

Your Guide to Understanding and Enjoying Powwows



Ronan Native American Club – 2025 Indian Education for All Best Practices Conference



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Introduction by IEFA Specialist Carrie McNab

Powwows are vibrant celebrations of Native American cultures, and this guide is designed to help you better understand and enjoy the events and activities you'll experience. While the specific customs, rules, and traditions can differ from one celebration to another, this booklet provides a basic overview to enhance your experience. It's not a definitive rulebook, but rather a resource to help you appreciate the history, events, and traditions of a powwow.

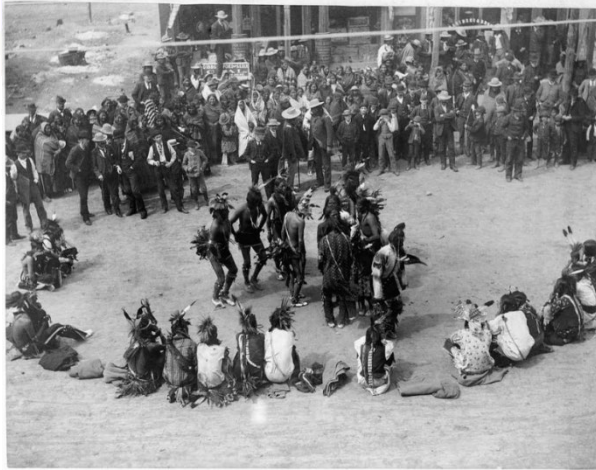
History of the Powwow

A Powwow is a gathering where Native American dancing, singing, and celebration take place. There are several different powwows that take place throughout the country; however, this



Carrie McNab (Saulteux-Cree)

booklet will talk about powwows in general and, more specifically, about powwows along the northern tier of the United States.



The Great Omaha powwow dance of the Cheyennes in Montana, circa 1891. Photo by the Wiley Brothers, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division LC-USZ62-101168

Some reports say that the word “powwow” has its origin from the Pawnee word “pa-wa”, meaning “to eat.” Other sources say the word is of Algonquin origin and was originally pronounced “pauau”, which indicates a gathering of people for purpose of celebration or important event. In any case, it is a special time for people to gather and celebrate, meet old friends, and create new friendships.

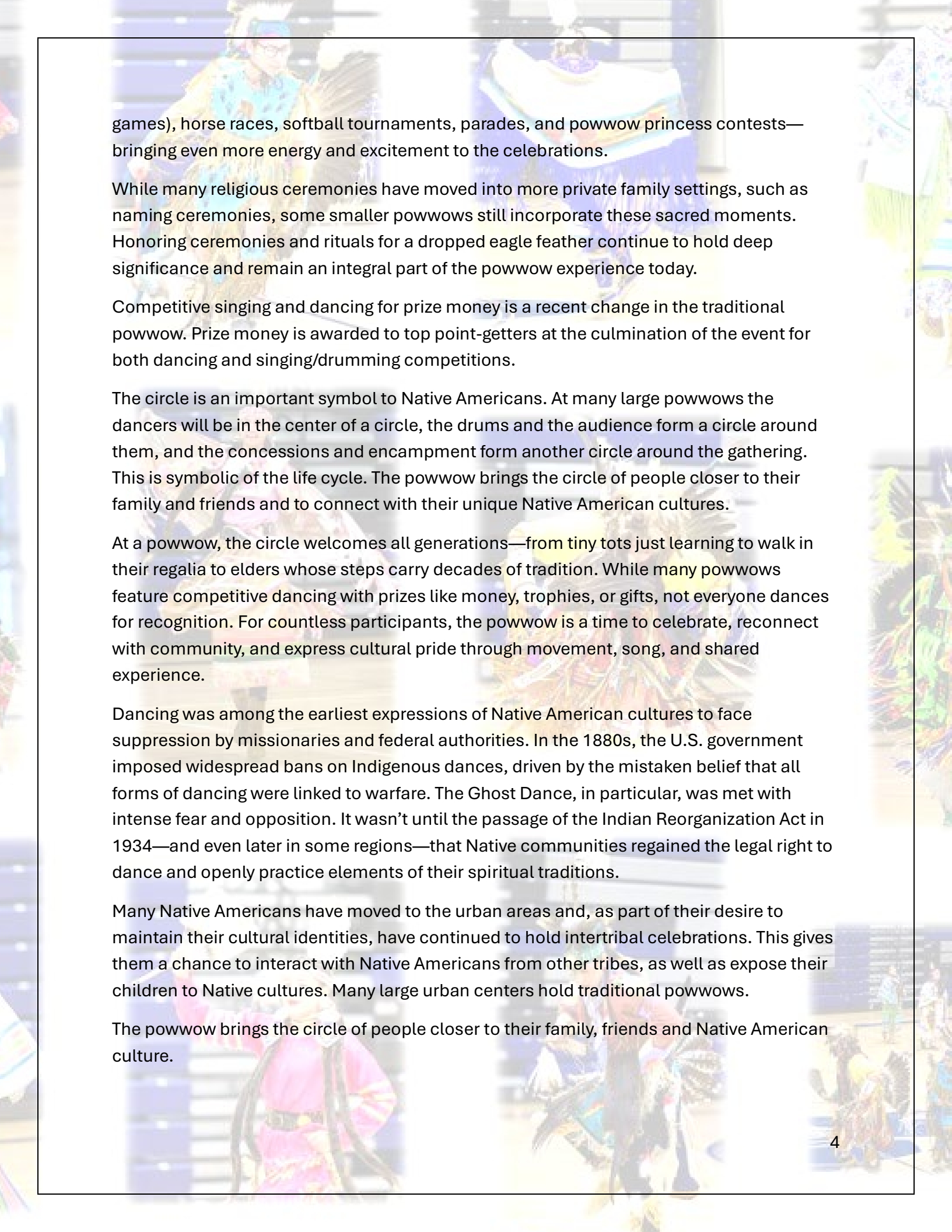
In early times, hunters would invite their friends and relatives to share their good fortune. As time went on, while the meal was

being prepared, relatives would dance to honor their host. Eventually, the dancing became the main focus of the event. Participants began to use this time to display their weaving, quill work, and other finery. Powwows also had religious significance. They were an opportunity for families to hold naming and honoring ceremonies.

Powwows have evolved over time, yet they remain vital gatherings where Native American people share their tribal traditions and culture. It’s important to understand that powwows are public events and should not be confused with private tribal customs and ceremonies that are not meant to be shared with the public.

Powwow celebrations continue to be a vibrant and essential tradition for many Native American communities. In the Northern Plains, the season can begin as early as March, though in most areas, it peaks from June through September. Nearly every weekend during this time, families gather on the powwow circuit—camping under open skies, sharing meals, and immersing themselves in the rhythm of drums and the joy of dance. These gatherings are more than events; they’re cherished reunions where people reconnect with friends, celebrate culture, and create lasting memories that carry them through to the next season.

Powwows are lively gatherings that celebrate Native American culture through a rich tapestry of traditions. These events often feature dancing and singing competitions, “giveaways,” communal encampments, feasting, and other cultural expressions. Over time, powwows have evolved to include activities such as handgames (also known as stick



games), horse races, softball tournaments, parades, and powwow princess contests—bringing even more energy and excitement to the celebrations.

While many religious ceremonies have moved into more private family settings, such as naming ceremonies, some smaller powwows still incorporate these sacred moments. Honoring ceremonies and rituals for a dropped eagle feather continue to hold deep significance and remain an integral part of the powwow experience today.

Competitive singing and dancing for prize money is a recent change in the traditional powwow. Prize money is awarded to top point-getters at the culmination of the event for both dancing and singing/drumming competitions.

