

POW WOW INFORMATION

The contemporary Pow Wow is a link to the past that helps maintain Native heritage. Seen by outsiders as entertainment due to the singing, dancing, and colorful regalia, the Pow Wow is a spiritual legacy which should be treated with respect and honor. It is a time of sharing, of laughter and tears, of learning, and of caring. It is a time when Indians reflect on their traditions. It is a time to honor the past and celebrate the future.

Indian families travel hundreds of miles to attend Pow Wows across the continent. Time and distance are not relevant. The renewal of traditions and reinforcement of the heritage is the important thing. It is a time to strengthen the circle. The word "Pow Wow" comes from the Algonquin word "Pau Wau" which was used to describe medicine men and spiritual leaders. Early Europeans thought the word referred to the entire event. As Indian tribes learned English, they accepted this definition.

The original dances were held by members of elite warrior societies. They were frequently called Grass Dances and were held for the benefit of tribal members. There were a variety of names used by different tribes for these dances. Among them are Omaha Dance used by the Sioux, Hot Dance used by the Crow, Dakota Dance by the Cree and Wolf Dance from the Shoshone and Arapaho.

The Grass Dance gradually evolved into the Pow Wow. As Indians began to live on reservations, they had more time to devote to non-survival activities and dancing became increasingly important. These celebrations were strictly social events until the 1920's when "Contest" dancing became popular. Many communities still hold social Pow Wows, but the majority of them now involve contest dancing where dancers compete for prizes.

Contests are judged by dance styles and age group. The dancers are judged on their regalia as well as their dancing ability. Dancing out of beat, losing regalia, and failing to stop on the last drum beat can disqualify a dancer.

A typical Pow Wow starts on Friday evening with a single Grand Entry and preliminary contest dancing as well as Intertribal dancing. Saturday has two Grand Entries, one in the afternoon and the other in the evening after a dinner break. Sunday usually has a single Grand Entry in the afternoon after which the final competitions are held for the contest.

Many of the larger summer Pow Wows have a "Camp Day" on the day prior to the beginning of the Pow Wow. This is a day set aside for visiting and for holding Memorials and Giveaways.

The dance arena, also called an Arbor, may be inside or out. It is blessed before the Pow Wow begins and is considered to be sacred ground for the duration of the celebration.

There should be no drugs, alcohol, profanity, or boisterous behavior in this area. It should be treated like the inside of a church. Frequently, there are bleachers for spectators to sit on or people bring lawn chairs. The front seats of the Arbor are for dancers, singers and their families. Elders are also given preferred places to sit.

The Master of Ceremonies keeps the Pow Wow running smoothly. He is the one who announces the contests, which drums are to sing, and explains ceremonies as they take place. Spectators should listen to him to understand what is taking place and to know when cameras and other recording devices are not to be used. The M.C.'s task is not all serious business though, and he weaves humorous anecdotes and jokes around his official announcements.

The Arena Director is another important person at the Pow Wow. It is his responsibility to make sure the dancers and singers have the amenities they need and to organize the Grand Entry. One of his most important duties is to protect a feather if it drops and to assure the proper pick up ceremony for it.

The Head Dancers are selected by their reputations as dancers and by their knowledge of their traditions and customs. They represent their particular style of dancing and serve as models to the rest of the dancers during the Pow Wow. Being selected as a Head Dancer is an honor. There are usually two, a man and a woman, but some of the larger Pow Wows also have a boy and a girl Head Dancer in addition to the adults.

The Host Drum is invited to hold that position at a Pow Wow based on their reputation and knowledge. They must be ready to fill in if there are any gaps in the drum order if another drum isn't ready to sing. Some Pow Wow only have one Host Drum while others have a Northern Host Drum and a Southern Host Drum. There may even be a Canadian Host Drum.

Each dance session begins with a Grand Entry, a procession of dancers. The Flag Bearers lead the procession. Being a Flag Bearer is an honor usually given to a veteran, a respected traditional dancer or a traditional elder. They carry the American flag, the Canadian flag, and an Eagle Staff. Indian royalty are next and consist of tribal and organizational princesses and other dignitaries. The Head Dancers lead a single-file procession of dancers arranged by category and age.

After all the dancers are in the Arbor, a Flag Song is sung. Then a respected person offers a prayer which is followed by a victory song during which the flags are placed in their standards. During the Grand Entry, the Master of Ceremonies will ask everyone to rise and for men to remove their head coverings.