

My Summer on the Pow-wow Trail

Hi, my name is Jesse and I'm from Saskatchewan.

I'd like to tell you about how my family
spends summer vacation each year.




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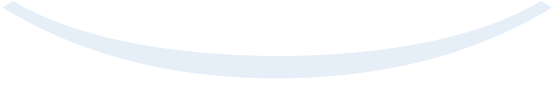
Summer is one of my favourite times of the year, because it means that my family heads out on the pow-wow trail. As soon as school is out, we pack our trailer with food, clothes and our dancing regalia, and we spend the summer travelling from one pow-wow to another in Canada and the United States. My sister and mom and I compete in dances; my grandma sells her beaded moccasins and earrings from a folding table that she sets up along the edge of the dancing circle; and my dad is a judge for the dance competitions.

Pow-wows are important to many First Nations people, because they give us a chance to get together to share our cultures and meet new and old friends. They take place in just about every province in Canada and every state in the United States, mostly in the summer months. They usually feature dance competitions, with prize money for the best dancers.





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There's so much that happens at a pow-wow! Let's start with the Grand Entry. This is the first dance that takes place. Everyone who is going to compete or is involved in the pow-wow in any way takes part in this opening dance. It's important that the participants enter the pow-wow field or arena in the right order. The flag bearers enter first. They are often war veterans, and they carry the flags of the country, the host nation and other visiting First Nations groups. The chiefs, Elders and tribal leaders come second, followed by the Aboriginal war veterans. If there are any princesses or warriors who have been elected to represent a community, they enter next. Then the dancers enter the arena—the men first, followed by the women and, finally, the children. Everyone circles the arena several times, while the drummers and singers play a Grand Entry song. It's an amazing sight to see, with everyone dressed in his or her finest regalia, dancing proudly around the arena to the beat of the host drum.

It would be pretty hard to have a pow-wow without a drum. The drum is the beat that all the dancers move to. Some people say that the drum makes the sound of a heartbeat. In a way, the drum is the heart of the pow-wow. The host drum is usually made up of a group of about eight men. They sit around a very large drum that is about one and a half metres in diameter. The drum is made out of deer, buffalo or cow hide, and each person has a leather mallet that they beat in unison on the drum. Each pow-wow has a host drum, and usually several guest drums. Men are the traditional drummers at pow-wows, but women often take part by singing the songs with the drummers.

Pow-wow songs are usually sung in the traditional language of the drummers, such as Lakota, Ojibway or Cree. Some songs are centuries old, while others were written more recently. There are also songs that use sounds, called vocables, instead of words. The drummers sing sounds like "Ah Hey Yah Ho," which makes it possible for everyone to join in.

Before the start of the pow-wow each day, women, men and children dress in their regalia and apply their face paint.

Mothers braid their daughters' hair, and young children run around excitedly as they wait for the signal to head to the pow-wow circle. I like to watch my uncle get ready for the men's Fancy Dance competition. He is an expert at putting on his regalia, fastening on his bustles and painting his face. You can feel the energy rising in the campground the hour before the pow-wow begins, as everyone is getting prepared for the Grand Entry.

Throughout the pow-wow, which usually lasts two or three days, there are many dance competitions. I compete in the Junior Men's Traditional and Fancy Dance. My mom competes in the Women's Traditional and the Fancy Shawl Dance. My little sister has a jingle dress, and she is learning to do that dance. In the winter, when there are not very many pow-wows, we make new regalia and repair things like belts, aprons and bustles.

My mom wins a lot of dances, but I am just getting started. I watch the older dancers carefully and practice a lot because I want to be the best dancer that I can be.

The best part of the pow-wow is when they have the Intertribal Dance. That's when everyone—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—comes into the arena and dances together. My mom says it makes her feel good that people are learning about Aboriginal culture and people, and that they have the chance to dance to our songs and drums. I guess that's just one of the things that makes our summer vacations so much fun.

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Pow-wow Dances

Dance has always been an important part of Aboriginal cultures. Long ago, men would perform dances before they went on a hunt or into battle. When Aboriginal people started living on reservations in the 19th century, families or tribes (especially those who lived on the plains or plateau regions of North America) would hold gatherings that included dancing. Pow-wows evolved out of these community gatherings. Below are descriptions of a few well-known pow-wow dances.