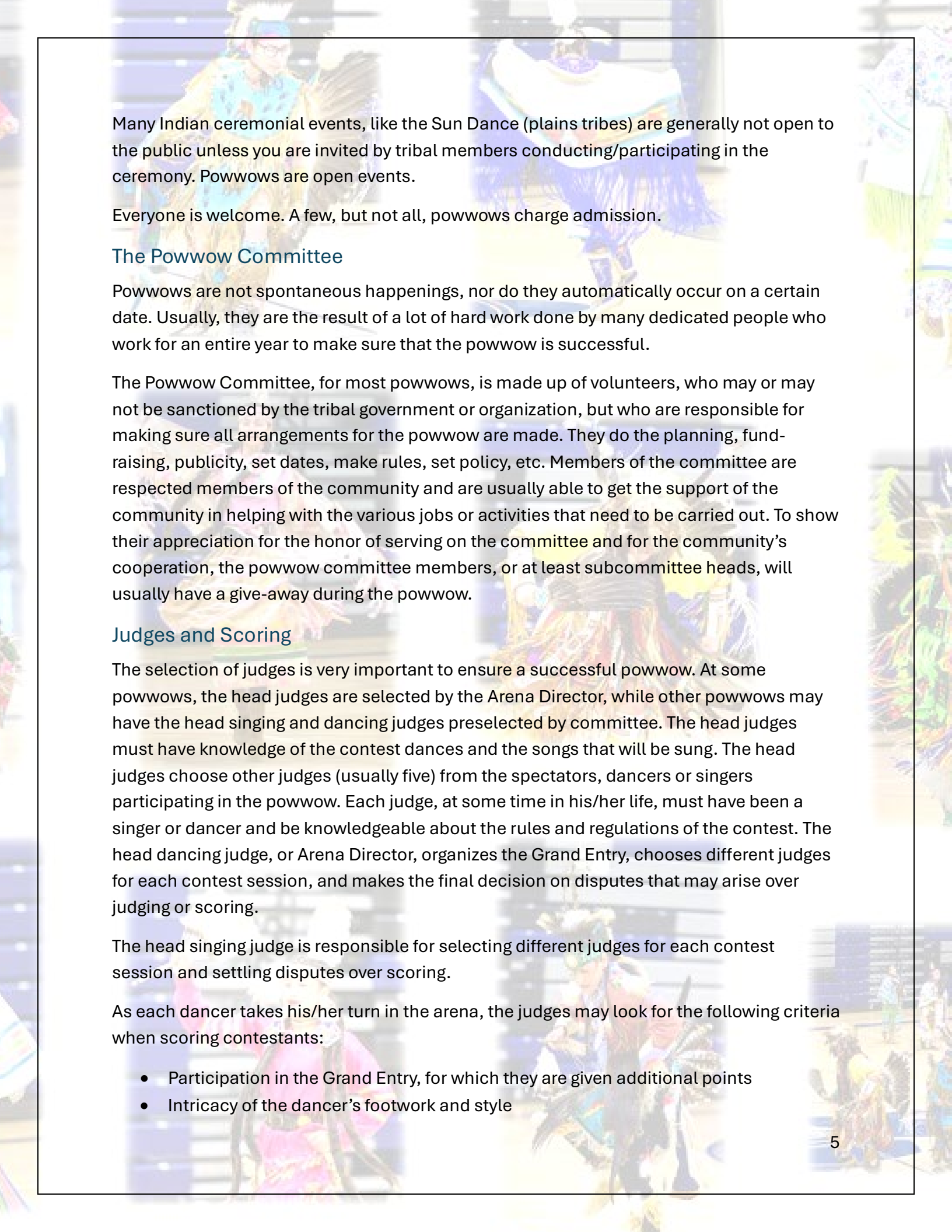
The circle is an important symbol to Native Americans. At many large powwows the dancers will be in the center of a circle, the drums and the audience form a circle around them, and the concessions and encampment form another circle around the gathering. This is symbolic of the life cycle. The powwow brings the circle of people closer to their family and friends and to connect with their unique Native American cultures.

At a powwow, the circle welcomes all generations—from tiny tots just learning to walk in their regalia to elders whose steps carry decades of tradition. While many powwows feature competitive dancing with prizes like money, trophies, or gifts, not everyone dances for recognition. For countless participants, the powwow is a time to celebrate, reconnect with community, and express cultural pride through movement, song, and shared experience.

Dancing was among the earliest expressions of Native American cultures to face suppression by missionaries and federal authorities. In the 1880s, the U.S. government imposed widespread bans on Indigenous dances, driven by the mistaken belief that all forms of dancing were linked to warfare. The Ghost Dance, in particular, was met with intense fear and opposition. It wasn't until the passage of the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934—and even later in some regions—that Native communities regained the legal right to dance and openly practice elements of their spiritual traditions.

Many Native Americans have moved to the urban areas and, as part of their desire to maintain their cultural identities, have continued to hold intertribal celebrations. This gives them a chance to interact with Native Americans from other tribes, as well as expose their children to Native cultures. Many large urban centers hold traditional powwows.

The powwow brings the circle of people closer to their family, friends and Native American culture.



Many Indian ceremonial events, like the Sun Dance (plains tribes) are generally not open to the public unless you are invited by tribal members conducting/participating in the ceremony. Powwows are open events.

Everyone is welcome. A few, but not all, powwows charge admission.

The Powwow Committee

Powwows are not spontaneous happenings, nor do they automatically occur on a certain date. Usually, they are the result of a lot of hard work done by many dedicated people who work for an entire year to make sure that the powwow is successful.

The Powwow Committee, for most powwows, is made up of volunteers, who may or may not be sanctioned by the tribal government or organization, but who are responsible for making sure all arrangements for the powwow are made. They do the planning, fund-raising, publicity, set dates, make rules, set policy, etc. Members of the committee are respected members of the community and are usually able to get the support of the community in helping with the various jobs or activities that need to be carried out. To show their appreciation for the honor of serving on the committee and for the community's cooperation, the powwow committee members, or at least subcommittee heads, will usually have a give-away during the powwow.

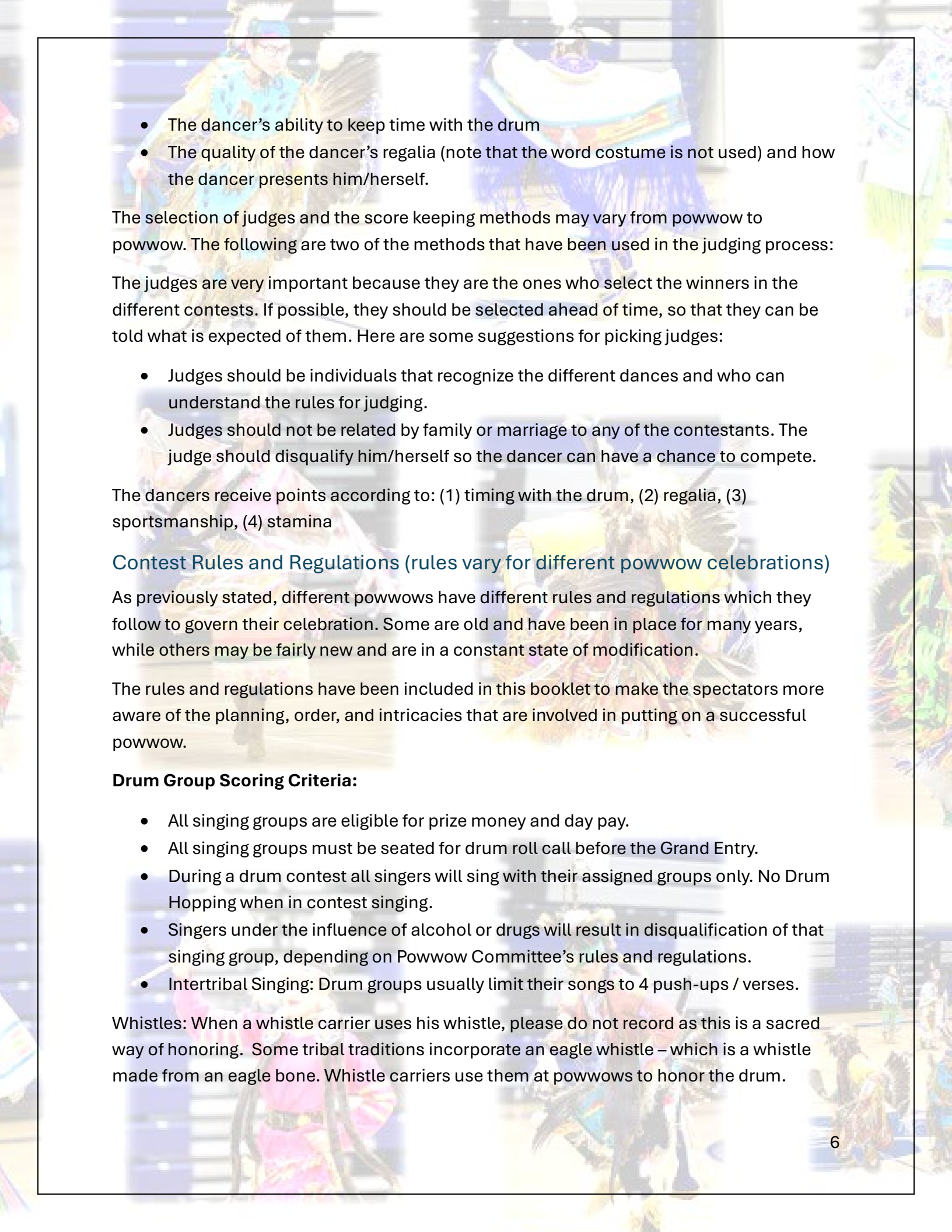
Judges and Scoring

The selection of judges is very important to ensure a successful powwow. At some powwows, the head judges are selected by the Arena Director, while other powwows may have the head singing and dancing judges preselected by committee. The head judges must have knowledge of the contest dances and the songs that will be sung. The head judges choose other judges (usually five) from the spectators, dancers or singers participating in the powwow. Each judge, at some time in his/her life, must have been a singer or dancer and be knowledgeable about the rules and regulations of the contest. The head dancing judge, or Arena Director, organizes the Grand Entry, chooses different judges for each contest session, and makes the final decision on disputes that may arise over judging or scoring.

