

*With Baskets on His Mind*

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Salt Center for Documentary Field Studies  
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JAKE WEARE sits on the end of his handmade draw horse with an old saddle pad as a cushion, his back to the windows and bright sun on the snow outside. His pair of Belgian draft horses clomp around in the yard below. Jake's basket making shop is in the upstairs of the horse barn. A painted sign reading *Horse Fever Farm* hangs outside on the barn door. The smells of horses and hay mingle with the subtle sweetness of newly cut wood. Jake is dressed in two plaid flannel shirts, the one on the outside is black and white checked. Bits of sawdust cling to the thighs of his black Wrangler jeans. Jake's trimmed fringe of white hair shows around the edge of his green canvas cap that is embroidered with work horses and the name of the farm.

Pale shavings of ash and sawdust seem to cover everything in the small shop. Jake's large thick hands hold the beginning of a round basket. This basket shape starts with twelve strips of white ash criss-crossed over each other. The long pale strips are carefully laid out flat on the seat of an old rotating stool. With the strips arranged like the spokes of a wheel, Jake begins to bind them together with a thin strip of weaving material. This is a task where his large hands are an asset. "Just put my hand down on it. Then sometimes one is out of reach and you have to let it go and the whole thing goes to pieces. I usually have to start it two, three times 'fore I get it."

All the material Jake uses to make baskets he prepares himself from white ash. "When I started," he explains, "I was gonna make baskets the same way they did years ago 'round here in this area. No brown ash 'round here, so that's why everybody 'round here made baskets out of white ash."



**THE PROCESS** of making a basket begins with cutting a tree and hauling it out of the woods. For many years Jake has done this with the help of his draft horses. He sets off into the woods "with baskets on [his] mind" to find and cut the trunk of a white ash tree. The cut log is split into sections along the length of the grain using an ax, wedges and a hammer. Each split section has thick bark on the outside and pale stripes of the inner layers that is the basket wood. Jake shaves off the bark with a draw knife, and continues to use the knife and a hatchet to shape a section down to planks measuring 1" x 1 1/2" x 60" of straight parallel grain.

Just inside the sliding door of the barn on the concrete floor is a five foot long rectangular tub constructed of sheet metal. This is the homemade soaking tank for the split and shaped sections of white ash. Once it has been cut, the white ash wood must not dry out until the layers have been separated. If it dried, no amount of pounding would separate the layers. However, once the layers are separated they can dry and then be soaked again before use to regain their flexibility.

Jake demonstrates how the strips of ash are "pounded out." He brushes through the white sheet door of the shop and out to the barn loft and brings back a plank of white ash. Sitting on the draw horse, he rests one end of the plank on a stump of wood that is up ended. With the back of an ax head he pounds on the ash along the grain of the wood. As he pounds vigorously he slowly slides the stick along its length. His right arm lifts and falls in rapid succession. He makes the hard work look easy. The wood makes cracking sounds as the connection of fibers between the layers begin to separate. Once the layers are flapping like a fan, Jake uses his hands to pull the ends apart. The layers of wood are equal thickness at about an eighth of an inch and Jake says that shows that the growing has been consistent. Each layer is a year of growth on the tree. Thin layers equal poor growth years and are often harder to separate. Almost nothing about the material is consistent; everything needs shaping and trimming.

The bundles of prepared ash are stacked upstairs in the barn next to the sweet smelling hay that is feed for the horses. When a strip is selected out for use, the rough grain on one side is scraped down. Jake drapes a thick piece of leather over his right thigh and uses the edge of his knife to scrape down the length of the strip of ash. Thin curls and bits of the wood gather on his jeans and the floor as he works. When he is finished using the trimming knife, he jabs it into the wall behind him. A random pattern of little triangular holes mark where the knife has stuck into the pine boards of the wall. From a collection of his tools Jake pulls out a tattered piece of leather, once a rectangular shape it now barely holds together around the edges. "Here's a pad I used to use for scraping. Now that's smoothed up a lot of strips, isn't it? Wore it right out." The scraped surface of the ash strips are turned toward the outside of the basket when it's made. "Makes a smooth looking basket," he says.

