



ON THE
POWOW TRAIL
DANCING FOR LIFE

ESSAY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUE REYNOLDS



Editor's Note: We asked East Bay photojournalist Sue Reynolds to share her experiences and the insights she gained after spending more than two years attending Native American powwows across the West to chronicle this moving tradition for her new book. Reynolds' discovered that the rich heritage of native people in the Northwest and Plains finds expression in the Bay Area, too, where California tribes and native people from across America continue their gatherings. Her odyssey shows us how contemporary powwows tie history to the present in beautiful, sometimes surprising, ways.

I came to the powwow trail because the drums called me.

Aiming to change my life, to gain new perspective, I put my business on hiatus to study photography during the summer of 2005 in Missoula, Mont. What changed me as much as the photography course was my unexpected discovery of the spirit of native celebrations, and of myself.

During the Fourth of July holiday, I heard about the Arlee Celebration, a Native American powwow held on the Flathead Reservation. It was here I heard powwow drums for the first time. They pulled me into the dance circle. I was home.

I've attended over 20 powwows since. Every time, the drums draw me into my own center as well as the physical center of the celebration. I enter an altered state. As my new life expands with each powwow, so does my appreciation of native people's culture and values.

According to American Indians, the drum is the heart-beat of Mother Earth. It helps them celebrate and respect themselves as individuals, tribes and as a community. In the drums, I feel a power and wholeness seeing enduring traditions, feeling my connection to the land.

THE POWWOW IS DIFFERENT

It's another, magical world. It overloads the senses, calms the mind. Watching dancers adorned with feathers create a blur of color, feeling the drum's vibrations, hearing the MC's humor, smelling fry bread, seeing powwow

Princesses, I realize this is a different world – one as unique as any foreign country.

Of course, a reservation is another country. American Indian reservations have a nation-to-nation relationship with the federal government. As visitors, it's good to remember this, and to honor tribal laws and customs.

A powwow is unlike any other event. It's a mixture of many things. It's social, reconnecting family and friends. It honors tribal members who help their community. It's cultural, keeping songs and dances alive. It preserves language. Creates identity. It's a sobriety movement. It is spiritual, with prayers, sometimes a service. It teaches specific tribal, and all-nation, traditions, which are embedded in everything from dance to drums.

Powwows are fun. I've been invited to social dancing and taught native dance steps. I've shared family "feeds" in





tipi camps. When I tried fry bread, touched a soft wolf pelt, heard a Crow elder describing her ancestor's part in Custer's Little Big Horn defeat, well, I knew I wasn't in suburban America anymore.

I've been fascinated by American Indian culture all my life. But nowhere else have I found such an exciting opportunity to understand, first-hand, the complexity of Native American culture today.

CELEBRATION'S PERSONALITY

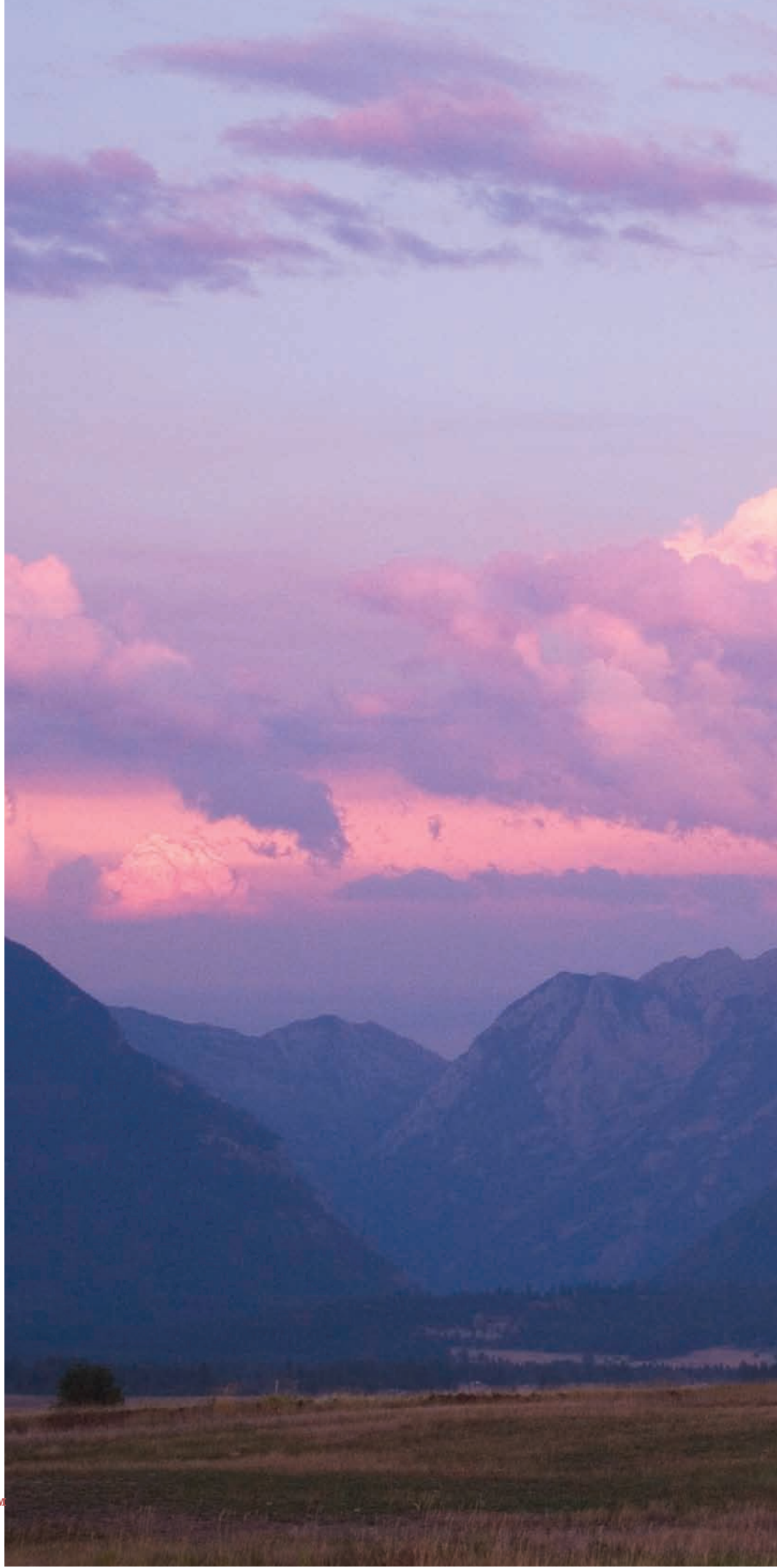
No two powwows are alike. Location, organizers, venues, the number and diversity of participants, give each celebration a special character.

