

MODERN

SCALP

ORNAMENTS



BY

JERRY SMITH



INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

The practice of tying feathers and other ornaments to the scalp is no doubt an old custom among the Indians of the Plains. Several of Catlin's portraits of the Crow, Blackfeet, Mandan and Eastern Sioux of the late 1830's depict hair ornaments fashioned from feathers and trade items tied to the front of the scalp. Evidence of this practice on the Southern Plains in the 1890's is shown in the cover photo and in the replica in photos 1 and 2.

By the 1920's photos of the Osage, Omaha, Ponca, etc. show that it was common to wear one or two major eagle plumes, or a group (two or more) of feathers, tied to the scalp. Photos 3, 4, 5 and 6 from the collection of Dr. James Howard are examples of the hair ornaments worn during this era.

Today, a set of scalp feathers is worn by each straight dancer. In addition, a fair number of feathers dancers are also wearing a smaller, more highly decorated version of these scalp feathers. Among the straight dancers, scalp feathers used to designate family or clan affiliation; however, at present scalp feathers are usually considered to be just another necessary decorative item of the outfit.

In contrast with the past, scalp feathers are tied to the roach string at the base of the roach rather than directly to the scalp. However, with long hair in style and the use of wigs, the past could very well become the vogue. The feathers may hang over either the left or right temple. Most dancers prefer to wear a pair of feathers; yet groups of three or four are occasionally seen (photos 7 & 8).



- 1 Delaware, made by Fred Washington, Ca 1925
- 2 Made by J. Howard, copy of a Tonlawa specimen
- 3 Fred Washington, Delaware about 1925
- 4 Fred Washington, Delaware
- 5 Lower Yanktonai Dakota (Hunkpati). Given to J. Howard by August-with-the-Horns, Ft. Thompson, South Dakota, 1968
- 6 Omaha-Ponca. Gift to J. Howard from Wilson Wolfe, Macy, Nebraska, 1964
- 7 Quapaw. Gift to J. Howard by Billy Killough, 1959
- 8 Steve Goodwin
- 9 Craftsman H. (Shorty) Quillen, Pawnee, Okla
- 10 Unidentified
- 11 Kiowa. Purchased in Anadarko by J. Howard
- 12 Pawnee craftsman Julius Caesar, 1960
- 13 Northern Ponca. Gift to J. Howard from the late Peter LeClaire, Merrick, South Dakota 1963
- 14 Nebraska-Winnebago. Gift to J. Howard from Edward Black Well, Sioux City, Iowa, 1966
- 15 J. Howard -craftsman
- 16 H. Tucker
- 17 Medallion & dangles by James Kagmega; feathers added by J. Howard
- 18 Steve Goodwin



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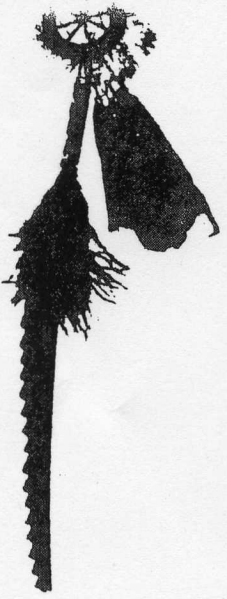


