

A Beginner's Guide to Pow Wows



Terminology

Arbour - this is an open-air arena in which the dancing takes place. It is circular, and most will have bleachers.

Grand Entry – the first dance of a pow wow and is used to bring all of the dancers into the gathering. It is led by a colour guard made up of veterans, active members of the armed forces, police and first responders, and dignitaries. Following the colour guard are the dancers who parade into the arbour from the left and loop until everyone is in the arbour. The grand entry finishes with the Flag Song.

Host Drum – a host drum is a drum group primarily responsible for providing the music for the dancers. At many Pow Wows, there can be several drum groups present, and they will rotate duties with the host drum.

Intertribal – when the announcer identifies a dance as intertribal, all dancers, regardless of their style or gender, are encouraged to join in the dancing.

Regalia – Regalia is the brightly coloured garments worn by dancers. Pow Wow regalia are treasured garments often commissioned by a dancer and involve a long, intensive process to complete. These garments should never be referred to as costumes and should be treated with respect.

Introduction

Scholars aren't very clear on the origin of the term "pow wow." Some believe that the word is an adaptation of the Algonquin word **pau wau**, which roughly translates into English as "medicine man" or "he who dreams." Some suggest that the origin comes from the Pawnee word **pa-waw**, meaning "to eat," while others suggest that it comes from either the Narragansett **powwaw** or Massachusetts **pauwau**. Regardless of the word's origins, indigenous people throughout Turtle Island have adopted it to describe a cultural celebration involving drums and song, dance, arts and crafts, food, fellowship, and competition.

Pow Wows have a long history in Indigenous culture here on Turtle Island. Originally, pow wows were gatherings to celebrate a successful hunt or a victorious war party. Many of the dances we see at today's Pow Wows have their origins in these events. However, there was a time in recent history when these celebrations did not occur.

The prohibition against Pow Wows and other indigenous cultural and spiritual practices in Canada is steeped in the amendments to the **Indian Act** in 1884 and the Residential School system. Beginning in 1884, the Indian Act set the stage to prohibit the Potlatch ceremonies of the west coast peoples. The prohibition was subsequently expanded in 1895 to include dances and ceremonies in which gift-giving was practiced. Additional ceremonies, including the Sundance, were then prohibited as they were seen as undermining the assimilation of indigenous people.

The prohibition against Pow Wows and ceremony came with amendments to the Indian Act in 1951. Since then, Pow Wows have occurred across Canada without interruption. Today, Pow Wows typically place from late spring and extend into the early fall. They have become family affairs with families of dancers spending vacation time and weekends travelling from Pow Wow to Pow Wow in communities across Turtle Island. While there are many traditional Pow Wows open for all to come and dance, some are competition Pow Wows with large cash prizes for the winners. We call this "following the Pow Wow trail."

Things to Know when attending Your First Pow Wow

Pow Wow Etiquette

Pow Wows are social events and should be fun. They are an opportunity to see beautiful regalia and watch breathtaking performances. The Pow Wow is a fantastic experience for all when everyone follows some simple rules of etiquette. Some things to remember include:

- Be on time;
- Follow the instructions of the Master of Ceremonies (MC);
- Dress in a manner that is respectful and appropriate for the weather conditions;
- Refrain from bringing drugs and alcohol;
- Stand and remove your hat during Grand Entry and during honour songs as instructed by the MC;
- Be mindful of where you are sitting. Avoid sitting in areas reserved for elders and dancers;
- Please show respect for the dancer's regalia by refraining from touching it. Regalia is very personal to the dancers and, in many cases are family heirlooms; and
- Ask permission before photographing individual dancers outside the arbour.

Things to take with you

There are some things that every person, whether a seasoned Pow Wow visitor or a rookie, should take with them to ensure their experience is an enjoyable one. These items would include:

- A hat;
- Sunscreen;
- Mosquito repellent;
- A portable lawn chair in case seating in the bleachers is limited;
- A roll of toilet paper;
- Hand sanitizer;
- Wet naps; and
- Cash if you wish to buy food or any arts/crafts from vendors.

