

# Regional Variation in Maidu Coiled Basketry Materials and Technology

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**M**UCH of the American Indian basketry in museum and private collections was generally made to sell to non-Indian people (Frohman 1977; Purdy 1973; Bates 1979; James 1901). This phenomenon is apparent not only in the aberrant shapes, designs, and sizes of baskets, but perhaps more notably in their pristine or unused condition. Relatively few baskets show wear or discoloring that result from stone boiling, parching, or a variety of other indigenous uses (Fig. 1).

Most Maidu coiled basketry collected prior to 1920 is a startling exception to the "tourist" type baskets usually found in collections. The majority of baskets are of the "home use" type—cooking baskets, eating bowls, drinking cups, water containers, parching and sifting trays, and the like. For example, while many extant cooking baskets show no use, Maidu cooking bowls are usually found with circular wear patterns, the result of stirring the heated cooking stones in the basket when boiling liquids, and in an incrustation and impregnation of acorn mush (Fig. 2).

The Maidu occupied what is now north-central California. They have been divided into three major groups based on linguistic differences: the Nisenan or Southern Maidu in the southern Sacramento Valley and adjacent

foothills, the Konkow or Northwestern Maidu in the northern Sacramento Valley and neighboring foothills on the lower Feather River canyon, and the Northeastern or Mountain Maidu in the high meadows of the Sierra Nevada to the east. Each of these three groups had a separate dialect, and this may be partially reflected in the observation that there seemed to be much more contact between the Valley Konkow and the Nisenan and neighboring valley Patwin than with their language kin (Mountain Maidu) to the east (Kroeber 1909: 255-256). Bordered by the Miwok to the south, the Washo and Paiute on the east, and the Yana, Nomlaki, and Patwin to the north and west, the Maidu as a whole occupied one of the most environmentally diverse and botanically rich areas of California.

Having no basis in native concepts of world order, tribal entities such as the "Maidu" are renderings by anthropologists, based upon linguistic data. These linguistically derived "tribes" existed in the sense that a general "tribal" style of "Maiduan" basketry can be identified. This remains, however, a very general perspective and provides only the slightest understanding of the immense diversity that contributes to the "Maiduan" style. Ethnographer Roland Dixon (1902: 2-12) noted that Maidu basketry when studied properly would demonstrate variance from valley to valley. Nevertheless, many ethnographers, museum curators, and private collec-

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Fig. 1. The Cady Collection, Susanville, California, ca. 1920. Mrs. Cady bought many of these baskets from the weavers, including Rose Salem, Selina Jackson, Daisy Baker, and Jennie Meadows (for whom the fancy polychrome "made for sale" Mountain Maidu coiled basketry is best known and admired). Many such pieces are included in this photograph. Note the variety of shapes, sizes, and designs that occurred as a result of the production of baskets for a non-Indian market. This collection was donated in the 1940s to the State of California, Department of Parks and Recreation State Indian Museum. Courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

tors have continued to categorize all Maidu basketry as "Maidu," ignoring variance in order to emphasize any general similarity found in these baskets. The differences in Maidu basketry are often based upon regional variations that coincide with the native social and political order of autonomous villages; that is, there is a tendency for the baskets from the same locality to have similar construction components, in contrast to baskets from other villages. Designs are the most unreliable of features for differentiating re-

gional styles, while sewing techniques and basket materials are without doubt the most reliable variants to allow sorting out of the wide diversity that is "Maiduan" basketry. This paper is an attempt to clarify some ideas about the materials and techniques used in their construction. Thus, we are not proposing new theories and methods in an area where taxonomic principles already exist. Rather, we are using already existent principles of classification that appear to coincide with Maidu views of world order.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 2. Cooking acorn mush at a Konkow Maidu feast, Bidwell Bar, California, 1903. The feast was given in honor of the visiting Chico Maidu (Hudson n.d.: 287-288). Note the large coiled baskets in use. Photograph by J. W. Hudson, courtesy of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago (Neg. No. 9514).

Functional baskets among the Maidu, as among other Native American groups, have a prescribed set of shapes and designs. The truncated cone, for example, is the most used shape for cooking vessels, while perfectly flat or slightly dished trays were produced specifically for sifting acorn flour. Designs are of a variety of styles, including connecting designs that zig-zag around the basket, isolated design units spaced evenly around the basket, and obliquely arranged patterns that use elements similar to those of the interconnecting designs. Occasionally, certain designs were recognized as the property or hallmark of individual women, and at least some Northwestern (Konkow) Maidu women created

utilitarian sets of baskets decorated with a single design unit (Fig. 3).

The Northeastern or Mountain Maidu eventually created a specific style of basketry which was sold exclusively to non-Indians (Fig. 4). However, the Konkow and Nisenan apparently never produced baskets of this genre on a regular basis, although traditional style baskets were made for sale. Many women, such as the cousins Mary Azbill (1864-1932) and Amanda Wilson (ca. 1865-1948), both of the Konkow group, continued to create baskets throughout their lives that were identical to those woven during their childhood. By still staying within the traditional confines of their peoples'



Fig. 3. Coiled acorn-flour sifting tray and meal receptacle woven by Amanda Wilson, ca. 1920. Sedge root, willow shoots, briar root. Note the variation of the *Su-su-yeh*-quail plume pattern, for which Amanda was well known. Matched sets of utilitarian baskets such as these were used by more affluent women among the Valley Maidu. Diameter of sifting tray, 40.6 cm., diameter of bowl, 24.7 cm., height 14.0 cm. Photograph by Michael Dixon, courtesy of private collection.

basketry they became acclaimed for their excellence by neighboring Maidu, Nomlaki, Patwin, and Wintu people, as well as by non-Indians.