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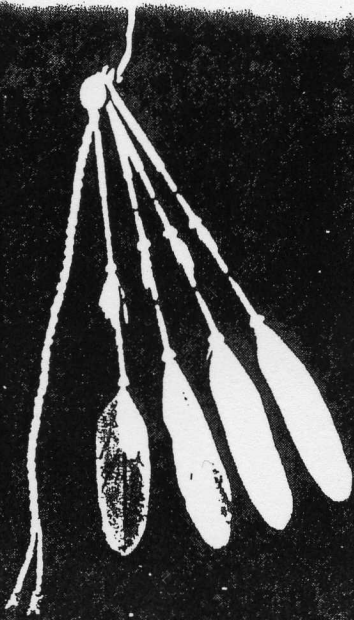
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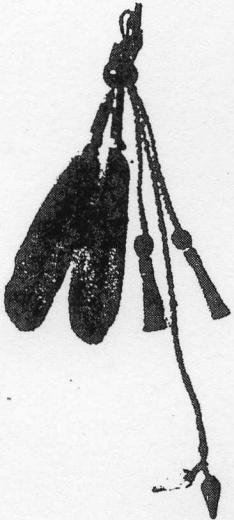
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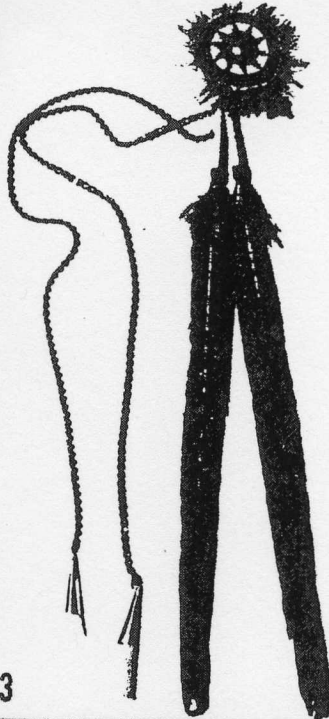
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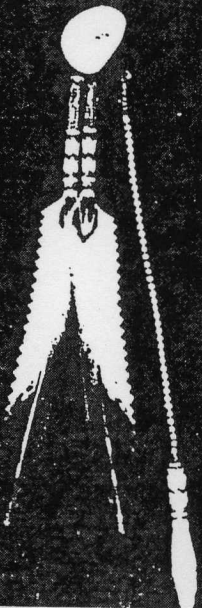
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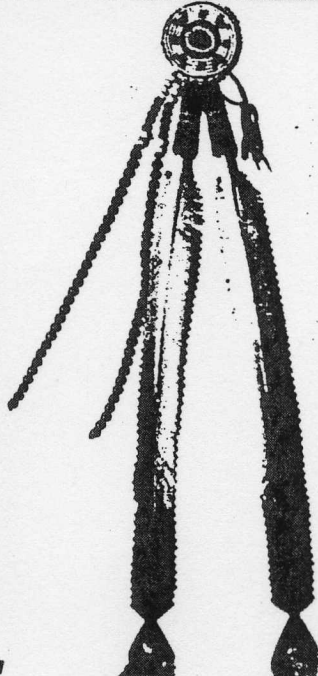
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THE FEATHERS & THEIR PREPARATION

Most of the scalp feathers are made from a pair of eagle tail feathers, matching left and right; however, a variety of other feathers are used, too: pheasant, scissortail, macaw and major eagle plumes. First the feathers must be straightened (see "AICC", Vol 3, No. 10, December, 1969) and they are then trimmed to the desired shape. See dimensions in Fig B. Before cutting up a good pair of feathers, get some practice with some turkey feathers. A sharp pair of scissors is the most effective tool. Experiment cutting against the lay of the veins until the desired results are produced. Two different types of a "saw-tooth" edge appear in the accompanying photos as shown in Fig C. Lots of practice and careful measurements are needed to produce that uniform look. Some of the feathers are dyed - red, green or yellow.

DECORATING THE FEATHERS

Though there seem to be endless ways to decorate a pair of scalp feathers, there are a few generalizations that should be used as guidelines.

The feather base is always decorated with hackles, small pheasant or other body feathers, or a small fluff (Fig D). These hackles, etc. are glued to the quill at the base. Choose colors that contrast with the natural feathers used when picking out hackles. Two or three different colors of hackles can be used. Normally, only the tip of the hackle is used.

