

This is Pow Wow

He stood among the dancers in the grass arena, still and poised, ready to outperform his competition. Finally, the loudspeakers rang out with the beat of the drum, setting the dancers into motion for the last time that year. Slowly, they began to come alive quickening their pace as the singers cried out their song. His steps were perfect, each one placed with meaning, precisely timed with the beat. His feathers bobbed up and down, echoing his movements. Beads of sweat streamed down his painted face and caught at the end of his nose before being thrown onto the moccasin-beaten grass. His bells and headdress shook with each step, the red and yellow colors of his regalia blurring as he spun. His heart raced as the song reached its peak, his hands wet with nervous sweat. He timed his steps, concentrated on the beat, and took a deep breath, preparing for the move that would bring him victory: a complete and perfect handspring.

As his feet came down over his body, thousands of Indians around the arena caught their breath. He pretended not to notice, continuing to pound his moccasins into the ground in rhythm with the drum. As the last beat rang, he froze his body in the stance of a warrior, posing as still as he had before the song began. His chest heaved and sweat poured down his broad, smiling face. I joined my family and the crowd in cheering for him, proud to be his niece. Dancers like him and moments like these are what keep our culture alive. This is why I love the Fourth of July. This is why I love Pow Wow.

Oneida, Wisconsin has long been the grounds for the Fourth of July Pow Wow. The annual celebration draws scores of people from all over Indian Country to the Oneida Reservation, or as we call it, the Rez. Like a great migration, thousands of beaten cars, vans, and trucks roll onto the lawn in front of the Oneida High School. Tires resting on grass, mud caked between the ridges, rusty and decrepit - these are Rez Cars. Their license plates show signs of other reservations: eagles, bears, turtles, and wolves border the numbers. Dream catchers and feathers dangle proudly from rearview mirrors.

Between the rows of cars, dancers are carefully donning their regalia. Hundreds of hours have been spent beading, sewing, and fashioning fans with the hopes of being the most eye-catching dancer in the arena. Feathers are gently removed from their boxes and secured. Bustles, large arrangements of feathers, are carefully tied to the backs and waists of men. Women step into skirts, pull on leggings, and tie their moccasins tight. A pin here, a little duct tape there - this is how the pow wow is held together.

If you close your eyes and listen, you can hear the jingle of the dresses as they're being put on. Someone with bells around his ankles walks by. There is the zipping and swishing of tents popping up for the weekend. Children chase each other, shouting naughty words in Oneida or Menominee. The smell of fry bread - that sweet, crispy dough - floats by. This is Indian food at its finest: an Indian Taco - fry bread with beans, meat, lettuce, tomato, salsa, and sour cream; a Fry Dog - fry bread wrapped around a hot dog; an Indian Burger - buffalo burger in fry bread. Or if you want something sweet, just drizzle honey on plain fry bread and enjoy.

At midmorning, the dancers wait in long lines to register and receive a bib number so the judges can keep their scores in order. Feathers, beads, bells, jingles, shawls, and bones adorn them as they shift their weight back and forth. Dressed in their regalia, they'll move to the beat of a drum and its singers in the heat of Independence Day. They'll dance for pride, points, and, of course, cash prizes.

Grand Entry starts at noon, Indian Time (so about 12:30 pm Central Standard). The emcee calls the dancers down to the east arena entrance to line up. The war veterans stand at the front of the entrance, dressed in their military uniforms, carrying the flags of the nations present. The American flag waves highest. Despite the long, dark history this flag represents, we gather today to celebrate our nation's independence with pride. We gather to honor our veterans, our warriors that represent a race that has dedicated more soldiers per capita to the United States Armed Forces than any other¹. We are proud to be Americans.

The emcee announces which drum has the honor of starting the pow wow and their salutatory beats resound from the speakers. The pow wow committee members rush to line up the dancers behind the veterans, making sure everyone is in order. The Head Dancers, a man and a woman given this special honor, are first in line. Just behind them stand community royalty - Miss Oneida, Jr. Miss Oneida, and Lil Miss Oneida - proudly wearing sashes and crowns covered in beadwork. The elders and adults are lined up next, men first, then women. The long queue ends with teenagers, and, finally, the Tiny Tots, those twelve and under. Within these age groups, the dancers are also organized

by dance category: Traditional, Jingle, Grass, and Fancy. This is tradition; this is Pow Wow.

