



**Penny and Bill's**  
**Wicker History**  
*A Family Tradition from 1920 to 2002*

By  
Penny L. Taylor and William G. Ressler

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The Penny & Bill Company, Box 504, Brookfield, IL 60513 USA

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## **Introduction**

### Background statement

Over 150 years ago, basketry took a large step forward and evolved into the art of American Wicker weaving. Unlike other artists, American wicker weavers have always created multiple pieces that closely resemble each other. For a few individuals, this repetition of design discounts the creativity and artistic value of the person creating the item. Luckily for this dying American art and the thousands of wicker weavers who diligently practiced their art over the past 150 years, the Smithsonian Institution held an exhibition recognizing the art of "American Wicker" at the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art from April 2 to August 1, 1993. This event was commemorated in the book *American Wicker, Woven Furniture from 1850 to 1930* by Jeremy Adamson (Rizzoli Books).

Traditionally, a wicker weaver was required to learn a number of distinct skills and processes before becoming a "Master" wicker weaver. This required years of study, an apprenticeship and the ability to design and weave wicker as well as the complimentary skills of cane and rush. Today, there are no schools where one can learn wicker weaving, cane and rush from Master weavers. Gone are the apprenticeship programs and the official designation of "Master" American Wicker Weaver. And if it were not for a handful of artisans scattered across the US that still practice this labor intensive art, American Wicker weaving would be a lost art.



Above Left: Great Uncle John (center) with family members Lou, Fred, John and Joe in 1968.  
Above Right: Bill's Great Uncle John, Master Wicker Weaver in 1968.

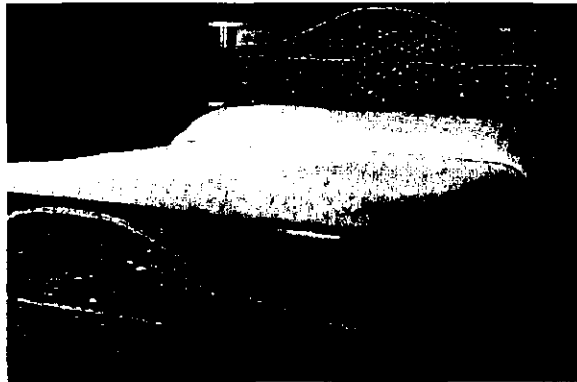
We are committed to Luckily for Penny and Bill, Bill's Great Uncle was a card holding Master Wicker Weaver. He started his own wicker company in Chicago, Illinois USA in 1920 and trained his three sons to be Masters in their own right since the trade schools creating "Masters" had all closed in the 1930s. Together, Penny & Bill spent several years learning the skills of wicker weaving (wicker, cane and rush) and the family trade secrets from the three brothers before they retired in early 1993. Today, Penny and Bill have stopped weaving full-time and simply keep the history and the art alive through publications such as this and weaving an occasional item.

### Artist Statement

We are committed to preserving this dying American Art form. Unlike other arts such as basketry, painting, pottery, and glass making, wicker weaving is uniquely American having its

founding in the 1850s in Boston, Massachusetts. Sadly though, American wicker weaving does not have the preservation efforts or awareness of its unique artistic status that pottery, glass making or even blacksmithing does. We hope that by maintaining an internet presence, providing informational books such as this, as well as occasionally producing artistic works of American wicker we may create awareness and exposure of this art form so that it is preserved before it becomes an extinct American art form.

We have been told that we must have extreme patience in order to weave the way we do. We guess we do, but really planning is key. In 1993, we finished our first major work, an old fashioned wooden bedstead with a wicker flair. Since it was our first attempt at a major design and not having been trained in bed making, it took several months to research old-time wooden bed making and then adapt it to wicker in the fashion we imagined. This diligence to research and design requirements allow us to create a beautiful item the first time every time. Tremendous time is allocated on each project to insure that before any weaving commences a clearly defined work path is in place.



1993 WickerArt Bed

The next large item we wove was a wicker tennis shoe pet bed for Socks Clinton. At the time in the early 1990s, we were weaving pet beds for a pet supply distributor. Penny had heard that the then new President Bill Clinton had a pet cat and she thought it would be appropriate for the "First Cat" to have an American Wicker pet bed. It was Bill who decided that a shoe was really needed for a Sock rather than a regular pet bed. Applying traditional weaving skills and pushing those skills to their limits, a very special pet bed was created for Socks. The greatest joy with that pet bed was not receiving a letter from the President (which was nice), but when we showed it to the 3 brothers who taught us to weave. That Saturday in their old Chicago wicker factory, all three stood in silent amazement with their mouths opened. Finally after several minutes, one of them broke the silence and verbalize what they were all thinking – "It's beautiful!"



