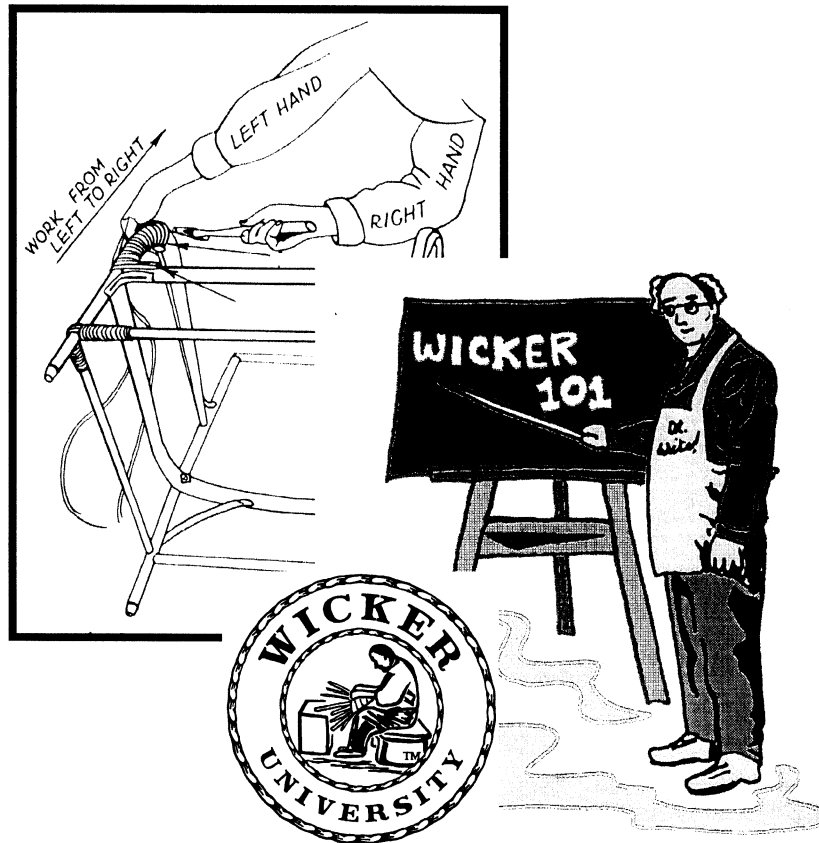


# Dr. Wicker's Wicker Wrapping 101

By Penny Taylor and Bill Resl



# **Dr. Wicker's Wicker Wrapping 101**

By Penny Taylor and Bill Ressler

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## **Introduction**

Dr. Wicker was developed by Penny Taylor and Bill Ressler, a husband and wife wicker team and the third generation of American Wicker weavers. All of Dr. Wicker's offerings are designed to teach you about the American art of wicker weaving. Until the 1930s, wicker weaving was a fully apprenticable trade similar to electricians and carpenters of today. With the advent of machine woven wicker in the early 1900s, hand weaving trade schools closed and the art of American Wicker weaving became an endangered art form. A typical wicker weaving curriculum took several years to complete and required the mastery of several skills including weaving, designing, caning (machine and hand) and rush.

### What is "Wicker?"

Wicker is a generic name for furniture and decorative accessories which are woven from reed, rattan, fibre, willow and other materials. In the United States, the term wicker became popular in the early 1900s. Before then this type of furniture was named after the raw material it was woven from: reed furniture, fibre furniture and willow furniture. With the advent of machine woven wicker which used various raw materials, the generic term of wicker became synonymous with anything which was woven including baskets (which is actually a separate art form).

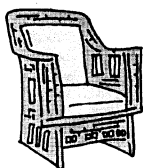
Originally, all wicker was made from reed which is a byproduct of the rattan palm. The branches are trimmed off the palm which is a quick grower. Branches with minimal processing are called rattan and can be used for weaving (such as a balloon gondola). Rattan (which is solid) is different than Bamboo (which is hollow). When rattan is processed, the bark is removed and the bark becomes cane for chairs, wrapping and weaving. Cane comes in several sizes based on width: carriage, super fine, fine fine, fine, narrow medium, medium, common, narrow binder, medium binder, large binder, shaved slab rattan and wide shaved slab rattan. The inner part (the remains after the bark is stripped) is called reed and is used for weaving. Reed is further processed into round, flat, half round, flat oval and spline designations.

