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## What is a Powwow

Powwows are celebrations of community and spirituality, featuring the drum and dance as well as vendors offering traditional food and crafts. Powwow is a big social event, like a big family reunion, where everyone comes to renew acquaintances and to dance together – put aside differences and help bridge the gap between the First Nations peoples and the non-native world. Powwows aren't simply a time to have fun, they are a prayer to Creator, a celebration of spirituality, and a connection with the past, present and future.

### History

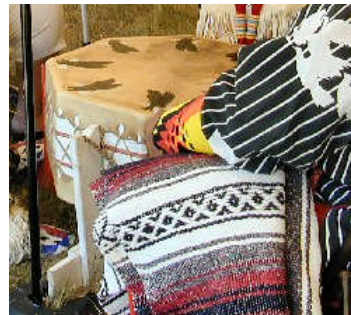
The powwow has been around for a long time before contemporary powwows as we know them have existed. The word powwow come from the Algonquin word pau wau – a coming together of medicine men and spiritual leaders in a curing ceremony. When early explorers observed these gatherings with the drumming and dancing, they mispronounced it "powwow" and thought it referred to any large gathering of First Nations people. As the tribes learned English, they accepted the definition given to their gatherings. The First Nations people of North America have all had ceremonial drums gifted to them by Creator. The drum is the heartbeat of mother earth, carrying our prayers up to Creator. Various dances and ceremonials accompanied by drums have always existed; however, the powwow dance drum as we know it was birthed in the mid 1800s through Tailfeather Woman

### Tailfeather Woman's Vision

Tailfeather Woman, a Lakota, was chased into a lake and hid in the reeds after soldiers massacred her 4 sons along with most of her people. While hiding in the reeds, Creator spoke to her and gave her detailed instructions on how to build the drum and the songs and ceremonies to accompany it. On the fourth day at noon, Creator sent her out to tell her people of her vision. Part of the instructions included using the drum as an instrument of peace – to be copied and passed on to the other tribes in a circular clock-wise direction to bring about peace.

During this time central plains tribes' warrior societies danced, first with scalps attached to their belts, then switched to braided sweetgrass. The Pawnee gave the dance to the Omaha, who in turn gave the dance to the Sioux in the early 1870s. When the Indian wars ended, the warrior societies and the "Helushka" continued, merging with the drum dance. The Helushka soon took the form on the Southern Plains of the traditional Straight Dance - proud and sedate.

As the people were moved onto reservations, the government tried to restrict the dancing. The harder the government tried, the stronger the powwow became as an expression of nativeness. Ultimately, the government retracted its policy because it couldn't stop the movement - the intertribal powwow became powerfully symbolic of both tribal and first nations identity – bringing about peace and understanding as Creator intended.



### The Drum

The drum is a central element of native life, drumming out the heartbeat of mother earth. Without the drum, there would be no powwow. The instrument and the singers collectively are both known as the "drum." It is both an honor and a serious responsibility to keep a drum. The drum must know many songs and take their responsibilities seriously. Alcohol is banned from the presence of the drum. Nothing is passed over the top of the drum and the drum is never rested directly on the ground. Occasionally, a drummer may make a mistake at the drum and be

observed dancing in place at the drum to show respect to the drum. Protocol requires the drum to go where it is called. It is customary, therefore, in many native communities to gift the drums – bringing tobacco, food and monetary gifts to the lead singer (who then distributes the gifts amongst the drummers). Please show honor and respect to the drums.



## Grand Entry

The grand entry leads off every dance session. All present rise and stand in respect for the grand entry and the flag song. All audience members wearing hats that are not part of regalia are asked to remove them. The drum sings the grand entry song until all dancers are in the area. Next the flag song is played while the dancers dance in place. Next a respected elder gives the invocation – a welcome to all attending followed by a prayer usually in native language, but sometimes in English. As the flags are posted, many times the MC will call out the names and tribal affiliation of the Veterans as they post their colors.

