

Remembering Canada's Forgotten Soldiers at Contemporary Powwows³

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The level of involvement by Native Americans in the Canadian military in times of war during the twentieth century is generally not well known by the Canadian public despite the fact that the Native level of participation and enlistment was proportionately higher than the non Native population (Schmalz 1991: 228; Dickason 1997: 304). Over 4000 Native Americans enlisted in the Canadian military during the First World War, more than 3000 enlisted for World War Two and hundreds of Canadian Natives participated in the Korean War (Summerby 1993: 3). Additionally, many Natives from Canada also enlisted in the American military forces due to their "... more lenient physical standards, better pay and less discrimination" (Gaffen 1985: 72). One of the key reasons for the enlistment of Native Americans was the esteem that was associated with their status as "warriors"; Historian Fred Gaffen commented on this "warrior prestige," writing:

Much more than in the white community the warrior had prestige and status in traditional Indian society. For some Indians a motive for enlisting was the opportunity to assert their manhood.... In reading some accounts that earned Native Canadian military decorations on the battlefields of both World Wars, it becomes apparent that the skills of the Indian hunter and warrior came to the fore (Gaffen 1985: 15).

With the enlistment of Native American in the military during the World Wars, the communities from which these soldiers came felt the impact of their absence: many First Nations were depleted of most of their able-bodied men, resulting in weakened communities and families, both economically and socially (Summerby 1993: 21). Many of the men who enlisted experienced severe culture shock, being forced to quickly adopt the routine and organization of the non-Native military forces (Gaffen 1985: 11). Upon their return from the World Wars, many Native soldiers found that portions of their reserve's land had been appropriated to support the war efforts domestically⁴ or to reward returning non-Native veterans (ibid.: 35). They also found that the respect and equitable treatment they had received in the armed forces was discontinued upon their return to civilian life (Dickason 1997: 301).

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⁴ At the Kettle and Stoney Point First Nation in southwestern Ontario, for example, the federal government appropriated 2240 acres of reserve land in 1942 to establish the Ipperwash Military training camp, forcing the removal and relocation of twenty-two families from their homes and land at Stoney Point to neighbouring Kettle Point. Although the government promised to return the land following the Second World War, it stalled over fifty years; only in 1995, after political protests at Canada Forces Base Camp Ipperwash and Ipperwash Provincial Park, and the wrongful shooting death of community member Dudley George did the community see their land finally evacuated of non-Natives.

The relationship between Canada's Native population and the Canadian military is one that is multifaceted and often misunderstood. Despite mistreatment by the Canadian government, many First Nations people continue to support Canada's military and commemorate the efforts of war veterans. In this paper I explore the reasons for Native enlistment in military organizations, as well as the impact this involvement has had on the cultural revitalization and political organization of First Nations people across Canada. I then examine the links between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century warrior societies and the evolution and spread of the powwow tradition, a cultural celebration in which Native traditions are celebrated and solidarity amongst Native people is fostered. Finally, drawing from fieldwork at powwows in southwestern Ontario, I illustrate the activities at contemporary powwows that *publicly commemorate and honour veterans*.

Canada's Native Warriors: Impetus for Cultural Revitalization and Pan-Indianism

Involvement in the Canadian military was critical in the history of First Nations people in the twentieth century in two significant ways: firstly, it fostered solidarity among First Nations people across Canada, leading to a strengthening of Native culture and political organization; and secondly, it encouraged the revival and performance of significant cultural ceremonies and traditional practices. These factors and the reinstated status of the veteran or warrior in Native cultures, encouraged the development and spread of the powwow and its music and dance practices throughout North America. Ethnomusicologist William K. Powers summarized the factors that contributed to this cultural reawakening in Native people:

Despite the belief that Indian cultures were dying out, a number of events occurred to strengthen rather than weaken Indian values, particularly of music and dance. First, World War I induced young American Indian men to volunteer for military service. The effect this had on native culture was to guarantee that many social institutions would maintain a sense of relevancy despite their anticipated degeneration and obsolescence. American Indians in fact had an opportunity to become "warriors" again, thus permitting songs and dances related to war to retain a function within each of the Plains societies.... My own interpretation of the effects of World Wars I and II and, to a lesser extent, Korea and Vietnam, is that they gave American Indians the opportunity to reinforce cultural institutions that might have become dysfunctional. Indians soldiers who participated were regarded as heroes by their people and, in accordance with tribal custom, were publicly acknowledged through their songs, dances, and giveaways (1990: 50-51).

