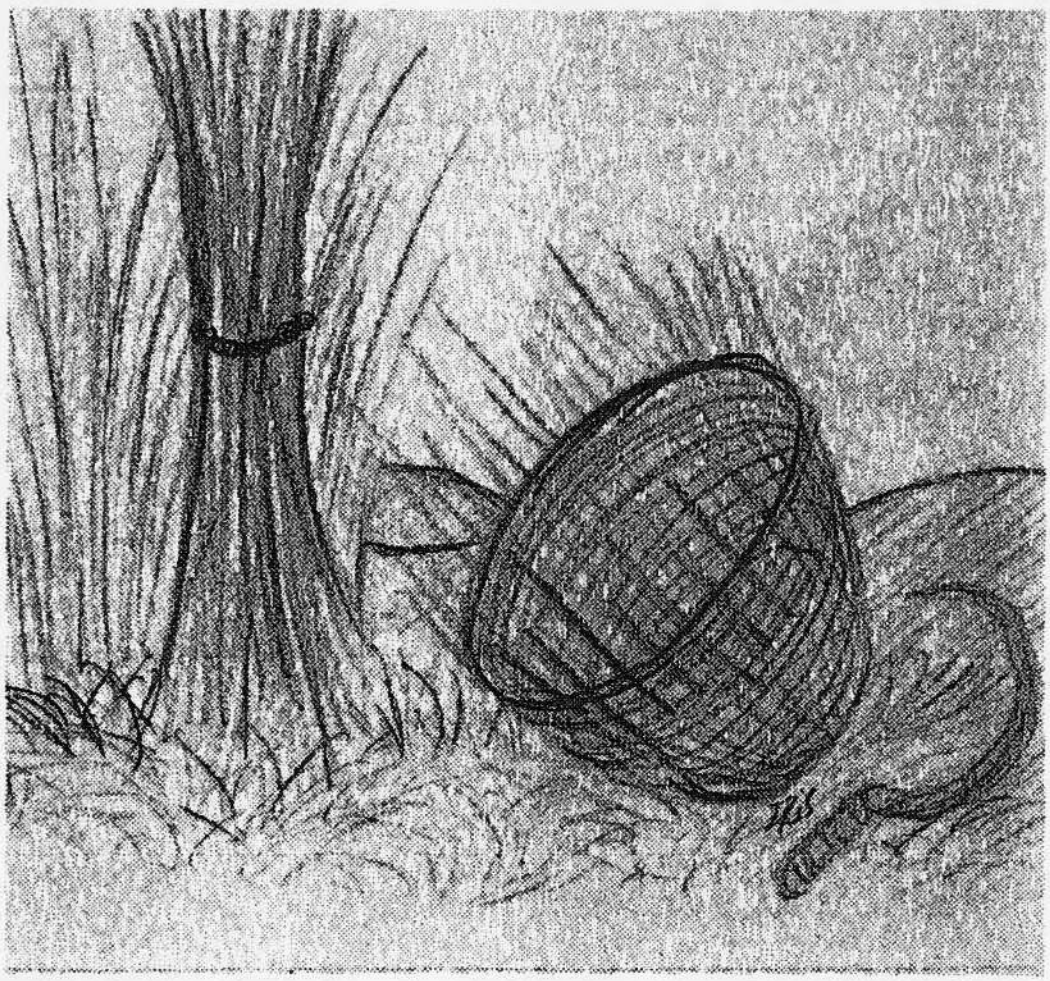
Willow Field Elementary School

A Name From Liverpool History



Iris Mekker

March 25, 1990

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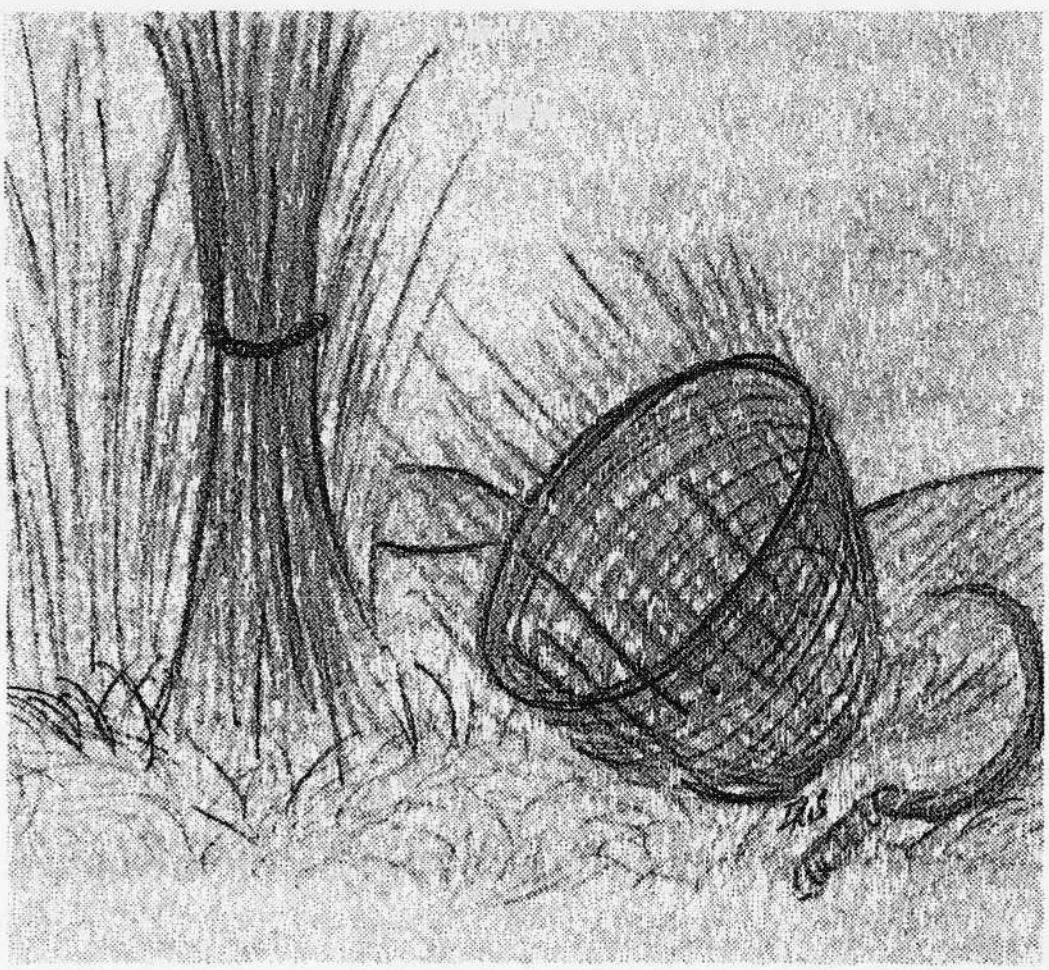


Iris Mekker

Written By Linda Loomis

After recess, Lori, Matthew and Hannah hurried back to class. Today they would present their research report explaining how their school got its name. All week they had worked in the library to gather information about the willow industry in Liverpool.

When all the fourth graders had returned to the room, Mr. Whitney called for the report. Hannah was first to speak. Holding a small, oval basket high above her head, she said, "Willow Field Elementary School is part of local history. This basket can help us understand our links to the past."

Hannah said that members of the Liverpool Board of Education decided to give the new school a name that would help connect it to the history of the community. After several months of searching for the best name, they heard a story about a man who

helped build one of the early industries of Liverpool.

"School board members voted to call the new school Willow Field Elementary," said Hannah. "Now Matthew will tell us why."

Matthew showed the class a picture of two men standing in a field of willow. "This is the material from which early residents created baskets to sell throughout the country," he said. "The reeds would be cut at the base with sharp, curved blades, then bundled and carted to shops in and around the village. There, the willow would be woven into baskets. This was the major industry of our community one hundred years ago."

Matthew glanced at his note cards. This is the story he told the class about how the first willow was discovered locally and how the industry developed:

