
ON THE WESTERN PLAINS, in late summer of 1835, a wooden cradleboard leaned against the trunk of a lone White Oak. In it an infant slept, shaded by the tree's low-hanging branches and soothed by the whispering sound of the wind passing through its leaves.

At dusk a medicine man, traveling as a trusted healer for tribes across the West, stopped to water his horse at a stream near the tree. He was a tall, strong-muscled man who years before had suffered harsh testing with other braves vying for the honored position of tribal leader.

His clothes were sewn from deerskin. Small feathers decorated the sides of each pant leg. Larger ones wound through two dark braids that fell to his shoulders. Simple beaded moccasins sheathed his feet. His side-belt held a skin pouch that he filled with water from the stream, taking a long drink before replacing it.

Before turning the pony out to graze, he removed a blanket and satchel from the animal's back, placing them on the ground beneath the tree's low limbs. As he arranged his resting place, the infant came awake. For a time it was quiet, but after a while it began to make soft cooing noises. Startled, the Indian turned and for a long moment stared at the cradle-bound child reaching out its small hands and arms toward him. He looked around. Not hearing or seeing anyone else, he walked closer.

A girl!

Next to the cradleboard a tiny dress lay folded. When the medicine man picked it up, he found it was of the softest deer hide, made supple until it would be just right against tender skin. Across the collar and hem several butterflies had been sewn. He carefully lifted the baby from the wooden frame that held her.

She did not cry but smiled and grabbed for his hair. Her grip was tight, and she pulled until the Indian laughed.

A distinct odor told him she had soiled herself. Carrying her, he walked to the stream, dipped her into the cool water, then returned to the Oak where he wrapped her in a cloth from his satchel and set her on his blanket.

The spoiled moss lining the inside of the cradleboard needed to be changed. The man tore fresh greenery from the edges of the stream and replaced the old moss as he had seen many Indian mothers do.

After everything was prepared, he picked up the child and gently rocked her in his arms, all the while speaking in soft whispers. When she fell asleep, he tucked her back into the frame.

Not knowing how long the baby had been left under the tree or when she could possibly have eaten last, he wondered if she should be fed soon. He guessed she was about six months old and would probably be able to swallow most softened foods. The herbs in his satchel wouldn't do, but then he remembered the gift of yams given to him by the Yakima tribe. When cooked and mashed they would be perfect.

While the baby slept, the Indian gathered brush and dead branches then started a fire. When it began to smoke, he added a small circle of stones and placed the yams among them, covering all with a flat rock. The strong heat would cook the food quickly.

In no time the yams became soft enough to remove from the fire. The Indian skinned and prepared them,

and then went back to the child, who had awakened. She watched as he took a spoon and bowl from his satchel and, kneeling, dipped small amounts of the mashed yams from the bowl. He was pleased when after the first bite she opened her mouth for more.

After she had eaten, he lifted her from the cradleboard. In a soothing voice he told her tales of where he had been until she leaned her head against his chest and fell asleep once more.



The medicine man had been visiting tribes across the Western Plains for several months. Now that the nights lay cooler around him, he wanted to move along quickly. The weather could change without warning. Yet now he felt he must stay at the tree for a while. Someone might come to claim the baby.

Three days and nights passed. No one came. He needed to move on.

Knowing he must take the child with him, he was certain his journey would be more difficult though not impossible. The cradleboard could hang snugly against his back, and, having watched tribal women with their young, he knew what the baby's needs would be. He

reasoned that when he stopped at the next village he would ask if anyone had heard of this lost infant.

When the sun rose on the fourth morning, the Indian extinguished the cooking fire and packed his satchel, blanket, and water pouch. In a cloth bundle he wrapped what he would need for the child, tied it to the pony's flank, then placed the baby in the cradleboard securely against his back. Finally, he hoisted himself onto the animal.

As they rode from the Oak, he became aware of a soft fluttering noise. Trying to locate the unusual sound, his eyes were finally drawn to the top of the tree. There, among the canopy, hundreds and hundreds of white butterflies hovered above the leaves, beams of sunlight outlining their transparent wings. When the Indian stopped to watch, the baby spoke in delighted gurgles, reaching her wiggling fingers toward the sky.

Then, having delayed longer than intended, the Indian nudged his pony forward.



He followed the same trails west that he had followed for years, pausing during the day only to attend to the child and rest the pony. Each night they sheltered near a

stream. And always the sound of whirring wings spread across the sky—white butterflies—following, stopping only when the man and child did.

For weeks the two journeyed, visiting several villages. The medicine man would then tell of finding the baby at the old Oak, but no one had heard of a lost infant.

As the months passed, he was beginning to feel as if the child belonged to him. At first he had thought he would leave her with one of the tribes, but in his heart, he had come to a place where he could not give her up. And it was then that he named her— Sewana.



The medicine man and Sewana traveled together for years, back and forth across the plains to the many Indian villages. As the child grew, the medicine man taught her more and more about the power of nature and herbs used for healing among their people. When she became a woman, the tribes called her “Medicine Woman... Daughter of the Holy One.”



Eventually, the Indian became an old man. It was time for him to go where his life would end in peace. His final

stop would be the pine forests and mountains at the end of the western trail—a hidden burial cave where people of many tribes had gone before.

For their final farewell, the woman and he sat beside each other under the ancient White Oak where their story had first begun. During a certain season of the year, the white butterflies still came and rested on the treetop. The gentle words of the old medicine man mixed with the soft whirring sounds in the canopy above.

“I am saddened. But though I leave you now, I will know you again one day. Take what you have learned to our people.”

And with that he stood then rode off, leaving Sewana behind to take his place.