



## Row Upon Row: Sea Grass Baskets of the South Carolina Lowcountry *Various Narrators*

### 1. “Gullah Baskets” (03:31)

*Narrated by James Clyburn*

**J. Clyburn:** Sweetgrass is a wild cylindrical grass that grows in clusters of slender [stems]. It is round, not flat or blade-like, as many grasses. And it usually grows in wooded areas near, but not in, the marshes and rivers.

*<Camera switches to women cultivating sweetgrass>*

Sweetgrass was once abundant in many areas along the coast near Charleston. It fringed the woods and fields and was easy to find and to gather.

*<Camera switches to shot of farmland>*

But as more and more land was used for commercial farming, commercial grasses and orchids, and for raising beef cattle, the sweetgrass began to disappear from these cultivated areas.

*<Camera shows shot of parking lot>*

Then progress gulped the farmland and even more of the wooded areas leaving in their place the shopping centers, housing developments, and highways.

*<Camera switches to women walking to gather sweetgrass>*

Gradually the sweetgrass has disappeared from all but the most remote areas. The weavers and the boys, who gather the sweetgrass for them, are forced to travel further and further. These women have come from east of the Cooper River, near Mount Pleasant, all the way across the city of Charleston to John’s Island, west of the Ashley river and nearly an hours drive from their homes. This area, once one of the richest plantations on the South Carolina coast, was recently purchased. Its future? More residential developments, more shopping centers and highways, recreation center, golf courses. Another source of the [flayed] fragrant sweetgrass will no longer exist and the weavers will have to travel still further, to even more isolated coastal islands, to cut grass. Finding the grass is only part of the problem. It takes time and hard work to cut enough

grass for one basket...and there is danger involved. While returning from this grass cutting trip, one of these women remark that often rattlesnakes hang from the limbs of these trees as they cut grass beneath them. Sometimes outdoor workers sing while cultivating or harvesting crops, but while cutting grass in these remote areas, the women work quietly so that the chilling rattle of a rattlesnake can be heard.

*<Camera shifts to Edna Rouse, an elderly woman making a basket>*

**E. Rouse:** And the palm is from the heart of the palm trees. The little boys, they goes up and cut that and we buy it from them. We uh, sometimes when we go and get the branch if it's low down we can get to it ourselves, but [????] have to buy that.

*<Camera shows a woman inspecting palmetto tree>*

**J. Clyburn:** Palmetto is plentiful in South Carolina "The Palmetto State", but the weavers use only the split heart of the palmetto. The heart must split in a certain way. If it fans out from the trunk, or does not separate, it is unsuitable for weaving. According to the weavers, the palmetto splits correctly only on the full moon.

*<Camera switches to a woman weaving a basket>*

A palmetto is split into narrow, pliable strips, and then woven into the baskets.

*<Camera switches to shot of pine tree>*

The pine straw is the basket material easiest to obtain, as long leaf pines are plentiful here. Ironically, the pine straw is simply ornamentation.

*<Camera shifts back to basket being woven>*

Though it gives the basket an artistic touch, it is not vital to the construction of the basket, as is the sweetgrass.

## **2. Edna Rouse in "Gullah Baskets" (02:41)**

*Narrated by J. Clyburn*

**J. Clyburn:** Here in Christ Church Parish on Highway 17 about six miles north of Charleston, one finds the handicraft of basket weaving being practiced by some of these people.

*<Camera changes to shot of old house>*

When and where did this craftsmanship begin? How are the baskets made? Will this handicraft survive?

*<Camera switches to young girl>*

The story of these baskets and the people who weave them follows.

*<Camera changes to Edna Rouse, weaving a basket>*

Edna Rouse, who lives near Christ Church, has been weaving baskets for many years.

**E. Rouse:** As far as I can tell about these baskets from back, was way back from 1924, when I could, uh, you know, really tell you about it. And the [distance] is from we don't know cause it's so far back. We don't know really what started these baskets. We was making these baskets ever since then, but since that, round the thirties and, we put an addition on to the basket by making different style.

**J. Clyburn:** Men, women, children weave baskets; some working on them in their homes off the highway. In all there are approximately three or four hundred weavers. Basket weaving isn't taught here in a conventional manner. It is an old craft. An ancient talent that may have come to the colonists from another continent. According to Carol Green Jr., former curator for the Afro-American Cultural History project at Washington-Smithsonian Institution, the sea island blacks represent one of the few survivors of African culture in the United States.

*<Camera shows successive shots of old photographs>*

The materials used in their baskets are similar to those that were used in Africa, as are the basic techniques of basketry. As in Africa, also, the apprentice system is the mold of manufacture.

*<Camera switches to a young child>*

**E. Rouse:** Well, it's like this. My parents, they got it from their parents, and as it come down, you can't never hardly take a child and learn them how to do it.

