

Arts and Crafts of the Cherokee

RODNEY L. LEFTWICH

*Professor and Head of the Department of
Industrial Education and Technology*

Western Carolina University
Cullowhee, North Carolina
(Retired)

Cherokee Publications
P.O. Box 430
Cherokee, NC 28719

it is alive. All honeysuckle has a hole in the center, but the size of the hole varies greatly. If the hole exceeds one-half the diameter, the vine will be apt to flatten or split when used.

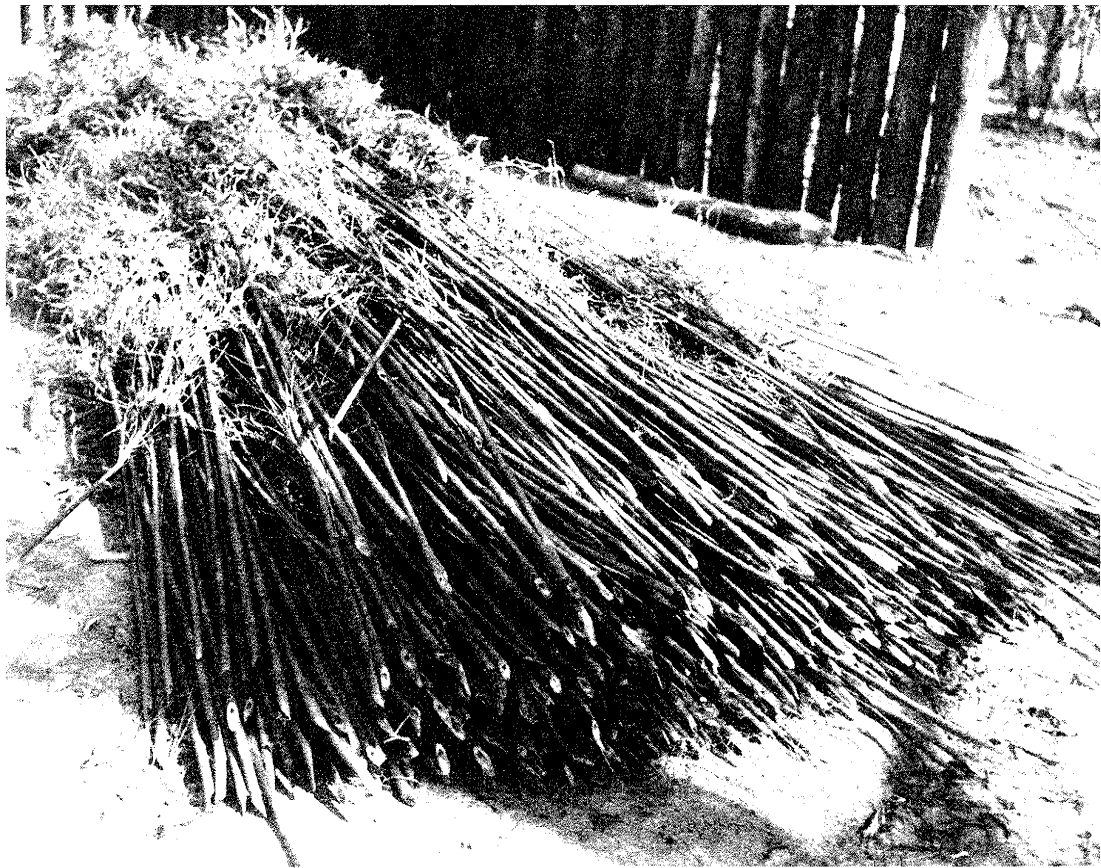
No tools are necessary in gathering honeysuckle. The vines are broken off near the roots by bending them sharply. They are then pulled free from the other vines, laid in long straight bundles and tied in several places. The bundles are then easily coiled and carried home.

PREPARING MATERIALS

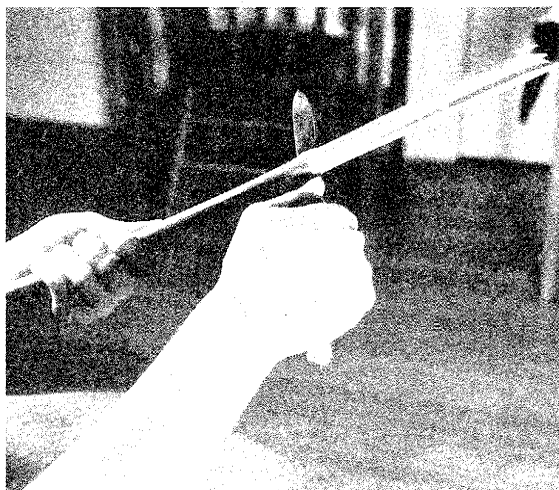
In their rough state, many of the materials for basketry would be as unfit for use as quarry clay would be for the potter or crude ore for the metallurgist. The Cherokee, using the simplest of tools, work the white oak logs, river cane, and wild honeysuckle into smooth, uniform materials for the warp and weft of their baskets.

The only tool needed for the preparation of cane is the jackknife. The worker cuts off and discards the small foliage-end of the cane. The large part of the cane is split lengthwise into four pieces. The basket maker then peels off the shiny outer surface of the cane. This is the part used in basketry (the coarse inner fiber of the cane is discarded). The cane splints are then trimmed along each edge to make them of uniform width. Scraping needs to be done on the inner surface only, because the shiny outer surface is part of the natural beauty of cane. These operations of splitting, peeling, trimming, and scraping produce strong flexible splints of uniform width and thickness.

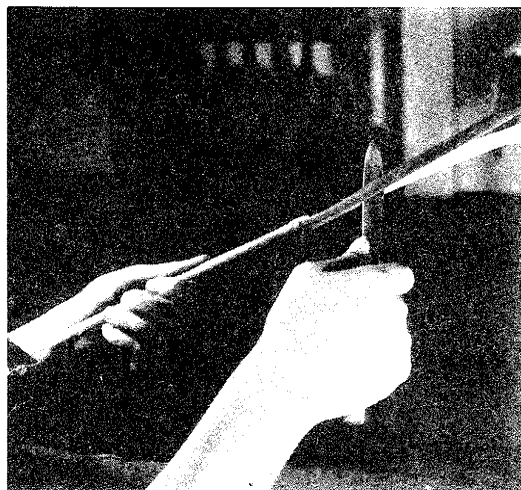
To prepare oak splints, the logs are first split lengthwise by driving a wedge, hatchet, or splitting axe into the end of the log. A small log is split into four pieces. A larger log will produce six, eight or more pieces. From this point on the only tool the Cherokee uses to prepare his oak splints is a jackknife. Each log section is trimmed to remove the bark and splinters. The jackknife is then inserted into the end of the log section parallel to the annual rings and far enough from the edge to make a splint of the proper thickness. After starting the splint, the knife is laid aside and the splint is



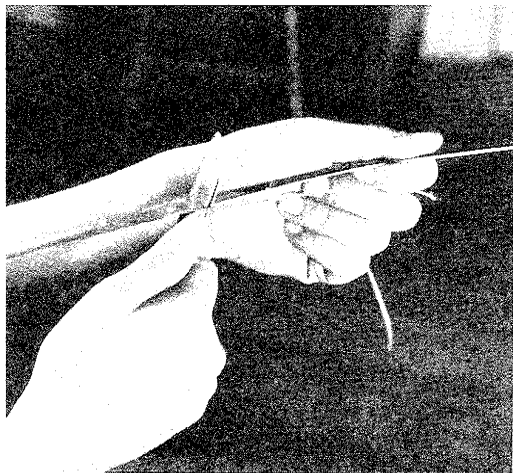
River cane that has just been harvested for use in the making of baskets.



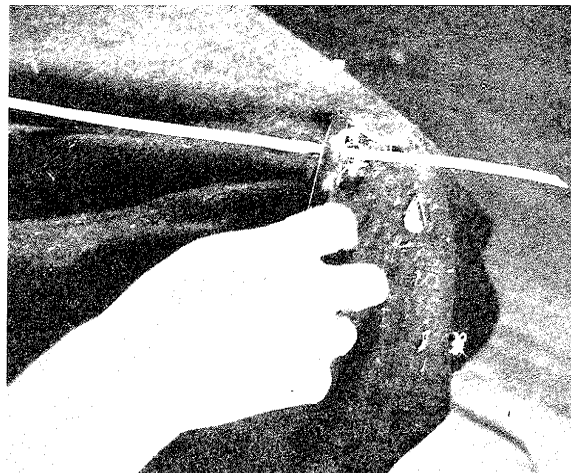
Splitting the cane. Cane is first split in half lengthwise. Each half is split again to make four pieces from each cane.



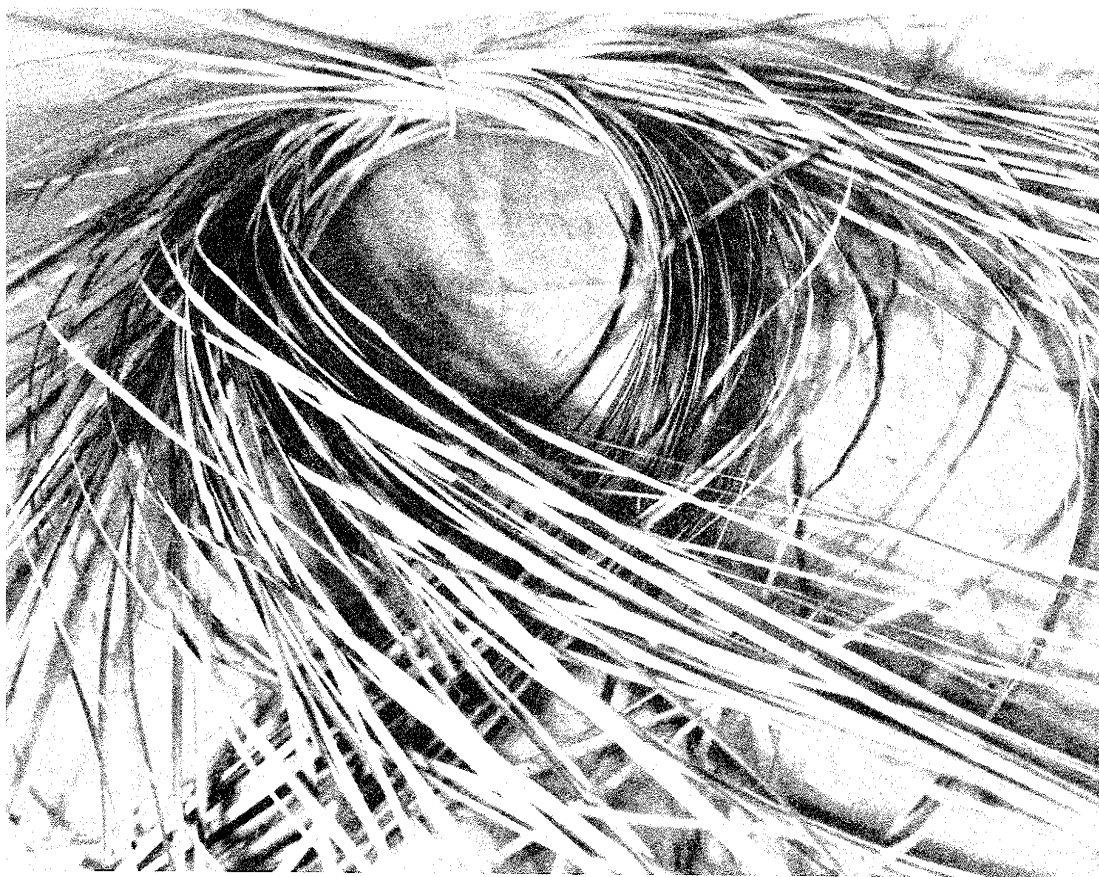
Peeling the cane. Each quartered piece of cane is split lengthwise to remove the shiny outer surface, which is the part used in basketry.



