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In Pursuit of Dancing the Indian Way: Part I

Mark G. Thiel

Marquette University, mark.thiel@marquette.edu

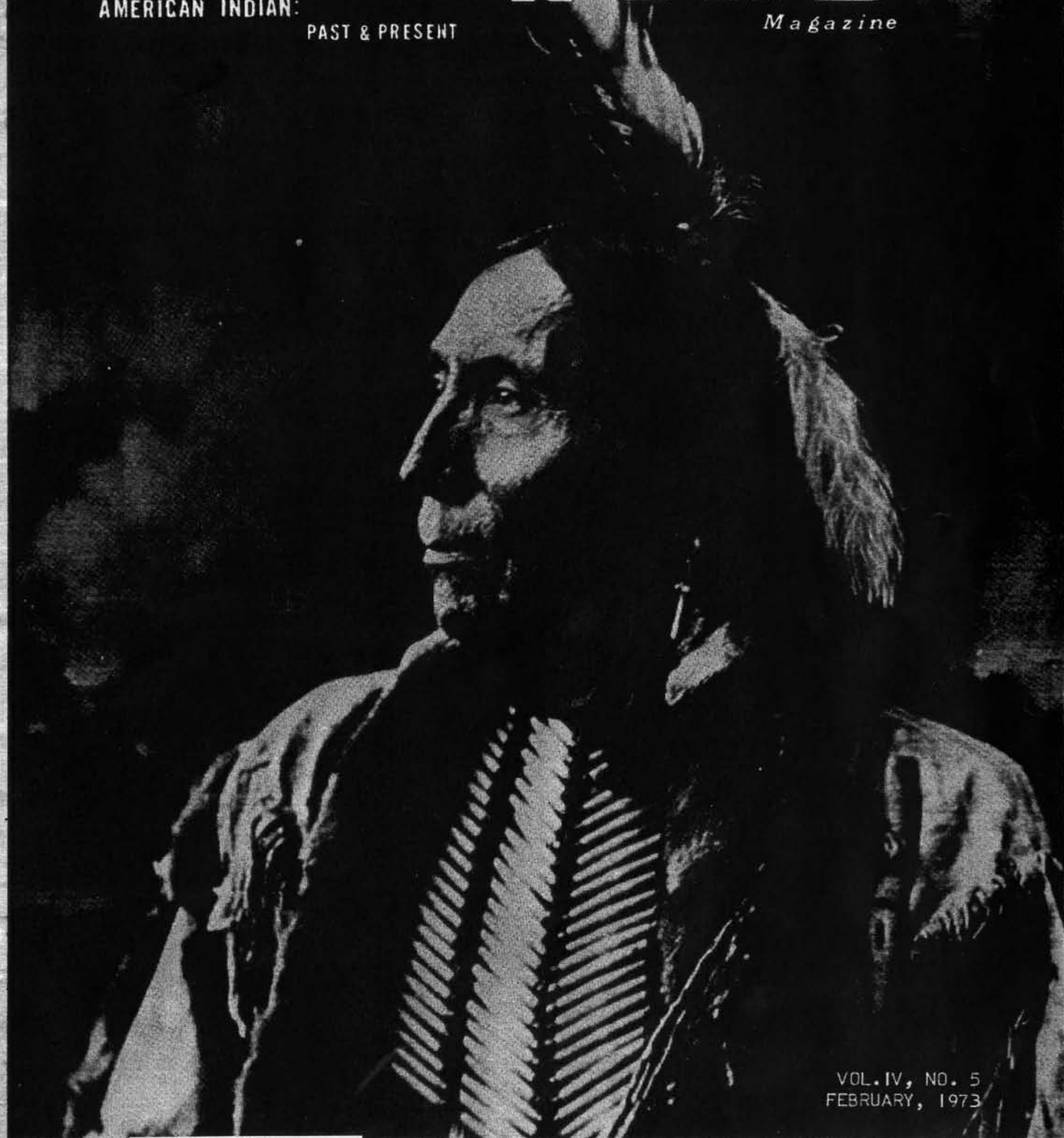
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IN PURSUIT OF DANCING

photo by dick madaus



THE INDIAN WAY

PART I

by Mark Thiel

America is not just a pale reflection of Europe - what is distinctive about America is Indian through and through." ¹ From the time European man first set foot upon this land, he began learning from the native peoples how to improve his way of life. He learned the use of numerous new products such as cigars, chewing gum, popcorn and rubber balls. He was exposed to new social concepts such as a chief is a servant of his people instead of their master, tolerance of the viewpoints of others, love of liberty and freedom, and love of nature.

