

Janie Verret Luster interview transcript. Running time 7 min, 30 sec.

Conducted by telephone on November 12, 2021, by Independent Curator Teresa Parker Farris. Written interview transcription by Curatorial Assistant Alex Landry. Interview text and audio have been edited for clarity by Newcomb Curator Laura Blereau with Landry.

[Untranscribed Houma language]

I'm Janie Verret Luster. I was born July the 11th, 1952, at Charity Hospital in New Orleans. And I was raised in the community of Bayou DuLarge.

When I look back, as to when I started weaving, the basket would lead me as to what it was going to be, what size--if it was going to be a small one, a medium or large one--I actually felt that. I can remember talking to other weavers, and I felt a little bit hesitant to ask the question, maybe a little bit embarrassed to say, "Does the basket lead you?" And when I saw the reaction in their faces--Yes it did. So, it was so satisfying to know that. And, like I say, a lot of times I may have an idea as to what I want the basket to look like and size and everything, but sometimes it doesn't happen. It's just a feel about, when you're weaving, that you get, and the basket kind of lets you know.

Now, I harvest the palmetto myself. I'd rather do that in the wintertime, if I have the need to have palmetto, but a lot of times we prepare in the fall to harvest the palmetto. It's almost like quilting--something to do when it's cold outside. We harvest the palmetto also sometimes by the moon. The moon makes a big difference as to what the palmetto feels like: Full Moon, it's really thick feeling, it's a heavy palmetto. Whereas in the New Moon, it's lighter, doesn't feel as thick. The New Moon is when you would probably harvest palmetto for a hat. I like to harvest in the Full Moon for my baskets because it makes such a solid basket.

I had tried before Hurricane Ida hit us, we had harvested some palmetto and had also marked the stem of the palmetto as to what date and what the moon was doing. Because, since I've been weaving--and I can remember Miss Marie Dean and I discussing about the palmetto sometimes curls on you, and she would say that has to do with the moon. So, I was going to document that. And, needless to say, I was only able to get that palmetto that we harvested in early August. Most of it was straight, laid flat--in other words, didn't curl up. Most of it was a thicker

palmetto, and I don't remember what the moon was doing at that time, but it felt thicker. Then, I think the following week, we had harvested some more, and some of that curled up on us. Miss Marie would say, sometimes when they curl, "I would put them on the front porch, wet them down a little bit, and put them in the direct sun, and they would flatten out."

At the time, those conversations I took in, but now I have the full meaning of those conversations--I really take it to heart and think about those conversations and try to analyze when to harvest palmetto and where to harvest, also. Where to harvest palmetto is getting hard now—especially after the hurricane—it damaged the palmetto really, really bad. I've seen a few plants survive, if it was sheltered in a really thick forest setting. Those palmetto survived, but those out in the open—the leaves themselves droop. I was telling someone, "I think it's going to be a couple years before they come back." I have palmetto right now, but I know I'm going to need more. It's just going to be hard to find the location, where to harvest the palmetto.

Where does palmetto grow? Will it grow in the area that you move to if you move? Or will you come back home to harvest the palmetto? And so, we have to educate [people] for when they move. And, even with this hurricane, we know many of our people will not come back, because there's nothing to come back to. The younger generation will want to move away, because this hurricane was so different than what we experienced before. Most of the hurricanes that have hit us in the past was the waters, and this was totally different. It was the wind that destroyed the homes of many, many people down here. But the older generation like myself, I have no intentions of leaving. And I feel that it's important that I do stay, to make sure that our culture is preserved and especially the basket weaving of our culture, because it kind of identifies us as a people.

And Miss Marie tended to use a lot of ribbon that was recycled, even back in those days, she was recycling, maybe ribbon from a birthday present or a Christmas present. And so, she used that to sew the palmetto together to form her hat or her basket. Whereas with a Houma half-hitch, you're making that half-hitch knot, and the basket's being formed as you're weaving. You don't have to go back and sew anything.