Trimming the cane to make the splints a uniform width.



Scraping the cane. This is done on the inner surface only, because the shiny outer surface is left to give a natural finish to the basket.



A bundle of prepared cane splints. These splints have been split, peeled, trimmed, and scraped.

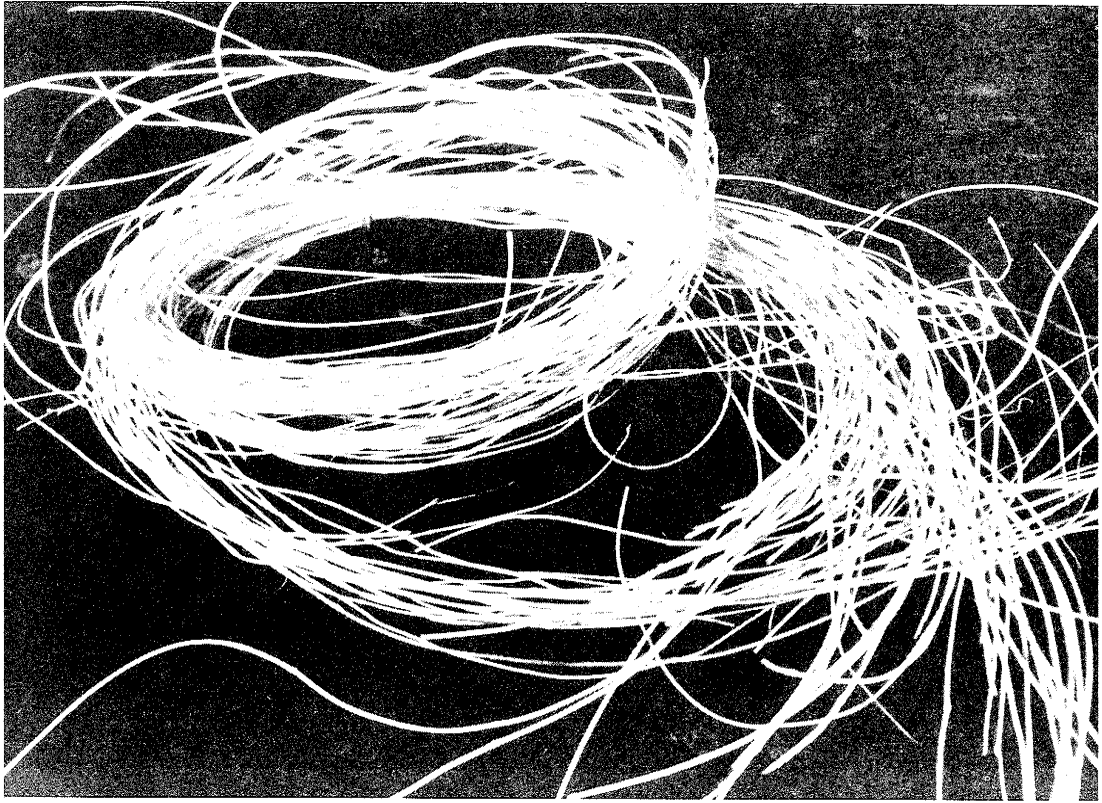


Cherokee man pounding his splitting axe into the end of a small white oak log. This is the first step in the preparation of oak splints for basketry.

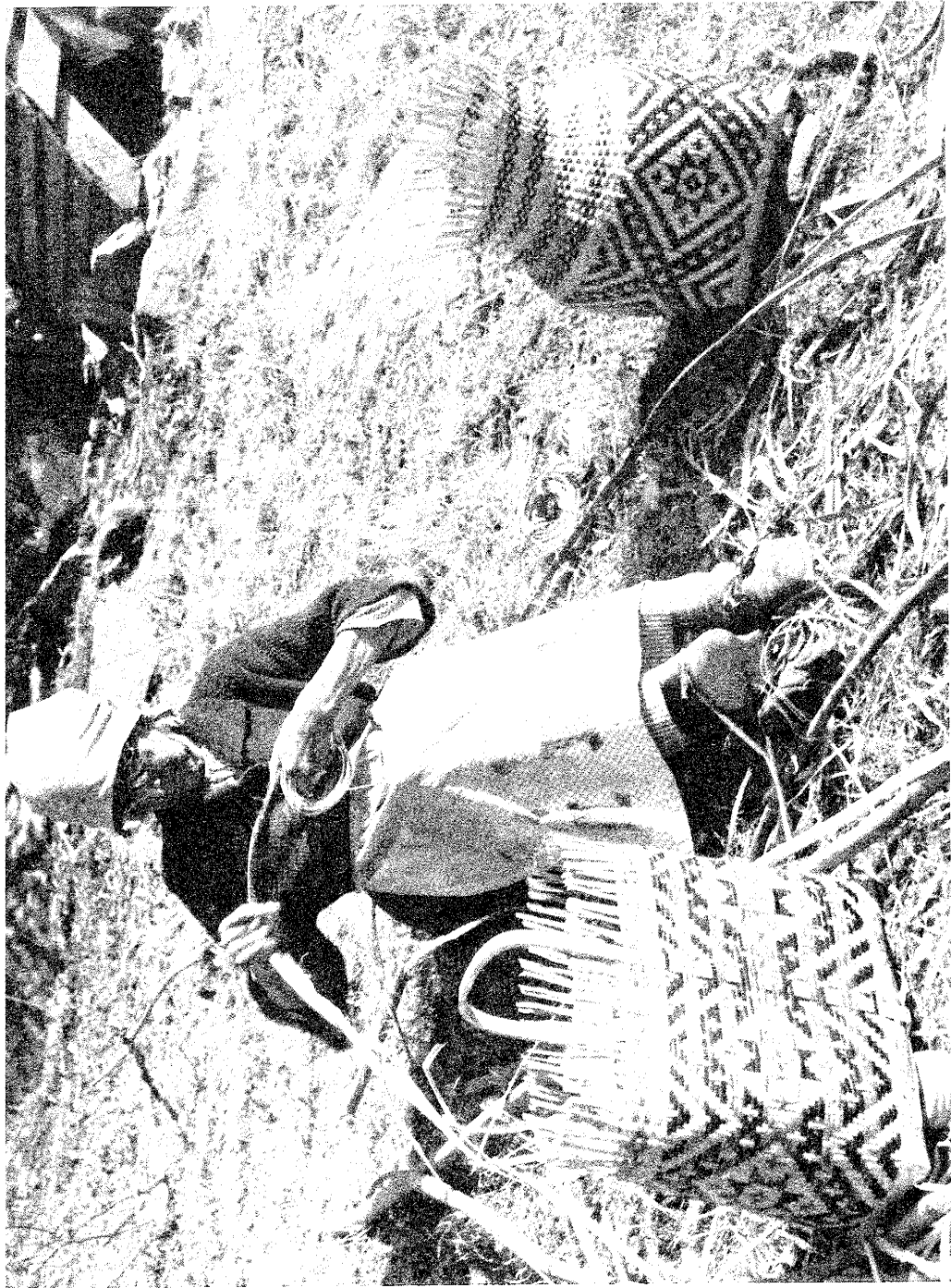


Oak splints are pulled apart with the hands after they have been started with a jackknife.

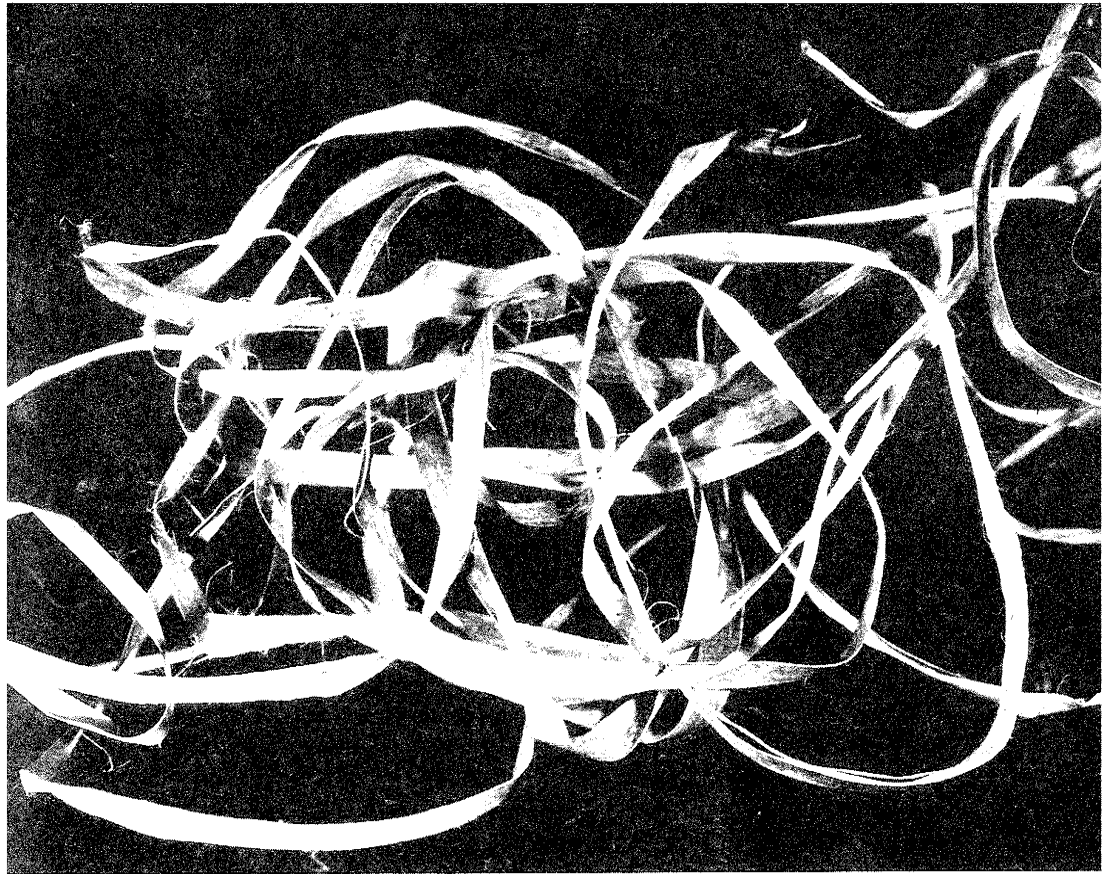
Honeysuckle that has just been gathered. It is rolled into a coil for convenience.



A bundle of honeysuckle with bark removed.



Mrs. Bradley coils hickory bark she has stripped from young saplings preparatory to placing it into a container to be boiled. The bark will be used to finish the tops of



Hickory bark is used to bind down the rim-hoops of many Cherokee baskets.



Bark basket. Bark was probably used by Indians prior to oak and cane splints.

peeled off the full length of the piece by pulling it apart with the hands. Much care is needed in this operation in order to produce splints of uniform width and thickness. When a splint starts to thin out or split off, the pulling must be done with the opposite hand.

After the oak splints have been stripped from the log sections, they are next trimmed to an even width with the jack-knife and then smoothed on upper and lower surfaces by scraping. In smoothing the splints the worker holds a knife, blade down, approximately even with his knees. The splint is drawn toward the worker beneath the knife. Some heavier splints are prepared from white oak for use as ribs, hoops, handles and the like.

Honeysuckle is quite easy to prepare. After gathering, the leaves and small branches are broken off. It is then coiled and placed in a deep pan, covered with water, and boiled until the bark begins to loosen. The bark can then be slipped off the vine by rubbing lengthwise with an old cloth. Any uneven joints, buds or knots are trimmed off with the jackknife.

Many Cherokee basket makers smooth and polish their honeysuckle vines by taking them to a stream where they use handfuls of sand to rub the vines.

If the honeysuckle vine is gathered at a time of year when the inner part of the vine is greenish instead of white, this greenish color may be removed by bleaching with any standard commercial bleach.

