

BASKETS AT CHICAGO & HAWTHORNE SOMETIME AFTER 1896
MCCREEDY'S STORE IN BACKGROUND

**A short history of basket
making in the Oak Creek
settlement that became
South Milwaukee**

PREFACE

BAKSET MAKING IN THE EARLY YEARS

This pamphlet reproduces an article written by Harold Hein in March 1988 called: Baskets- from Shops to Factories. Following the article I have added information from additional sources that expand the story and add some details - but In the end, because of the changing of names and missing data, it is impossible to define how many basket factories there actually were. The reader is left to speculate on which factory was which and where they were located.

It is likely that basket making by individuals for personal use began in the Oak Creek settlement as soon as the early settlers arrived in 1835. Commercial basket making followed, but the details are not clear. THE HISTORY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY 1892-1922 declares the manufacturing of baskets began in 1855, but according to other sources it started much sooner and the story is much more complicated.

Donald K. Bulley



BASKETS - FROM SHOPS TO FACTORIES

By Harold Hein - March 1988

One of the early industries in South Milwaukee, then known as Oak Creek, was basketmaking. Several basketmaking shops were known to be located along the creek and in the town. According to the History of Milwaukee county by H. Conrad, John E. Grover was said to have started the first basketmaking shop in the state, in Oak Creek, in 1855.

Born January 3, 1833 at Mansfield, Mass., he went to school until the age of 16 years old and then found employment in a basket factory, remaining there until he was 21 years old. He then went to Cecil County, Maryland and opened his own basket shop until early in 1855. After returning home for a short time, he came to Milwaukee along with his brother, James S. Grover, and cousins, A.B. and Edward T.B. Day.

They came to South Milwaukee and opened the shop in the fall of 1855. The exact location is not known, but John Grover had purchased 67 acres of land on the southwest corner of what is now Marquette and South Chicago Avenues. James later owned two acres on Rawson Avenue just east of the railroad tracks, according to the 1876 atlas. It was part of land owned by the Rawson's and may have been a wedding present when he married Lois Rawson, daughter of Oliver and Lois Howes Rawson. Another daughter, Sarah Rawson and her husband, Charles Watrous owned several acres on the other side of the tracks.

Basket making was a job that could be done with few tools and at home. When the materials were at hand to gather or were accessible, it provided a way to make a living quickly, or done part time in the winter for added income.

An awl, a utility knife and pliers are usually all that are needed, but the work is harsh. In a letter Edward Day was to write to Marietta Rawson* while serving as a clerk in the office of the Exchange Barracks at Nashville during the Civil War he said, "But Met, it is about as hard work to sit by a desk and write all day as it is to make baskets, I think." And in a later letter he says, "Well, this war won't last always, I am confident. If it does, my term will be out in seven months and then I shall have to work at home. But I think I shall be better recompensed than I am now."

But making a living as a basket maker was not to work out for Edward Day in this area. After the war was over, he lived in Cudahy with his wife Laura (Packard) Day and two sons, working at basket making until 1876 when he left them to return to Maryland, saying the he "could not make a living" here. Laura was granted a divorce, almost unheard of in those days, on grounds of desertion.

John Grover disposed of his interests in the basket shop in 1875 and retired to his farm with his wife, Angelina (McCreedy). One of the reasons that caused the Grover basket shop to close may have been the dwindling supply of raw materials that were provided along the creek area over the 20 year period. Some of the good points of the location had been not only the supply of water that is necessary in basket making, but the willow, oak and ash trees in the vicinity that provided the splints for the baskets.