As the drum rings out, the veterans advance, leading the dancers onto the grass arena. They move slowly around the field until they have formed a great circle that overlaps to fit everyone in. At the center of all of this, the drummers sit around their drum, pounding it and singing with the women standing just behind them. It has always been this way: men drum; women sing. They sit under a shade structure, but their sweat flies onto the stretched leather of the drum nonetheless. The drummers focus on their song with intensity, sometimes closing their eyes as they cry out the timeless words of their Grand Entry song.

Around the arena, everyone stands, hats off, to honor the veterans of the past and present, the tradition of pow wow, and the United States. The drumbeats pour out of the speakers and echo against the forest that encompasses the arena. As the song comes to a close, the dancers solidify in their circle, dancing in place, facing inward, embracing the greatness of this tradition. The final beats echo back onto the arena and the dancers disperse to return to their families and friends, ready for the pow wow to unfold into Flag Songs, Competition Songs, Intertribals, and the Two Step.

The emcee shouts, "Women's Fancy! All women's Fancy dancers come out to the dance arena!" While the ladies don their shawls and adjust their leggings, the emcee explains how these dancers move like butterflies with their shawls extended, twirling and bouncing around the arena. By the time the ladies are assembled, the judges are

standing in the corners, clipboards and pencils in hand, ready to critique and score. The song begins and the women set into motion. Their swift movements and fancy footwork are carefully observed by the judges. Their braids bounce and their bodies twirl as they travel around the arena, dancing to the drum, the heartbeat of mother earth.

The competitions are divided into age groups, gender, and dance category. Fancy, Jingle, Grass, Traditional, and Smoke dancers only compete within their division. For the young dancers, there is the much-adored Tiny Tots competition. All children twelve and under are called out to dance. Mothers and grandmothers carry the youngest ones, dressed in their tiny dresses and feathers. Those just old enough to dance on their own look around nervously as they try to keep the beat. Parents signal instructions from the sidelines. "Spin!" they mouth, and swirl their fingers. When the song ends, the tots scramble toward the emcee. Tiny Tots never forget the five-dollar prize at the end of the dance. As soon as the cash is in their hands, the kids bound out of the arena, looking for treats to buy.

They won't be disappointed - hundreds of vendors form an outer layer around the arena. Tents filled with Indian goods lure the dancers and pow wow goes to shop: beads, feathers, pouches for tobacco, dream catchers, jewelry, and pow wow clothes are all part of the normal wares. Between the merchandise traders sit food vendors, pumping out fry bread and corn soup at rapid pace. The soup is a specialty made with white corn that has been with the Oneida people for generations. In fact, it has been passed down from the same corn that saved George Washington and his troops at

Valley Forge². This white corn, as rich in history as it is in flavor, is ladled into bowls for everyone's enjoyment for the three days of pow wow.

Between competition songs, Intertribals take place. The emcee announces, "Innnntertribal! Evvvvverybody dance!" And when he says everybody, he means everybody. Dancer or not, come to the arena to take part in a dance meant for all people. Native or non-native, dancer or observer, in moccasins or sneakers, join us in the arena. This dance teaches us that these differences don't matter; everyone's feet hit the grass at the same time.

This is my favorite dance, the Intertribal. It welcomes all people to take part in an enduring culture that has overcome genocide, relocation, racism, and cultural repression, yet continues to open its arms to the world. But this is not a dance that highlights the pains of the past. Instead, it serves to bring us together to heal the losses of yesterday and provide hope for tomorrow. The Intertribal is the soul of the pow wow; it symbolizes the strength of compassion and the beauty of diversity. For this song, everyone feels the power of the drum and shakes the ground as one to honor our earth and all of its inhabitants. This is why I love the Fourth of July. This is why I love Pow Wow.

References

1. Williams, R. (1998). Marine creates Native American pow wow to honor veterans. *American Forces Press Service*. Retrieved from <http://www.defense.gov/specials/nativeamerican01/powwow.html>
2. Herzog, K. (2009). Returning to their roots, health. *Journal Sentinel*. Retrieved from <http://www.jsonline.com/news/wisconsin/70248617.html>