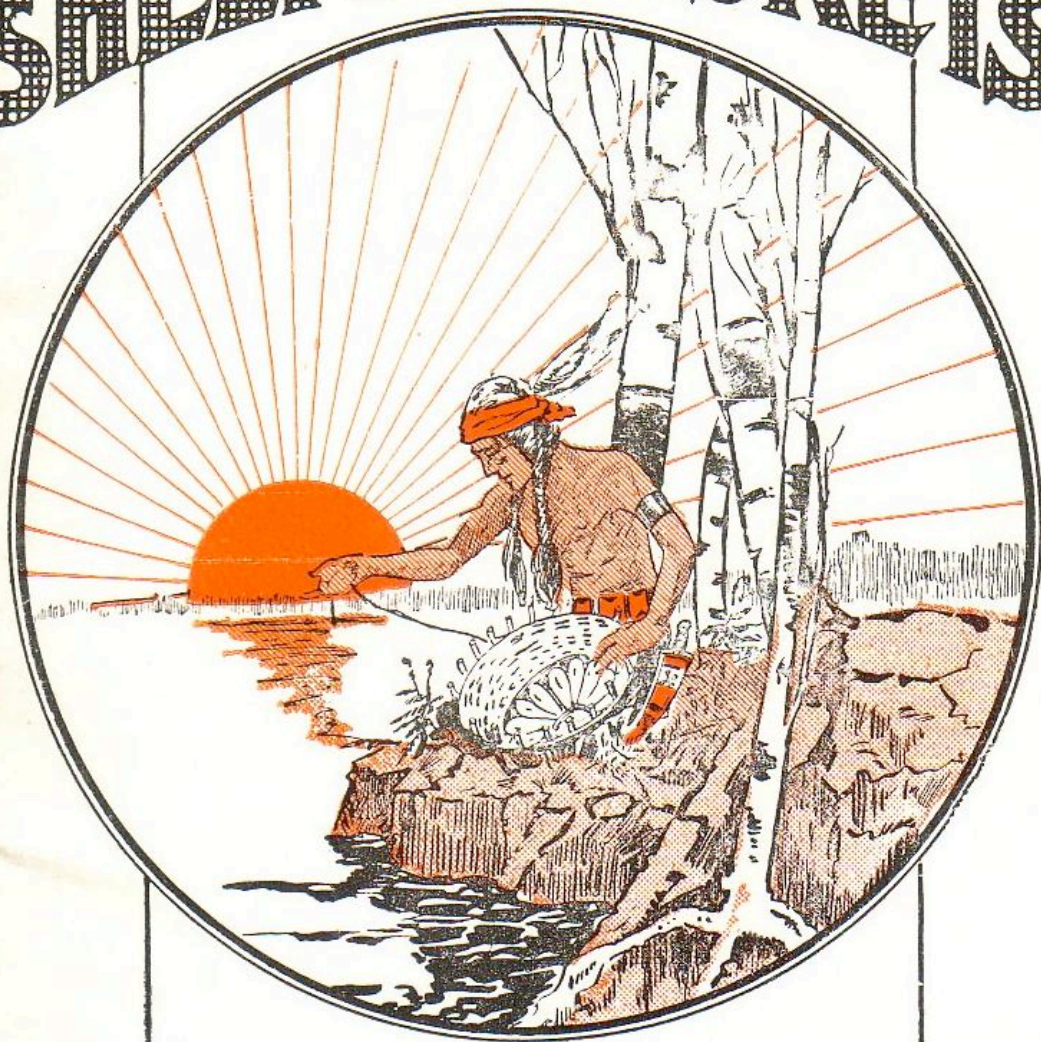


SHELTON BASKETS



America's First Industry

THIS BOOKLET IS RESPECTFULLY
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
THE PREMIER BASKET MAKERS OF
ALL TIME—THE AMERICAN INDIAN.

The Shelton Basket Co.,
Shelton, Conn.

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AMERICA'S FIRST INDUSTRY

AMERICA'S first industry! Basketry?
Indeed perhaps the world's first in-
dustry.

Certain it is, on this continent in any case, that agriculture did not take a very great hold on the roaming tribes of red men who found in the prodigal forests of our virgin country the fruits of agriculture without its labor. Through the veins of these forest dwellers there coursed a fierce current of life's ardent stream. To them the toil of the ploughshare was unknown, and when it did become known to them, came to be looked upon as purely a domestic art and scarcely worthy of the interest of the men folk or braves.

Instead they turned to the forest, to the hunt, for their "bread and butter." And in this, Mother Nature had taken care that they should miss nought that the struggling husbandmen of Europe provided.