Participation in the military fostered solidarity amongst Native people across Canada as this was the first opportunity people from different regions in Canada had to meet one another. Indeed, the First World War is recognized as an important turning point in the unity of Native Canadians. Historian Peter Schmalz claims that, "The seeds of pan-Indian consciousness were sowed when the war brought Indians from across the nation into contact with each other for the first time" (1991: 228). Resulting

relationships inspired the establishment of various Native organizations following each of the World Wars.⁵ For example, in 1919, the League of Indians of Canada was founded and, following the Second World War, other Native organizations were formed, including the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, and the National Indian Brotherhood (which was renamed the Assembly of First Nations in 1982) (Gaffen 1985: 72). These organizations promoted awareness of Native issues across Canada and also served to politically strengthen First Nations communities.

Throughout the twentieth century, Native activism and increased tribal visiting fostered a trend referred to as Pan-Indianism. The terms "Pan-Indian" and "Pan-Indianism" are applied to the arts, politics, social systems and identity of Native people to create a generalized "Indian" identity, dissolving the cultural distinctions between Native groups (Jaimes 1994: 433; Thomas 1965: 75). Beginning in 1955, anthropologists recognized the failed assimilation efforts of the American and Canadian governments and the growing cultural revitalization and pride of First Nations people (Howard 1955; Newcomb 1955). During the mid-1950s and 1960s, Native people were increasingly active and vocal about the validity of their traditional ways (Lurie 1965: 27) and social conditions in Canada likewise fostered governmental reform:

By the second third of the twentieth century changes in Canadian Indian policy were inevitable. Missionary organizations and Ottawa bureaucrats had come to recognize that directed change and economic development were not occurring as they wanted... the failure of the nineteenth-century policies and a rise in the numbers of Indians made attempts to redefine Indian policy unavoidable. And, as that process began on the governmental side of the relationship, coincidentally among the Native population there was a growing restlessness and a desire to control their own affairs (Miller 1991: 211).

Concomitantly, Native individuals and organizations in Canada actively promoted their traditions:

First Nations communities do face considerable pressure to adhere to indigenous customs, values, and practices. There are strong and concerted efforts across the country to rebuild and reinvigorate the cultural institutions – the potlach, Sun Dance, respect for elders, traditional governance systems, pow wows, healing circles, sweat lodges, and the like – that have long defined indigenous societies. To many First Nations people, being aboriginal means – at least at some public level – participating actively in the cultural life of the First Nation community. For many others, the expectation of participation is more subtle, and includes respect for communal values, a willingness to share and accept community responsibilities, and support for community aspirations (Coates 1999: 32).

⁵ As Hazel Hertzberg details in her book *The Search for an American Indian Identity: Modern Pan-Indian Movements*, Native Americans have organized themselves politically, militarily, religiously and socially for generations prior to the twentieth century (Hertzberg 1971: 6-8).

Social conditions and political movements contributed to the renewed interest in Native culture, which in turn fostered pan-Indian expressions of identity. One celebration that has received considerable attention as exemplifying and promoting pan-Indianism is the Native American powwow.⁶ These weekend-long celebrations are hosted by first Nation communities and organizations throughout Canada and share many common features, including music, social and competitive dancing, food, crafts, and some secondary events, such as baby contests and princess pageants. From as early as 1955 the powwow has been recognized as a principal site at which Native Americans engage in an expression of cultural pride and nationalism, as well as a place to learn about their heritage. The powwow is recognized as a symbolic representation of the pan-Indian movement and as “perhaps the one event to which the term *pan-Indianism* has been applied more often than to any other” (Powers 1980: 223). Despite these assertions, powwows are not homogeneous celebrations; within the generalized Plains-style of music and dance performed at powwows across North America, each celebration is distinguished by the participation of different individuals, the contrasting aims of organizers and variations in the programming of activities.

