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Interview with Gertie and Elwood West (FA 98)

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

Western Kentucky University

Interviewers: Gary Davis

Informants: Gertie West

Beth Wilson

Elwood West

Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of Folk Studies 477 G.

Instructor

Dr. Lynwood Montell

October 4, 1977

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTION

The following transcription is of an interview conducted on September 29, 1977 in the Cub Run community of Hart County, Kentucky. The informants are Mrs. Gertie West, age 74, and her son Elwood, age 55. Mrs. West and her now deceased husband Oscar, operated a general store in this community for several years and received many baskets for goods through the barter system of trade. Mr. Elwood West, born and raised in this community, now lives in San Antonio, Texas. To our advantage he was visiting his mother on the day we arrived to see if Mrs. West might be a possible source of information regarding basketmaking in this community.

III A 1
Gary - "Mrs. West, when you and your husband ran the general store here did people practice barter trade?"

III A 3
G.W. - "Yes, back then people didn't have alot of money so they would bring things in to swap for goods. Bartering was a common way of trade at our old store. It was common even after the big war (WWII). Money was usually scarce so people had to do the best they could with what they had."

E.W. - "It was a way of getting goods without paying cash. They would bring in things that they could spare and trade them for goods that they needed."

G.W. - "That kind of trading was sort of fixed by the merchant. A dozen eggs were worth so much coffee. You had to keep things straight in your head as to how much something was worth so that you didn't lose on a trade. Whatever they traded had to be sold by the merchant

III A 3
 ↓
 so he could get his money out of it. Some people liked to haggle over a trade but you just couldn't give in too much. After awhile at trading like this people would get to know how much to expect out of a trade."

Gary - "What kinds of things would they bring in to trade?"

G.W. - "All kinds of things, eggs, hens, but most of them brought in baskets they'd made."

E.W. - "Lots of people here in this part of the country made baskets and those they didn't need were traded off for things that they couldn't grow or make themselves."

Gary - "Did anyone in your family make baskets?"

IC
 IV D
 E.W. - "Grandma West made baskets. She made the best and tightest basket in this part of the country. We used her baskets to carry seed for planting in the spring. They were so tight that the seeds wouldn't even fall through."

G.W. - "Here's one Elwood used to carry his lunch to school in."

VI
 E.W. - "I went to a one room school when I was a boy. Walter Legsdon's daughter was my schoolteacher. I guess you've heard about him. He's a good basketmaker down near Brownsville. Anyway, I carried my lunch to school in that basket. I aint seen that basket in years. Brings back memories. I guess that basket's close to fifty years old."

Beth -- "What kind of basket is that?"

E.W. - "That's a half peck basket there. Grandma West made it."

Gary - "What kinds of things were baskets used for?"

IV C
 E.W. - "Well, all kinds of things really. We used them to carry things like seed, vegetables, and corn for the cattle."

G.W. - "Most all the women who came to the store used one to carry trade goods."

Anytime you had to carry a few things you reached for a basket."

Gary - "Did Grandma West teach anyone in the family how to make baskets?"

E.W. - "Yes, she taught my uncle Willy how to make them. I learned how from him. I guess I made my first basket when I was ten years old."

Beth - "Has basketmaking always been in your family?"

E.W. - "As far as I know it has. Grandma West learned it from her mother and uncle Willy learned it from her. He taught me so I guess its kind of a family tradition. I don't really know how far back it goes."

G.W. - "Willy don't make them anymore. He's quit that. He makes chairs now in his shop down in Kaysinger (Kessinger). You prob'ly passed it on the way down here."

Beth - "What is the name of his shop?"

G.W. - "West's Craft Shop. Its beside his house."

Gary - "Does he still make chairs?"

E.W. - "Yes, but he don't make them all by hand anymore. He's got some machines in there to make some of the parts. He still weaves stools and chair bottoms the old way though."

G.W. - "He makes the old pattern when he weaves them that Grandma West taught him. He made this chair here. I guess its forty years old. I got this leg patched 'cause one day Oscar weren't feeling too good and dropped his shotgun putting it on the rack and blew the bottom of this leg off."

Beth - "Why doesn't he still make baskets?"

E.W. - "Mostly its because wood's not too easy to find anymore. You need to use young timber or saplings. Its getting harder to find good wood."

Gary - "What type of wood is best to use for making baskets?"

IC
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IV A 1,2

VI

IB 1

IIA

E.W. - "The best kind is white oak. Its easier to rive and split."

Gary - "Have you ever used hickory?"

E.W. - "Yes, hick'ry is harder to work with though. This stool she's setting on has a hick'ry bottom. Its tougher, more resistant to moisture, it lasts longer than white oak. This basket was made of white oak and you can see how it got wet and rotted away some of the splits."