Jake weaves around the spokes of the basket with thin strips of ash he calls weavers, the work in his lap. It is during this time of weaving that the shape of the basket emerges. Early on in his basket making, Jake built all his baskets without any forms or molds. This is much easier when plaiting a rectangular shape than it is with a round shape. It takes skill to keep a round shape symmetrical. More recently he has begun working over molds to achieve a consistency in the shape of a basket.

"When you start a basket, right here at the bottom is the deciding factor, see? It ain't much fun to start a basket and it don't take the form you want. You're entirely dissatisfied with it. You gone to all that work getting the material out and then be disappointed in it. I've taken them out in the yard and touch a match to 'em. Burn them up. Start another one. A form makes it more satisfying."

A form or a mold is a shaped block of wood. Jake has one mold that he bought and two that he turned on a lathe, each for a different size round basket. He digs through the tool basket to find screws and a screwdriver. Jake screws the spokes of the basket onto the curved end of the mold. In the center

of the opposite end of the mold there is a drilled hole. The mold gets propped up on a dowel sticking out of a board so the mold can rotate while the basket is being worked. Jake does almost all the weaving of a basket sitting on the end of his draw horse which is like a saw horse, but it also has a clamping block in the middle. The work and his face are illuminated by the light from the windows. He keeps his cap on. While he weaves, his hands smooth the spokes down over the curved surface of the mold. Thin pliable weavers are used to pull the basket into shape. "I'm turning the weavers in two different directions at once, see. Turning around and bending them down both the same," he says as he works. He can only weave the bottom third of a basket on a mold before it has to be removed, otherwise he wouldn't be able to get the basket off the mold. The shape is now fairly well defined, but there are still choices to make in completing the design.

**THIS WAY** of making white ash splint baskets has been a tradition for nearly three centuries in this area of York, Maine. The craft has been passed down from generation to generation among families who settled around Mount Agamenticus. By the late 1600s, a small community began in the hilly terrain around the mountain. Common family names were Welch, Fitzgerald, Ramsdell and Bracy, suggesting ancestry in Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The story of one of the first settlers to the area, Philip Welch, suggests that some of these settlers may have come to the New World as indentured servants to wealthier families in the York area. The people who settled in the hill country may have chosen to live a distance from the coastal community, or that rocky terrain may have been the only land available to them. Either way, the mountain settlers made their livelihoods in part using the resources of the forest: the trees. Many of the Agamenticus families supplemented their incomes by weaving white ash or red oak splint baskets. It is likely that these settlers brought the tradition of splint basket making with them from their home countries.



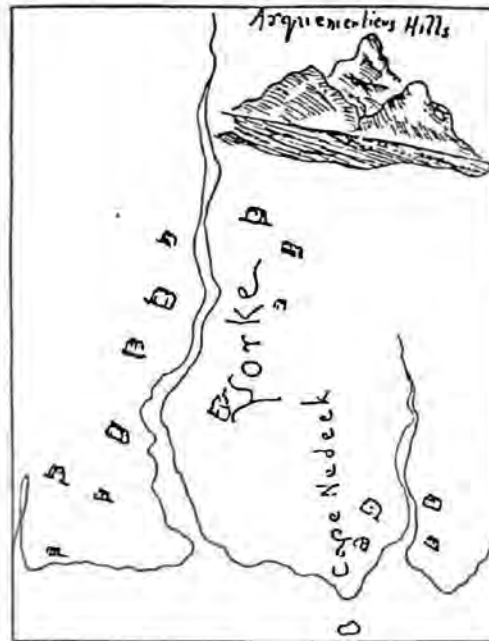
The baskets from Agamenticus were not fancy or ornamental; they were made to be useful. The most common baskets made were market baskets that ranged in size from half-peck to a bushel. Basket making was a craft in addition to many other tasks that followed the cycle of the seasons. Baskets were most often made in winter and traded for goods at the local store. In the spring, basket peddlers loaded their carts or yokes and sold door to door or traveled along the coast to market towns like Portsmouth, NH and Newburyport, MA.



