

Bread for Baskets

John J. Kania

The Chemehuevi of southern California are renowned for their elegant coiled basketry. Collectors and museum curators have observed that many Chemehuevi baskets bear a series of numbers that can be divided into two basic components. The first — a capital “L” followed by the numbers “1190” — remains the same on each basket, while the second differs. The second series of numbers can most often be found below this “L-1190,” separated from it by a black line (Fig. 5).

Over the years, it has been inferred that the “L-1190” baskets may have been collected by Mrs. Birdie Brown, a curio-shop owner in Parker, Arizona who sold and collected baskets (Collings 1979).¹ However, although Brown did write on the bottom of her baskets, she used a letter system including the initials or name of the weaver of each basket, and never used numbers (Kania 2006:72). Further complicating matters was the fact that the baskets that bore the “L-1190” series of numbers had been in the possession of Isidore and Rose Levinson. Over the years, collectors assumed, erroneously, that the “L” on the baskets stood for Levinson.

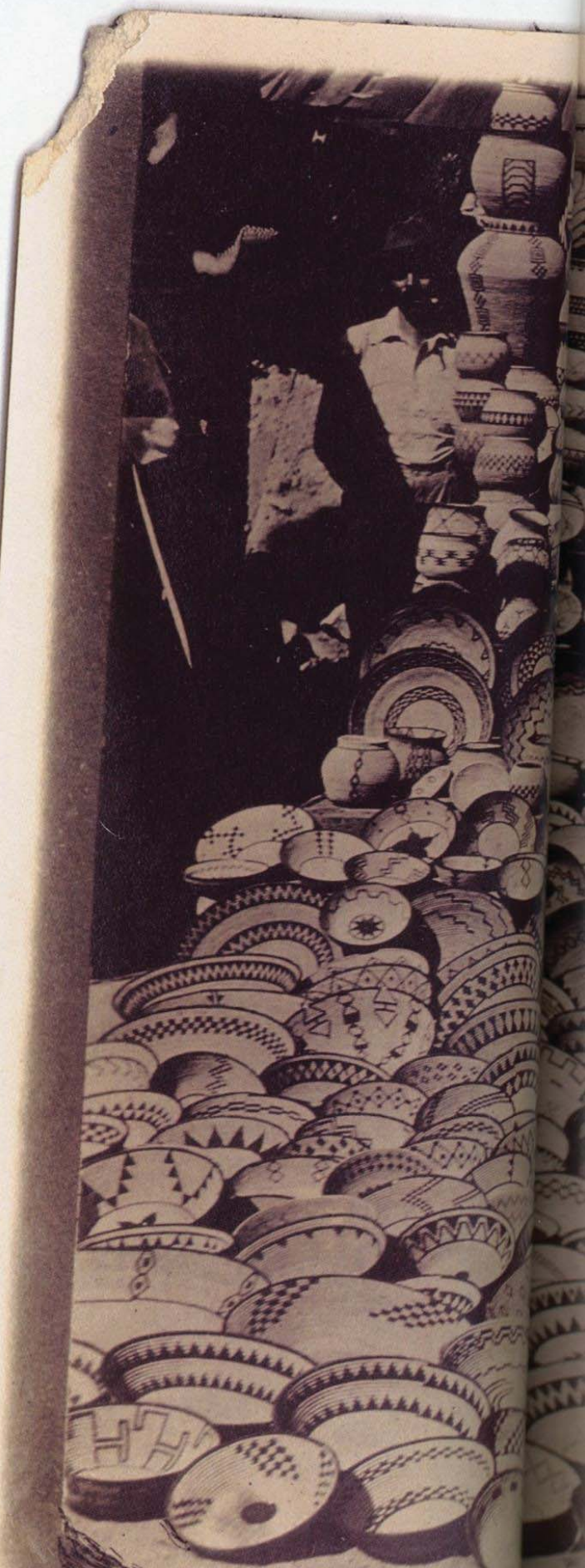
It turns out that a baker named Francis Xavier Ammann, who lived in Needles, California, was the original collector of these baskets and that he traded bread in exchange for them. In this article, I discuss how Ammann’s baskets came to be marked with the “L-1190” number and how that information allowed for the rediscovery of the largest known collection of Chemehuevi baskets. This is a matter of some importance not only for the study of Chemehuevi basketry, but also for the early history of collecting and the impact such collecting had on Native American basketry (Bates and Lee 1990; Cohodas 1997; Gogol 1985; McLendon 1996).

