

Heartbeat of a Nation

Every summer, Native Americans from across the country converge at the Taos Pueblo Powwow to drum, sing, dance, and celebrate the continuation of their rich culture today. **LINDA THOMPSON** joins in the festivities.



AFTER YEARS OF LIVING IN TAOS, MY HUSBAND AND I OFTEN FORGET WE'RE NOT ON VACATION. Especially in midsummer, the city is alive with events showcasing its multicultural traditions. Most years we taste sparingly of these delights, but last summer my husband, Terry, and I immersed ourselves in the Taos Pueblo Powwow. We spent three intense days under a spell of chanting, drumming, and whirling people that created a kaleidoscope of sound, color, and motion made up of eagle feathers, shiny jingling dresses, bright shawls, and beaded moccasins. On the fourth day, we even helped dismantle the Powwow grandstand, and were rewarded with a bison-steak barbecue and the companionship of our hosts and other volunteers. The question we asked everyone—“What is a powwow?”—brought

such a variety of responses that we began to see a complicated fabric taking shape. The Powwow, like Taos itself, partakes of many cultures, and has a rich history of its own that enhances the lives of all who participate, and of the spectators who relax under the shady brush arbor.

“What’s a powwow? It’s what Woodstock tried to be and failed,” says Lee Bentley, owner of a graphic-design business and a Taos resident for 37 years. “It’s a wonderful cultural experience, and it’s not just for Indians—it’s for all mankind. I have contributed my labor for many years, helped set up and take down the arbor and the grandstand, and I’ve been acknowledged for that and made to feel welcome. Every year, I feel like this is my party!”

Reminiscent of Woodstock? Or perhaps the Burning Man event in Nevada? “It’s more like a rodeo,” contends Otis Half Moon, a Nez Perce announcer from Idaho who currently resides in Santa Fe. “All Pueblos have their feast days, where they perform their sacred dances, but the powwow is very different. Some use the word pan-Indianism. Dancers come from all over the country, and they know each other, have competed against each other,

and it’s like family.” One year, Half Moon had a death in his family, so, following Nez Perce tradition, he didn’t dance. “We’re not even allowed to come to powwow to watch, and that was hard on me,” he says. “You want to get out there and dance your best. Also, there is some serious prize money, sometimes \$3,000 or \$5,000, or more, and in that way it’s like a rodeo.”



LEANNAH PADILLA, A TRADITIONAL SHAWL DANCER who traveled from Hilo, Hawaii, to participate, is helping her seven-year-old son, Kinyaadani (pronounced Ke’ani), adjust his headdress. Padilla, a Mescalero Apache, and her son, who is Apache and Diné (Navajo), were born in Hawaii, where her father relocated after serving in the Korean War. Padilla’s son sits with a drum group at home in Hilo, where there is an annual powwow as well. “He has connected with drumming since he was a baby. He knows that it is a form of prayer. For us, it’s very important that there is sobriety, no alcohol or drug use,” says Padilla, who is a history professor at the University of Hawai’i. *Well, that ends the comparison with Woodstock and Burning Man, I tell myself.*

“What do you think about powwows?” I ask Kinyaadani.

“I like dancing!” he grins. He performs in five or six powwows a year, and last year won a \$20 prize in San Diego.

Mother and son are lining up for Saturday’s Grand Entry, so I sit beneath the arbor between two drumming circles, called Heartbeat Singers and Red Pine.



This month’s Taos Pueblo Powwow is both a spiritual ceremony and a social gathering. The event is open to the public.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TERRY THOMPSON

I recognize one of the Heartbeat members as Erin Bad Hand, who is of Eastern Cherokee and Lakota descent. A Taos resident since she was five who holds a master's degree in poetry, Hand teaches writing workshops and helps run a nonprofit organization for youth here. "For me, there is no feeling in the world like being at Powwow," she says. "If you look closely at every single dancer, each piece of regalia tells a story. Each style comes from somewhere, from a long line of history. You're out there, creating your own style, and you get to be who you are. You develop a sense of independence."



ALL POWWOWS BEGIN WITH PRAYER.

Today, Andy Cozad, a Kiowa emcee from Denver (and originally from Oklahoma), is at the microphone. "Oh, Great Creator," he begins, "we pray for us to have a good time here and bless all the people who are here. We all have a purpose here, to be happy and be good to each other . . ." As the drumming and singing gain in volume and velocity, dozens of dancers fill the field, moving clockwise so that the leading flag carriers wend to the center. At the front, we see La Reina (the queen of next weekend's La Fiesta de Taos celebrating the town's Spanish heritage) and her court participating in the Grand Entry, a dance that begins the day and honors visiting tribes and dignitaries. Many men wear eagle-feather headdresses and carry feather bustles. The eagle feathers symbolize courage and leadership for the Plains tribes; often, a warrior who killed an enemy was awarded one. Women are decked out in dresses with brightly colored streamers of taffeta and silk, elk teeth, shells, or painted symbols—an Apache star, for example, or the Diné circle of life. The children are clad in beads and feathers—pinks, reds, oranges, greens, blues, and yellows. All blend into a dizzying pageant.

