

What is a Pow Wow?

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 for Indian families to be together with other family members and friends. 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 that 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 the 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 local 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 abilities. 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 in 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 Wows 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 carrying the Eagle Staff, American Flag, Canadian Flag, and frequently, the MIA-POW flag. Being a Flag Bearer is an honor usually given to a veteran, respected traditional dancers, or a traditional elder. Indian Royalty is next, consisting of tribal and organizational princesses and other dignitaries. The Head Dancers lead a single file procession of dancers arranged by category and age. Everyone is asked to stand during the Grand Entry and men should remove their head coverings unless it has an eagle feather.

After all the dancers are in the Arbor, a flag song is sung to honor the Eagle Staff and the flags. Then a respected person, usually an elder, offers a prayer. This is followed by a victory song during which the Eagle Staff and flags are placed in their standards. At this time the Master of Ceremonies will introduce the Head Dancers and Royalty.

Contest dancing is divided into categories by age and style. The number of categories varies among regions according to local traditions and to the number of dancers.

The age categories begin with Tiny Tots which are children five years old and under; boys and girls ages 6 to 11 are next; then boys and girls ages 12 to 17. The adult categories are divided between men and women ages 18 to 49. The Golden Age category is for men and women over 50.

The men and boys' contests are held for Fancy Dancing, Grass Dancing and Traditional Dancing which can be divided into Northern Style and Straight Dancing.

The women and girls compete in Fancy or Shawl Dancing, Jingle Dress and Traditional Dancing. The Traditional Dancing can also be further divided into Northern and Southern Styles as well as Buckskin and Cloth Dresses.

The men's Fancy Dance originated in Oklahoma. These dancers are noted for their fast footwork, athletic ability, and originality. The large double bustles of brilliant colored feathers distinguish these dancers from other types. Their regalia included angora anklets with sheep bells fastened above them, ribbon shirt, beaded yoke, belt, arm bands, cuffs, and headband. These dancers also wear a porcupine roach on their heads which has one or two feathers attached to them in a spinner.

Grass Dancers wear yokes, breech cloths, and anklets covered with strands of brightly colored yarn. On their heads they wear either a bandana or a porcupine roach. The Grass Dance is noted for its fluid movements and sliding steps.

The Traditional Northern Style dance represents a warrior scouting before a battle. Their regalia included a single bustle, usually of eagle feathers, ribbon shirt, bone hair pipe choker and breastplate, breech cloth, leggings, short angora anklets with sheep bells above them, beaded cuffs, belt, arm bands, and moccasins. The dancer carries a dance staff and a fan usually made from the wing of an eagle. Everyone should stand, and men should remove their head coverings unless it has an eagle feather, during this dance out of respect to the dancers and the eagle feathers they wear.

The Southern Style or Straight Dancer is easily distinguished by the otter skin trailer decorated with mirrors, beadwork, or ribbon work which hangs down the back. These dancers also wear long sleeved shirts, breech cloth, and leggings that are trimmer with ribbon work. Bone hair pipe and bead bandoliers, finger woven yarn garters and slide tabs,

a choker of German silver or beads, a wide loomed beaded belt, and a porcupine roach with a single eagle feather plus an eagle feather fan complete the Straight Dancer's regalia.

Women's Fancy or Shawl Dancers wear dresses made of a light weight shiny fabric like taffeta. Their leggings are made from the same fabric or from buckskin. Beaded belt, barrettes, and hair ties finish the apparel. Most important is the shawl which is worn over the shoulders and held out as the dancer steps and twirls. The legend behind the Shawl Dance is of a butterfly who lost her mate in battle. Grieving, she went into her cocoon (shawl) and traveled the world over stepping on each stone until she found beauty in one and was able to begin her life anew. The Shawl Dance is noted for its fancy footwork and fluid movements.

The Jingle Dance comes from the Objibwa Nation. It was popular from 1920 to 1950 and is currently experiencing a strong revival across the nation. The Jingle Dress is made a fabric such as cotton or taffeta and has numerous "jingles" attached to it. These jingles are made from snuff can lids. The distinctive sound they make represents waves of water or thunder and its good luck because it scares away the evil spirits. Moccasins, leggings, beaded or concho belts, neck scarf, bag, and an eagle tail or wing fan completes the regalia. Jingle Dancers are judged on their grace and traditional footwork.

There are two types of Women's Traditional Dresses: buckskin and cloth. Buckskin dresses are usually heavily beaded across the yoke and have long fringe on the sleeves and along the bottom. This fringe represents a waterfall, continuously flowing, giving life, and persevering like an Indian Mother. The cloth dresses are made from trade cloth and have elk teeth, cowrie shells, dentalium shells, or coins sewn in rows across the yoke. Both of these dresses are enhanced with beaded moccasins, leggings, beaded belt or concho belt, beaded hair barrettes, hair ties, and otter skin hair wraps. The Traditional Woman dancer carries a beaded bag, an eagle feather fan, and a shawl folded over her arm. There are two types of Women's Traditional Dance. One, sometimes referred to as Southern Style, is danced clockwise around the Arbor. The other, Northern Style, is danced in one spot.