WickerArt "tennis" shoe for Socks Clinton

We have enjoyed weaving. We have enjoyed designing and weaving simple American Wicker designs and we loved creating the unexpected in wicker. However, in 2002 it became evident that with the worsening of Bill's arthritis we would need to minimize our weaving from a full-time occupation to an occasional hobby. Our goal, as always, is to preserve this American art form while pushing the limits of weaving wicker to a new level and to have individuals (artists and non-artists alike) look at a piece and be amazed. Because we utilize traditional wicker techniques, we know that every item we have made (if taken care of) will last for several generations, longer than we will be here on this earth. It has a been wonderful creating new designs as well as to create something in wicker that we know no one else has ever done. We hope that through our efforts, traditional and artistic American Wicker weaving will become as familiar as the arts of basket weaving, cloth weaving, glass making, pottery and painting.

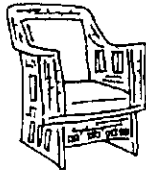
**Chapter One: Wicker History and Family Tradition**



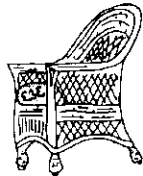
## Birth of an Art Form



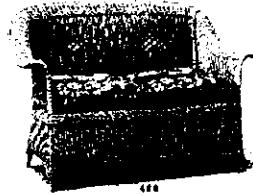
Late 1800s  
Victorian



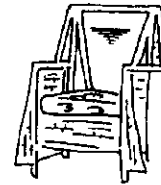
Early 1900s  
Craftsman



Early 1900s  
Bar Harbor



1920s  
American Art Deco



Late 1920s  
Modern

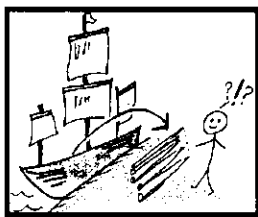


1930s  
Stick Wicker

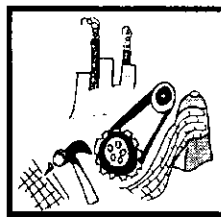
Unlike basketry (Shaker Baskets, Nantucket Baskets, Maple Splint Baskets), which is a distinct design style based upon a specific material, period of time or historical purpose, American wicker has always and continues to reflect the social, cultural and aesthetic values of our changing nation. From Victorian (late 1800s), Mission/Craftsman (early 1900s), Bar Harbor (early 1900s), American Art Deco (1920s), Modern (late 1920s), Stick Wicker (1930s) and eclectic Folk Art (today), wicker is not only beautiful and timeless, but has been and continues to be woven in many different styles.

## Wicker History

During the 1850s, Cyrus Wakefield, a Boston merchant noticed rattan which was used as dunnage on ships from the Orient being discarded. His experiments with the rattan began the American art form of wicker weaving with reed! By the early 1900s, there were thousands of wicker weavers. Handwoven American Wicker was being made in every shape and form.



Cyrus Wakefield "discovers" the art of wicker weaving in Boston, MA in the 1850s!



The effects of the Industrial Revolution destroys the hand weaving wicker industry.



Determination keeps the art alive. Great Uncle John (nicknamed the "Bassinect King") weaving in 1966.

During World War I (around 1918), the government enforced embargoes on imported reed so wicker weavers wove wicker with willow (folklore has it that the government actually encouraged farmers to grow willow during this time specifically for the wicker industry) and a new material called fibre (made from paper fibres) also emerged. About this time, the generic term "wicker" replaced the more accurate names of reed furniture, fibre furniture and willow

furniture. After the war embargoes were lifted, wicker weavers switched once again to a combination of reed and fibre (as we weave with today) and others switched completely to fibre. As the Industrial Revolution took hold, weaving by hand was replaced by loom woven wicker (large sheets of machine woven paper fibre material) which was tacked onto wooden frames. By the mid-1930s, the hand weaving of wicker became a vanishing American art form.

### The Family Tradition



1990 in Chicago, Illinois: The Weavers (from left): John, Penny, Bill, Joe and Lou.

One family, our family was determined to keep the art of handwoven wicker alive. Great Uncle John (nicknamed *The Bassinet King* by The Chicago Tribune in 1966 for being credited with over 500,000 Baby Bassinets) was a *card holding master wicker weaver* who started his own weaving company in Chicago, Illinois in 1920. Through two World Wars and the Great Depression in the 1930s, he kept the art of handwoven wicker alive. Soon his firm had 15 master weavers weaving 100 baby bassinets every day. He trained his three sons (John, Joe and Lou) to weave and they in turn dedicated their lives to keeping wicker weaving a viable American art form.