"Is the powwow a spiritual ceremony or a social gathering?" I ask Andy Cozad as he leaves the grandstand. "Both," he replies. "The songs are basically spiritual, because you can't perform a dance without spirit. The announcer has to know what kind of song is appropriate for each particular dance. The Grass Dance, for example, is from the Northern Plains—Southern Plains groups never play it. In Oklahoma, we Kiowa pass our songs and dances down from generation



Above—Heartbeat Singers perform during the Grand Entry. For Native American people, drumming is a form of prayer. Below—Sixteen-year-old Alyssa Woody, a Diné dancer from Bloomfield, readies for the Jingle Dance. Woody's mother makes her dresses by hand. The aluminum tubes "jingle" as the dancers perform.

to generation. My father and older brothers were song composers, and I learned from them. Yes, competition is a motivation, but that's not what makes the powwow survive. It's our culture and we love it."



THE TRADITION OF DRUMMING, SINGING, AND DANCING IS INTEGRAL TO NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE.

The drumbeat represents a beating heart, carrying the people's songs—their prayers—to the Great Spirit. In the early 20th century, the federal government prohibited singing and dancing on reservations, considering them obstacles to the "re-education" of Indians, but the bans were lifted in the early 1930s. Following World War II and the Korean War, the need to honor lost and returning warriors led to the intertribal powwow.

The origins of the word *powwow* are somewhat mysterious; it may come from the Algonquin word *pau wau*, meaning



"medicine man" or "he who dreams." Taos tribal members traveled for decades to powwows in states like Montana and Oklahoma to celebrate traditional Native culture; they began the Taos Pueblo Powwow in 1985, and have been sharing the tradition with the public ever since.



Pat Goldsmith, who teaches high school art in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Terry Huston, from Ponca City, Oklahoma, are sitting with me under the arbor. It's the first powwow for both. Goldsmith has traveled the world for inspiration to use in her classroom, but this is her first exposure to Native



America. "It's a culture shock," she says. "None of this history is in our books."

Huston compares the event with a bluegrass festival, which, in addition to music, also has families camping in the field, opportunities to renew friendships, contests, and vendors selling foods and crafts.

Clockwise from left—Leannah Padilla, from Hilo, Hawaii, readies her son, Kinyaadani, for his Grass Dance performance; Leannah is dressed in fancy shawl regalia. Vietnam veteran and POW Norman Largo, 67, dances in northern traditional dress. Boye Ladd and Otis Half Moon announce the dances during the Taos Pueblo Powwow.

"It is magical, mystical, wonderful," she says. "I love seeing the families together, the adults taking such pride in their children."



MY HUSBAND ARRIVES WITH LUNCH—NAVAJO TACOS AND ICED TEA—and Boye Ladd, another emcee, joins us. Of Hochunk and Zuni ancestry, Ladd is from Black River Falls, Wisconsin, and was wounded in Vietnam. He has danced since the age of four; he expects to dance and emcee at powwows all of his life. In his community he's a teacher, dancer, lecturer, and "warrior" in the Native American sense of the word—a leader and an enforcer. "I have been speaking most of my life to groups about alcohol and drug abuse, suicide prevention, and self-esteem," he says. "Being a warrior and leader is something we do 24/7. We use music and dance to get people to see themselves as warriors and leaders, to raise their self-esteem. I've traveled all over using music and dance to open doors and to gain an education." (His prize money enabled him to attend college.) "In powwow, we honor all warriors, all



Native people across generations agree: Powwow participation builds self-esteem for kids and teens.


veterans," he continues. "This is their circle. A lot of people don't understand our customs, and I always say, 'Come in with an open heart and with respect.' Here you see prayer, giving, healing, family-making—all the

things that constitute, in part, what we call religion."

Later, during an "intertribal," a dance that spectators are invited to join, I walk beside Alyssa Woody, a Diné Jingle Dancer from Bloomfield. She's 16 and has been dancing since she was able to walk. Every weekend she attends powwows around the country. Her mother makes her jingle dresses by hand, and it takes months to do so. Jingles are aluminum tubes, which are now sold ready-made but were originally formed from the lids of snuff cans. Hundreds adorn the dresses worn for this dance category. "The powwow keeps young people away from drugs and from getting into trouble," she tells me, echoing Ladd's sentiments.

