

Some Facts About Indian Dances

Old-time Dances are Largely Extinct Through Fact Inspiration is Gone. War Dance no Longer Realistic. Social Dances Survive.

In these modern times when the subject of dancing is commanding so much attention that it is a poor season that does not produce some dozens or more new steps it might not come amiss to write something of the dances which were in vogue in this northwest before the white man came with the waltz and two-step and their distorted descendants.

The dance is as old as the human race and the Indians, like all savage people, made it an important feature of their social and ceremonial life. They had their war dances, their medicine dances, their wind dances, their sun dances, scalp dances, death dances and many other dances with which to celebrate, commemorate and conjure.

Few of these dances persist today in their original form because many of them have lost their significance. Why hold a war dance when there are no more wars and how dance a scalp dance without scalps?

Many of the Indians, too, are becoming enlightened and not a few have embraced the Christian faith. Thus the dances based upon superstition and those having a religious import are gradually becoming lost in disuse. Those which endure most nearly in their primitive form are those used at social and ceremonial gatherings.

The Indian Drum.

The Indian dancing is done to drums made by stretching rawhide over a rim of wood and is almost always accompanied by chanting. The familiar step and the one used with slight variations in the majority of the Indian dances, consists merely in a slight bending of the knee, then a straightening of the legs, the first movement being accompanied by a rising upon the toes and half of the foot with a settling back upon the heel as the legs are straightened. The arms are generally bent at right angles, the hands held in front and moving slightly in time with the beating of the drums. In the war dance and in some other dances the movements are much more animated and the body is made to express the spirit of the dance. Sometimes it is stooped far over with back arched and then straightened, the movements having a sinuous grace that is indescribable.

The dances staged by the Indians at the Round-Up are commonly called the war dance the step-and-a-half and love dance. However, they are very abbreviated, due to the lack of time for the full dance and the absence of the inspiration which was a fundamental art of the original.

The real war dance, as danced by the Indians in the days when they fought with tribal foes, is practically unknown among the northwest Indians, according to authorities. Such part of it as is given these days by the modern Indians is not to be compared with the wild rush and frenzy of the genuine war dance as danced about the campfires of the Cayuses and Umatillas in the days when they made war upon their hereditary foes, the Bannocks.

War Dance a Drama.

The old war dance was in reality a drama. A good description of its manifestations and meaning is to be had from the description given by Jay Lynch, formerly superintendent of the school at the Yakima Indian Agency, Fort Snacco, Wash. In a letter to Major Moorhouse of this city in 1905, in part he wrote as follows: "While the women who have been chanting with the drummers retire to the rear. The warriors in front brandish their tomahawks, uttering their peculiar war whoops and making such gestures with arms as to represent a battle with the enemy. Some one then returns to the chiefs from the war party and reports of the battle and victory. This is all done, without words, by movements and dancing and bearing trophies of the victory. The drummers and women then set up a chant and wail in mourning of the dead. I do not think that any white woman can produce these sounds of lamentation. The scene then changes by the return of a war party who carries something, usually in the belt, representing the scalps taken in the fight and bearing other trophies of the victory. The warriors then form a circle and dance what is commonly known as the war dance or scalp dance. As they dance this celebrated dance they brandish their tomahawks and articles as they have to represent scalps, with war whoops and frantic gestures in celebration of the victory."

"Sometimes at the end of this dance an individual warrior or warriors will make short speeches to the chiefs and tell them of the incidents of the battle and boast of some of their deeds. This is the only instance where there is any talk, and often this is omitted. In relating their exploits it is often very amusing to hear them draw on their imaginations in relating their brave deeds and exploits. The dance is closed by a dance of the men and women with a chant of thanksgiving and praise.

"It generally takes from three to four hours to go through the entire performance. When these dances are given at exhibitions, they are generally given only in part. The dress is usually the most picturesque feature to those that do not understand anything about the meaning of the dance.

"I do not think it possible for anyone but an Indian to give this chanting, as it seems to be regulated, and the changes in the scenes and chants, by the beat of the drums."

The Chinook Wind Dance.

One of the dances peculiar to the Indians of the Inland Empire was the Chinook wind dance concerning which Col. William Parsons in his "History of Umatilla Counties," writes:

"The Chinook wind dance was held when spring was deferred and the ponies began to suffer from lack of grass. The dance sometimes became very wild; the sorcerers or witch doctors were much in evidence; the drumming became rapid and sonorous; the doctors grew excited and whirled about like howling dervishes; the more frantic bared their arms and gashed themselves with knives; blood flowed profusely; the conjurers suck it from the wounds, and even tore strips of flesh from their arms with their teeth and devoured them like wild animals. These wild performances were thought to show great bravery and manhood, and the doctors showed their scars in the future with much pride. During the height of the orgy the witches called

upon the wind spirits to come to the relief of the Indians and drive away the snow. If the Chinook did not come soon the dance was resumed until the warm west wind put in an appearance. Then the sorcerers triumphantly claimed that they had brought the Chinook and they gained not only fame but more substantial rewards."