Hickory bark is prepared by peeling off long, narrow strips of bark from young hickory saplings. These are coiled, placed in a container, and boiled until the dark outer surface of the bark can be scraped off. This leaves a tough, tan-colored, flexible withe which the Cherokee use to bind down the rim-hoops of their baskets.

DYEING MATERIALS

The Cherokee depends largely on the natural colors of his basket materials for their charm and beauty. The rich yellow of the natural cane furnishes the foundation color of all

the cane baskets, while the natural color of the oak splints and honeysuckle does the same for these baskets. The Cherokee, however, makes very few plain baskets so it is necessary to dye the materials that are worked into the design.

Vegetable dyes are considered superior to commercial dyes for basketmaking because they are softer, more harmonious and less effected by fading. Usually when they do fade they still bear a definite relation to their original color, and often become softer and more beautiful without losing their character; while a faded synthetic dye usually bears little resemblance to its original tone. The fact that colors obtained from natural sources do not usually deteriorate in quality, but sometimes improve, is a definite advantage in their use.

The sources of vegetable dyes may be the roots, barks, leaves, hulls, nuts, flowers, fruits, stems, seeds, or the complete plant. In many cases, the time of the year when these are gathered is important. This would be obviously true with flowers and fruits, but it is also true with certain roots and barks.

Cherokee basket makers' chief dye materials are black walnut, butternut, bloodroot and yellowroot. Brown is obtained from the bark or the root of the black walnut. The same parts of the butternut tree produce a strong black. The root of the bloodroot produces a red brown color. The bark of the twigs of the yellowroot gives a maize yellow. Some Cherokee use the common broom sedge to produce a color known as burnt orange that works beautifully in basketry. Although some basket makers on the Reservation have recently used a few commercial dyes, even these wisely restrict themselves to the original browns, blacks, and reds.

The large majority of native vegetable dyes are made by boiling the plant materials. For a dye pot an enameled kettle is generally used. In former days, a wash pot was used and dyeing was done out in the open. Sometimes the material to be dyed is boiled with the dye source and sometimes not. In every case, the dye must be boiling when the material is immersed. If the dye is too strong, it can be diluted; if it is

found not strong enough, it can either be boiled down or more dye material added. During the dyeing process the material being dyed is turned over and over so that the color evenly reaches all the parts. A stick is used for turning the material.

The length of time required for the dyeing process varies from fifteen minutes to eight hours depending on the material being dyed, strength of dye and intensity of color desired. Cane is the hardest material and takes the longest time for the colors to penetrate. Oak splints and honeysuckle are softer and need be boiled only about half as long as cane to absorb an equal intensity of color. Dyeing is the final step in the preparation of basketry materials.

PROCESSES OF MANUFACTURE

After the basket materials are split, peeled, scraped, and dyed, they are ready for fabrication into baskets of varying size, shape, weave, and use. In all types of weave the working strands must be pliable. The Cherokee use the materials soon after preparation and while still filled with sap, or else they soak them in a bowl of water until they are flexible enough to work easily. They are kept damp or are redampened during the weaving process.

As one gazes on an Indian basket maker he will be amazed to find that she uses no models, drawings or patterns. Her patterns are in her soul, in her memory and her imagination, in the mountains, streams and forests, and in those tribal tales and myths that are a tradition with her tribe.

Various techniques are used by Indian basket-makers. A brief look at the over-all picture will help us to better visualize those types employed by the Cherokee.

There are two distinct types of techniques in basketry; namely, (1) handwoven basketry, which is built on a warp foundation, and (2) sewed or *coiled* basketry, which is built on a foundation of rods, splints, or straws.

Kinds of Woven Basketry:

- A. Checkerwork: The warp and the weft having the same width, thickness, and pliability.

- B. Diagonal or twilled basketry: Two or more weft strands over two or more warp strands.
- C. Wickerwork: Inflexible warp; slender, flexible weft.
- D. Wrapped weft, or single weft wrapped: The weft strand is wrapped, or makes a bight about the warp at each decussation.
- E. Twined or wattled basketry: Weft of two or more elements.

Kinds of Coiled Basketry:

- A. Coiled work without foundations
- B. Simple interlocking coils
- C. Single-rod foundation
- D. Two-rod foundation
- E. Rod and welt foundation
- F. Two-rod and splint foundation
- G. Three-rod foundation
- H. Splint foundation
- I. Grass-coil foundation
- J. Fuegian coiled basketry

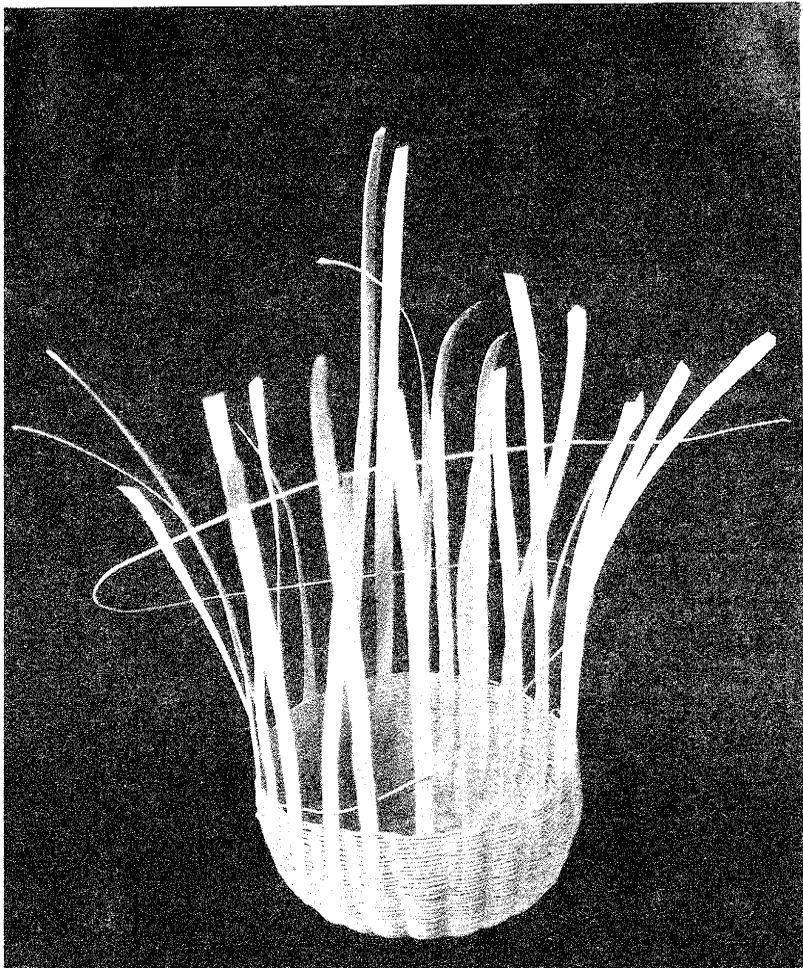
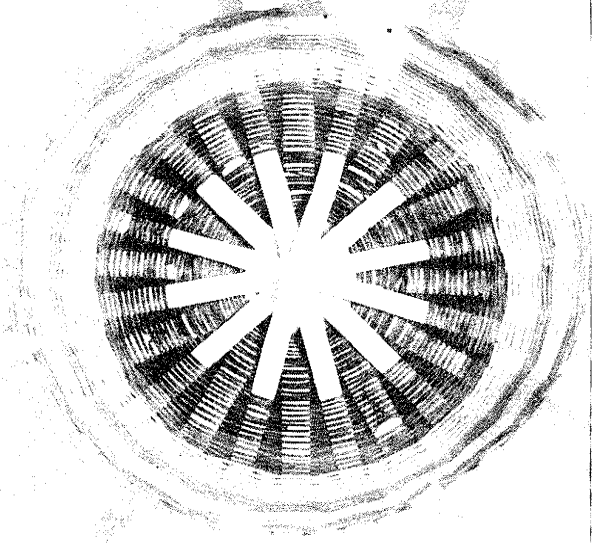
All Cherokee baskets fall into the first three classifications under Woven Basketry. The only coiling technique used is in binding the rim-hoops of some of their baskets.

Checkerwork (also known as mat weave and plaiting) is used in most Cherokee oak-splint work. This occurs especially in the bottoms of the baskets and generally continues up the sides. In this ware, the warp and weft have the same thickness and pliability. It is impossible, therefore, in looking at the bottoms of these oak-splint baskets, to tell which is warp and which is weft. The warp and weft of a checker-bottom are usually turned up at right angles to form the warp of the sides and new splints are added for the weft.

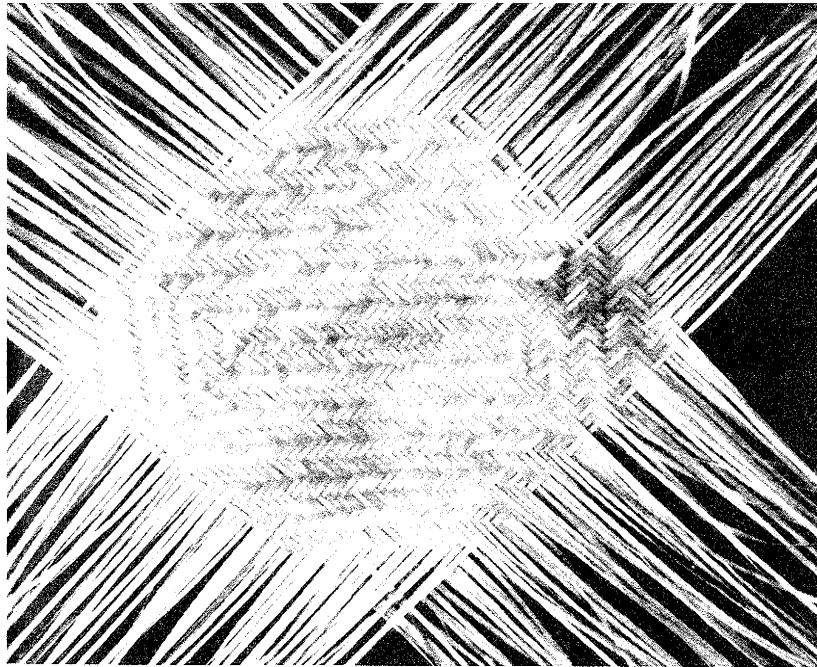
Checkerwork baskets are started by placing a number of splints side by side to make the warp. Then weft splints are woven one at a time over and under the warp at right angles. As this continues a mat is formed and when the proper size for the bottom of the basket is reached all splints are turned up to form the warp of the sides.

This simple over-and-under weave makes a strong basket

Bottom of an oak splint and honeysuckle basket.



Weaving the sides of an oak splint and honeysuckle basket. Two weavers are used in this process and the basket maker is now ready to insert a new one.