The Ammann Family

Francis Xavier Ammann was born in 1866 in Frieberg, Germany (Fig. 4).² He emigrated to the United States in 1884 and five years later married Mary Margaret Dotzler in New Jersey. In 1898 the Ammanns and their children moved to Needles, California.

Needles is just south of the junction of California, Nevada and Arizona. This area experiences some of the most extreme heat in North America, and it is unclear why Ammann chose this location in which

1. Photograph of part of the Ammann collection most likely taken by Grace Nicholson, c.1920. Courtesy of the Photo Archives, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. Photo Archive No. 2881.





2. Coiled olla, before 1904. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 6¼" diameter, 8½" high (17.1 cm x 21.6 cm). This basket was purchased by George Dorsey from the Fred Harvey Company for the Field Columbia Museum. Courtesy of the Field Museum, Chicago. Cat. No. 87714.

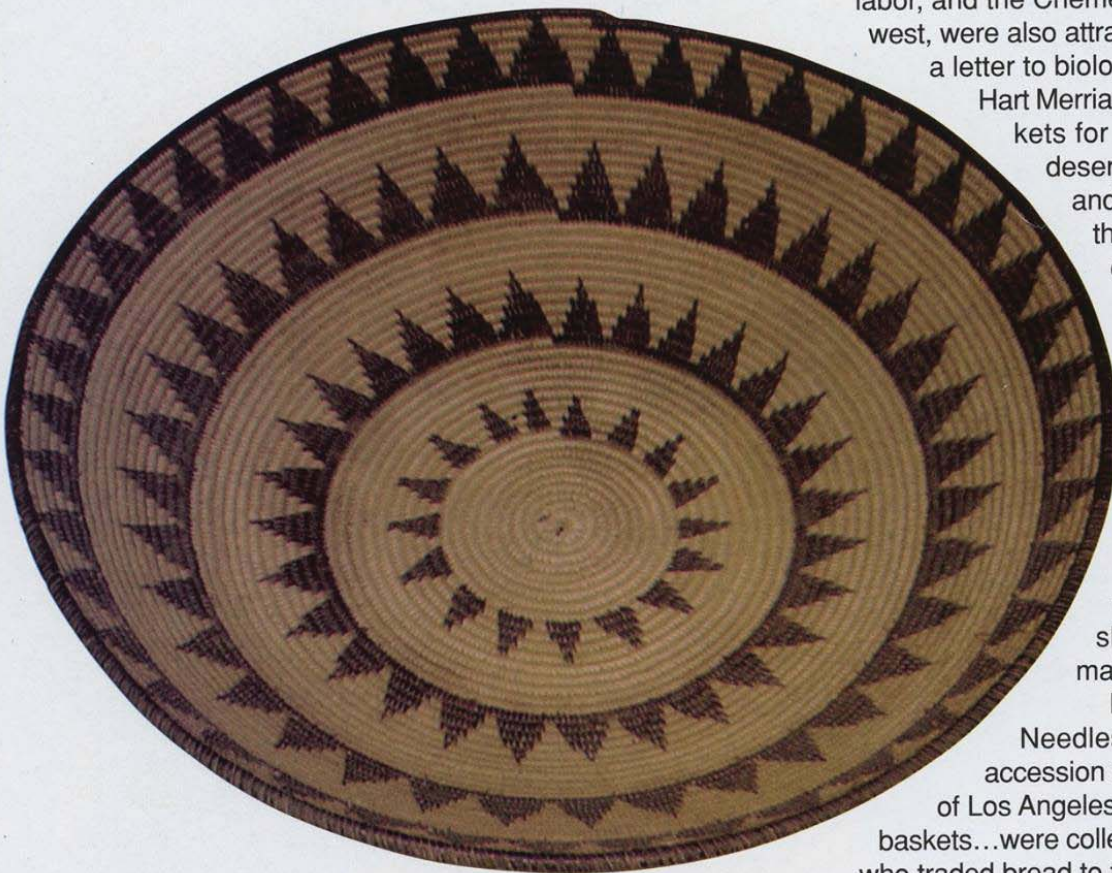
to settle. Whatever the reason, this rapidly growing community must have provided Ammann with ample economic incentives to endure the hardships of the region. Before 1883 Needles was little more than a steamboat stop on the Colorado River, but interest in the area had been pursued as early as the 1850s, when two American expeditions explored possible future routes for the development of reliable travel through the Southwest. In 1853–1854 Lieutenant A. W. Whipple made a preliminary survey for the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad (Whipple et al. 1856). And in 1858 Lieutenant J. C. Ives explored the Colorado River by steamboat for a north-south route by water (Robinson 1954:138–139). Both make brief mention of the indigenous people of the region, the Chemehuevi, but neither provides useful information about their baskets.