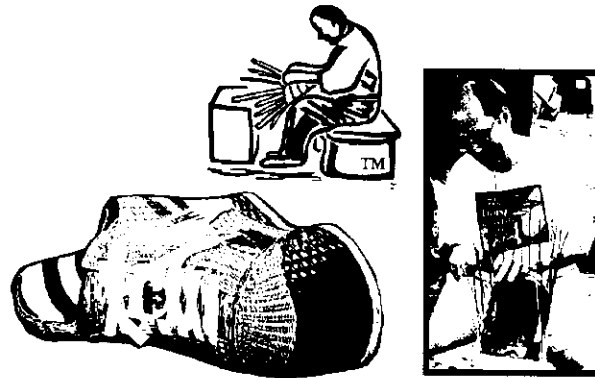


From left to right: Far left: Great Uncle John in about 1920. Center: Great Uncle John around 1966.  
Right: The weavers in the 1960s - Lou, Fred Great Uncle John, John Jr., and Joe.

In the 1960s, the three sons faced a shortage of available master weavers. Most of the masters, which were trained at wicker schools that had closed in the 1930s, were retired and no longer weaving. They hired and trained weavers as needed, but were dismayed when people they

trained left and competed in business against them. By the mid 1970s, they decided to downsize. Each brother would perform a specific task to keep the business alive without any outside assistance.

At a family wedding in the late 1980s, Bill introduced Penny to his Mother's cousins, John, Joe and Lou who were nicknamed the *Weaver's*. Penny was intrigued and asked if they could visit their factory in Chicago. 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. Over a several year period, the skills and family trade secrets were handed down. Penny & Bill learned from the three brothers, each with over 50 years of wicker weaving experience.



Bottom Left: Wicker Shoe for Socks Clinton, 1993.  
Center top: Penny & Bill's logo from 1990 – 2002.  
Right: Bill weaving a doll chair in 1998.

Today, the brother's are retired (Joe and Lou are deceased) and Penny & Bill have ceased weaving except for occasionally. Rather they attempt to keep the history of American wicker alive through their web-site [WickerWeaver.com](http://WickerWeaver.com) so that we all can continue to experience a piece of America's past, a part of this American legacy and become part of our family tradition which spanned three generations and almost 100 years!

Below are reprints of articles that have appeared over the years from various sources as noted.

### Those Enduring Craftsmen

Over the past 40 years John Novotny has earned the title of bassinet king, for he has made more than a half million baby baskets and all of them have been hand woven. Novotny has made a host of other things too: casket baskets, pigeon carriers, fernery, dog and doll and bike and butcher baskets. In fact, you name it or design it or suggest it, and as long as it's wickerware, Novotny and his three sons will weave it for you.



Great Uncle John Novotny in 1966

For the uninitiated, rattan or wicker is a thick grass-like plant that grows in the jungles of the Orient. It climbs at a ferocious rate of 20 feet, and the natives who cut it claim that you can hear it grow. Rattan is the whole plant; reed its core, cane its bark. All three products are used in weaving by the Novotnys.

When John Novotny, Sr. was a boy in Czechoslovakia there were trade schools for wicker workers as there are now for machinists and carpenters. Countless young Europeans earned their keep weaving rattan (or wickerware) baskets and furniture. When Novotny emigrated to the United States and opened his factory in Chicago in 1920, there were still a dozen other caners in operation. Gradually the wicker craze diminished and Novotny and sons have the field almost alone today.



The Novotny Factory in 1966.

In the Novotny factory which is hidden away in an old building in an old neighborhood, you can see this ancient craft in operation. The reed is soaked in great vats of water, woven wet, and can be patterned in many designs. As for the bassinets, the Novotnys weave them, paint them white, and the stores then decorate them and line them with satin and other materials.



John Novotny Jr. weaving a baby bassinet hood in 1966.

The Novotny sons, twins John and Joe and younger brother Lou, learned the trade during World War II when help was short, demand was great and the factory had government priority rating for turning out wicker bumpers and fenders for the Navy. Today [1966] the sons really run the business. But Novotny Sr., now over 70, almost blind, and supposedly retired, can usually be found sitting at his weaver's stool, his fingers flying as he transforms the by-products of rattan.

"If you can sketch it, I can make it!"

"About four years ago Detroit balloonist Ted Petersen came to our shop and asked me if I could make a gondola from rattan for him," says John Novotny, of Artistic Reed & Willow Co. "He had learned from European balloonists that rattan gondolas were much better than aluminum because rattan absorbed the impact of landing without losing its shape. "Petersen had heard my claim, 'If you can sketch it, I can make it,' and met with me several times designing that first gondola," says Novotny, who runs the shop at 420 S. Kolmar with his two brothers. "It was a matter of balancing his ideas with what was practical."

