



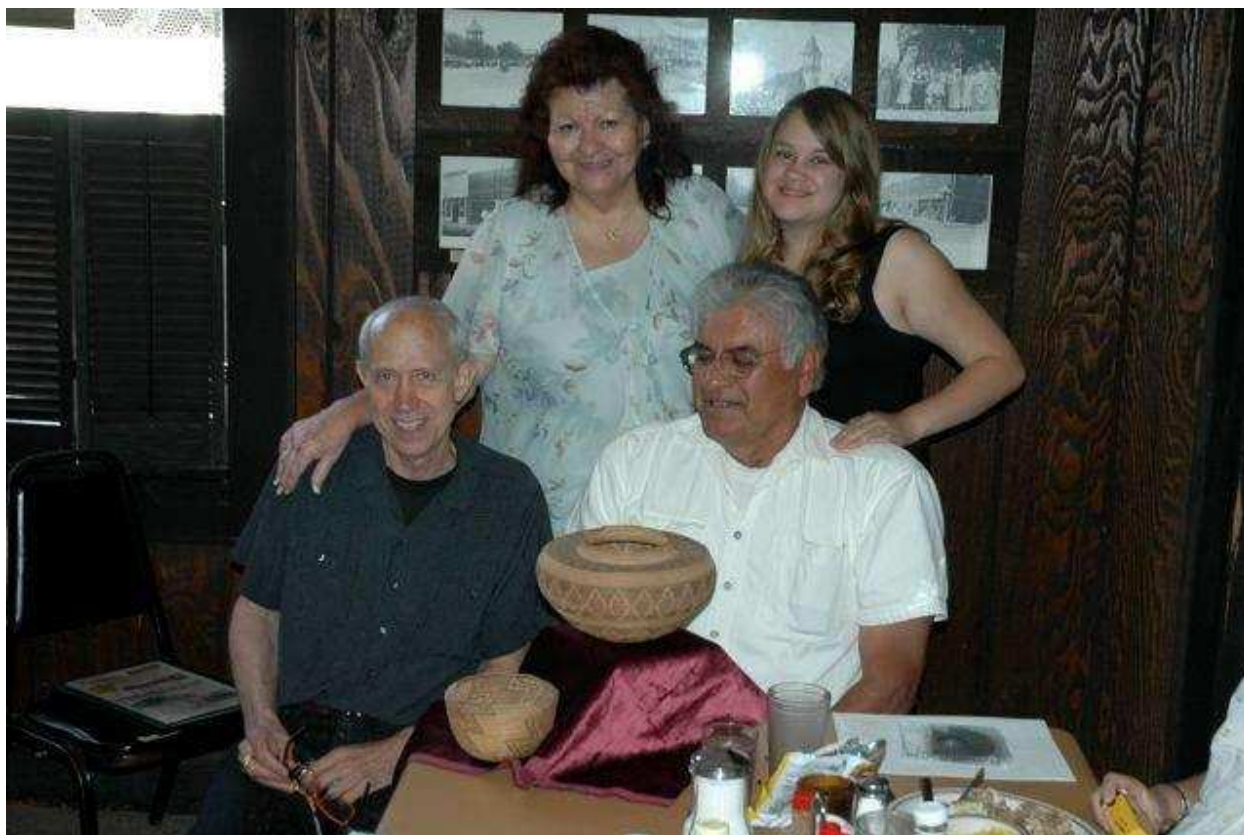












Kawaiisu Basketry Arts: Reflections on the Past and a Look at the Present

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This brief article is based on an excerpt, some additional reflections, and further details relating to our book:

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History

The last generation of great, native Kawaiisu basket weavers included Emma Williams, Sophie Williams, Marie Girado, Rosie Hicks, Louise (Luisa) Marcus, and Ramona Greene. With their passing it was feared that the native practice of basket weaving would be no more. Fortunately, through the pioneering efforts of former California State Assemblyman, Phil Wyman, a number of native Kawaiisu are now relearning the methods and cultural practices of their unique manner of traditional basketry construction.

Mary L. Claw, one of only three traditional Chemehuevi basketweavers, was recruited to teach the Kawaiisu method of basket weaving. *Weegie* (her nickname) lives in Parker, Arizona and is a descendant of other renowned Chemehuevi basketweavers. Mary Lou Brown, her grandmother, was a basket weaver of legendary skill and Brown's baskets are in a number of museums and private collections. *Weegie* was asked to come to Tehachapi and teach Kawaiisu basketry making since the Chemehuevi method of basket weaving is so strikingly similar. Claw was very careful to teach the Kawaiisu in their own methods of traditional weaving and to guide them in following the distinctive ways that apply to the traditional Kawaiisu basket construction techniques.

Kawaiisu Basketry at the Turn of the Century

Kawaiisu women became wage laborers during the early part of the 1900s to help provide for their families. Rosie Hicks, Marie Girado, Bertha Goings, Ramona Greene, and Sophie Williams all apparently sold their baskets to European settlers to make some extra money and to help their families. Marie Girado shared that people in the Caliente area would buy her baskets and that her mother's baskets were on display at the Shell gas station near the Mountain Inn. This was when the Lutges had the station and the Kawaiisu baskets were there on display - mainly from the Ed Tompkins collection. Sophie Williams also sold her baskets at the Monolith store and in Tehachapi and then would walk back to her home on Piute Mountain.

