



CRADLEBOARDS

Most Native American mothers in the West carried their babies in cradleboards. This device looked like a backpack combined with a small crib. It was the precursor to today's "snugglies," backpack carriers, and portable car seats. Swaddling their babies and strapping them into cradleboards allowed Native American moms to have their hands free to perform their daily tasks. Cradleboards could be strapped to mothers' backs like a backpack, lashed to a saddle or a *travois*, or propped up on the ground like a baby chair. Regardless of what the mother was doing, her baby would be safe, comfortable and nearby. Cradleboards were generally made from materials that were locally available.

The Ute tribe lived in southern and western Colorado and southern and eastern Utah. They are cousins to the Jicarilla Apaches who lived in northern and western New Mexico. The Utes originally constructed their cradleboards from willow branches and deerskin. Two stout willow branches formed the frame, which was covered with deerskin. A footrest was often incorporated into the cradleboard. Each cradleboard was stuffed with soft, absorbent materials that cushioned the baby and much like disposable diapers, kept the infant clean and dry. Ute cradleboards often contained a visor made of willow shoots that shaded the baby from the sun's rays. It is uncertain when the Ute adopted the cradle with the wooden backboard, but it had become the predominant type by the 1870s, possibly borrowed from the Plateau tribes. The rounded top, beaded decoration and the manner in which the child was secured all recall the cradles of the Nez Perce and other Plateau groups.

Ute flat board cradles were made from a slab of wood split from a pine or cottonwood tree. The bottom of the board was squared, while the top was rounded. The tanned hide covering was arranged over the board in a consistent fashion, so that a hide fringe hung near the top of the cradle's back. The cradle generally had a flat band of fringed hide, decorated with a beaded panel that was tied across the top of the cradle lacing just below the child's face. The Utes dyed the deerskin different colors. Generally, they used tan or brown for boys and yellow for girls. They added beadwork, elk teeth and cowrie shells to the deerskin as well. The skill of Ute women in tanning hides and decorating with beads was well known and their handiwork was much sought after.

In the southwestern states, infants spent most of the day in the cradleboard. They were taken out at intervals that increasingly became longer and longer. When the child reached the age at which he/she could sit up unsupported, then the mother would slowly wean him/her from the cradleboard. By the child's first birthday, a time when most babies learn to walk, cradleboards were no longer necessary.