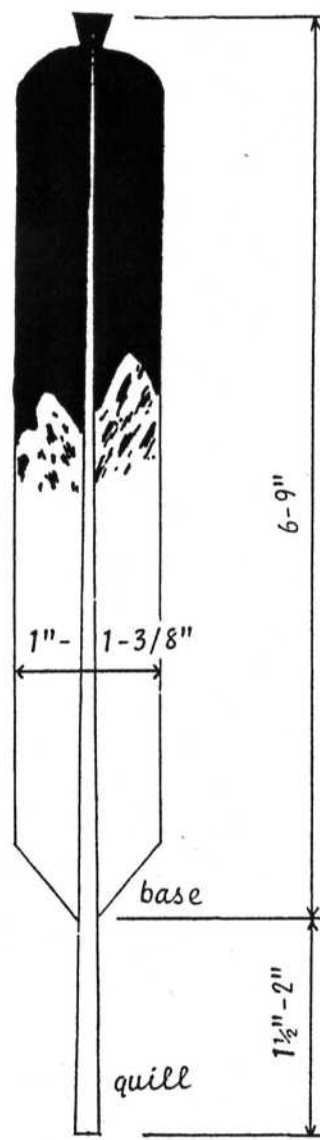
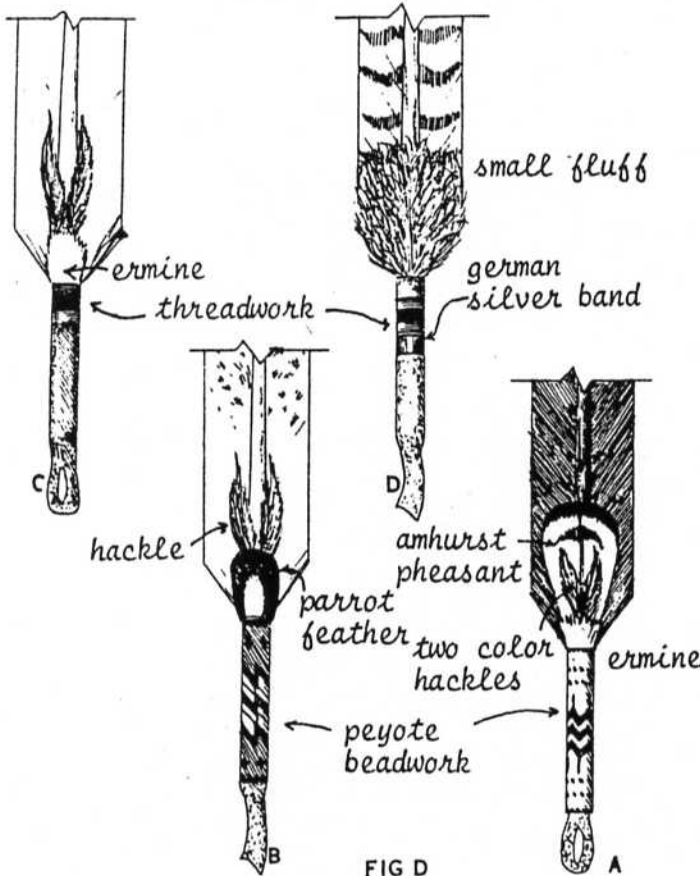


