



Mary Jane Bennett

*Interviewed by Dale Rosengarten*

**1. When basketmaking began and subsequent changes (01:14)**

**M.J. Bennett:** They was taught from slavery time, my great-grandmother some from the slavery time and they said, you know, came from Africa and they was on a plantation and they said was born on a plantation, it was a rice plantation.

**D. Rosengarten:** Mmm hmmm

**M.J. Bennett:** And they planted rice over there and that's when they begin to make baskets to put rice in and to carry food, big baskets to take food in the field and all like that. And you just keep going on down and make a different basket, keep adding, adding, and adding. Every generation makes a different style of basket you know.

**D. Rosengarten:** Mmm hmmm

**M.J. Bennett:** And people come and ask if you can make one thing or another and you make it and it turn out good and if it turns out good and you like it, and you begin to make more of it. It just comes natural; you don't have no design or no pattern or nothing. You just think of, or you just see a dish or bowl or whatever you see. See, I see a cake dish; I'm going to try to make a basket like a cake dish. And you make it and it comes along all right. That's what we do. See a basket or a bread basket or something and say, I'm going to try to make that, and you make it and it comes out all right and then you begin to make it, you like it.

**2. Ancestry and heritage (02:24)**

**M.J. Bennett:** I know my great-great-grandfather was a part Indian, you know. And they told me that, you know, he could make a lot of different things, even the belts. His belt, he would make it out of palm leaves and all like that, you know. My great-grandfather said he was part Indian but they didn't talk too much about them you know, or maybe they didn't remember too much...

**D. Rosengarten:** I, I think that's probably true because to me you look like you'd have some Indian, you've got the high cheekbones...

**M.J. Bennett:** Yes, and my great-grandfather you know...

**D. Rosengarten:** Now he, was he the husband of Jane?

**M.J. Bennett:** That's right.

**D. Rosengarten:** And he was part, probably part Indian.

**M.J. Bennett:** That's right.

**D. Rosengarten:** So do you think that the skills he had like making the belt and the weaving came from his Indian parent?

**M.J. Bennett:** I think it's mixed together you know, my great-grandmother from... they said West Africa, I don't know and they... and I don't know what the Indian, I don't know what the grandfather, if he's from Africa, but they said he was you know, Indian. Well, I know for instance, because my mother had sort of straight hair too, but my daddy, he was you know, just regular black people you know...

**D. Rosengarten:** Right, right.

**M.J. Bennett:** And um, it mixed somewhere and they sort of two combined together you know, and they made basket, I know they made basket and um, and that showed us that we could do a little of everything you know. I can, our family can do carpenter too you know, and all like that. Can do a little engineering, mechanic, it just come natural in the family, maybe the back grown, it's in the blood you know...

**D. Rosengarten:** Yeah,

**M.J. Bennett:** And it just come on down to the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren and all like that. That we can do, I can do seamstress work and I've never been to school to take a sewing or nothing and I can do seamstress work and do carpenter and my father could do carpenter work and they never went to school. And you know they could fix things with iron and different things like that and they never took no train, so it was just passed down in the family and to do those kind of things.

### **3. Other family members that weave (00:45)**

**M.J. Bennett:** Well all the sisters make baskets; they know how to make it. And my children know how to make baskets and um, my boys didn't know how to make

baskets but they don't make baskets, and my grandchildren. Cause take for instance my oldest daughter, she's a nurse and she lives in Oklahoma. She bring the kids down last summer to spend the summer with me and I was sitting on the porch and making a basket, and I put my basket down and ran to get a cup of coffee. And all the sudden when I come back up, the little granddaughter was sewing my basket and she never do baskets before. But she was making stitches, weaving baskets. So I said, "Oh you know how to make baskets?" She said yes, and so...

**D. Rosengarten:** She had watched you once then...

**M.J. Bennett:** Maybe

**D. Rosengarten:** Yeah.

#### **4. Appreciation for baskets and basketmaking (01:32)**

**M.J. Bennett:** Cause we're trying to keep the baskets alive you know we don't want it to die out. That's why I'm teaching it in the school, because I want it to go on, you know, I want somebody to know how it's done and I teach it in the different schools. They're so proud of it and they're so proud of the basket, they said they want to sell it for a million dollars. And, and they say now they appreciate the basket, you know, they see the black people make the baskets and they come to the highway and they see it on the stand and they look at the price of the basket and they say, "oh". But say now, they think that they don't charge enough for the basket, they appreciate the price and they can see why, now they appreciate the basket more and they will buy the baskets some. I teach them to make baskets and then people come, now they wouldn't give them their baskets, they come on down the road and let them buy a basket and tell them, "Y'all are getting it cheap."

