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## A Wiyot Fancy Basket

KATHERINE B. BRANSTETTER

The Wiyot were a coastal people who once inhabited the region of Humboldt County, California, between Cape Mendocino on the south and the watershed of the Mad River on the north. Located on some of the rare flat coast land north of San Francisco, the Wiyot were early victims of White American incursion. With their population greatly reduced by the 1860's (Elsasser 1978a:161-162), there were few Wiyot baskets for sale to the travelers who made California Indian basket collections around the turn of the century. This is especially true in the case of the basket type called the fancy basket.

A fancy basket, sometimes called a treasure (Elsasser 1978b:632), trinket (Merriam n.d.), or gift basket, is a decorated basket of no obvious work-function. The fancy basket was an aboriginal type for most basket-weaving cultures of California. It was made to store small items or to be presented as a gift and as an example of a woman's pride in her work. It is the basket type which sold best to collectors, so it is the type most often found in collections. Wiyot basket weavers, however, had relatively little opportunity to develop the trade in fancy baskets and they are rare in collections now.

In the first decade of the 1900's, Ella Branstetter Ries of Ferndale, California, was making regular trips to the Wiyot town of Ho'ket' at the mouth of the Salt River. According to her daughter, Mrs. Ries took clothing to the Indian families there and taught the women and girls to sew. In return, the Wiyot women gave her baskets for her collection.

The collection numbered 110 baskets—mostly Wiyot—when it was photographed in 1910. Subsequently, all but three baskets were destroyed while in storage. Of the three baskets which remain, one, shown in Figures 1 and 2, is one of the few—perhaps the only—documented Wiyot fancy basket in existence.

The basket is 30 cm. in height and approximately 50 cm. in diameter at its widest point. For warps, the weaver probably used peeled willow (*Salix* sp.) shoots, though obviously—



Fig. 1. Side view of Wiyot fancy basket.

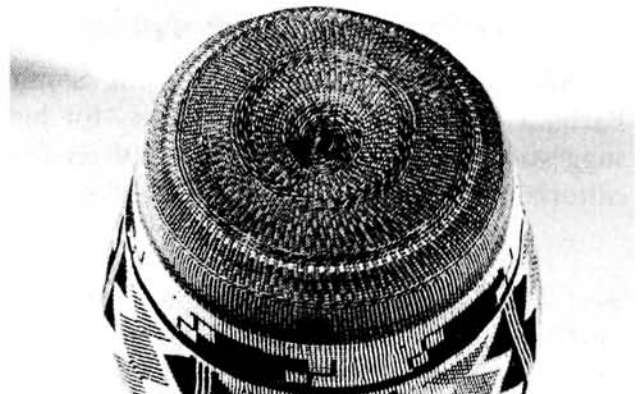


Fig. 2. Bottom view of Wiyot fancy basket.

and fortunately—the basket's excellent condition makes inspection of the warp materials impossible. The structural wefts are split, baked conifer roots; overlay strands are *Xerophyllum* leaf (*Xerophyllum tenax*) and dyed Woodwardia leaf midrib fibers (*Woodwardia fimbriata*). The start is a lashed, stratified bundle of eight shoots, 1.8 cm. square. That is, two flat bundles of four shoots each are lashed separately with conifer root, then one is lashed on top of the other with the shoots at right angles. Then, working to the right with the work face to the outside, three-strand twining is commenced for 2 cm. in conifer root, followed by 2.5 cm. of plain twining. 1 cm. (4 rows) of three-strand twining is followed by 3.2 cm. of plain twining; and 8 mm. (3 rows) of three-strand twining, all in conifer root. The next two rows in plain twining have a one-strand overlay in *Xerophyllum*. These rows are barely visible when the basket is seen from the side as they are at the point where the warps begin to turn upward to form the sides of the basket. Twining in conifer root continues above the two decorative rows with 1.7 cm. (8 rows) of plain twining, 5 mm. (2 rows) of three-strand twining, and 3.2 cm. of plain twining (16 rows). Throughout the three- and two-strand twining rows in conifer root, subtle speckled designs are created by the use of conifer root which has been dyed a darker brown. In the last half of the last 3.2 cm. of plain twining, one of the wefts of conifer root appears to have been dyed reddish with red alder-bark dye.

At this point, about 5 cm. up from the edge of the base, the design of single-face, two-strand overlay is begun. The first design, in a zone 1.8 cm. wide, begins 1.2 cm. from the base of the *Xerophyllum* overlay and is executed in dyed stems of Woodwardia. The design is a stepped pattern of a type which is not unusual in the northwestern area of California. There are six repetitions of the design around the basket, alternating red—dyed with red alder-bark dye, and brown-black—dyeing agent

unknown.<sup>2</sup> Above this design, there is an 8 mm. (4 row) band of black-dyed Woodwardia.

Above this band, there are eight repetitions of a large design, 13.1 cm. tall. It is topped by 7 mm. (3 rows) of brown-black-dyed Woodwardia, 7 mm. (3 rows) of *Xerophyllum*, and another 7 mm. (3 rows) of brown-black-dyed Woodwardia. These rows are just above the widest diameter of the basket. At this point there are 1.4 cm. (5 rows) of three-strand twining in red-dyed Woodwardia. A single row of *Xerophyllum*-overlayed plain twining separates the three-strand twining from the uppermost design which is repeated eight times around the top of the basket in brown-black-dyed Woodwardia strands. Two rows of plain twining overlayed with *Xerophyllum* complete the weft rows. The warps are broken even with the final weft course. The final stitch of twining is caught by a four-strand, two-ply cord of brown sewing thread which is threaded down through three rows on the inside and the outside of the basket. The ends of the thread are clipped close to the stitching on the inside and outside.