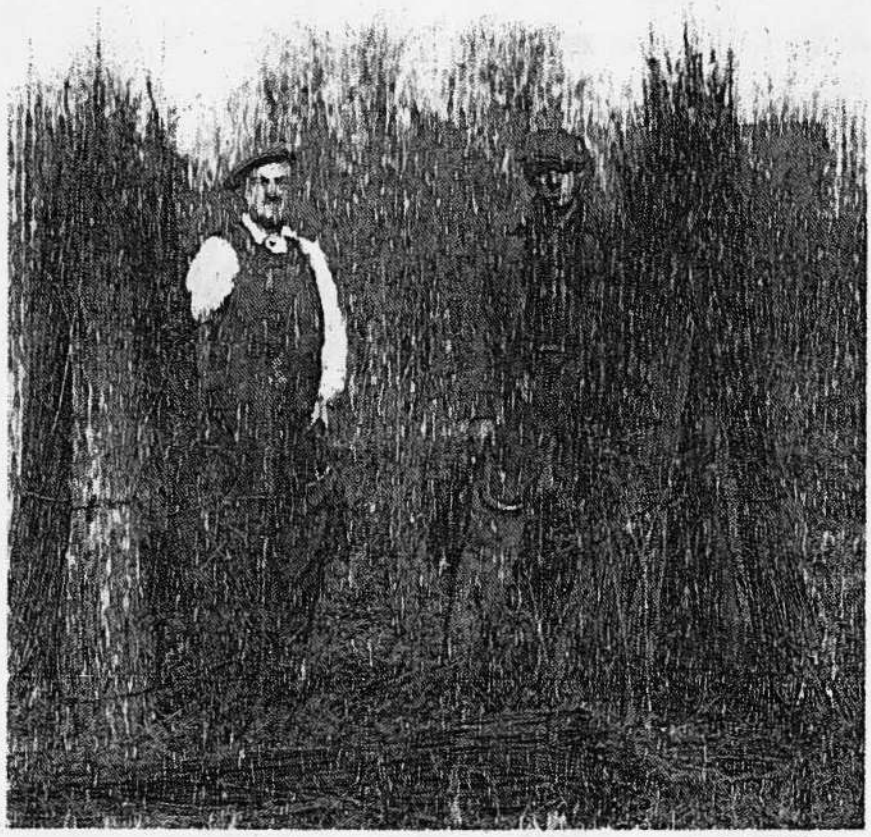
In 1852, nearly 150 years ago, John Fischer took a day off from his job in the salt industry where he had worked since coming to the United States from Germany. On his

way to visit a friend who lived in the small settlement of Euclid, north of the village, he discovered a field of wild willow. The reeds looked like reeds he had used in Germany to weave baskets. Mr. Fischer thought he could use the willow to weave baskets such as those he had crafted back in his native country.

John Fischer cut the willow and took it home. He made the first basket and sold it to a Liverpool woman who paid him 50 cents. Other people wanted baskets, too. He decided to send a letter to Germany inviting his family and friends to join him in Liverpool. Thirty families settled here and supported themselves by making and selling willow baskets.

At first the weavers gathered whips, or reeds, wherever they could find them growing wild. After a while, however, the demand for baskets increased so much that they needed a steady supply of raw material. Around 1868 the first field of cultivated willow was harvested on the Andrews farm near Cicero.

Matthew told the class that willow was harvested in the fall when the whips had grown to about eight feet high. Men cut the clumps at the root, and the roots would con-



Courtesy - Salt Museum

Using sharp, curved blades,men harvest willow whips to be woven into baskets. This picture was taken around 1920.

tinue to produce more willow each year without re-planting. Swampy or rocky soil which would not support other crops was ideal for willow. Between two and six tons of whips could be gathered from one acre of land.

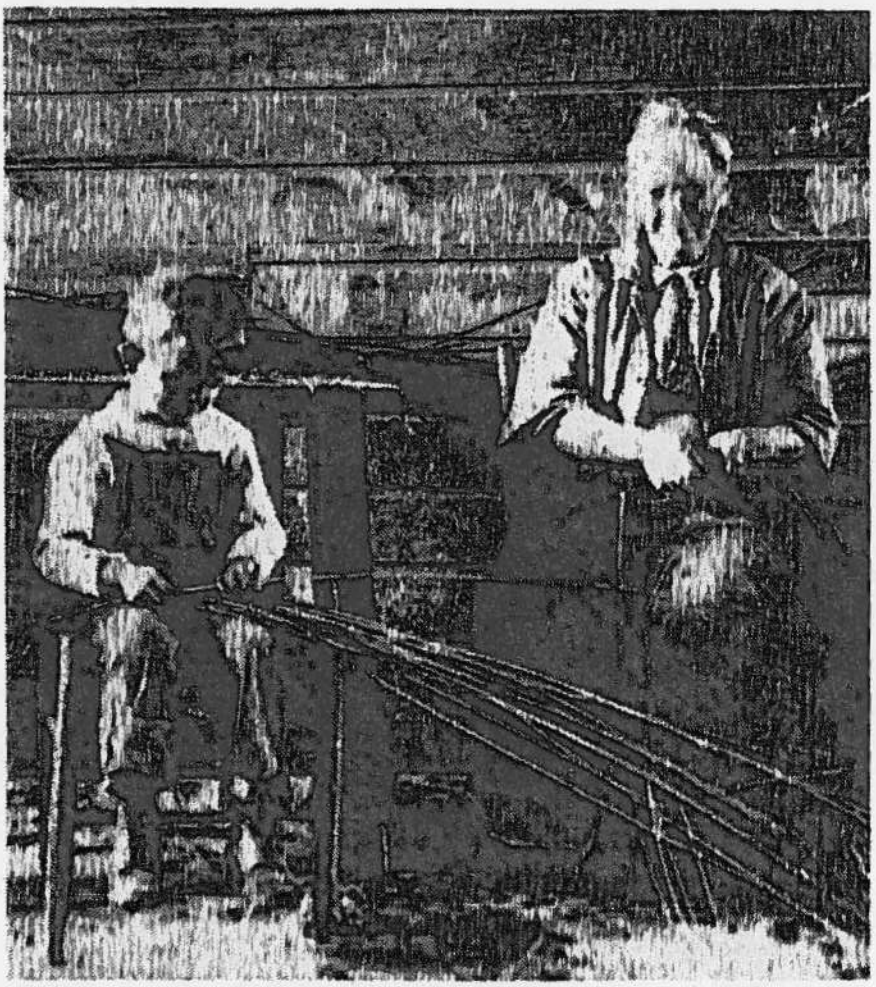
"Now," said Matthew, "our next speaker will tell you how baskets were made."

