

Pow ! Wow !



A guide
& Useful
Information



Schingoethe Center
for Native American Cultures
at Aurora University
630-844-5402/museum@aurora.edu



©2002 Aurora University. By arrangement with the powwow participants, photo use is restricted to the educational purposes of Aurora University.

What is a Pow Wow?

Some Useful Information and Tips for Pow Wow Visitors

*Prepared by the Staff of the
Schingoethe Center for Native American Cultures *
at Aurora University*

Pow Wow is an Algonquin term originally pronounced “pauau” or “pau wau” meaning a gathering of medicine men and spiritual leaders in a curing ceremony. The early European settlers thought that the term referred to all large gatherings of native peoples and came to use it to describe any such gathering. Pow Wows often included welcome home celebrations for native veterans and were often held in the spring to celebrate the beginning of life. Today they are held throughout the year, indoors as well as outdoors. Today’s PowWows are social events where members of many tribes come together to celebrate Native American life and values.

Although Pow Wows are organized in many different ways, there are some things that you will find at most such gatherings. When you enter the Pow Wow grounds, there will typically be a circular dance area and, in most cases, there will also be an area for vendors who sell Native American art, crafts, foods, and other items. A Pow Wow typically has a Master of Ceremonies, Lead Dancers (a man and a woman), a Head Judge and additional judges, and an Arena Director. In addition, a Pow Wow has drum groups and singers who are essential to the dancing.

The Master of Ceremonies calls the dances, directs the participants, and is in charge of the flow of the PowWow. It is the MC’s duty to inform the public of the events taking place and to instruct visitors in terms of behavior. Listen to the MC for instructions on when to rise and sit, when you may participate in an “Intertribal” dance, and when photography is not permitted (for example, during Honor Songs).

The lead dancers are in charge of showing the guest participants how to dance during the “intertribal” dances. They often go into the crowd and bring people into the dance arena.

The Head Judge is a senior individual who is respected for long experience in judging the fine points of Native American contest dancing. The Head Judge and assistant judges are responsible for awarding the prize money in a contest Pow Wow.

The Arena Director is responsible for making certain that the dancers are ready to participate. The Director lines up the dancers for the Grand Entries and lets them know when contest or special dances are to occur. Arena Directors also help dancers with their regalia and work closely with the MC.

***The Schingoethe Center for Native American Cultures**, located at Aurora University in Aurora, Illinois, houses the extensive Schingoethe Collection of Native-American art and artifacts, as well as a reference library and educational resource bank on Native-American subjects. The Center sponsors an annual PowWow, initiated in 1991, and also conducts educational activities for students of all ages to further the understanding and appreciation of Native-American culture. Founded and sustained through the generous support of Herb and Martha Schingoethe of Aurora, the Center serves as a significant educational and cultural resource both for the programs of Aurora University and for the surrounding communities. Visit the Center’s website at www.aurora.edu/museum, or, better yet, come and see the Center museum, on the Aurora University Campus. For further information, including driving directions, see the website, or call 630-844-5402.

Perhaps the most important participants in the Pow Wow are the drums and singers who provide the heartbeat of the event. The drum is considered sacred because of its special ties to the traditional way of life. Some see the drum as the heartbeat of the earth and her people, and it symbolizes powerful medicine. The drum is considered an individual with its own powers, and it is accorded respect by all American Indians. The drums provide the spiritual leadership for the Pow Wow.

Music

Music and dance are a large part of the Pow Wow. Drum groups that consist of many singers provide music for the event. Native American singers produce music in the form of words or sounds in the throat, rather than from the diaphragm as most people are taught to sing. For this reason there are many breaks for the drummers and water is on hand at all times.

Songs can come from a variety of sources. Many are traditional tunes passed from one generation to the next. Some are newly written to commemorate a person or event. The Grand Entry is the first song of a Pow Wow. During this song the flags, both Native American and United States, are brought into the arena. The flags are followed in proper order by the veterans, the lead dancers, men dancers, and women dancers. Each group of dancers arranges themselves by age, the oldest going first. Grand Entry songs were adapted from older honor songs to produce an active beat that would allow all dancers, regardless of their dance style, to participate.

In addition to Grand Entry there are Honor songs and Inter-Tribal songs. Honor songs are often done to honor someone who has passed away or for those who have returned from military service. The honor song is usually soft in tone. During an honor song the family members of the person being honored do not dance. Instead, they walk around the arena while other participants give them gifts and dance. Out of respect, photography and videotaping are not allowed during honor songs.