Towards the beginning of the 1940's Kawaiisu women stopped making their traditional basketry and baskets were no longer sold by Kawaiisu weavers. During this time the Kawaiisu lost the tradition of this remarkable art form and technology. Not until 2008 was a new Kawaiisu weaver introduced to the art of basket making and new Kawaiisu baskets began to be produced.

Kawaiisu Weavers: Past and Present

Annie Brown (1847–1925): Annie Brown lived in a Native American village at the Victorville narrows during the turn of the century with Maria Chapula, Susie Higgins (1841-1923), and Kittie Johnson (the latter were all Chemehuevi).

This Native Indian village was located near The Narrows in Victorville on the Verde Ranch. Annie Brown (b.1847), a noted Kawaiisu basketweaver, lived there during the early part of the 20th century (ca. 1919-1920) along with several Chemehuevi basketweavers (including Maria

Chapula [b.1856 – d.1960], Susie Higgins, and Kittie Johnson [b.1884]). A number of Annie's extraordinary baskets were part of an extensive auction of this material that was originally in the Natural History Museum in Los Angeles. There were about 44 Indian people living in that Victorville village at the turn of the century and the occupants included both Kawaiisu, Serrano and Chemehuevi. This settlement developed in the 19th century, as the Victorville area had been populated by the Serrano before the 1830s. Annie Brown was good friends with Susie Higgins and according to the well known basket dealer and collector, Grace Nicholson, she was the most skilled weaver from this settlement.

Annie Brown's maiden name was Wheeler and her Indian name was *Sahroh i'll*. That name might have referred to her talent as a basket weaver since the term *suhuvu* means anything woven. Annie Brown was the wife of Mary L. Claw's (*aka* Weegie) great grandfather (Joe Brown). Joe Brown's mother was Maggie Painter Brown - a famous Chemehuevi basket weaver.

Annie Brown manufactured many fine and well-crafted baskets of exquisite quality. These baskets were auctioned through Butterfields some years ago and fetched impressive sums of money varying from tens of thousands to over one hundred thousand dollars per basket!

Research is continuing into the historical details surrounding the Annie Brown basketry collection and her time as a weaver in the Victorville area. Phil Wyman is working with the Chemehuevi to develop a cultural heritage interpretive facility for this village site to tell the story of Annie Brown and her time there and to share elements of her relationship with the Chemehuevi.

Janice Williams (Harold Williams' sister) has begun to fashion a traditional Kawaiisu basket and is being trained to weave by Weegie Claw (Chemehuevi) through the Kawaiisu basket making classes. As a Native Kawaiisu, Ms. Williams is the first Kawaiisu woman to fashion a native Indian basket in nearly 70 years! As is tradition, this first basket will be given as a gift. Williams has chosen to give the basket to her son. She shared with us that the designs within her basket, that each represents a distinctive family member from her set of living relatives.

Jill Greene and Brandi Kendrick are also new Kawaiisu basket weavers. Both of these women are now weaving traditional Kawaiisu basketry. So the tradition is now alive and weavers are beginning to blossom! How remarkable. Brandi is the youngest of all the new Kawaiisu weavers.

One of the largest collections of California Native American basketry can be found at the California Department of Parks Resource Center: in West Sacramento. There are 58 baskets within the facility that have been tentatively attributed to the Kawaiisu.

Doctor David and the Treasure Basket

Phil Wyman shared that one of Elliot Wyman's relatives, his Uncle David, was an early doctor that lived near Oro Grande, close to Victorville and the Mojave River Narrows at the turn of the century. During this time there appeared before Doctor David a Native American man wrapped

in a blanket and he motioned that he needed his services. David endeavored to assist him and his patient continued to make his wishes known and motioned that he had something lodged in his eye. The Doctor found that it was a piece of metal and he got a small magnet from his son and was able to draw the piece out of the eye. The Indian man left but then he and other of his villagers returned with a bevy of gifts including a number of baskets, pinyon nuts, and ultimately they returned with a beautiful treasure basket.

That basket is a necked jar or “bottleneck” container. It is adorned with red wool and quail top knots around its rim and is believed to be of Kawaiisu affiliation since it has the signature hole in the base as the start of the basket. The basket also has a series of zigzag patterns around the edge and running up to the rim. Three rows of these zigzags run around the basket and are parallel and adorn the vessel in black-brown (Bracken Fern, Devil’s Claw, or Bulrush) on the base of the basket is a tan-buff colored willow weave.

Aren’t we blessed to have the basketry treasures of the Kawaiisu - both the new, contemporary Kawaiisu weavers and the examples of past artistic masterpieces of Kawaiisu basketry artisans. The Tehachapi Museum recently expanded its facility and is now displaying some of these jewels of Native American technology. Also some of Ramona Greene’s beautiful basketry works can be seen at the *Nuui Cunni* facility there on your way to Kernville by Lake Isabella.

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