Lori twisted one of her braids as she spoke. "Let's pretend we are living one hundred years ago. We have no cars or televisions or electricity. We walk to school on dirt roads, and after school we hurry home to help with family chores. Many of us are children of weavers, for Liverpool is the major producer of baskets in the country. In shops behind our homes, entire families work together to make baskets. This is what our lives might have been like:

"It is early winter and the air around our homes carries the sharp odor of willow bark. Workers are steaming the whips which had been gathered in the fall. Steaming loosens the bark so that the whips can

be stripped and readied for weaving.

"Men, women and children help run the whips through a tool called a "break" or "bark cracker." Then, children peel the re-



Courtesy · Salt Museum

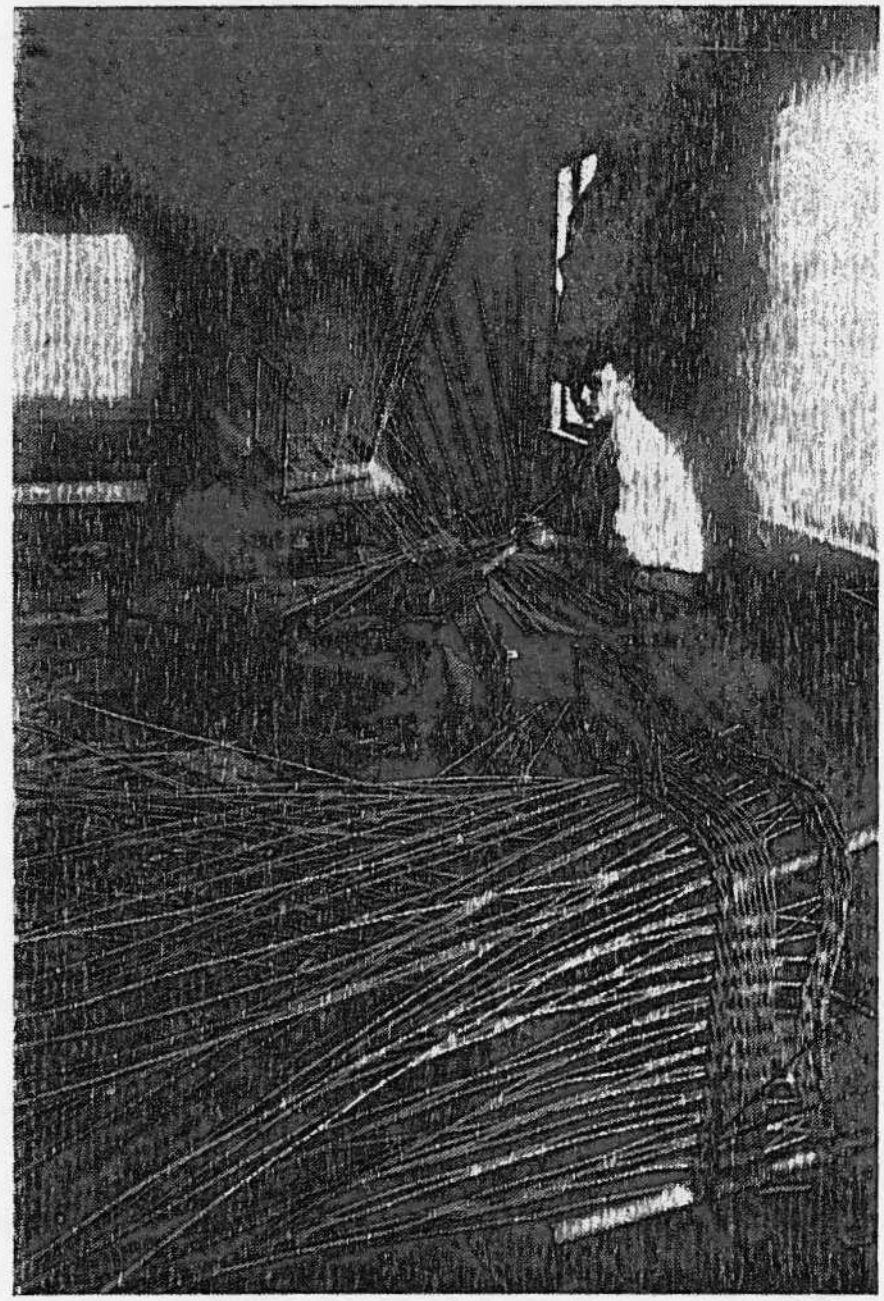
Mrs. John Renke and a grandson strip the bark from willow reeds. Families worked together in the production of baskets, Liverpool's major industry around the turn of the century when this picture was taken.