Trade was extensive between the Maidu people and their neighbors, as well as between the various Maidu groups. Women were interested in other people's basketry and

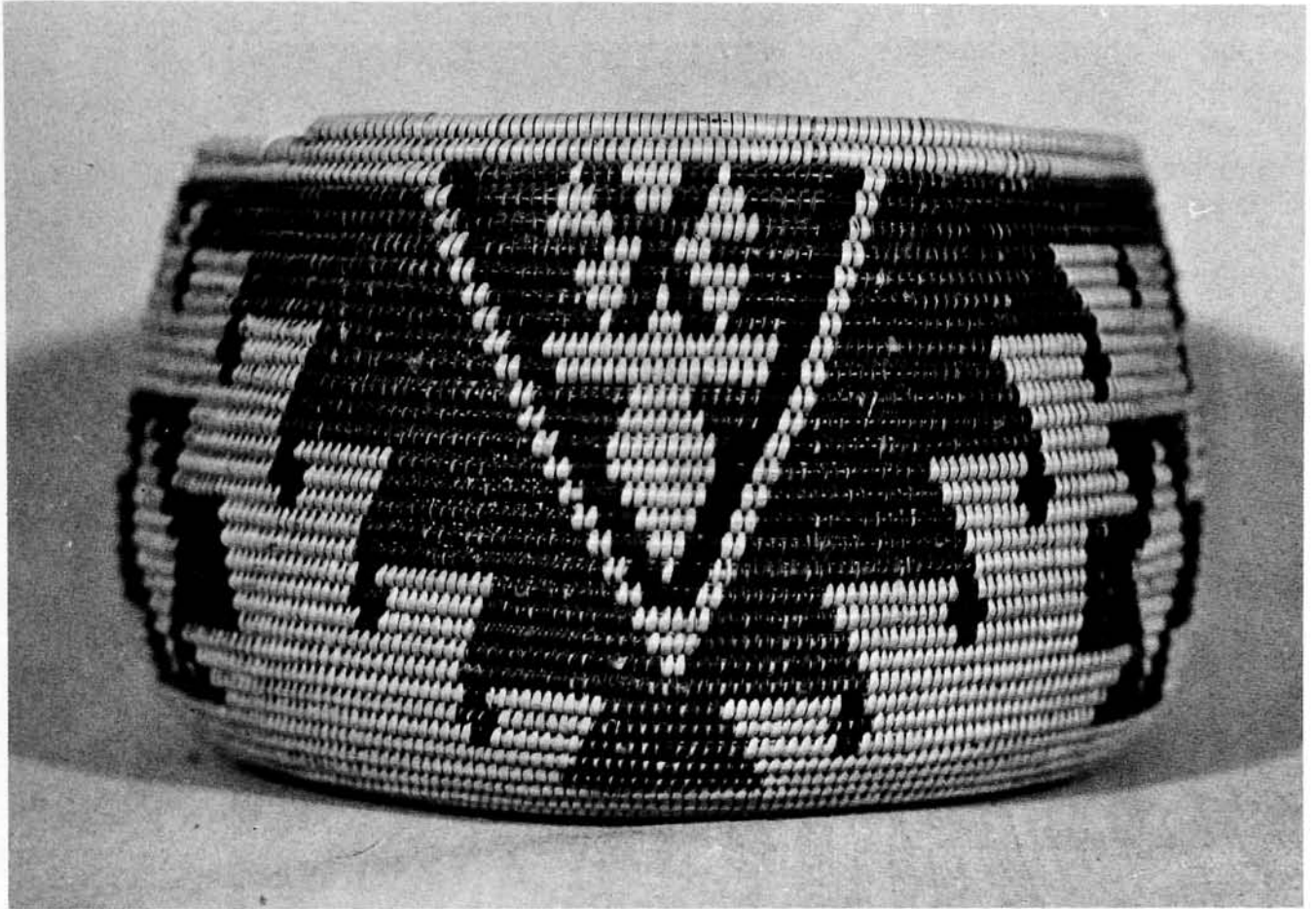


Fig. 4. Coiled basket by Polly Peters, Northeastern Maidu, made prior to 1915. Willow shoots, split maple and redbud shoots, bracken fern roots. This two-color pattern is indicative of the work done by post-1900 Northeastern Maidu weavers in baskets made for sale to non-Indians. Diameter 17.9 cm., height 10.2 cm. Photograph by Bruce Bernstein, courtesy of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley (Catalog No. 1-71963).

enjoyed having “different” baskets and occasionally working with materials not available locally (cf. Merriam 1955: 106-109). As an example, Konkow women at Chico owned baskets made by Maidu women at Big Meadows and by Paiute women from Susanville, as well as trading briar-root basket material to weavers living in the foothill belt (Henry Azbill, personal communication 1970). This type of exchange helps to account for baskets collected in certain localities that were perhaps not manufactured at the place of collection, and for baskets produced with materials not found in the local ecosystem. Many museum collections most clearly illustrate this

in containing baskets with provenience as to place of collection, but not necessarily the place of manufacture.

Basket weaving was a tradition handed down to young girls by older female relatives. Some learned to weave as early as three years of age (Marie Potts, personal communication 1977). While many did not acquire the skill at such a young age, most were accomplished weavers by the time they were ten or twelve years old (H. Azbill, personal communication 1969). In producing baskets, every aspect of the process was governed by traditionally established rules imparted to the young weaver during her training.