Gary - "Is it best to gather wood during a certain time of the year?"

E.W. - "Yes, spring is the best time because the saps running up then."

Beth - "What are some of the tools that you use to make baskets?"

II B

E.W. - "You have to have an axe to cut the saplings, and a wedge and hammer to split the wood into quarters. You also need a drawknife, an awl, and a sharp knife."

G.W. - " Here's an awl and the barlow knives you used to use Elwood."

Beth - "What type of knives did you say those were?"

G.W. - "The big one is a father barlow. The little one is just called a barlow knife."

II D

E.W. - "A sharp knife and a keen eye were important in cutting splits, Its not all as easy as it looks. You just have to have a feel for it."

Beth - "Do you know anyone who still makes baskets?"

IC

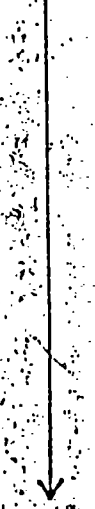
E.W. - "Well, Walker Thompson, he's a preacher here. He still makes baskets but his health hasn't been too good lately. He lives a couple of miles from here on the right side of the road (Ky 88). Most of them that I know have quit or died. There's just not that many people who do it anymore. Basketmaking was a big thing in this area at one time though. It seemed like someone in a family knew how to make baskets."

VB 2

G.W. - "The trouble was that many of the youngsters didn't take it up. Willy has six children but none of them learned how to weave baskets. That seems strange since most people, like Willy, have alot of pride built into their work. Clevy Childress still makes them I think. He lives a piece from here though."

IC

VI



E.W. - "Most of those who made baskets were older people. Most of them lived out in the country. When they came into this country people didn't care how far they had to walk to get to the house. The main thing was water. They'd build by a stream or spring. As long as they had water they were alright. During the depression, baskets and moonshine were what kept food on the table for lots of people. Most everywhere near a stream you could see the smoke from the still fires. I can remember when there wasn't even any electricity in the town, and I'm not that old either."

Gary - "How did your father get his money out of the baskets he had at the store?"

III B 5

E.W. - "He took them to sell at crafts shops between Elizabethtown and Cave City. Tourists bought them so these shops were where dad used to take them twice a year."

Gary - "Did you ever go on any of these trips?"

III B 3



E.W. - "Yes, dad had a model A truck he would put racks on and load up with baskets. We'd be gone about a week. Back then most of the traffic was on 31 E."

Gary - "About what time period were you making these trips?"

E.W. - "It was in the late thirties (1930's), I guess. I wasn't very old at the time. Uncle Willy used to tell me about the trips he made back in the early 1900's. He used a mule team and a wagon with

III B 5

racks on the sides. They'd tie the baskets in bundles by tying the handles together and then stack them in the wagon. Times were a little different then. It would take twenty to thirty days for a trip to Lexington and back. Most sales were in the farm areas. Business wasn't too good in the cities. He said he'd make about sixty dollars on one of these trips and he did it twice a year."

III

O.W. - "Merchants could make trips themselves like Oscar did or sell the baskets to a middleman who would make these trips to sell them a little higher somewhere else. A lot of baskets used to be made here and lots of people made the trips to make a little profit in areas where they were not so plentiful."

IV D

Beth --- "How did people feel about making baskets? Why did they make them?"

O.W. --- "I guess most people made them because they were practical. You can always find a use for them. It was also something that was fun to do. I always felt good about being able to make something like that. It seems like you appreciate things a little more when you have to put a little work into it."

IV C

IV D

Gary - "Would you consider basketmaking to be an art or a craft?"

O.W. - "Well, there's definitely an art to it. You have to have a feel for it. We sold most of dad's at craft shops so I guess they are considered as crafts. Basketmaking isn't really all that hard to learn but it takes a lot of practice or experience to be able to shape them good. You have to whittle out those ribs to different lengths and you have to wet down your splits to make them easier to work with. There's lots of tricks like that you have to know to make a good basket. When you spend a lot of time making something like that a lot of pride gets built right into it. One mistake could ruin the whole shape of the basket.

IV D

You have to take your time on things like that. I know Grandma West must have told me a hundred times that patience makes good work. If you do it wrong the first time you're gonna have to back up and do it right the second time."

G.W. - "That's the way people in the country felt about most all work. It was always better to do it right the first time than to have to do it over again."

Gary - "What kind of prices did you get for the baskets?"

III A 4

E.W. - "Well, alot of it depended upon where you were selling them. Some places got more basket trade than others. Back when we made those trips I'd say that a half peck basket would sell for about ten cents, a peck for about twenty-five cents, and a bushel basket would go for about fifty cents. You sure can't get them for those prices now. A bushel basket would prob'ly cost ten dollars now."

V B 1

G.W. - "Things just aren't the way they used to be."