FIG B

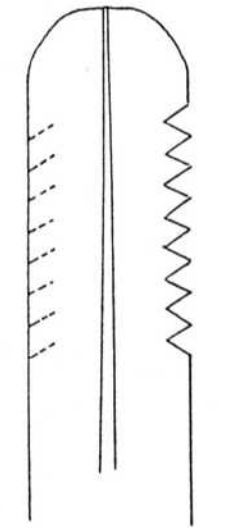
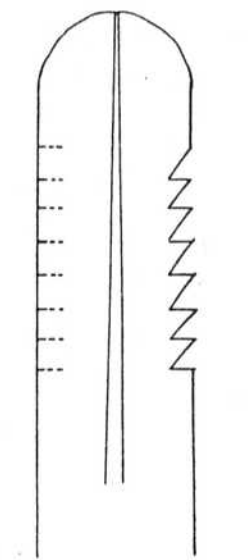
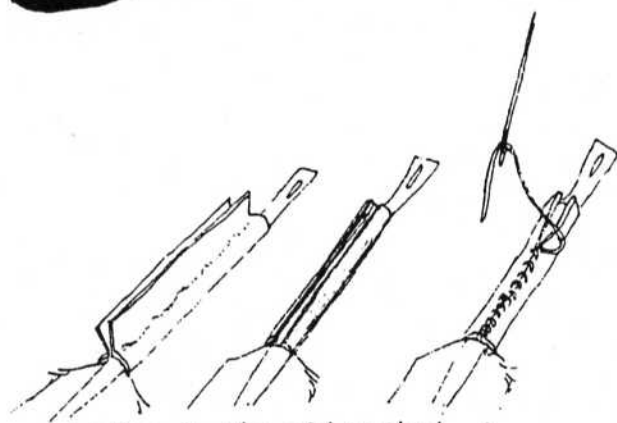
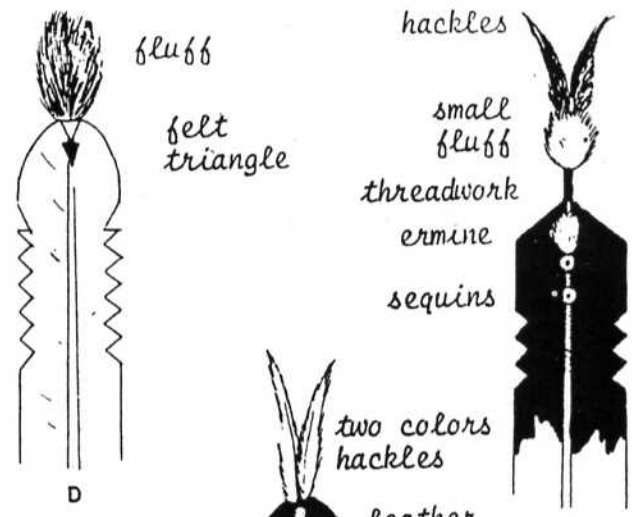
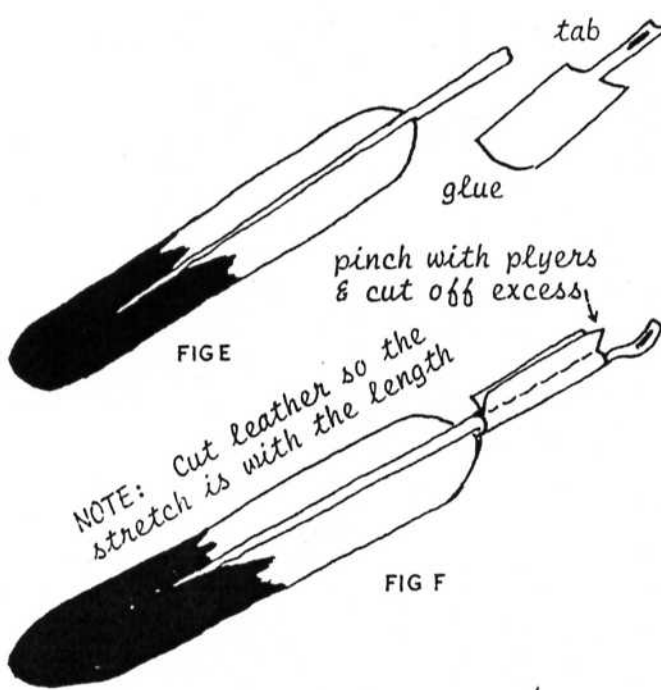


FIG C

The quill (Fig B) is always covered. Thin Indian tanned buckskin or similar commercial tanned leather is sewn (or glued) about the quill as shown in Fig E. The excess is trimmed off, but a tab at the end is left (Fig F). Most often peyote beadwork is applied over the leather (photos 7, 9, 10); threadwork, various bands of colored thread is also common (photo 11). Ermine fur and German silver bands are common buffers between the beadwork or threadwork and the feather (Fig A, photos 9, 11). Ermine is glued directly to the quill and not over the leather. Because of the small diameter of the quill, small faceted seed beads, 13/0 or 14/0 are used for the peyote beadwork. See "The Singing Wire", January, 1969 for details on peyote beadwork techniques.



sewing is the old method.
Cut to length desired and slightly shorter than diameter as leather will stretch.

The tips of the longer feathers (eagle, pheasant) are usually decorated, while the shorter feathers are left plain. The quill of the hackles or fluffy glued to the tips is covered with ermine, sequins, leather spots or thread (Fig G). Figs H, J & K show three possible ways to decorate the center portion of the feathers.

A small beaded medallion, German silver conch, or conch shell, is attached to the end of the feathers (photos 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, & 14). The ties of the medallion hold the group of feathers and its drops together, and these same ties can be used to attach the scalp feathers to the roach string (Fig L). The diameter of the disc acts to hide the point at which the scalp feathers are tied to the roach string. Note photo where both beaded medallion and conch shell are used. Photos 10 & 16

show large faceted beads in the center of the conch shell. "AICC" October, 1969 and January, 1971 give details for medallion construction.

