Uncoverings 1980

Volume 1 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Sally Garoutte

Quilts in Pomo Culture*

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California is noted for the exceptional basketry traditions of its Native American peoples. Among these, the baskets of the Pomo have the name of being the finest made in California, if not the world.[1] Pomo basketry is an art form in which color of materials, shape, design, texture and fineness of weave are manipulated for ends that are purely aesthetic as well as practical. Adept with their hands, Pomo women basketweavers admired and quickly duplicated the colorful patchwork quilts of the early white settlers in Mendocino County. What is the nature of these quilts and the Hopland Friendship Quilt of 1928 in particular?

Pomo baskets are not made by a single tribe of Native Americans but rather by members of some seventy-two autonomous groups living in the North Coast Range of California. Seven distinct but related languages were spoken, six of which had a number of dialects. Anthropologists have assigned names to these linguistic groups according to their relative geographical location: Northern Pomo, Central Pomo, Southern Pomo, Southwestern Pomo, Northwestern Pomo, Eastern Pomo, and Southeastern Pomo.[2]

Although the linguistic groups did not perceive of themselves as a homogeneous group, they did have a number of features in common. All lived in large, permanent villages that were mutually linked by marriage, trade and ceremonies. All drew their subsistence from fishing, gathering and hunting. In addition, all shared a common expertise and similar technology for the making of various types of basketry.[3]

Because of their rich environment which gave them bountiful

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harvests of fish and acorns, the Pomo led a more sedentary life than other nonagriculturalists, presumably freeing their time for expanding the aesthetic dimension of basket production. The men generally performed the coarser labor of openwork twining such as traps and cradles which, as A.L. Kroeber states, relieved the women of "this dull and heavy practical industry" to stimulate them "to attempt the achievement of a true art."[4]

During the nineteenth century, the various Pomo groups came into permanent contact with members of European society. The Russians, Spanish and Mexicans all had their impact early but it was not until the 1850s when California had become a state that the Pomo were pushed from their lands. Two reservations were formed in Mendocino County to centralize the Indians, one of which, Round Valley, still exists today. Thus acculturation began with the attempts of the Pomo people to survive in a new world.

One significant impact on the traditional Pomo culture was the realization by the women that their crafts had a cash value and they began to manufacture baskets specifically for sale. By the 1890s, there was a brisk business conducted by professional basket buyers who made semiannual trips into Northern California to purchase baskets.[5]

A second means of adapting to the new culture was as agricultural labor which provided cash for the new commodities available in the white towns. Harvesting crops, such as hops, became the sole livelihood for many Pomo between 1880 and 1940.[6]

Besides hop-picking, the Pomo women had an alternative source for employment. Some of them worked for the white townspeople where they would "do a days worth of laundry for twenty-five cents."[7] Ellen Wood, a Pomo woman, recalled in 1940: "My aunt . . . makes beads and makes baskets, and she do all the things . . . And she go around among white people to wash. And that's how I learn to wash."[8]

The town of Hopland was named in the days when the hop, the ingredient giving beer its bitter flavor, was Mendocino County's leading crop. Once, hops could be seen greening fields all over the county. Now they can only occasionally be viewed growing wild along the fences bordering fields where they have been replaced by grapes and pears.[9]

Hopland was also the site of an Indian "rancheria," isolated small acreages held in protective trust by the United States since the turn of the century.[10] The Hopland Rancheria consisted originally of some 2,070 acres and had a school for the Indian children. It is here that the "Hopland Friendship Quilt" was made in 1928.

In a letter from the donor of the quilt to the Mendocino County

Museum when it was added to the permanent collection in 1974, Geraldine Youd stated:

> Around fifty years ago I commenced teaching in the Hopland Elementary School. The first five years of the seventeen years I was there, I lived on the rancheria with the various teachers and drove back and forth to the little town of Hopland. The Indians seemed to hold us at arm's length. To gain their confidence, one of the teachers (Eunice Davies) and I decided to have them help us make the quilt that I am mailing you. I bought the materials and placed the designs on the squares of chambray, and invited both the women and men to come to the teacherage where we lived in the evenings. They were quite responsive and were soon handling an embroidery needle as if they had always used one. You will notice the signatures on the block each made, is authentic, and makes the quilt more valuable. My signature is on the last block. We found them to be very fine people, and we became real good friends.[11]

