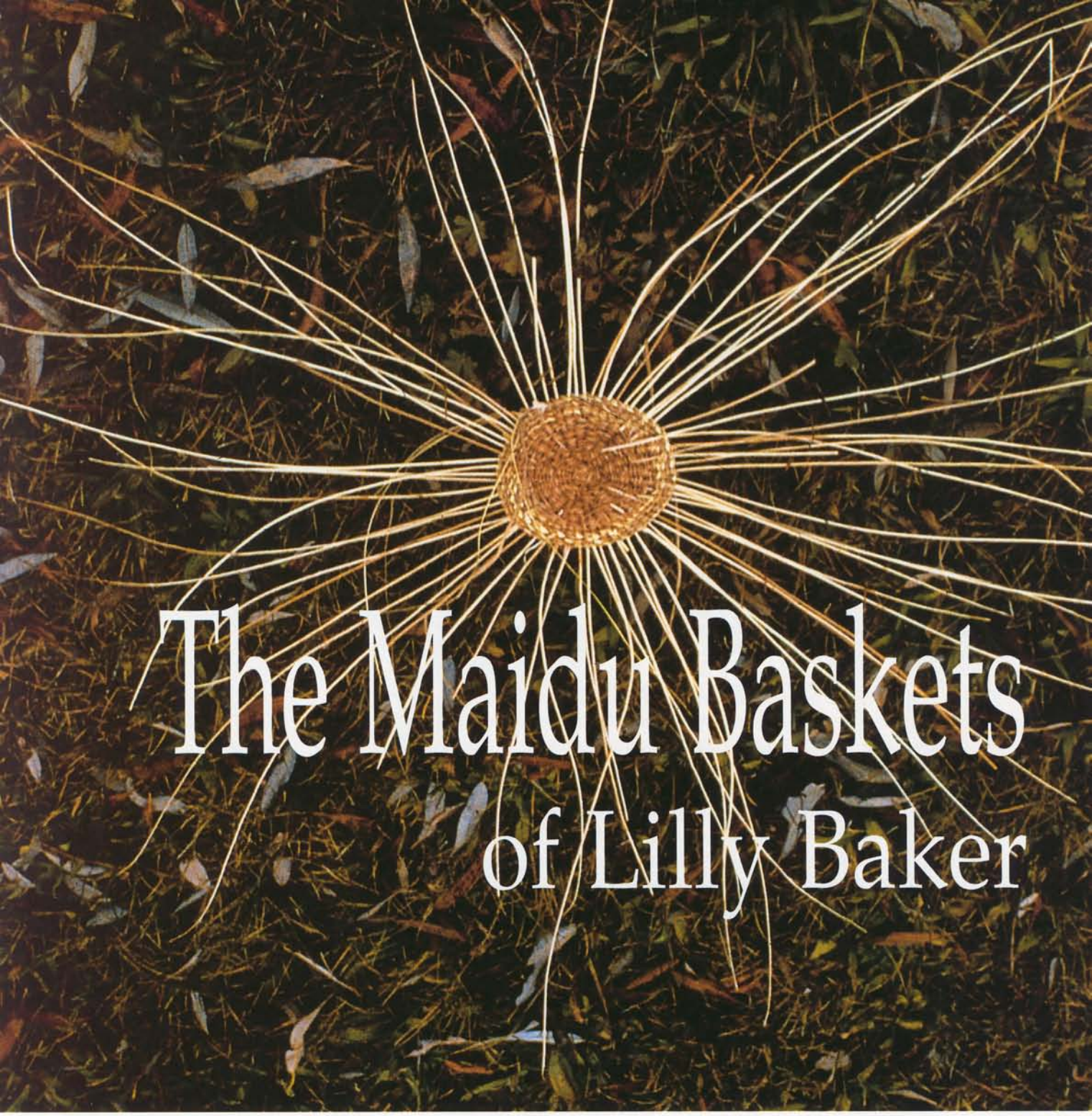

The Maidu Baskets of Lilly Baker

Story by Jane Braxton Little

Lilly Baker reaches into a clump of willows and rubs her fingers over leaf buds swelling under the smooth gray bark. She smiles, laugh lines radiating from her eyes into the mountain air just starting to warm with spring. "This is good willow. I can start a new basket today," she says.

Lilly has been starting new baskets for seventy-five years. Some are coiled, some twined. Each one is painstakingly faithful to the techniques handed down by her mother, her grandmothers, and their aunts and their grandmothers before them.

"All my people did baskets. It's our family trade."

A weaver by birthright and by choice, Lilly Baker, 86, preserves the traditional basket crafts of the Mountain Maidu who lived along the Feather River at the base of Lassen Peak, now a part of California known as Plumas and Lassen counties.

Along with the fruit, fish, venison, and acorn soup they were meant to hold, the baskets that grow from raw strands in Lilly's hands store a respect for life and the land that has nurtured the Maidu since the reasons, for practical reasons and for spiritual reasons."

