



Celebrate! Holidays In The U.S.A.

Native American Pow-Wows

(March - August)

"The spirit of the pow-wow is a continuum in Indian life. It isn't just for a few days in March. We live this spirit on a daily basis. It is why we have survived for so long. At one time we were a forgotten people, but I think we are getting stronger. From the powwow we gain strength as Indian people, individually and collectively, to go on into the 21st century."

- Lindsay Yardley, Taos Pueblo Indian

"Pow-wow" is the Algonquin Indian word for "ceremony", but the word holds a different meaning according to each native American Indian tribe. Most were religious or war pow-wows, with ceremonial dancing and sacred rituals. Until this century, non-Indians usually did not participate in the pow-wows.

In 1951, in Sheridan, Wyoming, Lucy Yellowmule was elected Queen of the Sheridan Rodeo. This was an annual exhibition where cowboys showed their skills of calf-roping and horseback riding. Lucy was the first Native American to be queen, and this marked the beginning of a new and better relationship between Native Americans and the rest of society. Lucy Yellowmule and a group of Native Americans traveled around the United States, speaking to large groups about her success at the Rodeo and her Crow traditions. Two years after her victory, All-American Indian Days was established. It became a three-day annual event with competitions in tepee-building and bread frying and a Miss Indian America contest. Now in Sheridan, the United Tribes International Pow-wow takes place in late August, the final pow-wow of hundreds throughout the spring and summer. The annual Denver Pow-wow in March begins the season of pow-wows. In 1990, it attracted thirty-thousand people, half of whom were not Native Americans. In the huge Denver Coliseum different tribes sing songs that have been passed down for thousands of years. They are accompanied by the beat of a large drum, played by five to ten drummers. Dancers of different tribes show their skills. There are dancers with strips of tin sewn onto their costumes or bells on their wrists and ankles. Dancers with fancy shawls look like delicate flying birds as they raise their cloth-covered arms to the beat of the drums. Grass dancers wear costumes of brightly-colored yarn, representing meadow grass.

Pow-wows mean different things to different people. They are still religious or war celebrations, but themes and goals have changed with the times. Now instead of giving thanks to their gods for a war victory, Indians honor those of their tribes who have served in the American armed forces. Young people return from the bigger cities to learn traditional dances and songs in order to keep their heritage alive. People who are not Native Americans are not only welcomed, they are encouraged to participate in the activities.

Embassy of the United States of America