoyed it.

TF: Yes sir.

MK: That's interesting that the peddlers would have kind of a shady reputation..like traveling salesmen.

TF: Yea, they wouldn't dress up, they'd just a-wear the clothes they wanted to, work clothes, wouldn't shave or get a haircut.

MK: So it was mostly in the summer this went on?

III B2
TF: Yea, so's they could stay out at night. One time, these fellers were driving back from up north an come to an old sawmill and decided to stay there for the night. Next morning, when they gets up one says to the other, "Where's the money sack?" and the other un says "I don't know-I must a lost it." So the first feller says "If you don't find that money, you're a-gonna walk home." So they kept lookin until the feller found it. He'd a-put under a pile of for safe, Lucky he remembered.

III B3
MK: What kind of teams did they use to draw the wagons-mules?

TF: Yea, mules. Horses sometimes but usually mules. Horse don't laast as long.

MK: I don't know how this might fit but did women ever go on these trips?

TF: No. That wouldn't be quite right-sleepin on the road and all.

MK: As far as todays goes, is there still a demand for baskets? Are people still interested in them?

TF: Yea. There's a feller who comes in from Tennessee who buys them from us. People from Indiana still come down here to buy baskets from us.

MK: Really?

TF: Oh, yea. But most of them get sold to tourists now. Few people around here buys them, though. They can make their own.

MK: I Imagine some still remember when they were fifty cents.

TF: Oh, yea.

MK: But there are still those who buy them in bulk and take them away to sell at tourist stores and the like.

TF: Yea.

MK: How does that work? Do they have an order?

TF: Just sell them as many or few as they want.

DK: Some of the baskets you've got for sale are like flower vases... they're not like the old baskets. Type you'd put on a table.

TF: or hang up

DK: Were those kind being made thirty years ago?

TF: No, mostly the workable types then..not as much for show as to do something. Somebody just started making those.

MK: How does someone come up with a new idea like that? There seem to be some very standard ideas about basket-making...

TF: I guess that someone just comes up with a new idea, an somebody studies it..like a new car style and they just try to keep making it better.

MK: In any kind of craft, there's sort of unsaid rules about making something. Rules that if you deviate from them it lessens the quality of the basket or whatever. Do you see that sort of thing in baskets? You know, rules?

TF: Well, you got to use the right timber...green timber or she's no good. Otherwise, it wouldn't be strong.

MK: Is there a particular time of the year to cut the timber?

TF: No. Long as the sap's not rujnin.

MK: You mean in the winter?

TF: Yea.

MK: Do you find that someone who may do basketmaking may also have a trade that deals with wood such as a carpenter, or say, a chair-bottomer.

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IV A2-

associated
TRADES

TF: Oh, yea. Alot of these folks will also bottom chairs.

MK: What kind did they do? Like that (pointing to a woven split-bottom chair) or rush?

TF: No, they didn't do rush. Only the stuff like the baskets. They'd work on the chairs like a basket an then shellac them. They called it Rat-Tat. It was a very thin split. Almost paper thin.

MK: Were ther names for the patterns used on the chair bottoms..

TF: Well, over two and under two or over one and under one, or over one and under... seemed to make a stouter chair bottom.

MK: Did they ever give names to the weaving styles on chair bottoms the way they did with say, patchwork quilts?

TF: No, just....settin chair bottom.

MC MK: Do you know if there is a certain number of weaves or ribs that should be on a basket?

TF: 70 each side I believe. That's how they do most. With a rib on top. Some will have the hoop on top, some with the rib.

At this point, Mr. Fenwicks dog comes in and for about three minutes, he is occupied with getting the dog to lie down and be quiet.

MK: Is there anything else that you haven't talked about that you feel is important about basketmaking or the people who do it around here?

TF: Not that I can rightly think of.

MK: For someone who doesn't amke baskets, you sure seem to know a lot about them.

TF: Well.....I liked to watch them working. Didn't work much myself..but liked to watch.

MK: Is there a right way an a wrong way to make a basket?

TF: Yup. You can make em so as people don't want to buy em.

At this point, both the informant and the interviewers were starting to tire and the interview was ended.

MK: I want to tell you that the recoding that were doing and the pictures we take are only going to be used in .. along with our work on basketry here. And if anything comes up where an article is published where there's

your picture used, that is outside of the university,
we will get your written permission and since that is
on this tape, it is as same as a signed piece of paper.
Does that meet with your approval?

TF: Oh, sure, boys.

MK: Well, I'd like to thank you for taking time out for
us and we'll come up again as soon as schools out
and give you a copy of the picture we took of you.