

More Than Just a Gathering: The Purpose of a Pow Wow

What is a Pow Wow?

A pow wow is an inter-tribal gathering of indigenous peoples that features traditional drumming, dancing and singing, with Native food and crafts. It's also an important way for Native people to share the richness and diversity of traditions, and to celebrate cultural connections.

How Were Pow Wows Started?

The term "pow wow" is from a Narragansett word meaning "meeting." Since time immemorial, tribal nations have regularly held their own ritual gatherings, where dancing represented important cultural or spiritual practices. However, when indigenous peoples were forced to relocate to reservations, they often then had to live close to Native people from different communities, some of whom may have even been enemies. The different tribes had to figure out how to get along for survival.

In addition, many of their traditional dances were outlawed. While many Native people continued to dance their traditional dances in private ceremonies, over time new dances emerged that were more social in nature. One such example is the grass dance, which started among various tribes in the Plains. As different tribes shared their dances, these inter-tribal celebrations became a way to showcase the diversity and vitality of tribal arts and traditions.



Native American Grass Dancers at the 2007 National Pow Wow.

Photo Credit: Cynthia Frankenburg, Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of the American Indian. Photo in the Public Domain.

What Does Native American Drumming Mean?

Drumming is also an important part of pow wows. The drum has cultural significance for many Native people, as Paul Gowder, the owner and founder of PowWows.com explains:

"One of the most important things in the life of a Native American is the Drum. Our whole culture centers around the Drum. Without the Drum and the singers around it, the Native Americans could not have pow wows. The Drum brings the heartbeat of our Earth Mother to the pow wow for all to feel and hear. Drumming brings everyone back into balance. Whether dancing, singing or just listening, people around the Drum can connect with spirit. It is no wonder the Drum should be treated with great respect."

What Do Their Songs Mean?

While some songs are sung in a tribal nation's language, others are sung in "vocables," so singers don't have to know a tribe's language to sing. Even if a song uses vocables, it usually has a special meaning for those who are familiar with it. Drum groups are led by a head singer who leads the songs and chooses the members of the group. Sometimes, the head singer will "open the drum," meaning that other members of the group can take lead. Women also join in the singing, and they often sit behind the men at the drum.



Mandaree Singers at a Pow Wow in 2002.
Photo taken by Hansen Berlin.



Photo of a **Native American shawl dancer**, taken at the 2015 Green Corn Festival, held annually at the Institute for American Indian Studies. This event is not an official pow wow, but is an educational event that teaches attendees about the history and significance of traditional Native American dancing.

What Are the Dance Competitions?

Often, dancers compete and are judged for their dancing skills and regalia, or ceremonial clothing. Dancers compete for cash prizes in categories based on dance styles. Men's dances include: grass dance, fancy dance, smoke dance, and traditional dance. Women's dances include: buckskin dance, cloth dance, jingle dress dance, and shawl dance.

What Is a Round Dance?

A round dance is an open dance in which anyone can join. Listen for the Master of Ceremonies (MC) to invite everyone to join. It's best to watch what the others are doing, and follow their lead. You'll step to the drum beat.

Who organizes a Pow Wow?

Pow wows are organized with a lot of hard work by a pow wow committee. They plan for months ahead of time. They have to hire the MC, the drummers, the singers, plan for food, and secure prizes if there will be any competitions.

What Happens During the Pow Wow?

All pow wows begin with a Grand Entry. Flags are carried in, and they may include tribal flags, the U.S. flag, and POW flag. Veterans and head dancers lead the procession, and an opening prayer is said. There may be an open dance to which the public is invited to join.

What is Pow Wow Etiquette?

When you're at a family gathering for the holidays, there are probably certain rules that you're expected to follow. For example, perhaps you're supposed to say "please" and "thank you" if you want someone to pass a dish that you can't reach. We call these types of rules "etiquette," which means how you should behave in order to be respectful and polite. In different situations there can be different etiquette, and there is specific pow wow etiquette. If you plan to visit a pow wow yourself, here are some things you should keep in mind, in order to be polite:

- Always stand respectfully, and remove your hat, when asked to do so by the MC.
- Never touch a dancer's regalia without permission. Elements of regalia often have cultural or religious significance, and may have been handed down through a family for generations.
- If you see a feather on the ground, please notify the nearest staff member. Do not pick it up! It could be a feather from a dancer's regalia, or intended for ceremonial purposes.
- If you plan to take pictures, please ask permission before photographing dancers in their regalia or before recording specific dances.
- Please only join in dances when the MC invites the audience to participate and never enter the dance arena unless invited.
- Above all, remember that this is a celebration. Have fun, try some new food, and enjoy the music.



Photo of **1983 Omaha Pow Wow Grand Entry**, taken by Dorothy Sarah Lee. Photo in the Public Domain.

For more information on the history of pow wows, appropriate pow wow etiquette, and examples of dancing, drumming and regalia, visit <https://www.powwows.com/what-is-a-pow-wow/>. Powwows.com is a great resource to learn all about these cultural events!

Connecticut Pow Wows

If you'd like to experience a pow wow yourself, there are several held throughout the Northeast that are open to the general public. Here are some of the annual Connecticut pow wows.

- Schemitzun (Pow Wow of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation) - typically held in late August at Mashantucket (Ledyard), CT.
- Wigwam Festival (Pow Wow of the Mohegan Tribe) - typically held in mid-August, at Fort Shantok in Uncasville (Montville), CT.
- Rising Sun Pow Wow (Inter-tribal) - typically held in April at the UCONN campus in Storrs, CT.

Questions to think about:

1. Are there times in your family's tradition in which you wear special clothing? When?
2. Are there similar traditions of dancing and singing in your community?



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The Institute for American Indian Studies Museum & Research Center preserves and educates through discovery and creativity the diverse traditions, vitality and knowledge of Native American cultures.