

NC 0004
Nomlacki basket

This is a Nomlacki basket made in the 1890-1900 time period. Nomlacki baskets are rare, less than 50 documented pieces are extant in museum collections, while public collections also include another 200 or so attributed pieces. They are not described anywhere in the literature pertaining to basketry. My observations and attribution is based upon my work with Southern Wintun weavers, Nomlacki people and museum collections.

The primary Nomlacki basket collections are in the Oakland Museum and the C.H. Merriam collection at the University of California at Davis. The former was collected by Charles Wilcomb in 1908-1912, he was the first curator of the Oakland and the DeYoung Museums and made several collecting trips through the area for the Museum. C.H. Merriam was an independent ethnologist who collected eight Nomlacki baskets from Stony Ford Rancheria in 1900-1902. Some of these baskets may not be Nomlacki, but rather may be Salt Pomo. Other scattered Nomlacki baskets were collected by J.W. Hudson for the field Museum in Chicago, and are in the Deisher Collection at the University Museum at University of Pennsylvania, and at the Smithsonian. These collections each include one or two pieces. Of importance to note is that none of these baskets were collected post 1912. Isolated attributed baskets usually appear in old northern California family collections. Finally, the Redding Museum and Art Center has a well-documented basket collected by the city's namesake, sometime after he first settled in the area. These few baskets provide the clues to understand and describe Nomlacki basket style.

Before describing the style, a few words on why Nomlacki people, and therefore their baskets are so scarce. The Nomlacki or Central Wintun once occupied a portion of the western Sacramento Valley. They made a distinctive style of basket as compared to other Wintun groups, the Patwin or Southern Wintun and the Wintu or Northern Wintun. The Nomlacki suffered greatly as a result of the Euro-American invasion of California. Although they largely escaped missionization, several epidemics swept through their territory and took nearly 90% of their aboriginal population. The remainder were placed on reservations in the 1860s, while other found employment with ranchers and farmers.

The Nomlacki are little known because of their early demise immediately previous to and during the American period. There were two Nomlacki rancherias, one at Paskenta (now dissolved) and Grindstone (still occupied and the center of what remains of aboriginal Nomlacki culture). Other Nomlacki people intermarried with other neighboring tribes such as the Salt Pomo (Stony Ford), Patwin, and Maidu, while others continue to live on the Round Valley Reservation. Anthropologists and museums have rarely paid these people any attention; Alfred Kroeber mentions them in his Handbook of the California Indians (1925) and Walter Goldsmidt's Nomlacki Ethnography (1952) are the most accessible published works which describe their aboriginal and historical culture.

Like most Nomlacki coiled ware, this piece is woven on a three-rod foundation. It is sewn with white sedge root (Carex sp) and black dyed bulrush roots (scirpus sp). Both materials are truly the ribosomes of these water plants that are cleaned and split into sewing strands. The sewing strand's ends are tucked under as well as cut, and sometimes long ends are carried into the foundation. The start is a pinpoint spiral start, practiced only by Patwin and Nomlacki weavers. The design is rather typical of Nomlacki weavers. It is distinctively vertically oriented, combining two discreet design elements, and opens with "V's" on its ascent up the basket. The design is an extremely diagnostic feature of Nomlacki basketry.

The design coupled with the materials (which are not particularly unique to the Nomlacki), the inclusion of long sewing strand ends in the foundation and the start makes this basket assuredly attributable to the Nomlacki.

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