

Pow Wow Now

The Berkeley Indigenous Peoples Day Pow Wow

By John Curl

Origins

When I lived in the Southwest between '66 and '71, I attended a Ute sundance, many Pueblo Indian ceremonies and, when I worked on the To'Hajiilee reservation, many Navajo healing rites that few outsiders have ever seen. But I'd never been to a pow wow. The first pow wow I ever attended I also helped organize, on Berkeley Indigenous Peoples Day 1993.

It's hard to believe that this year will mark our 19th annual pow wow. Little by little I've learned a few things about them. Pow wows are a place where Native people welcome non-Natives to come together, dance, sing, socialize with them, and honor Indigenous culture. There are dancing competitions, with prize money. Great Native food and crafts. The Berkeley Pow Wow has always been just one day, but some of the biggest ones continue for a full week.

On the first Berkeley Indigenous Peoples Day, back in 1992, we commemorated 500 years of Native resistance with ceremonies by Indigenous elders, but we didn't hold a pow wow until our second year. I don't recall whose original idea it was. I've asked around, but nobody seems to be able to trace it to one person. It might have been Millie Ketcheschawno, Muscogee, one of our group's first members, an activist on Alcatraz and a filmmaker. It could have been Dennis Jennings, Sauk-and-Fox, our first pow wow coordinator and a Treaty Council activist. More likely it was many people's idea, just floating in the air until the organizing committee pulled it down.

Many tribes trace pow wows back to their own periodic gatherings, large traditional celebratory feasts, usually after the fall harvest. The oldest continuous annual pow wow today is probably the Quapaw, now in its 138th year in Oklahoma. The term pow wow comes from an Algonquian word for a gathering of people, which began to be used in Oklahoma around 1900.

Diverse tribes have different stories about the origin of pow wow dancing. There are distinct northern and southern traditions. One commonly told origin story among southern tribes holds that the first pow wow dance was the Iruska, a dance of the Pawnee, taught to a man named Crow Feather by a group of spiritual beings who immersed their hands into boiling water and fire. Iruska means "they are inside the fire," but is often translated as "warrior." The dance is usually known today as the Warrior or Straight Dance. The beings held Crow Feather over hot coals, and after he survived, they taught him songs and the dance, and told him to teach them to the people. Then the beings turned into birds and animals and left. On a second night they returned and repeated the

ceremony. At the end, one spiritual being stayed behind and taught Crow Feather to make many of the symbolic items worn today by male pow wow dancers. His “crow belt” is today the back bustle worn by Fancy dancers. His “roach headdress,” made from deer and porcupine hair, represents the fire ordeal: an eagle feather in a deer shoulder blade represents the man standing in the center of the fire; the bone also represents the medicine given to him.

In the early twentieth century the dance spread out of Oklahoma through the Great Plains north to Canada. Dance societies were formed in over thirty Plains tribes, and through the dance former enemies made peace. Pow wows gained momentum after World War II, when they were held as local honoring ceremonies for returning Indian veterans. In the mid-1950s many Native people began traveling between communities, dancing in pow wows and promoting Intertribal culture. But they weren’t very prominent until after the Alcatraz occupation of 1969-’71, when an intense intertribalism revitalized Native culture.

With time and many different tribes adding their individual characters to the dance, the Iruska took a variety of forms: Grass Dance, Fancy Dance, the Northern and Southern Traditional, and many more. At first women did not dance, but today have a wide variety of dances, including the Jingle Dance, Shawl Dance, and forms of the Northern and Southern Traditional.

Pow wow dancing today is based on spiritual values, the commemoration of warriors who struggled for their people, former enemies dancing together, peacemakers and peace, cultural survival and spiritual resurgence.

The Pow Wow Circle

Every year since our first Berkeley pow wow in 1993, I have borrowed a chalker from the city parks department—the kind with wheels that they use for marking softball playing fields—to lay out the pow wow circle. In the late afternoon of the day before the event, our pow wow committee meets on the grassy lawn of Civic Center Park. I bring a rope about 12 paces long, the chalker, and a large bag of powdered chalk. We explain what we are doing to all the high school students relaxing there or playing Frisbee, and once they understand they gladly move to one side. A member of the committee holds one end of the rope in the exact center of the park. We tie the other end of the rope to the chalker and another person pushes it in a perfect circle with about a 60 foot diameter. On the east end of the circle we chalk a turtle’s head, on the west end a tail, and four turtle feet in between. It has now become a special place, the pow wow arena.

Tomorrow the pow wow dancers will be dancing inside the turtle circle, and at particular times the MC will also invite the spectators into the circle to join in certain dances.