MANY OF THE MOUNTAIN RESIDENTS WERE BASKET MAKERS who traded their baskets for staples at the nearest country store. An ax, jackknife and drawshave were the basic tools needed to fashion baskets from ash or red oak logs. These baskets were made in many sizes but the most common ones were half-peck, peck, half-bushel and bushel.

from The Old Photographs series - Old York Beach  
Compiled by John D. Bardwell  
Augusta, ME: Alan Sutton, Inc., 1994

The name Agamenticus is most likely derived from the Algonquian Indian language to mean "where the tidal river overflows the marshes;" a fitting description for the area first settled around the tidal York River. When the name of the colonial settlement changed to York, the name Agamenticus became attached to the prominent mountain and the community settled there. The Agamenticus hills are three shoulders of rock, the highest peak 680 feet above sea level; a rise so prominent in the southern coastal plain that it was known as a landmark to early mariners. Water that accumulates as run off from the Agamenticus hills collects to feed Chase's Pond and is the source of the Cape Neddick River. The river tumbles down through the forested landscape. On the way it passes the pastures of old farms and spills over the sites of sawmills and gristmills before it washes into the Atlantic at Cape Neddick.



YORK IN 1655  
British Museum Mss.  
The earliest known plan of the town



THE GENTLE slopes of farm land and forest of the eastern shore of the Cape Neddick River have been home to the Weare family for over 350 years. In 1921 when Raymond (Jake) Oscar Weare, Jr. was born, he joined the ninth generation of his family to inhabit this land. Jake grew up exploring the woods, the river and its tidal marshes, and the sea; but mostly he was drawn to the woods. As the oldest boy, he learned to work hard at an early age while helping out with the chores at home.

“When my brother and I got old enough to handle wood, my father never touched another stick. We burned about ten cords a winter you know, had the furnace, the kitchen stove, parlor stove, fireplace. You burn quite a bit of wood when you keep putting one stick in every few minutes. My father used to hire somebody to cut it and paid a dollar a cord. Them days I was always kind of money hungry. So I asked him why couldn’t I do the cutting and he told me go ahead. But the first ten cord I cut I didn’t know if the winter was going to be long enough. Come pretty hard. ‘Course you know I didn’t know too much about it. It was all hand saws and axes, weren’t no chain saws. Worked pretty hard for a dollar a cord. Then we hauled it out in an old Model T truck. That was fun. We liked to drive the truck. I was 10-12 years old. I cut the wood and my younger brother helped me haul it out. I’d have him crank the truck while I maneuvered it. And we’d get stuck you know, every time my father’d come home we’d tell him we needed more gasoline. He was gettin’ kinda upset with that.”

His boyhood experiences taught him the value of a commitment to work and gave him a deep connection to the land his family had made home for so many generations. He knew this was where he belonged and he made choices in his life that allowed him to stay connected to this place.

Jake rarely left his home ground. One time was after high school when he joined a New Deal work training program called the National Youth Administration. He went to Dexter, ME to learn the machine tool trade and apprenticed in a machine shop. But he soon realized that he would not be happy working indoors in a machine shop all his life. He went back home to



work in his father's fish market in York Beach. The fish market was a busy community place where men gathered to chat, tell stories and have a beer out back after work. While the market stayed open all year long, Jake was able to take time off in the winter and be outside where he wanted to be working in the woods or cutting ice on a nearby pond. While working at the fish market, Jake became acquainted with a basket maker from Agamenticus, Ervin Bracy.

Charles Ervin Bracy, born in 1870, grew up in the Agamenticus community. Like most of the men from the mountain, Ervin had many skills. He specialized in stone masonry, and could build a house from bottom to top. Basket making was one of the things that occupied his hands, especially as he got older. Ervin made market baskets, clothes baskets, and wood baskets. Anything that would be useful. Baskets were commonly used for all kinds of tasks: picking berries, going shopping, carrying a packed lunch to work, working in the garden or woods. "Ervin make a basket awful easy," Jake explains. "He acted if he didn't put no thought in it 't all. He form a basket like nothing. He come from up the mountain. He done it all his life." Ervin had two sons, but neither were interested in the lengthy process of making splint ash baskets. As Ervin got older it was difficult for him to do all the work himself.