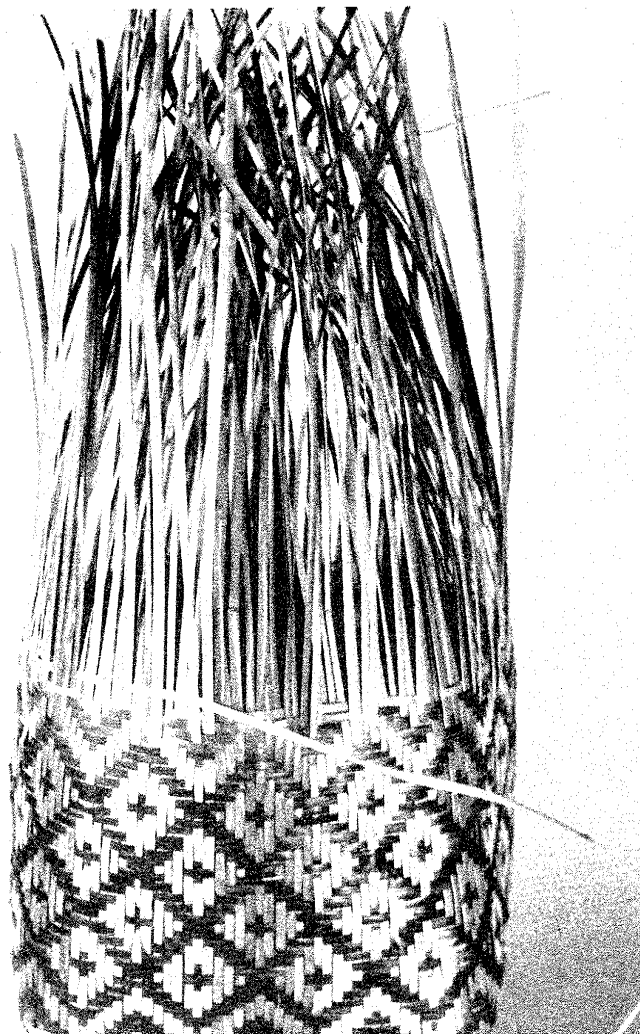
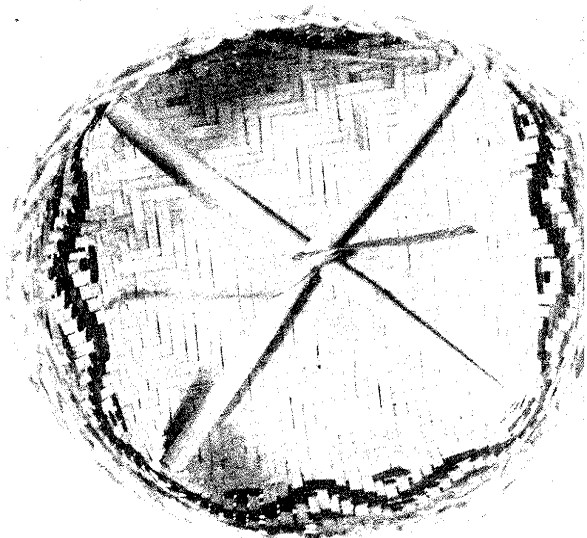


Bottom of a "double weave" basket ready for the sides to be turned up.

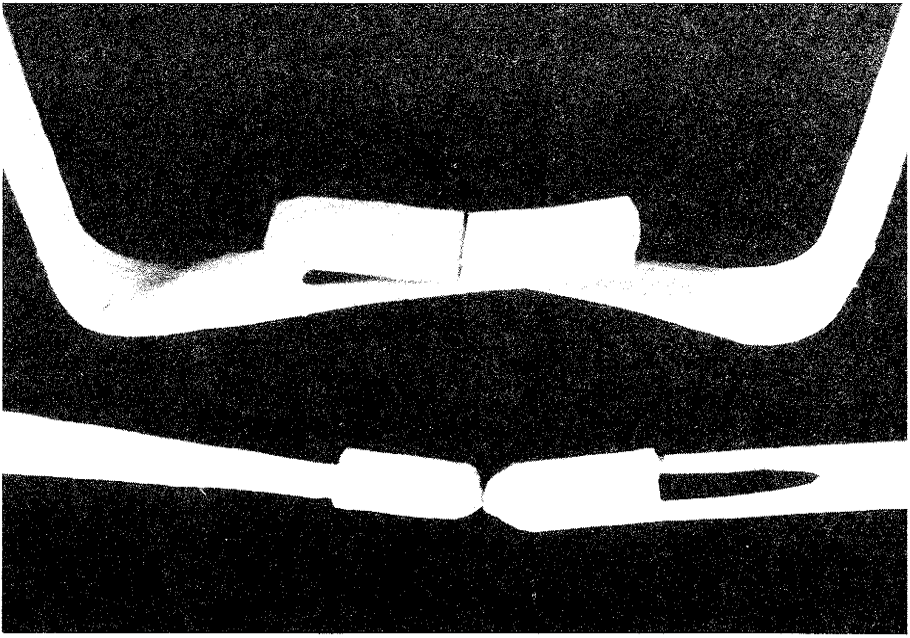


Partially completed "double weave" basket shows how sides are woven obliquely.

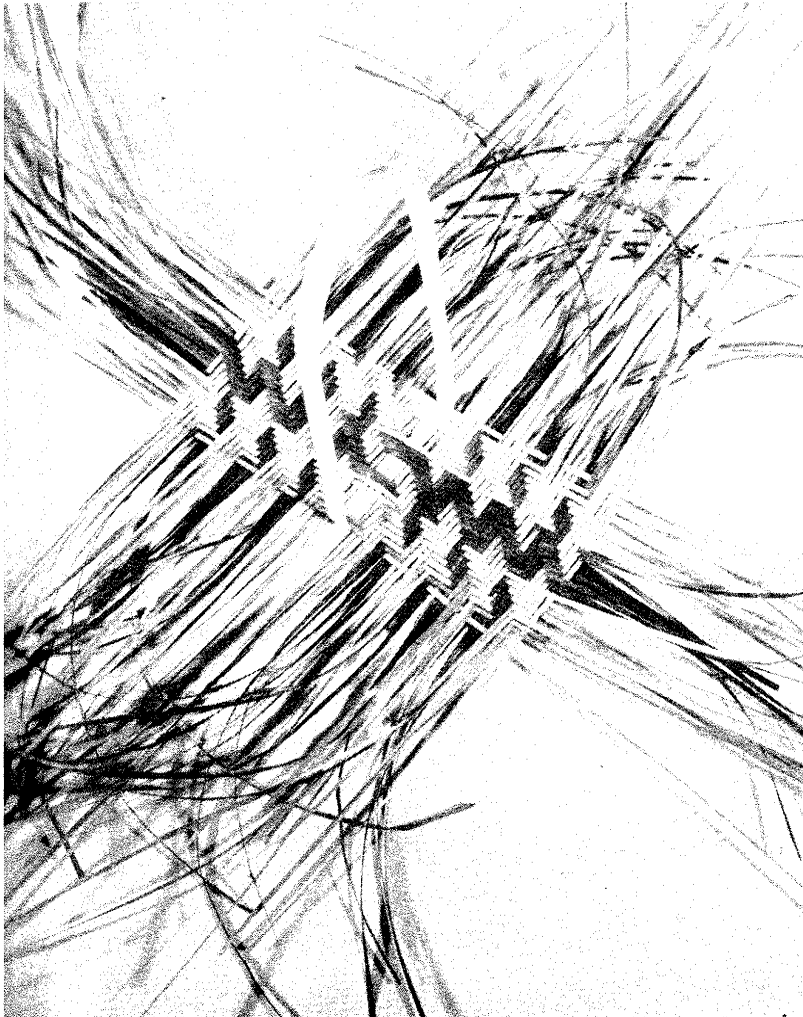
Crossed sticks or canes placed in the bottom of a basket during construction aid the basket maker to secure good form and contour. The sticks are removed when basket is completed.



Cane basket under construction shows how weft element is worked over-and-under the upright splints to create design.



Cherokee basket handles of white oak. Lower handle shows how ends are carved. Upper handle has ends locked in place.



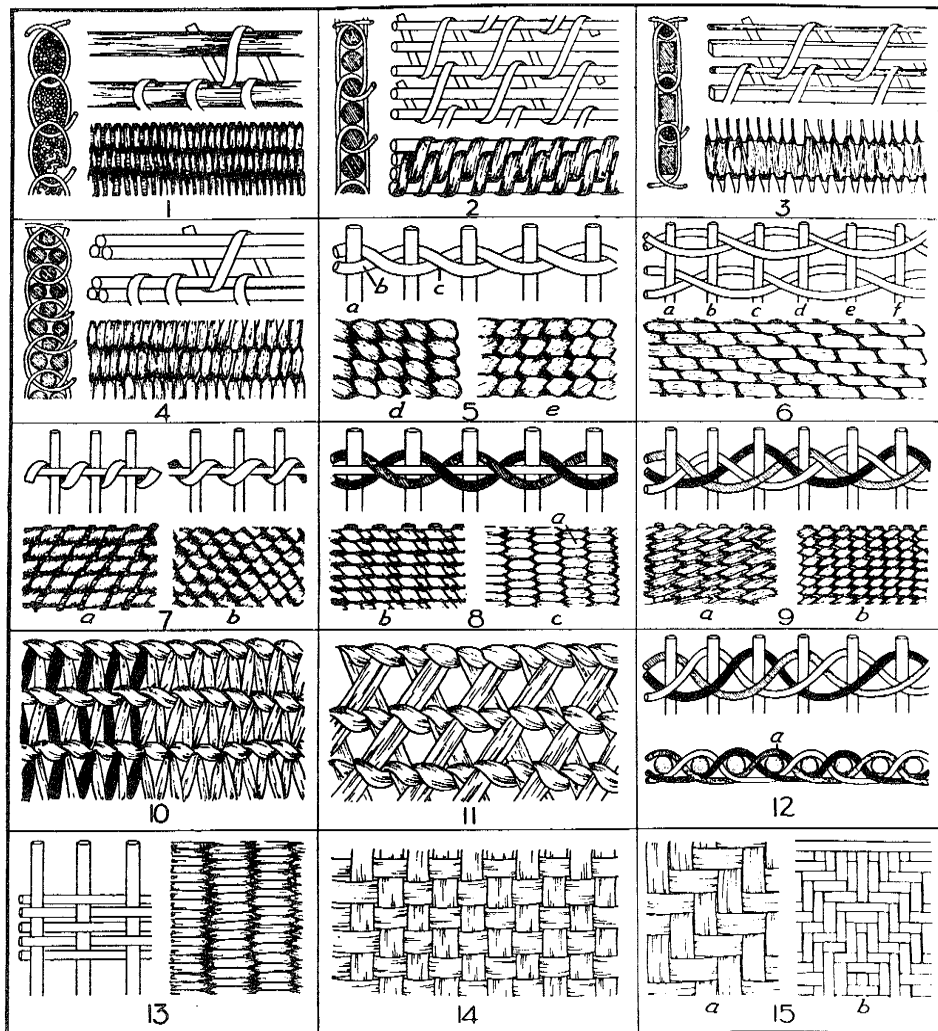
The handle of this cane market basket is woven in as the basket is made.

DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

FREDERIC H. DOUGLAS, CURATOR



Adapted in part from Weltfish and Mason

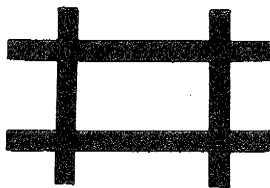
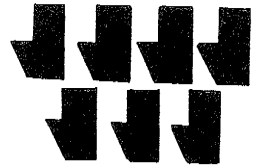
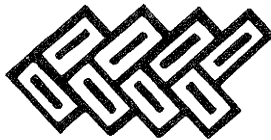
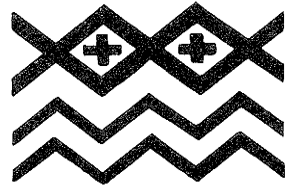
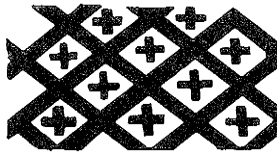
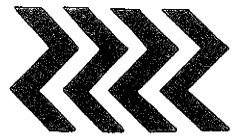
BASKETRY CONSTRUCTION TECHNICS

LEAFLET 67

DECEMBER, 1935

2nd Printing, September, 1940

Basketry construction techniques. Reproduced from a Denver Art Museum leaflet. The Cherokee use only techniques 13 wickerwork, 14 checkerwork and 15 twilling in their baskets.



Early Cherokee basketry designs. Reproduced from *Decorative Art and Basketry of the Cherokee* by permission of the Milwaukee Public Museum.

and Cherokee basket makers have worked out an amazing variety of patterns and designs by varying the width and colors of splints used.

