

## **What is a Pow Wow? \***

Pow Wows are social gatherings of hundreds of Native Americans who follow dances started centuries ago by their ancestors and that continually evolve to include contemporary aspects. These events of feasting, drum music and dance are attended by Natives and non-Natives, all of whom join in the dancing and take advantage of the opportunity to see old friends and teach the traditional ways to a younger generation.

Pow Wows have deep historical roots, going back to the early to mid-19th century when huge summer gatherings of tribes were held on the plains, according to Richard West, Director of the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). The Heluska society of the Omaha in Nebraska had a certain dance with a lively step that it would perform, and other tribes began to notice it. As the concept spread, tribes embraced the tradition of dancing and singing in different ways, adding their own variations. The roots of modern Pow Wows date back 50 to 70 years. From the small gatherings held on college campuses to large urban areas, today's powwows are contemporary intertribal versions of those 19th-century Pow Wows.

They also serve to unite Indians. "One of the things the federal government did in the dog days of adverse Indian policy was to separate us Indian communities from one another," says West, Director of the NMAI. "Pow Wows are a powerful contemporary device for getting together as Indians; and, in that respect, they are a potent cultural and social connector among contemporary Indian communities."

For non-Natives with limited exposure to American Indian culture, public events like the Pow Wow not only serve to dispel stereotypes, they provide the larger community with a chance to experience an American Indian gathering firsthand and to gain an understanding of Native cultures and traditions.

Each Pow Wow begins with the Grand Entry, which is a procession of all the dancers into the dance arena. This brilliant sea of color is led by the Head Man and Woman Dancers, as well as an American Indian military veteran color guard carrying the American flag, and various flags of tribal nations.

One of the most important things in the life of a Native American is the drum. Our whole culture centers around the drum. Without the drum and the singers, the Native Americans could not have Pow Wows. The drum brings the heartbeat of our Earth Mother to the Pow Wow for all to feel and hear. Drumming brings everyone back into balance. Whether dancing, singing, or just listening, people around the drum can connect with Spirit.

Songs are started with a lead line sung by the Head Singer. This lets the drum and the dancers know what song is coming. After the lead line, the second (another person at the drum) will take up the lead line, and everyone will join in with him. At this point the dancers begin to dance. The loud beats during the songs, sometimes called "Honor Beats" are a time for dancers to honor the drum. In Northern singing, these beats are generally during the verses. In Southern singing, the beats are generally between verses.

Some additional things to remember are 1) Liquor is never permitted at the drum and 2) Women, usually do not sit at the drum and beat the drum, if women sing, they may sit in the second row behind the men singers. At a Pow Wow the drums are led by at least one "host drum" which showcases its distinct style of singing (either Northern or Southern) and represent the best example of that style. The drum contest will highlight groups of 10 to 12 members each who frequently come from the same family and sing traditional songs that often have been written by family members and are handed down from one generation to the next.

The host drum for this event will be Southern Suns, a Southern style group with members from the Haliwa-Saponi, Lumbee, , and Coharie tribes of North Carolina. This group has traveled extensively throughout North America, both competitively and as an invited competitive group to many powwows and gatherings.

**The audience will see dancers representing dozens of tribal nations in full regalia compete in several dance categories:**