"There was an old man used to make baskets and bring 'em into market and we'd sell 'em for him," Jake explains, telling the story of how he and Ervin started working together. "I sold his baskets year after year in the fish market. We'd hang them up like this," Jake gestures to the baskets hanging in his own workshop. "One year he didn't have no baskets and I asked him, 'Where's your baskets, Ervin?' He said, 'I can't get in to woods to cut the ash.' 'Well,' I says, 'if you still want to make 'em, I'll help ya.'" The year was 1941 and Jake was twenty years old.

"So I give him a hand 'cause he wanted something to do and I was thinkin' well, maybe when I get to be an old man, maybe that'd be something for me to do. I always had to be busy, never could be idle. All my life, I ain't so bad now, but one time I couldn't sit still in the evening more than an hour.

Had to do something. Never wanted to read, so always had to keep busy. Always was my big fear that I wouldn't have enough to do, nothin' to do. So I went down and learned enough about the baskets so I could pick up the rest myself. Course he was an old guy and all he wanted to do was tell stories about the old times. And when you're in your twenties you got more on your mind than wanting to listen to some old guy tell stories. Didn't think I had time for too much of that. But I did learn enough and then I picked it up here and there."

A large round basket with a gracefully bent handle hangs from the ceiling in Jake's work shop. It is golden brown with age. A loop of string attaches a white tag to the handle. The tag reads: Ervin Bracy, 1948. Ervin Bracy passed on the traditional way of making the Agamenticus style baskets to Jake Weare. Ervin lived until 1952 . By then Jake was married, had young children, and was working long hours at the fish market he'd inherited from his father. He barely had an idle moment. Through the years Jake didn't always have time for making baskets. He was often busy in the winter cutting fire wood or building or repairing a collection of rental houses in York Beach. But he cut white ash and made baskets like the ones he had made with Ervin when he could.

**FOLLOWING THE** pattern of the settlers at Agamenticus, basket making has been a seasonal endeavor for Jake off and on since he was in his twenties. He is now seventy-seven. Winter days not suited for being out in the woods would find him making baskets down in the cellar of his house. When he built the horse barn, he put a small shop and tack room off the space with the horse stalls. That became his basket shop. Only a year or so ago he built a dormer off the upstairs of the barn to have a new space devoted entirely to basket making. It is a cozy small space, maybe 8' x 12', finished in pine boards. Three side by side windows look out over the yard and beyond is a view of the Cape Neddick lighthouse. Different sized round baskets hang from cup hooks in the ceiling. A new pack basket stands in one corner,

complete except for the canvas shoulder straps. An Empire gas stove against one wall heats the space and keeps warm a galvanized tub of water used for soaking the ash strips. The few tools Jake needs to make a basket are stored in a small basket on the floor. For the variety of tasks in weaving and shaping a basket, there are surprisingly few tools. "I thought one time I'd like to go out in the woods with just a knife and a hatchet you know, and come home with a basket." Jake says pausing in his work. "I think I could do it. Only two tools I'd need." After a moment he adds with a grin, "I might want to take my sleeping bag with me."

Jake unscrews the round basket he is making from the mold. On most of his baskets, he likes to make the middle fuller than the top and bottom. To do that he has to keep the weavers not too thick and not too tight. He fishes a weaver out of the tub of water. It is too thick for what he wants, so he scores one end across the grain and peels it apart, dividing the wood of one growth year. The weavers start out at one and a half inches wide. For smaller baskets they are cut down. "These strips I usually cut with scissors. Lot of different methods do it, but I use scissors. I'm in no great rush," he says. He snips in half down the length of a five foot weaver. In an over and under pattern, he weaves each piece around the upright spokes of the basket. Where the last one ends a new piece begins. Jake's hands glide through the motion of weaving, his shoulders rounded, head bent forward. He studies the work through his dusty bi-focal glasses. It's warm in the shop and the thin wood strips are drying out as Jake continues to work. It's okay that they are drying because most of the basket is shaped. "When I come up a little bit more I'll start tryin' to pull it in so it'll be smaller at the top. Can't always regulate it, but I try to." He runs his fingers along the weavers, pushing them down and making sure everything fits snugly together. Then the open top of the basket gets immersed in the tub of water. The spokes need to be pliable again for the step of hemming.