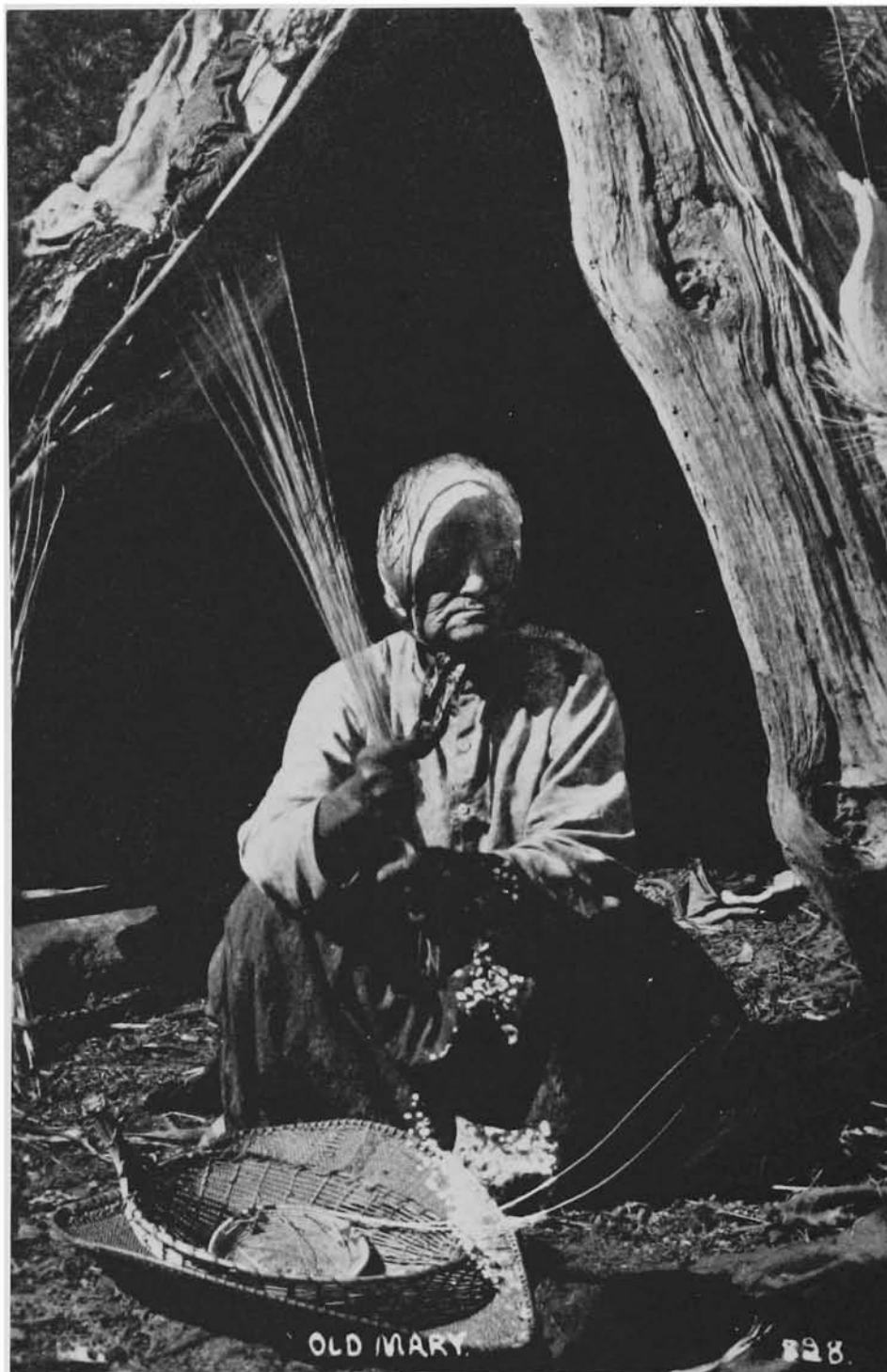


Fig. 5. "Old Mary," a Northeastern Maidu weaver ca. 1915-1920. Note the unfinished three-rod basket in the foreground, resting in a twined seed-beater of Northeastern Maidu manufacture, under which is a twined Washo sifting tray of the type commonly obtained by the Maidu in trade. She holds a bundle of scraped willow shoots in her hands. Photograph by J. C. Pillsbury, courtesy of the National Park Service, Yosemite Collection (Catalog No. 14,089).

To begin a basket, the woman soaked the necessary materials in water for about half an hour before starting to weave. The split strands were trimmed to a uniform width and thickness; and the rods scraped to an even diameter for their entire length with a piece of obsidian or, after EuroAmerican contact, a fragment of broken glass or a steel knife. Trimmings from this process were gathered into a small bundle, which was wrapped with a strand of the sewing material, then bent around and stitched to itself with the aid of an awl. More stitching took place, coiling the shredded material around and around. When this "start" had grown to an inch or so in diameter, three rods of even diameter were substituted for the shredded material—the beginning of a so-called three-rod basket (Fig. 5). Great care was taken to place the point of the awl so that it split the upper rod, as well as splitting the stitches on the non-work face, or inside, of the basket. The Northeastern Maidu carefully and evenly bifurcated stitches on the non-work face while other Maidu weavers were less attentive to this detail. The foundation rods virtually always projected to the weaver's left, producing a basket with a leftward coil direction when viewed from the work face. Single-rod baskets are rare and seem to occur in greater numbers in border areas. Southern Maidu contact with the Washoe and Northeastern Maidu exchange with the Paiute near Susanville apparently account for the rare use of single-rod coiling among the Maidu. The fag ends of sewing strands are generally concealed in the foundation, although one of the southernmost Nisenan groups trimmed the fag end on the work face, a common practice among the neighboring Miwok. The moving ends are generally either trimmed on the non-work face or are incorporated into the foundation bundle. There does seem to exist a division of sorts, with the trimmed ends being found among the groups living in the Sierra Nevada

mountains, and the bound-under ends being used by valley groups (Lawrence Dawson, personal communication 1974). However, women from the intermediate foothills use both techniques, often on the same basket, and baskets using each technique are to be found among all Maidu groups.

One of the significant diagnostic features of Maidu baskets is seen in the materials used in their construction. Materials are not collected, prepared, or used arbitrarily; climate and environment are essential conditions in producing "good" materials. Thus, well-made baskets depend a great deal on the quality of materials used in their construction.

Plant materials are gathered at specific times of the year, depending upon climate and intended function. Once gathered, the roots and shoots are split and bound into coils for use as sewing strands. Materials are stored for at least a year before being incorporated into a basket. Split shoot materials, such as redbud, maple, and willow, come from annually pruned plants that consequently produce young, straight shoots which may be split in halves, thirds, or quarters. Unsplit shoots, scraped of their bark, are used for foundation rods. Maidu weavers also once burned off yearly growth through control burns each year, providing a fertilized soil and, a year later, young, straight shoots (personal communications, H. Azbill [1969], Mary Wagoner Jones [1977], Frank Joseph [1976], and M. Potts [1977]).<sup>2</sup> Root materials such as those of briar, bulrush, and sedge were harvested from well-tended plots of sandy soil near waterways. Plots were annually cleaned of debris and crowded plants, and were tilled by both the action of digging roots and the intentional churning of the soil. A well-tilled ground provides a soft aerated soil in which strong and straight roots can grow.