Who were the Indians that participated in the Friendship Quilt? Some were children like Ignatius Billy who later graduated from the University of California and worked for the BIA in Washington, D.C., or Blanch Knight who now lives in Cloverdale. Some were men, such as J.A. Knight, the brother of Blanch, who served in World War I. With "Jensie" Knight's embroidered quilt block, the entire Knight family is represented. Still other contributors were adults at the time who particpated with their children, like Evelyn Joaquin. Three of the women, S. Bartlett (or Salome Bartlett Alcantro), Alice Elliott and Elsie Allen are today accomplished basketweavers.

As Elsie Allen recalls, each person who knew the teacher, Mrs. Mudd, received a block to take home and embroider. The blocks were already stenciled and the individuals were told "just sew." Mrs. Allen remembers that the project "sounded interesting so everybody did it."[12] There were no friendship quilts before so the idea was innovative and inviting to the participants.

The stencils, depicting colonial themes and Eastern Plains Indians scenes, had no meaning to the Pomo and still have none. "Indian Home Life," "Indian," "King Phillip," "Pocahontas-Smith" and "Standish Answers Indians" are all images that are as foreign to the California Indians as scenes of China or Alaska.

Coiling a basket is not unlike sewing a quilt: it is a time-consuming process which begins with the collection of the appropriate materials and is constructed with advance knowledge of its intended function,

shape and design. The Pomo employ two coiling techniques: one-rod or stick and three-rod or stick. The main difference between the finished products of these two methods is that in one-rod coiling the vessel walls are smoother. Three-rod coiling, on the other hand, has the advantage in that it lends itself to the addition of feathers as decorative elements.

The tool kit of a Pomo basketweaver of about 150 years ago would have included a basket in which to soak the materials, an obsidian knife with which to shape the fibers and a bone awl made from a deer fibula.[13] By the 1870s, the tool kit had become what it is today: a pan of water, a piece of broken glass or a bit of broken knife, a sharp pair of scissors or a single-edge razor blade and a steel awl set in a wooden handle. A No. 18 yarn darning needle or a No. 13 tapestry needle is also recommended.[14] These are used to separate the spaces between each coiled root of sedge and willow to make it easier to stitch the thread-like root. Like quilts, Pomo baskets are judged by the evenness and number of stitches per inch, the finest being about 65-120 stitches per inch. Through time, the baskets by one weaver can be seen decreasing in size while increasing in fineness of stitch.

Designs in black bulrush root or dark brown redbud bark are repetitive geometric motifs. Coiled baskets, because they are circular in construction, have horizontal, diagonal, crossing, radiating or isolated arrangements. The effect is often one of movement and flight.

In the AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF THREE POMO WOMEN by Elizabeth Colson consisting of information gathered as "life histories" in 1939, 1940, and 1941 from women in their late sixties, "Jane Adams" states:

> My mother good hand at baskets. She teach me how to fix the basket roots, and how to work on it. Just the way you going to do, make it like this, she tell me. (Did you learn to make anything else?) Well, they got nothing to make. They got nothing to teach. That's all the work they had, the baskets. But nowadays they crochet, like that. Everything they learn in school. Patchwork quilt. That why they don't want to work on basket. Easier to crochet. They can buy the thread. Basket roots they have to get out and take. That's hard work, not very easy. And gathering willow — that's kind of hard for young girls now. They dressed up, and basket root digging is awful dirty job.[15]

Two Pomo women born near the turn of the century were recently interviewed. Although their information varied slightly in fine detail, they both provide insights into the Pomo artisan — basketmaker/

quiltmaker.