Labor were vain when turkeys poked out-stretched necks between the palisades of encampments, when deer stalked by the shores of every stream, and buffaloes stampeded the plains of a vast continent. With wild duck, fish, bear, and everything else that the word game conjures before the minds of men; with cranberries, chestnuts, berries and all protruding itself as by the will of God, there was little that man might do in the way of agriculture. Here nature provided with a lavishness unknown to husbandry, so agriculture remained dormant, while into hand made baskets were culled the offerings of nature.



Long before agriculture made itself known to the savages they had evolved means of shaping their destiny—they had discovered the means of shaping wooden and stone utensils. Unfortunately the product of this

first industry was not the basis of legitimate nor permanent industry, for they were not so much intended for barter or sale as for winged messengers of death, and as such were ultimately superseded by those wingless messengers which civilization had brought to their door.

But enough of the things that might have been but that are not; the arrow with its



ash bow are now curios, no longer industries, though we shall hear more of the famous ash boughs which today go into the manufacture of Shelton Baskets, thus completing the prophecy that "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares"—their bows into baskets.

That other great product of Indian manufacture, the bead, has passed the way of the arrow, and is now more valued as a relic of our historical past, an ornament for museums and collections, than as an element of American commerce and industry. The wampum belts are no more—even the Indians today conduct their exchanges on a money basis rather than by means of wampum beads;

and such quality beads as figure in our trade to-day are usually of foreign manufacture.

But one industry they have endowed us with which, to this very day, defies competition of outsiders. Other nations may excel in pottery, in sculpture, in wood carving, in painting; but in basketry there has never been discovered anything to rival the matchless skill of our own natives. Their work has ever been in the greatest demand and so has endured to this very day, and given to this country the leadership in one of the world's most ancient industries.

Unfortunately the demand for their produce has grown to impossible dimensions, as year by year their numbers dwindle, and it has been for the white man to salvage the remains of the once great industry. To-day the value of their product is a mere fraction of one per cent of the annual output of the nation, and the bulk of it goes into curios rather than into commercial or household use.

However, the white man has intervened to preserve to mankind the heritage of ages of Indian civilization; and there are actually a few companies which to this very day

carry out the old Indian processes in defiance of the machine age and the call for more hurried, if cheaper, manufacture. Foremost amongst these companies is an old institution which grew up around the person of Mr. Norman P. Little, a typical old Yankee of up-state Connecticut who, gathering a small company of workers about him, set about to produce the old fashioned basket which as a child he had seen the Indians weave.

Mr. Little's ability as a basketer gained widespread recognition; and in 1857 he was called to the Rhode Island Trade School as instructor in the art. In 1862 however,



he returned to his native hills to set up for himself the manufacture which was to make him famous; and in the Spring of that year his produce began to appear in the markets of the surrounding towns. The industry struggled on through the troubled days of the war until, in the Summer of 1865, the returning veterans restored a semblance of normalcy to the deserted countryside.

Unemployment was rife as a result of the release of the numerous armies, labor was

cheap, and agriculture a dying industry in this part of the country; so for a number of years he experienced no great difficulty in supplying the surrounding country with baskets, and at a figure which was ludicrously small for such fine handicraft.

The company continued to operate as a home industry until 1889. At this date the volume of business began to call for a speeding up process, and Mr. Little was finally persuaded to install some machinery and concentrate his workers in a little red frame building which he had erected to that purpose. The machinery installed was largely in the nature of saws, etc., to prepare the lumber for use, but the basket itself remained an entirely hand made product.

With occasional additions to the small unit erected in 1889 the plant remained substantially the same until 1907 when it began to experience hard times, as the increasing cost of labor put hand industry in an extremely difficult position.

For a while that year there was actual talk of closing down and disbanding the force, but Mr. Little, though now an old man, was

loath to see the last wheel turned during his lifetime, and would not give the final order. The rumor continued throughout the year and the early part of the next, but by the Fall of 1908 things took a turn for the better. We can well imagine with what relief Mr. Little saw the ghost of defeat laid to rest.

For a few years things went along well, but by 1910 it became clear that nothing but reorganization could save the company, for the day of hand labor had completely set, and the cost of the finished product had greatly restricted the market.

In addition the long haul to the railroad station by horse and team affected unfavorably the merchandising of the product. There



would be times when unfavorable weather made the station inaccessible for weeks at a time, and the speeding wheels of modern industry could ill tolerate delay. Little by little the force was permitted to dwindle away until by 1910 there were no more than seven out of a normal force of eighteen left; and it might be added that basket makers are not easily replaceable.

ness growing to such proportions that it became evident that hand processes would never supply the demand. Mr. Lavietes however was able to install new methods and machines which very materially increased the speed of preparing the oak and ash logs for the weavers, and so preserve to himself a larger part of the business which was knocking at his door. However, like Mr. Little he is a basket man at heart, and refuses to apply machinery to such operations as will in any way affect the quality of his product.