**Marietta Rawson, the daughter of Luther Rawson, was 15 years old when the Civil War started. She had been friends with the young men who worked at a basket factory at the corner of Rawson and South Chicago Avenue. When they left to join Company K of the Wisconsin Volunteers, she wrote to them and kept the letters they sent back. Thirteen of Edward T. Day's letters to Marietta are included in a book, "Letters to Mettie" published by the South Milwaukee Historical Society and is available at the South Milwaukee Historical Society museum.*

Splint baskets are the workhorses of basketry. They were used for farm produce, coal and market baskets. The thin strips of wood are used in a plain uncomplicated weave, over one, under one. Splints from ash were traditionally made by pounding a log that had been soaked over winter to loosen the annual rings of growth. Oak was cut into lengths of about four feet with a diameter of one foot. Wedges of it were then boiled to make it pliable. An edge was started with a chisel, hit with a mallet and an oak lath pulled off by hand. It would have a width of 2-3 inches, a length of 4 feet, and a thickness of less than 1/4 inch. The laths were then put in a machine which cut the thickness in half and it would then be planed and smoothed by hand with a draw knife.

Basket rims were made with a single length of hazel, boiled until pliable, then fitted around a form. All the splints were soaked before working with them. When the basket dried out the lath set hard, making the construction very rigid and strong.

Willow harvesting along the creek was done in winter by hand. The canes were bundled and left until spring when the bark was easily removed in a brake by pulling the rods through. They were then left to dry out in the open and sorted according to length. Wash baskets were made of willow in Oak Creek.

Besides John Grover, Sanford Grover, another brother who came to Oak Creek in 1862, left to serve in the Civil War. He then returned to become one of the town's well-known citizens. Warren Grover, J.A. Bethel and Leonard Heidelberg were among those who also made split baskets, which were shipped all over the mid-west.

Perhaps one of the best remembered basket factories was the Moore Basket Factory (later the Moore-Whitmore Basket Factory) which was located on the south side of Oak Creek, west of Chicago Avenue and just south of what is now Parkway Drive.

In 1849 James Moore along with his wife Elizabeth Dean and several children came to Oak Creek from England. Moore bought a sawmill with water power from William Shaw which was located on the west side of Chicago Road on the creek. He built other buildings to the south of the creek and installed machinery for the manufacture of cotton goods.

This business did not prove to be successful and Moore changed back to the sawmill and manufactured furniture frames, wooden wheel hubs, veneer and wooden butter dishes.

In 1872 he turned his entire attention to the manufacture of baskets. After his death in 1888, the business was carried on by his two sons, Thomas and James, along with George Whitmore.

In 1899 the Moore-Whitmore Basket shop was taken over by J.F. Conant. By 1904, where there had been a small building where baskets were made entirely by hand, there was a great factory with "all the modern machinery known to the trade already in operation and dozens of workmen."

The chief products of J.F. Conant Mfg. were laundry baskets, market baskets, and fruit baskets. Conant also added a furniture veneer department, putting up a factory 110 feet by 40 feet for that purpose. Also constructed were a 100 foot long Bayley dry kiln, a stock shed for the basket factory and a warehouse. In the winter of 1904, Conant intended to add a sawmill to work into lumber those logs not suitable for veneer.

A 1911 Souvenir booklet about South Milwaukee speaks of the Conant Mfg. Co. as "one of the most flourishing factories of the kind in the state", but by 1922 it had changed hands several times and was known as the Milwaukee Basket Company. A few years later the site of the factory was purchased by Milwaukee County and became part of Oak Creek (Parkway).

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

SOUTH MILWAUKEE THEN TO NOW (pp47) MR. BUNN'S YELLOW MILL
"Mr. Bunn ran the Fowle grist mill for about ten years and then decided to build his own steam powered mill further up the creek. The building was completed and painted yellow. The machinery was ordered, but then he became sick and died in 1853. The building was never used for the purpose for which it was built. After that, many uses were made of the building. It was used for a basket factory, a broom shop, a straw shop, a creamery and a cheese factory".

SOUTH MILWAUKEE—AFTER 30 YEARS (pp3). "A steam flour mill was build on the present site of Frank Stuart's home at North Chicago Avenue and the bridge in 1852 - 1853. It was used for various purposes—basket shop, creamery and cheese factory. It burned to the ground late in the year 1886".