*<Camera switches to Edna with young child on her lap>*

But they would sit and look at you, as you work and they'll start, you know, tying up little grass and make little trash baskets until they learn to do it the right way. But it's very hard to learn a person how to do it. And I w-I was doing this since I was around about, I'll say about eight years old.

### **3. More from "Gullah Baskets" (03:07)**

*<Camera opens with shots of historical plantation tools>*

**J. Clyburn:** Years before the basket was sold on the highway, they were made for utilitarian purposes. They were found in plantations, in the homes of the people who knew how to weave them. At this time, the baskets were familiar to lowcountry residents.

*<Camera shot of Charleston Museum>*

Milby Burton, curator and director of the Charleston Museum, recalls the baskets and their use.

*<Camera switches to Milby Burton>*

**M. Burton:** I think most of the Gullah baskets are made above Mount Pleasant and, uh, you had to get there by boat. When we used to go hunting there I can remember seeing them on the road and being made, and since then, I don't know whether they've increased or not. I think they have a little bit, but very sparse. And that's the only part of South Carolina that I know where-or any place for that matter-where these particular types of baskets are made by hand.

*<Camera switches to world map>*

The slave traders did bring most of their slaves from the west coast of Africa. Of course South Africa is a little below what we think of Angola and that Portuguese part of the world. But undoubtedly some of them did come from there and introduced the weaving of these baskets here.

*<Camera switches to aerial view of farmland>*

**J. Clyburn:** Coastal South Carolina once produced tons of rice. And hand-woven baskets were needed on the rice plantations.

*<Camera switches to shots of historical plantation tools>*

Some of the baskets and other handmade utensils that were used in the cultivating and processing of the rice may be seen in both the Charleston Museum and the Rice Museum in Georgetown.

*<Camera switches to sketch of the Rice Museum>*

The Rice Museum, under the direction of Dennis Lawson, tells the story of Carolina's colonial rice culture in life like dioramas.

*<Camera switches to dioramas>*

And in relating in detail the story of rice, they also retell the part that these baskets played.

*<Camera switches back to historical plantation tools>*

Of the many handmade tools and utensils used in rice harvesting and cultivation, only the baskets have survived and evolved from a heavy utensil made from heavy materials and sturdy design and have become artistic expressions of the weavers art.

*<Camera switches to Milby Burton>*

**M. Burton:** Some people may disagree with me, but I don't think this culture for a moment originated in uh, the United-what is now the United States. I think it, uh, originated much, much earlier than that. Now, of course, we have no records of very early stuff, because nobody bothered to make records of these [phana] baskets and all. But some of our earliest photographs, taken in the 1890's, show them and they were used all the time. So I think they've been used practically since time immemorial in the culture of rice. Now I don't think this more modern basket *<grabs a large brown basket>*-I call it more modern because they're making some like that-*<holds up another, lighter colored basket>*. I don't know when that came into being. But they may have made them then, quite possibly for household use, instead of farm use or plant-plantation use.

*<Camera switches to shots of Edna Rouse, weaving a basket>*

**J. Clyburn:** If the art of basket weaving does vanish from the low country, the scarcity of materials, due to the spreading cultivation of land, will be responsible for its loss.

#### **4. "Charleston Basketweavers" (03:01)**

*Narrated by Andrea Freeman*

*<Camera opens to nature scenes>*

**M. Manigault:** The bulrush make a very nice basket. This grows, uh, near the beaches and the swamp area. And uh, the [mens] gather it and we-we buy-we have to buy it from them.

*<Camera switches to Marie Manigault, weaving a basket>*

**A. Freeman:** The coils that emerge from these hands form the spirals of a sea grass basket. They emerge from a tradition Marie Manigault can trace to her African ancestors who came to South Carolina as slaves.

**M. Manigault:** I have a lot of relatives, you know, doing it and they take the time to show those who don't know how. So I think it's a very special, that we, uh, you know, shave together and weaving baskets and stuff like that.

*<Camera shows a basket stand>*

**A. Freeman:** Sea grass baskets and weavers are found only along the South Carolina coast. They are found in stands like this one, along Highway 17, and in the Charleston Marketplace.

*<Camera switches to Charleston Marketplace>*

Once a trade tool for slaves on rice plantations, the baskets are now an increasingly popular item in the Charleston tourist industry and a recognized art form.

*<Camera switches to Dale Rosengarten>*

**D. Rosengarten:** One of the big advantages of this craft to the people who do it is the independence it offers and the fact that they can do it at home and they're their own boss.

**A. Freeman:** Researcher Dale Rosengarten has recently completed a two year study for the University of South Carolina on the weavers and the culture surrounding sea grass baskets.

**D. Rosengarten:** Uh, the big problems for the basket sewers are, number one, the scarcity of sweetgrass. The second big problem is, uh, to keep young people interested and pursuing this as a livelihood.