The founding of Needles coincided with the completion of the railroad at this crossing of the Colorado River (McShann 1991). Needles rapidly became a hub for the tri-state region, with the railroad (which terminated in Los Angeles) creating a new major east-west route connecting midwestern states with the West Coast. With the protection that nearby Fort Mohave provided, mining developed in the surrounding region and strengthened Needles's economic base. The Mohave Reservation, on the east side of the river, provided a source of cheap labor, and the Chemehuevi, who lived to the south and west, were also attracted by new work opportunities. In

a letter to biologist and self-taught ethnologist C.

Hart Merriam, Frank Stephens, a buyer of baskets for Merriam, writes that "most of the desert Indians have left their old homes and come to the R.R. [railroad] where they are employed as section hands, etc....Some few Chemehuevis [*sic*] Indians live at Needles, working for the R.R. Co. But most of them live in the Chemehuevis Valley — the next Valley below the Needles Canyon" (Stephens 1902:1).³ It was in this bustling Western railroad town that Ammann opened his Needles Bakery (Fig. 8) and began what was presumably a close relationship with the Chemehuevi basket-makers of the area.

Little is known of Ammann's life in Needles. A short handwritten note in the accession files of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County (NHMLAC) states: "These baskets...were collected by F. X. Ammann Sr., a baker, who traded bread to the Indians for the baskets." Also in the museum files is an undated obituary that reads: "Mr. Ammann engaged in the bakery and general merchandise business. From the now extinct Chimeheuvi [*sic*] Indian tribe he collected during his residence there [in



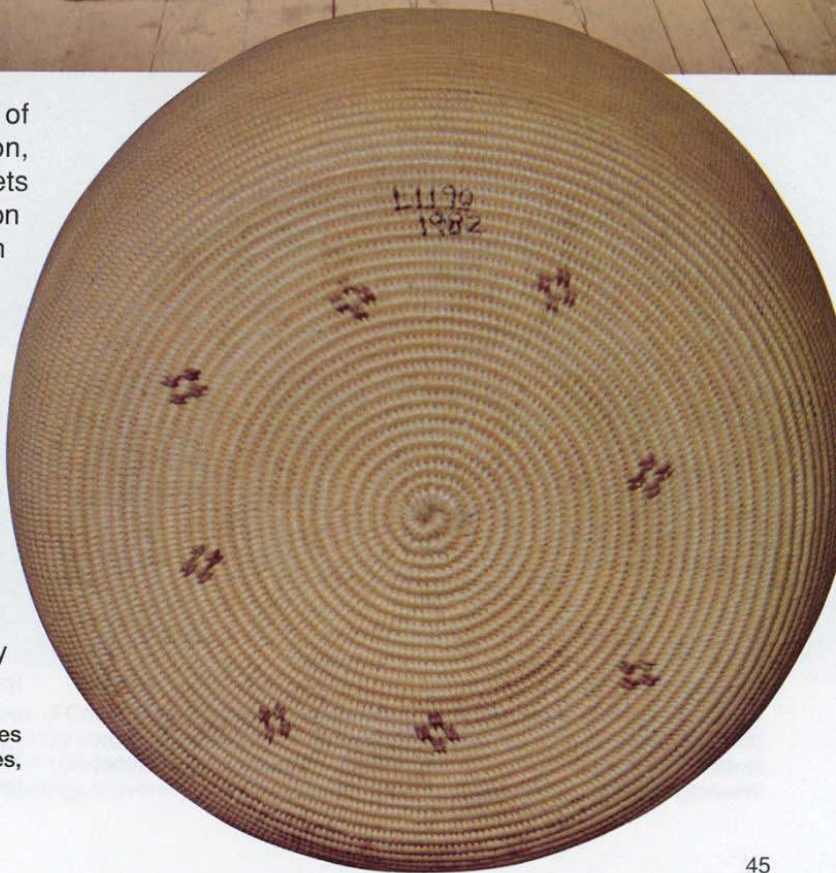
3. Tray, before 1904. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 14½" diameter (36.8 cm). This basket was purchased by George Dorsey from the Fred Harvey Company for the Field Columbia Museum. Courtesy of the Field Museum, Chicago. Cat. No. 87737.