The head singing judge is responsible for selecting different judges for each contest session and settling disputes over scoring.

As each dancer takes his/her turn in the arena, the judges may look for the following criteria when scoring contestants:

- Participation in the Grand Entry, for which they are given additional points
- Intricacy of the dancer's footwork and style

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- The dancer's ability to keep time with the drum
 - The quality of the dancer's regalia (note that the word costume is not used) and how the dancer presents him/herself.

The selection of judges and the score keeping methods may vary from powwow to powwow. The following are two of the methods that have been used in the judging process:

The judges are very important because they are the ones who select the winners in the different contests. If possible, they should be selected ahead of time, so that they can be told what is expected of them. Here are some suggestions for picking judges:

- Judges should be individuals that recognize the different dances and who can understand the rules for judging.
- Judges should not be related by family or marriage to any of the contestants. The judge should disqualify him/herself so the dancer can have a chance to compete.

The dancers receive points according to: (1) timing with the drum, (2) regalia, (3) sportsmanship, (4) stamina

Contest Rules and Regulations (rules vary for different powwow celebrations)

As previously stated, different powwows have different rules and regulations which they follow to govern their celebration. Some are old and have been in place for many years, while others may be fairly new and are in a constant state of modification.

The rules and regulations have been included in this booklet to make the spectators more aware of the planning, order, and intricacies that are involved in putting on a successful powwow.

Drum Group Scoring Criteria:

- All singing groups are eligible for prize money and day pay.
- All singing groups must be seated for drum roll call before the Grand Entry.
- During a drum contest all singers will sing with their assigned groups only. No Drum Hopping when in contest singing.
- Singers under the influence of alcohol or drugs will result in disqualification of that singing group, depending on Powwow Committee's rules and regulations.
- Intertribal Singing: Drum groups usually limit their songs to 4 push-ups / verses.

Whistles: When a whistle carrier uses his whistle, please do not record as this is a sacred way of honoring. Some tribal traditions incorporate an eagle whistle – which is a whistle made from an eagle bone. Whistle carriers use them at powwows to honor the drum.

Dancers Criteria:



Jonathan Windy Boy's (Chippewa Cree) Grass Dance Regalia on display at the new Montana Heritage Center. Jonathan is a champion grass dancer and was inducted into the MT Indian Athletic Hall of Fame in recognition of his dancing accomplishments. He is well-known on the Powwow Trail.

- All Dancing Contest participants entering the Dancing Contest are required to register for prize money.
- Dancing Contest participants are required to participate in all Grand Entries.
- Dancers must be in full dress and ready to go for Grand Entry and contest dancing.
- Dancers competing in various dance contests are eligible to sing with a singing group provided they are registered with that group.
- Dancers must, at all times, keep in time with the drum beat.
- Stop upon completion of the song and last beat of the drum.
- Trick songs can be used during competition dancing.
- No dancer shall dance under the influence of alcohol or drugs. This will be considered an automatic disqualification for that session.

Head Staff

The Head Staff are usually the heads of different aspects of the visible operations of the powwow. Often, the Powwow Committee chair is designated as Head Staff. Other persons designated as Head Staff are usually the announcer(s), head or host drum, head man dancer, head lady dancer, head boy dancer, head girl dancer, arena director, and head judge, (sometimes drum keeper, water carrier, etc.). Each member of the head staff has responsibilities which they are called upon during the powwow to carry out.

Head Staff - The Announcer(s)

No powwow is complete without Announcers who are often referred to as the Emcee. They are the orchestrators and motivators. They keep the Dancing and Singing Contests moving and keep the public informed about what is taking place. Effective announcers are extremely knowledgeable in the arena of Native American/First Nations tribal ways of knowing, the dances and songs. They are better suited to keep the events moving and they may also entertain the crowd by telling jokes, making comments, and following the Arena Director's instructions. They also set the atmosphere for the crowd and contestants. There

are many well-known powwow Announcers, and you may happen to see the same person at several different powwows in the same summer.

Head Staff - Arena Director

This is the individual whose responsibility is to keep track of the dance contests, singers, and special events. Arena Director provides the Announcers with important details; maintains the powwow agenda and they are very valuable in assuring a successful celebration.

Head Staff - Head Dancers

The Native American tribes have always strived to present exemplary role models for members of the tribe to follow. The Head Male Dancer and Head Female Dancer are such role models. Individuals who exhibit outstanding traditional qualities are asked to serve in this capacity. The responsibilities of this position include being present throughout the powwow activities and leading the dancers by being the first to begin each dance.

Head Staff - Host Drum

At a powwow, the host drum group, sometimes referred to as the "head drum" or "host drum," is responsible for providing the music for the Grand Entry, Flag Song, and Veterans Song that open the powwow. As well as the Flag Song and Retreat Song that close it. They also lead off the rotation for intertribal dances and may be called upon for special events. The Host Drum is picked by the Powwow Committee. They are the invited drum by choice of the Powwow Committee, and they are often called upon for special songs or ceremonies.



Southern Cree Singers - Rocky Boy, MT

Powwow Participants

Dancers and singers from tribes throughout the United States and Canada participate in hundreds of powwows and celebrations each year. They come from every state in the nation and every province of Canada. At times, even participants from the Native tribes of South America participate. Some smaller powwows serve as opportunities to gather during the winter months and may be more of a local event.

Only registered contestants can participate in the dance and singing contests, but when the announcer calls for an Intertribal dance, everyone has the option to dance and take part tourists included. You don't need a feather, beads or bells; you can dance in your street clothes. There are no spectators at the powwow.

Everyone is considered a participant, and highly valuable with your attendance. Everyone has a place in the circle of people.

The Grand Entry



Montana State University Powwow Grand Entry

Although powwows may differ, depending on the location or type, the following is a system used by many powwows throughout the Plains area. Many powwows use the following format:

First, the eagle staff is carried into the circle, followed by the American, Canadian, state, and tribal flags, followed by the title holders from tribal pageants. Other invited dignitaries are next, followed by the men. Men

traditional dancers first, then grass dancers, and fancy dancers. Women come next, followed by traditional dancers, jingle dress dancers, and fancy shawl dancers. Next, are the teen and junior boys, then girls, in the same order as the adults. The last to enter arena are the tiny tots.

The dancers dance sunwise—clockwise—around the arbor, showing the audience that they are ready to begin, showing their regalia (the term costume is seen by some as disparaging), and their dance steps letting those who watch know who they are and what they can do. (Note: This may vary from tribe to tribe or powwow to powwow.)

When the Grand Entry song ends, there is a flag song, an equivalent of the national anthem. Then there is an invocation blessing the gathering. After that, the eagle staff (always positioned above the American Flag to signify the first nation) is tied to the pole in the center of the arbor or brought to the announcer's stand. A welcome is extended and then there may be a few words by various dignitaries. When this portion of the ceremony is completed, the dancing can begin.

The Drum

Drums can come from a variety of sources. Some are handed down in a family; others are donated to a drum group. Drums are made of deer, elk, cow, or horse hides. Contemporary bass drums can be purchased or renovated, often times blessed, just as are the older drums.

The drum is more than just a musical instrument to those who own and honor it by using it; it has its own life. Some drum groups have gone through ceremonies and have had their drums blessed and named. The drum has its own powerful spirit. Gifts are made to the drum, and some drums have their own sacred medicine pipes. In some traditions, the drum symbolizes the heartbeat, in others, the powerful medicine of thunder.

Regardless of the tradition, the drum must always be treated with respect as a sacred object or entity. Many drums have their own songs, which are frequently sung as a warm-up at the beginning of the powwow/celebration.



