



*Photos and Story
By Jason Levkulich*

The Art of Dance

The normal silence of the Winnebago Reservation was interrupted last weekend by the steady beat of a drum at the annual Homecoming Celebration Powwow. The event has been carried on for the past 128 years.

Entering the grounds that morning, spectators could see the Women's Traditional dancers perform steps that have been passed down for generations. This small group was only a fraction of the 218 Native Americans who would display an art form of their past and present.

Returning to the reservation from all over the United States, the Winnebagos use this event to visit and relax, heal and grow.

Betty Earth, a Nebraska Winnebago whose family now lives in Milwaukee, said it's a time to visit and trade stories.

"Everything is done in good faith," she said. "It's also a time to make new friends."

For many, the Powwow stretches back to their youth.

"I introduced my daughter to the dancing when she was four days old," Earth said. "Most people return to dance until they are too old but, still they show up to watch and remember."

Among those who came to watch was a group of 46 University of Nebraska-Lincoln international affairs students. The students, from Europe, Asia, Japan and the Bahamas, came to learn about the history of the people who lived here before the white man.

Yenbo Wu, international student adviser and program coordinator, said the trip was part of a series of ventures that the department will be having to acclimate students to the U.S.

"We want them to see how the Native Americans live and perform various aspects of their culture," he said. "This experience will enable our students to begin to understand what's real from what's seen at the movies."

Some of the traditions the students watched were the various forms of dancing. From men's and women's traditional dance to the entrance dance, participants and visitors alike could see the elaborate costumes and decorations which have so much meaning in Native American life.

Travis Bear Ike from Sioux City, Iowa said that most people trade for the different devices that comprise their outfits.

"If we see something we like, we usually offer something of equal value so the other person benefits from the deal," Bear Ike said. "If one wishes to buy something from a company, they usually pay for it. For instance, bustles (frames lined with feathers on the backs of male dancers) will usually run about \$1200.

Along with dancers, various drum groups are invited to perform songs and establish rhythm for the dance competitions.

Jack Anquoe, leader and composer for the Gray Horse Singers, said the songs are stories of Mother Earth, the Creator and the past.

"What we and the other drummers do is not a show," he said. "This is a cultural tradition and together with the dancing, our way of life is carried on."

Each drum group tours many Powwows and other ceremonies every year, he said.

Norma Sealer, treasurer of the Winnebago Tribal Council, said that keeping with tradition, all dancers, drummers and others involved receive prize money or gifts.

"Forty-four thousand dollars was given away to winners and participants this year," she said. "As with the past years, all revenue generated is used towards the next year's event."

The dancers and their families spent the four days encamped on the surrounding hill. Trailers, tents, cars and tipis filled the sloping rise giving a cramped city-like feel to the solemn, yet charged atmosphere.

Betty Earth said the dance circle represents ever lasting life.

"The circle is never-ending, the same with our life force," she said. "Dancing around and around represents this on-going cycle."

As the day wore into evening, the celebrating—which originated from a feast and victory dance Chief Little Priest sponsored after helping quell the Sioux uprising in 1865—was gaining momentum. The dancing and socializing continued into night and the next day.

When the beat of the host drum faded, the last weary dancers packed away their colorful and symbolic clothing for another day. Many would remember the sharing and growing of this Powwow.

"We will come together once again next year, and share stories, dances and love with all the people," Betty Earth said. "It is our way."



In the walkways encircling the dance arena, various dealers sell their wares such as this pottery. Lucas Lonetree dances in full regalia during the grand entrance.