"James Moore bought an old saw mill (from William Shew) on the creek on the site of what is now the Milwaukee basket Company. It was originally a woolen mill, then a saw mill, and since 1872 has been a basket factory. When he died in 1888, the factory became known the Moore, Whitmore and Company. They continued to make baskets. Later the factory was made larger".

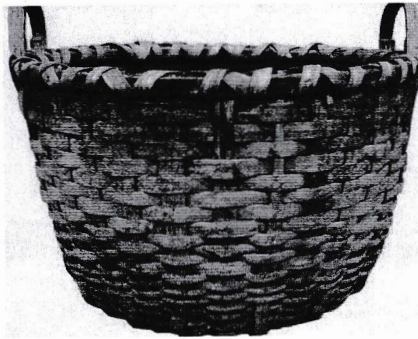
SOUTH MILWAUKEE THEN TO NOW (pp52 & 53) "James Moore was born in Yorkshire, England. He went to school in England; later he was a apprentice in the business of Manufacturing worsteds. In 1849 he came to Oak Creek and bought an old saw mill from William Shew on the creek. After running the woolen mill for awhile, it was given up because it wasn't successful. Then he moved the saw mill into new buildings and tore down the old mill.

In this new building he made wagon hubs and furniture later on. He ran this saw mill steadily for about twenty years. In 1872 he discontinued the saw mill and the furniture business and started to make baskets. Baskets were made for eighteen years in this factory..."

SOUTH MILWAUKEE AFTER 30 YEARS (pp 9,13 & 15) "Looking back thirty years to the farther edge of our picture, Over the hills to the southeast of this old landmark (the Fowle Mill) the Fowle brickyard made brick in a small way, while up the creek, near the railroad the Moore basket works were busy converting logs into various kinds of baskets. The Fowle and the Grover basket shops were turning out hand cut splint baskets nearby.

In 1901, ... "The Moore basket works has changed hands twice and is now the J.F. Conant Mfg. Co."

1922 ... "The Basket company has changed hands several times and is now known as The Milwaukee Basket Company, and have a larger capacity than ever."



SPLINT BASKET



WILLOW BASKET

ESTABLISHED 1871

ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE

OF

—GENERAL—

BASKETS

—MANUFACTURED BY—

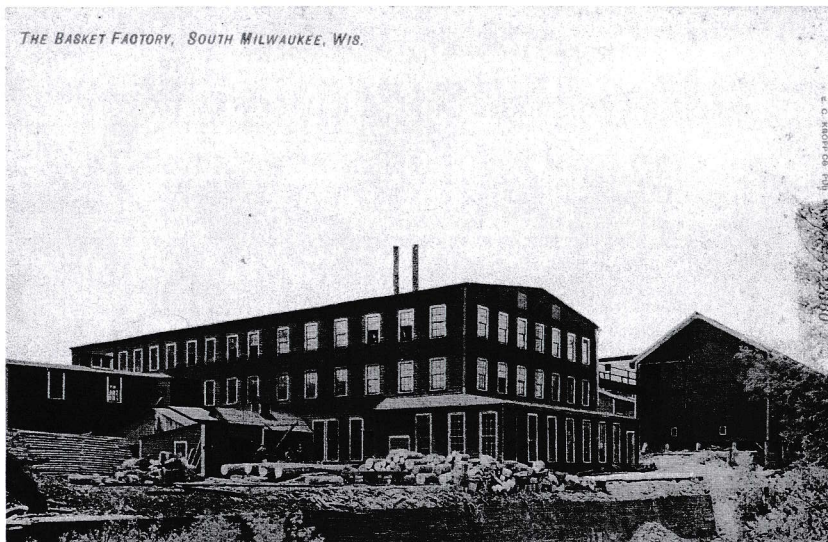
**The MOORE
WHITMORE
COMPANY**

SOUTH MILWAUKEE,
WISCONSIN.

