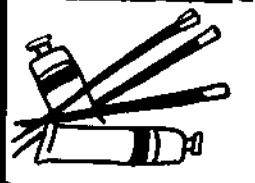
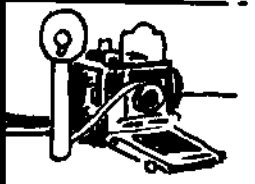
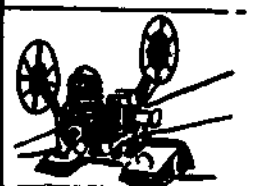
INDIAN CRADLES







INDIAN CRADLES

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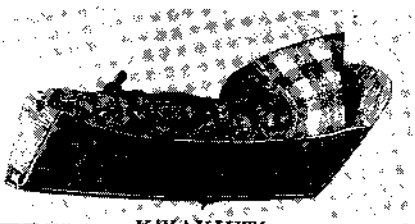

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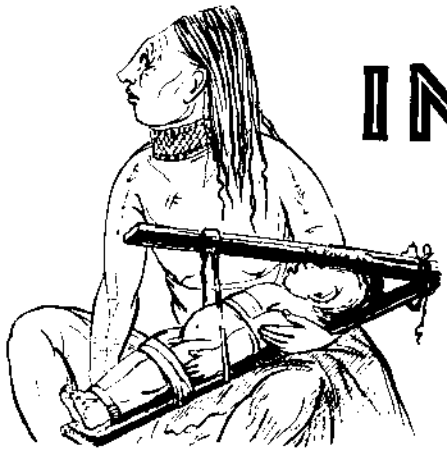


CHINOOK, from a Catlin drawing

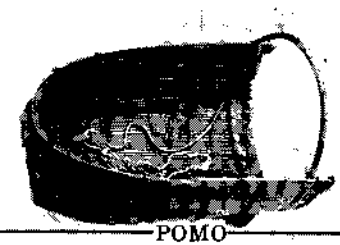
INDIAN CRADLES

by
ROBERT E. RITZENTHALER
Assistant Curator of Anthropology

WHAT DID the Indians call the thing they carried their babies in? This is the question that the Museum's Anthropology Division is called upon to answer more frequently than any other. We first explain that the English term for this combination cradle and baby carriage is "cradle," or, for the specific type used in the Wisconsin area, "cradleboard." Then we point out that the American Indians spoke a variety of languages, some as different from one another as English and Arabic; that an Iroquois Indian could no more understand a Navaho than a Greek can understand Tibetan. Thus the Indian name for the cradle depends entirely upon what tribe of Indians you are talking about.

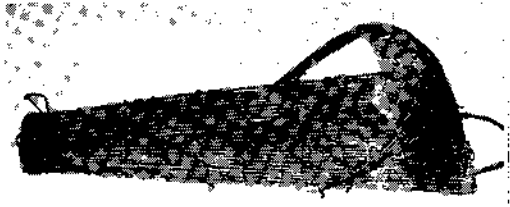
A few examples will illustrate how different the term can be. The Wisconsin Chippewa, who speak an Algonkian language, call the cradle a *tikinagan* (rhymes with "sticky toboggan"). Our Siouan-speaking Winnebago Indians call it *hochji* (rhymes with "ach chee"). A New York Mohawk, speaking Iroquois, calls it *karhon.*

Not only did the names vary, but the different tribes had their own ideas as to how a cradle should be made and used. The Chippewa, for example, took a cedar board about two feet long, ten inches wide, and three-eighths inch thick, and fastened a foot brace at one end and a head-protecting hoop near the other. A padding of soft and absorbent sphagnum moss was laid on the board to serve as both mattress and diaper. The infant was placed on the padding and securely bound to the board by means of two cloth or buckskin wrappers: strips about four feet long and nine inches wide, and usually gaily decorated with quill or beadwork.



POMO

CHIPPEWA



PAIUTE

The infant was bound onto the cradle-board a few days after birth and spent the major portion of its first six months of life on it. The infant was removed from the board once or twice a day to change the padding, but was usually nursed while on the board. The arms of the very young baby were bound to the body by the wrapping, but later on the arms were freed. When the child began to walk, the cradle-board was discarded.

The primary purpose of the cradle-board was to serve as a bed: one which could be used either horizontally or vertically. If the mother was working outside the wigwam, she could hang the cradle-board from a limb, or rest it against the trunk. If a gust of wind blew it over, the hoop over the head absorbed the shock of the fall thus protecting the child against injury.

The cradle-board also served as a baby carriage. When the mother went on a journey, the cradle-board was slung on her back and held in position by means of a buckskin band passed around her forehead. In a sense the cradle-board also served as a play-pen, and a variety of toys were hung from the hoop for the baby to watch or play with.

While the general type of cradle just described was used by most of the tribes east of the Mississippi, the tribes to the west had a variety of different styles. The buffalo-hunting peoples of the western Plains, such as the Plains Sioux, laced the infant in a skin bag supported by a slat framework. The exterior of the bag was often elaborately, and sometimes completely covered with quill or bead

SIOUAN MOTHER AND CHILD

designs. The Plains tribes also had the interesting custom of enclosing the navel cord in a decorated bag, in the shape of animals such as turtles and lizards, and hanging the object on the cradle or around the infant's neck as a protective and good-luck charm.