Dance Styles



Jingle Dress Dance

The Jingle Dress Dance began with the Mille Lacs Band of the Annishnabe in the early 1900s and became prevalent in the 1920s in Wisconsin and Minnesota (Great Lakes region) in the US and Ontario. The story is that the dress was first seen in a dream. A medicine man's granddaughter grew sick, and as the man slept his Indian spirit guides came to him and told him to make a Jingle Dress for the little girl. They said if the child danced in it, the dress would heal her.

The dance gets its name from the rows of metal cones sewn to the dress. These cones are traditionally made from rolled snuff can lids and hung from the dress with ribbon close to one another, so they make a melodic sound as the

girls and women dance. Traditionally, the dress is adorned with 365 visible jingles, or cones. Nowadays, these cones are often machine-made.

As the metal cones hit one another it sounds like rain falling, so it's important for the dancer to be light on their feet, to move in time with the drum and stop when the beat stops. They keep their foot movements low to the ground while dancing, kicking their heels and bouncing on their toes to the music. Typically, this dance is done in a zigzag pattern, said to represent one's journey through life.



Fancy Shawl Dance

Ladies 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 nations along the U.S. and 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.

Dance Styles



Women's Traditional

The women's traditional dance is a very dignified, graceful, and modest dance that shows the strength, pride, respect, and honor the women carry for their family, relatives and friends. There are usually two basic styles of women's traditional.

The first style is the stationary dance. This style originated with the Dakota/Nakota people in their small gatherings of long ago. The women would stand and bounce gently to the drum in honour of their family or relative for whom the song was sung. In these gatherings the men would adorn themselves with their most elaborate dresses and accessories.

In the second style, the women gracefully dance in a zig zag pattern around the edge of the arbour and is in time with the drum beat. Most women today carry a fan usually made of eagle feathers. On the down beat of the song, the dancer may raise her fan gracefully to show honour and respect as they dance.



The Grass Dance

The grass dance was held in honour of Mother Earth that had long provided for all the people's needs. It was also done at a time of healing, for gaining good fortune, or seeking warning of the approach of enemies. These dancers would also trample down the grass preparing the site where lodges would be erected. In the past, tall grass dyed with every colour of nature would adorn the dancers. In modern times, coloured wool or ribbons is used to represent the swaying grass.

Dance Styles



Men's Traditional

This is the oldest form of dance in Indigenous culture. The regalia is often thought to represent the animals that the Creator put on the earth. The movements tell of warrior actions – hunting, stalking games, and battling the enemy. While there is no prescribed look, several elements might reflect items worn by early warriors. Often a traditional dancer will wear a single bustle containing eagle feathers, which are considered sacred. It is said that, since the eagle flies the highest, it carries the prayers of the people to the Creator. Eagle feathers are traditionally awarded for feats of bravery or accomplishment.



Chicken Dance

The origin of the chicken dance is not clear as it has been said that the dance came from the Blackfoot while others say that it originated with the Cree.

Chicken Dancers will imitate the mating dance of the prairie chicken by rocking their heads back and forth as if they were pecking at the ground as they spin from side to side in slow majestic movements. Regalia belonging to the Chicken Dance are usually a porcupine hair roach and two long pheasant tail feathers that curl backwards with colored plumes on the end. Traditional dress for the typical Chicken Dancer is very minimalistic.



Men's Fancy Dance

The men's fancy dance originated in Oklahoma and is one of the most popular forms of dance seen at modern Pow Wows. The most obvious items in the Fancy Dance outfit are great amounts of loom beaded sets of suspenders, belt cuffs, headband, and 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.

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 the body's spinning up and down movement. It is also not uncommon to witness dancers performing great feats of

athleticism by completed flips and cartwheels.



Men's and Women's Buckskin Dance

The buckskin dance style is one of the oldest dance styles performed at Pow Wows and is characterized by the regalia made from deer or moosehide worn by the dancers. The men typically wear headdresses and beaded shirts. The regalia worn by women is similar to what is worn by dancers who dance women's traditional, except the dresses are made with deer or moosehide.

The dance style is slow and poised. The dancers will dance by alternating between the balls of their feet and their heels. They will dance around the arbour in a clockwise direction.