Powwow Origins in Traditional Warrior Societies

Contemporary powwows have their origins in the music and dance practices of various nations in the Plains developing out of warrior societies and related dances and ceremonies which spread throughout the Plains and beyond during the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These warrior societies fulfilled various functions in Native communities, including policing, conducting ceremonies, and participating in battles (Hungry Wolf 1983: 4). According to Orin Hatton, the origins of the contemporary powwow are found in the merging of the Iruska Society of the Pawnee with the Omaha’s Poo-ge-thun Men’s Society to create a new society called the Hethushka (1986: 198). The purpose of this new society was “to stimulate an heroic spirit among the people and to keep alive the memory of historic and valorous acts” (ibid.: 199, citing Fletcher and LaFlesche 1911: 459). Songs and dances of the Hethushka Society drew primarily from the Pawnee styles of performance and subsequently spread to the Ponca and the Lakota. From the Ponca and Omaha, this warriors’ society and its related music and dance spread to the Dakota nation in the Plains in the mid-nineteenth century. Music and dance were important in the operations of warrior societies, accompanying ceremonies and encouraging camaraderie amongst warriors. Adolf and Beverly Hungry Wolf comment on the role of music and dance in warrior societies, saying:

[A] custom shared by American Indians of the past ... was to work up courage and enthusiasm for war through dancing. Indian war dancers typically gathered in front of their leader’s lodge, dressed as though ready for battle ... the dancers pretended to sneak around, their bodies often bent low, scouting for enemies and searching the ground for signs. With their weapons they danced toward imaginary enemies and fought with them, while whooping and yelling. Older men usually drummed and sang for the warriors, whose

⁶ See, for example, Corrigan 1970; Howard 1955, 1983; Kurath 1957; Thomas 1965.

wives and other female relatives joined in with higher voices. If the warriors returned from their war trails successfully, the women joined them for victory dances... (1983: 4).

This description of dance in many ways parallels the styles of dance that are seen at contemporary powwows, especially as performed by the Men's Traditional Dancers, who often simulate the hunt or their approach to an enemy in their dancing. However, as the War Dance spread from the Dakotas at the end of the nineteenth century, it lost its overt association with war exploits and honouring of successful battles due to the influence of the reserve system and a decrease in warfare (Huenemann 1992: 128). It is at this time that the War Dance gained its status as a primarily social dance for men, women and children, and was performed at gatherings, celebrations and powwows. These celebrations and related music and dance spread beyond the Plains region, to the plateau and into the northern woodlands through ongoing intertribal contact with neighbouring communities. The War Dance was adopted by the Minnesota and Wisconsin Ojibway by the mid-nineteenth century, primarily functioning to "provide an identity-building situation for young men as braves, to integrate the community socially, and to maintain confidence in the old Indian way of life (Rynkiewich 1968: 122).

From the Minnesota and Wisconsin Ojibway the powwow spread to other Ojibway communities, adopted by the Ojibway in southwestern Ontario in the 1960s and 1970s. Factors that encouraged the adoption of powwow culture in this region at this time include the cultural renaissance of First Nations people during the 1960s and the revitalization and promotion of traditional practices. As well, during the 1960s and 1970s contact with individuals from distant communities who had migrated here increased, and local Natives began to travel to regions further west. Many community-organized powwows began as fund-raisers for reserve churches and initially took the form of staged shows. Competition and exhibition dancing quickly dominated the gatherings, and powwows became disassociated from the churches, being organized and hosted by members of the community. Many First Nation communities in southwestern Ontario host annual powwows to which all Native and non-Native people are invited to participate. It is within this context that the historic links between the warrior societies of the eighteenth and nineteenth century are evident in specific activities at contemporary powwows that commemorate veterans in attendance.

Contemporary Powwow Practices to Commemorate Native Veterans

In their current form, the social and competitive dances performed at contemporary powwows have a tenuous connection with their origins as warrior society dances honouring returning warriors and hunters. However, veterans attending powwows are commemorated through particular activities and roles assigned to them. Over the course of the weekend, Native veterans are called upon to fulfill specific leadership roles at the powwow. For example, a Head Veteran is appointed to ensure that proper protocol and appropriate behaviour is observed throughout the powwow. Veterans are prominent during the opening events of the powwow; during the Grand Entry, when all participants and dancers first enter the

powwow dance area, selected veterans are asked to form an Honour Guard to lead the dancers into the dance area. Each person in the Honour Guard carries a flag into the dance circle; these flags are subsequently attached to the central drum arbour: the Canadian flag, the American flag, the flag of the hosting community, and other flags such as MIA (Missing in Action), POW (Prisoners of War), and flags from neighbouring Native communities. The members of the honour guard are well-respected veterans from the Native community.