Inter-tribal songs generally have no words. Instead they are made up of sound syllables called "vocables." These songs are used when many different people of a variety of tribal origins dance together. Round dances are a kind of inter-tribal dance. Round dance songs sometimes have a combination of chant and English lyrics and can be about funny subjects like broken down trucks and lost girlfriends.



Dances

There are many different styles of Pow Wow dancing. A dancers' regalia indicates the style of dancing she does. Although dance styles and content have changed over time, their meaning and importance to Native American people has not. Native Americans come together in unity of spirit, regardless of tribal background, and celebrate life through dance.

Many dances at our Pow Wow are contest dances. There are many different contests at a Native American Pow Wow. Some believe that contests are a recent development. However, awarding outstanding individuals at social gatherings with gifts is a long standing Native American tradition.

Men's Traditional:

Men's Traditional Dances tell a story about a battle or tracking of an enemy or prey. These dances come from a time when parties returning to a village after a war or hunt acted out their most recent encounter in the form of a dance. Often the movements of this dance are



imitations of animals, birds, or animal tracking. The dance step is done with the ball of the foot touching the ground on the first beat and the whole foot touching the ground on the second beat.

The regalia of the traditional dancer is subdued in color and contains much bead and quill work. There is usually a bustle of eagle feathers worn on the back, which represents the cycle and unity of everything as well as the channel between the Great Spirit and all things on earth. Because many traditional dancers are

veterans, you may see them carrying items that symbolize their status as warriors.

Men's Grass

Also known as the Omaha Dance because it came from the Omaha Nation in the 1860s, this is a free-style dance in which the dancers are required to follow the beat of the drum and stop with both feet on the ground when the music stops. The steps to this dance are to tap the ball of one foot on the first beat and place the whole foot on the ground with the second beat.. This action is then repeated with the opposite foot without missing a beat. During this dance the dancers are required to move their heads up and down constantly with the drumbeat. The movements are said to be like a blade of grass in the wind. Another story about the origin of the



dance form is that the grass dancers danced first, to beat down the tall grass in the dance circle and make way for the other dancers.

Originally, the dancers' outfits were made from grass. Today natural grass outfits have been replaced with those consisting of many colorful fringes. These dancers also wear a roach, a crow belt, and carry an eagle-bone whistle.

Men's Fancy

The Fancy Dance is similar to the Grass Dance, but with an increase in speed, acrobatic steps, exaggerated motions, and varied body movements. With its roots in the old Grass Dance, this style is a blend of tradition and innovation.

The Men's Fancy Dance is done mostly by boys and young men dressed in brilliantly colored outfits, including bustles on the dancer's neck and waist.



Women's Traditional

Originally women would dance only in the background at Pow Wows, on special occasions, and to certain songs. As a result, the women's traditional dance is somewhat subdued. The women remain stationary and bend their knees with a slight up and down movement of the body. Their feet shift subtly as they turn slightly. By raising their fans, women will sometimes signal their pride and acknowledgment of a particular word in a song that has meaning to them.

The outfits worn by traditional women dancers vary according to tribal background. They are usually made from buckskin or oilcloth. Often the entire top of the dance dress is beaded with designs that hold meaning for the individual owner. The dress is often adorned with ribbon work, elk teeth, and shells. Accessories include decorated moccasins, knee-high leggings, beaded or concho belts, hair ties, earrings, chokers, and necklaces. Some women may wear or carry a shawl, and some may carry a feather fan made from Eagle or hawk feathers.

Women's Jingle

The Women's Jingle Dress Dance is named for the metal cone decorated dresses worn by the dancers. The dress is made of cloth and decorated with hundreds of metal cones called jingles, which are made from the tin lids of snuff cans. When the dancer dances, the metal cones strike against each other creating the jingling sound. The very soft metal of the can lids makes a



subdued sound that mimics the sound made by pieces of shed deer hoof, which were originally used for this purpose.

One story says the jingle dress originated when a holy man from Mille Lacs, Minnesota had a dream that came to him from the Great Spirit. He dreamt of four women who showed him how to make the jingle dress. They also taught him the songs and the dances to be performed. When he awoke from his dream, the holy man and his wife made four dresses, found the women that were in his dream, and dressed them in the new dresses. He brought the four women forth at the dance and told the people about his dream.

