

SPEAKER 1: Dozens of tents are pitched over this sloping hillside just northeast of the village of White Earth, on the White Earth Indian Reservation, which sits in the woods and hills just north of Detroit Lakes, Minnesota. At the top of the hill is an arena, surrounded by an arbor of poles and poplar branches. In the middle of the arena are six 30-foot poles bearing the flags of the sacred colors of the Indian Nations.

People, from small children to old grandmothers, begin to make their way toward the arena, where the Indian dancing, which is the climax of this powwow, will soon begin. They're coaxed by a voice that penetrates the midday quiet with a public address system.

SPEAKER 2: Singers, dancers, start making your way now to the arena, please. Minneapolis All Nations has the grand entry, Kingbird.

SPEAKER 1: Soon most of the drummers, singers, and dancers have reached the arena. The drummers sit in a circle and begin warming up. The dancers-- from old men and women to young children-- begin to assemble at the east opening of the arbor, awaiting the grand entry, as the master of ceremonies welcomes all who have come to the White Earth 14th of June Powwow.

SPEAKER 2: Those of you that are here for the first time during our powwow, we want to welcome you. We the people of the White Earth Reservation extend to you the right hand of fellowship. We hope that you have a good day with us. We as Indian people, we love our ways. We love our traditional ways. They mean a lot to us. So ladies and gentlemen, our grand entry. [NON-ENGLISH SPEECH], let us stand.

SPEAKER 1: The dancers enter the arbor, led slowly by a man with a staff of eagle feathers. The bird is sacred to most Indian nations. Following him are bearers of the American and Canadian flags, and then come the princesses of various reservations.

Soon the arena has exploded in color. There are the orange, green, and pink feathers on the bustles of the young men who are fancy dancers. There are the yellows, blues, and reds of women's shawls. There are white-tipped eagle feathers in headdresses and the white bone and leather breastplates of the men. The older women wear buckskin dresses with delicate beadwork, and every one is garnished with bells.

Now, there are hundreds of dancers in the arena, some dancing sedately, others dipping and fainting and twisting with intricate footwork. It's a rich and wonderful sight and one that draws Indian people from hundreds of miles. Bill Means is one of those who has come many miles. He's a Sioux from the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, who is deeply interested in the traditional ways of his people. He tells us about the significance of powwows and dancing for Indian people.

BILL MEANS: Socially, they get together with your friends and relatives across the country, meet a lot of people that you met through the years, different families. And of course, as with all, Indian dancing is spiritual reasons. As the old people have told me when I started to dance, each step that you take represents a prayer for one of your relatives.

And then as you're dancing, you actually tell them sometimes the story about your family, about something that happened to you, as well as praying at the same time on behalf of your family and your relatives. And I try to tell the story of, basically, my travels. I try to tell the story of how my family relates to the natural world.

SPEAKER 1: The spiritual significance of the powwow does not end with the dancing itself. It even extends to the circular shape of the arena in which the dancers move.

BILL MEANS: The circle has played a very important part in the life of the Indian. Throughout the years, we believe in what is called a circle of life, and that is how you treat somebody else is how it's going to come back to you or how you're going to be treated in the end, similar to what's known as a golden rule in White society.

The circle, itself, is, in terms of almost every ceremony, every religious event, every social event, always begins and ends in the circle. You see also, four openings within this arbor, this arena signifying the four directions, which Indian people view as the four spirits that bring us the various things that help us in nature.

And so we always acknowledge the four directions in all our spiritual and social events, so that's why the arena here is built in a circular fashion.

SPEAKER 2: Let's give them a big hand, folks. Line up the guests. Line up in front of the announcers.

SPEAKER 1: All who participate in the powwow do not see it in primarily spiritual terms. In recent years, dance competition has become a part of the powwow, with winners in a number of different categories receiving financial prizes. For some, it has become somewhat of a sport.

For Alice Red Elk, however, the powwow is most important for the friendships that are made and renewed as Indian people travel around the country attending the gatherings. Some families attend powwows nearly every weekend during the summer. Alice, who is from the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota, has already this summer traveled with her family to Washington State for a powwow.

But for Alice Red Elk, dancing is also a tie to the traditions of her ancestors.

ALICE RED ELK: My mom and my grandma were really-- they were heavy dancers, you know. And I used to really feel bad because my grandmother had a traditional funeral, and I remember her saying that to me. She said, when I'm gone, remember this song, remember that song, and try to keep it up, and don't let it die out. And she said when I go, I hope one of you grandchildren will inherit my dancing.

She said it'll come to you one of these days. And then all of a sudden, I just got that feeling and I remembered that. And my mom always wanted us to keep on, and all my other sisters and brothers lost interest. They grew up, moved to the cities, and they just forgot about it. So then I remembered that, and mainly, I wanted to keep on because of what they said,

SPEAKER 1: Although there are dozens of powwows all over the United States and Canada each summer, the 14th of June celebration has a special significance, because it represents the rebirth of a traditional holiday for the people of White Earth, a holiday that's been forgotten for several decades.

White Earth Tribal Secretary, Vernon Bellecourt, explains the significance of the 14th of June celebration.

VERNON BELLECOURT: In 1867, Chief Bugonaygeshig of the Mississippi Band of the Anishinaabeg people, or what were commonly called Chippewa people, negotiated with the federal government a treaty that reserved Gaa-waabaabiganikaag, or white earth. And in consideration of them reserving this land, they ceded all the other lands around Brainerd, Minnesota, around Crow Wing, it's called Nisswa, Old Agency up to Wisconsin, Michigan, up into Fond du Lac, and up into Grand Portage up in Lake Superior region.

That June 14, or before that, of course, Chief Wabanaki or Chief White Cloud of the Pillager Band of Chippewa people, along with 200 of his people came here by wagon and buggy, and many of them walked to this sacred land, which they called White Earth, or Gaa-waabaabiganikaag. And the following year, on June 14, 1868, they gathered their people in a place to pay thanks to the Manitou, the Great Spirit, to celebrate, to hold a feast, and to show that they were thankful for this new nation that their chiefs had reserved.

That became a tradition on down through the years. We don't have any history that it was ever disrupted or that it ever missed any years. But we do know that possibly in the First World War and the Second World War, they stopped it during those period of times in honor of our men and our women who were serving in the armed forces.

Nonetheless, we are still thankful for what we have, and of course, we've brought about a rebirth of our June 14 celebration. There are several efforts to bring it back in the last few years, but I think last year, it really started to come back strong. And of course, as you can see, it very well attended this year.

SPEAKER 1: Bellecourt, who is a national leader for the American Indian Movement, says the 14th of June celebration at White Earth is just one example of a resurgence in Indian culture that's bringing American Indians back from the brink of cultural destruction. Bill Means agrees.

BILL MEANS: It's said amongst our people that the drum that you hear is the heartbeat of the Indian Nations. That as long as you hear that drum, as long as you hear the songs of our people, they'll always be in it.