In the Bay Area, the Stanford Powwow is one of the biggest. It's a real all-nations event. In a beautiful eucalyptus grove on the university campus, I've enjoyed seeing many of the best dancers and drum groups from tribes across the nation compete. The sprawling vendor area also offers a sensory array of native arts, food and even a live eagle perched on a handler's wrist.

One Veteran's Powwow I went to was held on Travis Air Force Base. Amid government-issue buildings, with the occasional military transport roaring overhead, I met some of the native service-men and women who organize and participate in this event.

The Gathering of Ohlone Peoples in Fremont is a one-day affair among beautiful oak hills and tule marshlands in Coyote Hills Regional Park. Visiting this assembly of descendents, I was immersed in Ohlone traditions. I saw acorn mush made with hot stones, flint-knapping, soap root fashioned into all-purpose brushes, and toured a 2,000-year-old village site with a "temescal," or sweat lodge.

Farther afield, one scorching day I journeyed from Missoula along the wild and scenic Lochsa and Clearwater Rivers of Idaho to the Tamkaliks Celebration in the tiny Oregon town of Wallowa. Organized by descendents





2008 BAY AREA & WESTERN POWWOWS

Try www.powwows.com, www.powwowtime.com and ask natives at powwows where to find these events in the Bay Area and nationwide. Call to verify dates, as they may change.

The 37th Annual Stanford Powwow | One of the Bay Area's longest-running powwows, at Palo Alto, CA., May 9-11 | www.powwow.stanford.edu | 650-723-4078

Arts in Nature Fest/Spring Flute Festival | A gathering of Native American flutes, drums, and art activities for all ages in the Sierra foothills at Georgetown, CA., | April 26-27 www.softcom.ne | 530-333-9470

Gathering of Ohlone Peoples | A celebration of this East Bay tribe's culture held in Fremont's Coyote Hills Regional Park at Fremont, CA., | October date TBA. | www.ebparks.org | 1-888-327-2757

110th Annual Arlee Celebration | One of the oldest powwows in North America, attended by Native Americans from across the U.S. and Canada, held at Flathead Flats, Mont., | July 2-7 | www.arleepowwow.com | 406-275-4893

Tamkaliks Celebration | Honors the symbolic return of the Nez Perce to their ancestral homeland in the beautiful Wallowa Valley of Oregon, | July 18-20 | www.wallowanezperce.org | 541-886-3101

"Proud People: Many Nations within a Nation," a new limited edition by photojournalist Sue Reynolds, with native writers, unveils powwows across the West. A portion of proceeds benefits the American Indian College Fund. | \$72 plus tax/shipping. For orders and details on upcoming Reynolds' photography events, | info@susanreynoldsp photography.com

POWWOW ETIQUETTE

Show respect. Be polite. Don't touch dancers' outfits without asking. These outfits, or regalia – never called "costumes" – take many years to create and are expensive family treasures. Show interest in native culture — asking questions politely is welcomed.

Be a respectful photographer. Ask powwow staff if it's ok to take photographs of dancers, and listen for the MC to announce when not to. If you wish to take a picture of a native person outside the dance circle, ask permission.