While the basket is soaking, Jake rustles through his basket of tools on the floor looking for the clippers. He also needs his knife. He has to toe his



boot through some curly wood shavings on the floor to find it. Cradling the damp basket in his lap, Jake uses wire clippers to cut off every other upright piece so it is flush with the last round of weaving. This is the first step in hemming. In the second step, the remaining pieces get trimmed down to about two inches and then folded over towards the inside of the basket. The tip of each piece is shaped with the knife into a point and tucked down among the weavers. Jake holds the round basket in his open palms. "They's quite a lot to it, ain't they?" he says.

He sets down the basket he's been working on and picks up a small intercom he has in the shop. The other unit is in the kitchen of the house. He presses the button and leans his face close to the box.

"Is dinner ready?"

"Course it's ready. It's after twelve," Iris's voice hums back. Iris and Jake have been married for fifty-six years.

"Yup, thank you. Got to go eat," he says and places the intercom back on the floor amid the wood shavings. Jake almost never puts on a jacket for the walk between the barn and the house. He keeps the collar of his outer shirt turned up to cover the back of his neck. He crosses the yard past the horses and into the kitchen of the pale yellow house he built in 1947.

**THREE OAK** chairs surround the small kitchen table. Jake hangs his cap on the back of his rocking chair and sits down at the table with Iris for a sandwich. The most dominant object in the kitchen is the wood cook stove. It is a beautiful black stout Queen Atlantic that fills the space to the left just inside the kitchen door. It radiates warmth into the room. A shiny tea kettle sits to the back of six burners and yellow work gloves dry on a warming shelf. Iris's wood frame chair with green fabric cushions is tucked in the corner between the door and the stove. The firebox of the wood stove is on the side next to Iris's chair. The lowest level of the stove on that side has a shelf of cast iron trimmed in chrome. When Iris sits in her chair, she can stretch out her legs along this warm shelf. A crossword puzzle book is on top of library books

and magazines piled on the floor. A pen is cradled in the v of the open pages. On the floor on the opposite side of the stove is sturdy wood basket that Jake made. This rectangular basket holds stacked split pieces of ash that are exactly the right length to fit in both the basket and the firebox.

Jake's chair is perpendicular to the stove and faces toward the kitchen door. His chair is a tall backed rocker with straight wood arms, its back and seat woven tightly from thin strips of caning. Three worn cushions are stacked up on the seat. On either side of his chair, baskets hold an array of objects including manila envelopes, folded letters, a pair of pliers and a green sweater. In front of Jake's chair is a rectangular ottoman covered in a brown plastic material and the morning newspaper.

Jake finishes his sandwich and opens the mail. A check has come from the insurance company. He says it covers half, no maybe a third of the cost of his chain saw. The chain saw was stolen from the back of his pickup about two weeks ago. It must have been taken on a trip to town, but he's not exactly sure. Other winters the chain saw was a tool Jake used practically every day. Whether he was working in the woods felling trees, or back at the farm cutting up an order of firewood, the chain saw was in use. Perhaps days had gone by before he noticed it missing. A stroke last spring has left Jake feeling less steady on his feet, so he has not been out this winter working with a chain saw and the horses.