### Overview: American Wicker History

Wicker is an American art form which evolved from basketry in the 1850s. A Boston, Massachusetts merchant named Cyrus Wakefield noticed that rattan which was used as dunnage on ships from the Orient was discarded and burned. His experiments with the rattan began the American Wicker weaving industry and art.



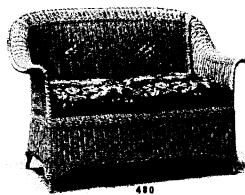
Late 1800s  
VICTORIAN



Early 1900s  
CRAFTSMAN



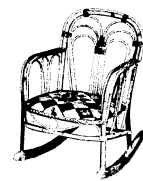
Early 1900s  
BAR HARBOR



1920s (by Great Uncle John)  
AMERICAN ART DECO



Late 1920s  
MODERN



1930s  
(by Great Uncle John)  
STICK WICKER

By the early 1900s, handwoven wicker was a large industry employing thousands of weavers across the nation weaving wicker in every shape and form. After the invention of the Lloyd wicker looms which created large sheets of woven wicker, hand weavers almost became extinct. The looms could do the work of 30 hand weavers and the large sheets of woven wicker were simply tacked onto wooden forms rather than handwoven. On top of this industrialization of wicker, the Great Depression of the 1930s closed most of the handweaving companies.

### **Overview: Our Family History**

One family, our family kept the art of handwoven wicker weaving alive in Chicago, Illinois. Great Uncle John Novotny started a wicker company in 1920 with several partners. Over the following years, he bought out his partners, hired handweavers who had been “out sourced” due to loom weaving and trained his three sons.



*Above:* Chicago, 1920. Great Uncle John.



*Above:* Chicago, 1966. Lou, Fred, Great Uncle John, John and Joe.

During the Great Depression, he obtained a contract and wove baby bassinets for Montgomery Wards. After the Depression, he was soon weaving baby bassinets for Saks, Boston Stores, Marshall Fields, and a number of large and small stores. During World War II, he obtained a government contract for weaving ship bumpers. After the World War, baby bassinets were once again popular. In the 1960s it became harder to find experienced weavers since the ones that had been trained in the old wicker schools were all retiring. Undaunted, Great Uncle John and his sons trained weavers which they continued to do until the early 1970s. After having several weavers leave and compete against them, the three sons decided to downsize operations and stop training weavers.



*Above:* Chicago 1990. John, Penny, Bill, Joe and Lou.

At a family wedding in the late 1980s, Bill introduced Penny to his Mother's cousins, *the Weaver's*. Penny was intrigued and asked if they could visit their factory. During the visit, *the Weaver's* agreed, *because they were family*, to teach Penny & Bill the trade secrets that their father had taught them years before. Shortly thereafter, Penny and Bill began to "apprentice" with the weavers. Over a several year period, the skills and trade secrets were handed down. Penny & Bill learned all the trade and family secrets that each of the three brothers had learned from their father and the master weavers who had once worked for their father. Penny & Bill learned the trade of wicker weaving from the three brothers, each with over 50 years of wicker weaving experience. Today, the brothers are retired (Joe and Lou are deceased) and Penny and Bill have ceased weaving full-time in order to focus on keeping this dying American craft alive through the printed word.

## **Chapter One - Thinking Like a Weaver!**

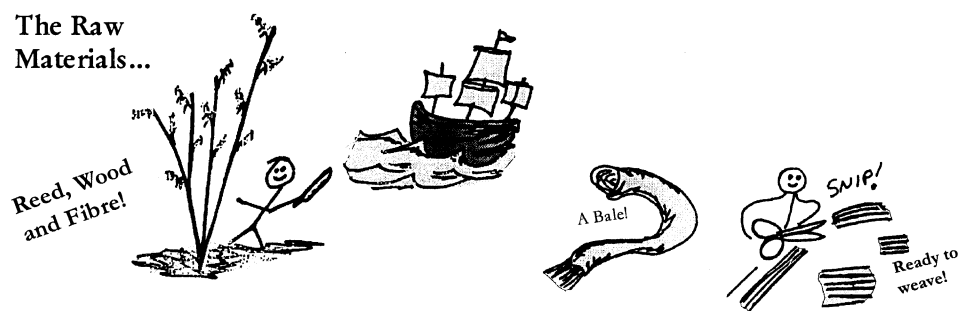


To understand how to repair wicker, you must first learn to think like a wicker weaver! Wicker is an art form. As such, one must understand the processes involved in creating the work of art. Much like a painter must learn brush techniques, color considerations and perspective, a weaver must learn skills of weaving, furniture design and how different materials respond to various applications. A weaver learns the basics of weaving and develops their own style. As a weaver advances, they learn to closely critique other weaver's work in order to learn more about this dying art.