On certain of their baskets the checkerwork is left open to form the mesh of the sifters and winnowing baskets. The amount of opening is varied to fit the use of the basket; for example, a meal sifter would be woven with a finer mesh than a hominy basket. This checkerwork weave is used most often on the market baskets, waste baskets, rib baskets and fish baskets.

Twilling is the prevailing weave used in Cherokee cane basketry. The fundamental technique of twilledwork (diagonal basketry) is in passing each element of the weft over two or more warp elements, thus producing either diagonal or twilled, or, in the best examples, an endless variety of diaper patterns. The twilling technique dates back to prehistoric times in the Cherokee area.

In twilling there are four fundamental variations showing some minor irregularities, the following of which produce the different designs. The bottom of the basket is often begun with double splints in an over-two-under-two weave. When the walls are reached the weave is continued for from three to six courses, in what may be an over-two-under-two up to over-five-under-five technique, to the point where the design is begun. Here, too, the number of over and under turns ranges from over-three-under-three to over-five-under-five until the region near the rim is reached, when the pattern may change again. It will be seen, then, that the figure proportions in the designs themselves are determined by following a certain mathematical scheme of over and under turns of the splints. This produces geometrical patterns within certain limits, such as diagonals, diamonds, horizontal or vertical zigzags and combinations of these with a few minor variations. These designs are wholly dependent upon passing by or adding one or more standard (upright) splints in each course of the filling. The basket maker is more conscious of varying the weave to make the design right than counting the number of over and under turns.

The following tabulated figures, taken from an examination of the several collections mentioned, show the proportionate occurrences of the variations in the work of the Cherokee.

Cherokee Basketry collection	over-one-under-one	over-two-under-two	over-three-under-three	over-four-under-four	over-five-under-five	Total Specimens Examined
American Museum of Natural History, N. Y.	6	5	18	3		32
Museum of the American Indian, N. Y.	8	2	25	5	3	43
Milwaukee Public Museum	5	2	10	10	1	28
Cherokee Indian Reservation, N. C.	13	3	22	5		43
Specimens examined elsewhere	3		5	1		9
Totals	35	12	80	24	4	155

This table was taken in part from *Decorative Art and Basketry of the Cherokee* by Frank G. Speck. Those baskets studied on the Reservation and elsewhere were examined by the author.

The figures in this table represent the predominating technique in each basket, chiefly in the lower part of the sides and in the design area. Thus it appears that more than half of the specimens examined are woven in an over-three-under-three twill. Correlating the designs with these twill variations, we find the over-three-under-three more often employed in forming the diamond pattern, and the over-four-under-four more often in the chain pattern; usually, however, these two appear most frequently combined in the same baskets. Sometimes, to cite an ordinary case, we find a basket begun by the over-three-under-three process in the lower part and changed to the over-two-under-two near the rim.

At times, in both checkerwork and twilling, the warp and the weft may be worked up obliquely, instead of vertically and horizontally. The chief examples of this technique are to be found in the twilled "double weave" baskets of the Cherokee. These are by far the most complex of all their baskets. In the "double weave" the splints are laid diagonally on the

bottom; that is, not at right angles to each other as in other forms. Then they are continued up the sides obliquely across the basket, the whole forming a diagonal twill. When the top of the basket is reached, the splints are bent over the rim and the oblique weaving is continued down the outside and under the bottom. During the first part of the weaving up to the rim, the flat, inner surfaces of the cane are turned out; as the splints are bent over the rim the flat surfaces are turned inside and the weaving continues in this manner. This exposes only the smooth, outer surfaces of the cane, thus the basket is completed in double facing, the inside and outside having only the glossy surface of the material showing. Even the patterns may vary inside and outside according to the number of under and over turns of the weave.

Wickerwork is probably the most common of all basket weaving techniques and is recognized as one of the most primitive forms of this industrial art. It is also known as the web weave, getting its name from the spider web appearance it has during weaving.

Cherokee use wickerwork in their honeysuckle baskets. This technique consists of a wide or thick inflexible warp and a slender flexible weft. The weaving is plain and differs from checkerwork only in the fact that one of the elements is rigid. The effect on the surface is a series of ridges.

Both mats and round baskets are made by this technique. If honeysuckle is used for the warp, the mat or basket is started by placing the required number of spokes at right angles to each other, then the weft strand is woven over and under this group for two full turns. The spokes are then spread into a radiating pattern. After spreading, the weaver goes over and under each spoke separately. Upon completion of one row, an odd spoke must be inserted or an extra weaver must be added, for proper web weaving can never be done with an even number of spokes and a single weaver. Cherokee basket makers generally use two weavers, allowing one to pass in front of the warp elements while the other passes behind them.

It is often necessary as one weaver runs out to start a

new one. The end of the last weaver is left behind a spoke with about three-quarters of an inch to spare. This is crossed with an equal length of the new weaver and weaving proceeds. When the basket is completed and dry, the unnecessary ends are cut off.

Oak splints are often combined with honeysuckle in Cherokee sewing baskets and waste baskets. These baskets are started by placing the splints, which will serve as the warp, one by one across each other so that they will form a radiating fan pattern. The weavers of honeysuckle are inserted between two of the splints and held tightly with one hand while the other hand is used to work them in and out around the center. As the weaving continues, the spaces between the splints will increase in size. These spaces may be filled by adding a second group of splints placed so that they fall between those used to start the basket. When as many rounds as necessary are woven for the bottom, each spoke is bent up to form the foundation for the sides. The weaving of the sides continues in the same manner as the bottom. The tops of honeysuckle baskets are bound in place with a withe of hickory bark or white oak.

Some baskets, such as market baskets and shopping baskets, require handles. The Cherokee carve these from white oak or hickory. A type of handle that locks together is generally used to insure strength. After carving, the handle is soaked well and bent to the proper shape, tied securely in this shape and allowed to dry. Most handles are woven in as the basket is made rather than being added later.

The borders or rims of Cherokee baskets are finished in several ways. The purposes of the border are to strengthen the basket, improve its looks, and dispose of the upright warp elements. Checker or twilled weaving with the edges left open all around would be a flimsy affair. Coiled work lends a hand in putting a finish on woven work. The Cherokee generally use a binding withe of hickory bark or white oak for this coiling.

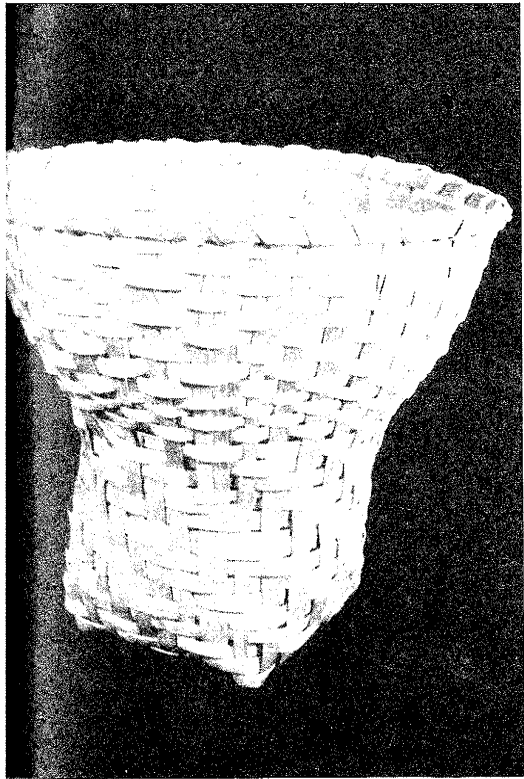
When the sides of an oak basket are ready to be finished, the last weft circuit is made with a thicker and wider weft

than those used in the body of the basket. The warps that remain outside the last circuit are cut halfway across from the right hand side, level with the top of the basket. The remaining half is shortened and sharpened and tucked down inside the basket under the wefts. The other warps are trimmed level with the top and then two rims are put in place. These rims, split from hickory or oak, are thicker than other elements of the basket and are rounded on their outer surfaces. The ends of each rim are tapered in order not to make it too bulky at the point where they cross. The basket is finished by binding these rims in place with a flexible withe of hickory bark or white oak.

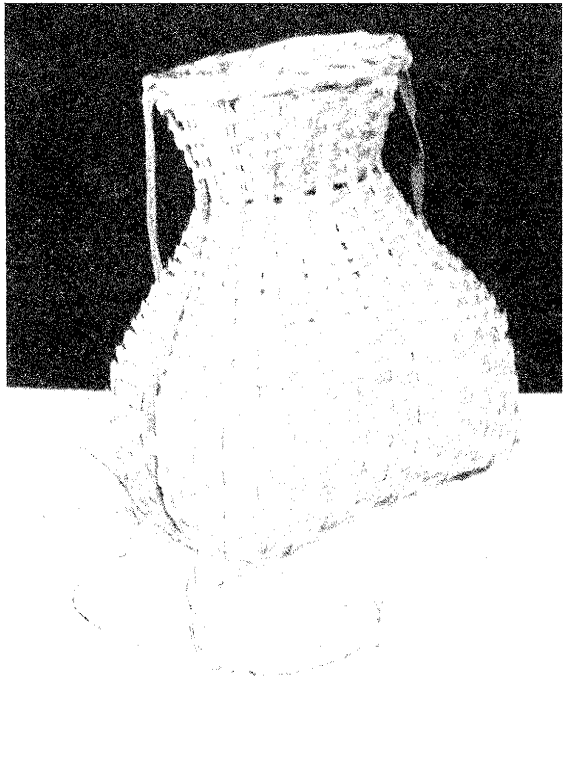
In cane basketry the protruding ends of the upright standards are disposed of by winding them into the rim. This resembles closely the interlacing of a series of crossed warps. The rim hoops may then be bound in place to strengthen the top. Cherokee methods of finishing borders are similar to those used by other Southern tribes.

BASKETRY FORMS

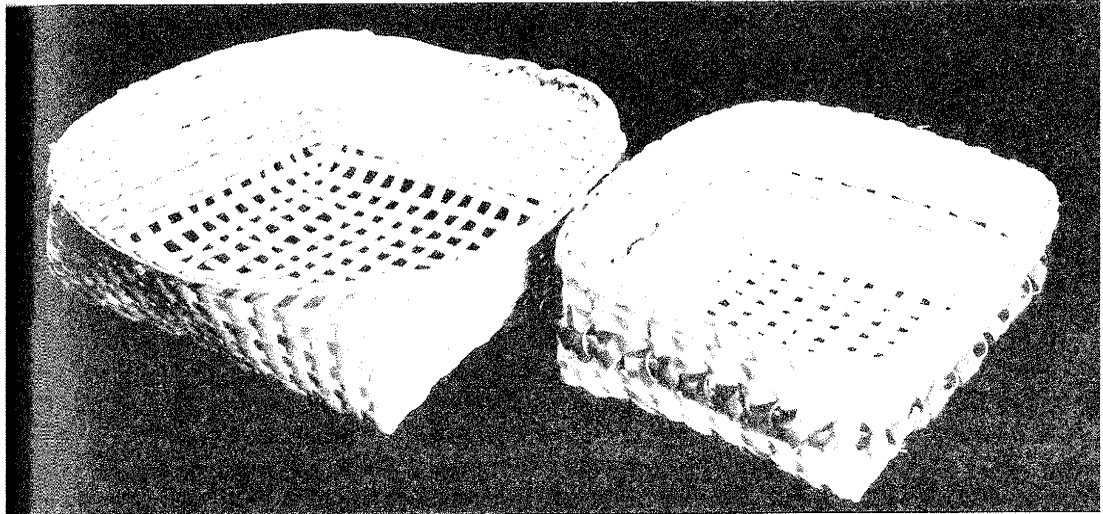
Form in basketry is decided at the outset, not by the desire to create something artistic, but to produce a useful receptacle. Although function is considered first, a sense of symmetry and other artistic qualities enter into the composition of all Cherokee baskets. The shapes of basketry have relation to the forms of solid geometry. The cube, the cone, the cylinder, and the sphere are the bases of all simple and complicated varieties. Most Cherokee baskets are cylindrical or rectangular in outline. In giving to basketry the forms just indicated, the Indian woman has always in mind the elements of the beautiful as well as of the useful. It is considered a reproach to violate the rules of bilateral symmetry or proportion in form. The manipulation of basket materials to produce baskets that are symmetrical and of pleasing contour is recognized as the most difficult task in basketry. Cherokee baskets are made in a wide variety of forms which may be classified as: flat forms, dish forms, bowl forms, jar forms, and miscellaneous forms.