The Hopi Indians of Arizona used several styles of cradles. The one illustrated here is made of basketry. It has a one inch rod bent in a hairpin shape, and filled in with wickerwork. The circular head loop is joined and held in place by a wickerwork band coming up from the back. The Hopi child was wrapped in soft buckskin, and secured to the cradle with thongs.

Among the Chippewa it was the task of the father to make the cradle, but for the Hopi it was the job of the grandmother on the father's side. In some tribes it was the custom to make a new cradle for every child, while among others it was a sacred object to be handed down from one generation to another.

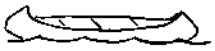
The Pomo Indians of California also used a basketry cradle. The infant spent the first month on a temporary cradle of matting, after which it was transferred to the rigid permanent one. The latter was a short, scoop-shaped affair made of wooden rods sewn together, with a circular hoop serving as a head protector and also to hold the shape of the cradle. It looks too small for even a baby, until one remembers that the baby sat in the curved bottom with its legs hanging out. The padding consisted of shredded tule reeds. Objects such as tiny baskets and feathers were suspended from the hoop, but, as the baby was wrapped and laced so securely that it could not move, these trinkets were there to be seen, not played with.

POMO, courtesy Chicago Natural History Museum

The Paiute Indians of Nevada used a cradle just about twice the length of that of the Pomo. It consisted of a flat, wedge-shaped foundation of willow rods with a neat basketry awning above to protect the child against sun and injury.

One of the most unique styles of cradles is to be found on the north Pacific coast. There, among such tribes of British Columbia as the Kwakiutl and Haida, the cradle consisted of a trough-shaped box made of cedar boards. The baby was placed inside on a bedding of shredded cedar bark supported by a rod framework, and laced in. The head was sheltered from light and insects by means of a hood of matting.

CHIPPEWA



PAIUTE

The use of Indian cradles has a rather interesting distribution. While nearly every tribe in North America north of Mexico had some type of rigid cradle, we find the cradle replaced with the sling and hammock in the tropical areas of Central and South America. As you enter the temperate regions of southern South America the rigid cradle reappears. This correlation of the rigid cradle with cooler climates is understandable in terms of the discomfort the wrapping of an infant onto a cradle would cause in tropical areas.

There has been some concern over the possible harmful effects of binding a baby in a cradle for such extended periods. However, no ill effects seem to arise from the process. In fact the Indians claim beneficial effects for their method of cradling, particularly from the standpoint of developing an erect posture by the continual contact of the baby's spine with the flat surface of the cradle. It was certainly a valuable protective device for a baby raised in a primitive setting. It prevented the baby from crawling into the open fire, or falling into the water if the family lived on the shore of a lake or river, or straying too close to the edge of the Pueblo rooftop that a Hopi family might be gathered on.

There was one permanent effect of certain methods of cradling. If the head of the infant was allowed to come into direct contact with a hard cradle-board a flattening of the back of the head took place which persisted throughout life. This, of course, could be easily prevented through the use of padding, but some groups, particularly those of the Southwest, did not deem it important to do so, and others, such as the historic tribes of Wisconsin, did not use sufficient padding.

There were also a number of tribes in which they intentionally deformed the head of the infant by applying mechanical pressure. The Chinook, for example, a tribe living along the Columbia River, placed the infant on a board and attached another board over its forehead at about a 25-degree angle. Steady pressure on the second board by means of a cord eventually flattened not only the forehead but also the back of the head, resulting in a permanent gable-shaped head. It was not a painful process, being done while the bones of

the head were still very soft, and produced no harmful effects. To the Chinook it was a mark of distinction, and a normal head was permitted only to slaves.

The primitive cradle is almost completely out of use among the American Indians of today. There are some cradle-boards still to be found among our Wisconsin Indians, but they are kept primarily as heirlooms and it is rarely that a child is raised on one at the present time. Only in the Southwest, in the states of Arizona and New Mexico, is the cradle still used to any extent. Among such tribes as the Navaho, Apache, and Hopi they may still be seen in use, but it is only a question of time until this interesting device disappears from Indian life entirely and will have to be sought for in our museums.

For further information on Indian cradles see:

BOAS, FRANZ, Cradles of the Kwakiutl Indians.
American Museum of Natural History, Memoirs vol. 8, part 2, pp. 458-460.

CODY, BERTHA PARKER, California Indian Baby Cradles.
The Masterkey, vol. 14, No. 3, May 1940.

DENNIS, WAYNE, Cradles and Cradling Practices of the Pueblo Indians.
American Anthropologist, vol. 42, 1940, pp. 107-115.

MASON, O. T., Cradles.
Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30, Part 1.

MASON, O. T., Cradles of the American Aborigines.
U. S. National Museum Report 1887, Part 2, pp. 161-212.

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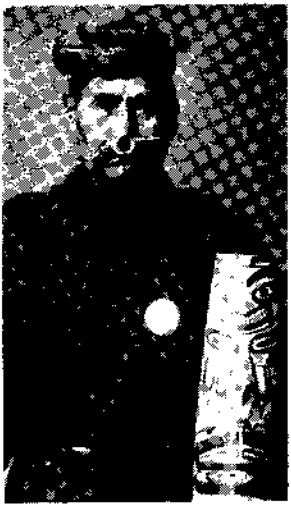

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