There is a definite protocol to the entering into the sacred circle. The order usually as follows: Staff Carrier, Flag bearers and color guard, honored Guests and Elders, Head Dancers, Powwow Princess, Men's Traditional, Women's Traditional – Buckskin then Cloth, Men's Grass Dancers, Women's Jingle Dancers, Men's Fancy Dancers, Women's Fancy Dancers, Boy's Traditional, Girls Traditional – Buckskin then Cloth, Boy's Grass Dancers, Girls Jingle Dancers, Boy's Fancy Dancers, Girls Fancy Dancers.

There is a variation as follows: Staff Carrier, Flag bearers and color guard, honored Guests and Elders, Head Dancers, Powwow Princess, Men's Traditional, Men's Grass Dancers, Men's Fancy Dancers, Boy's Traditional, Boy's Grass Dancers, Boy's Fancy Dancers, Women's Traditional – Buckskin then Cloth, Women's Jingle Dancers, Women's Fancy Dancers, Girls Traditional – Buckskin then Cloth, Girls Jingle Dancers, Girls Fancy Dancers.

The first dance after the grand entry is a Veteran's dance, where all vets, regardless of race or heritage are called into the dance arena to dance and be honored for their selfless service to the people. Once this series of events occurs the MC will ask the audience to be seated and a round of intertribal songs will be sung to establish the drum rotation. All are encouraged to go out and dance the intertribal and social dances.

## Dancers and Dances



### Men's Styles

#### Northern Traditional

The Traditional Dance is one of the most common styles seen at powwows and is a Northern warrior's dance style. Men's regalia consist of items such as breastplates, bustles, roaches, head dresses, breechcloths, leggings, fully beaded moccasins and

bandoliers (Great Lakes old style traditional men will wear beaded velvet regalia and otter turbans). A division in this category splits into buckskin and cloth. Men's moves imitate stalking the enemy or game.

#### Southern Straight Dance

The Southern Straight Dance is the formal Southern dance style, tracing its roots to the Helushka or Omaha warriors' dance. Southern Straight Dancers wear long shirts, leggings, wide belts, drops, bandoliers, aprons or breechcloth with ribbon work. They may wear Porky roaches or turbans. If they wear roaches, the feathers are mounted on a rocker (Northern roach feathers are mounted in spinners on the spreader). They do not wear bustles.



#### Fancy Dance

The Fancy Dance is the style of dance that contains the most color and movement. Fancy styles are relatively new to powwows. Fancy Dance started on Oklahoma reservations after World War II and spread north then east. The men's style dress consists of 2 bustles on the back and usually a set of arm bustles called Catawbas. The regalia is very brightly colored and the dancing requires great stamina.





### Grass Dance

A popular dance that is full of color and movement, the grass dance originated on the northern plains. Before any dances or ceremonies could take place, a select society of men known as the grass dance society

would have the responsibility of finding and preparing the dance arena. Once the area was selected they would flatten down the grass, fill in the holes and also bless the arena. It was said that after the dances were complete, the grass would rise back up as if no one had ever been there. The dancers wove the sweet grasses and prairie grasses into their outfits. Throughout the years, the dancers began to weave the brighter ribbons and yarn into their regalia to replace the sweet grass.

Legend tells of a young man who longed to dance but could not because he had a crippled leg or foot. One day the youth went on a vision quest to a small hill that stood on the prairie. As he prayed, Creator gave him a vision of a dance that could be done despite his handicap. He then noticed the wind making the grasses swoop and sway and mimicked the movements of the grass. As he danced, he was healed. Tradition holds you can gift a grass dancer with tobacco and request he pray for healing while he dances.

### Gourd Dancing

This dance is a separate type of dance before the Grand Entry. During the Gourd Dancing only the Gourd Dancers, their relatives, and relatives of Veterans should be in the Powwow arena. They dance and pray for all the people.



### Women's Dance Styles

#### Traditional

Women's traditional dance honors the woman's role as giver of life, and keeper of culture, family and home. This dance style reflects women's closeness to Mother Earth by never allowing her feet to completely leave the ground. Northern Traditional dancers usually dance in one spot, Southern Traditional dancers usually dance clock-wise around the arena.

### Buckskin

The Buckskin style of dance is very graceful and has some of the most elegant bead and craftwork. The traditional woman's feet are not to leave the ground entirely – symbolizing the woman's bond with mother earth. You'll notice their hands on their hips and the fringe on their yokes gracefully swaying to the drum beat.



