

Keeping Folk Art Alive with the Penn-Jersey Basketry Guild

By Pat Johnson

Basketweaving is one of the oldest and most durable forms of craft, notes the members of the Penn-Jersey Basketry Guild, an organization that has been promoting the art of basketweaving for 37 years. The Guild hosts instructors in weaving techniques in both traditional and contemporary styles, makes field trips to see exhibits and holds show and tell meetings while fostering friendships.

Locally, Guild Vice-President Mary May teaches out of her studio in Forked River, the Tuckerton Seaport and at

Cloverdale Farm County Park in Barnegat. May was one of the very first recipients of the New Jersey Council of the Arts Folk Artist Apprenticeship grants. She took lessons, had one-on-one mentoring and practiced, practiced, practiced. “You could say I was self-taught,” said May. “I had the desire, I just wanted to do it.”

May said she learned early on in her apprenticeship that South Jersey has a rich history in basket making and many of her basket workshops focus on the traditional baskets used by farmers, baymen and woodsmen. “I researched baskets in museums, local historical societies and private collections to reproduce traditional baskets,” she said. Baskets were used for eel traps, berry collecting, pine-balling, transporting goods and doing household chores. Baskets were the ‘plastics’ of their day—anything that needed storing or toting required a basket made from natural materials.

Guild program director Connie O’Connell has been making baskets for 40 years. “I started in the Montclair Historical Society and took a class in rug-hooking.

A friend was carrying her wool in a beautiful basket and she said she had made it. That got me started.”



Mary May basket making class at the Tuckerton Seaport.
Photo credit: Tuckerton Seaport.

O’Connell has taken many trips to conventions for intensive workshops and also attends the many workshops Penn-Jersey offers. “The Guild runs classes during the year for members and they bring in artists from different parts of the country.” Collecting baskets is also part of O’Connell’s hobby; she says she has hundreds of them. She also likes to rescue baskets that need a little tender loving care. “If you know the history of baskets you can almost identify where they come from based on the materials.”

May said members of the Guild recently helped the Mercer County Museum identify their baskets in their collection. “We went through their archives and gave them all the history that we could find,” said May.

“I’m a traditional basket weaver but some of our members are interested in contemporary design. We collectively bring our knowledge to each other. It’s been good for all of us. We’re all in a basket family.”

And members don’t have to make baskets, anyone can join who has an interest in them, she noted.

May was recently filmed in her studio by a PBS crew for a “State of the Arts” program. The date for airing

is not yet known. On September 6, May will be teaching experienced weavers how to make a modified Algonquin Native American daypack at Cloverdale Farm County Park and will be hosting a Winter Weaving Weekend at the Park starting Friday, January 10 through Sunday January 12, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Participants will make three nesting apple baskets. May will also talk about traditional South Jersey baskets at these events.

The Penn-Jersey Basketry Guild will be demonstrating basket weaving at the Tuckerton Seaport during the 42nd annual Old Time Barnegat Bay Decoy and Gunning Show, September 28 and 29 at Tip Seaman County Park. Come watch and perhaps get 'hooked' like O'Connell and May. "Once you start, you can't stop," said O'Connell.

The Guild is on Facebook and can be contacted at pennjerseybasketryguild.org



Mary May filmed for the PBS State of the Arts segment.
Photo credit: PBS.