

On The Road to the Pow Wow

written by:
Titos Menchaca



Intricate beadwork, supple leather and a feather fan combine to make this jingle dancer's regalia both bright and beautiful.

You may have read about them. Seen them advertised. Even been tempted to attend one in the past. For some, they may hold a kind of mystique. For others, maybe just a curiosity. Whatever your reason, however, a visit to your first pow wow can be an amazing, powerful, colorful and educational experience. Pow wows, which first came into being in the late 1800's, are a fairly modern phenomena and a way for both Indian and non-Indian people to learn about some tribes' customs, crafts, songs and dances. Authenticity is important, as many Americans have gotten most of their knowledge about Indians from Hollywood. And since even the

smallest semblance of accuracy often took a back seat to dramatic impact, it may be important to look a little deeper than we got to see with John Wayne, Kevin Costner and *Billy Jack*.

The heart and soul of the pow wow begins with the drum. Made in the traditional way by stretching treated animal hide over a hollowed out piece of tree, the drum beats in tandem with the heart of the Earth — and of Native people collectively. Even its shape offers spiritual symbolism, representing the circle of all living things: the moon, the cycle of seasons, and even of life itself — from seed to birth to death and to seed once more. A group of singers surround the drum

— usually four or more, depending on its size — and pound out a rhythm which they will accompany with traditional or modern songs.

The day begins with the Grand Entrance, a regal review led by a color-guard and followed by a feathered procession of stately elders, colorful warriors and demure women in blankets, shawls and jingle dresses. It is important to remember that the regalia worn by the participants is not in any way a costume — any more than are, say, the medals and uniform of a general in the United States Army. These are not actors pretending to be something they are not. Each color, bead, design and feather has special

significance to the wearer relating to their tribe, clan or personal accomplishments. Nor is it acceptable to randomly take photos of the ornamented participants without first asking permission.

Throughout the day, the Master of Ceremonies will announce the dances. Some are reserved strictly for participants in regalia while others are open to the public. Though not always strictly enforced, proper attire for spectators who wish to dance are long pants, dress shirts and closed-toe shoes for men. For the women, skirts or dresses and a shawl worn or carried. Tank tops, bare feet and shorts are very disrespectful and should be avoided entirely. Clapping is usually not appropriate, but follow the lead of the emcee for your cue.

Whether they are prayers, war chants or celebrations of thanksgiving, all songs have meanings and specific dances which they accompany. The nimble, hearty beat played for the Grass Dancers, Fancy Dancers or Jingle Dancers bounces along at a fun clip to a precise final downbeat, where all the seasoned participants end in exact unison. One of the most powerful dances of all—and, not surprisingly, one of the most traditional—is the Gourd Dance, meant to honor the memory and spirit of warriors, both living and fallen. So sacred is it that it is rarely even spoken of outside of Indian circles. It is only mentioned here to illustrate the point that, with proper reverence and observation, there are moments in a pow wow which can be truly awe-inspiring. To see multiple generations of warriors moving in a steady rhythm, re-connecting with their primal origins, perhaps somehow beginning to heal the traumatization of their souls which war can inflict, is as potent an experience as one can imagine.

Outside the dance arena are a plethora of booths containing hand-made, Native-themed arts and crafts from all over the country. Wooden flutes, dreamcatchers, drums, clothing, blankets, jewelry, food and paintings are just a few of the items usually available.

All-in-all, for a first-hand taste of First American culture, pow wows offer just enough music, dance, arts and fun to whet the appetite of the curious first-timer and hopefully open one's eyes to the beauty, spirit and grace of the true history of the Native Americans.

2002 Nearby Pow Wows

May 10-12 – Copley, West Virginia Native American Gathering/Pow Wow
Info: 304-462-8051

June 15-16 – Edgewater Park, Cleveland, Ohio. AIEC 8th Annual Competition Pow Wow. Info: 216-341-0000; email: AIECInc.@aol.com

June 22-23 – Saxton, Pennsylvania 2nd Annual Gentle Wind Pow Wow
Info: 814-635-3385; email: rpawuk@hotmail.com

More information on Pow Wows and Native American Gatherings:
www.nativeweb.org



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Photo by: Paula A. Kelley

A Word or Two about Indians...

If one were to accurately translate the tribal names of Native North American people, many would come out to be simply that: The People. This is due not to a lack of creativity, but rather to distinguish us as humans from, say, the Elk People or the Wolf People; the two-legged from the four-legged. It comes from a belief that all things have a spirit. All things live. How many of us have felt the love of a beloved pet or been fortunate enough to witness the breathtaking grandeur of a herd of wild mustangs thundering at a full gallop?

Although there were vast differences in many of the cultures, languages and customs of the original tribal nations, one of the similarities that necessarily developed was a reverential understanding of our place in creation. By graciously accepting our roles as stewards of the land; by only taking from it what we needed to survive and flourish—not wasting and, consequently, not wanting; by offering thanks and gratitude for the honor of living among and within such majesty, Native Americans were truly this land's first ecologists, caretakers, land managers and game wardens.

Author's Note: In these articles, I have used the terms Native Americans, Indians, First Nation, etc. interchangeably. While there are differing opinions on which is the more 'politically correct' term, it is my belief that all are equally valid in that they are all essentially incorrect. Indians are from India and there was no America then to which we could be Native. The terms have, however, found a place in modern dialogue, hence my use of them here. The 'proper' term would be to refer to one by his or her tribal name—Choctaw, Cherokee, Apache, etc. And if you don't know? Ask.

– TM



Editor's Note: In previous years a Pow Wow was held at McHenry, MD — we hope to see it return in the future.