Redbud (*Cercis occidentalis*) was the most common sewing material, used for both design and body of the basket. The young



Fig. 6. A group of baskets woven by Lizzie Enos, Southern Maidu, ca. 1950s. Note the variety of baskets, primarily of split redbud shoots on a foundation of willow rods, as well as the unfinished basket. Photograph by Norm Wilson, courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

shoots of the redbud were split in half, with care being taken to guide the split through nodes or buds. The inner, pithy heart was then removed along with adjacent woody material, leaving a long, even sewing strand. When prepared in the spring when the sap is running, the bark is easily pulled from these strands. This leaves a long, white sewing strand. During the winter months, however, the bark adheres tenaciously to the sapwood. Thus, the split strands retain the dark red bark as color, while the sapwood underneath provides the strength. White sewing strands can also be made from the redbud shoots during the winter by "toasting" the shoots over a fire prior to splitting, which loosens the bark. The vast majority of Maidu baskets studied contain redbud as a design material (Figs. 6-7).

The big leaf maple (*Acer macrophyllum*), split into quarters, also provides a white sewing material. This was a favored material and, while enjoying widespread use, seems to have been concentrated in Butte and Nevada counties. Maple plants were burned off in late

autumn to provide young straight shoots to be harvested either the next winter or following spring. At least on certain occasions, the maple shoots were gathered in the late winter, heated in ashes, and then split into quarters (Hudson n.d.: 280; Fig. 8).

Willow (*Salix* sp.) was listed by Kroeber (1925: 414) as the most common sewing material. However, the authors would suggest its presence in a more limited scope. The Susanville area Maidu apparently used the willow in imitation of, or as a result of intermarriage with, the neighboring Paiute. In addition, a few such baskets are to be found in the southeasterly part of Maidu territory (present-day El Dorado County). Perhaps this may be explained as an influence of the neighboring Washoe, who use willow strands exclusively.

Bracken fern (*Pteridium aquilinum*) was used as a black design material. The brown roots were dug from regularly visited beds in the autumn, cleaned of the adhering mucilaginous coating, and then dried. After drying, the roots were dyed black by acorn staining

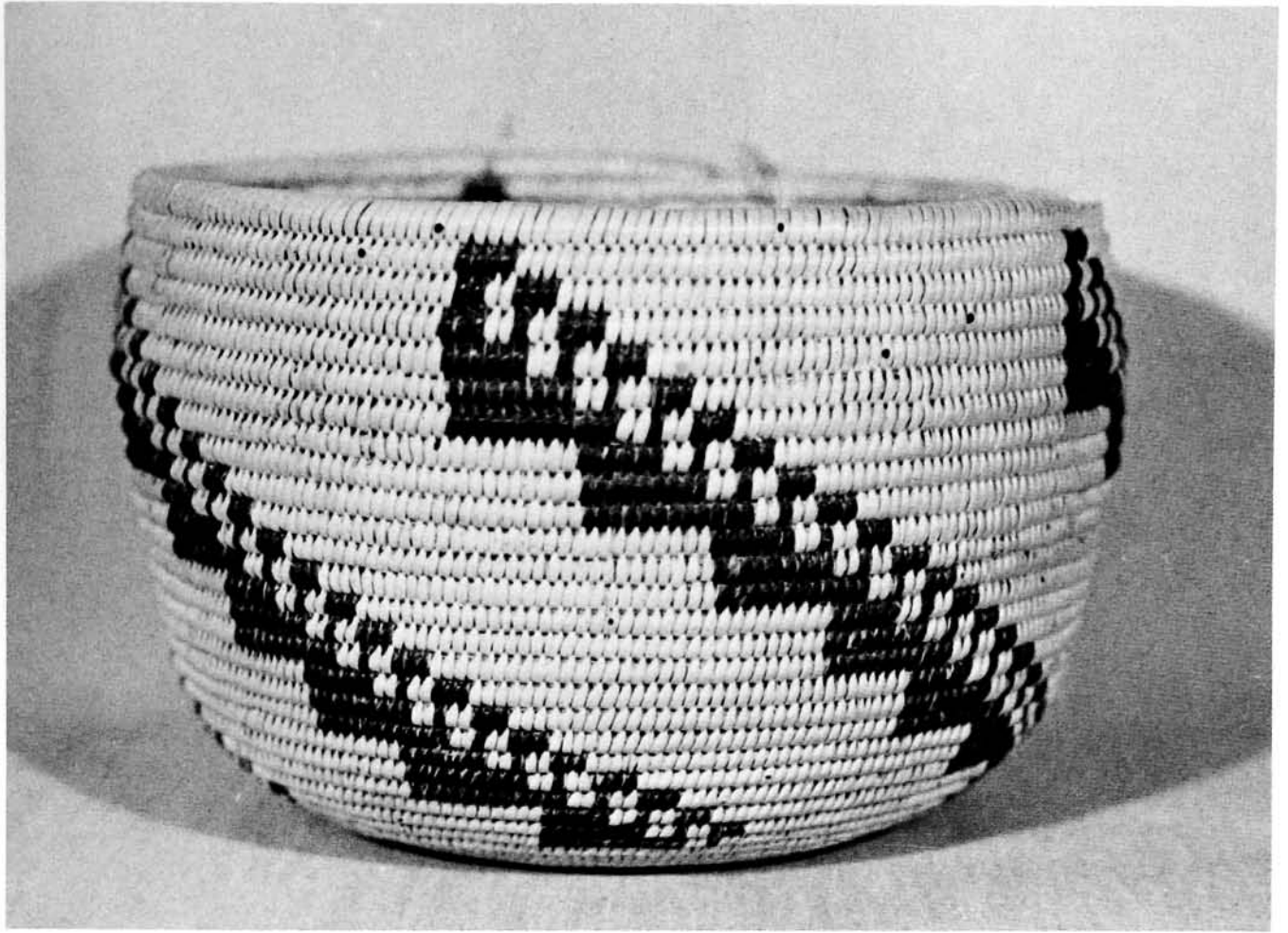


Fig. 7. Coiled basket woven by Nettie Wagoner, Konkow Maidu, ca. 1915. Willow rods, split redbud shoots. Diameter 17.9 cm., height 12.7 cm. Photograph by Craig Bates, courtesy of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley (Catalog No. 1-71260).

(Swartz 1958: 70), by placing them in a rusty tin can full of water, or by soaking them in a mixture of oak galls or walnut hulls and water (H. Azbill, personal communication 1970). A week to a month was necessary to obtain the desired jet black color. This kind of dyeing was used extensively by the Mountain Maidu and the southernmost Nisenan, but is found in basketry from all groups.

