

# Annual Powwow of Omaha Indians



SOME OF THE INDIANS WHO TOOK PART IN THE DANCES.—Photo by a Staff Artist.

**T**HE annual pow wow of the Omaha Indians, which has just been concluded on their reservation north of Omaha in Thurston county, is one of the most interesting events which the dweller in this section has the opportunity of witnessing; more interesting in fact than many sights which people travel thousands of miles to see. Yet this goes by every year and attracts no more interest than a camp of wandering gypsies. It is a strange commingling of the aboriginal and the modern, the customs of the Indian and the white man.

The Omahas are one of the most advanced tribes of Indians on the continent. They have their land in severalty and an unusually large proportion of them farm their land. They built themselves houses, many of them of a pretentious character, and have adopted the dress of the white man along with his other customs. Once each year, however, they pay tribute to the old life, when the tent was their only shelter and their abiding place wherever they saw fit to pitch it. These gatherings are designated "pow wows," a representation of the congregation of the old days, when the tribe was gathered together for counsel. When this time comes the houses are abandoned, the tents are hauled out and the habiliments of the old, free days are brought from their retreats and so far as possible the customs of years ago are observed.

To the older men these annual gatherings must bring a feeling of sadness, as it is brought home to them that the once powerful tribe has now dwindled to about 1,200 souls, with the certainty that in a few generations the full blood Omaha will be but a memory.

The camp this year was pitched about five miles southwest of the agency buildings, on the crown of a high hill with a large level space for the tents, which are pitched in a circle. As a rule the old Indian method of supporting the tent by means of interlocked poles is observed, but the modern dog tent is not altogether absent. The covering of skins of the old days has been of necessity displaced by the canvas of the white man, for the chase no longer affords the means of obtaining the old. Many there were among those who assembled who could remember when the lemonade stand, soda water and other luxuries of the white man's circus day were not features of the pow-wows. The steam merry-go-round is another innovation of the white man which was enjoyed immensely by both old and young. From the time the whistle blew in the morning until the fires were drawn at night the sons of nature patronized it liberally. That they enjoyed it was evidenced by the constant laughter of the squaws and the grunts of satisfaction of the braves. There was nothing but the dance in the big tent which could draw them away from it.

During the day the majority who were not patronizing the merry-go-round lolled about the tents, dressed in the white man's clothing, talking largely the white man's language and following largely the habits of the ordinary camper. It was only when the drums sounded in the big tent that the real Indian appeared. The first symptom of the coming event was the gathering of some of the old men at the tent,

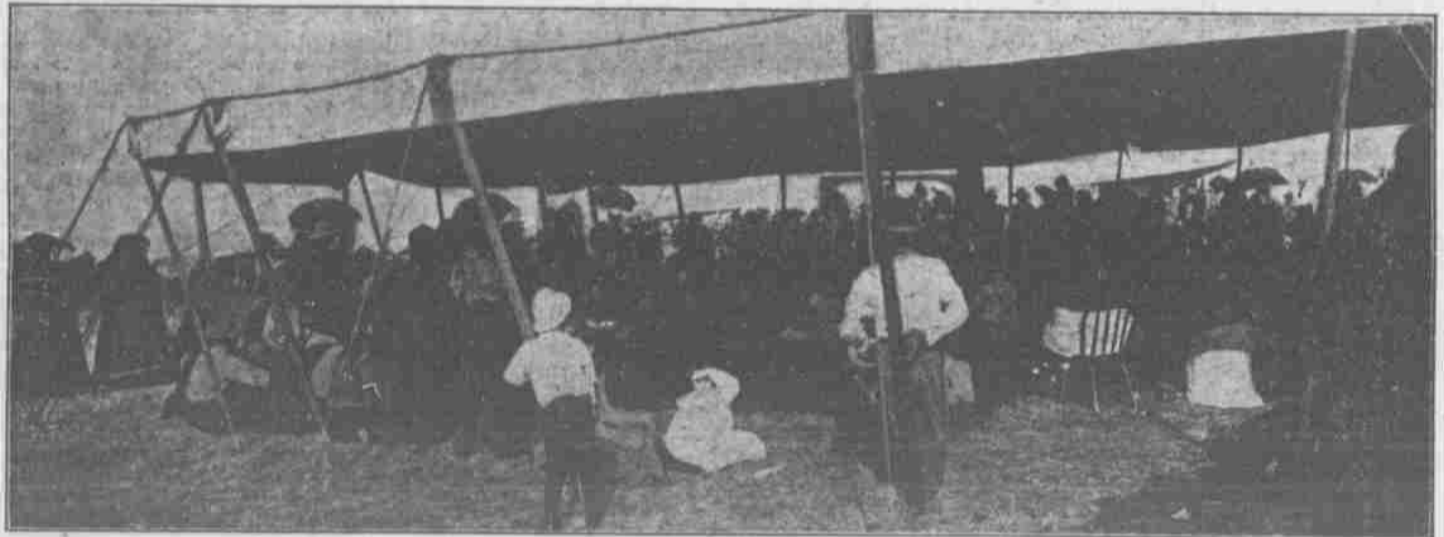
and in the raiment which the Indian wore before the reservation bound him. These gathered around the drums placed in the center and the monotonous beating commenced. From the tents in the great circle gradually came the Indians who were to participate in the dance. They, too, had cast aside the garb of the white man and taken on that of the Indian. Faces were painted as of yore and feathers adorned the hair. Here, again, it has been impossible to entirely get away from the white man, though the garb is fashioned after the manner of the Indian, it is largely the product of the white man's loom. The avenues for creating the old garb are closed with the passing of the chase. The white man would hardly recognize his handiwork in the garb which the Indian has fashioned from his product. This latter change has not come during the lifetime of Indians now living, for years and years before the coming of the

ence. The glories and the trials of the past are retold and in memory he can see the time when the country was peopled only by his race and abounded with game, which provided him with sustenance. No reservation boundary circumscribed his movements and no agent was near to tell him it was time to break up his powwow.