An Indian leader once stated, "my people were Americans for thousands of years before your people were. The question is not how you can Americanize us, but how we can Americanize you. We had been working at that for a long time. Sometimes we are

discouraged at the results, but we will keep trying. And the first thing we want to teach you is that in the American way of life, each man has respect for his brother's vision. Because each of us respected his brother's vision, we enjoyed freedom here in America while your people were busy killing and enslaving each other across the water. The relatives you left behind are still trying to kill and enslave each other because they have not learned there that freedom is built on my respect for my brother's vision and his respect for mine. We have a hard trail ahead of us in trying to Americanize you and your white brothers, but we are not afraid of hard trails." ²

This trail of learning the unique ways of the original Americans has been continuing to the present. This trail manifests

itself in many ways. At a rural Wisconsin Winnebago social dance or "powwow", a naive spectator once commented to me that some dancers had appearances that were astonishingly similar to that of Orientals. He was surprised when I told him that the particular "Sioux" dancer he was observing was of Japanese descent. This spectator could not comprehend why that person would want to participate in an Indian dance.

Various aspects of Native American culture appeal to many people not of Indian decent. They enrich, enhance and improve the lives of countless numbers of Americans. Social dances are no exception. The pulsating singing, the beautiful costumes, and the enthusiasm and enjoyment expressed by the dancers has had a strong attracting force on many people not of Native American decent. The result has been with the assistance of Native People, numerous non-Indians have learned to enjoy this art form.

The roots of the Indian lore movement reach back over half a century to that era known as the "Gilded Age". The east was industrializing, the west was conquered, and more and more people were moving into the mushrooming cities. Now that the Native peoples were conquered and confined to reservations, they no longer were a threat and could be viewed romantically. The dime novel, the Wild West Show, the Indian Medicine show, and the cigar store Indian were all manifestations of this thinking. The Indian theme did not die here. It was continually recast into new forms with changing times.

American society was undergoing rapid change with life becoming urban, more complex, and more impersonal. Clothing styles of this era restricted freedom and individuality. Women laced up their waists as tight as possible to make themselves appear slim and wore hobble skirts which restricted their walking ability. Men wore drab clothing without variety. Urban living conditions deteriorated and both adults and children worked long hours in unsafe factories. Growing industrialization was leading to wasteful destruction of natural resources. This rapid technological development caused a need for social readjustment.

At the turn of the century reaction set in against existing social conditions in the form of a growing movement for outdoor recreation and camping programs. The leading advocates of this movement were two naturalists, Ernest Thompson Seton and Daniel Carter Beard.⁴ By visiting Native American communities, these men found aspects of Indian culture that could benefit American youth:

love of nature, crafts, clothing, recreational games, dances and outdoor living skills. The making of crafts instill feelings of worth and importance, counteracting feelings of powerlessness that result from industrialization and urbanization. Native clothing provides that freedom of movement necessary for outdoor living. Games and dances provide good physical exercise. All of these activities together contribute toward a love of nature and the outdoors. The Native style breechcloths, feathered sticks, and teepees adapted by the followers of Seton and Beard became a sharp contrast to the drab and confining life-style of their era.⁵

In 1910 Seton and Beard were among the founders of the Boy Scouts of America and were instrumental in instituting the theme based upon Indian life.⁶ Throughout the early years of the Boy Scout movement and until 1941 Beard contributed articles on handicrafts and Indian "lore" to the Boy Scout magazine, BOY'S LIFE. His articles were an aid in earning the Indian lore badge for which some 20,000 boys⁷ had learned a few superficial items about history, dances and traditional way of life. In 1915, the "Order of the Arrow", a scout honor camping program was begun. It uses Indian style costumes and props to create an impressive atmosphere for campfire ceremonies.⁸ Like other youth camping enterprises founded in this era, it incorporated facsimiles of Native dances.

In writing for BOY'S LIFE magazine, Beard was succeeded by W. Ben Hunt, who became a well known author of Indian handicraft books. Hunt, a commercial artist from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, promoted on a generalized juvenile level, Native costuming and dancing by writing over eighteen books and over one thousand magazine articles. Hunt became interested in Indian crafts¹⁰ as a result of his grandmother encouraging handicraft making and telling stories about Native Americans, reading articles in BOY'S LIFE by Beard, and meeting the Sioux in the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show when it came to Milwaukee. Later, to learn more about crafts for his writings, he visited Frank Smart of the Lac Court Orielles Chippewa, museums and other Native craftsmen.

As a result of the influence of both Ben Hunt and youth groups with Indian craft programs, interested individuals formed organizations exclusively for pursuing the study of Native dance, music and costuming. These clubs, often based upon family activity, may build up a significant degree of sophistication. The Mi-Kan-Na-Mid Dancers¹¹ of Wichita, Kansas, for example, was founded

in 1945 and presently has third generation members.

