

155 JINGLE-DRESS  
DANCER, NAVAJO  
NATION FAIR,  
WINDOW ROCK,  
ARIZONA, 1989



**Women's Jingle-Dress.** This dance and dress style is named from the tin, cone-shaped jingles that are sewn in rows around the dress to move and jingle against one another (fig. 155). The dress style, which has some parallels with that of the northern style grass dancers, also began in the early 1900s. One story attributes its origin to a dream by an Ojibwa holy man in Minnesota, in which four women appeared in jingle dresses. From there the dance spread to North Dakota and Montana. Today it has regained popularity among women of all ages.<sup>17</sup>

Two important ingredients of most powwows — honor songs and give-aways — are more significant as social activities than as dance performance. An honor song is sung in honor or in memory of a specific person or group, usually with the person or group's Indian name inserted into a text recognizing their bravery or generosity. When the song is sung, the person being honored is accompanied around the dance floor by those requesting the song or by other relatives and friends who dance to honor the person.

A person may request an honor song for another person (or themselves) and may request also a "Special"—that is, an opportunity to "give away." Give-aways are used to honor a person, or to express appreciation for an honor given to a person. When a person has been honored in some fashion, or there is a special event that someone wishes to commemorate, the person (and/or the person's relatives) will give goods or money to the singers and other people in a spirit of acknowledgment and appreciation. This sharing is a traditional way of maintaining ties and bonds among the people.

Powwows sometimes end with a closing song during which the drum retires and the dancers dance and exit following the drum.

The organization of powwow events today often includes the selection and use of a Head Man Dancer. This stems from early warrior society dance organization and practices. One of these roles is the position of Whip Man. This person was a dancer who carried a whip to make sure that dancers participated when expected or required. Today both Head Man and Head Lady dancers are chosen to lead the dancers.

A selected drum (singing group) may also be invited to serve as the Head Drum or Host Drum to provide selected songs when needed. Other drums are also welcome. A small powwow may have only one or a few drums; some very large intertribal powwows will have twenty or more (fig. 156).



156 TWO DRUMS AT  
THE KEEPERS OF THE  
WESTERN DOOR  
POWWOW, ST.  
BONAVENTURE  
UNIVERSITY, NEW  
YORK, JULY 1992:  
YOUNG NATION DRUM  
(ABOVE) FROM THE  
TONAWANDA INDIAN  
RESERVATION, AND  
WHITE FISH BAY,  
MICHIGAN



The Stoney Reserve is located sixty miles west of Calgary, Alberta, in Canada. Lying at the foothills of the Canadian Rockies, the reserve (as tribal lands are referred to in Canada) encompasses an area marked by the majesty and surrealism of the mountains as they rise out of the buffalo-grass plains (fig. 157). The prairies are peppered with family farms and cattle ranches. Even in the midst of summer you can sense the chill northern winds to come when you see the stacks of baled hay and board windbreaks in the cattle pastures awaiting their calling for the winter months.

The Stoney people are hunters. It is common for tribal members to set up a hunting camp for two or more weeks at a time to hunt, gather, fish, and cook in preparation for winter. Hunting camp for modern-day Stoney is a time of respite and family togetherness—less a necessity than a matter of maintaining a lifeway.

Chief John Snow says that the Stoney people "are members of the Great Sioux Nation who spoke a dialect of the Nakota branch of the Siouan language family." A very large percentage of the Stoney population speaks the language today—from the oldest to the youngest, the people tend to carry on casual conversation in Stoney.

The importance of dance and its place in Stoney society can be seen in a variety of settings on the reserve. From the Trans Canada Highway you can see two Sun Dance lodges that are going back to the earth. Identifiable by the colored cloth that has been hung and tied to the central pole of the structures, the lodges represent one of the most sacred ceremonies of the Stoney. Reflective of self-sacrifice through fasting for the good of all people, and indicative of the fulfillment of an individual commitment by the Sun Dance maker (the person who actually sponsors the ceremony), the ceremonies occur during the summer months and are

integral to the cultural continuity of the Stoney people. Each Sun Dance lasts four days. During the summer of 1992, there were four different ceremonies on the reserve.

The Stoney, not unlike other groups of Native Americans, have a history wrought by misfortune—their land diminished and resources depleted at the hands of non-native governments and unscrupulous individuals. The Stoney's adaptation to their changing circumstances, while maintaining cultural continuity in the face of these pressures, is testimony to their vitality.

