
Powwow to celebrate tribal identities

Navajo, Sioux and Osage are expected. Kiowa, Cherokee and Lipan Apache are coming.

The United San Antonio Pow Wow, set for this weekend at San Antonio Shrine Auditorium, will draw members of 35 tribal nations from all over the country.

The 16th-annual event will showcase American Indian arts, crafts, foods, drumming and dancing.

While such gatherings have ancient roots, historians say powwow origins are contemporary.

Clyde Ellis, co-editor of the book “Pow Wow” and a historian at Elon University in North Carolina, said the 20th-century phenomenon grew out of cultural restrictions on reservations imposed by federal authorities bent on assimilating tribal peoples.



From the late 1800s through the 1930s, Ellis said the government banned dancing, in particular, as a spiritual expression.

“Religious rituals and all kinds of dancing offended federal policymakers, who thought they were wasteful and pagan,” he said. “They were especially concerned children not attend.”

Ellis said that instead of ending such traditions, people merely took them off the reservation, on the road and into towns.

In becoming more public, he said they also became “more secular and performative.”

After World Wars I and II, the powwow was one of the ways Indian veterans were welcomed home.

“It became a way for people to combine contemporary experiences with old values,” Ellis said. “They reminded people of their tribal identity.”

Today, they're a way for Indians to share customs with each another and non-Indians.

The San Antonio powwow's newest addition will be the Native American Women Warriors color guard, military veterans from diverse tribes who will carry flags at the main entry.

Active duty, retired and reservist, they wear their military insignia on traditional healing garments called jingle dresses, said the group's vice president, Julia Kelly.

“Our regalia is meant to bring healing to the nation, to our tribal nations and to our veterans,” she said.

The group was part of inaugural festivities last month in Washington, and has become so popular it now has an auxiliary unit that includes male members, Kelly said.

Tim Tall Chief of the Osage Nation will be the master of ceremonies again this year, and Bill Takes Horse, a Crow, will serve as arena director.

This year's powwow will be dedicated to the late Michael Gonzales, a Comanche artisan known for his moccasin, buckskin and bead work, said Erwin De Luna, president of the United San Antonio Pow Wow.

Gonzales, who died last year, was a powwow founder, a deputy director of the San Antonio River Authority and a tribal lands biologist, De Luna said.

He said powwows have become important cultural events for urban Indians.

“Many of us have never lived on a reservation,” De Luna said. “The powwow is where we celebrate our history, traditions and our customs and honor those before us.”

The American Indians in Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions, established by the Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation in San Antonio, is a sponsor of the free event.

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The United San Antonio Pow Wow

Where: San Antonio Shrine Auditorium at 901 N. Loop 1604 West

When: Saturday: 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. (Grand entries 1 and 7 p.m.)

Sunday: 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Native American Church service 9:30 a.m.; grand entry 12:30 p.m.)

Michael Gonzales obituary

Coverage of last year's powwow

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