How was quiltmaking introduced into Pomo culture? Both women believe their people were good at copying what they saw. Because a Pomo woman was often employed by a white family to wash clothes, she handled and studied the construction of a quilt. "Good with their hands" from weaving baskets, the women found little difficulty in handsewing. Furthermore, it simply "did not take long to learn to grasp the white culture."[16]

It was explained that some wealthy white families would "adopt" certain Pomo families as friends. Often they would bring food and used clothing to the rancherias. The Pomo, in turn reciprocated with gifts, usually baskets. Men's old woolen suits or out-dated ladies' dresses "were not their style" so "they would tear them up to make into quilts."[17]

Practicality and beauty were both important. Overalls that had torn were sewn into utility quilts or ground blankets and taken to the hopfields. Hop-pickers and their families slept on a pile of straw with a layer of cotton blankets and quilts.[18]

Satins and silks, on the other hand, were also treasured. In Potter Valley, for example, the Pomo quiltmakers "competed with one another" for who had the lovelier quilt.[19] This prestige and pride is traditionally found with competing basketmakers as well.

Designs for quilts were geometric, most commonly squares. No applique quilts are known to have been made by the Pomo. Patterns were never from books. One quiltmaker believed that "you lose pattern in mind if use book" so both basket and quilt designs were imbedded in the creative mind of the maker.[20] Sharing of the patterns among the Pomo was common. Because basketmakers and quiltmakers always worked alone traditionally sitting on the floor to weave or sew, they were private with their work. But after hop-picking time, the quilts would be washed and hung on the clothesline to dry where all the women would see and admire the show. One woman remembers how they would "ooh and aah" over the colorful exhibition.[21] If there was a pattern that a quiltmaker particularly liked, she would study it at a distance and then go home to duplicate it. "Eyes were so sharp, memories so good, they just remembered."[22]

By the 1870s, patchwork quilts were commonly made by the Pomo Indians of Mendocino County. It was also established by this time that a good basketweaver made a good quiltmaker. In fact, in Pomo language, the terms are synonymous: a woman is described as "ta na sha" or "the hands know, knowing hands."[23]

The quilt itself has a Pomo name, "sha tzun," meaning "heavier and

thicker" than blanket or "bah tah." These words are most likely from the earlier terms for animal pelt blankets, the thick and heavy animal hide like bear and a thinner blanket like a deer pelt.

Pomo women found the making of quilts an appealing part of white culture. Whether it was for practical use in the hopfields or for prestige in competing with a neighbor, the finest quilts were made by the deft fingers of the Pomo basketweaver. Although the Hopland Friendship Quilt may be an exception, it is an important historic document for Mendocino County. As one Pomo woman expressed: "So much basket. Sew and quilt, then go back to baskets . . . weaving is tedious, quilting relaxes."[25]

Notes:

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4. Kroeber, HANDBOOK, p. 246.
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6. Thomas C. Owens, THE YOKAIA, Ukiah: Mendocino Historical Society, 1980, p. 20.
7. Ethel Docker, THE GOOD OLD DAYS, San Francisco: Panpipes Publications, 1968, p. 14.
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9. Ted Erickson Jr., "County's Hops: Once King, now a Pauper Weed," Ukiah, The Ukiah Daily Journal, October 5, 1980, p. 11.

10. Final Report of State Advisory Commission of Indian Affairs, 1969, p. 9.
11. Accession Records (74-13-1), Willits Mendocino County Museum.
12. Interview with Elsie Allen, 4/15/80, Willits, Mendocino County Museum.
13 Roosevelt & Smith, ANCESTORS, p. 121.
14. Sandra Conie Newman, INDIAN BASKET WEAVING, Flagstaff: Northland Press 1974, p. 11.
15. Elizabeth Colson, AUTOBIOGRAPHIES OF THREE POMO WOMEN, pp. 201-202.
16. Interview - Elsie Allen, 4/15/80 Mendocino County Museum.
17. Personal interview, 10/24/80, between author and Pomo informant, Willits, Mendocino County Museum.
18. Person l interview, 5/12/80, between author and Pomo informant, Willits, Mendocino County Museum.
19. Ibid.
20. Personal interview, 4/15/80 between Pomo informant and author, Willits, Mendocino County Museum.
21. Ibid.
22. Personal interview, 5/12/80, Willits, Mendocino County Museum.
23. Personal interview, 9/11/80, word from one Northern Pomo dialect
24. Personal interview, 10/24/80, words are from one Northern Pomo dialect.
25. Personal interview, 4/15/80, between author and Pomo informant, Willits, Mendocino County Museum.