The Scalp Dance.

The same authority in describing the scalp dance, says: "In the scalp dance the women did the dancing inside a ring formed by the other members of the clan sitting around. The dancers were half naked, hideously daubed with paint and with disheveled hair. They danced about while those sitting around sang a wild, monotonous song and beat on boards with clubs."

The Medicine Dance.

One of the dances of the old Umatillas was the medicine dance but they never developed it to the extent that the coast Indians did. In fact the coast Indians spent much more time dancing than did the inland tribes for the reason that the long rainy periods kept them confined indoors and forced them to turn to the dance for pastime.

Thomas N. Strong of Portland some years ago contributed an article to the Oregonian in which he gave a graphic description of the medicine dance which he says, was at its best among the coast tribes. It was held in a long lodge, "in such a lodge," he wrote, "in case of sickness of some distinguished person, there would be gathered at night a hundred or more Indians. In the sunken place in the middle of the lodge cleaned out for this purpose, and near the fire, would be placed upon a mat the sufferer lightly covered with furs. Around the sides and ends of the lodge in double and triple ranks, each with a pole in his hands, would be placed every available Indian man, woman and child.

"At a given signal from some master of ceremonies the dance would be commenced by everybody, at first slowly but afterward more quickly, jumping up and down in their places to the loud chant of 'yo-o-o, yo-o-o, yo-o-o, yo, the first three long drawn out and the last sharply cut off and shouted almost explosively. No one stirred from his position except monotonously to jump up and down with the pole held upright in both hands in front of him, so that the movement brought it into contact with the low roof in perfect time with the chant and the jumping, the movement being so timed that the poles struck the room all together with the final 'yo.' The noise was deafening and the lodge would shake in every timber. After this had gone on with increasing enthusiasm for a half hour or so and the patient was supposed to be sufficiently prepared and the evil spirit properly alarmed, a terrific noise would be heard in the darkness outside, and suddenly the medicine man with four or five assistants would come bounding through the door with howls and yells into the smoky interior. They looked like fiends, bodies naked, faces covered with a hideous mask over which towered a frightful headdress, and in their hands rattles, large cumbersome things covered with teeth and feathers. This dress varied with different people and different medicine men, but the one idea was to make it hideous and awe inspiring as possible, so as to impress and frighten the demons who had wrought the evil witchcraft upon the sufferer. Not for one moment did the dancing, chanting or pounding cease or vary in its monotony. The medicine man howling dimly circled with great leaps and bounds about his patient in sporting phrase, sparring for an opening to get to close grips with the evil spirit. Finally his chance came. The spirit, invisible to all but him, had been caught off his guard. He rushed in, seized the sick man, and with hands and teeth attempted to drag

him from the demon that tormented him. In the contest the patient was tossed and roughly handled, for Indian devils come out reluctantly. The performance lasted for hours, taking the greater part of the night, and the assemblage was wrought up to a frenzy. The treatment stopped only because human nature could endure no longer. With the smoke, noise and general atmosphere, the interior of the lodge became unbearable and the physical strain was too great to be longer endured. Sustained and smoothed by his struggle with the evil one in his body, the sick man himself, with patience and before many days, generally gave up the ghost."

At many of the dances there was an orator to make an address and he generally recounted the history of the tribe, telling of the brave deeds of warriors past and present and enjoining his hearers to emulate them.

However, except for the student and the closely observant, most of the Indian dances are interesting chiefly because of the barmanic splendor of the dancers, for the Indians, just like their white brothers and sisters, put on their finest feathers when they dance. The dancing garb of some is quite like the dancing garb of some modern society belles, chiefly attractive because of its scantiness.