During the summer of 1992, the Stoney people hosted the Indian Ecumenical Conference, a gathering of native religious leaders and elders, which included a community powwow. The Nakoda Nation Singers kicked off this small and



157 THE SACRED MOUNTAINS OF THE STONEY PEOPLE ARE THE BACKDROP FOR THE INDIAN ECUMENICAL CONFERENCE CAMPSITE, STONEY RESERVE, ALBERTA, CANADA, 1992



**158** ROUND DANCE ON THE STONEY RESERVE, 1992. A COMMON ELEMENT OF POWWOWS, THE EAGLE-FEATHER LANCE, OR STANDARD, IN THE FOREGROUND IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE "NATIVE AMERICAN FLAG."

intimate event, held primarily for the conference attendees, with the Grand Entry song. Following the Grand Entry were a good range of dances that included intertribal war dances, round dances, the Sneak-up Dance (a men's dance that recalls the courting ritual of the prairie chicken), a Women's Traditional Dance, the Grass Dance, and the Owl Dance (similar to the Two-step among Southern Plains tribes). Although the powwow was brief, it was a further demonstration of the people's commitment to their traditions (figs. 158, 159).

As in any encounter of this nature, non-group members can never really experience the security and identity of the group. Being among the Stoney, however, gives an observer the sense that these people are fully involved in the social structure and maintenance of their nation. With the kind of group integrity and cultural activities that the Stoney and other native peoples continue to protect and practice, native self-expression through dance and music will survive and prosper into the unknown future.

*Fred Nahwooksy*



**159** VERN HOULE DOING THE SNEAK-UP OR CHICKEN DANCE, STONEY RESERVE, 1992



160 WOMEN FANCY-SHAWL DANCERS PARTICIPATING IN THE KEEPERS OF THE WESTERN DOOR POWWOW, ST. BONAVENTURE UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK, JULY 1992

**M**any intertribal powwow songs have no words and use only vocables. Songs for more specific dances or uses, such as flag songs and honoring songs, have texts that relate brave deeds or that encourage the people.<sup>18</sup> Most songs sung for the types of dances done at powwows follow a common song structure. This form is used for intertribal, Round, Rabbit, Two-step, and Omaha or War Dance songs:

*the lead singer starts the song (melodies start high);*  
*the lead phrase is "seconded" (repeated) by the group;*  
*the main body of the song (the chorus) is sung through and repeated;*  
*the lead singer then "picks up" (starts) the song over again.*

If the song has words, it is usually sung through first, using only vocables, with the words sung the second time through the chorus.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast with the ascending contour of many European melodies, Plains Indian songs start high and generally descend phrase by phrase to the end of the song or chorus. Each type of song has a stock vocable and rhythmic ending formula, such as *weyaheyeyeyeyo* for War Dance songs. Powwow songs are generally short; certain songs are traditionally sung four times through, with the chorus or song repeated as a "tail" during soldier-related songs, while intertribal dance songs may be sung any number of times through.



**T**helonius Monk is credited with observing that "talking about music is like dancing about architecture." An attempt to convey or experience dance through writing is no doubt equally elliptic. Nevertheless, four characteristics of Northern Plains dance that indicate both performance and social aspects of the dancing and dances, and of the tribal societies, should be noted. First, the dance is historically male dominated. Male participants have a more prominent role and use more vigorous leg and body movements. In warrior society dances and in earlier traditional powwow forms, women were restricted to dancing in a reserved manner around the edge of the dance area. This reflects the male leadership found traditionally among the Northern Plains tribes in matters of government and religion.

Exceptions, such as the virgins' roles in the Sun Dance or women's performance of the Victory Scalp Dance have their explanation in the stories and in the high respect accorded women, particularly sisters, in Lakota values and ideals.<sup>20</sup> Today, the active style of women shawl dancers and jingle-dress dancers in the center of the arena must also reflect the changing roles and relationships of men and women in non-dance settings (fig. 160).

Second, the central male dance forms are quite individualistic. Although this is often sublimated in the Sun Dance, powwow dancers dress and dance, within the parameters of each identified genre, in individual and individually decided and designed styles. This is an expression of the free mobility of the individual and of the extended family and larger combined family groups or bands in Plains life. Dances such as the Round (circle) Dance are prescriptive only for the basic formation and step; this flexibility can be thought of as reflecting the unity and egalitarianism of the camp circle and social unit.

A third characteristic is that the dance posture and steps are essentially earth-bound and earth-oriented. Traditional steps are flat-footed, and accented movements are generally in an earthward or downward direction. This contrasts directly with the vertical, upward orientation of the epitome of classical European dance, the ballet, and expresses the mother-earth aspect of Lakota and Indian belief.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, the level of difficulty or complexity of the dances allows and provides for general participation. The dance is not professionalized to the exclusion of the people. The best elaborate and subtle details of dress and dance style are recognized and appreciated, but people dance not as dance specialists, but as members of the family and tribe. The few specialized dances, such as the Hoop Dance, that require years of practice remain the exceptions and are usually used as special program entertainment dances (fig. 161).