### Southern Cloth

The Southern Cloth style of dance is much like Southern Buckskin, but the beautiful outfits are made with fine cloths and ribbon work. Women dance sedately.

### Jingle Dress Dance

This dance has its origins in the Mille Lacs area of northern Minnesota with the Anishinaabe people. As the story goes, a medicine man's granddaughter was very ill. He had a dream in which a spirit wearing the jingle dress came to him and told him to make one of these dresses and put it on his granddaughter to cure her. When he awoke, he and his wife made the dress as described by the spirit of his dream. When they finished, they and others brought the girl to the dance hall and she put on the dress. During the first circle around the room, she needed to be carried. During the second circle around the room, she could barely walk and needed the assistance of several women. The third circle around the room she walked without help and during the fourth circle around the room, she danced.

The steps are controlled and do not involve high kicking or twirls - the steps are in a zigzag pattern to reflect the zigzagging involved in the journey of life. Similar to a Women's Traditional dancer, the Jingle Dress dancer also raises her fan when the "honor beats" are played on the drum. The Jingle Dress dance is revered as a healing dance; the Jingle Dress is often referred to as a "healing dress" and Jingle Dress dancers are sometimes called upon to dance for a sick or injured community member.



Cones are shaped from chewing tobacco lids. Traditionally, a cone is secured on the dress for each day of the year (365 cones), in seven rows for seven days of the week. The woman or girl says a prayer for each snuff lid that is turned. The snuff lids symbolize the tobacco carrying up the dancer's prayers to Creator. Many Jingle Dancers dance for the healing of the Earth. You can also gift tobacco to a Jingle dancer for prayers for healing.

#### Fancy Shawl Dance

The Fancy Shawl Dance is the most exciting of the ladies' dance styles to watch, due to its many intricate movements and steps. It's also called the butterfly dance. Dancers start with their shawls drawn snugly around them and as they dance they open their shawls out – symbolizing young girls blossoming into womanhood.



#### Smoke Dance

The Smoke Dance is a very rapid dance in a different style than what most are accustomed to seeing. Traditionally there is one drummer drumming on a water drum. The drum plays very fast songs that require intricate, fancy footwork.

#### Hoop Dance

The hoop dance is more an exhibition dance. It takes years of practice and a lot of skill to hoop dance. The dancer tells a story through symbols as he dances in and out of the hoops, forming shapes with the hoops as he dances.

#### Intertribal Dances

##### Round Dance

Round Dance is a group social dance where all join in a big circle and dance in a side-stepping motion around the arena. This dance can be one big circle or two – the outer circle consists of women dancing clockwise around the arena and the inner circle of men dancing counter-clockwise.

### Two-step and Snake Dances

The two-step is a couples' dance led by a lead couple – normally the Head Man and Head Lady Dancers. It is often “woman’s choice” and if the man refuses he customarily gifts the woman



with money. In the snake dance is led by the Head man dancer and at a certain point the line splits into groups as the snake “crosses the river” and the line is reformed.

### Owl Dance

The Owl dance is another ladies choice couples dance, however the couples dance independently and don't follow a lead man and woman.

### Blanket Dance

Named for the purpose rather than a specific style, a Blanket Dance is an opportunity for those present to donate as a blanket or shawl is carried around the circle, or spread out on the ground for dancers to come up and make a donation. The purpose is announced before the dance and visitors' contribute voluntarily the amount they feel is appropriate.

### Candy Dance (Northeastern)

The Candy Dance is a children's dance game. The MC invites children of all ages to participate and chooses four men to watch over the children to play the role of both as rule enforcers and tricksters. Next, the MC explains the rules to the children. They are to dance around the circle to the drum, when the drum stops, they gather up as much of the candy strewn around the circle as they want, but when the drum starts again, they have to drop what they have and begin to dance again. When the song ends, they can keep whatever they have in their hands, but they also have to share with one another. On the surface, it is a lesson of sharing, but a deeper lesson of life is that things come and go, so never take what you have for granted.

