

Basket making keeps local couple in touch



An Ancient Craft Remembered

Fred Haas, a local basketmaker, keeps a living connection with the past where work was a hands-on experience. A popular item in craft shows, baskets now keep him and his wife busier than birds in the spring.

What if the birds forgot how to make their nests. Imagine, we might be finding eggs rolling down gutters or left in hats on the picnic tables. And the birds, poor things, would be going to bird counselors and taking stress tests. They would know something was missing from their life. But what? Once nature forgets...can she remember?

The answers to grave questions like these are usually closer than we think. Go, for instance, to the Candlelight Farm in Nottoway County where Fred and Jo Hass, like a busy pair of robins, have made a nest for the production of, not bird nests or eggs, but baskets.

Driving up the fruit tree lined lane to their house and surrounding buildings, all painted in coordinated browns, creates the feeling that one is entering an outpost of Williamsburg. The well-house that focused attention to the center of the compound is a copy of a Williamsburg well.

“We wanted something that would fit into the

countryside,” Jo Hass said as she retraced the steps they took during the design and building of their nest since they landed in Nottoway County in 1977. Even the little tool house is a miniature replica of the larger house that Jo Hass had found in a Currier & Ives picture.

And the house and it surrounding still look like a picture. All the part are woven with each other and then painted to blend perfectly with the background of woods and fields. Only the railroad tracks that cut across the edge of the land like an accidental slip of the artist’s brush show a break in the order and control that these artists hold over their work.

Fred Hass was pleased acting the tour guide through his “Williamsburg West,” as the postman had called it. Through 64 years old and a business-management teacher all his life his face showed neither worry nor a classroom pallor. Hass wasted no time focusing on his favorite topic.

Pointing to antique farm tool hanging from the garage wall like a trophy of an extinct species, he said: "Imagine the fellow who swung that wheat cradle all day long. When I look at this I can see the man standing there using it... We're saving it so it doesn't disappear."

One wondered if Has was talking about the tool or the way in which man once related to this world with his hands that he wanted to save.

Haas opened the lid to an old steam washer that looked to a modern push-button man's eye like a baby's space capsule.

"You put your clothes in her, boiling water in there, close the lid, turn th crank, and you actually have a washing machine," he said, delighted in this fragment from another age that he had rescued from the sea of time. "It's a link to the past that is being preserved here."

Haas opened the door to his basket shop, a building with a high slanted roof that deflects the unobstructed west wind up over the main house like a ski ramp. The rafters inside are hung with baskets, as if the s wallow had come home there to nest.

"All the baskets you see here are our own design," Haas said as he began working on a wine basket.

"We want our baskets to be totally functional," Jo Haas said. "We leave the fancy ribbons and painted designs for the customers to add if they want to." All their baskets are trimmed cleanly and stained nut-brown for a finished look, something the old basket makers never did, she added.

There seemed to be as many baskets as there were different kinds of bird nests: egg baskets, and wine baskets, their most popular, followed by baskets for flowers, wood, clothes, picnics, laundry, muffins, and just about anything man wanted to carry or stow.

In order to keep the price around \$12, Hass makes his baskets—the popular ones take about two hours to make—from commercially prepared strips of wood rather than peeling the ribs "from the tree," a time consuming process.

To emphasize this point, Jo Haas brought out a beautiful oak basket she had made in Tennessee where a master basket weaver had taught them how to make the coveted oak baskets that will last over 100 years. The basket took a week to make, But just in case a customer wanted one, Haas keeps some split oak buried in sawdust by the shop.

You can see an herb garden neatly labeled and squared with wood borders through the window where Jo Haas was seated, watching her husband working at the center table.

"Living here has been an expansion for us because we've been getting in touch not only with ourselves but with nature."

"When I'm here, I'm away," she said with the skill of a riddle weaver. "People keep saying I've got to get away." She paused, then smiled. "Well I'm away."

The Haases have only been making baskets for three years. Now with several serious craft shows every two months and their baskets supplying the Blackstone Emporium and the Stonewall Vineyards in Concord, Va., what started as a hobby with "blisters galore" has now grown into a steady business.

"We didn't foresee this happening," Jo Haas said, and she could come up with no reason for starting with baskets either, other than it was "just one of those things I had always wanted to do. We took one lesson, and that Christmas we made and gave baskets. And because of the response people had over our baskets, we just took off from there."

The unruly reeds in Haas's hands were beginning to take the shape he wanted from them. Knowingly, his hands seemed to be sketching the visual message that his life and marriage was nothingness than a union of opposite ribs and weavers firmly supporting each other and serving some as yet unspoken greater design.

"If you lose faith at this point," he said, as he moved the weavers up the ribs tights, "you have nothing at all. You have to have faith that if you get your weavers in and pull 'em tight you'll have a basket. So if you ever get through this initial frustration, you'll end up with a basket and have accomplished something in life."

He looked up and smiled as if the answer we much simpler than anyone had ever realized.

"You know, I've just never met anyone who didn't like baskets."