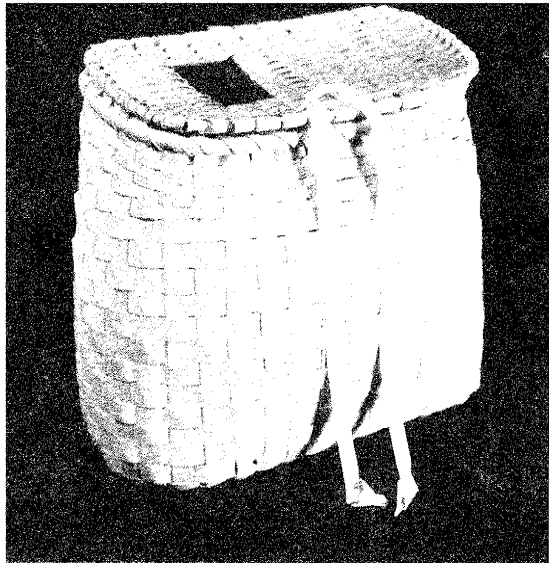
A Cherokee pack basket of white oak splints. Over one hundred years old. Note where new splints have been added. The top rim is bound with hickory bark.



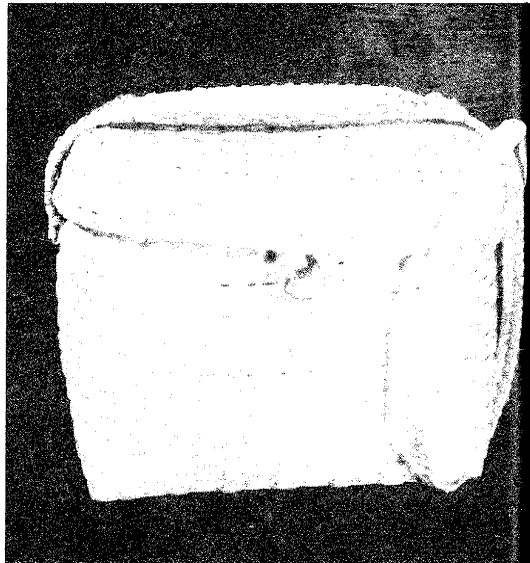
Early Cherokee fish basket of oak splints. The basket was purposely made small so that the fisherman would not catch more fish at one time than he could use. A horsehair fishing line is shown with the basket. Museum of the Cherokee Indian, Cherokee, North Carolina.



Hominy sifters. The one on the left is very old. The one on the right is a newer, fancier reproduction. Both are made of oak splints.

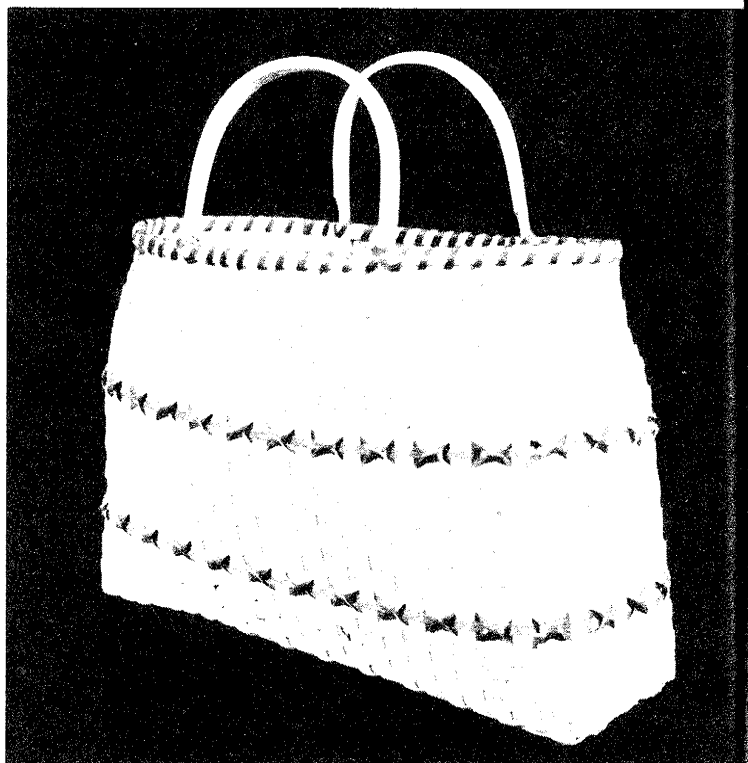


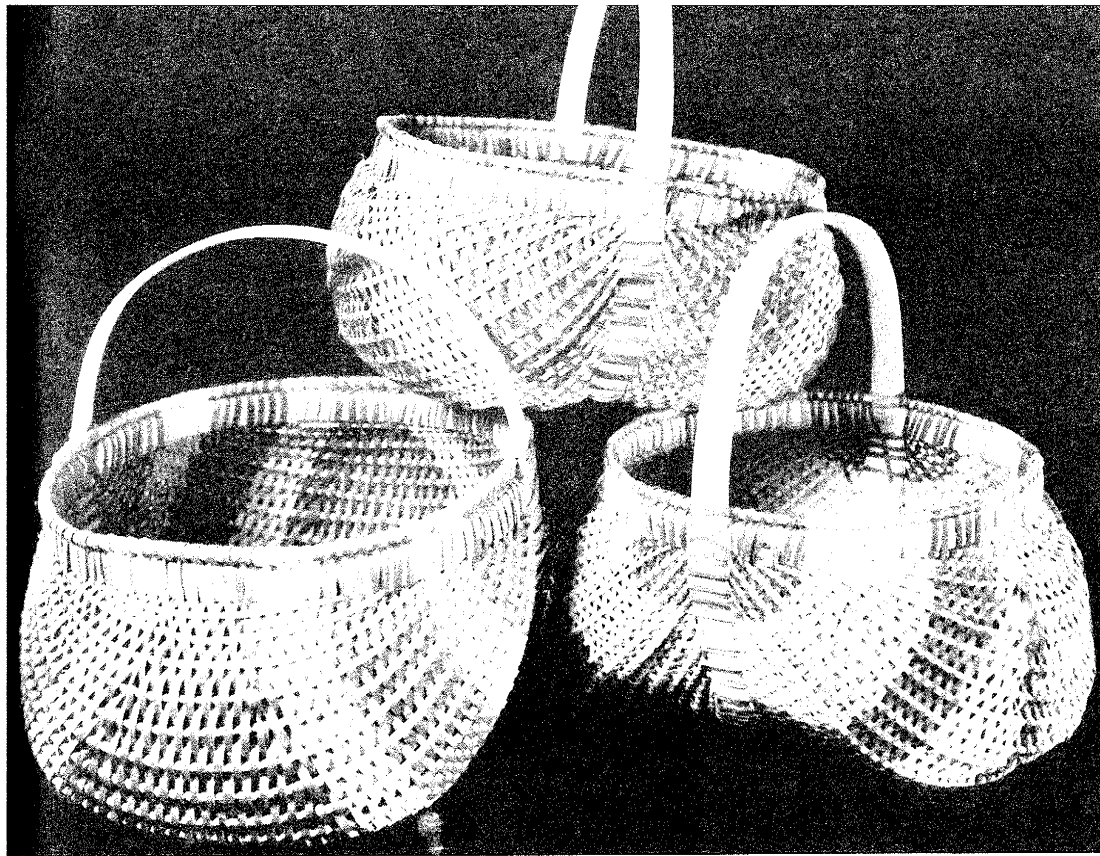
Trout basket with hinged lid. Made by Lottie Stamper with white oak splints.



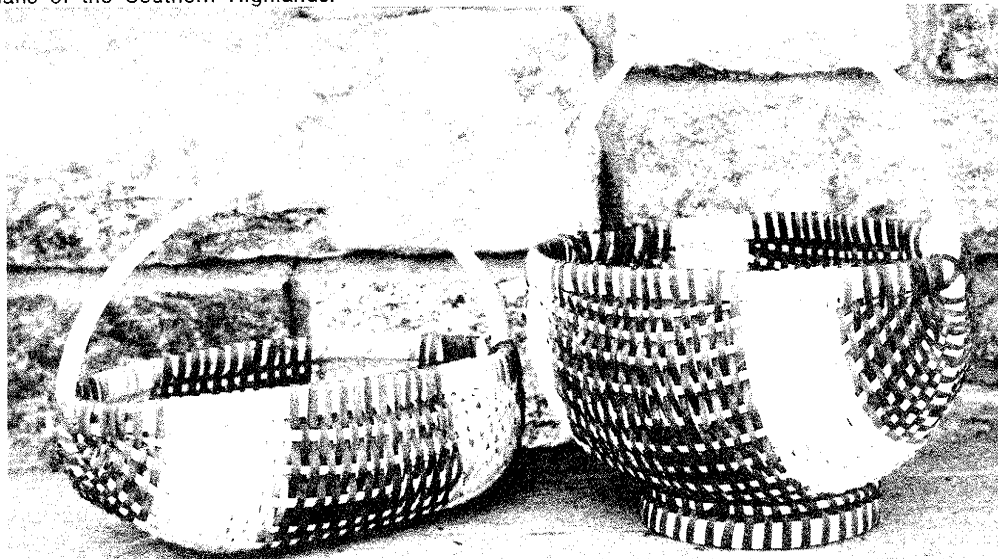
Lady's over-the-shoulder bag. Made of white oak splints by Lottie Stamper.

Oak-splint shopping bag. Decorated with two colorful cross-stitch bands.

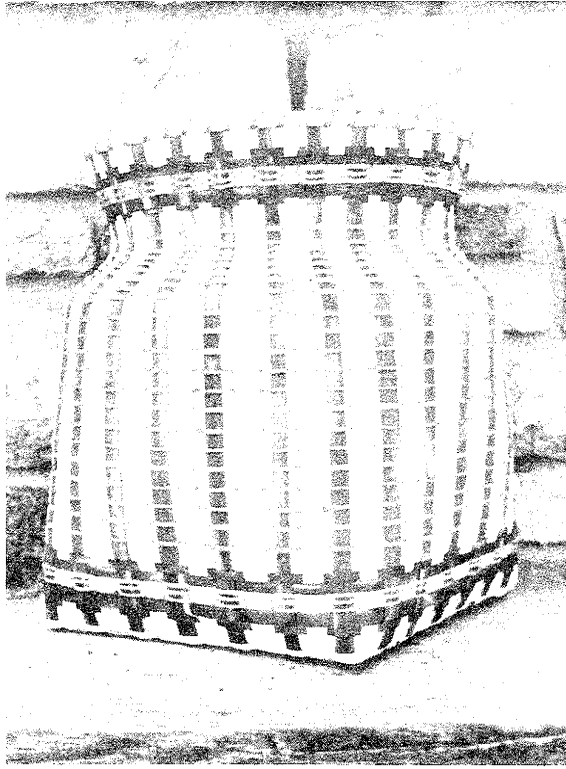




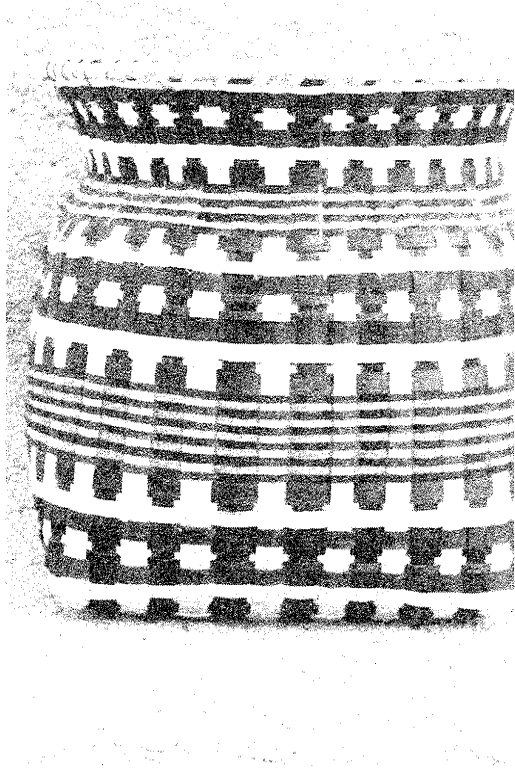
Colorful rib baskets. Also known as saddle, pack or bow baskets. This is not a traditional Cherokee shape, but has been made for many years by both white men and Indians of the Southern Highlands.