4. Photograph of Francis Xavier Ammann with part of his collection, most likely taken by Grace Nicholson, c.1915. Courtesy of the Photo Archives, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. Photo Archive No. 2881.

Needles] more than 2200 Indian baskets.¹⁴ The actual number of baskets that were inscribed with the “L-1190” prefix was 2,138, according to the accession records at NHMLAC. However, Ammann may have controlled even more Chemehuevi baskets. Accession file records at the Field Museum in Chicago include a letter to Mr. J. F. V. Skiff, director of the museum (then the Field Columbia Museum) from George A. Dorsey, curator of Anthropology, that pertains to the acquisition of “a collection of 26 baskets from the Chemehuevi of the Colorado River” to be purchased from the Fred Harvey Company for the sum of \$300. The letter continues: “and, so far as I know, the basketry of this region was represented in no museum until Mr. Huckle [a representative of the Harvey Company] a few years ago obtained a large collection from a collector at the Needles, California” (Dorsey 1904). The Field Museum subsequently approved the purchase of these baskets (Figs. 2, 3). In 1903 another group of baskets from the same Harvey collection was purchased from Dorsey by the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. This group included twenty Chemehuevi baskets (Figs. 6, 7) that were used as examples by Otis T. Mason in his monograph *Aboriginal Indian Basketry*, which included the first written definition of Chemehuevi basketry (Mason 1904; Kania 2006:68). These and other sales of Chemehuevi baskets to museums suggest that Needles was the source of the material. Given the small size of Needles at the time of Dorsey’s statement, it is most likely that these baskets were obtained from Ammann. Clearly, Ammann was dealing in Chemehuevi baskets as well as collecting them.

In 1913 Ammann moved to Los Angeles with his wife Mary, son Francis Jr. and two daughters Mary Margaret and Elizabeth. Ammann’s obituary

5. Bottom of a Chemehuevi basket illustrating the “L-1190” series of numbers. Courtesy of the Needles Regional Museum, Needles, California.





6. Coiled olla, before 1903. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 11" diameter, 9" high (27.9 cm x 22.9 cm). This basket was purchased from George Dorsey for the National Museum of Natural History and was illustrated in Mason (1904:Pl. 232). Courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Cat. No. 220482.



7. Tray, before 1903. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 15½" diameter, 2½" high (39.4 cm x 6.4 cm). This basket was purchased from George Dorsey for the National Museum of Natural History and was illustrated in Mason (1904:Pl. 232). Courtesy of the Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Cat. No. 220465.

states that he had spent the previous eighteen years in retirement in Los Angeles. However, a business card in the files at NHMLAC indicates that Ammann opened a business called "Pasadena Imported Novelty Goods and Chimehuevis [*sic*] Indian Baskets — The Largest Collection in the World." The business card lists the proprietors as F. X. Ammann and A. Wolfe, and an address of 30 North Los Robles Avenue, in Pasadena. (Ammann's home was located on Hope Street in Los Angeles.) Notably, Ammann's business on Los Robles Avenue was only one block from that of the famous basket dealer Grace Nicholson (Apostol 1976; McLendon 1996).

The combining of two or more businesses along with the selling of American Indian objects was a common practice during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also suggests that dealing in Native arts and artifacts was often more fashionable than lucrative and that a more practical business was needed to bolster unpredictable sales of Native American objects. Sally McLendon writes about the uncertainties of the basket business:

It was not as easy to enter and succeed in the basket business as one might imagine a hundred years later. Weavers wanted and needed to be paid at the time of purchase although the collector might not be able to re-sell the basket for several months or even years... A serious dealer needed a considerable amount of capital, something very few people at the time had. There was also considerable risk. Although sizable profits could sometimes be made, there is evidence that frequently dealers could not find a market for a basket at the price they had paid for it, much less for more, and so received no return on the capital they had invested in the basket (1993:54).

In Needles, Ammann must have successfully combined a bakery and a venue for general merchandise and Chemehuevi basketry. Even the famous Harvey Houses featured lodging, a restaurant, a tour office and an Indian salesroom all under the same roof (Howard and Pardue 1996).⁵

A second business card in the NHMLAC files indicates that Ammann's daughter Elizabeth was also involved in the business. This card, however, gives a different name for the business: "Pasadena Indian Basket Store — Genuine Chimehuevis [*sic*] Indian Baskets and Curios." This card lists only Elizabeth's name, suggesting that she may have taken over the business at some point, perhaps by the late 1920s, when Ammann's health was in decline. This business card also suggests that the business had become more narrowly focused on Chemehuevi baskets but the address remained the same.

