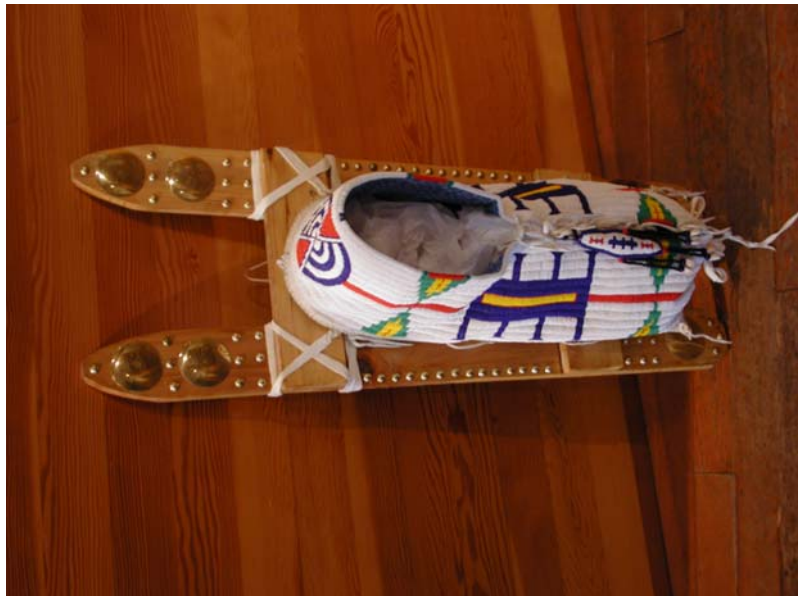


Cradleboards served many purposes for Native Americans

BY PAM PHILLIPS
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Cradleboards served many functions in Native American life. Today they would replace baby cradles, carriers, travel seats, backpack or front carriers, highchairs, and maybe even the baby swing.



While they varied greatly in appearance from tribe to tribe, they had several design features in common. All cradleboards have a rigid back with a protective device to shield the baby's head from injury and provide a raised area to drape some form of material, whether cloth or animal hide over the top to protect the child from the elements.

The sides of the cradleboard is made of soft cloth or hide and laces down the front to secure the baby, which is swaddled before placing inside. Some cradleboards have a rigid footrest while others allow movement of the feet through an opening at the bottom. The one thing all cradleboards have in common is they provide a safe, secure environment for the infant.

Today, pediatricians (and grandmothers) will advise a new mother with a crying inconsolable infant to swaddle the baby tightly with the arms at the sides and make low hushing sounds similar to the environment of the womb to calm and soothe.

A cradleboard achieved the same purpose. A cradleboard can be carried in the arms or tied on the back. It can stand propped against a firm surface or hung at eye level next to the mother freeing her hands for tasks requiring both hands, while still allowing her and the baby to maintain eye contact.

Utilitarian use aside, a cradleboard represents love, pride, beauty and art. Several generations were usually involved in the creation of a cradleboard and there were never two alike. While some cradleboard makers could be identified through their unique designs or beadwork, each one was an individual work of art completed painstakingly over many months in anticipation of the new arrival.

Sometimes the cradleboard was made by the mother but often it was made by an aunt or grandmother. When time was scarce, intricate decorations were kept to a minimum, but when there was free time, a lot of love and excitement was shown in the beautiful designs.

In some families, cradleboards were passed down from generation to generation with parts of them being replaced as needed. The cradleboard pictured is fully glass beaded on leather, lined in felt trade cloth, and backed with rawhide on a lattice framework secured to two wooden uprights. It was part of a collection from a Montana family secured in the 1930s from the Crow tribe. Normally, cradleboards were not made for sale until the early 1900s when there began to be an interest on the part of collectors. Cradleboards still are used today and the babies appear to be comfortable and happy.