- Women's Traditional dance can be broken into to groups according to the type of regalia: buckskin and cloth. The oldest form of women's dance style, is Buckskin. This is a dance of elegance and grace. The movement is smooth and flowing. The ladies wear fine, handcrafted buckskin dresses, decorated with intricate bead designs. Northern dresses are fully beaded on the shoulders, or cape. Southern ones, the beadwork is mainly used to accent. They are equally beautiful. The women carry fringed shawls over one arm. Ladies Cloth is a Southern Traditional form of women's dress. This style is dance by the Kiowas, Osage, Ponca, and others. The dance is slow and graceful, much like the Women's Buckskin style. In either case, much like the Men's Traditional Dance, there are many tribal and regional differences in the outfitting of this women's style.
- The Men's Northern Traditional dance is a popular Northern style of dress and dance the traditional style, evolved from the well-known "old time Sioux" style of the early reservation period through the 1940's. Although a clear distinction exists, one can see an obvious connection to the old-time Sioux Outfit, with the dancer drawing from this earlier style various elements to which he either adheres to or uses as a basis for his own interpretation. Therefore this form of dancing that has evolved over the years, is the oldest form of Native American dancing. The movement in this style is one that is sometimes characterized as similar to a prairie chicken. The dancer is also said to be re-enacting the movement of a warrior searching for the enemy.
- Men's Southern Traditional, often called the Straight Dance, from Oklahoma is a formal, tailored, prestigious form of Southern dance clothes. The overall effect is of reassuring solidity, with everything closely matched and coordinated. It looks as if it is planned all at one time. This dance has evolved from the Hethuska dances. It is believed that the Ponca created this style. The Hethuska are dances held by different societies. There are a lot of clothes to wear in the outfit, and accordingly the dance is slow and proud. The art of Straight dancing is in the little, sometimes unnoticed things, both in the movement and the outfit. Smoothness, precision with the song, knowledge of dance etiquette, and a powerful sense of pride mark the outstanding straight dancer.
- The Oklahoma Feather Dancer or "fancy dancer" is one of the most popular style of dance and outfit seen at modern powwows. The fancy dance outfit, as such, has no tribal identity. The most obvious items in the fancy dance outfit are great amounts of loom-beaded sets of suspenders, belt cuffs, headband, and a set of armbands. The designs are usually matching in all items and of a rainbow feather or geometric design. Beaded medallions are on the forehead and bustles are also quite common. Occasionally a breastplate will be used in place of the beaded suspenders or in conjunction with them. The other trademark for fancy dancers is the use of large feather bustles. Currently most bustles are color-coordinated with the beadwork by using large amounts of feather hackles dyed the appropriate colors. The dance style is of two types: a basic simple step while dancing around the drum and a "contest" step with fast and intricate footwork combined with a spinning up and down movement of the body.
- Women's Fancy Shawl is the newest form of women's dance, and is quite athletic! Fancy Shawl is often called Northern Shawl, as it does come from the Northern tribes along the US-Canadian border. This is very similar in dancing and the bright colors to the Men's Fancy Dance. The ladies wear their shawls over their shoulders, and dance by jumping and spinning around, keeping time with the music. They mimic butterflies in flight, and the dance style is quite graceful and light. Emphasis is paid particularly to the shawls, with elaborate designs, appliqué, ribbon work, and painting. Long fringe hangs from the edges of the shawl, and flies round.
- Jingle dress is also called a prayer dress. There are differences in the origins of the dress among the tribes. The dress was seen in a dream, as an object to bring healing to afflicted people. It comes from the Northern tribe Ojibwa, or Chippewa, along the Canadian border. A medicine man's granddaughter became very ill one day. In a dream, his spirit guides told him to make a jingle dress for her and have her dance in it. This, he was told would heal her. When the outfit was finished, the

tribe assembled for a dance. On her first time around, the illness would not permit her to dance and she was carried. As time went on she was soon dancing in the circle. Jingle dresses are decorated with rolled up snuff can lids that are hung with ribbon. The ribbon is then sewed to the dress, the jingles placed close enough so they can hit together, causing a beautiful sound. If one were to close their eyes as the Jingle dancer passes, it would sound as though it were raining!

- The Grass dance is a very popular style of dance today. Originally done as a warrior society dance, it has evolved over the years. It has further evolved into a highly competitive form of Northern dancing. Grass Dancing always stands out by virtue of two things: his dancing style and his outfit. His dancing has been described often by the words 'gutsy', 'swinging', 'slick', and 'old-time.' His outfit stands out by virtue of the almost complete absence of feathers, for aside from the roach feather, there are no bustles of any kind to be seen. The name "Grass Dance" comes from the custom of some tribes wearing braided grass in their belts. The unique parts of the northern outfit are the shirt, trousers, and aprons, to which yarn fringe, sequins, and beaded rosettes other designs are attached. The outfit makers are fond of using playing card designs-hearts, clubs, spades, and diamonds. Hearts and rosettes are the most common. White fringe is preferred, however, gold, silver, and other light color fringe is also used. Bells are worn around the ankle. Mostly plains hard-soled or woodland soft-sole moccasins, and sneakers are worn.
- Tiny Tots (5 and under) are honored as the future of our culture. As such, at many events they are not judged in a competition, as it is not wished to discourage the future of the circle from participating. The emphasis is placed on ensuring these youngsters enjoy their time in the circle and learn from being in the company of the older dancers and singers. Parents decide what style of regalia in which to cloth the young ones and they are encouraged by the parents, family members, and everyone at the powwow, to dance their best and watch the other dancers, while also learning the proper etiquette and customs from their elders.

\*Adapted from the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI)