

A mother in Native dress



A sculpture depicting a Native woman and baby

Walking into the California Trail Interpretive Center, I pass a beautiful sculpture of a Native woman and child. The sculptor is Ben Victor and it depicts a generic Great Basin woman representing the native people of this area. The California Trail Interpretive Center is seven miles west of Elko and is a great place to visit to learn both about the people traveling the California Trail and the native peoples living in this area.

The depicted clothing interested me. I wondered how such native garments were created so I talked to Leah Brady. She is a local Shoshone basket maker, who also volunteers at the California Trail

Interpretive Center. Leah conducts demonstrations and teaches classes about native ways for various organizations.

Leah told me the sculptured woman is wearing a rabbit skin blanket, the typical, historic, winter dress of the Shoshone and Paiute. This warm garment required a lot of work to create, requiring the pelts from 100-150 jackrabbits. The skin from each rabbit was cut off in long strips. These were twisted into ropes about four feet long and then the ropes were woven together using buckskin thongs to form the blanket. They constantly required repair or replacement.

The woman's other major garment is a skirt made of sagebrush bark. Through a long process, bark was pulled from the brush and the inner bark stripped away and cleaned. The end result was reddish-brown, pliable, strong fibers. A rope was twisted from a plant called Indian hemp, a very rare plant today. The sagebrush bark strips were then draped over this rope and tied to it. The strips were woven together with more sagebrush to hold the skirt together. Leah also said the depicted skirt is too long.

On the woman's feet are footwear made of tules. These reeds are a type of large bulrush found growing in marshes. This versatile and tough vegetable material was easily gathered in Ruby Valley along creeks and other marshy areas. The cut reeds were dried for a couple of days to allow shrinkage. They were then soaked to make them pliable and woven together. Reeds formed the soles and then bent up and over the toes. Such footwear did not last long but was easy to create.

She holds a tightly woven container formed of split willow. Some basket containers could be used to boil food when hot rocks were added. If the pot was used to store water, the inside would have been sealed with pitch. White globs of pitch were gathered from pine trees. Hot rocks and clumps of pitch went into the basket where the hot rocks melted the pitch and smeared it onto the woven willow as the woman rolled the pot in her hands. Such a sealed container could also store water during traveling. Pine pitch was also used to protect peoples' feet. Shoes were not typically worn during summer and pitch smeared onto feet helped to protect them from sharp rocks.

On the woman's back is a cradleboard that caused some questions with Leah. She could tell by the shape of the cradleboard that the contained baby was a newborn wrapped in its own rabbit skin blanket. Newborns usually stayed inside a hut for the first month. A special cradleboard was used during that time but it would not have a carrying strap, buckskin cover or sunshade. The sunshade is a contemporary addition.

When the baby was old enough to go outside, it was transferred to a different style of cradleboard that offered more protection. The newborn cradleboard was called boat baskets by some people due to the fact that if the newborn did not survive its first month, baby and cradleboard were placed on the water and sent adrift instead of a burial.

The typical cradleboard has an oval frame made of hardwood. Peeled willow stems are lashed onto this frame with buckskin strips to form a flat backboard. It is then covered with buckskin and a sunshade attached to protect the baby from sun and also protect it in case of a fall.

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