*<Camera switches back to Marie Manigault, weaving>*

**A. Freeman:** Weavers are introducing a new material, bulrush, to supplement the scarce sweetgrass. Some women, like Marie, sell baskets for their family members who are employed full time and weave part-time. With ample resources and young talent, this tradition could thrive with oncoming generations. This is Andrea Freeman reporting.

*<Camera introduces and then switches to Henrietta Snype>*

**H. Snype:** Yes, it's passing on from generation to generation. That's why I feel I really want my kids to know how to do this part of our craft.

*<Camera introduces and then switches to Mary Vanderhorst>*

**M. Vanderhorst:** I taught a few people how to weave, but now I'm not teaching anybody. I had a nephew came down from, uh, Georgia and he was interested in it and my grandchildren. And um, my niece and my children they learned for art-craft, and um.

**A. Freeman:** Is-do you think it's important to pass this down to the children?

**M. Vanderhorst:** Oh yes, but they don't-not interested in it like we were. They'll learn like for art-craft in school and after that it's over until they need to do something again. Then they'll pick it back up.

### **5. Mazie Brown (02:59)**

*<Camera opens with Mazie Brown's basket stand>*

**M. Brown:** First thing I do when I get there, I...hang the baskets up. Then you have to check and see whether any of the stitches are broken, cause sometime I-loading them in the van, you get some of the stitch, then you have to repair that. And you go-I go and I open my house *<laughs>* and then I set out my material. I usually drink my coffee first and then I go sew. I usually sit there and I sew, constantly. Most of the time I'm there sitting. Unless I get someone stop, I'm sitting there. Then your legs get a little tired and you have to get up and walk around. But it's mostly-that's what you do. Sit there and sew. If you get tired I read my bible, I take a book sometime, I stop and I take a break, but that's basically what you do all day: sit there and sew. My mother taught me when I was about eight years old. Before then I used to see them doing it all the time. I learned when I was about-about eight years old, I remember. Everybody did it, it was sort of like a supplemental income cause my father worked out in the logging woods and I think that time they were making about 75 cents an hour. And with thirteen kids, we needed something to help. I took over the stand after momma couldn't go out no more and I took over the stand. She was out there and she got too much where she couldn't not go out and for about six months nobody went and, uh, she sold all her sets, her baskets, to, um, my brother [Navie] and, uh, they were going to tear the stand down so I told her 'leave it and I would go out', so I made a couple of baskets and every week until I got enough to go out there. *<laughs>* I was out there ever since; I enjoy doing it.

*<Camera blacks out and opens again with a close-up of Mazie Brown>*

But mom-mom worked most of her life; it was hard work. I remember when my-when we were coming up, uh, she was-she would be expecting and she would get out there and work in the field. *<Makes a short sigh>* I don't-I don't think if I had to work as hard as she did. *<laughs>* I don't think I could make it because I remember we really had to used to work. I mean just to really make ends meet, to make a living. Because, when like, my parents they had very little education so most of the stuff we had to do, we had to work with our hands to-but, they raised us *<laughs>*. But I find out if you have a determination, you can do it. A lot of people said I can't do this, but if there's a will you can do-you can get it done if you're determined. You can do it.

## **6. Future of basketmaking (02:25)**

*<Camera opens with Mazie Brown>*

**M. Brown:** Very few of the family you find now, some of them, they stands, they ain't nothing on the stand because the kids, either they move away or they just quit doing it. Especially now that our material is getting scarce. See, once, when everyone was doing it, you could go anywhere on the islands, sometimes beside the highway where the water is, you could go out there and you could find sweetgrass. Now it's getting scarce, now you have to buy it, so a lot of people are saying it's not worth it since they have to buy the material. By the time they take buying it, making it, it's not worth what they're gonna get out of it. There was one lady stopped. She had baskets she brought for me to repair. She said she paid-I think she said about three dollars back then. It'd cost her about ten or fifteen dollars or more now for that same basket. But, back then, I guess you look at how much you could buy for three or four dollars *<laughs>*. You know when she bought the basket, cause she said she had it for about twenty years so.

My kids are grown and I start to do this as a hobby, and then I really enjoy doing it, so it-it more-it helps me. I, uh, can really, you know, I can survive with their help, with the baskets. In the fall it gets a little slow, but, uh, what them helping me, you know, with my bills and stuff, it's fine. Some of mine, "It's beautiful. You do pretty good." I remember, um, this, uh, lady, this [May Johnson], she had a basket stand and she used to buy most of my mother's baskets. And then after my aunt start doing it, we would sell it to her. And then finally, my mother put up a stand for her own. In front of



Snee farm, the first one she had. She was there up until, uh, I think somebody bought the property and, uh, she had to move. Once they buy the land, most of the time you have to move. They keep pushing'em back. A lot of them went to the market that was beside the highway. And, um, some of them just sort of dammed up together. But so far, in [and] where I'm at, is sort of-is fine right now. I don't know what's gonna happen later on. Because, you see all the posting, you know, where they're selling the land. It's becoming a scarce area, you know, no place to go.