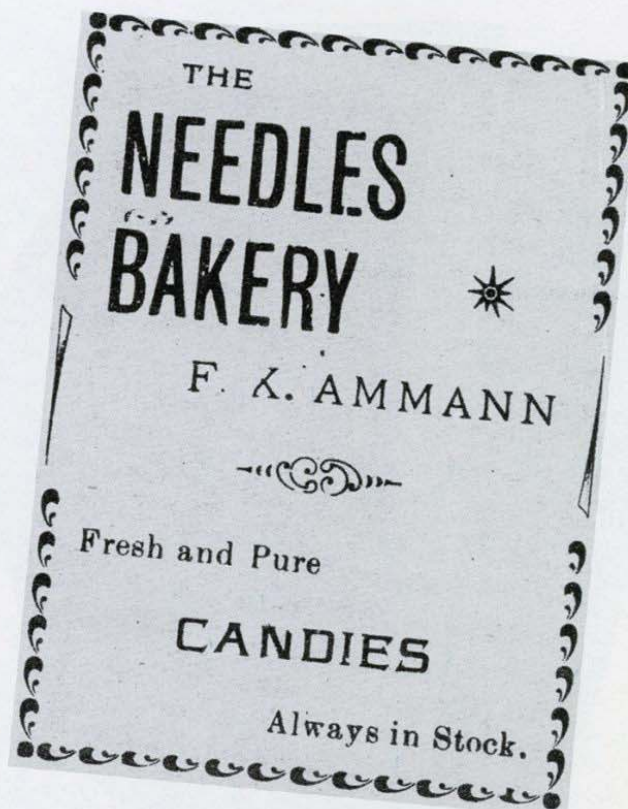
The Photographs

In 1902 Grace Nicholson opened a business specializing in Indian basketry, and the next year she relocated it to 46 North Los Robles Avenue in Pasadena, where it remained until her death in 1948. Having been estab-

lished for ten years in that location prior to Ammann's arrival in Los Angeles, Nicholson would have been well aware of the opening of his business so close to hers. In fact, she may have known about Ammann long before his arrival in Pasadena. Nicholson was a tenacious dealer, traveling great distances to obtain baskets from Native peoples, finding substantial inventories of baskets from even the smallest tribal groups. However, although the Chemehuevi were only about 250 miles away from Pasadena, Nicholson's ledger is curiously lacking in Chemehuevi baskets from the Needles area; only five examples are listed as coming from the Chemehuevi Valley (Fig. 13).⁶ A preponderance of Chemehuevi baskets from the Victorville area and the relative lack of baskets from the Needles area suggest that Nicholson was having difficulty obtaining baskets from the latter area, perhaps because of Ammann's cornering of the Chemehuevi market.

Nicholson was known for taking thousands of photographs during her collecting trips (Apostol 1976). However, she also took photographs of baskets that she was offering for sale. A large quantity of these photographs have been preserved, along with her ledger, at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley (Fig. 9). Upon examination of these basket photographs, it was evident that the majority were used to sell baskets from Nicholson's inventory to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Nicholson was a major supplier of basketry to public institutions throughout America, but she developed a particularly long and fruitful relationship with the Peabody Museum, being the major source of American Indian basketry for that institution. She worked closely with Lewis Farlow, a benefactor to the museum, who provided much of the museum's funding for collections (Turnbaugh 1998). Most of the Nicholson-Farlow transactions were accomplished through the use of the photographs now at the Hearst Museum.