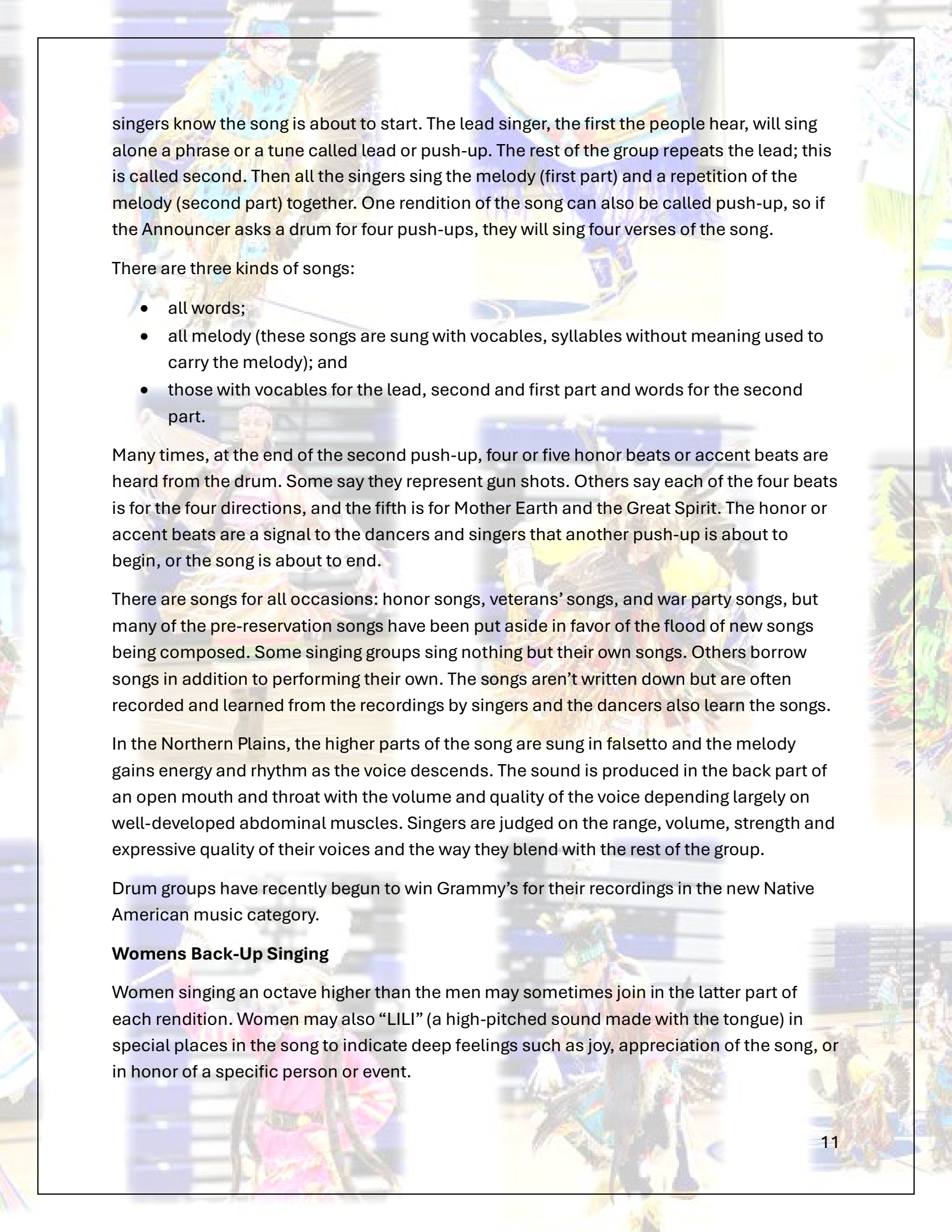
MSU Bobcat Singers Drum

The beat of the drum is like a heartbeat, starting slowly and then beating more quickly as the singers get further into the song. The drum sticks connect the singers to the power of the drum as they sing. The drum is more than just a musical instrument to those who own and utilize it; it has its own life and spirit.

The drumming is judged in contests by the rhythm of the song. Usually, the drum group is only judged on the songs they sing for the dance contests and on intertribal songs. There are many different rhythms and drum beats played, and each type of contest song requires a different one. The drum beats must be in perfect time, and each player must be in perfect unison. The drum beat that is heard in movies, old Westerns, and at Kansas City Chief games is NOT authentic.

Singing

Different types of songs are sung for different events—Grand Entries, dance contests, and honoring ceremonies. Songs are made for all reasons. Although they differ in tempo, words, and emotion, powwow songs all follow a similar structure. The lead singer selects the songs to be sung for a contest. He/she may hit the drums once to let the dancers and other



singers know the song is about to start. The lead singer, the first the people hear, will sing alone a phrase or a tune called lead or push-up. The rest of the group repeats the lead; this is called second. Then all the singers sing the melody (first part) and a repetition of the melody (second part) together. One rendition of the song can also be called push-up, so if the Announcer asks a drum for four push-ups, they will sing four verses of the song.

There are three kinds of songs:

- all words;
- all melody (these songs are sung with vocables, syllables without meaning used to carry the melody); and
- those with vocables for the lead, second and first part and words for the second part.

Many times, at the end of the second push-up, four or five honor beats or accent beats are heard from the drum. Some say they represent gun shots. Others say each of the four beats is for the four directions, and the fifth is for Mother Earth and the Great Spirit. The honor or accent beats are a signal to the dancers and singers that another push-up is about to begin, or the song is about to end.

There are songs for all occasions: honor songs, veterans' songs, and war party songs, but many of the pre-reservation songs have been put aside in favor of the flood of new songs being composed. Some singing groups sing nothing but their own songs. Others borrow songs in addition to performing their own. The songs aren't written down but are often recorded and learned from the recordings by singers and the dancers also learn the songs.

In the Northern Plains, the higher parts of the song are sung in falsetto and the melody gains energy and rhythm as the voice descends. The sound is produced in the back part of an open mouth and throat with the volume and quality of the voice depending largely on well-developed abdominal muscles. Singers are judged on the range, volume, strength and expressive quality of their voices and the way they blend with the rest of the group.

Drum groups have recently begun to win Grammy's for their recordings in the new Native American music category.

Womens Back-Up Singing

Women singing an octave higher than the men may sometimes join in the latter part of each rendition. Women may also "LILI" (a high-pitched sound made with the tongue) in special places in the song to indicate deep feelings such as joy, appreciation of the song, or in honor of a specific person or event.

Singing Video Links

Check out these videos to learn more about powwow singing traditions:

[Singing Traditions on the Powwow Trail](#)

[Nakoa Heavy Runner - The Power of Indigenous Songs](#)

[Last Chance Powwow 2019-Helena, MT](#)

[The Power of the Drum](#)

The Flag Song



Flags of the Montana Tribal Nations

[Flag Song- Lame Deer Version](#)

[Flag Song - Southern Cheyenne Version](#)

Many Indian tribes around the turn of the century adopted a song with which to honor the flag of the United States. The Flag Song has since been utilized by the tribes at the beginning of virtually all events in almost precisely the same manner in which mainstream America has adopted the Star-Spangled Banner. Flag Songs also honor the flags of the Tribal Nations and the Eagle Staff in addition the Flag Songs also honor the Canadian flag and flags of the First Nations of Canada.

The Honor Song – Video: [Honor Song for All Students and Teachers](#)



Mike Jetty (Dakota/Chippewa) & Shane Doyle (Crow) offer up an honor song.

Note: Spectators should always stand and remove their caps and hats during an Honor Song. As the name suggests, Honor Songs are requested at the powwow/celebration to honor someone. Perhaps a family would request an Honor Song for a son who returned from being away, or in the memory of a deceased relative. Honor Songs can be made for almost any occasion. In some traditions, people with an Indian name have their own songs and those songs are sung if the person is to be honored. In

other instances, there are “generic” Honor Songs for people without their own song.

A background image of a Powwow dancer in traditional regalia, featuring a large feathered headdress and a beaded necklace. The dancer is wearing a blue and yellow outfit. The image is slightly blurred and serves as a background for the text.

The Trick Song

A Trick Song is really a contest between the dancers and singers. The drummers try to fool the dancers into missing beats or failing to stop on time. Singers will either pick a specially composed song or transform another song by agreeing among themselves when they will stop.

The Crow Hop Song

The "Crow Hop" is a dance performed as a lively and fast-paced dance, often described as enjoyable and energetic, and can be done by both men and women. It is a unique form of dancing which has developed within the powwow culture. It has also been called the Skip Dance and the Jump Dance. This dance is part of the repertoire in every competitive dance function. (This dance is different from the Salish Jump Dance, which is a religious ceremony.)

This dance was developed in the 1900s and done with a specific rhythm of the drum beat. When the Crow Hop is performed, the singers find the music and drum beat easier to follow than the typical intertribal music beat. When dancers execute the Crow Hop, they have a feeling of exhilaration. The Crow Hop is a change of pace for dancers and is dramatic to watch.

Round Dance Song

Round dances at powwows are social dances where everyone is invited to participate, representing friendship and unity. They are typically performed in a circle, with participants moving around the drum in a clockwise direction, sometimes joining hands. The songs are sung by a group of drummers, and the music often features hand drums and soaring vocals, with a steady, resonating beat.

Side Step Song

The "Side Step" song, in the context of the Ojibwe culture and powwows, is a special song often used with the Jingle Dress dance, a healing and spiritual dance with origins among the Ojibwe. The Side Step dance is characterized by low, soft-footed steps and a zigzag pattern, and the Jingle Dress itself is known for the sound of metal cones jingling as the dancer moves. The dance and song are deeply connected to healing and prayer, and the Jingle Dress is considered a "medicine dress".

