

DREAMWEAVER

Master Traditional Artist Rena Beers

Rena Beers does not tell her story to anyone who walks through the door. The secrets of a lifetime do not flow readily in a single afternoon. The past is too big, too painful, too hard to explain. Besides, providing explanations is not her job—she'd rather just show you cradleboards.

Sitting in the cozy living room of her ranch house on the Burns Paiute reservation, surrounded by her exquisite handiwork, Beers, 88, is a piece of living history—a link to a time and a place the modern world has all but forgotten. With her high cheekbones, wide brown eyes, and silver curls, she radiates an oddly elfin presence, like a time-traveler stranded in a strange land.

Beers has been making cradleboards since she was a little girl. Born in a sagebrush field near Jordan Valley in 1918, she grew up in a band of Wadatika Paiute Indians and didn't learn English until she was 14 years old. "I still don't know how to talk English," she says with a smile.

For thousands of years, bands of Paiute roamed the immense landscape of southeastern Oregon, which unrolls from the chalky-blue horizon, mile after mile of open valleys and lonely buttes thinly clothed with juniper and sage.

As nomads, the Paiute mastered the art of packing light, and cradleboards were essential to their lifestyle. For mothers, cradleboards let them carry their babies on their backs while keeping their hands free. For babies, cradleboards provided warmth, security, and the feeling of being held—even when their mothers set them down for a minute. "If you go somewhere, you know they're in there, staying there, so you don't have to worry," Beers says.

Cradleboards are one of the most distinctive crafts of the Northern Paiute, a cultural tradition of special importance because of the fractured history of the tribe. In 1868, after U.S. Army General George Crook led a bloody campaign against them, Paiute chiefs signed a peace treaty. Although Congress never ratified the treaty, President Grant set aside a reservation of 1.8 million acres for the Paiute north of Malheur Lake. Conditions on the reservation were grim. Western settlement—ranching, farming, railroads—had demolished the fragile environment on which the Paiute traditionally depended. Corrupt contractors siphoned off federal assistance or sold them rotten supplies. Ravaged by influenza and starvation, the Paiute were desperate—so desperate they joined the ill-fated Bannock Indian War of 1878.

The war was little more than a series of raids, but it spelled disaster for the Paiute. The U.S. Cavalry ambushed and killed the Indian warriors and the Paiute chief, Egan. The federal government then dissolved the Malheur reservation and banished the surviving Paiute to reservations hundreds of miles away, including the Yakima Reservation in central Washington and the Warm Springs Reservation in central Oregon.

Some families returned to their ancestral territory, however, camping outside towns like Burns and struggling to find a niche in a world that had been turned upside down. For many years, Beers lived with her family in a tent and survived by chopping and selling firewood behind the Old Castle Restaurant. "Life was tough then," she says. "We were real poor. Nothing to eat—not like now."

Lacking a formal education (until 1949, Indian children were turned away from the public school in Burns because of fears about tuberculosis), Beers raised a family, worked as a housecleaner and later as a community health nurse. But her real passion was cradleboards.

Every fall, Beers walks down to the meandering banks of the Silvies River to collect willow shoots, which she soaks in water to soften and shape. Her sons and grandsons bring her deer and elk hides, which she cleans with a sharpened deer's rib and then tans or smokes over a woodfire in her backyard.

Stitched together with strips of willow or deer hide, the finished cradleboards are strong, light, and sturdy. They feature exquisitely curved shades that shield the baby's face from the fierce desert sun, and often sport beads or shells as decoration. A typical cradleboard takes her two months to make. She gives them to family members—her children and grandchildren all wore them—or sometimes sells them to collectors.

In 1998, the Oregon Historical Society recognized Beers as a "master traditional artist" and awarded her a grant to pass her craft down to other tribal members. "Rena has been a craftsman of the highest regard," wrote Wanda Johnson, then the tribal chairwoman. "Her reputation is built on quality and accuracy. She is the best there is."

For her own part, however, Beers would prefer to stay out of the spotlight. "I don't want to be recognized," she says. "I just make something that I like to make." —CHRIS LYDGATE

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Rena Beers collects willow shoots outside her home in Burns to make traditional cradleboards. A distinct craft of the nomadic Northern Paiute, cradleboards were essential for carrying babies.

ROBBIE McCLARAN (2)