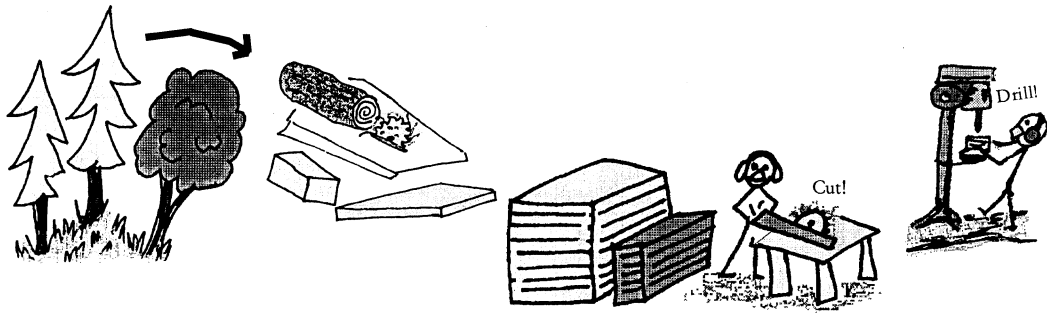
Once the basics are learned, antique wicker can be a wonderful tool to learn more about weaving. When fixing antique wicker, think like the weaver who originally wove the item and repair it appropriately! By learning the basics of how the chair was originally woven, you will better be able to repair an antique chair. Learning the basics on the following pages will provide you a blueprint of how the original weaver created the chair you wish to repair. Learn the basics well, then adapt them to your particular repair. At times, this may require a little creative thinking in order to work around years of accumulated paint, but the results will be stunning!

### **Where Does It Come From and How is it Made?**

Wicker weaving is an art of the hand and requires a few very simple tools: a hammer, diagonal pliers, needle nose pliers, nails (various smaller sizes), clippers, drill, and drill bits. A serious weaver will also have their own weavers bench, a weaving stand, a small knife, an awl, and a couple of other tools custom made for weaving. The following pages describe exactly how these simple tools are used to create wicker.



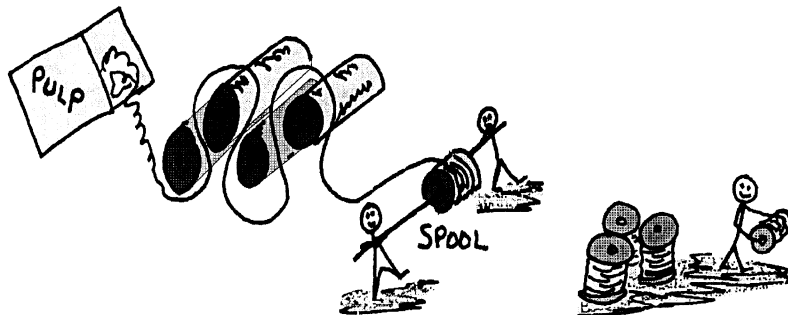
**Reed** is the inner part of rattan. The rattan palm grows like a vine and can attain a height of 600 feet in the jungles of the Far East. The bark of the plant is removed and sold as cane for chairs. The inner part is reed and used for wicker. The reed is shipped to The Penny & Bill Company in large bales which are up to 25' in length. Before weaving, the reed must be cut to the appropriate lengths for weaving.



**Trees** are harvested and trimmed into boards. The boards are stored at lumber yards until they are needed as bases for a wicker item. They are cut to size and holes are drilled for weaving. After the base is cut and drilled, it is rough sanded by machine and sanded smooth by hand. Lastly, it is often stamped with a company logo. Finished bases are stored until the weaver is ready to weave!