DROPS

Rolled fringe, rhinestone strips (photos 10, 13, 16) or bead string drops (photo 17) are often added to the scalp feathers. These drops are tied or attached to the medallion conch or conch shell along with the scalp feathers.

If the drop is made of rolled fringe (photos 8, 11, 12, 13), filed and polished German silver bands are frequently crimped around the fringe. The bands are spaced evenly down the length. The fringe end is finished with a polished, filed and stamped German silver pendant. This pendant may be strung to the middle of the fringe before it is rolled or added later (Figs M & N). Fig M & P show two methods by which a single fringe can be split into two or more strands such as in photos 13 & 8 respectively.

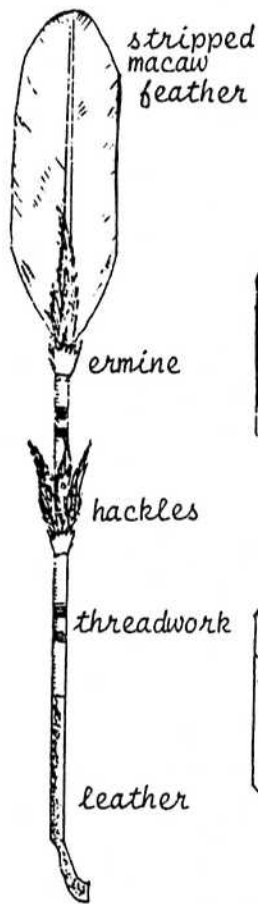