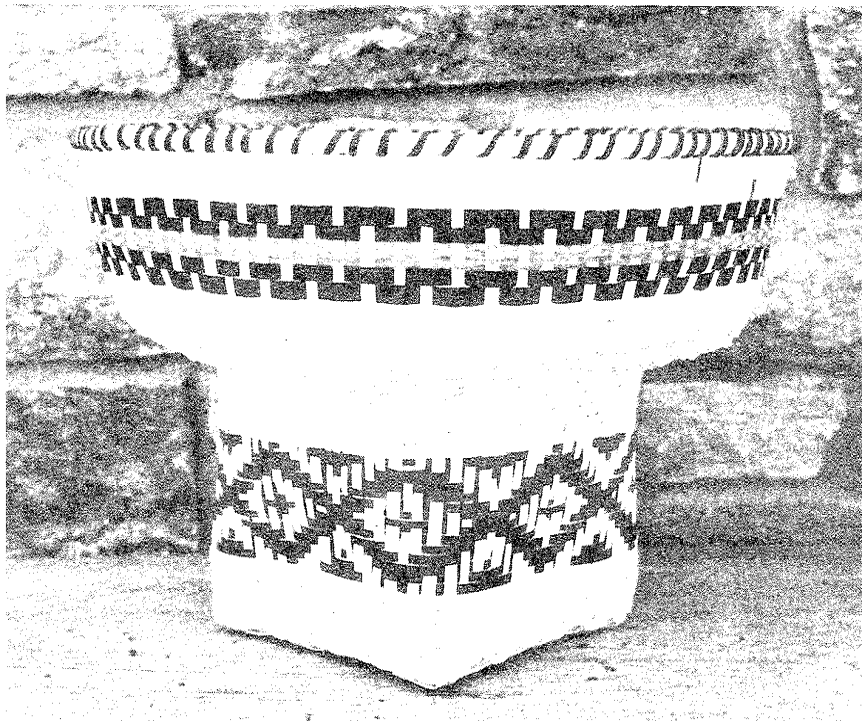
White oak rib baskets. Oval basket on left. Round basket with foot on right.



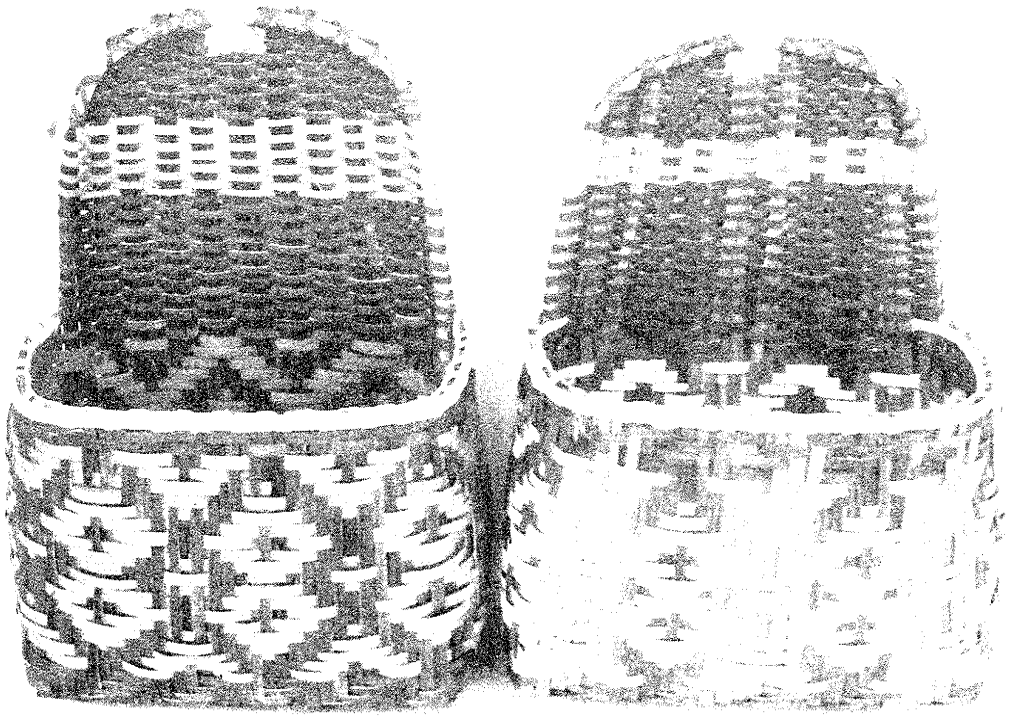
White oak basket. Design formed by alternating narrow and wide weaving splints.



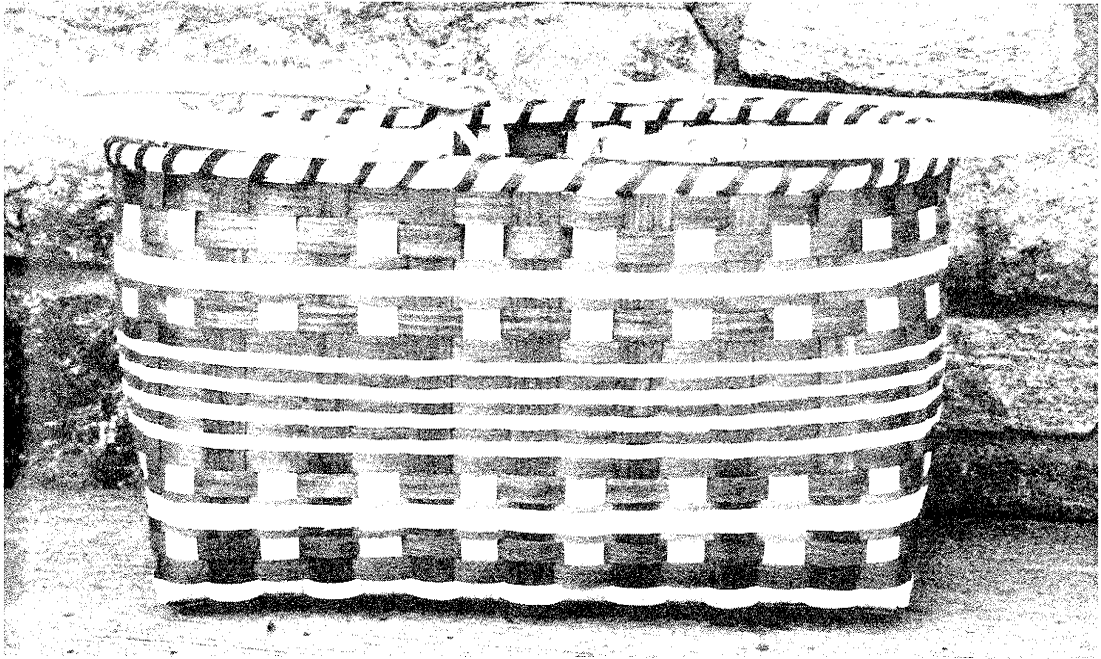
White oak waste basket. Native dyes of blood root and walnut were used for some splints. Design is obtained by variation in width of splints. From the collection of the author.



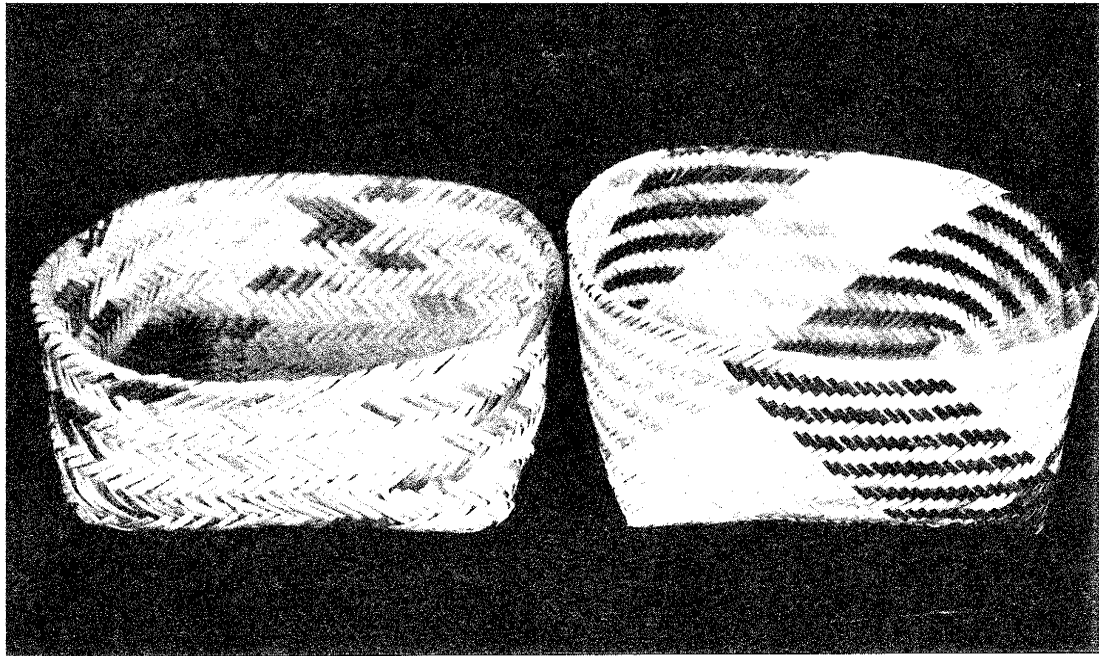
Square to round white oak basket.



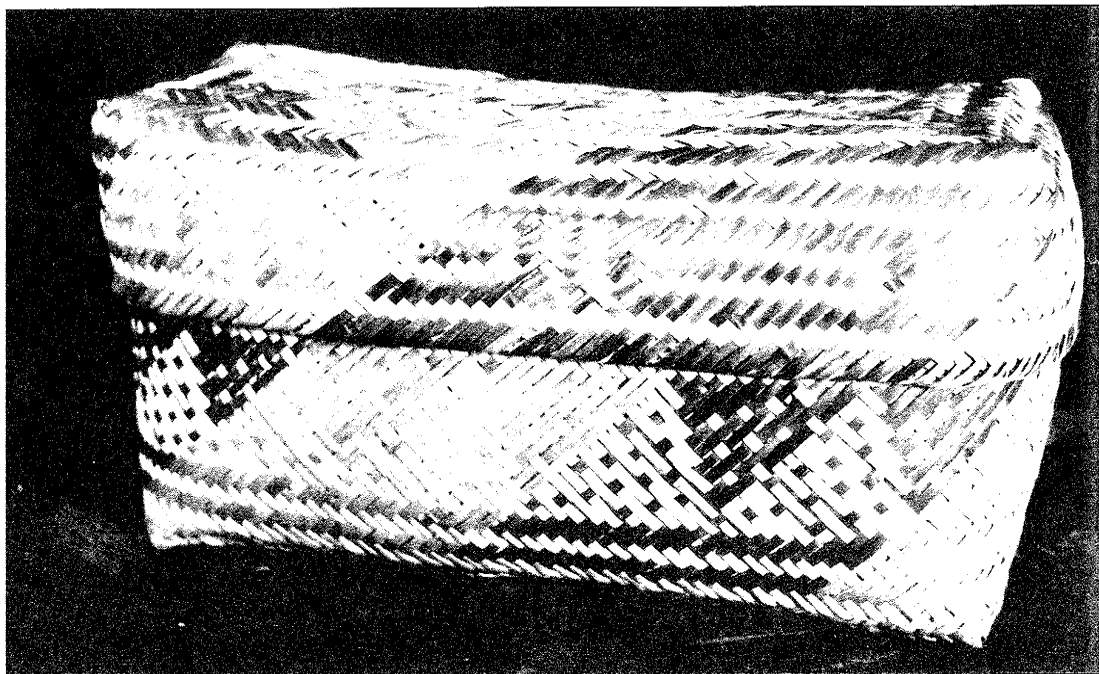
Wall or hanging baskets of white oak.