At many Pow Wows the Southern Plains tradition of the Gourd Dance is observed. This is a ceremonial dance done only by members of certain warrior societies or clans. Songs are always sung in sets of four, and the group participates in each song four times. Women who are auxiliary members, dance behind the men in an outer circle. While the public is welcome to observe these proceedings, absolutely no photos or recordings of any kind are to be made.

A Round Dance is a social dance that all dancers and spectators may participate in. It is done in a clockwise circle stepping to the left in time to the drum beat. Sometimes this is done as a Friendship Dance with two concentric circles moving in opposite directions with people shaking hands as they pass each other.

A Blanket Dance is done for a specific purpose such as defraying travel expenses of a special performance group. Several of the Royalty dance around the edge of the Arbor with a blanket outstretched between them to collect monetary contributions.

The Forty-Nine is an impromptu gathering after the Pow Wow events are through for the evening. People gather together to sing "49" songs which are a combination of Native and English lyrics. The lyrics are usually composed by a lover addressing them toward their partner and often have a humorous message tucked into the lyrics. The origin of the name "Forty-Nine" is unclear.

One story is that the laments are sung because 50 warriors went to battle and only 49 returned. Another version, from Oklahoma, is that only 49 dancers showed up at a Pow Wow.

An Intertribal is a non-contest song that all dancers may participate in. Everyone is welcome to dance, but women should wear dance shawls if not in regalia.

Arena: The area inside of the Pow Wow circle where the dancers move in a circular pattern. There are certain times when dancers or spectators may enter the arena. During competition dances, only the dancers are allowed to enter the arena. Judges will be standing and walking just outside the dancers to observe movement for competition.

Arena Directors: The men assigned to coordinate the events on the dance arena, dancers, categories, giveaways, etc.

Blanket Dance: Refers to a purpose rather than a specific dance. A blanket is carried by 4 persons around the perimeter of the dance area to accept monetary contributions. Spectators may contribute voluntarily by throwing coins or bills into the blanket. The purpose is announced prior to the singing of the song, a good purpose indeed.

Bustle: Circular configuration of feathers worn by war dancers, primarily a more modernistic attire for the men fancy war dancers. The bustles are usually worn in pairs, one at the back of the neck and one at the lower back. The bustle sizes vary according to the individual but generally ranges from 24" to 40". The main feathers are from the Eagle and are usually tipped with colorful hackles.

Chorus Girls: Slang term for women singers who generally gather close to the drum and who assist in the singing of the drum songs.

Contest Song: A song for a specific dance category and is sung for judging purposes.

Drum: A descriptive term used to identify a particular group of singers, i.e., the Southern Drum, the Morning Star Drum, the White Eagle Drum, etc.

Emcee: The announcer who keeps the dancers and audience informed on the Pow Wow events and schedules and occasional jokes.

Fancy Dance: A modernistic expression of dancing whereby much body and head movement with perfect timing of footwork to the pace of the drum tempo.

Giveaway: A "Giveaway" is a long standing tradition of appreciation. An event occasioned by an honored person(s) who give thanks and recognition to other individuals such as family, relatives, friends, visitors and bestows upon them gifts of appreciation.

Gourd Dance: A social dance primarily for men but with women participants. The dance is one perpetuated by the Cheyenne, Kiowa and Comanche and taken up by many other tribes. Dancers wear red and blue robes draped about the shoulders. Other attire are the beaded and fringed sashes, mescal bead bandoliers worn over one shoulder and the dancer carries a gourd rattle and feather fan. The songs and dance is one where the movement is either stationary or with little foot movement. The dance circle is generally clockwise, are social in nature and solely for the enjoyment of the dancers and singers. From time to time monetary or material gifts are given at the feet of the dancer.

Hackle: A long narrow feather coming in various colors, widely used by fancy war dancers in constructing bustles.

Head Dancer: A designated dancer who is appointed to lead all other dances during Pow Wows or War Dance. The position is one of honor and a big responsibility with all other dancers affording the deserved respect. For any given set of songs, no other dancer will dance until the head dancer commences.

Honor Song: A specific song which is sung to fulfill by request to honor an individual's accomplishment or such other auspicious occasion. The song itself, sung by a particular group of singers, may be one of tribal, family and individualistic significance.

Inter-Tribal: A general term referring to an open Pow Wow dance or song that can be joined by anyone, all tribes and spectators. You will see dancers in street clothing participating in the dance on the Pow Wow arena.

Judge: A person appointed to evaluate and rate dancers in a particular category of competitive dancing (i.e., men, women, fancy, traditional, age groups, etc.). Dancers are judged on overall dancing ability, tribal dress, knowledge of the song(s), and of prime importance, performance of individual dancers who must stop precisely at the last beat of the drum. If the dancer misses that last drum beat, the dancer will automatically disqualify themselves and leave the dance arena. Dancers can also be disqualified during a competitive dance if part of their outfit (not to be called a costume) falls to the floor.