FIG H

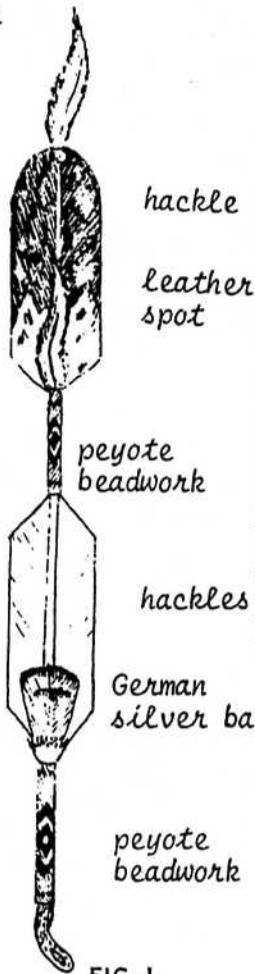


FIG J

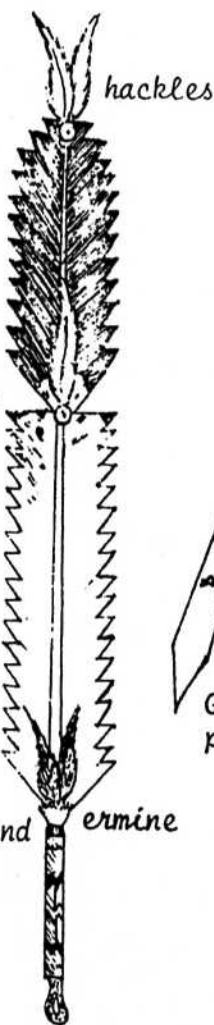


FIG K

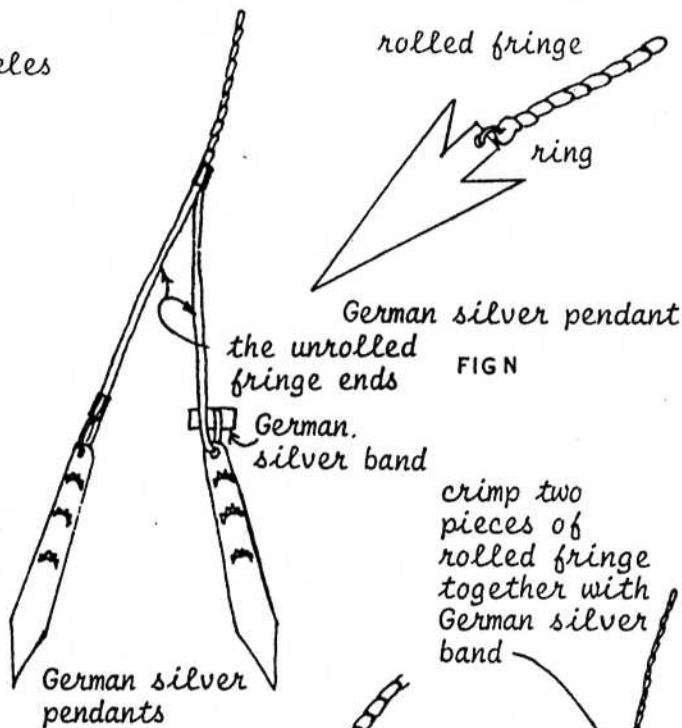


FIG N

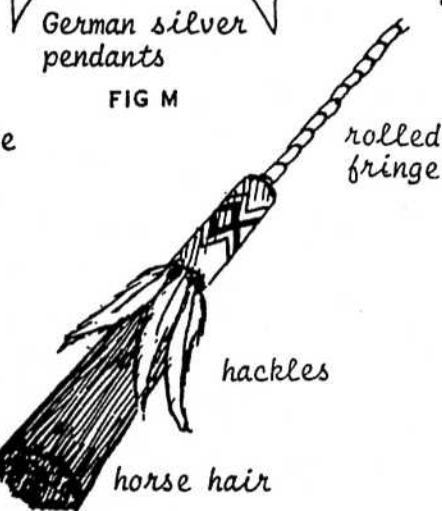


FIG M

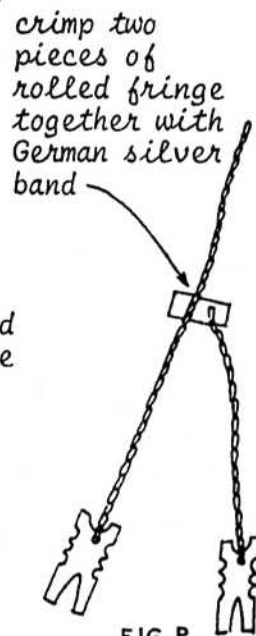


FIG P

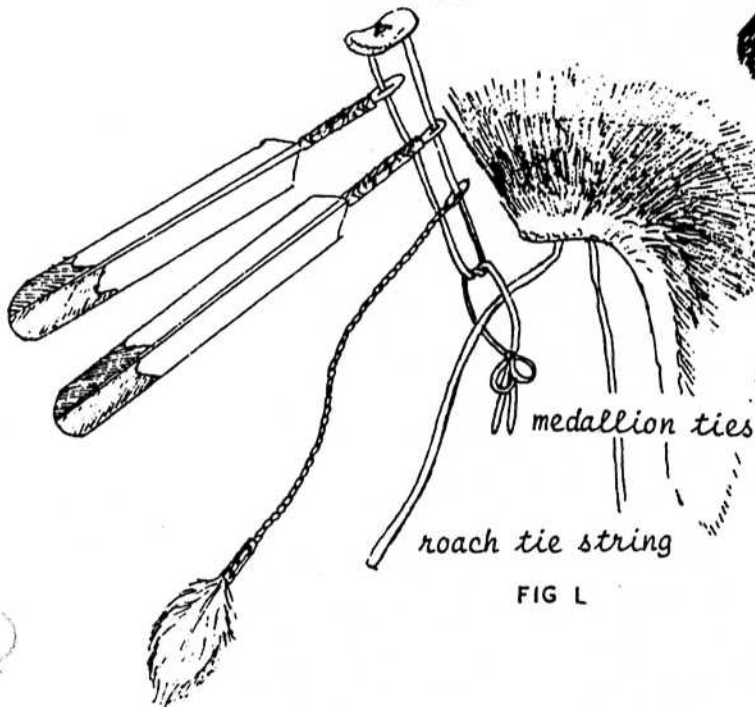


FIG L

Ends of other drops are finished off with horse hair (photo 11) or most any color, or with an eagle plume (photo 10). Glue and wrap the plume or small bunch of horse hair about the end of the drop with thread; glue leather over the thread wrapped area, then cover with threadwork or peyote beadwork (Fig Q, photos 10, 11, & 16). When scalp feathers with long drops are worn, the drops are tucked through the roach string at the chin to keep them out of the dancer's face.