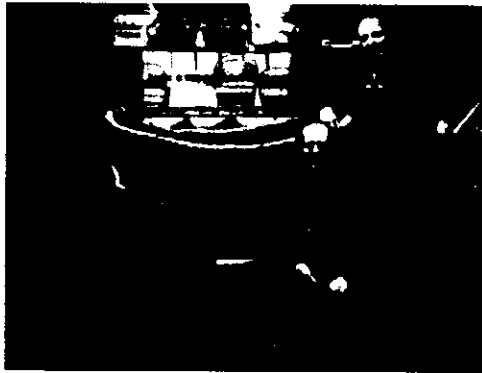


John Novotny Jr. weaving a gondola in 1977.

Novotny's first gondola took five days to build, and it was just what Petersen wanted. Word of Novotny's work spread among American balloonists, and soon he was contacted by Raven Industries, Inc., of Sioux Falls, S.D., a hot air balloon firm. Novotny now builds about 100 gondolas a year for Raven; each one requires about three days work and sells for from \$300 to \$500.

The first step in building a gondola is to soak the rattan in vats of water for two to three days to make the thick vines workable. (Rattan, nature's gift to balloonists, is the palm tree, that grows throughout India, China, Ceylon, and Malayan Peninsula. There are about 150 varieties of the tree with such exotic names as Kooboo, Omaloe, Bahang, and Loontie. Rattan, the tree itself, and its by-products, cane and reed – the tree's bark and core – are all used in making a gondola.) Working with rattan requires strong hands to bend the one-inch-thick branches. Says Novotny: "When I work on a gondola my hands change. They get hard like bone, and I get more calluses. But after I work on one a few days, I get used to it." A finished gondola weighs 100 pounds and

contains about \$200 worth of rattan. Making gondolas requires so much skill that there are only three companies in the country doing it.



John's last gondola in March, 1991. John standing on the right Bill sitting in front. John made over 500 gondolas in his career, this was John's last and Bill's first (and only).

Gondolas aren't the only product built at Artistic Reed & Willow. Novotny and his brothers, Joe and Louis, also make bassinets, chests, lampshades, buggies, chairs, collection trays for churches, clock faces, and caskets. During World War II they even made ship bumpers, so that docks could absorb the shock of ships bumping into them. Has Novotny every gone up in one of his gondolas? "They've invited me to ride in them a couple of times," he says, "but I never got around to it. I', too busy making them."

#### Chicago Historical Society, Exhibit and Book



Above: Joe, John and Lou before retiring in 1993 at their Chicago Factory on the corner of Ogden and Kostner Avenues.

Working with pliable vines of rattan rather than wood, the Novotny brothers, John, Louis, and Joseph, weave bassinets, chairs, chests, buggies, church collection plates, and caskets at the Artistic Reed and Willow Company. They learned to weave from their father, John, who started the company in 1920, thirteen years after emigrating from Czechoslovakia. Bassinets, modeled after their father's fifty-year-old design, are their principal product. But the Novotnys, who

claim that they can translate any sketch into rattan, also build gondolas for a hot air balloon firm in South Dakota, making about 100 of these each year.

## *Artistic Bassinettes*



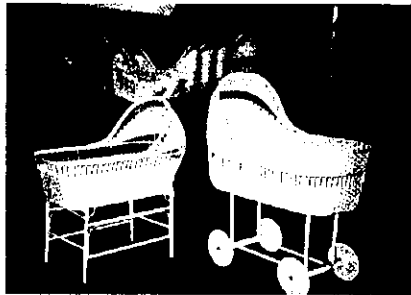
Above: John weaving one of his last bassinets in 1993.



Above: Joe singing a bassinet in 1993.



Above: Lou with one of his last "Cadillac" bassinets in 1993.



Above: The old Artistic Bassinettes logo from a 1940s brochure. Above left: Two of their famous baby bassinets with doll cradles behind on the stand. Above right: John, Penny, Bill, Joe and Lou celebrating the 70th anniversary of the family tradition in 1990.

### **Penny and Bill News Articles**

#### **The Landmark – September, 1998** *Weaving the Antiques of the Future*

Members of Bill's family have worked in wicker since his great-uncle John started a Chicago-based wicker weaving company in the 1920's. Baby bassinets were the company's main product, and over the life-time of the company, more than a half million bassinets had been woven.

Shortly after their marriage, Bill introduced his new wife to the weaving side of the family. Curious, Penny asked Bill's three cousins, who now ran the business, to see the factory where

the bassinets were made. That visit led to an apprenticeship for both and for several years afterwards, they worked on their wicker weaving skills on weekends and in any spare time.