At the powwow which has just closed 175 tents were pitched and it is estimated that at least three-fourths of the membership of the tribe was present at one time. It is likely that few if any were not present at some time during its progress. The best of order prevailed, the policing of the camp being in charge of Gary La Flèche, who performed his duties in a creditable manner. There were a large number of visitors during its progress, the number on the last Sunday being especially large. Its location, twenty-five miles from the railroad, probably kept many visitors away, though the Indian was probably no sufferer from this.

Fletcher in her "Hunting Customs of the Omaha Indians," published in the Century Magazine some years ago.

The annual hunt always took place after the corn crop had been laid by. It was a tribal offering and all the people of the village were expected to take part in it. After the date had been fixed by the council it could not be changed for any reason, as it was only determined after the most solemn of ceremonial and was considered irrevocable. All save the decrepit, the sick and some who were necessarily left behind to look after the permanent village, went on the expedition. The Omahas hunted between the Niobrara and the Republican rivers on the north and south and the Missouri and the Rocky mountains on the east and west. The hunts were conducted in strict conformity to well established rules, and the work was duly apportioned among the people, so that all had something to look after while



TENT WHERE CEREMONIAL DANCE IS HELD.—Photo by a Staff Artist.

settler the trapper and the trader furnished the Indian with these products of the white man's industry. Under the big tent when the dance starts the white man's language is also dropped and the mother tongue alone is heard, except from the lips of the curious onlooker.

Slowly the dancers gather and one by one they drop into the circle and perform their part. The spectator may be impatient for the affair to start, but the Indian is never in a hurry. He sticks to his custom, and if the spectator does not wish to wait he can come back later or not come at all, for this dance is for the pleasure of the Indians and not given for the benefit of the spectator. Once started he sticks to it with a persistence unknown to his white brother. Hour after hour the drums keep up their rhythmic beat, hour after hour the Indian feet keep time, never seeming to tire, accompanied continually with the chanting songs, meaningless to the uninitiated, but each word and movement significant of something to the participants and the Indian onlookers.

Here to the Omaha is the culmination of the year's pleasures. Here is practically all that is left to him of the life which the older generation cherish in memory and the younger ones have been taught to rever-

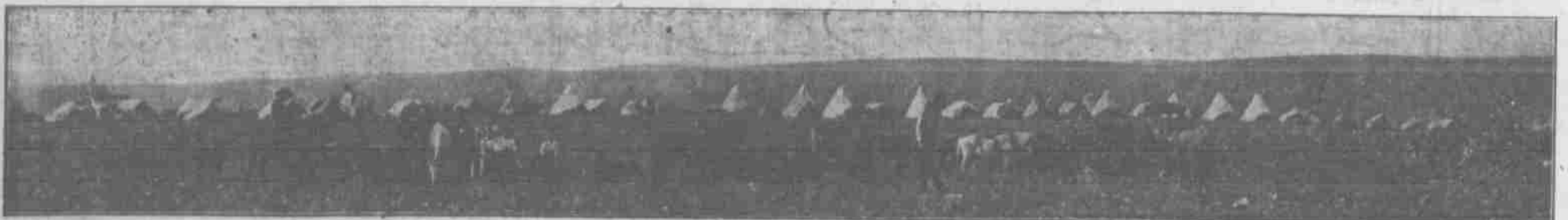
He can get along fully as well, if not better, without the influx of sightseers.

The dances of the Omaha Indians were all ceremonial, and each had its peculiar significance. The one which is now engaged at the annual powwow was celebrated in connection with the annual hunt on which the tribe went each summer to gather meat for fall and winter consumption. This was one of the really important ceremonies of the tribe, and was observed with even more than the usual solemnity. In connection with it were certain formula that were lost to posterity by a peculiar accident. The exact method of opening the council that was held prior to the beginning of the dance was confided to one man, the ritual being long and involved, requiring about four hours to carry out and being entirely oral. Only one man knew this, and he was trusted to impart it to his son, or someone designated by the elders of the tribe to receive it just before his death. On one occasion, not so very many years ago, but while the tribe was still living in barbarism, the keeper of the secret ritual was killed on a hunt, and the ritual died with him. Many of the other forms observed in connection with the hunting dance and council have been preserved, and are charmingly described by Alice

away. Sometimes war parties of Sioux from the north or Pawnees from the south were encountered, but not frequently. The main occupation was to kill, cut up and cure the meat and dress the hides. The summer killed hides were used for making tents, and the winter hides for robes.

The arrangement of the village in a circle is also significant. It runs each way from the sacred lodge in the center, and the line of division, though unmarked, is a sacred boundary dividing the several gentes of the tribe. No one who belonged on the one side could live on the other. The little Indian boy who happened to be sent on an errand from one side of the circle to the other was forcibly impressed of his trespass, but when once they were away from the influence of surroundings, they were friendly enough. This division of the tribe into gentes or families was a marked characteristic of the North American races, in common with the barbaric and savage races the world around. It was observed with great strictness by all the Indians, but by none so closely as among the Omahas. Marriage within the gens was forbidden by all, but among the Omahas marriage had to be across the line, that is, a young man

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OMAHA INDIAN ENCAMPMENT, WHERE THE ANNUAL POWWOW WAS HELD—THIS PICTURE SHOWS BUT ONE SIDE OF THE CIRCLE.—Photo by a Staff Artist.