maining bark off the reeds. This job leaves hands stained and sore.

"Families often sing and tell stories as they work. Some children watch their parents and learn the craft of basket weaving from them. Women sometimes make the bottoms of baskets, then set them aside to be completed by the men. Working a 10-hour day, a weaver produces about a dozen baskets."

Lori explained that basket weaving was primarily a "cottage industry," one which involved small family groups working in their homes. She said that a few ambitious businessmen operated small factories in which they employed up to two dozen non-family workers. Men who worked in the basket shops earned between one and three dollars a day. Women earned only a quarter. The peak production year in the willow industry was 1892 when 360,000 baskets were sold.

Lori then told the class about a change in the industry which came about in the 1880s. "Up until that time the weavers had



Courtesy · Salt Museum

A young man creates a "common basket" at the Raupaugh Furniture Company around 1900. He has secured a basket bottom to his sloped workbench with an awl to hold it securely as he weaves the sides.

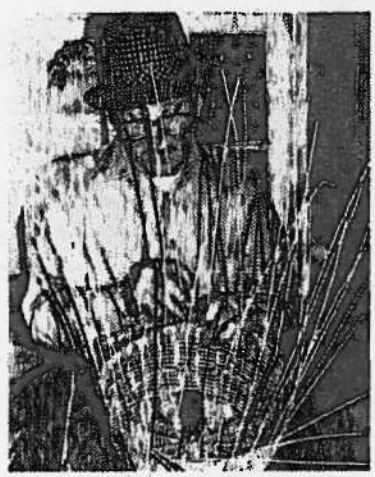
produced only what they called 'common baskets.' Then, the craftsmen started to make 'fancy ware.' They wove market baskets, baby bassinets and furniture. People all over the country ordered Liverpool willow for their homes."

From the mid-1800s through the 1920s, Liverpool was known for the production of sturdy, high quality, attractive baskets. Life revolved around the shops behind village houses and even social life reflected the people's interest in their craft as they participated in basket weavers' picnics and dances.

Today the shops are abandoned or used as garages. Acrid smoke from burning bark no longer fills the village streets in spring. The willow industry floundered in the 1920s, and by the end of the 1930s, after the Great Depression, few shops survived. Competition from Europe and the Far East, where willow and wicker baskets could be produced inexpensively with cheap labor, was too great for local weavers to overcome.

The last local craftsmen, John Wiegand and Martin Hetnar, closed their "fancy ware" shops in the 1960s. Only one basket weaver survives today. Frank Selinski, a former resident, now lives in Hamilton, New York. He makes a limited number of baskets following the craft he learned as a child at the turn of the century from his grandfather. He alone carries on the tradition of the Liverpool basket weavers -- a tradition which can be traced to John Fischer who saw possibilities in a willow field in 1852.

"Our school is named to help us remember the people who worked in the basket industry," said Lori. "We can be proud of our heritage and proud of our school."



In 1990 Frank Selinski made a basket especially for the pupils of Willow Field Elementary School.

Photo by Sharon Fulmer

This Book Belongs To

Name_____

Age_____ Grade_____

My teacher is_____

My friends are_____

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