The roots of the sedge, cut grass or slough grass (*Carex* sp.) were the most valued of all sewing material. While providing a strong sewing strand, the material ages to a varied golden brown hue. Although it could be dug at any time of the year, the winter months were favored because the water was low and

the roots had stopped growing (H. Azbill, personal communication 1970). Large, sandy areas near watercourses were favored and returned to yearly. The sedge used by the Valley Maidu is darker in hue than that used by other California groups. It most closely resembles the sedge used by the Patwin at Colusa and Grimes (Bernstein n.d.; Merriam n.d.). The use of different types of sedge for different baskets is known for the Pomo and Patwin (Mabel McKay, personal communication 1976). From appearances only, it seems unlikely that the sedge used by the Pomo (*Carex mendocinensis* or *C. barbarae*; Peri and Patterson [1976: 17-19]) is that used by the Maidu, but rather that the Maidu type is

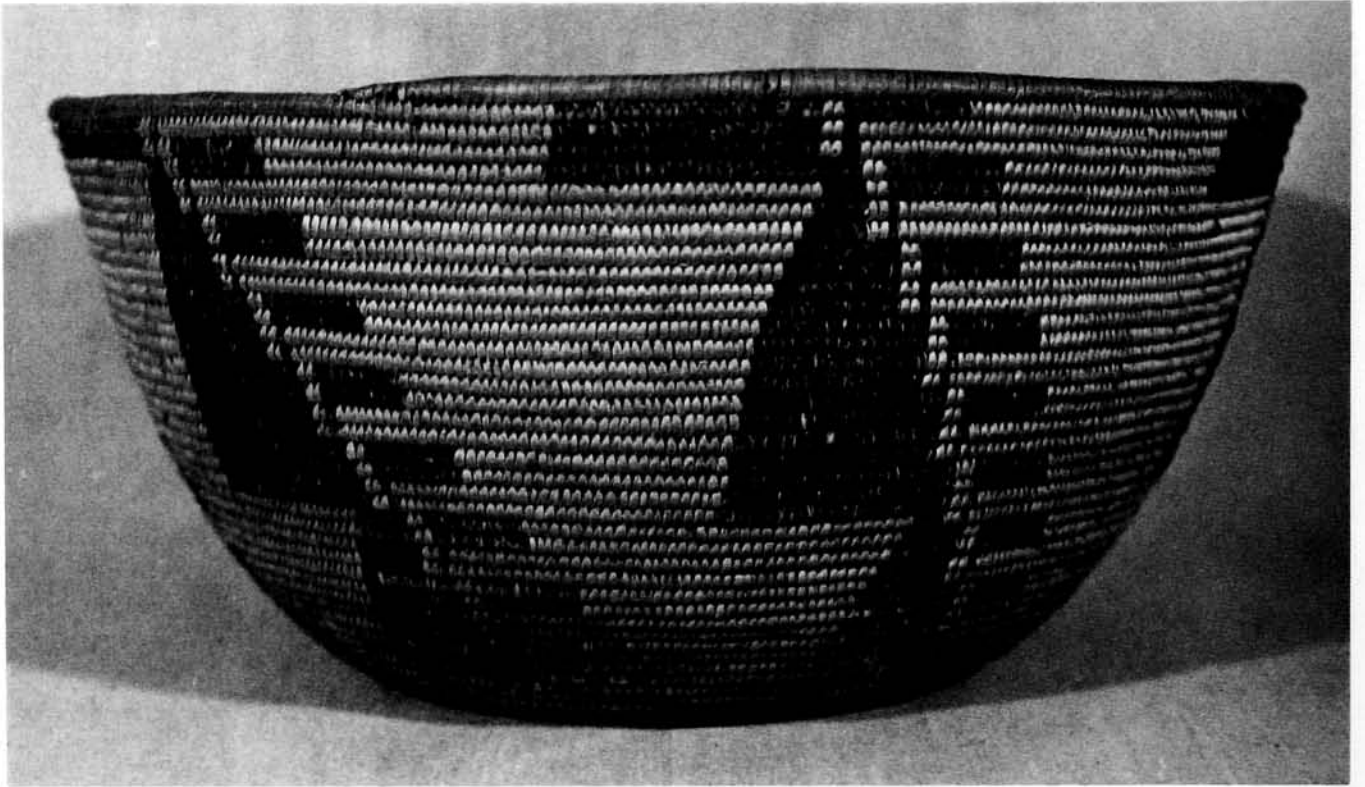


Fig. 8. Coiled cooking basket, collected at Chico by Roland Dixon, ca. 1902. Willow rods, split redbud and maple shoots. Diameter 30.4 cm., height 14.0 cm. Photograph by Bruce Bernstein, courtesy of the Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley (Catalog No. 1-14516).

distinctive. C. Hart Merriam suggested that this sedge is actually a *Cladium* sp. (n.d., 1903: 826), however neither Munz (1963: 1428) nor Jepson (1966: 158) include Maidu country in the *Cladium* sp. range. This sedge is mainly used among Konkow and Nisenan people living in the Sacramento Valley and adjacent lower foothills. Attempts by the authors to identify the specific sedge species used in this area have been unsuccessful.

The Marysville sedge beds were perhaps the best known of all Maidu sedge-gathering localities at the turn of the century. Once a year Mary Azbill would journey the 50 miles south from Chico to obtain the prized roots. After digging the roots for a week, most of which averaged four to six feet in length, they would be tied into long bundles. A wet canvas was spread on the buckboard, sometimes overlain with a thin layer of damp sand. The bundles of roots were placed on this, stacked

one on top of the other, usually making a pile a foot or more in height in the bed of the wagon. A canvas was spread over the top, the camping gear tied on this, and the trip was made back to Chico where Mary would spend the next two weeks cleaning the roots (H. Azbill, personal communication 1970). By 1982, the sedge beds had been destroyed by construction activities.