## Protocol

1. Listen to the Master of Ceremonies, he coordinates the Powwow.
2. Do not sit on the benches or chairs reserved for the dancers. Dancers get priority for seating around the edges of the circle. Bring your own chairs. Most powwows will not have seating for the public or enough seating for everyone. Also remember the benches in the arena are for dancers only.
3. If you want to take pictures, check first with the MC, powwow committee and dancers. Respect the wishes of the people who are your hosts.
4. Any tape recording must be done ONLY with the permission of the MC, powwow committee and the Lead Singer of the drum.
5. If you are not wearing traditional regalia, you may dance only to social songs (two-steps, Blanket Dance, Specials, honorings, etc.) or when specifically invited by the MC.
6. Only those with the permission of the Lead Singer may sit at the drum.
7. Stand during the Grand Entry, Gourd Songs, Flag Songs, Invocation, Veteran's Songs and the Closing Songs.
8. Only Gourd Dancers enter the circle during the Gourd Dancing.
9. Please do not let your children enter the dance circle unless they are dancing.
10. Following the Grand Entry, remain standing for the Flag Song and Invocation.
11. The dancers wear is regalia. Sometimes they call them their outfits. They are NOT costumes. Do not touch anyone's regalia without their permission – it is disrespectful.
12. Do not turn down an invitation by others – especially the Elders.
13. Do not consume alcoholic beverages or drugs before going

to a powwow or while around the powwow. The grounds are blessed before the powwow. It is very disrespectful and you will be escorted off the grounds.

14. Be on time. The committee is doing everything it can to keep the powwow running smoothly.
15. Appropriate modest dress and behavior is required in the circle. Anyone unwilling to abide by the protocol will be asked to leave by the Arena Director.
16. Listen to the Master of Ceremonies, he will announce who is to dance and when. If you are a guest, and the general public is considered so, do not enter the arena unless invited to do so.
17. Respect the position of the Head man and Head Woman dancers. Their positions entitle them to start each song or set of songs. Please wait until they have started dancing before you join in.
18. Be aware that someone may be standing behind you and may not be able to see over you. Make room, step aside, sit, or kneel if someone is behind you.
19. Show respect for the flag and honor songs by standing during "Special" songs, stand in place until the sponsors of the song have danced a complete circle and have come around you, then join in. If you are not dancing, continue to stand quietly until the song is completed.
20. While dancing at any powwow, honor the protocol of the sponsoring group.
21. The Flag song, or Indian National Anthem, is sung when the Staff and the flags are posted. Please stand and remove your hats during the singing. This is not a dance song.
22. Powwows are usually always non-profit. The committee depends on donations, raffles, blanket dances, etc. for support. Donations are encouraged as a way to honor someone. Any participant can drop money into the blanket to aid in the powwow expenses. Support the committee

through donations and buy raffle tickets if you can.

23. Giveaways, attributes of Indian generosity, are held at many dances. They are acknowledgements of appreciation to recipients for honor given. When receiving a gift, the recipient thanks everyone involved in the giving.  
NOTE: All specials and giveaways must be coordinated with the Master of Ceremonies. Please remember that it is traditional to make a monetary gift to the drum for this request – clear this through the MC.
24. If you are ever unsure about procedure or etiquette, please check with the MC, Arena Director, or Head Singer. They will be glad to help you with your questions.
25. The Drums are closed, check with the Lead Singer if you have any questions. Do not touch the drums.
26. If taking pictures, ask the dancers first. Remember common courtesy and ask for permission. Group photographs are usually alright, but check with the committee first to be sure.

Remember, protocol may be slightly different in different areas you visit. Different is not wrong, just different. Be respectful of the uniqueness of each group and area. You can find out more on the internet if you are going to different areas. You can also check for local powwows and more information on [www.powwows.com](http://www.powwows.com), [www.crazycrow.com](http://www.crazycrow.com), [www.nocbay.com](http://www.nocbay.com), [www.wanderingbull.com](http://www.wanderingbull.com), [www.matoska.com](http://www.matoska.com), [www.prairieedge.com](http://www.prairieedge.com) and other sites.

### Short Reading List

Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Powwow, Tara Browner

Ojibwa Dance Drum, Thomas Vennum Jr.

The Powwow Trail, White & Stanley

We Dance Because We Can, Bernstein & Contreras

A Dancing People, Powwow Culture and the Southern Plains, Ellis

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