

## INDIAN BASKETRY OF THE WINTOON INDIANS OF CALIFORNIA

By Myra Rauzi, Ninth Grade

The art of making baskets by the older women of the Wintoon tribe is fast disappearing and it does not seem as if the women of the younger generation were attempting to keep up the work, for the making of basketry has decreased. A great many years ago every one of the older women knew how to make baskets, while today there are about one out of every ten who understand the art, and I believe that the women of the younger generation ought to learn how to make baskets and teach their children, so they can in turn teach their children and so on from generation to generation.

Today a basket is high priced because few are made and the women realize how hard it is to obtain the material and how long it takes to make one. The different materials used are the roots of a pine tree, the maiden hair fern, and the green fern, the willow, and a long, sharp, white grass called peelee, by the Indians. This grass grows to a height of from three to four feet. When dry the long, white grass is very sharp; it would cut your hand if you placed it along the edge. This grass is quite hard to obtain, for it grows in the rockiest parts of certain mountains. Before it is ready to use it has to be kept moist in a damp cloth over night, or until it becomes soft and is no longer sharp-edged.

The next fiber, the roots of the pine tree, are also very hard to obtain. The Indian woman has to get a pick and go out into the woods and look for the roots of the pine. She is very particular about the kind she gets, for some roots of pines are hard and not pliable and these are unsuitable.

The way to tell good roots is that some are above the ground and they start in to dig if they are satisfied with them. Some of the roots grow very deep into the ground and the poor woman has to dig almost all day before she has enough for her supply. Sometimes she gets the roots of two or three different pines, for it makes no difference.

Then after she has taken the roots home there is another long process: She builds a fire outside and cooks the roots, as we say; that is, she holds the roots over the flame which cooks the outside bark and renders it easy to take off. The inside is nice and white. The root is round and she now has an old, sharp knife, with which she cuts the roots into four parts, and keeps on dividing it until she can get very thin pieces off of it. Then that is all for the present. She then puts them out in the sun to dry. After they are dry, she puts them away, if she is not inclined to use them right away. These roots have to be moistened

in a damp cloth over night before being ready to use. The roots are about the most needed material for basket making.

A very plain basket can be made from just the roots and willow, but to make a pretty basket the other materials have to be used, especially maiden hair fern. Some maiden hair ferns grow near mountain springs, and are very difficult to obtain, besides being scarce. These ferns have to be split in two and also moistened when made ready for use.

The green fern also grows in the mountains, but it is more commonly seen than maiden hair fern. These ferns are picked when green. The first process after getting them home is to pound the stems of the ferns with a rock until they get very soft. After pounding there is a long white fiber inside the fern which is removed. This is what she wants.

After she gets these white fibers out, she dyes them a light pink with the bark procured from an alder tree. To obtain the pink this bark has to be pounded very fine and put into a bucket with some water, and then the white fibers are put into the dye and left for a day or so, then they are taken out and dried in the sun. Then after they are dried she has the pink ferns ready for use. They also have to be moistened before they are used.

Next is the willow: There are two kinds—the Pussy willow is not used—but the other kind which grows bunchy, some growing tall while others are short. The limbs are taken off these willows and great care is taken to get the slender limbs all the same size. The smallest limbs make the smallest baskets and the larger baskets need very large willow limbs for making. Before these limbs are used the bark has to be taken off with a knife. After it is taken off they are spread out in the sun and also dried. When ready to use, the ends are put into a can of water.

The Indian woman, when she sits down to start in to make a basket, has many articles around her—the roots of a pine tree, the black fern, and the green fern, a long sharp white grass, and the willows.

The first materials used in a basket are the roots of the pine and the willows, and the roots woven in and out of the willows form the bottom of the basket. As the top is formed, the design is woven in with the different colors.

The Indian women make up their own designs, each design having a special meaning. These designs are woven into the basket accurately and without any mechanical aid. It is an art that should be cultivated and fostered by all Indians whose tribes excel in basketry.

The American one year, 25 cents.