After lunch, Jake pulls on his cap and is out the door. In fifteen minutes or so he returns from the fish market, swinging the pickup tight to the huge granite step at the kitchen door. He slides a green plastic crate to the edge of the tailgate. Jake grabs two fish from the bin of crushed ice and carries them into the kitchen. A cutting board straddles the sink. Two plastic boxes are on the counter - one for the heads, bones and skin (that Iris will use to flavor her fish chowder), the other for the filleted white fish. Jake finds his favorite knife and gives it a few swipes on a sharpening stone. His large hands work surely and quickly with the knife separating the white flesh of the haddock from the translucent bones. "He never taught us anything," Jake

says remembering working for his father. "Just expected us to know how to do things, I guess. That sure made us pay attention because we had to learn how to do it right, but there was never any teaching." Jake says that's how he learned to do most things, by taking an interest and paying attention. When it comes to baskets, he has been both an interested student and a willing teacher.

IN THE early 1980s a young woman living in York became interested in the history of the Agamenticus basket making community. JoAnne Russo was buying kits and teaching herself to make reed baskets. The York Historical Society asked her to demonstrate basket making and she agreed. In the crowd that afternoon during her demonstration was Jake Weare, then in his sixties. He asked JoAnne about the material she was using and she replied that she thought it was wood, maybe oak. Jake disagreed. Someone in the crowd let JoAnne know that Jake was a basket maker. He had a few of his baskets with him in the truck and reluctantly brought them out to show JoAnne a basket made from wood. She was interested in knowing more about how he prepared the ash and he wanted to know how she made the round bottoms she had demonstrated.

The next day JoAnne went to the Weare farm. Jake and JoAnne hooked up the horses, went out on the land and cut a white ash tree. A partnership began. They would work on one basket together, preparing the materials, weaving, taking turns with the different tasks. Sometimes they'd spend a whole day working down in the basement of the house. When a basket was finished, they'd flip a coin to see who got to keep it. "Once we had made a particularly good big basket and we both really wanted it," JoAnne explains. "So we flipped the coin and he won. I remember being a little disappointed and he said, 'Well, we could just make another one for you.' And I said, 'Oh, okay.' So we made another one."

JoAnne and Jake continued to work together on basket making for six winters. They shared information and tasks, each developing different skills as they worked together. Their collaboration on baskets ended when JoAnne



moved from Maine to Vermont. JoAnne was interested in making a living from the craft. She realized that making baskets from white ash was not going to be practical with the amount of time and effort it took. So she switched to brown ash which is easier to prepare and can be purchased in uniform sized strips. She researched and collected different forms of Native American baskets made from brown ash and sweet grass in Maine. Based on these decorative styles, she began designing smaller, finely detailed baskets. She discovered more interest and money in the elaborate and delicate baskets she creates. Collectors and buyers were not very interested in the practical forms of the Agamenticus baskets that she had made with Jake. That is considered craft. Her work had become art. When asked if he considers himself an artist or a craftsman, Jake replies, "Neither. Never give much thought to it." For Jake, making baskets has not been about money or creating styles that please other people; it has been about pleasing himself.

**THE BASKET** shape Jake has experimented with most is the pack basket- a basket like a backpack. The pack basket is not a shape Jake learned from Ervin Bracy. It is a shape he developed by copying a store bought basket. The first one he made has fairly straight sides and a slight twist. Building a pack basket can be unpredictable. Without a form to start them, they are built free-hand which makes them challenging and each one is unique. Jake says, "Have to take some of 'em apart two, three times 'fore I get it right." Jake taught a retired teacher from Vermont to make pack baskets. "I got a letter from him awhile back, and he says ya know, I don't believe you ever make a basket you're entirely satisfied with. I never thought of it before, but it's about the truth, ya know. You see something that ought to been done a little different. Nothing too bad, but not entirely satisfied with. Probably that's true about anything that's handmade. You start another one and you pay attention to that thing you wasn't satisfied with and try to correct it."

Hanging upstairs in the barn are at least five different completed pack baskets. To an untrained eye they look the same except for color. Age and

sunlight darken the white ash to a honey brown color. But when Jake drops the baskets down from the rafters and starts talking about them, the subtle differences in the shapes become more apparent. He likes it when the basket "bellies out a bit" in the middle. There is a delicate balance among the elements of shape that make it pleasing to his eye. One might be too straight or have an opening that is too big. These get hung back up in the rafters. This collection of pack baskets shows the progression of his style and skill over the years. The favorites have webbing straps for shouldering the pack and are darkened and smooth from seasons of use.