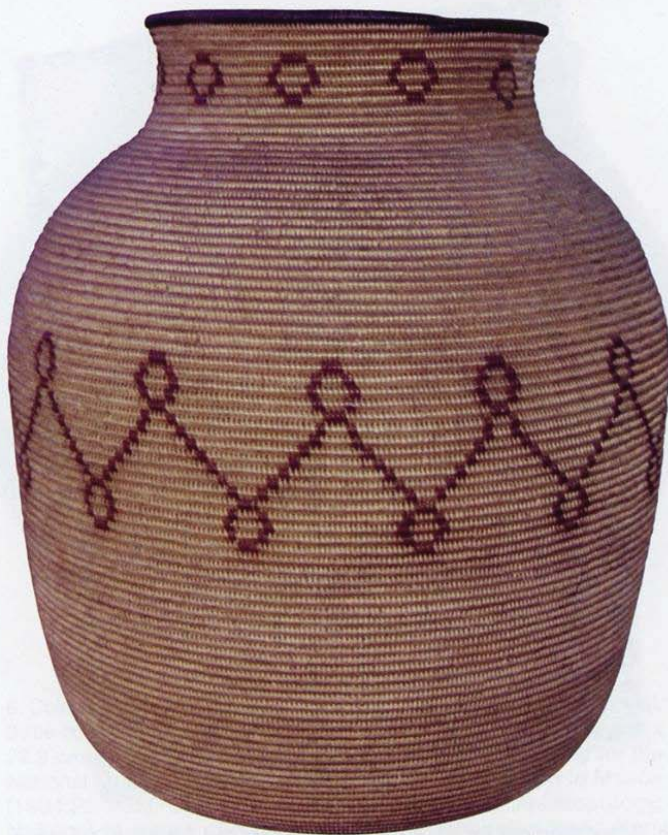
Of particular importance to this study are two photographs at the Hearst Museum. One shows hundreds of Chemehuevi baskets, as well as a partially hidden man with a mustache, probably Ammann, standing to the left of the collection (Fig. 1).⁷ This photograph is also in the archives at the Peabody Museum with the information that this was only



8. Advertisement for the Needles Bakery in the June 6, 1908 issue of *The Needles Eye*, the Needles, California newspaper.



9. An example of one of Grace Nicholson's photographs used for selling baskets to the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, showing an olla sold to the museum in 1905 (Cat. No. 05-7-10/64503; middle right). Courtesy of the Photo Archives, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. Photo Archive No. 2881.



10. Unusually large olla, c.1900. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), Joshua tree root (*Yucca*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 11" diameter, 13" high (27.9 cm x 33 cm). This basket appears in Figure 1 (left half, second from the top). Donated to the Needles Regional Museum by Lewis Welsh in 1959. Courtesy of the Needles Regional Museum, Needles, California.



11. Circular tray with three bands of black geometric design, c.1900. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 16" diameter (40.6 cm). This basket appears in Figure 1 (upper right). Courtesy of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles. Cat. No. A.3446.34-21.

a portion of some 1,800 baskets in Ammann's collection, which suggests that the photograph had been taken before the collection reached its final size. The Peabody Museum has no record of how or when this photograph was acquired, but given the nature of the relationship between Nicholson and Farlow, it seems likely that it came from Nicholson. The presence of this photograph with the Nicholson sales photographs at the Hearst as well as at the Peabody raises the question of whether Nicholson was trying to sell the Ammann collection to the Peabody Museum. If so, the transaction was never accomplished.

The second photograph at the Hearst Museum (Fig. 4) shows a much smaller grouping of baskets, many of which can also be found in the larger photograph of the Ammann collection (Fig. 1). The focus of this photograph, however, seems to be less on the baskets than on the unidentified man, who is certainly Ammann.

The Loan

In June 1929 Ammann placed the basket collection on loan with NHMLAC. Apparently, it was his intention that the museum act as a temporary repository (and a viewing room) for the collection while he was offering it for sale. A copy of the loan agreement between Ammann and the museum verifies this highly unusual arrangement between a public museum and a private party. While the agreement clearly protests the terms of the loan, the museum agreed to it, most likely in the hope of raising the funds to purchase the collection before it was sold elsewhere or perhaps hoping the collection would be donated to the museum by the family after

Ammann's death. Although the museum did not, in the end, obtain the collection, it was fortunate that the collection was taken on loan, for it was at this time that each basket was marked with the "L-1190" prefix. The "L" stood for loan (as opposed to "A" for accession) and the "1190" was the number assigned to the Ammann material. The secondary number on each basket represents each basket's inventory number. Since 2,138 baskets were on loan, this secondary number runs consecutively from 1 through 2,138. Thus, each basket so numbered is clearly identified as being from the Ammann collection.