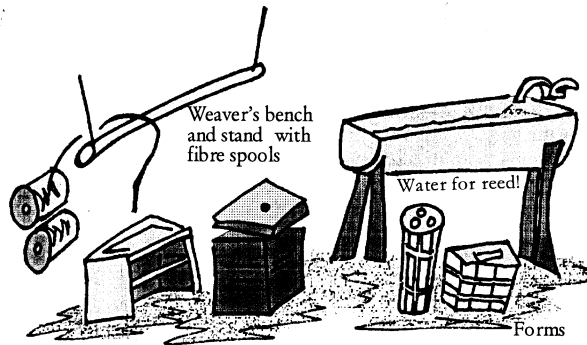
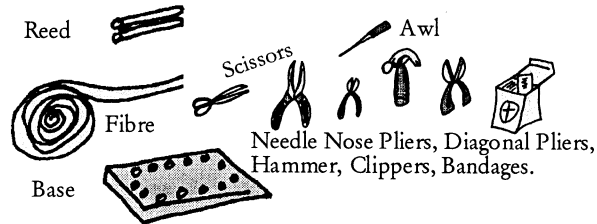


**Fibre** is a paper product which is made from wood pulp. Trees are harvested and ground into pulp which is then transformed into paper and ultimately fibre for weaving. The fibre is rolled onto spools which are stored until needed for weaving.

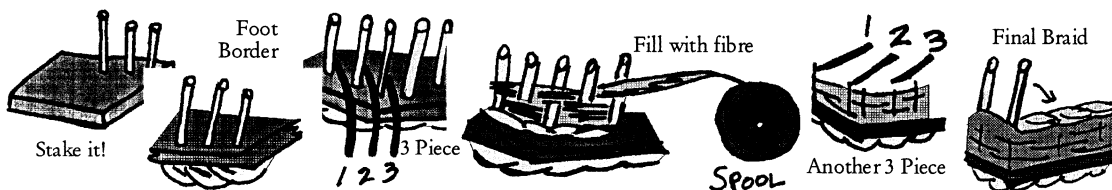


**Preparation** Once the weaver is ready, the weaver gathers the raw materials (reed, fibre and a base). First, the reed is soaked in water to make it pliable. Next, the weaver

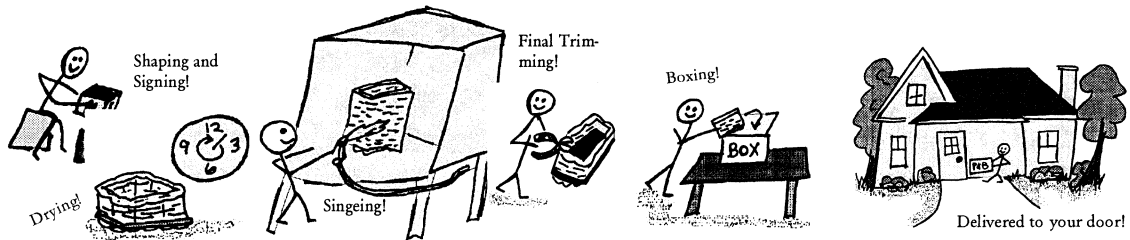
organizes their weaving area and gathers their tools (scissors, diagonal pliers, wire cutters, awl, hammer (“persuader”), clippers and bandages (if needed). Before weaving, the weaver positions their weaver’s bench (where they sit) and stand (where the product sets during weaving). Lastly, the correct form (which guides the weaver in weaving your product) is located. Finally, weaving can commence!



**Weaving** American wicker weavers weave wicker which utilizes basketry skills but that is a distinct separate art form from basketry with different terminology. The following is a general definition, each product may vary from the specifics noted. The weaver first *stakes* the base by inserting a reed stake in each hole in the base. A *foot border* is woven on the bottom and insures that the base will never separate from the stakes. Next, a *3 piece* is woven with 3 pieces of fibre. Then, the product is *filled* with fibre. Another *3 piece* is woven on top of the *fill*. Lastly, the stakes are *braided* on the top which completes the item!



**Finishing** Most basket weavers are finished after weaving, however an American wicker weaver still has work to do! Finishing is an extremely important part of the American wicker weaving formula. It begins as soon as the weaver is finished weaving. Each item is inspected by the weaver, shaped with their hands, signed and dated. Next the item will dry which usually takes 24 hours. This insures that the reed which was soft and pliable when woven returns to its harder dry state. As the reed dries, the product actually tightens up and becomes more secure. After it is dried, the wicker is singed with a gas torch to remove any reed frays that may exist. Then the item receives its final trimming and sanding. Last, the product is inserted into a shipping box for delivery to your door.



## **Chapter Two: Before Wrapping – Some Rules**