

13 Moons Turtle Clan

What is a Powwow?

Powwow time is Aboriginal Peoples getting together to join in dancing, visiting, renewing, sleeping-over, renewing old friendships and making new ones. This is a time to renew thoughts of the old ways and to preserve a rich heritage. In Micmac territory, it's Micmac Time!

Powwow singers are a very important part of the Powwow. Without singers and the rhythm of the drum beat, there would be no dance. Original songs were in the native languages of the singers. Songs are many and varied: fun and festive songs; war and conquest songs; honor and family songs; spiritual songs; songs of joy and songs of mourning; having your Indian name song; and so on.

Dancing has always been a very special part of the North American Indian. Most dances seen today at Powwow are "social" dances which might have had different meanings in the earlier days, but have evolved through the years to the social dances of today.

Origin of the Powwow

It is believed by many Natives that still practice the traditional way of life, whose roots trace back to the beginning, that nature and Native peoples spoke the same language. A common belief is that when the Creator made this world, the Creator gave in nature uniqueness and power to each tribe. Geographically, each Nation enjoyed a very respectful and harmonious relationship with Nature as a guide and provider. The relationship with the Creator was pure and its strength was at its peak, being both visible and heard through the voices of Nature.

In times of need, guidance, and sickness, Indian peoples prayed and gave by means of spiritual fast, sweats, and sacrifice. Prayers were answered through the voices of Nature, thus establishing the Spirit of Nature and man as one. This explains the reasoning for the creation of the clan system and its respect for the balance of Nature. Each clan, like Nature, has a function and responsibility within the Nation. Both Nation and clan affiliation can be seen in color combinations, design and ornaments.

Numbers were also very important with respect to Nature and the Indian way of life. The number 4 is held sacred by most tribes in respect to the Four Cardinal Directions, as well as the Creator, in the context of the symbol of the cross. The cross has always been synonymous with the Great Spirit, even before the first Christian missionaries came to North America, and is referred to by Aboriginal peoples as the "Medicine Wheel." The Spirit of Power is held sacred in the combination of certain colors, designs, and numbers.

Eventually, songs and dances evolved around the imitation of animals and the natural forces that were held sacred. Many of these sacred dances, because of their religious significance and spirituality, are not performed in public. The Sun, Eagle, Buffalo, and Medicine dances are just a few of the many sacred dances that are still practiced. Any sacred object of ceremony of power should not be brought into the public or even discussed in open conversation. War, medicine and protection can also be included here, with the consequences being grave if respect is not kept. When early European explorers first saw these sacred dances, they thought "Pau Wau" referred to the whole dance. Actually, its Aboriginal definition refers to the medicine people and spiritual leaders. As more Nations learned the English language, they accepted the "Powwow" definition.

As mentioned before, each Nation maintained uniqueness and power geographically, which resulted in conflicts over hunting territories. Indian wars were controlled by medicine people and spiritual leaders. One simply could not go out and fight his enemy on his terms. There were ceremonies of preparation to protect and guide the warrior. Inspiring songs, warrior speeches, and war dances were preformed.

When going into war, the leaders were distinguished by the paint they wore, and the numbers and color markings on their feathers. There was mutual honor and respect even for the enemy in battle.

It is said that in taking the life of the enemy, one captures his spirit. It is still believed that this spirit belongs to the victor along with his power. In the “Physical World” the victor gives and feeds the spirit of the victim until he enters the “Spirit World.” Then the victor guides the victim into the “Spirit World” of our ancestors. That is why, even today, Elders warn against arguing or fighting with a distinguished warrior.

Upon the return of the warriors, feasts for the captured and mourned spirits were held, and victory dances were performed. In the dance, re-enactments of brave deeds during battle were performed in a stately manner reminiscent (recall to memory) of the tracking of the enemy.

From this early interpretation came the origin of the war dance in its spiritual form of expression, demonstrated through footwork, smoothness, and agility. There are many beliefs and customs that are still practiced today that were and are still an integral part of the Powwow.

Many of the old war dance songs are still being sung, but are considered honor songs. In some traditional communities, new songs honoring the veterans and their deeds of valor are still being composed. Through these songs, and the spirit of the drum, are communicated ancestral values, cultural integrity, solidarity, and personal relationships for future generations. Our youth is our future, and our elders are our guide.