Lead Singer: The principal singer in a drum group who starts the songs by that drum. This is common to the drum groups of the Northern Plains style of singing.

Loo Loo: A vocally high-pitched staccato sound emitted by women Pow Wow participants to praise or otherwise acknowledge the receipt of a gift.

Northern Drum: Refers to the Northern Plains Tribes style of singing (North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho and other states and certain provinces in Canada). Songs are characteristically sung at a higher pitch.

Northern Fancy: This refers to a War Dance style of dancing and dress of the traditional Warrior Societies of the Northern Plains tribes. Dancers do not wear the colorful bustles of the fancy dancer. Depending upon the Tribe, they wear only the bustle at the lower back; cloth or buckskin leggings are often worn with a breech cloth. Dance steps are pronounced but not to the extent of the fancy dancer. Roach headdresses are worn with generally two Eagle feathers.

Princess: Title of honor bestowed upon a young woman who has been selected to represent her family, her tribe or a Native American organization. Some qualities exemplified by a Princess are their knowledge of tribal history, promotion and maintenance of traditional values, cultural awareness and self-awareness as a Native American.

Roach: The headdress worn by most male dancers on top of the head and tied beneath the chin. The roach is narrow and long to the back of the neck and is made from porcupine guard hair and a deer tail.

Round Dance: A social dance in which all dancers or spectators can participate. The dance movement is clockwise in a circular fashion, sometimes holding hands. The dancers step continually to the left in time with the beat of the drum.

Shawl: A fringed garment worn around the women's shoulders or sometimes carried on the arm.

Snag: (noun) A girlfriend or boyfriend.

Snagging: (verb) The art of seeking out a new girlfriend or boyfriend, much like asking someone for a date.

Snake and Buffalo Dance: A series of social songs and dances depicting serpentine movement and then emulating the buffalo. Strictly social dance not to be confused with dances performed by other tribes of the Southwest.

Southern Drum: This refers to the Oklahoma style of singing. Songs are characteristically sung at a lower pitch and the languages of Southern Plains tribes.

Southern Fancy: This is a war dance that refers to the Oklahoma style of men's fancy war dance where by body movement and rapid dancing are paramount. This too is a modernistic style where songs are sung by the Southern Drum in a moderate fast to very fast tempo.

Southern Traditional: See "Straight Dance."

Special: Derives from a "request for a special son," to honor a person. The "special" song is one which has significant meaning for the one so honored in terms of tradition, family history or individual accomplishment. The Special as current used often times refers to the entire process of Honor Song giveaway.

Spread a Blanket: A phrase used in the process of gaining contributions for the stated cause. Similar to the Blanket Dance in purpose except that a blanket is spread on the floor or ground with which to accept voluntary monetary gifts while an appropriate song is sung.

Squeeze: Of the same nature as a Snag (noun) but to a more serious extent and reflective of a longer standing relationship, i.e....., "my main squeeze."

Starts: Refers to the ultimate length of a song and how many successive times the lead singer starts the song again from the beginning. Also stated as the number of times through a song or push ups (each time a song starts).

Straight (War) Dance: The traditional style of dancing and dress of the Plains Tribes of Oklahoma. Absent are the colorful feathers of the fancy dancers; the Straight dancer in keeping with the traditional warrior society, mode of dress is distinguished by a roach headdress with generally one Eagle feather, cloth or buckskin leggings with breechcloth, and an otter skin tailer down the back. The overall dance is one of smoothness and dignity.

Two-Step: A social dance with male and female dancers dancing as partners, this is the only dance where men and women dance with one another. The name comes from the dance steps- two steps forward and one back; similar to the Rabbit Dance or the Owl Dance.

Veteran's Song: A song specially composed to honor a war veteran of one of the Wars (WWI, WWII, Korean War or Vietnam War). Many tribes accord special recognition to their veterans and pay special tribute to the men and women who have served and are serving in the Armed Forces.

War Dance: The traditional dance of many Plains Tribal warriors and warrior societies depicting battle exploits. Changing times have long since led to adaptations and the men dancers more closely display and depict the original war dance. The basic steps are evidenced by all who participate in inter-Tribal dancing.

Warm Up Song: A song specifically called to allow contestants a chance to ready themselves for the contest song or actual contest event.

Women's Buckskin: Refers to the contest category designated for ladies in traditional buckskin dress. The traditional tribal designs on the dresses are handmade with beads or porcupine. The design are specific to their tribe as well as the adornments.

Women's Cloth: Refers to the contest category designated for ladies in traditional dress but not buckskin or fancy dancers.

Women's Shawl: Refers to the contest category designated for younger women. Colorful shawls are an integral part of the dancers' attire. Women shawl dancers are the counterparts of the men fancy dancers; dancing is at a faster tempo than the women's cloth or buckskin



Thanks to the late Roy Track, who compiled these terms