

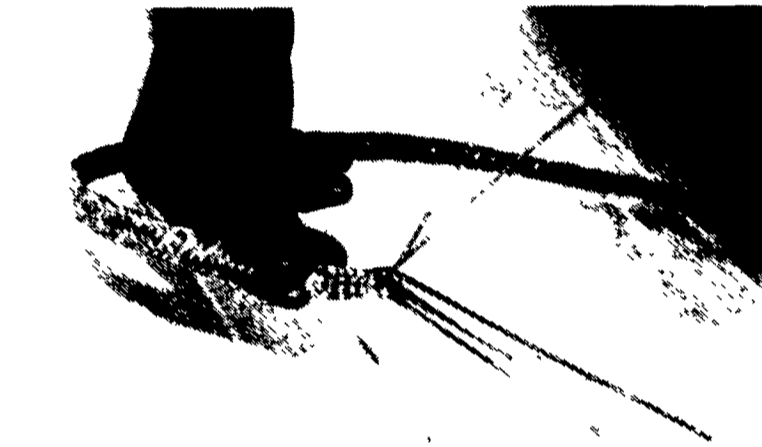
Woman Braids 7-Strand Straw Into Hats

GAIL STROCK
BELLEVILLE (Mifflin Co.) —
 "I make 200 hats a year," the woman says with a cheerful grin. Three steps up from where I stand is an open wooden porch with rocking chairs, benches, and a cupboard covered with baked goods. Her boot-length dress is royal blue, cap pure white, shoes black and heavy, and grin wide. My father's childhood friend sent us here to learn how the Old Order Amish of Mifflin County make their straw hats.
 But here on a back road home-
 stead, this self-sufficient order of people blend in with the self-sufficiency of nature, and I can't get over the overwhelming quiet. No humming refrigerator or computer. No phone ringing. No TV. No machines. No stress of having to be somewhere at a certain time and always running late. Just an occasional truck whooshing by on the gravel road just above this white wood-frame house, fenced to keep the chickens in and who-ever out.
 The sounds we do hear are the welcome sounds of nature that are easy on the ears. Michael Jordon

may have the glitz of nothin' but net, but here there's nothin' in this country air but peacefulness. Or so I thought.
 "I learned to make hats with rice straw, but now I can work with wheat. It's tougher, but goes easier through the sewing machine," Miriam says of the long plaited strips she overlaps and machine sews in a circle to form the hats.
 Miriam orders rice straw by the box. Each box holds 12 bundles and she goes through one box in two months. She gathers the wheat straw in from the fields the beginning of July when the wheat is ripe. Although the wheat straw hats are slightly darker than the rice ones, both are a natural golden color.
 I ask how much wheat she gathers.
 "Oh!" she laughs, pleased with the labor. "By the wagon full!"
 After gathering the longest stems, Miriam removes the wheat heads and prepares the stems.
 "I strip off what we call the pants (an outer thin leaf-like sheath) and you end up with a hollow tube. I soak it for an hour or



Strips of wheat straw and bundles of rice straw are carefully woven into hats.



two and braid it wet." She can braid four years of straw in one hour and it takes 16 - 17 yards to make a wide-brimmed men's straw hat.
 Miriam says she will wet some straw and show us how she plait it. Soon we hear the hand pump creaking in the kitchen as she dampens the straw.
 Working with the dampened, pliable straw, Miriam starts with seven straws side by side. She works the single strands in the over-under fashion of braiding. Beginning with the outside strand,

she passes the strand over, under, over, under (four times), stopping before reaching the other side. Then she starts with the opposite outside strand, passing it four times over and under towards the middle. For a thinner band, use five strands. (I practiced with seven strands of baler twine).
 Most men buy a new straw hat every year. Miriam makes all sizes of men's hats, each with a thin white ribbon tacked on where brim meets crown. Miriam sometimes uses varnish to stiffen the brim on the men's hats. The crown

of her women's hats are only about one inch high, but the brim is wider. The sides bend down when the 3/4 inch black ribbon is tied under the chin.
 "This is what I did yesterday," she says with pride, lifting a loaf of homemade bread and pointing to the sticky buns and half moon pies.
 It's then that I realize there's more in the air out here than nature's peace. There's pride. Not the vanity kind. The pride that finds pleasures in accomplishment and in work well done.

Amish hats are made of long strands of woven wheat straw sewn together.

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