When Iris was a young girl her family called a pack basket a "lunket." She remembers picking blueberries with her family around the hills of Andover, ME. They would pick into smaller baskets, then pour the collected berries into the lunket to hike off the hill. As a younger couple, Jake and Iris used pack baskets on horse trips and canoe trips. Jake used one to carry tools into the woods. His grandson uses one ice fishing and always has friends asking him where he got his pack basket and could they buy one?

Jake does not make baskets to sell. "Afraid I'll spoil my fun if I sell 'em." He's happier if he can make them and give them to friends who he knows will appreciate and use them. "I don't do it for money. You get so many hours in 'em, most folks be upset if you get what you ought to get for 'em, so I don't bother even try. Quite a lot of satisfaction to it, you know. And it keeps me busy. Gives me something to do." Although he has not been interested in putting a price on his baskets, Jake mentions that he has been considering opening up a basket shop. "I got it back my head maybe someday when I got nothin' else to do, I'll get quite a few stock piled here, put up a little sign *Jake's Basket Shop*. See what happens." But he doesn't seem to think he really has time for that yet. "Some summer when I get older," he jokes. He doesn't like to admit it, but getting older is one of those things he can't control.

JAKE DOESN'T have to go into the woods where he has lived all his life to know that the forest is changing. He can tell by picking up a split length of ash log. With his square blunt fingernail he points to the wood just underneath the ridged bark. The alternating layers of light and dark stripes run close together like contour lines on a map at a steep gradient. The layers practically blend together; no good for pounding out. White ash for baskets needs even layers of light wood separated by thin bands of brown. Jake looks for trees that will have even growth layers. An ideal white ash has a straight trunk with no scars or bends for at least five feet up starting just above the flange of the roots. That's a basket tree.

But they're getting harder to come by, those first rate basket trees. The thin pinched layers of wood under the bark show the stress of trees fighting a disease identified as ash leaf rust disease. For at least thirty years, the coastal population of white ash trees in Maine have been affected by this fungal disease that forms orange blister spots on leaves and cankers on the branches. Severe enough blistering can cause a tree to lose its leaves during summer months, thus changing the quality and quantity of wood production. The coastal populations of white ash have been hardest hit because the rust disease has an alternate host in marsh grass. The disease tends to jump back and forth between the host species, causing cyclical outbreaks in the white ash about every ten years.

A Maine Forest Service plant pathologist maintains from his office in Augusta that the rust disease has not been severe enough to have killed many white ash trees. Jake's experience tells a different story. He steps carefully on slight hummocks in the forest floor to keep his feet out of the puddles of water as much as possible. Jake grabs at the rough diamond patterned bark of a white ash. It peels and crumples in his hand. Steadying himself with a hand against the trunk, he tips back his head to look up at the branches. The lowest ones, some eight to ten feet above his head are broken and blunt. No fine branches flair out at the ends. "See that? That tree's dead. Dead as hell. Twenty five years ago these would all be good. First rate trees."



Trees that he would have considered marginal before now might have to make do. He pulls a yellow metal tape measure from his pocket and slides it up the trunk of an ash. He looks to see if there is a straight clear section of at least five feet. He lets the tape measure curl and snap back into its case, pockets it and walks to another clump of trees.

Jake grew up with these trees. Cut stumps poking out of the water are markers of his harvesting. Sometimes in a clump of ash he takes only one tree, giving the others a chance to continue growing. So he cuts not only with an eye on making a basket right then, but for having wood for baskets in the future.