The turtle’s head marks the entrance into the arena. To one side are tables for the MC (this year Randy Pico, Luiseño), the arena director (Henry Johnson, Paiute), the coordinator (Gino Barichello, Muscogee), and other organizers. Posted near the MC table are an eagle staff and flags, including the US flag. These are carried around the dance circle by honored elders during the Grand Entry at the beginning of the pow wow, and at the closing. The eagle staff, a high curved wooden staff with eagle feathers attached, is

equivalent to a flag for Native Americans.

At the south end of the turtle circle is the host southern drum, which this year is Rockin Horse, and at the north end is the host northern drum, All Nations. Both are based in the Bay Area. The northern and southern drums represent different styles and traditions.

Continuing around the dance circle are shade canopies where the dancers and their families and friends rest between events. The circle beyond that is a walkway, and finally the outside circles consist of Native vendors selling arts and craft items, mostly hand made, and Indigenous food.

Inside and around the pow wow circle violence, drugs, or alcohol are never permitted. The arena has been blessed with prayer and sage; it has taken on a special atmosphere and become spiritual ground.

Learning how to live in indigenous ways does not come easy to many people of European backgrounds, coming from such a long checkered history of aggressive domination justified as bringing the gifts of civilization to the world. But every year that I have worked on the pow wow I have felt the power of Native people increasingly impact our world with their living philosophy of peace, community, and sustainability.

Our pow wow circle is a turtle because the turtle symbolizes the American continent. On the back of the turtle on our logo is a map of the Americas. The concept comes from an ancient creation story of the Great Flood, when all the animals clung to the turtle's back, then dove down one by one to the bottom of the sea, each returning with a handful of earth which they placed on the turtle until the continent was formed. Native people often call the Americas Turtle Island. Our pow wow committee received the turtle island symbol from a group of North and South American Indigenous elders, who came together in Ecuador in 1991 to fulfill a prophesy that when the eagle of the North and the condor of the South joined together after 500 years, Native people would experience a cultural renewal. With each Indigenous Peoples Day Pow Wow I feel that cultural renewal increasing and changing the world.

The Drums

Pow wows often have two host drums, one Southern and one Northern. All other drums are invited, and some often show up unannounced. At this year's Berkeley pow wow the Host Southern Drum is Rockin Horse, with lead singer Rick Leroy, and the Host Northern Drum is All Nations, with lead singer Michael Bellanger. The drums usually take turns, unless the MC or arena director specifically asks one drum to play a particular song.

Many drums travel from powwow to powwow each week and are in high demand. Many have recording contracts, and each year drum groups are nominated for Grammy awards in the Native American category.

The drum is heartbeat of the pow wow.

Each drum has a lead singer and a second lead. The lead singer is responsible for knowing any kind of song requested by the MC or arena director. When the lead singer sings a line, the second lead usually repeats it in a variant key.

There are two basic styles of pow wow drumming and singing, Southern and Northern. These are not geographical locations so much as different styles and arrangements. Southern singing is in a lower pitch and slower than Northern, which is often in a high fast falsetto. Songs are usually in Native languages. Sometimes the songs are not in words at all, but in vocables, “meaningless” syllables carrying the melody and meaning.

A pow wow drum is considered a sacred instrument. In many traditions it is never left unattended, nothing is ever placed on top of it, and no one can reach across it. It is constructed with a wooden shell covered on both ends by the stretched hide of a deer, buffalo, elk, or steer. The tension on the drum heads tune it, determining pitch and voice. Usually about 26 – 32 inches across, standing off the ground, it is large enough for five to ten people to sit around. There are usually at least four drummers, one for each of the directions. The drummers beat it in unison with hide-covered sticks. They are also singers, and their song arises from their unique blend of voices and drumming. Each group of singers is called “a drum.” Most drums are all men, but some have women members and some are all women. Drummers usually dress in ordinary clothes. Most drum carriers and singers have studied many years learning the traditions and the songs. Many of the songs have been passed down for unknown generations, while some are recent. During a song, there will be occasional “honor” beats, louder and in a slower tempo, which are said to be done out of respect for the drum. A single drum beat supposedly represents Mother Earth and a double drum beat represents human beings. Every pow wow drum is said to contain its own spirit, so the singers must comport themselves with traditional dignity around it.

Numerous stories are told about pow wow drums, that a woman’s spirit lives inside them, that they place the people in touch with their heart, bringing balance, life, and spirituality, that they channel ancestral voices to heal the people and the earth, that the drum carries its beat down into the heart of the planet, and returns carrying the earth’s heartbeat up into the pow wow, summoning the people together and harmonizing them.

The Dancers

Dawn on pow wow day greets the vendors, many coming from long distances, setting up booths displaying an amazing array of craft items and traditional foods. With them is vendors coordinator Hallie Frazer and her clip board, straightening out any confusion about spaces and checking that all the booths are carrying only creations hand made by Native people. Every vendor contributes a piece to the raffle, and winners are announced throughout the day.