Certain materials appear to have been used only by particular Maidu groups and thus are diagnostic of specific localities. Perhaps the most limited in use was briar root (*Smilax californica*), principally in the Butte County area of the Northwestern Maidu (H. Azbill, personal communication 1969; Hill 1981). Used as a design material, the stiff, warty, black-brown root is an indicative feature of these baskets; it is found only rarely in baskets from the neighboring River Patwin and Nomlaki. The material was available in

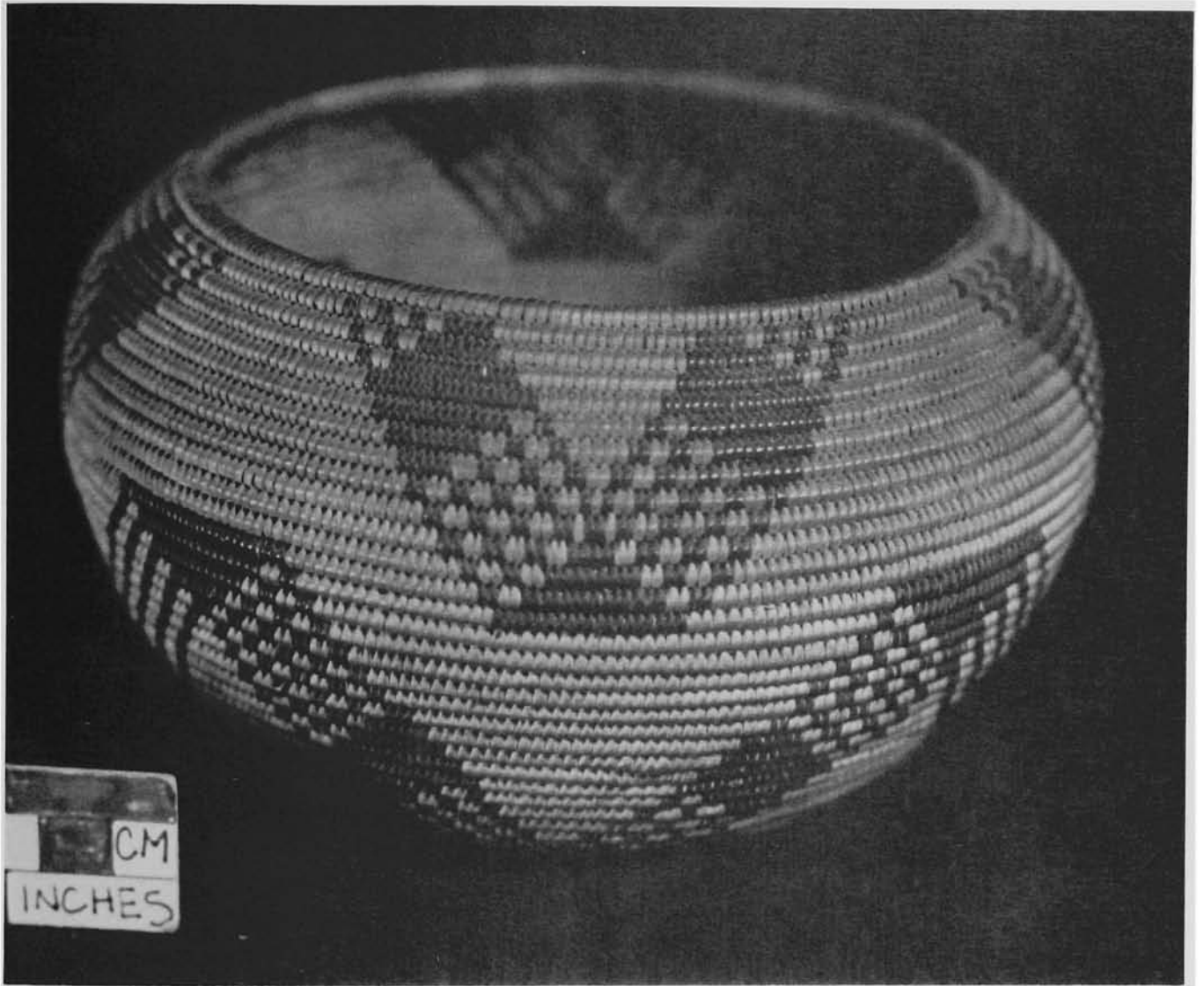


Fig. 9. Coiled gift basket, collected at Chico by C. Hart Merriam on June 8, 1903. Willow rods, sedge and briar roots. Merriam recorded the name for this basket as *too-too*, the design *wick'-ah* (meaning headband of abalone, small shells, and beads worn by women when dancing). Diameter 16.0 cm., height 9.5 cm. Photograph by Bruce Bernstein, courtesy of the University of California, Davis (Catalog No. 256).

several localities, but apparently was favored by known weavers within the Chico-Oroville area. Baskets using briar root have been collected from nearly every Butte County village, and it is important to note that all of these employ sedge root as a background material (Fig. 9).

Another unusual material is bulrush (*Scirpus* sp.) root, found in only a few baskets. Several of these are from Butte County and another is from Susanville. Used by the

neighboring Pomo and Patwin to the west, the use of such material in Butte County is understandable, but is perplexing when found in Susanville. However, J. W. Hudson noted (n.d.: 256) at the turn of the century that in the Susanville area weavers used "cirpus [sic] stalks" (Fig. 10).

Split branchlets of the Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menzies*) were an extremely uncommon material, and are only known to have been used by the Southern Maidu (Nisenan)

