

A GUIDE TO  
**POWWOW**

History, Customs, and Etiquette





*Brought to you by:*

## **WYOMING HUMANITIES**

We invite Wyoming to explore the stories and ideas that shape us. Through grants and programs, we support Wyoming's rich cultural and creative sectors.



## **NATIVE AMERICAN JUMP START**

Our mission is to provide opportunities of growth and success for Native American individuals and families through education and employment.









## INTRODUCTION

---

The content of these pages aims to provide powwow attendees with valuable insights into the events and activities at numerous area powwows and celebrations, enhancing their understanding and enjoyment. Given the variability of customs across different cultures, this booklet should only serve as an introductory guide rather than an authoritative directory. Its purpose is to furnish readers with resources to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of powwow history, events, activities, and planning.

Wyoming Humanities and Native American Jump Start extend our sincere gratitude to those individuals whose contributions of materials, information, and expertise have made this guide possible. Their invaluable assistance has been indispensable in bringing this project to fruition.

### **HISTORY OF THE POWWOW**

Powwows serve as gatherings where dance, song, and celebration intertwine. While these events occur across the United States and Canada, this guide primarily focuses on powwows in the northern United States.

The origin of the term "powwow" is a topic of debate among scholars and historians. One theory suggests that it originated from the Narragansett word "powwaw," which referred to a spiritual leader or healer in certain Native American tribes of the Northeastern United States. Another theory proposes that it is derived from the Algonquian word "pauwau," which describes a gathering or meeting of people for various purposes, including religious ceremonies, celebrations, or council meetings.

Over time, the term "powwow" came to be associated with the gatherings and celebrations of Native American communities across North America. These events often involve dancing, singing, storytelling, and socializing, serving as important cultural and communal gatherings. Today, powwow is widely recognized as a term for these vibrant and dynamic gatherings holding a special place for Native peoples to come together, reconnect with old acquaintances, and forge new friendships.

In earlier times, hunting parties shared their bounty with friends and relatives, with dancing evolving as a

## INTRODUCTION

way to honor hosts during meal preparations. Over time, the focus shifted towards dance, becoming the central element of these gatherings. Participants began showcasing their craftsmanship, from weaving to quill work, while also incorporating traditional practices such as namings and honoring.

While powwows have evolved, they remain pivotal in preserving tribal traditions and cultures. The powwow season in the Greater Yellowstone area typically kicks off as early as March and continues through September. Families often embark on a circuit, camping out and immersing themselves in the festivities, which include dancing and singing contests, feasting, and various cultural activities.

### TRIBES AND HISTORY OF THE GREATER YELLOWSTONE REGION

Yellowstone, often perceived as an untouched landscape, has been inhabited by humans for tens of thousands of years, with Indigenous peoples shaping history and traditions as rich as the terrain itself.

To various Indigenous groups, Yellowstone holds different names: the Crow call it the "land of the burning ground" or "land of vapors," the Blackfeet as "many smoke," the Flatheads as "smoke from the ground," and the Kiowa as "the place of hot water."

Established as a National Park almost 150 years ago by President Ulysses S. Grant, Yellowstone National Park stands as a global symbol of natural splendor and conservation. Yet, its human history extends far beyond this relatively short span. The myth that Indigenous peoples feared Yellowstone and its natural features was a narrative used to drive tourism to the park. For millennia, hunter-gatherer societies interacted with Yellowstone, discovering, exploring, and utilizing its resources long before Euro-American settlers arrived. Today, ongoing research continues to unveil the rich history of Yellowstone's earliest inhabitants.

While many tribes visited Yellowstone seasonally, the Tukudika, or Sheepeaters (Mountain Shoshone), were its only known permanent residents. Named after the bighorn sheep they closely followed, the Mountain Shoshone

relied on these animals for sustenance, crafting bows from ram's horns using Yellowstone's geothermal features. Additionally, Yellowstone's hydrothermal features held ceremonial and medicinal significance for many tribes, with origin stories linking sites like Dragon's Mouth to the creation stories of the Kiowa.

The National Park Service has identified twenty-seven tribal nations as having cultural ties to Yellowstone. Tribes such as the Arapaho, Bannock, Blackfoot, Cayuse, Cheyenne, Coeur d'Alene, Crow, Nez Perce, and Salish are known to have utilized Yellowstone's resources over the past several hundred years. Modern trails maintained in the park are believed to be traced back to Indigenous routes dating to roughly 12,000 years ago. Treaties issued in the 19th century are still upheld, offering support to tribes to access resources within the National Park and surrounding forest lands.