Women's Fancy

This is considered to be a new style of dancing that originated in the early 1900s when women started making shawls to replace the blankets and buffalo robes they wore in public. The dance, thought to have evolved from young women showing off their new shawls, is energetic and graceful. The fancy footwork, the main component of the dance, is done to the changing beat of the drum, and involves spinning and other elaborate movements.

Dancers of the Women's Fancy Dance wear decorative knee-length cloth dresses, beaded moccasins and matching leggings. Flashy sequins are an important part of the regalia. The outfit is finished with a fringed shawl and Native American jewelry. The dancer wears her shawl around her shoulders causing the fringe to bounce in accompaniment to the dance steps.



Hoop Dance

Native American cultures often find expression in the circle. Hoops are circles. They have no beginning nor end and symbolize the continuity of the spirits of all living things. A skilled hoop dancer is a featured performance at many Pow Wows. You will be amazed at the number of hoops the dancer uses (often as many as 30), and the elaborate patterns the hoops form around the dancer's body—all while dancing at a dizzying pace.

Tips for First-Time Pow Wow Visitors

- If a Pow Wow is advertised as “open to the public,” then everyone is welcome to attend, regardless of whether or not they are Native American. This is the case with most Pow Wows that are publicly advertised.
- The dance circle and the area where the drum groups sit is generally off-limits except to those actually participating in the dancing or drumming, or unless you are invited to come in. There will be seating areas around the dance area, but some areas may be specifically reserved for the dancers and their families, so look for signs.
- If an “intertribal” dance is announced, that is the time when everyone is welcome to join in the dancing—so don't be shy. In an intertribal it is OK to dance in your “street clothes.” Follow the lead of, you guessed it, the Lead Dancers. You only need to use the basic Native American dance step: tap the ball of your foot on the ground for the first beat, then place that foot flat on the ground for the next beat; then repeat with the other foot, and keep alternating, without missing any of the beats. You'll quickly learn how the drum group “controls” the movements of the dancers.
 - In general, dress in comfortable, informal clothes to attend a Pow Wow. Depending on the location, there may be some walking involved—from the parking area, around the vendor area, etc. Wear good walking shoes suitable for grass and other “natural surfaces.”
- You can take photos and videos at a Pow Wow except at certain times that have special ceremonial significance. This includes honor songs, invocations, and songs using a ceremonial drum. Listen to the MC for guidance. Outside the dance circle, ask permission before photographing participants in regalia. If a participant asks you not to photograph her or him, always abide by their wishes.
- The MC may also give instructions to the crowd as to when to stand (and perhaps re-



move hats), such as during the grand entry of the dancers and the invocation at the start of the Pow Wow.

- Finally, of course, the MC gives you information about who is dancing next, not only in terms of the contest categories, but also when the special events, such as a hoop dance performance or an intertribal, are about to take place. So listen carefully.
- Vendors at a Pow Wow offer a variety of items—and food! Many of the vendors will be Native American, but most Pow Wows also welcome vendors who are not Native American, but whose goods are consistent with the theme of the Pow Wow and are presented with due respect for the traditional culture. Vendors will often advertise their tribal connection, so you can take that into account in choosing your purchases. Come prepared to do next year’s holiday and birthday shopping—not only will you find items that you won’t see anywhere else, but the prices may be quite attractive.
- Many Pow Wows have special activities going on as well as dancing and vending booths. For example, some have activities for kids, or educational activities where you can learn more about Native American culture. If there is a printed program available to purchase when you enter the Pow Wow, it is usually worth the small charge for it. The program will often give much more information on activities during the Pow Wow and specific background on the history of the event, and of the participating tribes.
- The program or signage will often have a schedule of events for the Pow Wow, but listen to the MC for updates on when things are actually going to take place. The contest dancing may take more or less time, depending on how many dancers show up in each category, and all traditional ceremonies tend to “take as long as they take” to unfold. If there’s one particular dance category that you want to see, it is wise to keep checking on the progress of the dancing, if you want to take some time to go and see the vendor booths, for example.



Children’s traditional craft class in the tipi.

The Schingoethe Center for Native American Cultures is located on the campus of Aurora University, 347 South Gladstone Ave., Aurora, IL 60506-4892. 630-844-5402 e-mail: museum@aurora.edu On the web: www.aurora.edu/museum/