



Photo: Clara Gough

Edith Clayton of East Preston, “the last link of a tradition”<sup>1</sup> was instrumental in preserving the distinctive, centuries-old art of woven wood baskets found in several Nova Scotia communities. Born in 1920 at Cherry Brook, Edith learned the art of basket making from her mother and grandmother, who had learned it in turn from their mothers and grandmothers. The method had originated in Africa and was brought to the Americas by enslaved people, then to Nova Scotia during the Black migrations of 1812–1814.<sup>2</sup>

Like her mother and grandmother, Edith journeyed to the Halifax market each week to sell decorative household items such as market baskets, cradles, clothes hampers and storage hampers, as well as homemade bread and produce. Husband Clifford assisted by gathering red maple wood that was split either into the ribs or the wood

ribbons woven to make the body. Edith obtained natural dyes from Mi'kmaq women to decorate some of her work. The dyes arrived by mail in little brown sacks; when she was expecting an order, a family member was sent to the Dartmouth post office to collect it. Edith's basket making became so well known that people came from all over to buy her work and to study with her. She represented Nova Scotia at Expo 86 in Vancouver and at various craft exhibitions in other parts of Canada. Her baskets are found in collections around the world.<sup>3</sup>

Edith loved children; she raised 11 of her own, adopted a daughter and cared for neighbourhood children after school. She was a wonderful storyteller but also a good listener. Many women approached her for advice about children or about life, and she generously gave of herself. Both Edith and Clifford were active in their church. Edith made collection baskets, served in women's groups and gave workshops. She felt it essential to preserve the tradition of basket making so identified with her community and taught her daughters as well as others. Sylvia Hamilton's film, *Black Mother, Black Daughter*, features Edith making a basket and talking to a group gathered around her, learning and making baskets of their own. Among other honours, Edith received the Queen's Medal in 1977. She died in 1989.<sup>4</sup>

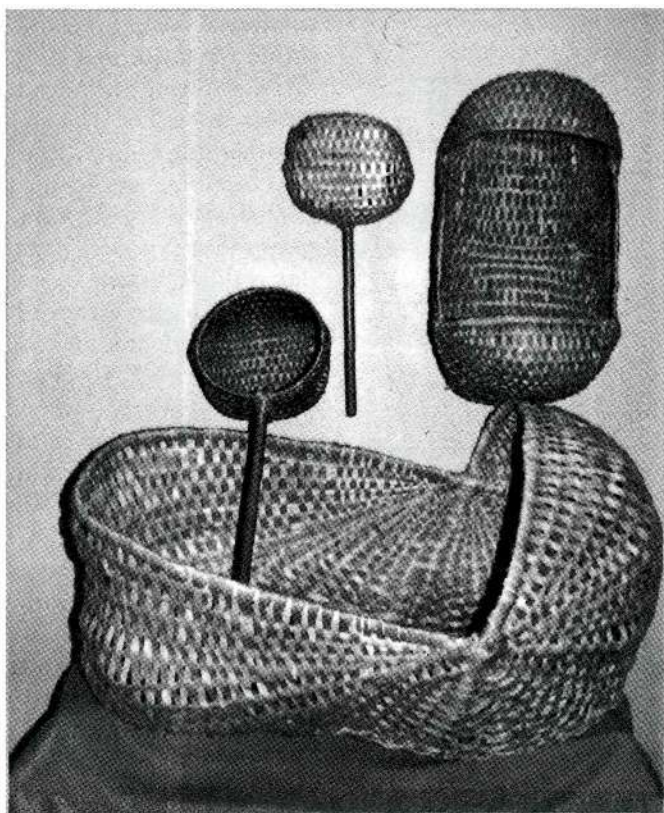


Photo: Clara Clayton Gough

*Display of two types of baskets by Edith Clayton*

The collection baskets used in church and the cradles shown above are but two of the many basket types created by Edith Clayton. While market baskets may be the best-known shape (see page 74 for photo of a market basket), Edith followed the same technique for all of her art. The framework for a basket with a handle involves two circles of red maple wood, quartered lengthwise; one piece is the rim, the other the handle. These are placed at right angles and joined, or wrapped, with ribbon-like pieces of split wood. "Into these two wraps are inserted the ribs. The ribs are long narrow pieces of wood with sharp tapering points on either end and they form the warp of the basket through which the finely split ribbons of wood, the splits or strips, are woven as the weft."<sup>1</sup>