Being a Maidu basket weaver is not an easy calling. "It's hard to learn baskets," says Lilly. "It was hard for me. But you just keep on practicing and keep

days when World Maker defied the cunning of Coyote to create these pine-scented canyons.

It is a mantle she wears without a trace of self-importance. "When some people look at me I feel like I'm just a basket. They don't ever see me. Just only baskets," she says with a chuckle.

As the only remaining master weaver of the Maidu, Lilly hands down both techniques and attitudes, says Sara Greensfelder, Executive Director of the California Indian Basketweavers Association. "Baskets help people master an identity with the land—with plants, gathering sites, the spirit of places," she says. "For a lot of California Indians, baskets represent their identity as Indian people. Knowing the tradition is alive is important for cultural

on practicing and practicing. You keep weaving and you get excellent."

Lilly began practicing when she was nine with a basket she hoped to never see again. "It was my first one and I didn't do very good on it. I didn't like the looks of it so I threw it out." But her father found it lying under a tree. "He brought my poor little basket in on a soft cloth. He pounded it neatly until it

OPPOSITE PAGE *Twined Maidu baskets begin by weaving a weft of pine root into a willow warp out from a common center. Photo by Sue Gutierrez. Courtesy of Plumas County Museum.* ABOVE *Lilly Baker in 1995. Photo by Jane Braxton Little.*

shaped up pretty nice. He decided I was to finish it. So I did."

Since then she has finished hundreds of baskets: small coiled bowls for cooking, twined burden baskets, wicker creels for trapping fish, and cradle boards. Each one has a purpose.

"Our baskets were not just fancy things you show at places like museums. They didn't have time for show. The difference between beauty you're hanging up on the wall and what you make because you need to use it—that's the difference between nowadays and the old way," Lilly says.

Months, even years before a basket was ready to cook ground acorns into soup, Maidu women roamed the creek banks and meadows gathering stems and roots for warp and weft. They looked for willow rods the same size from base to tip, the key to a neat basket. When they found a ponderosa pine uprooted along a lake shore, they clipped the tough stringy tendrils that had helped hold the tree upright. They found redbud in the winter, bear grass in the summer, and maple in the fall. Once home, they faced the tedious task of preparing each piece of material for weaving in a time-consuming ritual of whittling and scrapping, soaking and bending, and roasting and peeling.

"You don't buy the materials for baskets," says Lilly. "You go out and you work to get them. You pick half the day and you clean half the day. That will get you started but it won't ever begin to finish your basket."

When Lilly goes picking she haunts the places she went with her mother and grandmothers, harvesting recollections along with stems and roots. Walking along the shore of Lake Almanor near her home, she rounds a bend that turns a memory.

"My folks picked loads on a buggy and brought it all home. My two grandmothers and my mother always worked together. We'd take a lunch and go gathering, talking and talking. And we'd pick food, too—wild currants, nuts. It was always fun and I learned about the old ways."

The Maidu women tended their wild gathering patches like crops, pruning the willow and burning the maple to encourage long, straight shoots for weaving. They picked bear grass from the center of knee-high clumps. "You just pull up a little from each bunch. It comes up like hands praying. We always left plenty for next time," Lilly says.

Maidu basket materials are not as easy to find as they once were. Over the years Lilly has gone farther and farther to gather. Her frequent companion is Ennis

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP AND CENTER *Inspecting the willow rods Lilly Baker comments, "The willow rods have got to be the same size all the way. Otherwise they bulge out and don't make a neat basket. Photos by Jane Braxton Little.* OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM *Lilly Baker helps Shelly Morrison with a basket during a class in 1983. Photo by Sue Gutierrez. Courtesy of Plumas County Museum.* ABOVE *Lilly (right) and her mother, Daisy Baker (left), weave together in 1963, using the basket traditions of their Maidu mothers and grandmothers. Photo by Philip Hyde.*

Peck, her nephew and student. Sometimes they return disappointed. "People don't pick often enough so nothing grows as nicely. The best materials always seem to be along the highway but we're not supposed to pick there," Lilly says.

Sometimes they encounter hostility. Ennis recalls a woman who shooed them away from a nice patch of redbud. "She said she paid taxes on it. I offered to make her a basket but she sent us down the road," he says.

By the time Ennis finishes, Lilly's slender frame is shaking with laughter. "That lady should have taken his basket," she says. "Ennis charges a lot for them."

The gathering process goes on continually, spring after spring, summer after summer. "Any season is a good time to gather and a good time to pass on if you have lived a full life. I don't have a favorite time of the year," Lilly says.

Gradually, year after year, gathering, preparing materials, and weaving become a part of a cycle, says Denise Davis, another of Lilly's students.

