In Pursuit of Dancing the Indian Way: Part I

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IN PURSUIT OF DANCING

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. 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."

This trail of learning the unique ways of the original Americans has been continuing to the present. This trail manifests
love of nature, crafts, clothing, recreation-
al games, dances and outdoor living skills.
The making of crafts instills feelings of
worth and importance, counteracting feelings
of powerlessness that result from Indus-
trialization and urbanization. Native clothing
provides that freedom of movement necessary
for outdoor living. Games and dances provide
good physical exercise. All of these activi-
ties 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 con-
fining life-style of their era.

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. 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 boys 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 cos-
tumes and props to create an impressive at-
mosphere for campfire ceremonies. 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 be-
came a well known author of Indian handi-
craft books. Hunt, a commercial artist from
Milwaukee, Wisconsin, promoted on a gener-
alized juvenile level, Native costuming and
dancing by writing over eighteen books and
over one thousand magazine articles. Hunt
became interested in Indian crafts as a
result of his grandmother encouraging handi-
craft making and telling stories about Na-
tive 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 Oreilles 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 or-
ganizations exclusively for pursuing the
study of Native dance, music and costuming.
These clubs, often based upon family activi-
ity, may build up a significant degree of
sophistication. The Mi-Kan-Na-Mid Dancers
of Wichita, Kansas, for example, was founded

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 pos-
sible to make themselves appear slim and
wore hobble skirts which restricted their
walking ability. Men wore drab clothing with-
out variety. Urban living conditions deteri-
orated and both adults and children worked
long hours in unsafe factories. Growing in-
dustrialization was leading to wasteful de-
struction 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 re-
creation and camping programs. The leading
advocates of this movement were two natural-
ists, Ernest Thompson Seton and Daniel Carter
Beard. By visiting Native American com-

ities, these men found aspects of Indian
culture that could benefit American youth:
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 masse 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, 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 Powwow 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

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Native American values, ethics and principles has been developing. As one non-Indian has observed, “there is something missing ... there 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.”

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