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# Origins of the Jingle Dress Dance

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By Mark Thiel

Many different oral traditions surround the origins of the modern Jingle Dress Dance, as noted by a number of web sites and the book, *Heartbeat of the People*, by Tara Browner. Most traditions have similar themes describing the dress as a prayer or medicine dress for healing afflicted people, that came in a dream from spirits or the Creator. Furthermore, most point to the origins among the Ojibwa of the Minnesota-Ontario boundary waters area from 1900 to 1920. Beyond this confluence, specific details vary widely. Nonetheless, it is possible to glean additional interpretations by interfacing these traditions with the larger historical context.

In the upper Midwest, the use of jingle cones for personal and ceremonial adornment is rooted in antiquity. The first ones were made of local copper that were replaced in the 18<sup>th</sup>

century by sheet tin, coins, and thimbles from the fur-trade. In 1833-1834, Swiss artist Karl Bodmer painted the portrait of a Yankton Sioux woman in a buckskin dress with a row of



**Figure A:** An Ojibwa group dressed to dance at Red Lake, Red Lake Reservation, Minnesota, ca. 1920-1929. Included are two women wearing cloth jingle dresses, one adorned with two and the other with three rows of jingle cones. Red Lake is about 100 miles southwest of Manitou Rapids. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Marquette University; from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records and Marquette University Digital Collections online.

**Figure B:** Adults left to right: George Cumigo or Pasaungwab ["Blinking"] wearing a kilt adorned with jingle cones and Charley Congray with son at Reserve, Lac Court Oreille Reservation, Wisconsin, 1922. In his research, the author has not found any information regarding men wearing garb with jingle cones. Does this represent male jingle "kilt" dancing or an alternate use of cones? The Reserve is about 250 miles southeast of Manitou Rapids. Photographed by Denison Photo, Barron, Wisconsin.

Courtesy Marquette University; from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records and forthcoming in the Marquette University Digital Collections online.



tin cones around the bottom. Now in the permanent collections of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska, this painting is believed to be the first portrait of a Native woman wearing a jingle dress. Presumably these past practices influenced the developments in subsequent generations.

World War I and its aftermath were stressful times in

Indian country, which caused concerned people to seek spiritual help. In September 1918, Maggie Wilson, a Scots-Cree visionary at Manitou Rapids, Ontario (near International Falls, Minnesota), organized a new jingle dress dance, according to directives she received in dreams over the previous four years. Called the Union Star Dance, it



**Figure C:** An Ojibwa group dressed to dance in St. Paul, Minnesota, 1929. Included are four women wearing cloth jingle dresses, two adorned with two and two adorned with three rows of jingle cones. St. Paul is about 290 miles southeast of Manitou Rapids. Probably photographed by the Selby Studio of St. Paul.

Courtesy Marquette University; from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records and the Marquette University Digital Collections online.



**Figure D:** Independence Day celebration among the Dakota Sioux at Crow Hill, Fort Totten Reservation, North Dakota, 1935. Standing, left to right: Ambrose Abraham, Zane Grey, Crazy Dog, Tom Peoples, unidentified, Mary Jane Thomson, and Mrs. Clem Lohnes. Seated, left to right: two unknown girls and Elizabeth Redday. Presumably the girls were babies when the flu hit and for protection, their parents may have begun making jingle dresses and encouraged them to become jingle dress dancers. Crow Hill is about 340 miles southwest of Manitou Rapids. Photographer unknown.

Courtesy of Marquette University; from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records and forthcoming in the Marquette University Digital Collections online. Also published in "Glimpses, Devils Lake Sioux Jingle Dresses—1930-1949," courtesy Louis Garcia, *Whispering Wind*, 24:12 (1991):20; reprinted in *WHISPERING WIND Magazine's CRAFTS Annual #5*, 2002.

quickly gained popularity because it gave people a special way to pray for the safety of their soldier-relatives serving in the war. This ceremony engaged community members for up to four days each spring and fall when the thunderbirds frequented. It featured dancers in cloth jingle dresses or *ziibaaska'iganagooday* (*ziibaaska'igan* = jingle + *agooday* = dress) who danced to special songs that re-enacted dreams by Maggie Wilson and others.

Meanwhile, during the fall of 1918, Canadian and United States soldiers returned home. But, they unknowingly carried a deadly pandemic—the Spanish Influenza—which spread quickly across North America. In Minnesota alone, over 11,000 people died from 1918 to 1920. Those hardest hit were Indian children and young adults whose death-rate soared to 20% in some communities. In response to these compelling needs, new forms of jingle dress dancing emerged suddenly in the Canadian borderlands.

About 300 miles northwest of Manitou Rapids is the Ojibwa Indian reserve of Berens River on the east shore of Lake Winnipeg, Manitoba. When the flu struck here, a local visionary dreamed of a jingle dress dance with songs, a dance, and protocols as a healing prayer. Within the context

of a Dream Dance, this dance soon received credit for miraculous cures.