"Not everybody can be a weaver. You're picking all year around. You're always thinking of weaving everyday and it becomes a way of life," said Denise, a Mountain Maidu who grew up in Marysville, California.

A painter and print maker, Denise wanted to weave from the time she was a young girl. "I was weaving on my own—crazy baskets. But I wanted to do traditional work. So I went to Lilly."

Their first lesson was nothing like the exercise Denise remembered from school. "Lilly showed me some sticks and told me to go out and find more. I thought it was impossible. I didn't know anything—maple from redbud, nothing. But Lilly says 'just do it.' So I did. She's been a real teacher for art and for life."

Lilly hands out willow and unfinished baskets in place of paper and pencil, says Ennis. "You watch, you put a basket in your hand and hold it. Once you

LEFT *After they gathered the stems and roots for baskets, Maidu women sorted them by type and size. Photo by Sue Gutierrez. Courtesy of Plumas County Museum.* RIGHT *Lilly Baker's basketry includes twined and coiled bowls, wicker baskets, and cradle boards.* OPPOSITE PAGE TOP *Coiled Maidu baskets are made with tiny stitches of maple, redbud or bear grass.* OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM *Lilly Baker has demonstrated the Maidu techniques of weaving baskets and grinding acorns to hundreds of Greenville Elementary School students. Photos by Jane Braxton Little.*

get the feel of it, basket weaving becomes a part of you."

Lilly's teachers were her mother, Daisy Baker, her grandmother, Kate Meadows McKinney, and her great-grandmother, Jenny Meadows. Now, as then, all Maidu baskets begin with willow. Lilly uses three carefully-sized parallel rods to start a coiled basket, lashing each row to the one below it with a strand of redbud or maple. Same-sized stitches with same-sized strands build up one at a time, creating the nubby texture which is uniquely Maidu. Her grandmothers pushed the rods apart with a small bone and slipped the new strand through. Lilly uses a metal awl.

She calls coiled baskets sewed baskets and still uses her mother's as models. "My mother's stitches were so tiny, so perfect. See how nice her start is? So pretty. No holes. Then look at mine. My baskets are more holey than righteous," she says, giggling.

The sides of one of Lilly's woven bowls rise here, dip there, like the lilt of her voice. A larger gathering basket casts a pale bronze glow that shimmers against her weathered face.

"Lilly's baskets pull you in," says Denise. "When a person weaves, something goes into it that you feel. All Lilly's baskets have her special warmth."

Daisy Baker died before she could teach her daughter twined basket techniques. "I'm still learning them," Lilly says. "I just started when I was forty." More weaving than sewing, twined Maidu baskets begin with a willow warp and a weft of sticky pine root. "It's strong. You can pull on it and it doesn't break." Sometimes Lilly alternates bear grass into the pine root weft.

"Bring one over. Put one over each side. Pine and bear grass. Then pine again. Your basket begins to grow."

As the sides rise out of a taut round center, Lilly weaves in a pattern with redbud and bracken fern. "The basket isn't so difficult but you have to work out the design. You just think about it and finally it works out for you."

Maidu patterns vary from weaver to weaver, inspired by the clouds and mountains, plants and animals of daily life. Each weaver has her own pet design. Lilly's grandmother's favorite was the quail tip.

"I like lizards," says Lilly. "Lizards gave us hands. I never cared too much about snakes in baskets. I wouldn't put in a design. When you weave a design into a basket you put the spirit of what you are doing right into the basket. You don't have any other way. It all goes into the basket."

Over the years Lilly Baker has shared her basketry with thousands of people, regularly visiting local elementary schools and doing demonstrations for civic groups. Many of her baskets are preserved in private collections and she has exhibited them throughout California and the West. Lilly is also the subject of a slide show demonstrating the techniques of gathering materials, preparing them and weaving.

Everywhere she goes, Lilly commands attention. "She's a magnet. Even the little children sit still for her," says Linda Brennan, former Curator of the Plumas County Museum. "It's her attitude. Lilly lives around the philosophy of baskets as life. She tells everyone to finish what they start. Her strength is her Indian way."

Lilly's Maidu way and the tradition of baskets are getting more and more difficult to maintain.

"It's really time consuming to make a basket. Nowadays women have too much to do. They don't think about making baskets. People brought a lot of pretty things into our country but they weren't our things. With all the fancy stores, people almost quit the old ways and started doing things their new, easier way."

As she talks Lilly is weaving a small coiled basket of scraps scattered and left behind by a class. "I don't like to waste anything. It's too hard to get the materials."

It's also hard to find the concentration for traditional Maidu weaving. "A basket has a life of its own but you help it along. It takes a space of time. You've got to put your mind on baskets to carry through and you can't do it right away. You've got to settle down to do it."

After a lifetime focus on baskets, Lilly Baker personifies the strength of this Maidu tradition with her gentle acceptance of life. She has no plans to stop weaving.

"I haven't had the time when I don't want to make baskets."