Buff Vernon Denies He Was Drowned

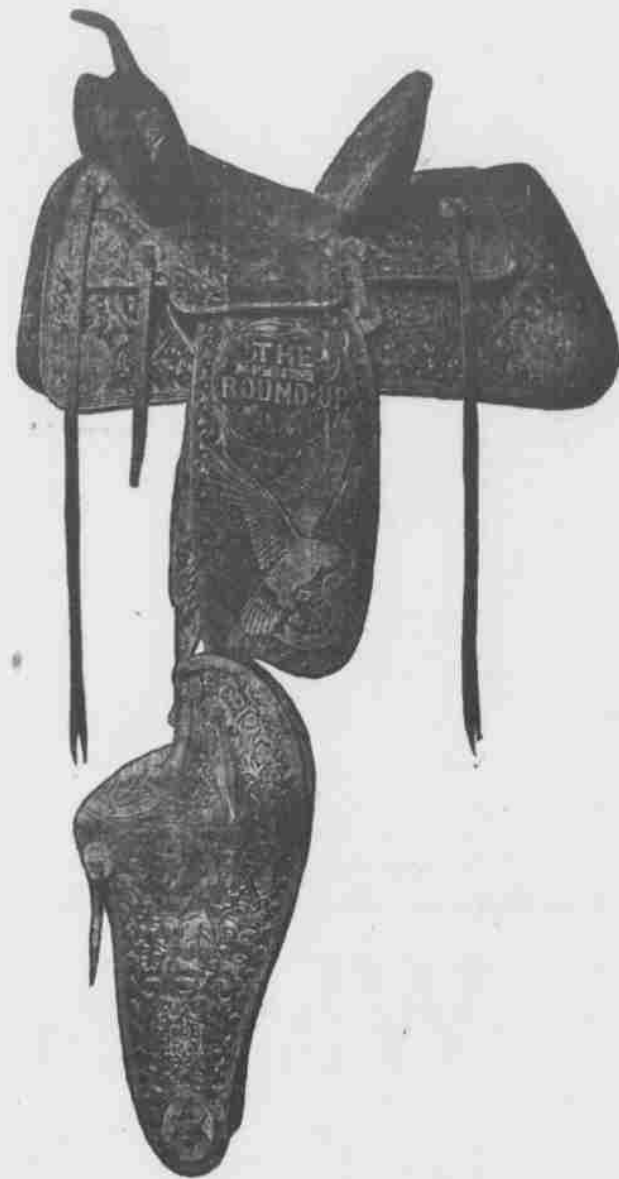
"How can a cowboy be drowned when he is in a dry state?" was the very pertinent query raised by Buffalo Vernon, popular Round-Up performer, when he read in the Billboard that he was supposed to have been drowned. "Buff" promptly took his pen in hand and in the following letter to the Billboard dispelled the report that he had met a wet and untimely end.

"In the Billboard I'm supposed to be drowned at some place with a heavenly twang down in Texas. On the billboards out here (Pendleton, Ore.) I'm scheduled to bulldog rope and tie a few wild long-horn steers at Pendleton, and Oregon's a dry state. There sure is a discrepancy somewhere in the statistics on my health.

"I sure was glad to get your letter and be able to put the bunch right for I am not the guy in Texas, but am still here and ready to go. Don't even know the other chap, and am sure he is not of the same herd, at the same time am sorry to hear of his misfortune. Our bunch of Vernons are 'punchers,' and while you might get a cowboy more or less pickled, I've never yet heard of one getting clear drowned.

"If you or any of the bunch come out here to the Round-Up, at Pendleton, Ore., September 21, 22 and 23, where they hold genuine contests for cowboys and cowgirls, you will sure see some real sport. They originated the wild steer bulldogging contest, and yours truly had the honor of winning the first contest held for the

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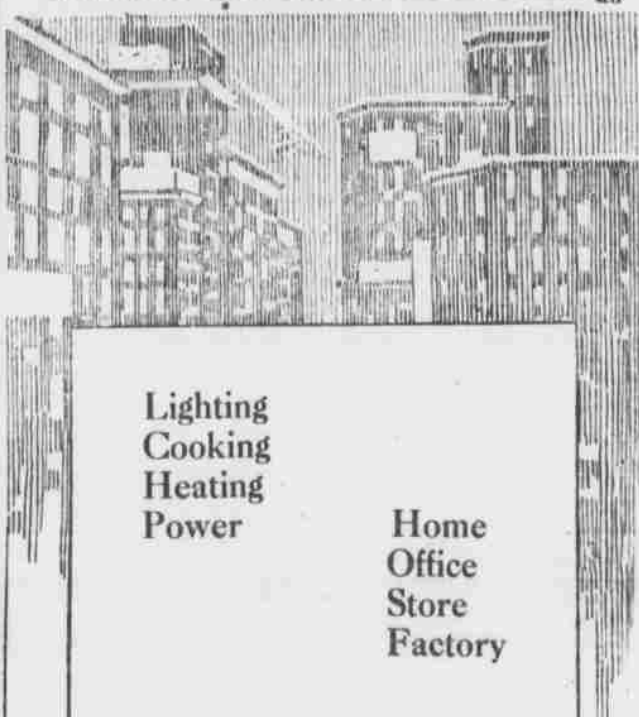
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