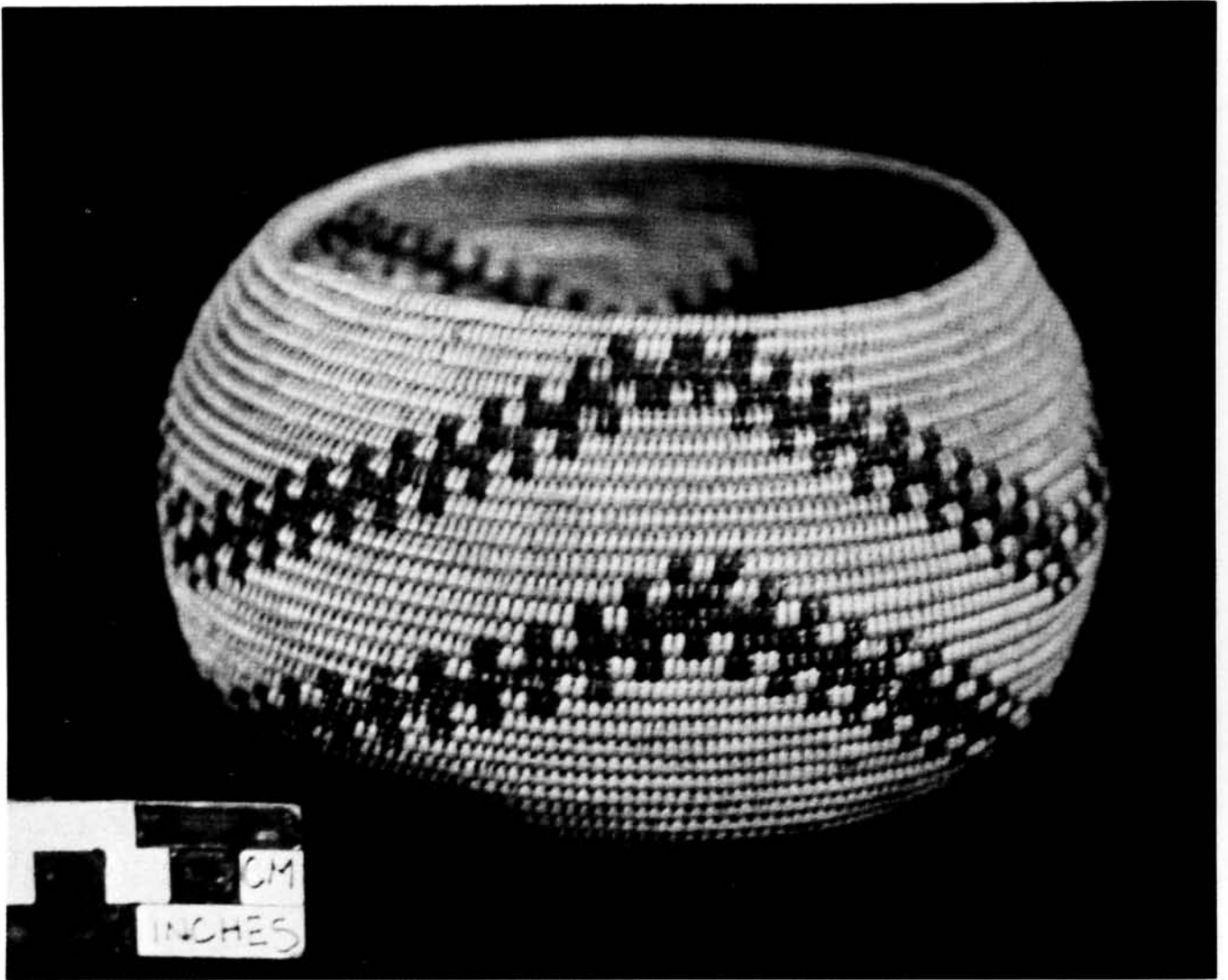


Fig. 10. Coiled gift basket, collected at Mountain Meadows (20 miles southwest of Susanville, California) in the summer of 1898 by Vernon Bailey for C. Hart Merriam. Willow shoots, split willow shoots, bulrush roots. Diameter 16.1 cm., height 9.0 cm. Photograph by Bruce Bernstein, courtesy of the University of California, Davis (Catalog No. 266).

in coiled baskets. This is easily identified material, since small distinctive scars are left on the branchlets by the spirally disposed needles. Gathered in the spring, they were split in half and cleaned of their bark, making a buff-colored sewing material (Fig. 11). Another widespread use of the branchlets was in the manufacture of "basketry chains," a common practice at the turn of the century. Such "chains" were possibly invented for sale to non-Indians (Fig. 12).

Split willow root (*Salix* sp.) has been

found on only one basket, from the Cosumnes River region near Nashville (Nisenan territory). It is a relatively uncommon material in California basketry, otherwise found only in baskets made by the Patwin and some of the Pomoan peoples, by a lone Yokuts weaver near Bakersfield, and in twined ware manufactured by Northwestern California groups.

Foundation materials are difficult, if not impossible, to identify in completed baskets. Willow appears to have been the most com-



Fig. 11. Coiled storage basket collected at the Nisenan Rancheria near Colfax, Placer County, by C. P. Wilcomb between Sept. 29 and Nov. 28, 1911. Willow rods, split redbud shoots (darkened), and split Douglas fir branchlets. Diameter 25.0 cm. Photograph by Bruce Bernstein, courtesy of the Oakland Museum (Catalog No. 16-1760).

mon in foundations, according to ethnographic accounts and consultants (Dixon 1905: 145; Kroeber 1925: 414; personal communications, H. Azbill [1971] and M. W. Jones [1976]). Gathered either in the winter when it was judged by some weavers to be stronger, or in the spring when the bark could be easily stripped, the willow with the "small, narrow gray leaf" was favored. It is the most flexible and has the smallest pith (M. Potts, personal communication 1971). Sweet birch (*Caenothus integerrimus*) was used for foundation rods by many foothill people (M. W. Jones, personal communication 1977). In the Greenville area, the well-known weaver Salina

Jackson told her relative Lily Baker that the use of these shoots for the final coil on the basket would make for a stronger finish (Dale Kronkright, personal communication 1980). Other foundation materials include dogwood (*Cornus* sp.), sumac (*Rhus* sp.), and poison oak (*Toxicodendron diversilobum*) (Merrill 1923: 240; Wilson and Towne 1978: 392; Riddell 1978: 376; Hill 1972; H. Azbill, personal communication 1971).

Auxiliary materials of decoration were used by the Maidu on special gift baskets. On a few Maidu baskets, designs were made by stringing glass beads directly on the sewing strands, perhaps continuing an ancient Central



Fig. 12. Three unidentified persons taken near Genessee Valley, Plumas County, ca. 1915. Presumably, the photograph was posed, for this collection—now a part of the State of California, Department of Parks and Recreation State Indian Museum collection—includes such non-Maidu type baskets as Pit River, Western Mono, and Tlingit. However, it is suspected that the women in the photograph wove some of the baskets pictured. Also note the string netting (a male skill) and the basketry chain of Douglas fir branchlets strung between the trees. Courtesy of the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Californian tradition which included use of shell beads (Dawson 1981). Abalone pendants are reported for the Chico Maidu, where at least one weaver used them to ornament oval coiled baskets (H. Azbill, personal communication 1969). Whether this was an ancient practice or one copied from contact with Pomo peoples is unknown. Feathers were used to ornament certain baskets. Of the few documented Maidu feather-decorated baskets that exist, the majority have the base unfeathered, unlike Pomo examples. Feathered baskets from Butte County have scalp fea-

thers from the mallard duck, and acorn and pileated woodpeckers. One basket from the Nisenan in Todds Valley differs in that it is covered with valley quail topknots (Fig. 13).