In September 1931 Ammann died, and his will was filed the following month. Although the basket collection had previously been valued at \$12,000 in the agreement between Ammann and NHMLAC, there was no specific mention of the collection in his will. The last official mention of the collection appears in the NHMLAC files in January 1934. Ammann's son withdrew the collection from the museum "to be sold if possible." However, the younger Ammann did leave thirty-five baskets (Fig. 11) and a group of bows, arrows and a head-dress as a gift to the museum.⁸



12. A portion of the Chemehuevi baskets given to Edward Krachey by Ammann's son. Photograph by Herbert Lotz.

The Letters

The disposition of the collection was unknown until some Ammann baskets appeared on the market with several letters. The letters followed a similar format, presenting a few facts about the Chemehuevi people, some information about their basketry and some information about Ammann. They also contained information about how the collection was divided up, including the fact that half of the baskets had been acquired by the letters' authors, Isidore Levinson and his wife Rose, of Tucson, Arizona. According to the Levinsons, after the death of Ammann Sr. the "2,100 or more" baskets were divided between Ammann's son, a physician with the Edison Company of California, and his niece, whose name remains unknown. The Levinsons went on to state that in 1952 they obtained from Ammann's son his share of the baskets, which totaled 1,000. There was also mention of an additional group of Ammann collection baskets "on display at the University of California [Berkeley]" (Levinson n.d.).

Although this listing remains incomplete, what we know about the dispersal of Ammann's collection is as follows: Thirty-five baskets were given to NHMLAC and another thirty-five were given by Ammann's son to his friend Edward Krachey, vice president of the Edison

14 CHEMEHUEVI.			Boundary of Arizona & California Chemehuevi Valley - 40 miles S of Needles, Ariz.
SHOSHONEAN Family.			
also see page 218 =			
No.	Retail		Remarks.
5	3.00		7 of 9 - 5 wide, 5 base - old Black edge. Coiled. Black design
4.	25.00		11 wide, 2 1/4 high - Coiled - imitation Navaho design
195	47.50		6 1/4 - 8 1/2 - 4 - old age - very fine weave and shape. Edge brown with white
194	30.00		7 1/2 - 10 - 9 - 4 1/2 2 Rows Black with white design good specimen -
3563	7.50		5 - 2 - 2 - old - 4 designs black -

13. Copy of page 14 of Grace Nicholson's basketry ledger showing only five Chemehuevi baskets from the Needles area. Courtesy of the Photo Archives, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. Photo Archive No. 2881.

Company (Fig. 12), for his help in settling the elder Ammann's estate (Wetmore 1989). The remaining baskets were then divided equally between Ammann's son and his niece. Ammann's son gave an indeterminate number of baskets to his lifelong friend Lewis Welsh. In 1959 Welsh donated at least two of these baskets to the Needles Regional Museum (Fig. 10), stating that he had received the baskets directly from the Ammann family (McShann 1991). Of the 1,000 baskets the Levinsons purchased from Ammann's son in 1952, some were given to friends, but the majority were sold. One of the Levinsons' first purchasers was Emil W. Haury, on behalf

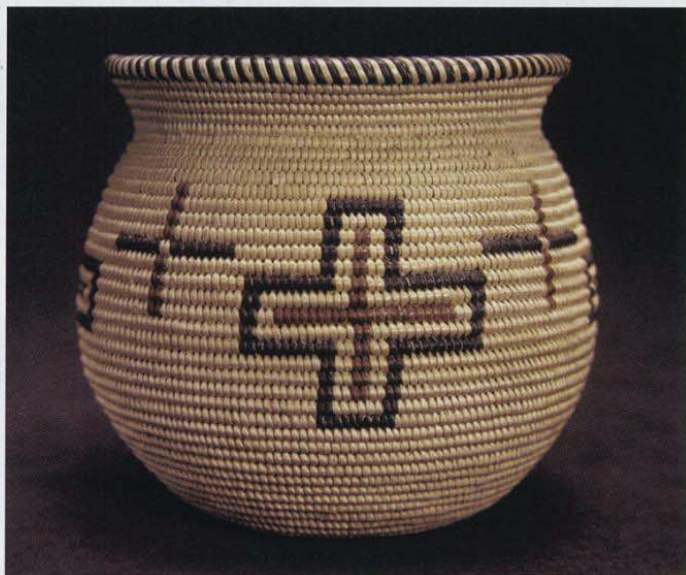
of the Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, Tucson. In 1952 Haury purchased seven baskets for \$35 (Fig. 15). William F. Scheele, of the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Ohio, purchased four Ammann baskets from a Denver dealer who related that the baskets came from a collection in Tucson. Of the baskets from Ammann's niece's part of the collection we know only that seventy-five baskets were purchased by a Mrs. DePue and donated by her in 1945 to the Hearst Museum (Figs. 14, 16). These are the baskets mentioned in the Levinson letters as being on display at the University of California.