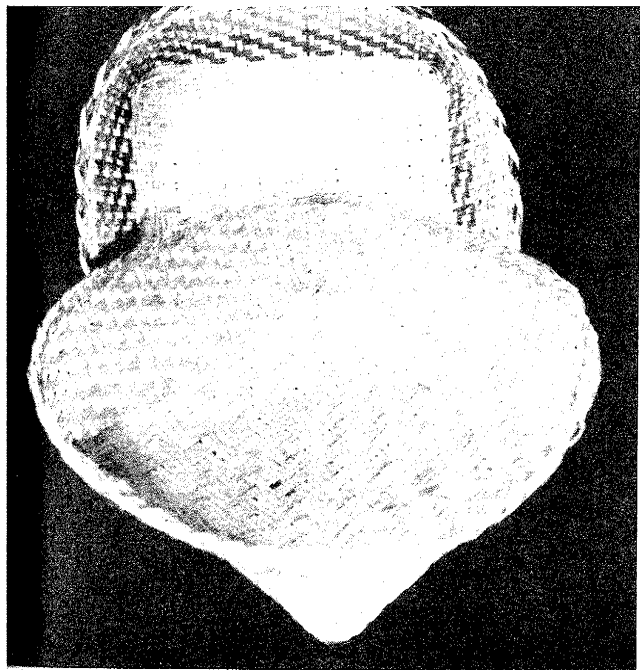
Market basket of white oak with carved handles.



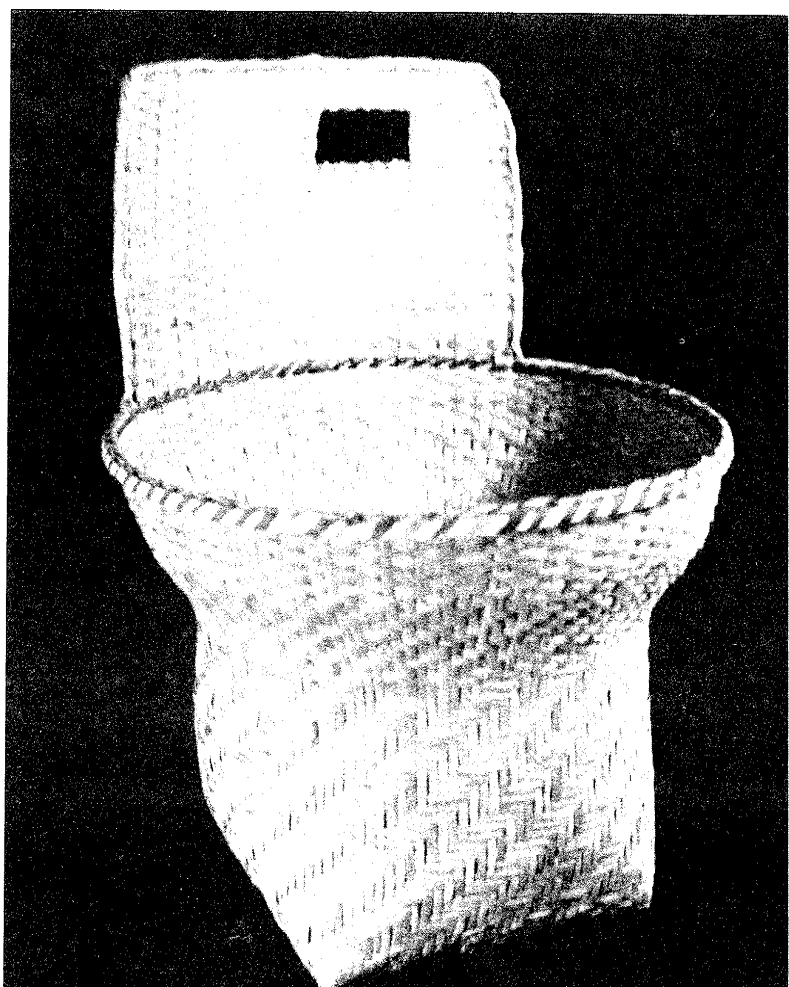
Cherokee double-weave baskets. Basket on left is about one hundred years old. Basket on right is new and illustrates flowing water design.



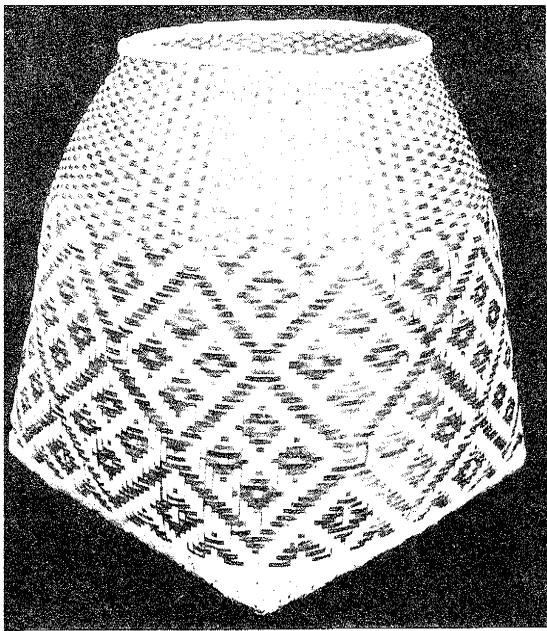
Double-weave basket with lid. This basket was reproduced from a photostatic copy of a Cherokee double-weave basket that has been in the British Museum since 1725. Basket is of split cane and is about eighteen inches long. Chief's coffin design on lid, arrow point design on body.



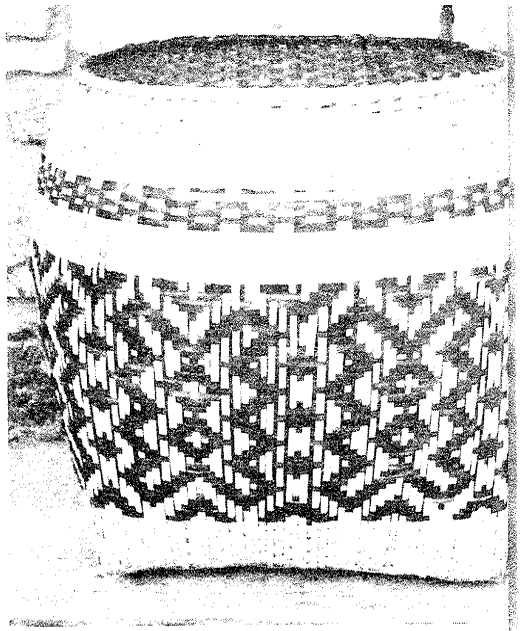
Cherokee bread baskets of native split cane. The one in foreground has been used for many years to drain chestnut bread and as a utility basket about the kitchen. The one in back is a recent reproduction.



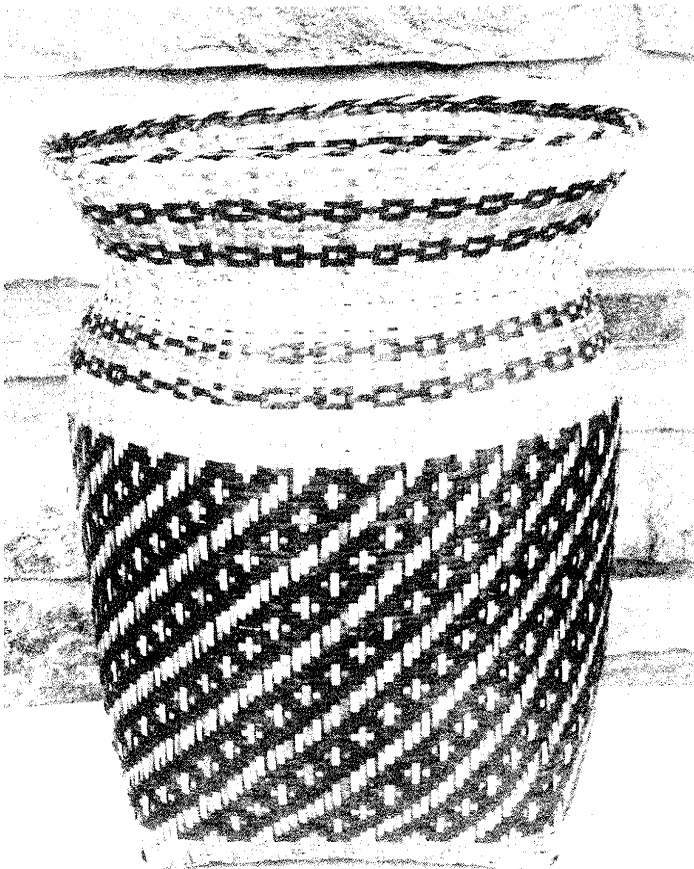
Carrying basket of split cane. This was not strictly a Cherokee style but was typical of all Southeastern tribes. Hole in flap is a hand grip for use when basket is carried on the back.



Burden or storage basket of cane. A large basket used by the Cherokee for carrying and storing grain. The big diamond design was used here. This shape is often used today for wastebaskets.



Barrel-shaped cane basket with chain and double chief's daughters designs.



Cane waste basket. Dyed with bloodroot and black walnut. Chain and cross-on-the-hill designs used.

DECORATION

The natural crossing of warps and weft elements in checkerwork, wickerwork and twilling produces pleasing patterns in itself, but the Cherokee add to the beauty of their baskets by the use of color and designs. Bold all-over patterns are worked into most of their ware. Naturally colored structural materials account for a good portion of the designs used on their baskets. Most baskets so decorated have a light background (the natural color of oak, cane or honeysuckle) on which appear designs in shades of black, brown, red, yellow, or any combination of these. These colored materials are part of the warp and weft elements that are dyed before the weaving starts.

When color is used, mosaic effects are produced in woven basketry. The tiny squares and rectangles formed by the crossing of elements can be arranged to produce an unlimited variety of patterns and effects. There is a possibility of variety even in checkerwork through changing the width of warp and weft elements. Oblong rectangles there mingle with tiny or larger squares in tassellated surfaces. When two colors are used, there is no limit to the possibilities any more than there is to the results an Italian workman may achieve when making a tessellated pavement with marble blocks in white and black.

As soon as the weaver steps outside of her monotonous checkerwork into the province of wicker, or especially twilled weaving, the possibilities of ornamentation are indefinitely multiplied. The elements of wickerwork mosaic are horizontal in the same piece. The Cherokee, by varying the twilling technique from over-two-under-two or over-five-under-five, have produced squares, triangles, rectangles, diamonds, crosses, lines, diagonals, zigzags, and chain patterns. Most of these patterns have been given names such as: chief's daughter, chief's coffin, big diamond, broken heart, and Indian arc. Although these names may have had symbolic meaning at an earlier date, they are used today merely for the convenience of identification.

Another type of decoration that is fairly common on Cher-