Another significant role that veterans may play at a powwow is that of retrieving an eagle feather that has fallen from a dancer's outfit. A fallen eagle feather is recognized by Natives as a symbol of a fallen warrior, so typically, when an eagle feather has fallen, a ceremonial song and dance are performed to pick the eagle feather from the ground. This ceremony is typically conducted by four veterans who dance around the feather for the duration of a Retrieval Song in preparation for retrieving the feather at the ceremony's conclusion. This ceremony is described by Chris Roberts:

The eagle, often represented by the Thunderbird, is treated with the highest respect by all tribes. The Thunderbird is said to be the messenger of the Creator. Indian people treasure eagle feathers. Dancers perform a special ceremony when an eagle feather accidentally drops on the dance floor. The feather is immediately pointed out and a veteran dances close by, protecting it from trampling. The area cleared, four veteran traditional dancers perform the picking up ceremony. A veteran who has been wounded in combat is selected as the "Brave Man" and picks the feather up with another eagle feather ... The "Brave Man" then returns the feather to its owner. The owner gives a gift to the man and the drum in honor of the service they have performed (1992: 54).

Finally, the most obvious activity which recognizes veterans is the ceremonial Veterans' Dance, a segment of the opening ceremonies at powwows. Veterans' Dances take place after the Grand Entry, an Invocation (a prayer recited by an Elder), a welcoming address by a Band Council member, the Flag song (a Native National anthem), and the posting of the flags. For the Veterans' Dance, the master of ceremonies invites all veterans to come onto the dance area to participate, and instructs the audience and participants to observe traditional protocol during this activity: photos are not to be taken, videotaping is prohibited, men must remove their hats as a sign of respect, and everyone who is able is asked to stand for the duration of the song. The following is the commentary made by the master of ceremonies at the 1997 Kettle and Stoney Point Powwow to explain the purpose of the Veterans' Dance to the audience:

One of the first songs that we have we dedicate to our veterans ... This is to honour our veterans and recognize the contributions that many, many people made for the freedoms that we have and know today. It is in our custom and our way when we have these gatherings and the first song we have is always dedicated to our veterans. And I would like to ask any veteran that is out there, you don't have to be dressed in regalia, you don't have to be an Indian

person, you don't even have to have served on the same side. We would like to honour the veterans ... So anyone out there who is a veteran, we'd be *honoured for you, to come out and join us. You don't have to be an Indian person, this is for our veterans* (Butch Elliott, public statement at the Kettle and Stoney Point powwow, 12 July 1997).

Veterans' songs are characterized by even drumming patterns and the songs are often texted in a local Native language. Honour beats (accents in the drumming) are sounded strategically during the performance of the song, to which many participants raise their hands in acknowledgement. As the song begins, the participating veterans dance clockwise around the drum arbour one time, moving to the beat of the drum. The drum group repeats this same Veterans' Song as many times as needed to accompany the dance. Once the veterans have completed one rotation around the arbour, others in attendance are invited to individually demonstrate their appreciation of the veterans by individually greeting them and shaking hands. Once they greet the veterans the well-wishers gather behind the veterans on the dance grounds, waiting while others similarly who their respect. Once everyone is through, the entire group begins to dance around the arbour together until the start of the final rendition of the song. As the final statement of the song commences, everybody in the dance area turns to face the drum arbour, dancing on the spot until the song is concluded. Although there are slight variations in the performance practices for Veterans' Dances, this description applies to those most common in the region of southwestern Ontario. Veterans' Dances take place after the Grand Entry during every session of a powwow (usually comprised of Saturday afternoon and evening sessions and Sunday afternoon session), drawing significant attention to the veterans in attendance.

The prominence of veterans at contemporary powwows reminds all people in attendance of the importance contributions that veterans made to secure the freedoms and rights that Canadians and Native Americans enjoy today. As dancer Boye Ladd states: "We never forget the warriors, the veterans. Without the warriors we wouldn't have the freedom that we have today ... having this coming together, the drum, the feathers, the honor dances, all things that are part of the powwow" (cited in Roberts 1992: 54). The impact of Native American involvement in the Canadian military during the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. The prestige and honour given to veterans effected the revitalization of music and dance practices that fostered the spread and acceptance of the powwow celebration. Additionally, the cultural resurgence that characterized First Nations society during the twentieth century resulted in part from the solidarity generated by participating in Canada's military and the concomitant political organization of Native people across Canada. The honouring of veterans at powwows recalls the origins of the powwow in the nineteenth century warrior societies of the Plains, and certain components of the powwow are symbolic gestures that allude to earlier cultural practices that honoured Native warriors and veterans. The prominence of veterans at contemporary powwows celebrates the military involvement of Native peoples throughout the twentieth century, recognition that is not adequately given by the Canadian public.

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