Jake walks through the woods along an old road lined with tumbling stone walls. His shoulders are slightly rounded on his solid frame, hands shoved in his pants pockets put some tension on his red suspenders. A few years ago he was so busy working in the woods that he didn't make any baskets. This winter is the reverse. Jake has not been out in the woods working with the horses cutting fire wood or basket trees. "Pretty sad to get to the end of it," he says referring to the notion that he may have to give up working with the horses. "I think it's something you form habits when you're young. Kept busy every minute all my life, playing or working. Now, hard doing nothing. Pretty hard medicine. I feared it all my life when there'd be a time I couldn't work." Making baskets has filled a purpose for Jake, just as he thought it might when he was twenty and got started helping Ervin Bracy. Jake worked hard to achieve what he wanted and made the right choices for himself. He explains, "Well, choices all through life, lots of choices. Everything you do there's choices. Some people make the right ones, some people don't. If I lived my life again I'd never change a thing. Do just exactly the same."

**THE FINISHING** touches of rims and handle will complete the basket Jake is making. "To decide the length of my handle I usually take about half the circumference of the basket." He has already cut out a two foot long half

inch by half inch stick of heartwood. "See the grain in there? Well that ought to bend half decent 'cause I'm gonna try and follow the grain. Grain's pretty good there most of the way." The main tool used for shaping the handle is a draw knife. While one end of the stick is held by the clamp on the draw horse, Jake begins to shape a notch in the wood that will hold the handle and the rims together. He pulls the draw knife toward him to peel off thin layers of wood. The wood curls off like he is scraping a stick of butter. There are soft folds of skin around the corners of his eyes. His look is of relaxed concentration. He shapes notches on each end of the handle, then scores the center of the handle and begins to draw down the wood between the center area and each notch. "If I don't make it the same thickness, they won't bend the same, break a lot of 'em." He works surely with the draw knife and then his trimming knife to shape and smooth the handle. Once it is shaped, Jake bends the wood over his thigh forming graceful arches. "Bends a little different, kind of a kink right there, ain't it? It's alright. I'm gonna let it go. It'd be a bit more perfect if I'd left a bit more right there. Too late now. But that ain't bad." The straight ends of the handle are shaped into points and tucked down among the weavers on the inside of the basket.

The smooth rims come out of the water and get clamped into place around the edge of the basket; the inside one fitting into the notches of the handle. "They lace in better if they're damp, I can pull them in better," Jake explains. Lacing looks like he is sewing, the way a thin strip of ash is drawn in loops around the rims. Once the lacing has been completed in one direction, Jake pulls another thin strip from the water and begins lacing around the basket in the opposite direction. This round goes faster. The finished pattern of lacing creates a row of x's across the top of the rim. The last bit of lacing tucked in place, he cups the round basket with its arching handle in his hands. "They used to tie this kinda' basket 'round their waist, or a string around the neck, pick berries with both hands." Jake mentions the general loss he has seen in people knowing how to do practical tasks. "All them old



things is gonna' be lost. Every generation knows less and less about anything. Seems so," he says.

Jake is the last person to be making white ash baskets in the Agamenticus tradition. The craft may become one of those things lost. So far, no one in the tenth or eleventh generation of Jake's family has shown an interest in making baskets. "One grandson, he watched me ten minutes one time, thought he knew all about it!" Jake laughs. But he doesn't seem particularly concerned. "I don't try to run anybody's life. If they want to [learn about baskets] I'm here. They know they're welcome. That's all you can do, isn't it?"



Photographer Unknown



Liz Larson



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salt center for documentary field studies  
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## *Basket Trees*

written by Meredith Wade

photographs by Liz Larson

FOR OVER fifty years, Jake Weare has cut and hauled basket trees from land where he lives in Cape Neddick with the help of his draft horses. "When I started," he explains, "I was going to make baskets the same way they did years ago in this area. No brown ash 'round here, so that's why everybody 'round here made baskets out of white ash."

Jake's way of making white ash splint baskets has been a tradition for nearly three centuries in this part of Maine. The craft was passed down from generation to generation among a community of Irish and Scottish immigrants who settled around Mount Agamenticus.

For the variety of tasks in weaving and shaping a basket, there are surprisingly few tools. "I thought one time I'd like to go out in the woods with just a knife and a hatchet, you know, and come home with a basket. I think I could do it," Jake says, pausing in his work. "Only two tools I'd need." After a moment he adds with a grin, "I might want to take my sleeping bag with me."



Photographer Unknown





Photographer Unknown