161 BENITO CONCHA PERFORMS THE HOOP DANCE AT THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION'S FOLKLIFE FESTIVAL ON THE NATIONAL MALL, WASHINGTON, D.C., JULY 1992



**M**usic and dance are central in and to the cultural life of Indian peoples. More than options or accessories, they remain at the heart of cultural matrices and provide an understanding of Indian beliefs and social life. Further, they are among the elements and domains that remain most overtly Indian in Indian peoples' individual and collective lives. Northern Plains song and dance activity continues within both rural reservation and urban Indian communities with visible and vigorous strength.

Moreover, in recent years intertribal powwows of the Plains type have become a vehicle for pantribal expression of Indian identity in all reaches of the United States, from New York State to Los Angeles to the Southwest, even among many members of tribes such as the Navajo and Hopi, for whom the powwow is a totally imported form. The predominant influence in much of this current practice, both in dance and singing styles, is that of the Northern Plains (Southern Plains practices, including the Gourd Dance, war dances, and drumming and singing styles are also spreading, but northern styles seem to be dominant, especially among the young).

Among a widening circle of Indian people, performing and understanding Northern Plains Indian dance and song continue to be a means of guarding and sustaining either specific Northern Plains cultural ways or a more generalized Indian identity within a Western society that usually has little appreciation or understanding of the content and richness of these dance and song traditions. Nevertheless, the creativity and cultural continuity that mark these activities today give clear evidence that Northern Plains dance and song will continue to provide a strong center and outlet for cultural energy in Indian life for generations to come.

- 1 John Collier, *Indians of the Americas* (New York: Mentor Books, 1947; slightly abridged, 1964), p. 137.
- 2 Dance complex refers to the interrelated elements of dance performance, the dance event, and related activities and beliefs associated with sponsoring, performing, and conducting the total event.
- 3 Elizabeth S. Grobsmith, *Lakota of Rosebud: A Contemporary Ethnography* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), p. 52.
- 4 See William Powers, "Comment," *The Singing Wire* 5, no. 3 (1969): 9–10. Also see Lynn F. Huenemann, *Songs and Dances of Native America: A Resource Text for Teachers and Students* (book and tapes), (Tsailé, Ariz.: Education House, 1978), p. 94.
- 5 William Powers, in a paper given at the Society for Ethnomusicology Annual Conference, discusses the courtship function of grass dancing. Strutting prairie chicken was described by Asa Primeaux (Yankton Dakota) in a lecture to one of my classes at Navajo Community College, ca. 1979.
- 6 Frances Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 61 (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1918; reprint, 1972), pp. 101–109.
- 7 James H. Howard, "Notes on the Dakota Grass Dance," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1951): 82–85.
- 8 See Densmore, *Teton Sioux Music*; also see a series of articles on American Indian music by William K. Powers, in *American Indian Tradition* 7–8, nos. 3–4 (1961–62).
- 9 Ben Black Bear, Sr., and R.D. Theisz, *Songs and Dances of the Lakota* (Rosebud, So. Dak.: Sinte Gleska College, 1976), p. 27.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 11 Huenemann, *Songs and Dances*, p. 97.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 14 Parts of these descriptions are based on the author's previous writings. For other similar descriptions of dance styles and categories, see George P. Horse Capture, *Powwow* (Cody: Buffalo Bill Historical Center, 1989); and Black Bear and Theisz, *Songs and Dances*, pp. 15–20.
- 15 See Powers, "Comment," p. 10, and Huenemann, *Songs and Dances*, p. 94.
- 16 See James H. Howard, "Northern Style Grass Dance Costume," *American Indian Hobbyist* 7, no. 1 (1960): 20. The outfits using the V-shaped fringed shirts have been attributed to the influence and use of cowboy shirts and styles, but they may have also come directly from earlier Indian shirt and leggings styles. Men's nineteenth-century Ghost Dance shirts often used a fringed V-shaped yoke, similar to that of the Grass Dance shirts.
- 17 See Horse Capture, *Powwow*, p. 27.
- 18 The best source for ordering recordings of Indian songs of the Northern Plains and other tribal areas is Canyon Records in Phoenix, Arizona, since they sell both their own excellent recordings and those of several of the other significant recent and current recording companies that have produced good Indian recordings (including Indian House Records, Library of Congress, Folkways, Soundchief, and others).
- 19 See Huenemann, *Songs and Dances*, p. 82, and Powers, *American Indian Music* 7: 28–29.
- 20 For an excellent description of, and for insight into, these and other traditional Lakota and Dakota values and ideals, see Ella C. Deloria, *Speaking of Indians* (New York: Friendship Press, 1944; reprint, 1983).
- 21 See Huenemann, *Songs and Dances*, p. 202.