Warp introduction is not accomplished in any regular pattern. The new warp is placed between two old warps and caught in the node with the warp to its right. Warp fag ends are frayed and allowed to project to the inside. Fag ends and moving ends of weft materials are cut short on the inside of the basket.

In general, the basket is superbly made. The shape is excellently controlled; the twining is fine and very regular. The inside of the basket shows only a hint of the one-face overlay.

A number of features characteristic of Wiyot fancy baskets are indicated by the analysis of this basket and comparison with the documented Wiyot baskets in the Lowie Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley.<sup>3</sup> I would expect these features to be found on other Wiyot fancy baskets and I hope they will be of use to those

who attempt to attribute undocumented baskets.

The materials in this basket are also used in the fancy baskets of the neighboring Indian groups, that is: willow, conifer root, Xerophyllum and Woodwardia dyed reddish brown. One difference is that, unlike neighboring groups, a dark contrast is not created with maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*). Instead, there is Woodwardia which has been dyed a brown-black with an unknown dying agent. Some of the conifer root wefts of this basket have also been dyed and they alternate with undyed wefts in the base of the basket. Technical features of this basket are virtually identical to those of the Hupa—with one exception. Where Hupa basket makers added warps in an organized fashion, the warps in this basket are added randomly, as needed.

The shape of this basket is, perhaps, its most obvious Wiyot characteristic. On this basket, like Wiyot cooking baskets in the Lowie Museum's collection (see Elsasser 1978a: fig. 3 for an example), the widest diameter is no lower than one-fourth of the way from the top of the basket. On this basket, as on the cooking baskets, the widest point is reinforced. On the cooking baskets there is a rod bundle lattice-twined at this point. This basket, however, is reinforced with five rows of three-strand twining. Wiyot baskets also seem to share a characteristic repetition of reinforcement bands of three-strand twining on the base of the basket which is not so common in the baskets of the neighboring groups.

The designs in this basket are more elaborate than on any other Wiyot basket known to me. Undocumented Wiyot baskets<sup>4</sup> have been noted which have a single band of designs, but none is known with three bands like this basket. Consequently, this basket may not be characteristically Wiyot in this feature. The vertical arrangement of the designs and the speckled design in the largest design zone and on the base of the basket do seem to be features

more often seen on Wiyot than on the basketry of the neighboring groups. Design placement is also unique for the Wiyot. The design begins one-eighth of the way up the side of the basket, a feature which would be avoided by basket weavers in other northern California basketry traditions.

Wiyot basketry is seldom found in modern basketry collections. It is particularly unusual to find documented Wiyot basketry. Fortunately, the unusual characteristics of the Wiyot basket make it possible to make educated guesses as to the identification of undocumented Wiyot pieces. I would appreciate being notified of the location of documented Wiyot basketry as well as undocumented baskets which show the features described here.

## NOTES

1. This town was identified to me by Mrs. Ries' daughter as Hookton. I am assuming that it is Ho'ket on Kroeber's map (1925, fig. 10) because of its identical location and similar name.
2. Although Elsasser has suggested that the Wiyot dyed Woodwardia by burying it in mud, L. E. Dawson questions whether the fern could hold up under this treatment (personal communication).
3. I want to thank Lawrence E. Dawson of the Lowie Museum for sharing some of his considerable knowledge of the special features of Wiyot and neighboring California basketry with me.
4. These include some baskets in the 1910 photograph of the Ella Branstetter Ries Collection, which have been destroyed, as well as baskets seen and described to me by L. E. Dawson.

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## Death Valley Indian Farming

WILLIAM J. WALLACE

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century some Death Valley Indians had incorporated small scale farming into their subsistence economy. First to report native crop raising was Lieutenant Rogers J. Birnie, Jr., who led a United States Army exploring party into the desert country in 1875. After departing the silver mining camp of Panamint, the lieutenant and his contingent of seven soldiers traveled through a canyon in the Panamint Mountains on their way to Death Valley. While passing down the canyon, Birnie noted that:

... grass and a short running stream were found, also a small cultivated piece of ground where vegetables were raised with facility by irrigation [Wheeler 1876:132].

Without doubt, this was the place now called Hungry Bill's Ranch, named for a well-known local Indian who maintained a small farm thereabouts. Hungry Bill's is located near the head of Johnson Canyon on the east face of the Panamint Mountains.

Sixteen years later Frederick V. Coville, botanist for the United States Department of Agriculture's 1891 "Death Valley Expedition," remarked upon plant propagation at the same spot as well as in Hall Canyon that feeds into Panamint Valley.

At the mouth of Hall cañon, near Hot Springs, at the west foot of the Panamint Mountains and in Johnson cañon, on the eastern or Death Valley slope of the same range, the Indians have under crude irrigation and cultivation two or three acres of ground. The crops commonly raised are corn, potatoes, squashes, and watermelons. Of the last they are especially fond, fully as much as the African and the desert climate is admirably suited for their growth [Coville 1892:352].

Edward W. Nelson, one of the expedition's biologists, added the following details:

On the east side of the Panamint mountains, at a place marked 'Johnson's R.', is a series of three or four little patches of soil along the course of a steep rocky cañon leading down into Death Valley, just south of Bennett's mills.

There a couple of families manage to live by raising corn, melons, squashes, and a few peaches and grapes, with pine-nuts and grass-seed in their season [Nelson 1891: 371-372].<sup>1</sup>

Hungry Bill's Ranch was not the only locality farmed. Five families living in Grapevine Canyon at the far northern end of Death Valley also cultivated plots of ground (Steward 1938:89).<sup>2</sup> A survey map of "Scotty's Old Ranch" prepared in 1924 shows "Indian Gardens" at two places in the vicinity of Grapevine Springs. These springs water a green patch

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