



Baskets recall past era

By DIANE SANDS

Before the appearance of paper sacks and plastic totes, people found baskets a convenient way of transporting goods.

Indians and farmers used them to gather food, carry babies, store supplies and exchange goods. Usually the baskets were made on the spot to fill any number of needs.

Mrs. John (Dorothy) Bigham, of Rochester is a collector of baskets made in America before 1900, and a knowledgeable source of information on the history of the handicraft-art.

"I have always been interested in the methods and materials used in making baskets," explained the retired art teacher.

"I BEGAN collecting them and entering my baskets in antique shows three years ago. I found farmers' and Indians' baskets interesting because of the many purposes they served and methods and materials used in their construction."

"Farmers made sturdy baskets for a definite purpose, collecting eggs, gathering berries, marketing or storage. They were constructed from raw materials found in the area — willow, ash, birch or hickory," she said.

One basket in the collection on display in her Rochester antique shop was used originally as a baby cradle during the covered wagon era and later as a laundry basket.

The Indians also wove baskets for functional purposes, as containers,

cooking utensils and in ceremonial worship. Those in the Great Lakes area used sweet and marsh grasses in their weaving in addition to the reeds and barks of trees.

"MANY INDIANS used a complicated method of tight weaving which would hold water. They also incorporated braiding and ribbon weave for decorative purposes," said Mrs. Bigham.

"Weaving was left exclusively to the women of Indian villages, where one female was designated head basket weaver and assisted in her art by apprentices."

The exception to the rule was the burden basket, which each man built for his own individual purposes," she explained.

"The Indians began making decorative baskets to use as barter when early settlers first arrived. Since the farmer's wife was capable of making her own simple baskets, the natives began to innovate new techniques in their weaving to make their baskets more appealing."

They used sumac and elderberry dyes for color and created baskets with double floops to hang easily on the arm for knitting or light parcels," said Mrs. Bigham.

MRS. BIGHAM explained that Michigan is fortunate to have a large number of Indian baskets made in the area of the Mackinac Bridge.

Before the bridge was built travelers to and from the upper peninsula had long waits for the ferry from the Indiana brought baskets of food and handicrafts to trade with the travelers who in turn transported the baskets throughout the Great Lakes region.

"I understand that there are only a few Indians still making baskets in Michigan. They live on Walpole Island in Lake St. Clair and it seems that there are no young people there willing to learn the craft from the older weavers," commented Mrs. Bigham.

"I think that many people today realize that this art is quickly disappearing and this accounts for a rising interest in the hand woven baskets," she said.

"THERE ARE no books written on the Indian baskets," said Mrs. Bigham. "Most information is in the form of magazine articles."

"Research on farm baskets can be done at the Pennsylvania Farm Museum, in Lancaster, or locally at the

museums in Greenfield Village, Detroit and at Cranbrook," she said.

Mrs. Bigham advises those who collect baskets as a hobby to use them in the home for practical as well as decorative purposes.

"They can be used to serve cheese, hold soaps and towels in the guest room, for plant containers or mail holders," she suggested.

Mrs. Bigham is the owner of Country Cousins antique store, Rochester.

Keatington to show art

Among the artists participating in Keatington Antique Village's seventh annual art show Saturday and Sunday will be Birmingham's Alice Egan and Robert D. Gwynn Jr.; Martha Millicarek and Bonnie Sabine of West Bloomfield Township; Marlene Shapiro of Bloomfield Hills; and Marjorie Fairson of Southfield.

Others include Audrey Ratterman, Paul and Martha Kohler of Southfield and Celeste Distors of Rochester.

The show will be held at the village, on Joslyn Road, Lake Orion from 10 a.m. to dusk both days. There is no admission charge.

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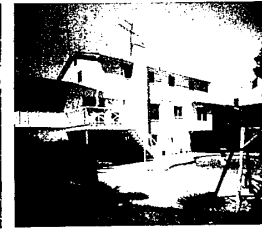
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