Around 10 am traditional elders bless the grounds. Then exhibition dancing begins, from traditions outside the dances of the pow wow proper. People who arrive later miss this extraordinary segment. Native California Indians dance first, since it is their land and we are their guests. Traditional Pomo dancers, feather bands across their foreheads, feathered robes and skirts, bone whistles, barefoot and crouched, stomping deep into the earth, hunting, praying. Then the Aztec dancers, conch shell trumpets to the four directions, long feathers swooping to the beat of the tall upright drum, connecting earth

and sky, keeping the stars, planets, celestial forces in their proper motion, balance and harmony.

The Open Gourd Dancing begins. Because of its particular spiritual significance, no filming is permitted. The dancers, usually with a red and blue blanket over their shoulders, holding metal or gourd rattles and feather fans, find places near the perimeter of the circle. They dance in place or nearby, shaking the rattles in a horizontal motion, lifting their feet to the drums in prayer. The pace of the songs starts slowly then picks up as the dance progresses. It is a healing for warriors, a proud, dignified dance. The Head Gourd Dancer this year is Earl Neconie (Kiowa).

At noon is the Grand Entry, and the pow wow proper begins. All the dancers line up in a specific order behind elders and veterans carrying the Eagle Staff and flags at the entrance to the arena. This in honor of all the warriors of the past and veterans of today who sacrificed for their people. As a host drum begins a special song, the staff and flag holders lead the procession into the arena and around the circle, slowly moving in a group to the drum beat. A powerful spectacle. Then the MC calls an honored elder forward to give an invocation. As the other host drum plays veterans and victory songs, the staff and flags are positioned at the MC table, and the procession leaves the arena.

The dance circle is blessed by an honored elder. The MC introduces the head staff and visiting dignitaries. This year the MC is Randy Pico (Luiseño), the Arena Director Henry Johnson (Paiute) and the Coordinator Gino Barichello (Muscogee).

The drum begins again, for either a sneak-up or a round dance. The sneak-up dance is based on scouting animals or rivals. The drum quickens to pitch, suddenly stops, and the dancers need to stop simultaneously. Intertribal Round dances are joyous social occasions, and all people—non-Native and Native alike—are invited into the arena to dance together. Everyone joins hands into a long circle moving around and around. If there are too many, another circle is formed within the first. The round dance transcends all cultures and brings people together.

The Contest dancing begins, organized around dance style, gender, and age. The judges are elders, usually winning dancers. The contest styles are Traditional, Fancy, Grass, Jingle, and Shawl. Pow wow dances today are the result of over a century of evolution through interaction of the Native people of different tribes and nations.

The Tiny Tots come on first, all under 6, some in their first pow wow, always a joy to watch, and everyone's a winner.

The Head Man and Head Lady Dancers are the first to dance in any song. This is an honor, and head dancers serve as model for all other dancers. This year the Head Dancers are siblings, Daniel and Angelina Swimmer (Lakota).

The Men's Traditional Dance is based on a warrior stalking game or tracking an enemy. The dancer may be wearing a feather bustle and headdress, beaded moccasins, ankle bells, carrying a shield and a dance stick. Men's Fancy Dance is strenuous, with intricate footwork. Fancy Dancers spin and leap, wearing brilliant regalia, and two feathered/beaded dance sticks. Men's Grass Dance involves swaying and dipping motions. It began as an occasion of flattening plains grass for a camp. Grass dancers wear colorful shirts and pants, with fringes and ribbons, ankle bells, headdress, beaded moccasins.

Ladies Fancy Shawl Dance is based on a butterfly in flight, with highly energetic, intricate footwork involving dips, twirls, spins, and other fancy steps. The dancers wear a fringed shawl with vest and leggings usually adorned with sequins or beads, and a feather in the hair. The Jingle Dance dress is sewn with row upon row of small metal cones that chime rhythmically, and dancers wear beaded leggings, carry a feather fan and a plume in the hair. The Jingle Dance is associated with healing.

In between contest dances there may be Honor Songs for members of the community who have crossed over in the last year, and Blanket Dances to raise funds for deserving organizations, families in need, visiting drums, or another worthy cause. Every year there are special dances, such as a Two Step/Owl Dance (Ladies Choice); a Potato Dance sponsored by the Black Native American Association, a Switch Dance (women and men exchanging regalia and dancing in each other's style). At various times more intertribal Round dances are held where all people, Native and non-Native dance together.

Toward the end of the day the final raffle winners are announced. The contest winners are called to be honored and receive their prizes. A Thank-you song for the organizing committee. Finally at 6pm, as the sun hovers low in the west, the Eagle Staff and the colors are retired, and the Indigenous People Day Pow Wow is ended until next year.

Hope to see you there. For all our relations.

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