After World War II, Native Americans were again showing that they were proud of their identity, and a renewed interest in dancing began sweeping the country. A modern version of the war dance with corresponding new styles of dance clothes began diffusing outward from Oklahoma. For men, the dominant costume throughout the U.S. has become the "fancy" or "feathers" costume and among women the long fringed shawl has gained wide acceptance. This new war dance or "powwow" is an en masse¹³ type of dance requiring no rehearsal. Its structure is such that it easily accommodates intertribal and integrated hobbyist - Native American powwow aggregations.

The serious hobbyist responded to this resurgence in dancing by adopting this new form of dancing and by scrutinizing a number of older forms. Eventually, hobbyist interest came to center on variations of the "feathers" costume, the Oklahoma straight dancer, the grass dance costume, the early 20th Century Sioux costume, and the various women's styles. With the aid of Native Americans, the camera and the tape recorder, many hobbyists have become accomplished costume makers, singers, and dancers. Interest in the dance expanded to also include the customs and proper facilities, most notably from the northern or southern plains. As a result, in the last ten to fifteen years,¹⁴ dances sponsored by non-Indians have become comparable to the social dances sponsored by Indians and attendance at a number of dances in integrated.

The hobbyist movement has been developing into a coordinated national movement. In 1954 the first hobbyist magazine, the **AMERICAN INDIAN HOBBYIST** was published and edited by Norm Feder of the Denver Art Museum. It provided hobbyists with articles on Native dancing, dance costuming, and dates of powwows. This magazine has since been succeeded by a host of others. The 1960's and 1970's saw the formation of large statewide hobbyist organizations in California, Florida, Louisiana, New England, Ohio, and Texas. Dances sponsored by hobbyists groups were now being held throughout the U.S., drawing integrated hobbyist and Indian participation. In 1969, the first National Hobbyist Powwow¹² was held in Denver, Colorado. It brought together 300 to 400 Native Americans and hobbyists from 35 states for a weekend of dancing and friendship.

More recently non-Indian dancers have begun to look beyond the colored feathers and the other visible aspects of the culture. In varying intensities, and awareness of

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 14)

LIHA NEWS

"WW" To Be Microfilmed

Microfilming Corporation of America recently added WHISPERING WIND Magazine to its growing list of Indian publications that will be microfilmed and made available to institutions and persons interested in the American Indian.

The issues of WHISPERING WIND that will be microfilmed will begin with October, 1971, Vol. IV, No. 1 and continue with all issues after that date. There are two issues of Vol. IV that are out of print and will not be microfilmed, Nos. 3 & 7.

For more information on other publication in the MCA collection and for availability of WHISPERING WIND including prices, please contact Microfilming Corporation of America; 21 Harristown Road; Glen Rock, New Jersey 07452.

Monthly LIHA Powwow

The February LIHA Monthly Powwow will be held February 10, 1973 at Our Lady of Divine Providence Church (cafeteria), corner of N. Starrett and W. Metairie Rd., Metairie, Louisiana---7:30 pm.

Everyone try and come out. This is the only chance we all have of getting together for some good dancing during the winter months. Everyone is welcome. Bring a friend. Let's grow and continue to grow.

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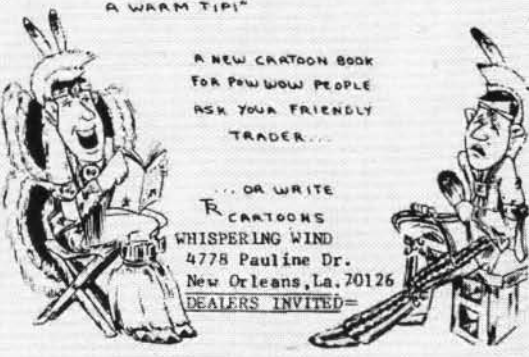
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Native American values, ethics and principles has been developing. As one non-Indian has observed, "there is something missingthere is a great deal of difference between dances put on by hobbyists and those put on by Indians." He observed that dances sponsored by Indians are more leisurely; they are not run by the clock. Another non-Indian noted Indian hospitality: Indians put on dances for others while hobbyists charge admission. As a result, some people have been advocating an adoption of Indian values, doing it the "Indian way".

Among some non-Indian dancers, there is growing concern for the social problems of Native Americans. Some of these dancers interested in the current social struggle and support Indian causes through donations. Others work with projects in Native communities. Some hobbyist clubs have set up educational funds for Indian students. One non-Indian explains, "We are not hobbyists, but enthusiasts. A hobbyist likes to sit down and do beadwork...he is only thinking of himself. An enthusiast is one who is interested in the people...A large percentage are only interested in feathers and dancing...(but) there are a number of us who use this as a springboard for helping the Indian people. It is so much easier to meet them socially first."

....CONTINUED NEXT MONTH....

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