Men's Traditional

The Men's Traditional is one of the oldest dances that you will see at a pow-wow. It originated from the traditional dances that were used in hunting and war hundreds of years ago. Today, it is a very important spiritual dance, as it tells stories about the dancers' ancestors. Dancers portray different characters, such as hunters sneaking up on an animal, or warriors approaching an enemy. The regalia used in this dance might include a breastplate made from animal bones or shells, a neck choker, a bustle attached to the lower back, bells or animal hooves attached to the ankles, or a hide shield decorated with tribal symbols. Dancers usually perform with a large wing fan and a dance staff with feathers attached to it.

Men's Grass Dance

The Grass Dance is another dance that has a long history. Some people believe its beginnings were when scouts would dance on fields of grass to flatten a place where they could set up a camp. Later, the Grass Dance was performed at pow-wows and involves dancers stomping their feet in a way that looks like they are flattening out the grass on the field. Dancers wear regalia with fringes of yarn or fabric on their aprons, capes and leggings. By dancing in a very smooth, fluid motion, the fringe on the dancers' outfits looks like grass swaying.



Men's Fancy Dance

The Men's Fancy Dance is a blur of speed and colour. Dancers must be in excellent physical condition because they are constantly jumping, twirling and performing fancy footwork. This dance was created in the 1920s in Oklahoma as a form of entertainment for people visiting Aboriginal reservations. Today, it is one of the flashiest of the pow-wow dances, and is usually performed by younger men. The regalia used for this dance includes beaded headbands, beaded and fringed aprons, and multi-coloured feather bustles tied to the arms, neck and back. The headgear consists of a bristly head cap known as a roach, and a rocker spreader, with two eagle feathers that are decorated with colourful tape and plumes.

Women's Fancy Shawl Dance

The Fancy Shawl Dance is an exciting, high-spirited dance that shows off a woman's grace, endurance and athletic abilities. It is a newcomer to pow-wow dancing, having originated in the 1950s as a competition dance. The dancer wears a beautiful decorated shawl with long ribbons or fringe. On her feet are high beaded moccasins, or short moccasins with colourful leggings. The dance involves kicks, spins and fast movement, while the dancer holds the end of her shawl out so that it looks like she has butterfly wings.

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Women's Jingle Dress

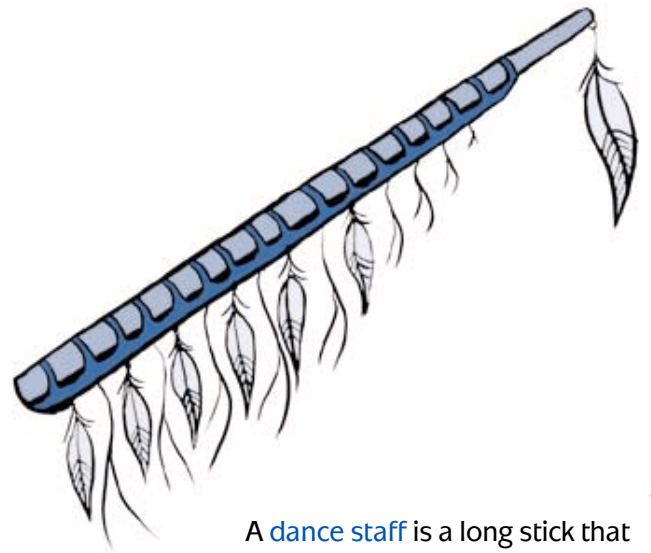
The Jingle Dress Dance originated in northern Minnesota and was popularized by Ojibway dancers. The story behind it is that a medicine man's granddaughter was very ill and one night he had a dream about a spirit who was wearing a jingle dress. The spirit told the grandfather to make his granddaughter such a dress and that she would be cured if she danced in it. When he woke up, he made the dress according to the spirit's directions, and had his granddaughter dance in it at the community hall. By the time she had danced around the room four times, her sickness was gone.

Today, jingle dresses are made by hand using the lids of snuff cans molded into triangular shapes. By sewing several hundred jingles on a cloth, velvet or leather dress, the dancer makes a wonderful jingling sound as she dances.



POW-WOW TERMS

A **vocable** is a phrase, usually made up of vowels, that is used in the place of lyrics in a pow-wow song. It is a non-language sound, such as "Ah Hey Yah Ho," which can be used as the words in a song, so that everyone can join in.



A **dance staff** is a long stick that dancers hold in one hand while they dance. Dance staffs can be decorated with feathers, beads and coloured tape.



Men fancy dancers wear **bustles**, which are arrangements of feathers worn on the head or body. Bustles are made of turkey, hawk or eagle feathers.

Moccasins are the traditional footwear of Aboriginal people. They look like slippers, and are made by hand using soft deer or moose hide. Moccasins are often decorated with beads and porcupine quills.



This information is also available through the Internet at www.inac.gc.ca