### TRIBES OF THE NORTHERN GREAT PLAINS

The tribes of the Northern Great Plains share a deep connection to the region's vast expanse of rolling prairies and grasslands. Their rich cultural heritage is marked by centuries of adaptation to this unique landscape. These tribes have traditionally lived with nature, relying on the buffalo herds that once roamed the plains for sustenance, clothing, and shelter.

Their cultures are characterized by strong spiritual beliefs, communal living, and intricate social structures. The traditional way of life revolves around seasonal cycles, with activities such as hunting, gathering, and ceremonial practices deeply ingrained in their daily routines.

Tribes include: Bannock, Blackfeet (Siksika), Cree, Crow (Apsáalooke), Dakota, Gros Ventre (Aaniiih), Lakota (Sioux), Nakoda (Assiniboine), Northern Arapaho, and Shoshone

### POWWOW TODAY

Organized powwows emerged in the mid-20th century as a response to tribes becoming more homogenized in the era of Indian Boarding Schools and being relocated from reservations and reserves to major cities. Modern-day powwow features numerous styles with an

element of competition. While competitive dancing and singing for prize money is a recent development, not all participants engage for rewards; for many, it's a celebration of culture and heritage.

Powwows held throughout the United States and Canada represent the combination of numerous tribal dances and ceremonies. Each dance style has an origin story or a story it tells. For example, the Grass Dance originated with the Blackfoot Confederacy, where revered men were asked to bless new homesites and dance down the grass when the tribe relocated throughout the Plains. However today, you will see dancers of many other tribal nations dancing grass. This is just one example of a style that has been shared among tribes and is now featured in powwows.

The individuals that plan and put on a powwow are, together, called the Powwow Committee. Powwow committees, supported by tribal organizations, non-profits, and sponsorships, fund the competitive aspects of a powwow, with a planning period that can last a year or more. Each powwow is slightly different, but the day's events usually begin with a grand entry procession.









## THE GRAND ENTRY

---

The powwow initiates with the grandeur of the Grand Entry, a collective participation of all dancers. The event is called to order by an MC who asks the honored drum to begin.

The revered eagle staff held by a veteran leads the Grand Entry, which symbolizes tribal nations, tribal elders, and Indigenous ways of life. Accompanied by esteemed veterans as flag bearers, the procession is ordered by age, gender, and social standing, which includes Golden Age, Men's Traditional, Grass Dance, and Fancy Feather dancers—Women's Traditional, Jingle Dress, and Fancy Shawl dancers. Teen

and youth dancers follow in the same order. Depending on the regional location, some powwows will feature styles unique to the area. Dancers showcase a variety of stylistic interpretations moving gracefully to the rhythm of the drum when entering the powwow arena.

As the dancers gracefully move within the arena, they collectively form a circle, symbolizing the sacred circle of life. This action connects participants to their ancestors, signifying an enduring commitment to uphold traditional values.





## HONORING VETERANS

---

Native Americans hold veterans in the highest regard and reverence, bestowing honors like asking veterans to lead the Grand Entry procession in carrying the eagle staff and flag during powwows and celebrations. Community respect for veterans is deeply ingrained in Indigenous cultures, stemming from traditions where the well-being of a community relies on the strength and valor of its warriors. Native American men and women enlist and serve in the armed forces holding the highest statistic of veteran service compared to any other U.S. demographic or ethnicity. Prioritizing collective welfare over individual interests, veterans are revered for their willingness to serve and sacrifice for the greater good.

## CONTESTS, JUDGING, AND RULES

---

### SELECTING JUDGES FOR A POWWOW

The process of selecting judges is crucial for ensuring the smooth functioning of a powwow. In some instances, the powwow committee appoints head judges, who may also offer recommendations for singing and dancing judges. It is imperative that judges possess comprehensive knowledge of the contest, dance steps, and songs scheduled for the event.

Eligibility for judging requires prior experience as a singer or dancer, coupled with a deep understanding of the contest's rules and regulations. Judges hold the role in high regard, recusing themselves of any conflicts, such as if a relative is participating in the contest, they are asked to judge.

The head dance judge works with the arena director, assuming responsibility for organizing the Grand Entry. They appoint different judges for each contest session and resolve any disputes that may arise regarding judging or scoring. Their expertise ensures the fair and efficient execution of the powwow's competitive elements.



## CRITERIA FOR JUDGING DANCERS:

During each dancer's performance in the arena, judges assess contestants based on the following criteria:

- Participation in the Grand Entry, with additional points awarded for this segment.
- Complexity and finesse of the dancer's footwork and individual style.
- Ability of the dancer to maintain synchronization with the drumbeat. (Disqualification may occur if the dancer fails to stop on the final drum beat.)
- Quality and presentation of the dancer's attire (referred to as Regalia, not costume), including overall appearance and demeanor.
- Observation of any instances where a dancer drops or loses part of their Regalia, which may result in disqualification. Additionally, points may be deducted if the dancer is unprepared or not fully attired for the contest.

