



Leroy Browne

Interviewed by Dale Rosengarten

1. Necessity (00:21)

L. Browne: A lot of people who knew how to make it at that time because it was strictly, a necessity. This was, this was a, people didn't have a... they lived on a farm and had kids and stuff, they used that a lot. And they could make their own, you know?

D. Rosengarten: And it was part of their farming process?

L. Browne: Yeah.

2. Baskets at Penn School (00:38)

L. Browne: See they used the baskets at Penn just like, in the classrooms, the wastepaper baskets too. And use them everyday for different things you know. And they'd get one and then they'd get in bad repair, they'd just throw them away. They wouldn't do what I do now with this raggedy old thing like this, just throw it away. When the classroom day is over they'd send you out to empty the trash but you'd need one of these baskets, for the students' papers and stuff, it's be in those things.

D. Rosengarten: Right.

3. First baskets at Penn School (00:34)

L. Browne: Now this, let me see something, what it says here.... That's it.

D. Rosengarten: There it is, ok, 1905.

L. Browne: 1907, continued to grow.

D. Rosengarten: Ah, 1905.

L. Browne: Huh? What does it say?

D. Rosengarten: “As there is a demand for the island baskets of rush and palmetto, a native teacher has given instruction to thirty-three boys. The use of the work and scrap-basket in the home means an advance in housekeeping.” 1905, that’s great.

L. Browne: I see, now it’s further than that.

D. Rosengarten: Mmm hmm.

4. Where to find materials (01:27)

L. Browne: You just didn’t find it to cure in any place; you had to go on tracks that were not ravaged by fire and where they had a chance to grow over the years and most of those a... tracks of land were owned by large land owners or something like that. Those things came from those kinds of woods. Now back in those days...

D. Rosengarten: Now what... you mean the, the palmetto?

L. Browne: Huh?

D. Rosengarten: You mean the palmetto?

L. Browne: The palmetto too, the palmetto especially.

D. Rosengarten: Uh huh.

L. Browne: They...see that’ not the palmetto from the tree, that’s the soft palmetto that never grows into a tree that has sharp edges like a saw.

D. Rosengarten: Right.

L. Browne: They don’t grow into trees.

D. Rosengarten: I see.

L. Browne: They grow up about five, six feet up. They grow in, not anywhere either. They grow in certain places in the woods.

D. Rosengarten: Right.

L. Browne: You don’t find them too much where you’ve got a lot of pine. You find them down there where you’ve got oak and gum and stuff like that.

D. Rosengarten: Low ground.

L. Browne: Huh?

D. Rosengarten: In low ground.

L. Browne: Yeah, well certain places that are richer and wetter...

D. Rosengarten: Yeah.

5. Father gathering bulrush (01:33)

L. Browne: He would gather enough of this stuff to uh; he'd gather enough of this stuff that'd last him a long time, because you don't want to be going in the spring in the hot snake infested areas. Then he would go and take a marsh, this thing with a handle, it was curved, something like uh, like the rushing thing....

D. Rosengarten: Like a sickle?

L. Browne: Sickle, like a hand sickle.

D. Rosengarten: You call it a marsh hook, have you ever heard it called a reef hook?

L. Browne: Reef hook?

D. Rosengarten: A reef hook, or a rice hook?

L. Browne: Yeah, but I'm trying to be sporty...

D. Rosengarten: Yeah.

L. Browne: (Laughs). So uh, anyhow, he would go ahead and cut that stuff and then he would grab a handful of it and cut it. He'd grab it like that and cut it. There's a lot of dry dead ones in there, it's died over the time. You don't those, you want the green ones. And he would hold all of those in his hand and do like that, and those dry ones would drop out, I don't know how he did it. Those dry ones, he'd sift, he would sift it, the dry ones would drop out on most of it, it'd drop out and he'd have the green ones. And then when he got a bundle as big as he wanted, he'd tie that up and then he'd go out and he'd get as much of that as he'd think would take him a certain number of months and he'd bring it out and cure it.

6. Curing bulrush (00:36)

L. Browne: He'd spread it out thinly on the grass in the sunshine, and then they would cure until it gets to a nice golden...

