



The Evolution *of the* American Indian Pow Wow

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The Washington University in St. Louis Pow Wow is currently in its 27th year. This event will be held on Saturday, March 25, 2017, and is free and open to the public. We invite you to participate in this cultural event celebrating American Indian people and diversity. This Pow Wow brings together more than 5,000 people from the Washington University community, the broader St. Louis community, and dancers, artists, and guests from across Indian country. For

more information, please visit the Kathryn M. Buder Center for American Indian Studies website (www.buder.wustl.edu) or call us at 314.935.4510.

The Indigenous peoples of the Americas were a people strong in spirituality and creativity. American Indian people are traditionally known for using song and dance to celebrate, welcome, honor, and socialize. The drum used during these ceremonies was considered the heartbeat of their souls, allowing them to find balance between themselves, each other, and Mother Earth. Traditionally, we know that hunters celebrated with friends and relatives to share their good fortune



Honorary Head Man and Head Woman leading the Grand Entry at Washington University's 23rd Annual Pow Wow: Honoring Our Cultures While Strengthening Our Communities (2013).

after a successful hunting trip. While the meal was being prepared, the drum played and everyone danced to honor their host. In time, the drumming and dancing became the main focus of the gathering. Friends and families then began to use this time to display their craftsmanship and artwork as well. As such, we see how these traditional gatherings have developed and grown into what is considered a “pow wow.” A modern day pow wow, which comes from the Native word “pauwau” or “pauau,” originated in the 1800s and today is a gathering that

brings together both Native and non-Native people to celebrate Indigenous culture.

From their beginning to the mid-1900s, pow wows remained tribal gatherings, not yet accessible to the public. However, they soon “grew in size and number through the 1960s and 1970s, dance styles and regalia evolved into pan-Indian forms, blending details and traditions drawn from many tribes,” (Reader’s Digest, *Through Indian Eyes: The Untold Story of Native American Peoples*, 1995, p. 379). In addition, many tribes were holding pow wows together, bringing longtime foes together in peace to establish new friendships and celebrate shared traditions (*Through Indian Eyes*, p. 378).

The main aspects of a pow wow are the dancing and dance contests. The dancing originates from ancestral, ceremonial dances. American Indian people learn of these dances, along with creation stories, through storytelling, a central practice of American Indian culture. Elders sit around a fire with children of the tribe, sharing stories and linking the past to the present. As a Hopi man once said, “We perform the Snake Dance for rain to fall to water the earth, that planted things may ripen and grow large; that the male element of the Above, the Yei, may impregnate the female earth virgin, Naasun.” This type of oral history is how and why dancing at pow wows began, and how it continues to develop now.

The pow wow is home to both competitive and noncompetitive dances. The competitive dancing is intense. It is performed by both men and women, adults and children. The most common adult dances include the Men and Women’s Traditional Dance, Men and Women’s Fancy Dance, Women’s Jingle Dress Dance, Men’s Grass Dance, and others, depending on the Head Staff preference. The Head Staff are individuals chosen to run and direct the pow wow the day of the event; it is an outstanding honor to be chosen as a member of the Head Staff. Children also compete in their version of each dance, which is truly a sight to see. Dancers compete in regalia, traditional Native dress passed down from generation to generation, for a monetary award for first place. Dancers spend much



Traditional Dancer preparing regalia for competition at Washington University's 24th Annual Pow Wow: Education: Balance in All We Learn (2014).

time perfecting their regalia, designing it with detailed and unique elements. Some choose family patterns, while others use more modern patterns. Noncompetitive dances, such as the Blanket Dance, Potato Dance, and the Round Dance, are opportunities for community members and guests to participate within the pow wow circle, socializing and celebrating with friends and family members.

The atmosphere at modern day pow wows is welcoming, exciting, and fast-paced. Native vendors and craftspeople line their booths around the pow wow circle to show off and sell their artwork and crafts. Most pow wows have policies that only Native vendors can sell work, respecting economic opportunities for Native people. The food at a pow wow can be described as “comfort” food, including the ever-so-popular “Indian Tacos.” Many pow wows also serve American food, such as hotdogs, pretzels, and hamburgers. Usually, food is provided by a local vendor or a traveling Native vendor.

Attendance at a pow wow varies from a few hundred to several thousand. Pow wows

are considered “family” events, meaning most attendees bring children, grandparents, cousins, and friends. The pow wow usually lasts one full day, but some have been known to last as long as three days, filled with competitive dancing, eating, and celebrating.

As was true when they were first established, pow wows today still hold great importance in the lives of American Indian people. Each pow wow is unique and usually incorporates a theme which honors a certain group of people. Themes may include preserving Native languages, honoring elders, or respecting and preserving Mother Earth. This year, the theme of the Kathryn M. Buder Center's 27th Annual Pow Wow will recognize the significant role of children and families. The theme was chosen in hopes of bringing families closer together,

to gather within the circle and become unified in our American Indian heritage.

GOALS OF THE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY POW WOW

- Offer American Indian students a sense of community, extended family, and healthy relationships while away from home;
- Allow the St. Louis community to experience an intertribal gathering, which also allows the larger St. Louis Native community to gather, share, and celebrate honored traditions;
- Enhance cultural awareness and education for the non-Native person in surrounding communities.

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