Listen to the MC. He shares tips on powwow customs, and offers non-natives cultural and historical insights. When in doubt, ask the MC or powwow staff about what's ok.

Remember powwows are alcohol and drug-free.

Bring your own chair or blanket. If there is bleacher seating for visitors, save yours with a blanket. Just in case, bring a folding chair. Place it outside the circle of chairs closest to the dance arena, where dancers, their families, and the drums are set up.

To learn more, ask native participants. Some powwows sell programs, with tips on etiquette as well as background on their celebration and general powwow traditions. Buy a book, go online. www.nativeweb.org

of famed Nez Perce Chief Joseph and of white settlers, this powwow has a particularly friendly feeling. Its mission is to create reconciliation between natives and non-natives. Its poignant history touches me deeply.

In an unusual move in 1997, a portion of the Wallowa Nez Perce homeland was purchased – or more accurately, repossessed – for its original people by this remarkable alliance. It’s a bittersweet homecoming. Chief Joseph himself, and his survivors of a tragic conflict with the U.S. Army, were forbidden to return to this land. Some died in exile in Oklahoma. Others, including Chief Joseph, died on the Colville Reservation in Washington State.

These repossessed 320 acres provide a peaceful sanctuary for the Wallowa Band Nez Perce. It includes a grassy flat, where the powwow is held, and an imposing bluff used for religious ceremonies. During the annual celebration, a shaded dance arbor and cold creek offer welcome respite from fierce summer heat.

At a unique Tamkaliks friendship feast, I savored native-caught salmon, elk, and venison, and non-native, ranch-raised bison. Conversations during this cross-cultural potluck gave me a sense of how powerfully tribal and local history mingles with the present here. That evening, in the twilight lit by intensely red clouds, I wandered the camp of tipis, tents, and RVs that surrounds the arbor, marveling at the blending of old and new, foreign and familiar, that makes powwows compelling.

Whether it’s the power of reconciliation, the beauty of dance, or the realization that our inheritance is the healing power of, and ancestral bond with, lands we love, what ties these celebrations together are positive feelings and behavior. Native people call this “coming to powwow with a good heart.”

DANCING THE PRAYER

After the drums first called me, I noticed the dancers. They mesmerized me. Their graceful movements, refined over time by tribes across the Plains, are hard to describe, beautiful to behold. Natives have told me stories about the origins of each dance. They tell me they are dancing for life, for their people. It is prayer.

One of the loveliest dances is Men’s Grass. These dancers move elegantly, like waves of prairie grass bending in the endless wind. Men’s Fancy Dance is known for elaborate outfits and energetic whirling requiring enormous stamina. When I first saw a Prairie Chicken Dancer, I wondered, “Why is that man running around in black spandex tights?” Chicken Dancers imitate male prairie chickens. The skinny-legged look, adorned with melodious bells and a bustle sprouting long tail feathers, is unforgettable.

Young women have their own version of Fancy Dance, called Fancy Shawl or Butterfly Dance. Large, colorful shawls with intricate designs make these dancers look like butterflies. Jingle Dance is performed for healing by women



in dresses covered with tin cones – or jingles.

Slower paced, “Traditional” attracts mature dancers in old-time regalia, often beautifully beaded buckskin. Dancing starts young. I’ve seen three-year-olds frolic in the Tiny Tots category, and newborns carried by their parents during social dancing.

The drums, played mostly by men who also sing, keep dancers going. Directed by the MC, the men play songs to fit each dance category. Some drum groups, as well as dancers, travel throughout North America, making a living “contesting” on the powwow trail.

MEANING WITHIN

The powwow has many layers, like a flower unfolding. In the beginning, when my mother was dying, they were a way to re-connect to the meaning of family and community. I noticed how accepting Native Americans are of grief. It’s as if the many griefs they have experienced historically through loss of family, language, and land gives them greater empathy. For a time even powwows were outlawed, and the right to practice their religion was not restored until 1978 with the American Indian Religious Freedom Act.

Powwows showed me many American Indians leading heart-based lives. I felt my separation from my own heart’s desires, saw how outgrowing my old roles, including owning a fast-paced, growing business, had influenced my choices.

Powwows showed me different choices about my greatest asset: my time. They’ve led me to value people over things, taken me into the Native American flute world, brought me wonderful photography projects from portraits to book publishing. As I travel this trail, observing natives balancing tradition with life in modern America, I see a better path for myself.



Native people tell me the meaning of these celebrations is very individual, and it may change over a lifetime.

RECONNECTING

Powwows connect. They’ve re-connected me with who I am and what’s important. They’ve introduced me to some of the first nations who still live on this land, in this nation we call home. Powwows are joyful. They bring me laughter with native friends,

bliss around the drums and dancing, beauty of lovely lands at rural celebrations, serenity of tipis at sunset.

Powwows transform. I believe the values powwows promote can help us today. Respect for oneself, one’s elders, the children and the community, and a “seventh generation” perspective on preserving the environment are just a few. Experience the powwow in its kaleidoscopic complexity. Allow its alchemy to transform your life, too. ■