### **The Press Publications - October, 1993**

Bill Ressler is one of a vanishing breed. Along with his wife, Penny, and cousins, John, Lou and Joe Novotny, Ressler is the remainder of a vanishing group of artisans who handweave wicker. Ressler is understandably proud of the unique and historic craft he and his family members have mastered.

### **Chicago Art Deco Society, Winter 1993/1994**

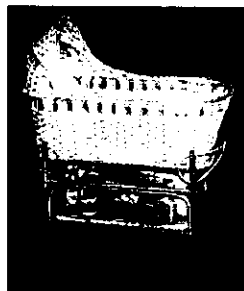
In the late 1980s the three brothers took on the challenge of teaching their second cousins, Penny Taylor and Bill Ressler, in the art of weaving wicker by hand. Penny and Bill, a husband and wife wicker weaving team from Brookfield, Illinois, apprenticed with the weavers in their Chicago factory. They were taught to design and weave wickerware with reed and rattan in the old world way – the way the brothers had learned years before. Week after week, year after year, the secrets of wicker weaving were revealed and passed on to the next generation. On Saturday, October 30, 1993, the three brothers officially retired. The lights were turned off for the last time as the weavers and their families sang Goodbye Sweetheart.

### **Illinois Artisan – 1994**

Wicker weavers from Brookfield have created unique... functional craft art.

### **Chicago Tribune – February, 1994**

No matter how exotic your tastes in wicker may be, chances are Brookfield weavers Bill Ressler and Penny Taylor can weave what you want. "You're only limited by your imagination because almost anything can be woven in wicker. From file cabinets to grandfather clocks." says Taylor.



Penny and Bill's Baby Bassinets  
Sold 1999 to 2002.



**Suburban LIFE Citizen – February 1994**

For 70 years, Bill Ressler's family has been turning reeds, rattan and fiber into woven masterpieces. Ressler and his wife, Penny Taylor, continue the tradition from their home in Brookfield. Ressler and Taylor are the third generation of wicker craftsmen. Ressler's great uncle, John Novotny, started the family tradition about the time of the first World War.

## Chapter Two: How Wicker is Made

## How Wicker is Made

American wicker is typically woven by hand - the old fashioned way. Wicker weaving is an American art form which started in Boston, Massachusetts in the 1850s. Although American wicker weaving evolved from basketry, it has different terminology and set of skills. In 1993, when the Smithsonian Institution featured an exhibition on American Wicker, American woven wicker was practically only a distant memory. Today, however, very few, if any, old-time American Wicker families are still weaving by hand – primarily due to the labor intensiveness of the art. Below the various steps involved in this dying American art form are described. Welcome to the world of American Wicker weaving!

### Weaving Material Preparation

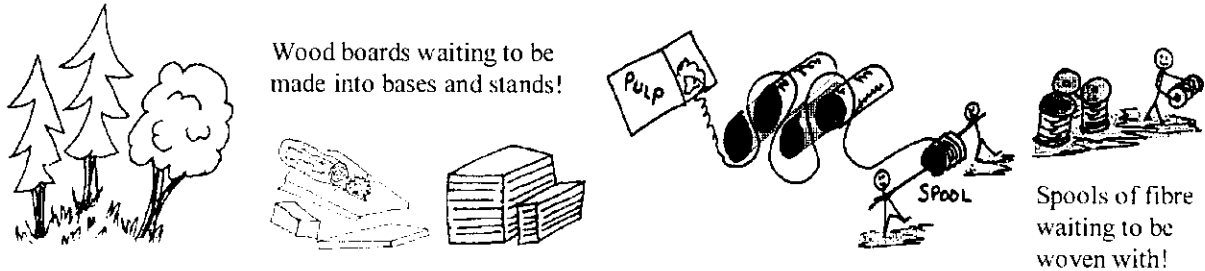
Before we define how wicker is woven, we must first lay the ground work on why certain materials are used in weaving and where they come from. The story of your American Wicker begins over 150 years ago around 1850 in Boston, Massachusetts. A grocer named Cyrus Wakefield created the new art form (and industry) of American Wicker weaving after finding a use for rattan which was used as dunnage on ships from the Orient. This discovery led to the creation of this labor intensive art form and an industry which once employed thousands of wicker weavers during the late 1800s and the early 1900s!