L72-1-49

<p style="text-align: center;">Riveted Diamond Market.</p>  <p>The regular Extra Quality basket, made of best rock elm, has heavy bent hoops and riveted bails; a first-class article.</p> <p>No. 1—18 qt., 14 x 9 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 2—16 qt., 17 x 12 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 3—24 qt., 20 x 12 x 7 1/2 deep, per doz.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Extra Quality Milwaukee Diamond Market—Labelled.</p>  <p>The highest grade of a diamond market to be found; made of selected rock elm, all hoops and bails being carefully cut and heavy sawed hoops and extra heavy riveted bails; every basket is perfect.</p> <p>No. 1—18 qt., 14 x 9 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 2—16 qt., 17 x 12 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 3—24 qt., 20 x 12 x 7 1/2 deep, per doz.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Common Drop Ball Market.</p>  <p>Well made of birch or maple. These baskets nest, thus saving storage room and freight charges.</p> <p>No. 1—8 qt., 15 x 8 x 5 deep, per doz. No. 2—16 qt., 17 x 12 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Extra Strapped Drop Ball Market.</p>  <p>A very high grade basket, made of best rock elm; has heavy bent hoops and sawed bails.</p> <p>No. 1—8 qt., 15 x 8 x 5 deep, per doz. No. 2—16 qt., 17 x 12 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Extra Quality Wide Band Staves.</p>  <p>Made of rock elm, have double bent hoops, extra heavy hoops, and heavy sawed hoops. Each basket is perfect.</p> <p>No. 1—18 qt., 14 x 9 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 2—16 qt., 17 x 12 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 3—24 qt., 20 x 12 x 7 1/2 deep, per doz.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Extra Quality Milwaukee Stave.</p>  <p>Made of rock elm, have double bent hoops, extra heavy hoops, and heavy sawed hoops. Each basket is perfect.</p> <p>No. 1—18 qt., 14 x 9 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 2—16 qt., 17 x 12 x 6 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 3—24 qt., 20 x 12 x 7 1/2 deep, per doz.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Oval Splint Market.</p>  <p>Will last a lifetime and then be good for a well-made of fine rock elm splints, with oval board bottom.</p> <p>No. 1—16 x 12 x 8 deep, per doz. No. 2—18 x 13 x 8 1/2 deep, per doz. No. 3—20 x 14 x 9 deep, per doz.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Crackery Basket.</p>  <p>Strongly made from selected rock elm, with sawed hoops.</p> <p>No. 1—12 x 12 x 12 deep, per doz. No. 2—14 x 14 x 13 deep, per doz. No. 3—15 x 15 x 14 deep, per doz. No. 4—17 x 17 x 17 deep, per doz. Iron strapped, any size, extra</p>

THE BASKET FACTORY, SOUTH MILWAUKEE, WIS.



BASKET FACTORY ABOUT 1910

BASKET MAKERS

There were many basket makers in the early settlement. The following are the names of people who have been identified as Basket makers in one capacity or another.

Warren Grover	James Moore Jr.
J . F. Conant	George Whitmore
James Moore	Mackie Walls
E.C. Knoernschild	Robert Filbey
Edward Day	William Shew
DeLos A. Fowle	Elihu Higgins
John E. Grover	James Grover
Sanford Grover	J.A. Bethel
Leonard Heidelberg	Thomas Dean Moore

SOURCES

HISTORY OF MILWAUKEE COUNTY

By H. Conrad

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SOUTH MILWAUKEE—AFTER 30 YEARS 1892—1922

Author unknown

ILLUSTRATED CATALOGUE of GENERAL BASKETS

MANUFACTURED BY
THE MOORE WHITMORE CO.

SOUTH MILWAUKEE THEN TO NOW

Gertrude Moe Endthoff

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*The material in this pamphlet has been abstracted by
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