

Inside the Contemporary Powwow

By Marvin “Marty” Richardson

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Imagine a series of circles or rings, filled with action—sights, colors, tastes, smells, and sounds—all connected to and celebrating the American Indian heritage of the event’s participants. This image describes a modern American Indian powwow. At the center of a powwow are the dancers, scattered throughout a circular arena, wearing regalia (special dress or finery) in beautiful hues of blue, red, black, white, yellow, orange, and other colors of the rainbow. The dancers move to the beat of the drum and the song, making various movements according to their individual styles. The men’s bells and the women’s jingles offer a constant background of sound. Singers sit on the edge of the arena around a cow or buffalo hide drum, providing music for the dancers.

Outside the arena, spectators sit on bleachers or lawn chairs, watching with excitement throughout the intertribal, social, exhibition, and competition dances. In yet another circle are artist and vendor booths filled with American Indian arts and crafts such as pottery, flutes, and jewelry. Within this area, powwow visitors can smell the frybread, corn soup, buffalo burgers, Indian stew, and other foods made by talented Indian chefs.

The modern powwow is arguably the dominant, and most culturally relevant, event and symbol of American Indian identity for most of North Carolina’s Indians. On any given day, even if no gathering is in progress, Indians are participating in powwow-related activities such as making new drums, practicing songs or dance moves, creating new regalia or outfits, and planning the next powwow or powwow trip. Along the way, young people—watching, listening, or joining in the work—learn to take pride in their heritage. Just as importantly, people from different Indian nations meet, interact, and learn about and from one another as they enjoy the social atmosphere that the modern powwow brings. Natives from the four compass points take pride in their heritage.

An intertribal gathering, the modern American Indian powwow features dancing in many styles, including Men’s and Women’s Traditional, Women’s Jingle, Men’s Grass Dance, Men’s and Women’s Fancy, and Men’s Southern Straight. An emcee announces the dances and other powwow activities. The drum—the instrument and the drum group—is central to the powwow, providing the music for the dances, honor ceremonies, and other activities within the circle. An arena director, or “whip man,” makes sure that the arena and activities are orderly, and that the dancers and singers are taken care of. Head dancers, a male and a female, lead the dances within the circle, and are usually the first dancers in the arena. Today, most powwows start with the parade of dancers, or Grand Entry. Dancers line up in dance categories and by age, with older dancers entering the arena first. American Indian veterans lead the Grand Entry and bring in the United States flag, state flag, tribal flag, and American Indian eagle staff.

After the Grand Entry, a local pastor or a tribal leader from the sponsoring tribe or group usually leads an invocation, or prayer. Next, the host drum or another attending drum is asked to render a flag song, often called the American Indian national anthem. Veterans post the flags near the stage, and one of the attending drums renders a song to honor all veterans, both American Indian and non-Indian. After these ceremonies, the emcee usually announces intertribal, social, and exhibition dancing. At competition powwows, dancers try to win prizes in individual style and age categories.

In the early 1970s, North Carolina's Indians began to adopt the Plains (or midwestern) Indians' dance, regalia, and singing styles, as well as the Plains-style powwow structure. Different tribes, though, may maintain certain traditions. A tradition is a story, custom, or belief passed down and continued by a family, village, or other group of people. For example, the Haliwa-Saponi—a tribe centered in Halifax and Warren counties in northeastern North Carolina—still include some traditional tribal dances such as the Canoe Dance in powwows and performances. Although many elements of the modern powwow are not strictly traditional to the Southeast or North Carolina's Indians, the powwow remains an institution built on the old values, activities, and spirit of community, the struggle for Indian identity, and the Indian tradition of sharing. Each of North Carolina's state-recognized tribes has had "Indian only" institutions and activities, such as the Indian school, Indian church, and "Indian only" gatherings. Among the Haliwa-Saponi, annual tribal activities such as the May Day Festival, Fourth of July celebration, and church homecomings were Indian-only social events that promoted community solidarity, Indian pride, and interaction. By 1957 the tribe had built and opened the Haliwa Indian School, the only nonreservation, tribally supported Indian school in North Carolina. As part of the school's extra activities, the tribe started a Boy Scout troop, through which the students learned more about, and became more confident in, making traditional regalia, drumming, and publicly practicing other parts of traditional American Indian culture.

Starting in the 1920s and particularly in the early 1960s, through periodic contact with Virginia and North Carolina Indian tribes of similar and connected backgrounds—especially the Chickahominy of Charles City County, Virginia—the Haliwa-Saponi gained more cultural knowledge and experience. The Virginia Indians had their own story of racial and ethnic prejudice; intolerance from state and local governments and their white constituents; and cultural decline and change. These encounters with other Indian people stimulated the Haliwa-Saponi, because they knew they were not alone in the fight for Indian recognition.

The Haliwa-Saponi celebrated their state recognition as a tribe, which came in April 1965, by instituting the powwow as a new symbol of public Indian identity and ethnic distinctiveness. With the help of the Chickahominy and other tribes along the eastern seaboard, they gained and shared knowledge about Indian dance, song, and regalia, starting a new tradition of culture that has only grown and developed. After two years of holding private powwows for themselves and invited Indian guests, the Haliwa-Saponi held their first public powwow on Saturday, April 16, 1967, on the grounds of the Haliwa Indian School in Hollister. To raise awareness of the tribe and the event, they invited the

press and the public. Tribal Chief W. R. Richardson reached out to other tribes in the state and nation, inviting them to attend and offer speeches to the crowd.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the tribes of North Carolina worked together to push for the N.C. Commission of Indian Affairs, which was established in 1971. During this interaction, the Haliwa-Saponi shared their dances and culture with the Waccamaw-Siouan, Coharie, Lumbee, and others, who started their own powwows. Today, all eight state-recognized tribes and the urban Indian organizations hold one or more powwows each year in their own communities. University groups and other organizations, as well as individuals, also sponsor powwows.

Dancers, vendors, and singers from tribes throughout the United States and Canada—including the Sioux, Ojibwe, Cree, Pawnee, Kiowa, Seminole, and others—regularly visit several North Carolina powwows. In the same way, members of North Carolina's tribes have visited other tribal groups such as the Six Nations of Ontario, Canada; the Morongo Band of Mission Indians of California; the Saginaw Chippewa Indians of Michigan; and the Coushatta Indians of Louisiana. This cultural exchange has led to an understanding of tribal histories and cultures, as well as to an understanding of the similarities and differences between Indian nations throughout the continent.

Marvin “Marty” Richardson is a member of the Haliwa-Saponi American Indian tribe and, at the time of the publication of this article, served as its tribal planner. The tribe maintains its headquarters in Hollister, North Carolina.