



L e s t e l a n d O l l i e C h i l d r e s s



Lestel and Ollie Childress and their nephew Cleve are regulars at practically every crafts show held in Kentucky. Lestel and Ollie are fifth generation basket makers from Hart County who have been making baskets together since before they were married. Their families were always very close and both had long histories of basket making.

Lestel and Ollie have made many baskets for me over the years. Their baskets come in all shapes and sizes, but the Childress baskets all have a distinctive design. Ollie made a special one with red splits when she found out red is my favorite color. The Childresses have made baskets for Marshall Fields in Chicago and for the "Oh! Kentucky" boutique at Neiman-Marcus in Beverly Hills.

Their fondest hope is that their grandson J.R. will join their nephew Cleve and his sons to ensure that a seventh generation of Childress basket makers carries on the proud tradition.

Ollie spoke with us one afternoon in her kitchen, surrounded by the fresh white oak Lestel had just carried in from their backyard woodshed.

Lestel and I have been married forty-three years but we've been making baskets together for over fifty years. My father died when I was six years old and my mother died when I was eleven. I had to go live with my sister Rachel who was married to Lestel's older brother George. Both Rachel and George made baskets, and Lestel and I used to work on one basket together. We'd put a basket frame in our laps and Lestel would work on one side while I worked on the other.

Lestel asked me to marry him when I was fifteen years old. I'll never forget my wedding dress. I bought a beautiful blue crepe dress at Lestel's grandmother's second-hand store. Aunt Lett, as everyone called her, was a legend in Hart County. She made baskets well into her eighties. She traded me that blue crepe dress for a peck basket I made for her. I was so proud of that dress. I'll never forget it.

Lestel's parents taught him how to make baskets. His dad peddled baskets by the roadway. Everybody in both our families made baskets. Up till recently, we made baskets all the time. We'd just sit right out there under the big apple tree in the front yard and make all kinds of baskets. When it got too cool, we'd just move into the kitchen.

When we want to make a basket, we go to the woods to look for a young, straight white oak between six and seven inches in diameter with no knots in it. Lestel carries the timber into the barn and takes his wedges and maul and busts the wood out

BASKETS

He halves it, then quarters it. From that point on, he can take his froe and mallet to it. He removes the heartwood, the dark wood in the center of the tree, then he busts the white sap wood into small pieces about one-and-a-half to two inches wide. He does everything else with his pocket knife. Timber has a grain in it, and it should just peel apart if it's good wood.

We've taught an awful lot of people how to make baskets. We've been demonstrating our basket making at universities and crafts fairs now for over ten years.

The Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen sponsored a three-day white oak basket making workshop, at Virginia Petty's farm. Virginia took the workshop, of course, and Sarah Frederick was there, too. Two of Kentucky's finest white oak basket makers, Beth Hester and her husband, Scott Gilbert, conducted it. We taught them to make white oak baskets. They're like family to us now. We're happy to share what we've learned over the years about making baskets with other craftspeople in Kentucky.

People often ask me how we make our colorful baskets. Lestel usually runs the splits and I dye them in a kettle on the stove. Then we just weave those dyed splits into our baskets.

Sometimes Lestel and I sit here making baskets for hours and we don't even say a word to each other. Other times, we'll sit here and talk about everything under the sun. We often listen to my gospel tapes while we're working. It's amazing what basket making can do for me. It calms me down and lifts my spirits.

Lestel and I are fifth-generation basket makers and we feel it's important to preserve our family's tradition. I just hope that I live to see one of my grandchildren become a basket maker, so we can ensure that the seventh generation of the Childress clan stays in this important family craft.