**D. Rosengarten:** Yeah.

**M.J. Bennett:** Because they wouldn't sell they baskets cause what you go through to make it and I let them know. I say, "This is only a taste cause you haven't been in the woods to gather the sweet grass. If you have to go around all the snakes and the bees and all that to gather the sweet grass, then you'll see." Cause sometimes you go in the woods and you'll begin pulling sweet grass and there's a snake crawling right over your feet and sometimes when you pull a bunch of grass up, all the ground bees down

in there and they fly up and you'll start licking and two or three hit you. You got to go to the doctor and pay five or ten dollars for a shot and you don't get five dollars worth of sweet grass. So see it's danger around and around.

#### **5. Jessie Bennett describes the places he looks for sweet grass (00:55)**

**J. Bennett:** Sometimes we drive about sixty miles and get out in the woods and go up in the woods about three or four miles. (Laughs) Sometimes we find a little bunch of grass, we'll be out there and get an armful of grass and sometimes we'll be out there for four or five hours and maybe we'll get a bit, an armful of grass.

**D. Rosengarten:** What kind of area do you look in?

**J. Bennett:** Mostly where a lot of mucklebush grow, near the salt water.

**D. Rosengarten:** What kind of bush?

**J. Bennett:** Mucklebush

**D. Rosengarten:** Mucklebush

**J. Bennett:** Yeah, near the saltwater lake, behind the beaches from like off Kiawah Island, back in them woods back there, where all them thick bushes are, briars, and places like that. And then there's flat, there's some flat land that I've found some, way down there next to Hardeeville, like that soft grass there. I've got a little from down there but all those places are burnt now.

#### **6. Curing sweet grass and bulrush (01:03)**

**J. Bennett:** Just spread it out there in the sun on that rock or you know on the grass, look for a good sunshine day and let it dry thoroughly good, rake it up and pulling it up and she always takes her grass, clean it out and get all the trash out of it, bundle it up, tie it up, and put it in the barn.

**D. Rosengarten:** How many days does it need to sit out in the sun?

**J. Bennett:** Well, it all depends on the, on the heat, off the rubber. So you've got a good, nice, warm, hot, sunshine day, in maybe two days it'll be dry; if you get no rain on them. But if it happens to come rain, if you get them wet, then they'll just stay out there two or three days, so they dry good.

**D. Rosengarten:** And what about the rush?

**J. Bennett:** The rushing? Well sometimes it takes maybe... possible four or five days, maybe a week.

**D Rosengarten:** Longer, longer than the grass.

**J. Bennett:** Yes, yes it will, the rush will take quite awhile to get those dry.

**D. Rosengarten:** Uh huh

**J. Bennett:** They'll be out there in the sun ..., let the rays come on them and then we still have let it stand out till they dry back out like that.

### **7. Baskets from her youth (01:31)**

**M.J. Bennett:** They call it can basket, the big basket with a lid on it you know, they call it can basket.

**D. Rosengarten:** A can basket?

**M.J. Bennett:** mmm hmmm, they call it a can basket.

**D. Rosengarten:** Where does that come from? What...

**M.J. Bennett:** Well, the can basket is something just like something that you said, and you put cookies and stuff and you know a big jar. They call it a can basket...

**D. Rosengarten:** I see

**M.J. Bennett:** And like a picnic basket and um, them big bowl baskets. Those the old time baskets you know, that come out and then curve back in and got two side handles on the side with a top on it. And they use it for sewing baskets and some they use it and they have a hole in the top to fill it up you know, large to have a hole in the top and they put their thread in there and then their thread, they make the thread come up the top, the thread and the spool will be down in it and they just pull the thread through the top and it just keep on working. See, they don't have to take the thread out to thread the side and the thread just go around and around and ravel off and they be working the basket. So they call it the big bowl basket and the handbags, and all like that. The oval handbags, like a big shopping bag with the two handles on the sides, you can sit it beside you or you can hold it, you know. And the hat box, they call it the hat box you know. It's the round basket with a handle and a lid and they call it the hat box. They could use it for a handbag, it's big enough to stack hats in and all like that.

**8. Sell baskets at fairs and shows (00:51)**

**D. Rosengarten:** What's the furthest away you've gone?

**J. Bennett:** Um, Sarasota, Florida so far and...

**M.J. Bennett:** And far as Nashville

**J. Bennett:** Nashville, Tennessee

**D. Rosengarten:** Uh huh. How often? How many times a year?

**J. Bennett:** I only go once a year to uh, Tennessee...

**D. Rosengarten:** Uh huh

J. Bennett: But we was usually going to Florida twice a year to a regular museum.

**D. Rosengarten:** They have a fair at a museum?

**M.J. Bennett:** We go to a regular museum twice a year, well once a year. We go in November and we go in March

**D. Rosengarten:** Uh huh. Do you find that the sales at the fair are, are good?

**M.J. Bennett:** The regular museum...

**J. Bennett:** Pretty fair

**M.J. Bennett:** Pretty good

**D. Rosengarten:** Do you feel that it's worth it not to be on the highway for that time?

**J. and M.J. Bennett:** Oh yes

**M.J. Bennett:** Nice vacation (all laugh)