Conclusion

Although much about Ammann's life and his reasons for collecting Chemehuevi baskets remain obscure, his contribution to the study of Chemehuevi basketry is lasting. His Chemehuevi baskets, collected between 1898 and 1929, with the majority of these being collected prior to 1913, form the foundation of research material for much of the Traditional Period of Chemehuevi basketry (late nineteenth century to 1910) and most of the study material for the Transitional Period (1910–1930;



14. Olla, c.1900. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 11" diameter, 9" high (27.9 cm x 22.9 cm). This olla appears in Figure 1 (top row, third from left). Courtesy of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. Cat. No. 1-70068.



15. Basket, c.1900. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), Joshua tree root (*Yucca*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 4 7/8" diameter, 4 1/8" high (12.4 cm x 10.5 cm). Purchased by Emil W. Haury from Isidore Levinson for the Arizona State Museum. Courtesy of the Arizona State Museum, University of Arizona, Tucson. Cat. No. E-2551.



16. Oval tray, c.1900. Willow (*Salix*), devil's claw (*Proboscidea*), three-rod foundation, coiling right. 15" x 12" (38.1 cm x 30.5 cm). This basket appears in Figure 1 (bottom left side, third from bottom). Courtesy of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. Cat. No. 1-70059.

Kania 2006). Given the small number of Chemehuevi weavers who worked during that thirty-year span, Ammann must have nearly monopolized their production of baskets. Thus, his personal preferences for design and color in these baskets undoubtedly contributed greatly to the changing direction of Chemehuevi basketry from one period to the next, whether or not his preferences were overtly expressed to the weavers. But above all, it is the sheer size of his collection of Chemehuevi baskets for which Ammann will be remembered.

Footnotes

- ¹ Brown's shop was near the Colorado River Indian Reservation. She was well known in the region for the substantial number of Chemehuevi baskets she had accumulated. A year after her death in 1969, her collection of baskets was auctioned in Phoenix, Arizona. In spite of being sold at public auction, many baskets never entered the public arena, as 300 were purchased by the Chemehuevi tribe during that auction and are currently housed in the Colorado River Indian Tribes Museum in Parker, Arizona.
- ² Ammann's death certificate states this date of birth, but the 1900 census in Needles gives the date as November 1867. In fact, the entire series of dates given in the census is in conflict with information on the death certificate. Consequently, I have used the death certificate as the most reliable for key dates.
- ³ Merriam, who helped to found the National Geographic Society in 1888, was also an avid collector of California Indian basketry, keeping meticulous notes on each basket. His collection is now housed in the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Davis. Stephens was a contact of his, hired to find Chemehuevi weavers and to buy any Chemehuevi baskets from these weavers.
- ⁴ While the Chemehuevi may have lost many aspects of their culture by the time this obituary was written, they still exist, and this statement should be considered a misunderstanding of this fact.
- ⁵ Similar examples are E. Mehesy Jr. in Santa Barbara, California, who was a "Practical Furrier, Fur Dresser and Taxidermist" and who also sold "Indian and Mexican Blankets and Relics, Souvenir Goods and Curiosities" (James 1902) and Whalen Curio Store in Los Angeles, which dealt in all manner of Indian items as well as "Mexican items, Eucalyptus Buds, Leather Pillows, etc." (Steiner n.d.).
- ⁶ These baskets are listed on page 14 of Nicholson's ledger. There is a much more extensive listing, on page 218, of Chemehuevi baskets from the Victorville area, a location in the far western Mohave Desert, to which some Chemehuevis fled after their disastrous war with the Mojave during the 1860s.
- ⁷ This photograph was first published in *Indian Baskets* based on the collection at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh 1986:65).
- ⁸ The museum at that point assigned an accession number to the donated material — "A.3446" — removing the old "L-1190" loan numbers from the pieces.

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I thank Maggie McShann of the Needles Regional Museum, Needles, California, who spent several hours introducing me to the history of Needles and what was known at that time of the Ammann family. I also thank Sarah and William Turnbaugh, whose insights into the relationship of Grace Nicholson, Lewis Farlow and the Peabody Museum were significant. Particular thanks go to Margaret Hardin at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, where the Ammann basket collection had originally been stored.

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