The Industrial Revolution during the early 1900s forced wicker weavers to find cost saving measures to weaving production. The result? Solid wooden bases on products such as serving trays, baby bassinets, and most other items. This minimized the need to weave the bottom of the product and saved time to focus on weaving the rest of the item which was (and is) still very labor intensive. With the First World War came restrictions on reed (which was and still is from the Orient and other far off lands). This forced wicker companies into finding cost effective alternatives (fibre (a paper product) and willow). Fibre became increasingly popular and many pieces woven during the 1920s are completely made from fibre. Willow, which became popular during the War was soon replaced by reed once the War was over. (Interesting side note: rumor has it that the US Government even encouraged farmers to start growing willow as a cash crop during the War specifically for the wicker industry!) Today, most wicker weavers would use a combination of reed, fibre and solid bases.

**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 normally shipped in large bales which are up to 25' in length. Before weaving, the reed must be cut to the appropriate lengths for weaving.

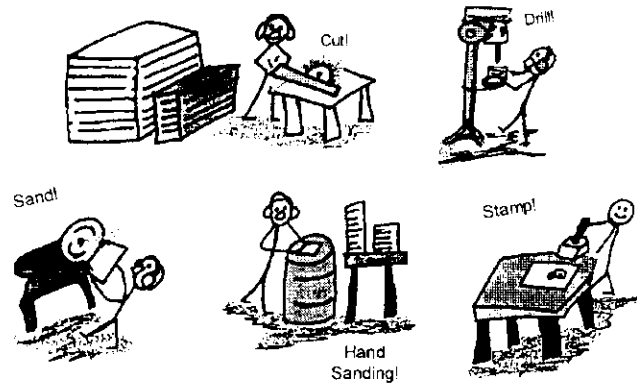


**FORESTS** are grown for lumber. Trees (a re-growable resource) are harvested for wood and paper making. Trees which are harvested for wood products are cut into various wooden boards and made into wooden products such as hard board. Wood boards are purchased and stored until they are needed as bases and wooden stands for your wicker item. Other trees are made into pulp which is then made into paper and fibre for weaving! The fibre is rolled onto spools which are stored until needed for weaving.



### Base Preparation

As needed, the boards which are stored are cut to size based on the size of the product that will be woven. Once cut, holes (for the stakes, the vertical pieces of reed which are inserted later in weaving) are drilled!

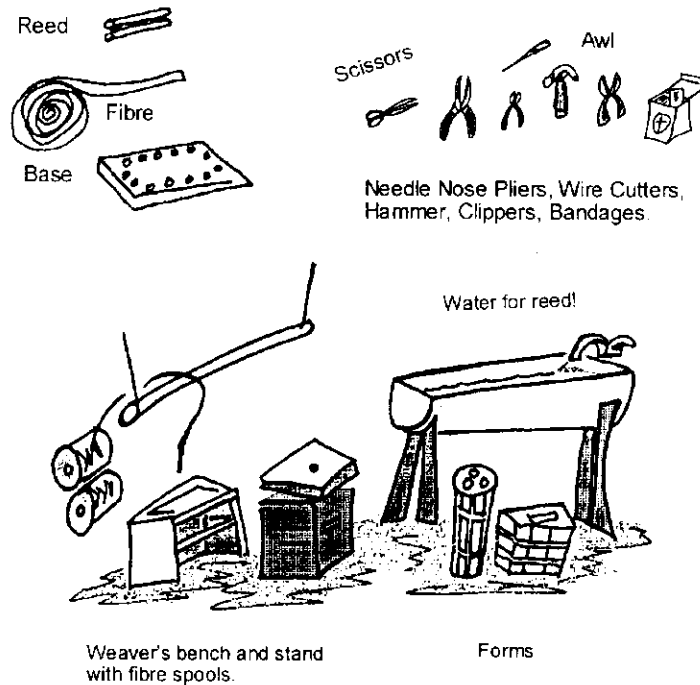


After the base is cut and drilled, it is rough sanded by machine and sanded smooth by hand. Often the bottom of the bases were stamped with a company logo. Finished bases are stored until the weaver is ready to weave! Other wooden parts (baby bassinet stands, etc.) typically were all handcrafted by the weavers!

### Getting Ready to Weave

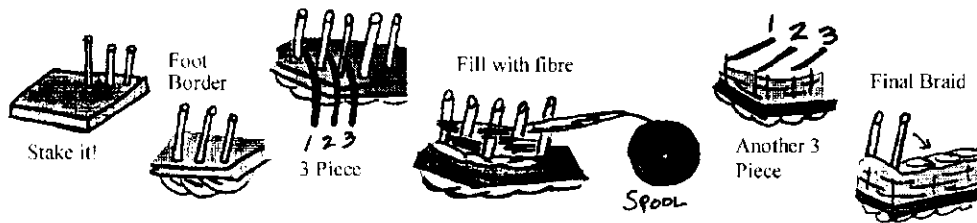
Once an order is placed, the weaver gathers the raw materials (reed, fibre and a base). First, the reed is soaked in water to make it pliable. Next, the weaver organizes their weaving area and gathers their tools (scissors, needle nose pliers, wire cutters, awl, hammer ("persuader"), clippers and bandages (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!