Thus the weaving and manufacture remains to-day essentially what it has ever been under their most scrupulous direction, a painstaking and careful hand process, an art as well as an industry, and we might add, the ancient American art, the oldest American industry.

The ash and oak strips that go into Shelton Baskets are genuine hardwood splints, cut by hand, and with the grain, so as to give a continuous fiber to the strip. Other factories have with only the rarest exceptions applied the use of machinery to this process; but unfortunately the nature of wood does not lend itself to this process of manufacture, for the

In 1910 however Mr. Little, feeling the exigencies of the business growing too much for his feeble health, disposed of the better part of his interests to A. H. Lavietes, one of the young men who had been associated with him in the management of the company.

By this time through the capable direction of the younger member, the company had become entirely rehabilitated, and by a partial reorganization of the production end, the price had been lowered to a point consistent with the requirements of the market. The problem of shipping became ever more acute; and finally, in 1911, it was decided to move the plant from Columbia (Conn.), to its present site in Shelton.

The company was once more reorganized, and a fine new concrete factory was built for it in Shelton, in the foothills of the Berkshires, where the Housatonic and Naugatuck Rivers join on their course to Long Island Sound. In increasing the capacity of the plant it was found necessary to take in another member, and in 1914 Mr. G. G. Blakeslee was made a member of the firm.

The reorganized company, now in a more accessible part of the state, found its busi-

stripping machine slices in a straight line instead of following the grain, thus slicing

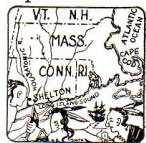


through the very grains or fibers which give to wood its peculiar tensile quality. The product of such a process is a veneer strip, not a genuine splint; it is made up of numerous fibers of short length and no strength whatsoever. It is a product of much the same tensile qualities as paper, and hardly suggestive of those fine oak and ash splints that go into the make-up of a Shelton Ash Clothes basket or an Old Oak Market.

The expert management of Mr. Lavietes has kept the price of these baskets at a figure scarcely higher than the machine made veneer product; and has kept on the market a basket which has been as familiar to the old American homestead as the old oaken bucket.

The Shelton Splint Basket is as superior to the foreign and American willow clothes and market baskets as it is to the ordinary veneer, the imitation splint with which the market is flooded. At the same time it avoids those rough projecting willow ends which work such devastation to clothes and other articles.

Thus this American art and industry remains as firmly established today under the capable direction of Mr. Lavietes, as it was

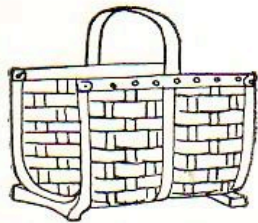


under Mr. Little and his predecessors, the Indian Basket makers. Many moons have passed since the savage tribes of Pootatucks who gathered along the banks of the Housatonic and Naugatuck rivers disappeared, but their heritage remains firmly implanted on the banks of these rivers where the Shelton Basket Co. is now located.

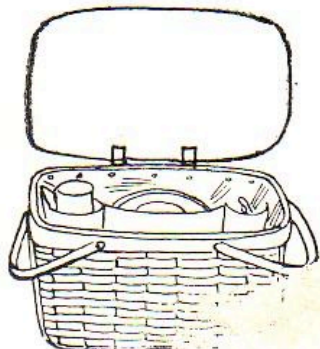
If any to whose eyes this little booklet should come, should ever find themselves in this locality, the management will be only too well pleased to show them the process by which oak and ash splints are drawn from the wood, woven, and made into those simple but sturdy baskets that pass in the world as the genuine "Shelton" Splint, and which in the home are known as the Old Oak Market, the Shelton Ash Clothes Basket and the Old-Fashioned Picnic-Lunch Basket.

"AND THEY SHALL BEAT THEIR
SWORDS INTO PLOUGHSHARES—
THEIR BOWS INTO BASKETS."

12



Rustic Oak Ribbed Log Bas.



Picnic Kit



Picnic Hamper



Flower Stake Bas.



Rustic Waste Bas.



N.E. Work Bas.



Leaf Gathering Bas.



Flower Bas.



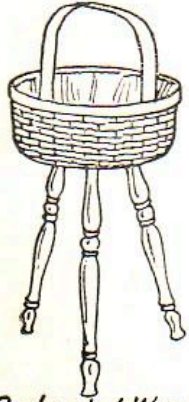
Flower Bas.



Cake Bas.



Rustic Mail Bas.



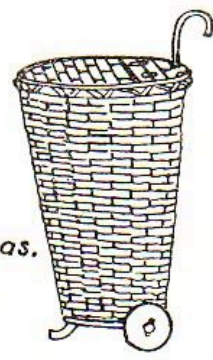
Colonial Work Bas.



Down East Pie Bas.



Garden Tool Bas.



Rustic Hamper On
Wheels.

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