

Missouri Folk Arts Program

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Photo by Darcy Holtgrave

From left to right, Joe and Alice Dudenhoeffer with Aaron Holsapple pose outside the workshop on Basket Lane with raw materials and a collection of baskets that Aaron made over the course of his apprenticeship.

As the Folk Arts Specialist at the Missouri Folk Arts Program (MFAP), I am responsible for an important component of our mission: to identify and reach out to exemplary, new-to-us traditional artists and encourage them to apply (with a worthy apprentice) to the Traditional Arts Apprenticeship Program (TAAP). Often leads come to me from artists with whom we have established relationships. I first heard about white oak basket makers, Joe and Alice Dudenhoeffer, from Patti Tappel of Osage Bluff near Jefferson City, Mo. Patti is a wonderful and prolific quilter whose husband Bernard is a previous master blacksmith in TAAP. Patti shared glowing information with me about the Dudenhoeffers and directed me to her blog, *Osage Bluff Quilter*, where she had posted images of their beautifully made oak baskets. Unfortunately, Patti lost their phone number but told me they lived on a farm outside Linn, Mo., in Osage County on the appropriately named "Basket Lane."

I often have to track down contact information to locate artists. Basket Lane is not found on Google maps, and the phone number listed for the Dudenhoeffers in the online "White Pages" was disconnected. Osage County is located within the German Rhineland cultural region, and I discovered the surname Dudenhoeffer is ubiquitous. Luckily, it took only two phone calls to reach one of Joe and Alice's close relatives, who cheerfully gave me their cell phone number. One phone call later, I introduced myself to the Dudenhoeffers on Basket Lane.

Immediately apparent was their passion for and knowledge of the white oak basket making tradition. Over the course of phone conversations and in-person visits, I learned that Joe and Alice Dudenhoeffer have almost seventy years of basket making experience between them. They are direct inheritors of the well-known Gibson-Curry family white oak basket making tradition in Missouri. The late Roger Curry

(another previous TAAP master artist) and his wife Betty, fifth generation basket makers, were Joe and Alice's most significant mentors. The Currys taught the Dudenhoeffers the tradition, as they say, "from tree to basket."

When the Dudenhoeffers use that simple phrase they mean it quite literally. They select and harvest oak trees off their land and process that wood into basket making materials. Weaving is the last step in a time consuming and labor intensive process. Alice often says: "the quality of your (raw and processed) materials is ninety percent of making a beautiful and sturdy basket."

As did generations of Missouri basket makers before them, Joe and Alice start their baskets with a hike into the woods to search for just the right young oak trees. At the base of the tree, the trunk should measure about six inches in diameter, stand straight, and be knot and limb free from four to six feet above ground. Identifying and harvesting the tree is only the beginning. The Dudenhoeffers painstakingly break down the log by splitting it into wedges, halves, quarters, and so on. They use a hand built shaving horse and drawknife to remove the bark to shape and smooth the wood into a rectangular board. A shave knife helps them to produce the ribs and weavers. The heartwood is used to carve out the handles and rims. Finally, these materials are woven into a wide variety of baskets.

Joe and Alice first met their apprentice Aaron Holsapple of Jefferson City, Mo., four years ago. He was unaware that two master basket makers were "practically living in [his] backyard" and was teaching himself the "tree to basket" process, using books and online sources. Once he met Joe and Alice, Aaron often stopped by Basket Lane for advice. I encouraged them to submit an application for TAAP, whereupon a panel chose their team to participate. When I visited them at the workshop after several weeks of lessons, Alice described Aaron as the "perfect" apprentice: "He already had experience, a desire to learn more and, as a professional forester, he has a tremendous knowledge of trees." While the "official" apprenticeship is now over, they continue to work together. Sometimes TAAP apprenticeships seem, as Alice put it, "just meant to be." ■

Aaron Holsapple watches intently as Joe Dudenhoeffer bends and tucks stave tops to finish the rim of his basket.



Alice Dudenhoeffer demonstrates how to weave a gathering basket during Deutsch County Days at the Luxenhaus Farm near Marthasville, Mo.

"From Tree to Basket"



Joe Dudenhoeffer created this large gizzard basket, affixed at the rim with the "God's eye" weave and adorned on the handle with shed antlers.

Photos by Deborah A. Bailey