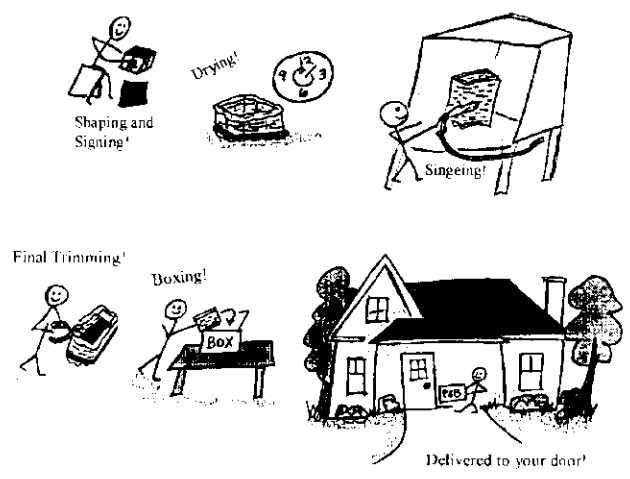


### Weaving and Finishing

American wicker weavers weave American Wicker which utilizes basketry skills but 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. The 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!



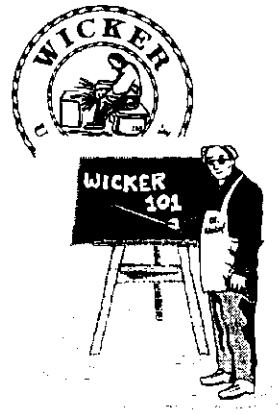
Most basket weavers are finished after weaving, however an American Wicker weaver still has work to do! Finishing is an extremely important part of the American Wicker weaving formula. It begins as soon as the weaver is finished weaving. Each item is inspected by the weaver, shaped with their hands, and often 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 wrapped up and inserted into a shipping box for delivery.

## **Chapter Three: Dr. Wicker's Wicker IQ Test**

## Dr. Wicker's Wicker Challenge



Below are a few simple questions regarding wicker! Think about each and then check below for the right answer – the right answer as a wicker weaver sees it! Dr. Wicker hopes you enjoy trying your Wicker IQ. A perfect score means that you are up on your wicker (and American ) history – and that you think like a wicker weaver! If you did not get any right, we recommend that you take the time to read the book *American Wicker, Woven Furniture from 1850 to 1930*, Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art, Rizzoli, New York, Jeremy Adamson (author), 1993. After, try our test again and see how you do!

### The Questions:

**True or False:** Wicker and basketry are the same.

**True or False:** Weaving is a female thing, definitely not for men.

**True or False:** Wicker was once a very large American industry.

**True or False:** Wicker Companies really started the assembly line, not Henry Ford.

**True or False:** American Wicker deserves respect and to be preserved.



**Answers:**

**Wicker and basketry are the same.  
FALSE**

Wicker is a separate art form from basketry and has its own terminology and methods to weaving. Basketry is an ancient art form dating back several thousand years predating pottery, glass making, paper making and even arrow head making. Wicker is an American art form which evolved out of basketry in the 1850s in Boston, Massachusetts. Wicker weavers pushed the limits of basketry to create large quantities of every day household items like chairs, love seats, rockers, baby bassinets, desks, lamps, pianos, victrolas, caskets and even the seat Charles Lindbergh sat in as he sat in his plane *The Spirit of St. Louis* across the Atlantic in the 1920s!

The basic differences?

Wicker is normally woven from reed, fibre, or willow in any furniture style or shape (Victorian, Bar Harbor, Modern – casket, chair, clock). Basketry normally uses indigenous plants in specific basket types (Shaker, Oak Splint, Cape Cod). Wicker normally has a solid base (serving tray) or is woven around a wooden frame (chair). Baskets usually feature woven bases and rarely come in shapes other than basket shapes. Wicker utilizes a solid base for economy (weaving bottoms of caskets would take a very long time to do) and strength (a wooden base will hold up better than a woven one). Simply, wicker is a documented and genuine American art form and basketry is not. Although there are Americans weaving baskets, the art of basketry predates the United States whereas wicker weaving was actually started in the United States!