## THE DRUM, SONGS AND SINGERS:

To those who own and play it, the drum is more than just a musical instrument; the drum is a living entity with its own powerful spirit. Through ceremony, singers earn blessings through songs, namings, and rights. In some traditions, the drum symbolizes the heartbeat, while in others, it invokes the spirit of thunder. Regardless of the tradition, singers treat the drum with respect, considering it a sacred object that deserves special care. Many tribes believe that items should never be placed on the drum and it is unacceptable to reach across it.

Drums can come from various sources and styles depending on tribal preferences. Traditionally, drums are made of hides wrapped around a wood frame and attached with rawhide strings. Singers may sit at a communal drum or opt for a hand-held drum, depending on song requirements.

When the drum is first struck, drummers may sing a special warmup song composed for the instrument at the beginning of a powwow celebration. Like a heartbeat warming up, the song starts slowly and then beats more vibrantly as the singers move further into the song. Various song types are performed for distinct occasions, including Grand Entries, dance contests, and honoring ceremonies. These songs serve diverse purposes and exhibit various tempos, lyrics, and emotional expressions. Despite variations, powwow songs generally adhere to a consistent structure.

The lead singer assumes the responsibility of selecting songs based on needs. To begin a song, the lead singer may strike the drums once to signal the start to dancers and fellow singers. As the initial voice is heard, the lead singer begins with a solo rendition of a phrase or tune called the lead or push-up. Subsequently, the remaining singers echo the lead with a second part. Following this order, the entire group joins in singing the melody (first part) and its repetition (second part) together. The lyrical order will repeat in even-numbered intervals depending on how the lead singer determines the length of the song. Participants recognize the completion of a song and will stop on the final drum beat in succession with the drum.



## DANCE STYLES YOU CAN SEE TODAY

### **MEN'S TRADITIONAL DANCE:**

The Men's Traditional Dance is deeply rooted in the warrior traditions of Native American cultures. The men's traditional style closely models the movements of animals. Dancers wear traditional regalia adorned with intricate beadwork, feathers, and other symbolic elements. Their movements are deliberate and grounded, reflecting the hunting, tracking, and storytelling traditions of their ancestors. This dance often serves as a visual narrative, with dancers portraying stories of bravery, honor, and resilience through their movements.





502

## DANCE STYLES

### **MEN'S GRASS DANCE:**

The Men's Grass Dance originated as a healing dance among the Plains tribes and is characterized by its fluid and graceful movements. Dancers wear regalia adorned with long, swaying fringes that represent the prairie grass. Their movements are smooth and flowing, symbolizing the gentle sway of the grass in the wind. The grass dance is a beautiful and contemplative style that honors the connection between humans and the natural world.









**MEN'S CHICKEN DANCE:**

The Men's Chicken Dance is a lively and energetic style inspired by the mating displays of the prairie chicken. Dancers wear colorful regalia adorned with feathers and vibrant patterns, mimicking the plumage of the bird. Their movements are characterized by rapid footwork, spins, and leaps, symbolizing the courtship rituals of the prairie chicken. This dance is a captivating display of agility, creativity, and skill.

**MEN'S FANCY DANCE:**

The Men's Fancy Dance is a dynamic and acrobatic style characterized by fast-paced footwork, spins, and leaps. Dancers wear brightly colored regalia adorned with fringe, sequins, and other eye-catching embellishments. Their movements are athletic and fluid, often incorporating elements of modern dance and gymnastics. The fancy feather dance is a crowd favorite, known for its high energy and impressive displays of athleticism.





**WOMEN'S CLOTH DANCE:**

The Women's Cloth Dance is a graceful and elegant style characterized by flowing movements and intricate footwork. The women's cloth dance closely follows the practice of honoring warriors when successfully returning from war. Dancers wear regalia made of cloth adorned with ribbonwork, beadwork, and other decorative elements. Their movements are smooth and controlled, reflecting the beauty and grace of the traditional cloth dance. The cloth dance celebrates femininity, tradition, and cultural heritage.



### **WOMEN'S BUCKSKIN DANCE:**

The Women's Buckskin Dress Dance is a traditional style that pays homage to the ancestral traditions of Native American women. Dancers wear regalia made of buckskin, decorated with beadwork, fringe, and other embellishments. Their movements are deliberate and grounded, reflecting the strength and resilience of Native American women. The buckskin dress dance is a powerful and dignified style that honors the traditions and customs of Indigenous cultures.