Sneak Up (Shake) Song

The "Sneak Up" is a traditional song and dance performed at powwows, with significant cultural and historical relevance. The movements of the dancers pay homage to past

warriors who would stealthily maneuver behind enemy lines to mount their attacks. This traditional sneak up song/dance is characterized by deliberate, slow steps and precise head movements, emphasizing the critical role of observation, all synchronized to the rhythm of the music. The structure of the Sneak-Up Dance follows a distinct pattern. It features drum rolls in the first half of each of the four renditions, transitioning into a standard beat in the latter half. During the drum roll segments, dancers actively engage by shaking their bells and executing gestures that symbolize either following or seeking out the enemy. When the beats commence, the dancers advance stealthily toward the center, pausing on the final beat of the song, and then retreating back to the perimeter. Notably, the fourth rendition diverges from the format of the initial three, as it continues on for an additional three or four straight renditions. As a result, the song is performed a total of six or seven times throughout the dance, enhancing the communal experience and the storytelling aspect of the performance.

Owl Dance/Song

The Owl Dance is performed by couples to the beat of either a hand drum or big drum. It is performed at social events and all ages participate.

Dancing Categories and Descriptions

Men's Traditional Dance – Video: [Men's Traditional](#)



*Brad Cichosz (Nakoda Tribe,
Fort Belknap)*

The men's traditional dance is just that: a traditional dance held over from times when war parties would return to the village and dance out the story of the battle, or hunters would return and dance their story of tracking an enemy or prey.

The regalia of the traditional dance is more subdued in color than the other dancers. The outfits are frequently decorated with bead and quill work.

Traditional dancers wear a circular bustle of eagle feathers, representing cycles and the unity of everything. The eagle feather spikes on the bustle point upward, representing a channel between the Great Spirit and all things on earth.

The traditional dancers are usually veterans and carry, as they dance, many traditional items that symbolize their status as warriors. Traditional dancers carry shields, weapons, honor staffs (used to challenge the enemy and

decorated with eagle feathers representing achievements in battle), and medicine wheels (carried as a reminder of the wisdom of the four directions, unity, and for the cycle of all things in the universe).

The traditional step is done with the ball of the foot touching the ground on the 1st beat and the whole foot on the 2nd beat. The traditional dancer's movements are patterned after animals and birds, like the grouse, and may be an imitation of the tracking of the animals themselves.

The men's traditional dance competition is generally divided into four age groups: golden age, men, teen, and junior boys. Dancers are judged on their regalia, how well they keep time to the music, follow the beat of the drum and stop when the music does.

Men's Fancy Dance – Video: [Men's Fancy](#)

The Fancy Dance is a relatively new dance. The brilliantly colored feather bustles are said to have originated in Oklahoma in the early 1900s when promoters of large Native American ceremonials asked dancers to beautify their outfits for the spectators. Also at that time, the dance contest for cash prizes was introduced and contestants started making their outfits more colorful as a result.

The Fancy Dance—danced mostly by boys and young men—is based on the standard double step of the traditional grass dances, but it takes off from there with fancy footwork, increased speed, acrobatic steps and motions, and varied body movements. The Fancy Dance is also a freestyle kind of dance. Dancers do whatever they can to keep up with the music! They, too, must follow the changing beat of the drum and stop when the music does. The Fancy Dance competition is divided into four categories: golden age, men, teen boys, and junior boys.



Walter Runsabove and son Cactus RunsAbove (Northern Cheyenne, Chippewa)

Men's Grass Dance – Video: [Men's Grass](#)



Jarell Gopher (Chippewa - Cree)

Much has been written about the Grass Dance. Borrowed from the Omaha tribe, perhaps in the 1860s, the dance is very popular. Dancer's outfits feature a good deal of colorful fringe, replacing the grasses dancers originally tucked into their belts. Many dancers wear the hair roach, the belt, and the eagle-bone whistle—originally emblems for the Omaha society.

The basic step of the Grass Dance involves the ball of one foot being tapped on one beat and placed down flatly with the next, repeating the action on the opposite foot without missing a beat. Each time the foot is placed flatly on the ground, the weight is shifted to that foot. Dancers should keep their heads moving either up or down with the beat of the drum, nodding quickly, several times to each beat, or moving from side to side. The purpose of this action is to keep the roach crest feathers spinning. To keep the feathers moving constantly is the sign of a good dancer.

Although the Grass Dance is a freestyle type of dancing, dancers must follow the changing beat of the drum and stop when the music does, with both feet on the ground. The competition is divided into four categories: golden age, men, teen, and junior.

Men's Prairie Chicken – Video: [Chicken Dance](#)

The Men's Chicken Dance originated from the Blackfoot Confederacy. This dance style represents the mating dance of the prairie chicken, with each move mimicking the movements and calls of the bird as it searches for a mate. The dance is performed smoothly and carefully, with the dancer moving to the beat of the drum. The Men's Chicken Dance is performed only during a straight powwow song and is associated with a Blackfoot warrior society.



Rod First Strike (Blackfoot / Cree)

Men's Crow Style – Video: [Crow Fair](#)

Today the distinctive Crow men's outfit is often made up of a matching beaded set that includes a headband, armbands, gauntlets, a belt and belt pouch with trailer, and mirror bag. The sparse attire includes matching capes and breechcloths with moccasins.



Crow Style Dancers - Crow Fair

Dancers wear a head roach made with porcupine hair protruding around the edge and two eagle feathers situated directly on top of the head. The bustle they wear in back is a cluster of feathers with a decorated trailer. Bells are also worn on the ankles, and a strap of bells hangs from the waist and is secured at the ankles (not tied at the knees). Face paint is personal and family owned; most having originated in the visions of ancestors. The history

of men's Crow-style powwow dancing in Montana is deeply rooted in the Apsáalooke (Crow) Nation's cultural practices and traditions, which have evolved over time while maintaining their unique and distinct characteristics.

Women's Northern Buckskin Dance – Video: [Northern Plains Traditional](#)



Jaynah Gopher (Chippewa Cree)

In the mid-1800s, when beads were acquired through trade, the style for women's traditional dance outfit was to bead the entire top of the dress. The design of each dress had a symbolic meaning to the individual owner. The dresses are decorated with ribbon work, elk teeth and shells, among other things, and the dancers usually wear decorated moccasins, knee-high leggings, beaded or concho belts, and various pieces of jewelry like hair ties, earrings, chokers, and necklaces. Most traditional dancers wear or carry a shawl, and some carry a hawk or eagle feather fan, or a single feather. This may depend on whether the dance is social or a competition.

Traditionally, women only danced to certain songs or on certain occasions and even then, they were in the background. This is why the Women's Traditional Dance (relatively new as a competition category) basically consists of remaining stationary and bending the knees with a slight up and down movement of the body. At the same time, the feet shift subtly and women turn slightly. It is also acceptable to dance slowly around the circle.

Some traditions hold that this symbolizes the way women turned and looked for their warriors to come home. At certain points in the song, women may hear words that have meaning to them. They may signal their pride and acknowledge the words by raising their fans. Others raise their fans during the honor beats of the song.

Women's traditional dancers must follow the beat of the drum and stop with the music. The dance competition is generally divided into four categories: golden age, women, teen, and junior girls.

Women's Fancy Shawl Dance – Video: [Fancy Shawl Dance](#)



Carrie McNab (Saulteux Cree)

The Women's Fancy Shawl Dance is a relatively new addition to the dance competition. Until recently, women performed their fancy dancing in traditional attire. Some accounts say in the early 1900s, shawls replaced the blankets and buffalo robes young girls traditionally wore in public. In the 30s and 40s, young women would show off the shawls they made by doing some fancy footwork during the dances. Some say that was how the Women's Fancy Shawl dance was born.

The Fancy Shawl Dance outfit consists of a decorative knee-length cloth dress, beaded moccasins with matching leggings, a fancy shawl, and various pieces of jewelry. The dance itself is similar to the Men's Fancy Dance, and the

style is moving toward more movement, especially spinning. Footwork is the chief element of the dance. Fancy Shawl dancers must follow the changing beat of the drum and stop when the music does with both feet on the ground. The competition is generally divided into four categories: golden age, women, teen, and junior girls.

Women's Old Style Shawl

An "old style" fancy shawl dance, also known as "Northern Shawl" or "Graceful Shawl," is a powwow dance style characterized by a focus on intricate footwork and smooth shawling, with less emphasis on elaborate twirls and spins. Dancers in this style move swiftly and gracefully, mimicking the movements of butterflies, while keeping time with the drumbeat. The shawl itself is a central



Sheydon StandingRock (Chippewa - Cree)

element, often adorned with intricate designs, applique, ribbon work, and long fringe that hangs from the edge

Jingle Dress Dance – Video: [Jingle Dress](#)



*Sapphire Ferguson- Jetty
(Dakota/Chippewa)*

According to one account, the Jingle Dress Dance evolved from Mille Lacs, Minnesota. In a holy man's dream, four women wearing jingle dresses appeared before him. They showed him how to make the dresses, what types of songs went with them and how the dance was performed. The dresses made a pretty sound to him. Upon awakening, he and his wife made four of the dresses. The four women who appeared in his dream were then dressed in the dresses. He brought them forth at a dance and told the people about the dream and told them that was the way the women were to dress and dance. From there, the jingle dress spread throughout the Ojibway territories. In the late 1920s, the White Earth people gave the jingle dress to the Lakota, and it spread westward into the

Dakotas and Montana. But until recently, the jingle dress dance had all but died out. Now, interest in the jingle dress is rekindled and women from many tribes are beginning to wear them. The jingle dress is not likely to be mistaken for anything else. The dress is made of cloth with hundreds of metal cones or jingles covering it. Often women use 365 cones to symbolize each day of the year. Jingle dress dancers must keep time with the music and stop when the music does with both feet on the ground. The competition is divided into four categories: golden age, women, teen, and junior girls.