One of the veterans leading the Grand Entry on Sunday is Norman Largo, 67, who also served in Vietnam and was a POW. A Diné from Brimhall, he participates in the "men's traditional," which closely adheres to heritage dances and dress. He has discovered quite a few benefits to dancing during his 65 years in the arena. "It's not for the money," he tells me later. "It has to do with friendship. It's good exercise, too." He at-

tends powwows most weekends throughout the summer. Largo has made his own regalia; it took him four-and-a-half years to do the beadwork and feathers. "We dancers compete with the drumming and singing," he explains. "The drum says, 'See if you can dance to my beat.' The singer says, 'See if you can dance to my song.' With your body in motion, you can make everything dance—your body, your legs, your muscles, your hands, and all of the feathers on your head. We are trying to explain our way of life, and some of our words have no English equivalents. The colors represent all different nationalities, but the people—black, red, white, yellow—we are all one people, the same."

As the sun settles on the western horizon, turning Taos Mountain lavender-pink, Terry and I promise to return in the morning to help remove the grandstand and the lights in the arbor. (One year, they left the grandstand up, and vandals set fire to it.) We leave knowing that the powwow is not Woodstock, not Burning Man, neither a rodeo nor a bluegrass festival, but a social and spiritual celebration of the survival and determination of Native people, an ongoing tribute to warriors—veterans, leaders, and teachers—and a means of welcoming outsiders to share in the diversity of today's Native American culture. 

Taos writer **Linda Thompson** has written 20 children's books about Native Americans and American history. She teams with her photographer husband, Terry Thompson, whenever she can.

IF YOU GO:

The Annual Taos Pueblo Powwow is held July 10–12. The grounds lie about 2.4 miles north of Taos Plaza on U.S. 64; turn east (right) on Ben Romero Road, just north of the Overland Sheepskin shopping complex. General admission is \$5 a person per day, or \$10 for a three-day pass; no charge for children under 10. Photography fees are \$5 for a still camera and \$10 for a video camera. Etiquette: Always ask permission before taking photos of people who are not in the arena. Do not use flash attachments when photographing dancers. Do not touch anyone's regalia without permission. Photos are for personal use only, unless you make advance arrangements with the Taos Pueblo Tourism Office: (575) 758-1028. For info: www.taospueblopowwow.com

WHILE IN TAOS

A local recommends what to see and do this summer:

- **July 2–11:** Wine connoisseurs will converge on the fourth annual **Toast of Taos Wine Gala**, featuring the finest wines from the Southwest. Proceeds benefit the Holy Cross Hospital Foundation. For info: (575) 751-5811, www.toastoftaos.com
- **July 4:** Celebrate our nation's birthday with nighttime fireworks and a parade on historic Taos Plaza. It's all part of the **Taos Summer of Love**. For info: (887) 587-9007, www.taossummeroflove.com
- **July 24–26:** Celebrate and revere Taos's patron saints, Santa Ana and Santo Santiago, during **La Fiesta de Taos**. Join in the community celebration of the area's Spanish heritage with traditional mariachi music and *ballet folklórico* performances. For info: (575) 741-0909, www.fiestasdetaos.com
- **Summer:** **KTAO Solar Center**, a solar-powered radio station, has become one of the region's prime entertainment venues. Two or three evenings a week all summer, KTAO-FM offers outdoor concerts with entertainers such as Eric McFadden, Carrie Rodriguez, and Angelique Kidjo, at truly affordable prices. Indoor concerts feature a 3,200-square-foot dance floor and popular local bands, including Don Richmond, Michael Hearne, and Jimmy Stadler. KTAO is on the Ski Valley Road (N.M. 150), just a few miles north of Taos. For info: www.ktao.com
- **May–September:** Convene at Taos Plaza every Thursday from 6 to 8 p.m. for the free concert series **Taos Plaza Live!** For info: www.taosplazalive.com

■ **Anytime:** Beat the heat at **Taos Ski Valley**, 18 miles northeast of town. Take a guided late-night wilderness hike to Williams Lake under a full moon July 21, or you can mountain-bike, rock-climb, or take Alpine horseback-riding lessons anytime. For more adventurous travelers, explore Wheeler Peak—at 13,161 feet, New Mexico's highest mountain. For info: (575) 776-1413, www.taosskivalley.com

Take an early-morning hot-air balloon ride over the Rio Grande Gorge, finishing with a champagne breakfast on the mesa. Most flights with **Eske's Air Ventures/Paradise Balloons** last about an hour; allow three hours for the total experience. For info: (575) 751-6098, www.taosballooning.com

WHERE TO STAY:

One of the best bets is the **Quail Ridge Taos Condominium Resort**, which offers not only affordable lodging, but swimming, tennis, yoga, massage, youth camps, a children's pool and hot tub, even lessons in tango and swing! From \$85. For info: (800) 624-4448 or (575) 776-2211, www.quailridgetaos.com

WHERE TO EAT:

Orlando's New Mexican Café serves great food at a great value. Choose *carne adovada*, fish tacos, or blue-corn enchiladas, and leave room for the wonderful flan. 1114 Don Juan Valdez Ln. For info: (575) 751-1450.

—Linda Thompson

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