

Functional And Decorative Baskets Woven With Pride

BY SHARON SCHUSTER

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WESTMINSTER — With Easter just around the bend, Peter Cottontail is probably selecting that indispensable accessory, the basket, for his hop down the 'Bunny Trail.' Sharon Schaeffer of Westminster, Maryland, weaves baskets that even a bunny with the most discriminating taste will find irresistible.

As a weaver of baskets, Sharon Schaeffer is accomplished in the craft, with her creations featured in area craft shops, mail order catalogues, and in a book entitled *Baskets*, by Nancy Schiffer, 1984.

Sharon, an art teacher at Westminster High School, said she first became interested in baskets eight years ago. She learned the basic skills along with two of her friends who became her business partners. "There was a time when I produced more than one basket per day," she recalled. "Then I made the transition from shops and craft circuit, to being an independent consignment dealer." She sells her baskets in Maryland and Pennsylvania shops and out of her home. "Here and in Pennsylvania, people are respective of the craft," said Sharon. "They realize that baskets are functional as well as decorative."

"I use baskets all the time," said Sharon. While others tote their belongings in canvas bags, Sharon conveniently tosses son Curtis' needs in a market basket and off to the babysitter they go.

A friend who lives in town carries her mail in one of Sharon's hand crafted baskets. Nine-month-old Katie has a basket full of toys, and she can even climb into the largest basket made by her mother to play with her 3-year-old brother Curtis.

Many think of baskets as being either of the Easter or laundry variety, but Sharon is quick to explain that there are many more varieties of useful and decorative baskets. "Sometimes this is called a butt basket," Sharon said pointing to the two humps of the traditional Appalachian Egg basket. "It's the biggest seller, and I enjoy making it the most." The flat Pie basket or Double Pie basket is made for transporting delectable pastries with care. Cheese baskets have a large open weave so the liquids can drip through.

"There are stories behind most of the baskets," Sharon said. Farm women used hen baskets to take their hens to market. The key basket has one flat side so that it can be hung on the wall by the door so you can toss in the mail or your keys when you come in. The square and rectangular baskets are market baskets."

Sharon uses natural materials when weaving her baskets. The reeds of various widths are mostly ash, and the handles are oak. Sometimes Sharon twists reed for the handles. She can make a basket in an evening. She said, "A basket is something you can pick up and put down. I do it in bits and pieces

as I am walking around." When Sharon has many orders to fill for a show or an exhibit, she said she produces them in "assembly line fashion. I make all the handles at once, and so on. It's faster that way."

Sharon explained that "the hardest part of making a basket is making the structure to weave on. I usually make a God's Eye to hold together the ribs — the part that you weave over and under."

Sharon noted that a basket weaver can often be identified by the details in the weave. There are individual looks for baskets. It's like a signature." Sharon also signs and dates each one of her baskets.

Traditionally, baskets are all natural in color. "As they age, they get darker," she explained.

Sharon also collects old baskets and looks for baskets in good shape with a natural darkened color. "Sometimes people ask about repairing old baskets. The general rule of thumb is, don't do it." When new materials are used to repair a hole in a basket, it may decrease the value of it as a collector's item. "It never has the same patina," she explained. "Old baskets in good shape sell for as high as \$90. The average in this area is \$50."

The baskets that Sharon weaves are functional, but are often purchased for their decorative quality. She said, "I have started adding bows and ribbons, and I like to experiment with color. It's just like dying fabric. The reed will take the



Frank & Sharon Schaeffer pose with 3 year old Curtis and 9 month old Katie who are snug in their mother's prize-winning basket.



Sharon Schaeffer demonstrates basket weaving. She begins with the basic frame. Her baskets have been featured in the book entitled *Baskets*, (foreground) 9 Month old Katie in an Appalachian Egg Basket.



The Schaeffers have had a successful lambing season with 6 sets of twins & 1 set of triplets in their Dorset flock.



Sharon Schaeffer displays some of the varieties of baskets that she weaves. The light colored open-weave basket is a cheese basket. Katie holds a key basket.

color because it is porous and absorbent." Sharon uses Batik dyes for vibrant colors, and Rit dye for lighter shades. "You can use anything that will stain," she explained. She has experimented with coffee, tea, and raspberries, among other natural sources.

The largest basket that Sharon has made holds both children with room to spare. It won a contest at the shopping center for the largest basket. The top hoop is over two feet in diameter. The smallest basket she has made is about four inches.

"There is a peaked interest in

baskets for Easter," commented Sharon. Easter at the Schaeffer home is more than what's in the basket, it's the basket itself. She noted that her 3-year-old son has never had the same basket twice.

Sharon's interests are not limited to sheep. With her husband, Frank, she raises a flock of Dorset sheep. "We had a good birthing season," she reported. Frank added "We had six sets of twins and one set of triplets so we have over a 200 percent growth rate."

The Schaeffers are pleased with

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Homestead Notes