Women's Crow Style – Video: [2024 Crow Fair](#)



Amber Old Horn (Crow)

The history of women's Crow-style powwow dancing in Montana is deeply intertwined with the broader evolution of powwow culture on the Northern Plains. While powwows have ancient roots in tribal ceremonies and social gatherings, their modern form, including the distinct women's dance styles, has a more recent history shaped by cultural resilience and adaptation. The regalia for a Crow-style traditional dancer is distinct. It often includes a beaded buckskin or cloth dress, which is a key component of the Northern traditional style. The dresses are long and adorned with heavy fringe and intricate beadwork that reflects the dancer's family and tribal heritage. The dance itself is characterized by a slow, deliberate, and graceful movement. The dancers move in a steady, rhythmic bounce, staying mostly

in one place. They hold themselves with a sense of pride and dignity, often carrying a shawl over their arm and a feathered fan in their hand. During the "honor beats" of a song, they might lift their fan to show appreciation.

Team Dancers

Team Dancing is another relatively new addition to the powwow/celebration. Generally, three or four members, who make up a team, all dance in the same style. They must synchronize their steps. Team Dancers are judged on their synchronization, their outfits, how well they look together, and how well their steps are put together. Team Dancers, as usual, must keep time with the music, follow the drum, and stop when the music does.



Intertribal Dance

Everyone is welcome to dance in the Intertribal Dance including spectators/tourists. It is not so much a particular type of dance, as it is a dance in which everyone can participate. (Note: this may not be the case among some tribes.) Intertribal Dancers move around the arbor sunwise—clockwise—and everyone is welcome to take part. You don't even need to be in regalia. You can dance in your street clothes. The basic step is the same one used by traditional dancers; the ball of one foot is tapped on one beat and placed down flatly with the next, repeating the action on the opposite foot without missing a beat.

Everyone is welcome to dance in the Intertribal Dance and the Announcer will invite all to dance.

Tiny Tots

This category is for young kids 0-5 years of age. You will see Tiny Tot dancers representing all dance categories.

The Blanket Dance

The Blanket Dance is a means of gaining contributions from the audience for certain causes (e.g., paying the drummers, a family in need, special programs, etc.). Sometimes a blanket dance will be held to give the spectators a chance to donate gifts or money to help defray powwow expenses for a particular reason or person. The lead dancers hold the blanket, by each corner, and walk around the arena. The other dancers may join behind the procession. As the blanket is carried by, the spectators are given a chance to contribute by tossing money into the blanket. Please feel free to participate.

Exhibition Dances

This event gives dancers an opportunity to exhibit their specific style of dancing. It is a chance for participants to dance for the audience without being judged. Usually, each category will have an exhibition dance. For instance, the announcer will call for all the men's traditional dancers to perform.

Switch Dance - mix it up!

It's important to note that the specific rules and traditions of a switch dance can vary depending on the particular powwow and the community hosting it. Dancers will learn movements from the opposite gender's dance style and incorporate them into their own performance while using the opposite gender's regalia. Switch dancers often compete for prize money and while the dancers do their best to represent the particular style of dance they are demonstrating, the overall goal is to have fun and to show off your fancy moves for the audience and judges.

Dropped Eagle Feather Dance

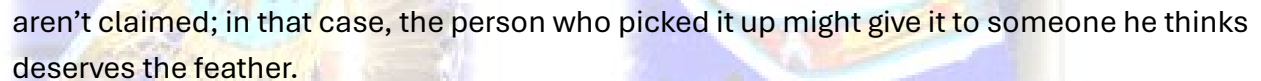


During the Eagle Feather Ceremony, regardless of the tradition in which it is being performed, spectators should stand and remove their hats. Picture taking, with still or video cameras, is not permitted.

To most Native Americans the eagle feather is sacred. So, when a feather falls from a dancer's outfit, the powwow must stop and a special ceremony must be performed.

In some traditions, a fallen eagle feather is treated like an enemy because it is believed the sacredness of the feather can turn against the person who dropped it. The ceremony is necessary to capture the feather, ask its forgiveness and say a prayer over it to make the feather's medicine good again.

The ceremony is sometimes performed by four male traditional dancers, generally veterans (i.e., warriors who have earned the privilege) who dance around the feather. At a certain point in the song, they approach the dropped feather from four directions and attack the feather, usually four times. In some instances, the warrior who actually picks up the feather relates a battle or war story. For most tribes, four is a sacred number, symbolizing, among other things, the four directions. When the feather is retrieved, a prayer is said. If the person who dropped it wishes it returned, it's customary to gift the four dancers, the drum who performed the song and sometimes the Powwow Committee. Sometimes the feathers



aren't claimed; in that case, the person who picked it up might give it to someone he thinks deserves the feather.

Different tribes have different customs. In some traditions, the eagle feather is looked upon as a protector and accidental dropping is similar to the American flag touching the ground. Some traditions simply have a veteran pick up the feather and return it after the prayer and gift.

Honoring Veterans

American Indians serve in the US armed services at a higher percentage rate than any other group and the honor accorded to veterans is something you will see at all powwows.

Veterans are asked to be flag bearers, called upon to retrieve dropped eagle feathers and honored in a multitude of veterans' songs.

The respect shown to veterans is an integral part of Native American cultures, a tradition from times when the welfare of a village depended on the quantity and quality of fighting men. To be a warrior was a man's purpose in life, and the best death a man could have was to fall defending the tribe. To the Native Americans, the good of all outweighed the good of the individual, and veterans were honored because they were willing to give their lives so people could live.

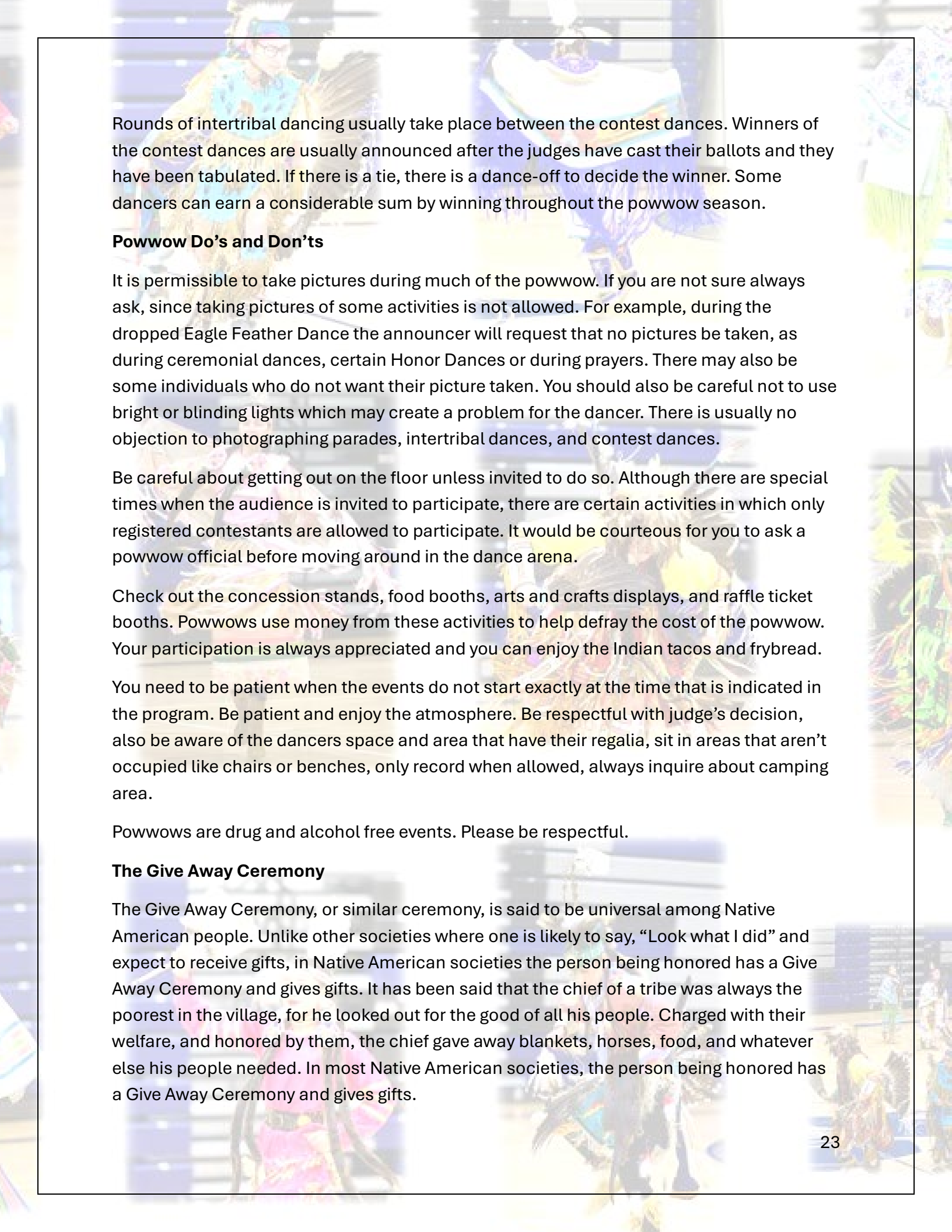
The veterans of today are accorded the same honor and respect as the warriors of times past, and, in some tribes, bravery is still honored as one of the four virtues: bravery, generosity, wisdom, and fortitude. The veterans of today are accorded the same honor and respect as the warriors of times past.