**WOMEN'S JINGLE DANCE:**

The Women's Jingle Dance originated among the Ojibwe and other Great Lakes tribes. Dancers wear regalia adorned with rows of metal cones, or jingles, which create a distinctive sound as they move. Their movements are graceful and rhythmic, symbolizing healing and prayer. The jingle dress dance is often performed in honor of loved ones or to seek healing for the community, making it a deeply spiritual and meaningful style.



### **WOMEN'S FANCY DANCE:**

The Women's Fancy Dance is a vibrant and energetic style characterized by fast-paced footwork, spins, and leaps. Dancers wear colorful regalia adorned with sequins, fringe, and other eye-catching embellishments. Their movements are athletic and dynamic, often incorporating

elements of modern dance and gymnastics. The fancy dance is a spirited and captivating style that captivates audiences with its high energy and expressive movements mimicking the movements of birds and butterflies.



## POWWOW ETIQUETTE

---

### Listen to the Master of Ceremony (MC)

- The MC announces to all dancers, drum groups, and spectators what is going on at all times in an entertaining and informative manner.
- Inter-Tribal Dances are open to all and will be announced by the MC. Join in and follow the leaders!
- The MC will also tell you when to stand and remove head coverings for special songs (Grand Entry, Flag Songs, Veteran Songs, Memorial Songs, etc.)
- Photos and videos are not always permitted. The MC will let you know when it is not appropriate to take pictures or audio.

### Grand Entry and the Arena

- The Eagle Staff leads the Grand Entry, followed by flags, honored guests, and then the dancers, while the host drum group sings an opening song.
- Those who can are asked to stand and remove hats during the Grand Entry and flag song.

- The dance arena features a circle, which is usually blessed and reserved for the dancers unless the general audience is invited in. Avoid walking across the arena and use the outer perimeter.
- The seats closest to the arena are reserved for dancers and singers. Dancers will leave blankets on the benches or seats to reserve their place. Don't move the blankets or sit on them.
- There might not be enough seats for the public, so you can bring a lawn chair or a blanket to sit on.

### Elders, Dancers, and Drum Respect

- Elders hold a significant role in Indigenous cultures. When attending powwows, keep the well-being of elders in high regard.
- Dancers wear regalia which is part of their cultural identity featuring important cultural patterns and designs. They are meticulously handmade for ceremonial purposes—please refrain from regalia “costumes.”
- Never touch a dancer's regalia! Many of the pieces of a dancer's outfit have special meaning and can be cherished family heirlooms.





- If you locate a piece of regalia or dropped feather, do not pick it up. Instead, stand near the item and notify a staff member or the Arena Director immediately.
- Avoid walking or running between the drum and the chairs surrounding it. Respect the drum and singers by not sitting down uninvited or removing chairs from the circle.

### Be Culturally Aware

- Powwows are fun events celebrating American Indian traditions. The grounds should be treated with courtesy.
- Alcohol, drugs, or being under the influence is never permitted on powwow grounds.
- If you see trash, including cigarette butts, please pick it up and throw it away.
- Some tribes consider finger-pointing poor manners. Use your eyes or nod your head to direct attention.
- Dress appropriately, no foul language/imagery on clothing. Do not come to the grounds barefoot.

### Taking Pictures and Shooting Video

- Singers and dancers generally allow you to take photographs of them or with them. However, out of courtesy, be sure to ask first.
- Refrain from blocking elders or the announcer's stand when shooting media.

### Supporting the Organization

- If you can, please donate during the blanket dance by dropping money onto the blanket. These funds will benefit the powwow hosts or intended designee.
- When encouraged by the MC, during a designated song or dance, it is customary to donate money to the drum as a sign of appreciation.





---

# THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO PARTICIPATES IN THE SUCCESS OF THE TETON POWWOW

---

## CREDITS

### Co-authors:

Emy diGrappa, Executive Producer, Wyoming Humanities

Bianca Wahkinney (Oneida, Kiowa, Comanche, Ottawa), Native American Jump Start

Edited by Hunter C. Old Elk (Apsáalooke, Yakama), Vice-Chair of Native American Jump Start

Photo Credits: Central Wyoming College

Printed by: Wyoming Humanities

## CONTACT INFORMATION:

### Wyoming Humanities

Ask@ThinkWY.org

307.721.9243

## RESOURCES

<https://centerofthewest.org/explore/plains-indians/powwow-dances/>

<https://www.powwows.com/main/pow-wow-visitors-guide/>

Your Guide to Understanding and Enjoying Pow Wows

<https://folklife.si.edu/online-exhibitions/american-indian-powwows/history/smithsonian>

<https://www.nps.gov/yell/learn/historyculture/historic-tribes.htm>

<https://powwow-power.com/powwow-history/>

<https://www.nps.gov/grte/getinvolved/associated-tribes.htm>



