



M a r y a n d R o b i n R e e d



Going to see Mary and Robin Reed in our four-wheel-drive Jeep was like taking a trip back in time. We topped a mountain, forded a creek, rounded a bend, crossed over a bridge, then arrived at their home in a beautiful valley in the Daniel Boone National Forest.

The Reeds are a versatile crafts couple who can make everything from baskets to weavings, from candles to cornshuck flowers and nativity scenes. And as anyone who has ever visited them outside Irvine, Kentucky, will tell you, their life-style is as interesting as their crafts and as much a part of their story.

Imagine two college-educated, middle-class people who sought an alternative — call it "hippie" if you like — life-style together twenty years ago, as many others did, but who have stayed committed to it ever since.

Mary and Robin live in a small Sears pre-fab home which has no electricity and no running water. But being with this happy family, you realize there is nothing missing

from their lives. They lead a peaceful, quiet, and natural existence. Sitting in their cozy kitchen, I couldn't help but wonder about all the appliances and conveniences we think we need to be happy.

In spite of their quiet life-style, the Reeds are an active family. In addition to running their busy home craft business, they conduct craft workshops through the public schools and library and the local craft cooperative. They have also worked with local television stations on programs about alternative life-styles and preservation. Mary finds time to be president of her children's PTA. Their daughter is an adorable tomboy who plays on a T-ball team who, in her uniform, reminded me of Tatum O'Neal in The Bad News Bears.

To keep up with their many family and work commitments, the Reeds are a two-car family, though it wouldn't have surprised me, when I first arrived at their house to have seen a covered wagon parked outside.

Mary and Robin are fully aware of the eccentricity of their style of life, especially in

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an age when most former hippies are "yuppies," and they acknowledge it with a laugh, as if to say, "We don't take ourselves all that seriously."

The Reeds pride themselves on being self-sufficient. Their young son proudly showed us the bucket of crawdads he had caught in their creek the day we visited, then set off to sell them at the general store for three cents apiece.

Their traditional country crafts are always popular at crafts fairs, but it is their Kentucky spirit we celebrate here — a stubborn resistance to the easy way out, a reverence for living off the land, and a love for making things with their hands.

ROBIN: We were both born and raised in Lexington, Kentucky, and we both went to the University of Kentucky. I was studying architecture and Mary was studying in the fine arts program.

Our first venture into crafts was candle-making. My cousin, a candlemaker in California, moved back to Kentucky and was making candles in the basement of his farmhouse in Woodford County. He gave us ideas for what you can do with wax.

When we started, we didn't know anything about the craft business. A friend of ours turned us on to the first crafts fair. We started making money selling the things we'd made, but it was just subsistence level for many years. In about 1980 or '81 we started making a little more money because we started going to crafts workshops sponsored by the Kentucky Department of the Arts. We both had to learn the business and learn to get personal with the people we were selling to. Now we make a little more money each year.

We enjoy the isolation of living away





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from the city. We were from middle-class families but we just gave it all up. Being college educated and "green" to the ways of the country, we turned to the local community for its knowledge of survival skills. We learned about farming with horses, cooking and heating with wood, preserving food, birthing and raising children, practicing herbal medicine, building houses, and of course making natural crafts. This has allowed us to survive and to gain total independence of thought and action.

I always have my eyes open for new basket designs. Mary and I read all kinds of magazines for ideas. We always try to stay abreast of what's happening in the Atlanta crafts show in the fall, when all the new designs, trends, and colors come out. We latch right on to those new colors and start dyeing our cornshucks those colors. By March, they move!

We work all day and all night, but we do most of our craft work after dinner. We take orders any time of the year. Other craftspeople like us are one of our biggest buying markets.

MARY: Candles were popular in the 1960s and '70s. But we stopped making our candles because they were just not exciting to people anymore. We've now gotten into about eight kinds of cornshuck flowers, dolls, nativity settings, and baskets. We buy cornshucks by the bale, already bleached and cut. They're very easy to work with. We used to go into town once or twice a month with our team of horses to pick up the cornshuck bales.

Joan Curry was the woman who taught me about cornshuck flowers. She lived in Lexington. I would take her some of my flowers and she'd tug at the petals and they



would fall off. She'd say, "They're no good, take them back." That's the best thing she could have done for me. I developed my own style. The first cornshuck doll I ever made took me all day and I read the instructions out of *Mother Earth News*. As soon as I sat it down, it fell apart.

But there's a great camaraderie among craftspeople and we got a lot of help and advice from them at craft fairs. When we were making candles we would sit next to

someone who made cornshuck flowers and they'd show us how to make them. We'd come back and say, "What do you think?" and they would tell us how to improve them.

People ask us why we live the way we do. We say, "How can we keep from living this way?" We can't turn away from the reasons why we moved here. Our creative spirit comes from living in the hills, and that spirit stays with you.