[American Indians in the Military - A Warrior Spirit - Grades 7-12](#)

Miscellaneous

The powwow will open with a Grand Entry, in which all dancers will enter single-file behind the Eagle Staff, Tribal Nations Flags, Veterans Flag, State Flags and the United States Flag and sometimes the Canadian Flag.

The Grand Entry is followed by a flag song. You should stand for this song as you would for the national anthem. This is followed by all dancers joining for several rounds of intertribal dancing. The contest dancing will follow often beginning with the smallest dancers, progressing to the men's fancy dance. Dancers in the four main categories (Men's Fancy, Men's Traditional, Women's Fancy and Women's Traditional) may compete in a series of dances to decide the finalists.



Rounds of intertribal dancing usually take place between the contest dances. Winners of the contest dances are usually announced after the judges have cast their ballots and they have been tabulated. If there is a tie, there is a dance-off to decide the winner. Some dancers can earn a considerable sum by winning throughout the powwow season.

Powwow Do's and Don'ts

It is permissible to take pictures during much of the powwow. If you are not sure always ask, since taking pictures of some activities is not allowed. For example, during the dropped Eagle Feather Dance the announcer will request that no pictures be taken, as during ceremonial dances, certain Honor Dances or during prayers. There may also be some individuals who do not want their picture taken. You should also be careful not to use bright or blinding lights which may create a problem for the dancer. There is usually no objection to photographing parades, intertribal dances, and contest dances.

Be careful about getting out on the floor unless invited to do so. Although there are special times when the audience is invited to participate, there are certain activities in which only registered contestants are allowed to participate. It would be courteous for you to ask a powwow official before moving around in the dance arena.

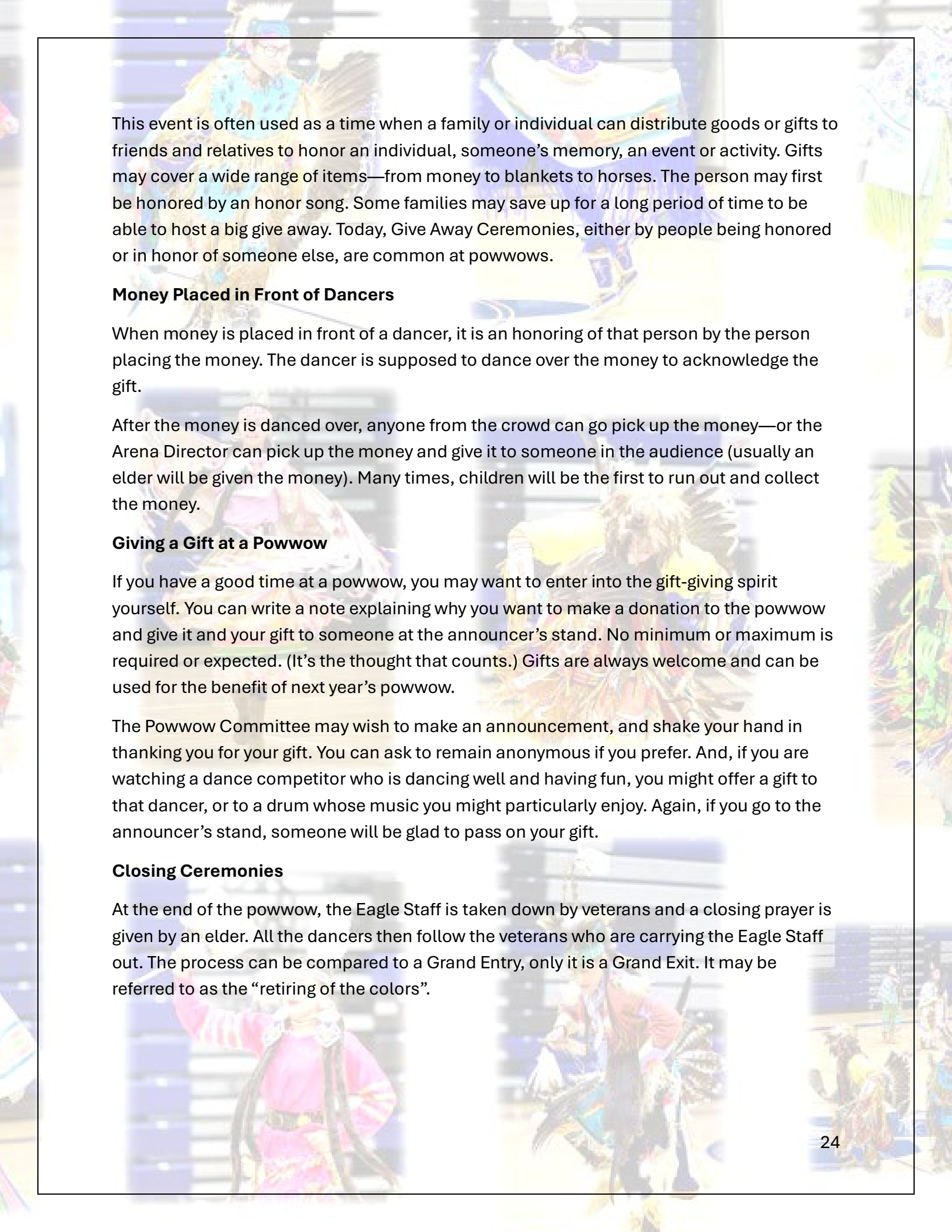
Check out the concession stands, food booths, arts and crafts displays, and raffle ticket booths. Powwows use money from these activities to help defray the cost of the powwow. Your participation is always appreciated and you can enjoy the Indian tacos and frybread.

You need to be patient when the events do not start exactly at the time that is indicated in the program. Be patient and enjoy the atmosphere. Be respectful with judge's decision, also be aware of the dancers space and area that have their regalia, sit in areas that aren't occupied like chairs or benches, only record when allowed, always inquire about camping area.

Powwows are drug and alcohol free events. Please be respectful.

The Give Away Ceremony

The Give Away Ceremony, or similar ceremony, is said to be universal among Native American people. Unlike other societies where one is likely to say, "Look what I did" and expect to receive gifts, in Native American societies the person being honored has a Give Away Ceremony and gives gifts. It has been said that the chief of a tribe was always the poorest in the village, for he looked out for the good of all his people. Charged with their welfare, and honored by them, the chief gave away blankets, horses, food, and whatever else his people needed. In most Native American societies, the person being honored has a Give Away Ceremony and gives gifts.



This event is often used as a time when a family or individual can distribute goods or gifts to friends and relatives to honor an individual, someone's memory, an event or activity. Gifts may cover a wide range of items—from money to blankets to horses. The person may first be honored by an honor song. Some families may save up for a long period of time to be able to host a big give away. Today, Give Away Ceremonies, either by people being honored or in honor of someone else, are common at powwows.

Money Placed in Front of Dancers

When money is placed in front of a dancer, it is an honoring of that person by the person placing the money. The dancer is supposed to dance over the money to acknowledge the gift.

After the money is danced over, anyone from the crowd can go pick up the money—or the Arena Director can pick up the money and give it to someone in the audience (usually an elder will be given the money). Many times, children will be the first to run out and collect the money.

Giving a Gift at a Powwow

If you have a good time at a powwow, you may want to enter into the gift-giving spirit yourself. You can write a note explaining why you want to make a donation to the powwow and give it and your gift to someone at the announcer's stand. No minimum or maximum is required or expected. (It's the thought that counts.) Gifts are always welcome and can be used for the benefit of next year's powwow.

The Powwow Committee may wish to make an announcement, and shake your hand in thanking you for your gift. You can ask to remain anonymous if you prefer. And, if you are watching a dance competitor who is dancing well and having fun, you might offer a gift to that dancer, or to a drum whose music you might particularly enjoy. Again, if you go to the announcer's stand, someone will be glad to pass on your gift.