Between Manitou Rapids and Berens River, about 100 miles northwest of Manitou Rapids, is the Ojibwa Indian reserve of Whitefish Bay on the shore of Lake-of-the-Woods, Ontario. Presumably, at about the same time that the flu struck Berens River, a concerned father at Whitefish Bay prayed for the recovery of his young daughter, who also suffered from what is believed to have been the flu. This father too, received a vision of a jingle dress with songs, a dance, and protocols that were followed and then credited with a miraculous cure. The girl's name was Maggie White (no relation to Maggie Wilson) and today, her sons and grandsons, as members of the Whitefish Bay Singers, preserve a number of the original songs from this jingle dress dance while the reserve calls itself the "Home of the Jingle Dress."

Hope of salvation from illness—specifically the flu—no doubt provided the impetus for jingle dance popularity. Among the Ojibwa, Cree, Dakota Sioux, and others (**Figures A, B, C, and D**), the dance spread rapidly, apparently facilitated by friends and relatives traveling between communities.



# “Throughout the 1920s and 30s, jingle dress dancing enjoyed great popularity from the Great Lakes west to Montana and Alberta.”

Throughout the 1920s and 30s, jingle dress dancing enjoyed great popularity from the Great Lakes west to Montana and Alberta. Photographs demonstrate that jingle dresses were common within at least a 500 mile range of Manitou Rapids

During the next several decades, observers in Indian communities compiled documentation relating to jingle dress dancing from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. When arranged geographically, these memoirs and photographs resemble concentric ripples across an oval “lake” more than a thousand miles across. Manitou Rapids, now the Rainy River First Nations Reserve, was the epicenter whereas points such as Fort Totten, North Dakota, St. Paul, Minnesota, and Lac Court Oreille, Wisconsin, were around the perimeter (Figures E).

Thereafter jingle dress dancing waned, continuing in just a few northern strongholds (Figure F) until its resurgence in the 1970s. By 1926, Maggie Wilson had disbanded the Union Star Dance, which lost its war-related purpose and she was forgotten. Similarly, by the 1940s, fewer girls took up the transformed jingle dress dancing as its healing relevance had passed and native dancing’s general popularity had also declined. But the elders remembered and saved the songs,

and oral traditions, a number of which included similar reminiscences of the father-daughter healing event with Maggie White. Together, the common threads of this healing event point to Whitefish Bay as an important place in the spread of jingle dress dancing.

## For Further Study

Browner, Tara. (2002). *Heartbeat of the People: Music and Dance of the Northern Pow-wow*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana. Describes jingle dress oral histories and traditions from Whitefish Bay, Canada and the Midwest.

Cole, Sally. (2003). Maggie Wilson and Ojibwa Women’s Stories. *Ruth Landes: A Life in Anthropology*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. Pertains to Manitou Rapids, Canada.

Garcia, Louis. (1971). Dakota Jingle Dress. *American Indian Crafts and Culture*, 5:9. Pertains to Fort Totten, North Dakota.

Garcia, Louis. (1991). A Short History of the Jingle Dress and Glimpses, Devils Lake Sioux Jingle Dresses—1930-1949. *WHISPERING WIND Magazine*, 24,12: 20-22; also reprinted in *WHISPERING WIND Magazine’s CRAFTS Annual #5, 2002*, pages 2, 14-15. Pertains to Fort Totten, North Dakota.



Enlarged area of map showing Whitefish Bay on Lake of the Woods.

**Figure E:** The region west of the Great Lakes abounds with Ojibwa, Cree, and Dakota jingle dress accounts and photographs from the 1920s and 30s. The concentric rings denote the 250 and 500-mile distances from the epicenter at Manitou Rapids.





Figure F: An older Ojibwa jingle dress dancer continuing this style from her youth at Red Lake, Red Lake Reservation, Minnesota, which remained a strong-hold of this tradition while it faded elsewhere, ca. 1956.

Photographer unknown. Courtesy Marquette University; from the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions Records and forthcoming in the Marquette University Digital Collections online.

Landes, Ruth. (1968). *A Woman's War Vision. Ojibwa Religion and the Midéwiwin* Madison, University of Wisconsin Press. Landes wrote the manuscript in the 1930s from interviews and correspondence with Maggie Wilson; Plate 4, taken by Ruth Landes in 1933, features daughter Janet Wilson in her jingle dress (with four rows of jingle cones) as worn for the Union Star Dance at Manitou Rapids, Canada.

Matthews, Maureen and Roulette, R. (2003). *Fair Wind's Dream: Naamiwan Obawaajigewin*. Jennifer S. H. Brown and Elizabeth Vibert (Eds.). *Reading Beyond Words: Contexts for Native History*. Broadview Press, Peterborough, Ontario. Page 356 illustrates a 1930s photograph with a jingle dress dancer dressed for participation in the Dream Dance ceremony at Berens River, Canada.

*Powwow Trail, Episode 8: Women*. [DVD]. (2004). Winnipeg, Canada: Arbor Records. Includes discussions on jingle dress dance origins from Whitefish Bay, Canada.

Swearingen, Scott and Rhoades, Sandy (Producers). (2002). *Jingle Dress* [DVD]. Tulsa, Okla. Full Circle Communications. Includes a flash-back with photographs of Midwest jingle dress dancers from the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of which came from Marquette University.

Marquette University Digital Collections,  
<http://www.marquette.edu/library/MUDC/>; use key-word "jingle" to search for pictures with jingle dresses.

Vennum, Thomas. (1982). *The Ojibwa Dance Drum: Its History and Construction*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

## The Author

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