

Leona Waddell

“I’ve been making baskets on and off since I was about nine years old, helping my mom to start out.”

Leona Waddell was born in 1928 into a family of basket makers. Like many families in Hart County, they traded baskets for groceries and clothing. When Leona started her own family, she sold baskets to the basket stands along the Dixie Highway, where tourists stopped to purchase the distinctive Hart County baskets. Later she sold baskets to a broker, who sold them to upscale stores in New York. In all those years, she was never paid what her baskets were worth and never received recognition. Frustrated, she quit basket making for 17 years and worked various jobs, including as a seamstress and as a cook. When she retired in 1997, she began making baskets again to earn a little extra money, but that changed when she won first prize at the Hart County Fair. Encouraged, she refined her technique and began making a wider variety of baskets. Finally she received the recognition she deserved and a fair price for her baskets. In 2001, she helped found the Mammoth Cave Basket Makers Guild to *preserve and promote traditional basket making of the south central Kentucky region*. The Mammoth Cave basket making tradition is one of the strongest regional traditions in the Commonwealth. In 2012, Leona was awarded the Kentucky Governor’s Folk Heritage Award. One of her baskets is on exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.