Closing Ceremonies

At the end of the powwow, the Eagle Staff is taken down by veterans and a closing prayer is given by an elder. All the dancers then follow the veterans who are carrying the Eagle Staff out. The process can be compared to a Grand Entry, only it is a Grand Exit. It may be referred to as the "retiring of the colors".

Handgames (Stick Games)



Ledger Art by Making Medicine - Cheyenne playing Hand Game - 1876

Many Indian tribes throughout the United States and Canada practice some form of the hand game, also called stick game or bone game. It is simply a gambling game of hide and guess. Sides are chosen and one person will hide the two different colored bones. Another person, from the opposing team, is designated as the chooser. The person doing the hiding will try to confuse the chooser into making the wrong choice. The rules may vary from tribe to tribe, but basically, the team who wins the other team's (11) counter sticks is the winner. Hand game tournaments sometimes offer thousands of dollars in prize money.

[Rock in the Fist - Grade One](#)

[Traditional Games Units](#)

Powwow Princess Contests

A relatively new addition to the powwow scene is the Princess Contest. Since Indian tribes do not have royalty, the Princess designation is in name only. The Princess Contest allows young ladies to represent their tribes, communities or cultural groups. The young ladies are judged on their knowledge of culture and customs, communication skills, poise, and some sort of cultural talent. Winners are usually given an honored place at the powwow, as well as considerable respect in their schools and communities. In some locales, the outgoing princess is obligated to provide for a give-away for designated honorees.

Parades, Rodeos and Indian Relay

Other attractions at many powwows are parades and rodeos. This is a chance for the community and participants to show off their outfits, regalia, animals, honored persons, and programs. Many parades have horseback riders, floats, bands, and dignitaries. Rodeos may attract top-notch cowboys from all over the Native American and cowboy world. These two events have become a very popular part of the powwow scene.

[Indian Relay Documentary - Montana PBS](#)



Curriculum Resources

[Bowwow Powwow Model Lesson](#)

[Powwow Trails - Grade 3](#)

[Powwow Circuits - Grades 9-12](#)

[Great Lakes Powwow Guide 2025](#)

[Full Circle for Indigenous Education Powwow Guide](#)

[North Dakota Tourism Powwow Guide](#)

[Wyoming Humanities / Native American Jump Start Powwow Guide](#)

Powwow Calendar

The following is a listing of some Montana Powwows, celebrations, and cultural events that occur throughout the year. The dates are approximate since the days may vary year-to-year, and in some cases, the celebration or powwow may no longer be an active event. For further information regarding exact dates and schedules you might call tribal councils, cultural committees, school districts or the Indian Education Specialists at the state departments of public instruction. Some of the events listed below may not take place on a yearly basis, so please consult the tribes and organizations for further information.

Montana Powwows

Plan to attend one of the many annual powwows across Montana to celebrate the culture and traditions of Native Americans in Montana.

[Powwow Calendar from Montana Tourism](#)

Blackfeet

North American Indian Days – Second week of July

Heart Butte Celebration – First weekend of September

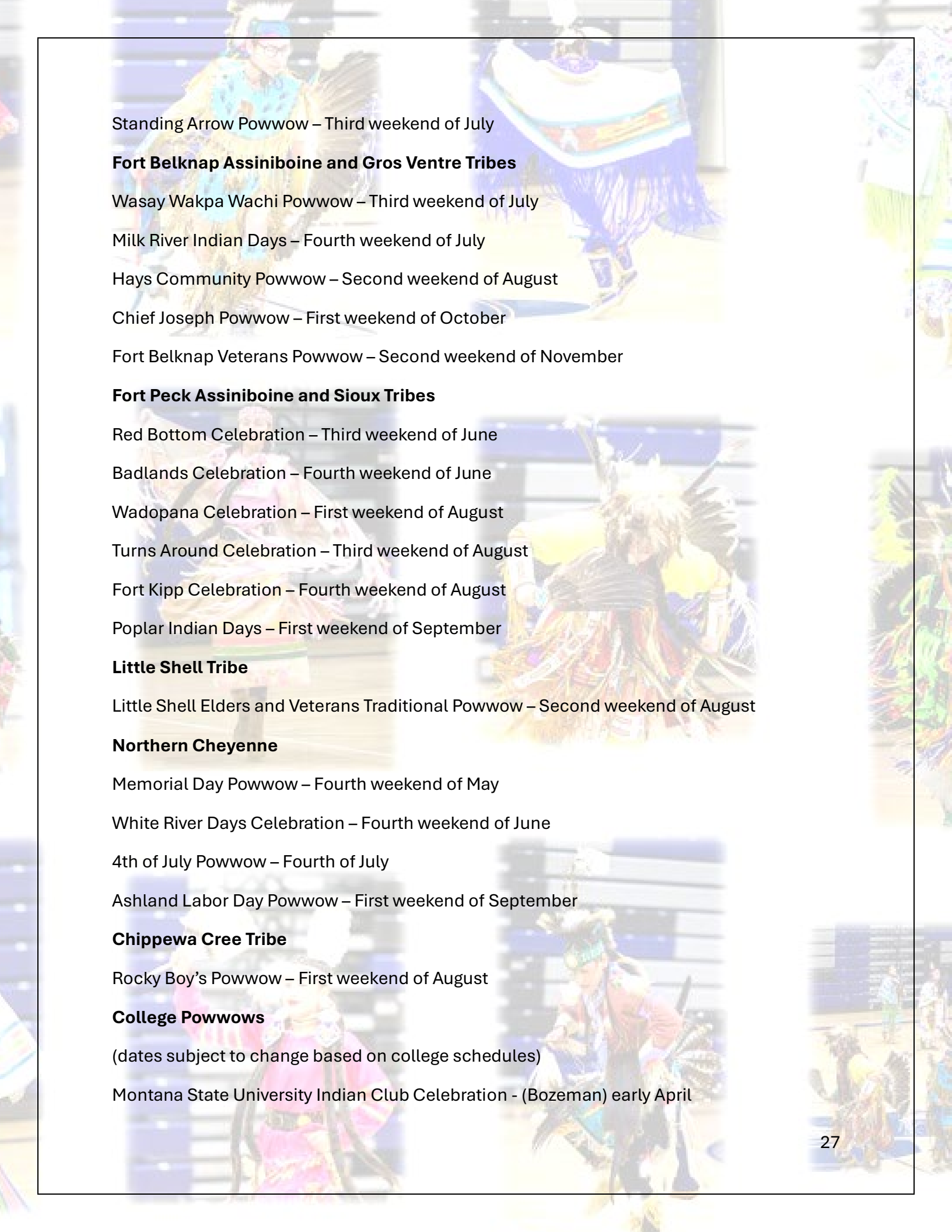
Crow Nation

Crow Native Days – Third weekend of June

Crow Fair and Rodeo – Third weekend of August

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes

Arlee 4th of July Celebration – Fourth of July



Standing Arrow Powwow – Third weekend of July

Fort Belknap Assiniboine and Gros Ventre Tribes

Wasay Wakpa Wachi Powwow – Third weekend of July

Milk River Indian Days – Fourth weekend of July

Hays Community Powwow – Second weekend of August

Chief Joseph Powwow – First weekend of October

Fort Belknap Veterans Powwow – Second weekend of November

Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes

Red Bottom Celebration – Third weekend of June

Badlands Celebration – Fourth weekend of June

Wadopana Celebration – First weekend of August

Turns Around Celebration – Third weekend of August

Fort Kipp Celebration – Fourth weekend of August

Poplar Indian Days – First weekend of September

Little Shell Tribe

Little Shell Elders and Veterans Traditional Powwow – Second weekend of August

Northern Cheyenne

Memorial Day Powwow – Fourth weekend of May

White River Days Celebration – Fourth weekend of June

4th of July Powwow – Fourth of July

Ashland Labor Day Powwow – First weekend of September

Chippewa Cree Tribe

Rocky Boy's Powwow – First weekend of August

College Powwows

(dates subject to change based on college schedules)

Montana State University Indian Club Celebration - (Bozeman) early April

University of Montana Kyiyo Indian Days (Missoula) late April

Montana State University-Northern (Havre) mid-April

Montana State University-Billings (Billings) late April

Urban

Last Chance Community Powwow (Helena) late September

American Indian Alliance Powwow (Butte) mid-September

Photo credits

The Great Omaha powwow dance of the Cheyennes in Montana, circa 1891. Photo by the Wiley Brothers, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division LC-USZ62-101168

Ronan Native American Club students

Thanks to all the dancers for sharing their pictures, photos were also from the collections of Carrie McNab and Mike Jetty.

Now you are ready to hit the powwow trail...[NDN Kars by Keith Secola](#)

Original Version Developed by: Murton McCluskey, Ed.D. (May 1995 / Revised 2009)

Updated December 2025 – Indian Education for All Unit



New Powwow Arbor at Crow Agency