**Weaving is a female thing, definitely not for men.  
FALSE**

Actually, historically just the opposite was true. Wicker weaving was a male thing, definitely not for women. Although it seems that today there are more women than men weaving baskets, wicker weaving has traditionally been a male art form. Historically, the art of wicker was considered a trade much like carpentry and plumbing are today and even had a complete school and apprenticeship system – all the way to Master Wicker Weaver. Most of the old time weaving factories featured male weavers and by the time (historically speaking) that women became involved in labor intensive trades, wicker was no longer a viable trade. Although, our family (Great Uncle John and his sons) did have several wonderful women weavers (which they trained) during the 1960s who wove as well as any man. Today, wicker weaving can be equally enjoyed by both males and females.

**Wicker was once a very large American industry.  
True**

In the 1880s through early 1900s, wicker weaving was one of America's premiere industries. Before the Big Three auto makers came on the scene during the 1900s, American wicker had the Big Two – Massachusetts based Wakefield Rattan Company and Heywood Brothers and Company – who singularly and later in merger dominated the wicker industry. In addition, there

were hundreds of smaller "wicker" companies in places like Wisconsin, Michigan and Illinois. In Chicago alone in 1920, there were 24 wicker companies producing wicker items. The wicker industry employed thousands of weavers, winders and framers. By 1930, it employed only a handful. The Industrial Revolution and the invention of machine woven wicker (woven on large looms rather than handwoven) which performed the work of 60 handweavers destroyed the handwoven wicker industry and made the art of handwoven American wicker a dying art form.

**Wicker Companies really started the assembly line, not Henry Ford.  
TRUE**

Although you will not find this in any history books (we all know history books often glorify history) but for all practical purposes the American Wicker industry started the assembly line. Granted it was not a large machine, but it was a large sequence of winders, framers, weavers and finishers that created the wicker antiques of today. The old wicker factories of yesteryear were complexes of several buildings several stories tall and several blocks long. In Chicago, Illinois and Gardner, Massachusetts, Heywood Brothers operated factories in the late 1800s that would be the envy of many modern day manufacturing companies.

The following is a quote from *American Wicker, Woven Furniture from 1850 to 1930*, Rizzoli, New York, page 152 noting the thoughts of Richard Greenwood, President of Heywood-Wakefield Company as he describes the time consuming hand weaving process during a visit to a Chicago factory in 1926...

"First, wooden dowels were steamed until they were soft and pliable and then bent into desired shapes and left to dry. Finished bentwood dowels next went to the machine room where they were cut and assembled into frames. After being inspected for quality and accuracy of size, the frames were sent to the winders who wrapped strips of flat reed around the legs and structural braces. Once the winders had completed their task, the skeletal forms were taken to the reed shop where skilled Swedish, Polish, Lithuanian, Dutch, Czechoslovakian, Irish and Italian workers, some singing, others reticent, handwoven individual pieces. Many took two days of hard work to complete.

The men work in individual stalls with long reeds lying on the floor or hanging from the walls – each stall the reed-workers private domain. Stacks of frames stand in front of the weaver, and by his side is a pail of water into which the reed is dipped to make it pliable for weaving and to prevent splintering. The ends of the reed are pointed with a small knife so that they may be concealed when the piece is finished. Small benches with swivel forms help to hold the frame in position as the work progresses.

Next door, a younger generation of workers fitted sections of fiber fabric onto the same bentwood frames constructed for reed furniture. The room resounded with the noise of their hammers as they tacked the machine-loomed wicker onto the wooden forms. Once completed, each piece of reed or fiber furniture was inspected before being shipped out to the company's warehouses to be painted and upholstered."

That description, is the basic concept of an assembly line - where men skilled in one specific function (framer, winder, weaver, finisher) sit in one spot while the product moves past. Unlike Henry Ford's automotive plant which utilized more machinery, the American Wicker assembly lines were totally powered by people. It is a forgotten part of history since there are no longer any of the original companies or weavers still around.

**American Wicker deserves respect and to be preserved.**

**TRUE**

Unlike most art forms, wicker is American. It was started in our country and flourished to such an extent that in the early 1900s other countries even opened wicker weaving schools to teach the trade to their citizens. Today, there are only a couple of wicker weavers remaining in the United States (a couple in New York, Penny & Bill in Chicago-land and some in California) that have been trained by weavers who were the Masters of yesteryear. The work of the Master weavers from 1850 to present is slowly being lost due to lack of care and often refinishing which strips the old product of its original natural beauty by covering it with paint. Antique American wicker should be respected and preserved in its natural state. Allow the old wicker to tell you the story of who wove it (every weaver has their own "trademark" weaving techniques) and about all the people who used it and placed those wear marks on it. Enjoy the old wicker as it is and please do not destroy its unique and historical features by covering them with paint. Many old pieces of wicker are over 100 years old and still in their original finishes. To protect their value, they should look like they are over 100 years old with wear marks and the natural discoloration which occurs as a century's worth of dust rests in the crevices of the weaving.