The materials that comprise baskets are many, and an understanding of them allows a better comprehension of the overall technology of Maidu basketry. While a basket can be woven from poor quality materials (i.e., short roots resulting from poorly tended plots or shoots cut at the wrong time of year), a well-constructed basket begins and ends in a quality reflective of the materials used by the

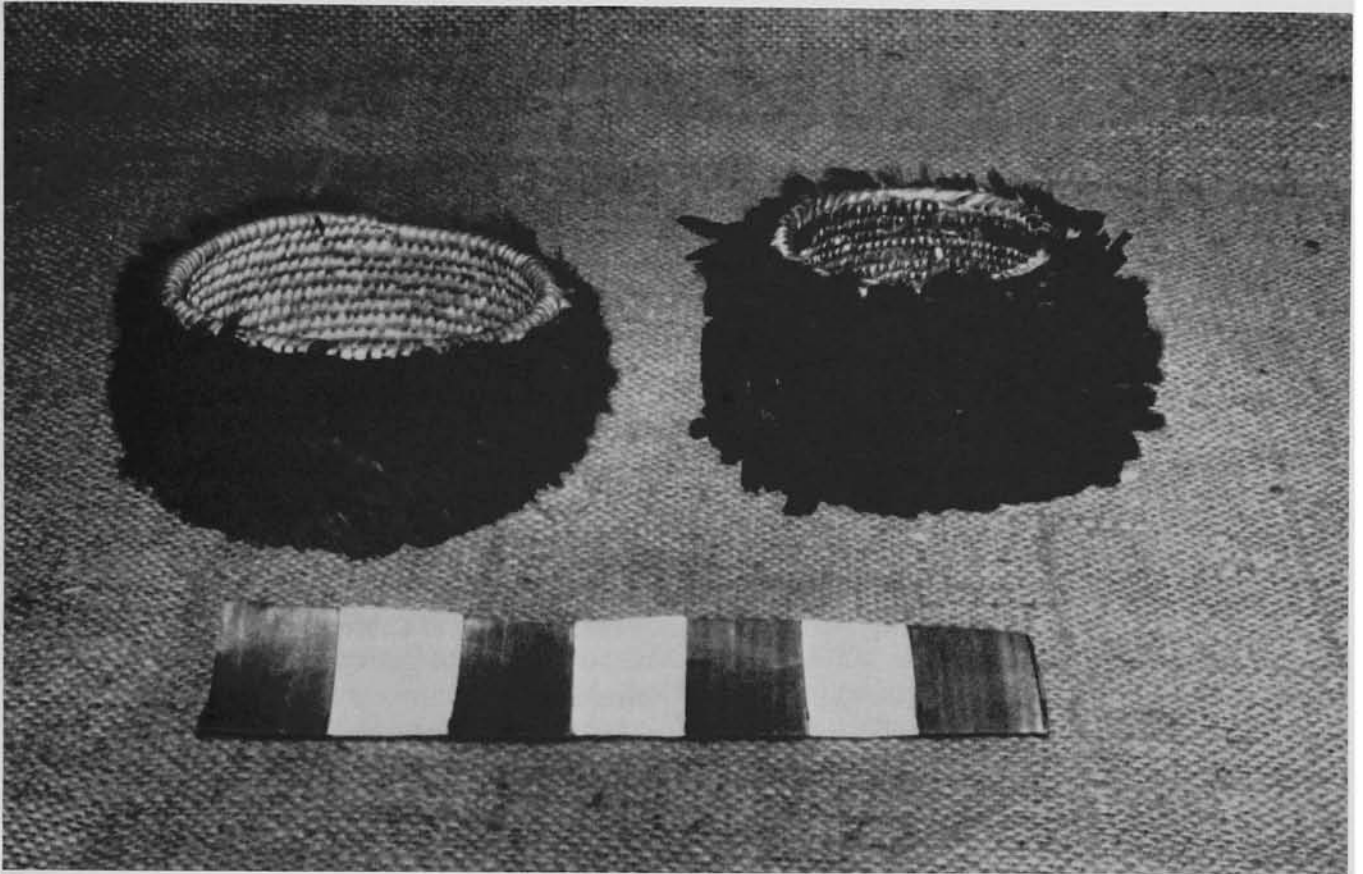


Fig. 13. Feathered baskets: the left from Butte County, Konkow, willow rods, split maple shoots, mallard duck scalp feathers, and the right from Todds Valley, Nisenan, willow rods, split redbud shoots, valley quail topknots, mallard duck scalp feathers. Diameters 8.8 cm. and 7.7 cm., respectively. Photograph by Craig Bates, courtesy of the Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago.

weaver. A weaver's ability is enhanced by strong, straight shoots that are cut at the proper time of the year, and the even splitting and drying of selected roots. Even once the materials are at home they can be ruined by exposure to excessive sun, moisture, or over-soaking directly before weaving. Hence, a weaver's technical expertise is in many ways dependent upon maintenance of carefully tended plots of basketry material.

Basketry material horticulture and preparation are incorporated into the cosmology of Maidu people, and thus must be taught and schooled—unlike actual weaving techniques which can be passed on only by demonstration and correction. Materials are region-specific among the Maidu, allowing an insight into the differentiation of their weavings.

Outer forms such as design and shape are easily changeable to fit whims, moods, and the desires of non-Indian customers; however, “inner” features, particularly materials, are not so easily altered. For the most part, Maidu weaving changed only slightly for sale to EuroAmericans and thereby retained a strong indigenous essence of form, function, and materials, these all being intertwined and inseparable in basketry intended for “home” use. Materials are therefore a doorway to the understanding and appreciation of certain significant differentiations of Maidu coiled basketry.

#### NOTES

1. Throughout this paper the past tense is largely employed for the sake of consistency. This by no

means implies that Maidu basketry making is a thing of the past.

2. The few Maidu weavers today do not burn off bushes for improved shoots. Increased government presence, in the form of the National Park Service and state agencies, coupled with logging in the region in the 1940-1950s have caused the demise of this practice.

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