D. Rosengarten: Like this color.

L. Browne: See this is this color because of dirt and whatnot. But he'd let it cure until it gets this nice golden color and then when it gets uh... that golden... grab it up

and bundle it up and put it up over the headboard, where we store it until he was ready for it and then he's got that.

7. Gathering material for class (00:35)

D. Rosengarten: Did he gather enough material for everyone in the school to use?

L. Browne: Yeah.

D. Rosengarten: He would...

L. Browne: He was the only one who got the material.

D. Rosengarten: Why is that, why didn't he take his students?

L. Browne: Why he didn't take his students? Because um, most of the time his students in the classes come and he wouldn't be there at that time. By the time they came to school, it wouldn't work, he'd already have the materials.

8. Pine Needles (00:42)

L. Browne: They have used over the years, they've used pine needles. I've seen them use that, but you know these pine needles around here unfortunately, are short needle pine. Long needle pine is better, because they're longer and everything but unfortunately, the Lord didn't bless us right around here, short needle. Happened so that later on, we got some longer leaf pines and stuff but there were only certain places that those long needle pines grew, and that was hard to come by.

9. Keeping palmetto green (01:35)

L. Browne: If he'd find anything, you'd have to come and cut it, but not the top off. The top shapes up something like a palmetto, like a fan, you don't want that. And then you bring this um, the body of it, you bring that in and sort of, you cut a not triangular but, a kind of shaped three-sided like, kind of like that.

D. Rosengarten: Kind of like that?

L. Browne: Yeah, kind of like that, a diamond or something like that...

D. Rosengarten: Yeah, I know what you mean.

L. Browne: And a, so the thing a... they would take that and he had a tank, a tank about six feet or so tall. Most of the time it was just an ordinary hot, hot water,

galvanized hot water tank that people at that time used to use to heat the water with the stove, wood, and had these tanks, big tanks. Some of them were galvanized, some of them were that big around, you'd cut the top out and then you would fill it with water and submerge these... in the water. And as long as these stay in the water, for a reasonable length of time, I say reasonable lengths of time...say about a month, they'd stay green.

D. Rosengarten: So let me get this, the rush he dries... but the rush he dries,

L. Browne: The rush he dries...

D. Rosengarten: but the palmetto he keeps green?

L. Browne: He keeps green, one green just like this...

10. Modern restrictions (00:41)

L. Browne: I imagine a long time ago, they could go to places like Kiawah, all those places. You could find that stuff on the beaches and nobody could have prevented you before with the cops and all of those places and stuff like that. And all those beaches in that area around there....

D. Rosengarten: Yeah.

L. Browne: They've got a range of places.

D. Rosengarten: That's true, that's true

L. Browne: That you could go and not have to worry about anybody saying, you don't have to worry about the UPA. You see one time I could go in the creek, and get all in the marsh, and the marsh grass and get some dry ones and make compost, you can't touch anything like that now.

11. Moses found in bulrush basket (01:33)

D. Rosengarten: Last year you said something to me about these baskets being the same as the basket Moses was in...

L. Browne: That who? Who was it? Moses? Yeah...

D. Rosengarten: Do you remember that you told me that?

L. Browne: That's just a... you know, I guess.... a that expression was one that was handed down and a...from childhood they knew, you say things you hear from what

parents say and whatnot. But I guess that's the way my own father used to describe it. He used to describe it because he was a deacon of the church and all that stuff you know, and a... so he just had a strong belief that when they found the baby Moses, the pharaoh's daughter found it in the, in the creek, it was floating in one of those little baskets a... that probably, a... shaped something like a... bigger than this but it was shaped something like this, floating down the river and all that stuff. And you know, everybody got their own beliefs about all that but that's just one of those things. And I guess people who make other baskets; they've got other different beliefs about certain things and so...

D. Rosengarten: I've, yeah, I've heard that too. I've heard it was a bulrush basket.

L. Browne: See, you know, it's just one of those kinds, nobody had seen the basket or anything like that, and it's just a belief.

D. Rosengarten: Yeah.