

Marjorie Battise and Myrna Wilson interview. Running time 10 min, 6 sec

Conducted in Elton, Louisiana, on August 24, 2021, by Independent Curator Dayna Bowker Lee. Written interview transcription by Curatorial Assistant Alex Landry. Interview text and audio have been edited for clarity by Newcomb Curator Laura Blereau with Landry.

(MB): [Untranscribed Koasati language] My name is Marjorie Batisse. My birthdate is October 26, 1942. My hometown is Elton. But it's three miles from Elton is where I grew up. [Koasati language] The parish I grew up in was Allen Parish. [Koasati language]. My tribe is Coushatta.

(MW): [Koasati language] Okay, my name is Myrna Wilson, and I was born March 14, 1945. I'm from Elton, three miles away from Elton. And I was born in Allen Parish and was delivered at home.

(MB): My earliest memory of starting to make baskets was probably about nine, maybe ten. We learned it from my mother, which is Nora Abbey. She made baskets to support the family, an extra income for us. The home that we had was only a two-room, no electricity, no bathroom, no running water. And we had a porch where mother had two rocking chairs, and that's where she sat and made her baskets. We would sit at the end of the porch by the steps, and my mother would start the baskets for us and then we would pick up, learn by watching her make baskets.

(MW): I started making baskets whenever I was three years old. My mama would sit on the rocking chair, and I would sit close to her foot, sit on the floor. And then she would give me the scraps of the pine needles and the scraps of the raffia. And then I would take that and start making baskets. And then I started learning more. She said, "If you learn a little bit more, you're going to use the good material." So, I kept on trying and trying until I made a basket. After that, we kept on making baskets. My mama, Nora Abbey, was making it, and then the three of us would sit by her foot.

(MB): We used pine needle baskets, pine straw. Some of them call it pine straw, but we call it pine needles, and raffia. We color the raffia with a dye. Back in the '30s, they would have crepe paper that they would use, but nowadays they use Rit to dye their raffia, to make colorful flowers, and use these to design the baskets. They also had—we call it sweet grass, but we just recently found out that it's called sage grass [broomsedge bluestem, aka sage grass, *Andropogon virginicus* L.]. And there was one lady that didn't have any pine needle baskets, and she used Bahia grass. And so we have three types—well, actually four types. We have pine needles, we have sage grass, and then we have Bahia grass. And then we do have rivercane baskets.

(MW): Yes, the old days. It was our utensils to use, *cawáhka*, and all different types—like field peas, shelling field peas in those baskets, and the big, round pine needle basket we use as a container. The smell of the pine keeps the bugs away and we will store it in shelves. The rivercane, nowadays we can't hardly find it, so, it's kind of lost there.

(MB): When the people started fencing their property, we couldn't get in there. They put posted signs and said that you're not allowed to come on their property. That's when they started using pine needles, which would be about in the '30s.

(MW): As far as I can remember, my grandma used to still make baskets and cane baskets as far as I can remember.

(MB): I'd like for the basketry to continue. I have taught my oldest daughter, well, both of my daughters, and my granddaughters. They know how to make it, but I haven't seen them complete a basket yet.

(MW): Me too. I'm very traditional making basket. I'm for it for the kids, but only got one daughter. She don't even make baskets no more, so that's it. It's just me. And the boys always says, "Make me some baskets for Christmas, give me a basket for Christmas", so they can keep and treasure it for themselves. So, that's what they've been asking.

(DBL): So it's important to them?

(MW): It is important, it's a memory. They enjoy seeing me making baskets, you know.

(MB): You could see your mother sitting down and say, "I'm going to make a vase basket" and you can just about see her, how she used to sew. And you think back and say, "I think I can make one like that". But the stuff that they made back in the '50s and the '60s and the '70s, all have changed and they all just make certain kind. Like, we used to make 12-inch baskets and 14-inch round baskets. They don't make those anymore.

(MW): Like purses. They used to make purses and all that.

(MB): Bread trays that are oblong, real long. Flower baskets.

(MW): They don't make them anymore. So, it's just a little bit of baskets here and there. And that's it.

(MB): People like to buy small baskets.

(MW): People not really into big, big baskets, you know? And then we don't have no use for us. Then, we had the use for us, like storing beans and all that, but now they don't have—all it is, is a souvenir for them. So, it's just small.

(MB): For display.