CONCLUSION

The feathers are the focal point of a set of "scalp feathers". Do not let the decorations become overpowering. Note the relative sizes and proportions found in the photos.

REFERENCES

- McCracken, Harold, George Catlin & the Old Frontier.
- Feder, Norman, "Costume of the Oklahoma Straight Dancer" American Indian Hobbyist, Vol 9, Nos. 1 & 2, Sept-Oct, 1957.



Pheasant Scalp Feathers

By Rolf Clements

Today, scalp feathers are worn by the majority of Straight dancers, Feather dancers and by many of the women in Taffeta clothes. For many years, and still today, eagle feathers are the number one choice for use. Many dancers also use various types of hawk feathers, scissortail flycatcher and macaw feathers. Due to the illegality of most of these feathers many dancers, Indian or hobbyist alike, have faced quite a dilemma in making costume items requiring feathers.

One kind of feather that is legal, and readily available, is the pheasant feather. The use of pheasant feathers is very common and dates back several decades.

Traditionally the tail feathers from the Ringneck pheasant have been used though several other species are now in use.

This article will present a construction outline for a typical set of scalp feathers along with some variations.

MATERIALS NEEDED

1. Matched pair of pheasant tail feathers approximately 10" or more in length.
2. White glue.
3. Enough thin white leather to cover quills.
4. Small, decorative body feathers from parrot, pheasant, etc.
5. Thread for decorative wrapping.
6. A few hackles.
7. Small piece of ermine (or rabbit) fur.
8. A sharp pair of scissors (or single-edge razor blades)

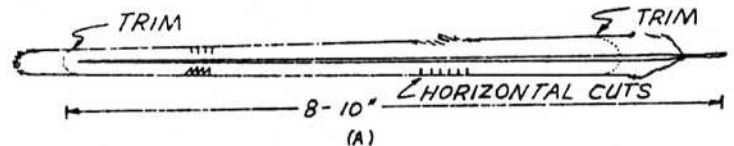
Patience and practice, practice, practice.

HOW TO DO IT

Usually pheasant feathers don't need much straightening, but if they do, just bend the feathers until the quill is straight.

Rarely will you need to steam them to straighten.

Once the feathers are straightened, assess any that you'll have to work around (i.e. mangled tips, cuts in the veins, etc.). Remember, what you do to one feather has to be done to the other. See illustration (A) for example of doing this.



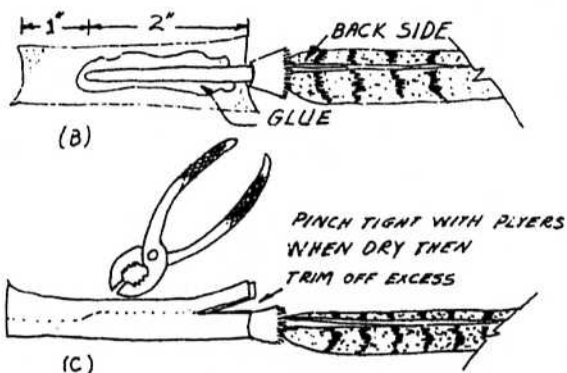
Now take your scissors and trim to approximately the shape shown (A). Cut against the direction of the veins (from tip toward base). A steady hand and patience is needed here. After obtaining your desired shape then cut any "sawtooth" decoration (horizontal cut looks best for pheasant).

Men's scalp feathers tend to be longer than women's due to the different wearing positions, so take this into account when designing feathers.

Now comes the part that many people seem to have trouble with, choosing the decorative body feathers to go on. Pheasant feathers do pose a problem in this regard because of their own color. The main objective is to get a pleasing contrast between the pheasant and decorative feathers. Usually a solid color feather will look best; I find that parrot feathers or that fluffs will most often do the job. Hackle feathers are used at the base and/or the tip of scalp feathers. After deciding what feathers to use, cut them to the needed length and glue into place on the quill (D).

While the glue is drying cut two equal pieces of fur, ermine or rabbit. Cut the skin from the back side with a sharp knife being careful not to cut any hair on the front. Make sure that it just reaches around the diameter of the quill. Now glue these pieces onto each feather with the leather backing right up to the base of the feather. The seam should be on the back side of the feather.

After, and only after, the ermine is in place, glue leather around the quills as shown, making sure that a "tab" is left for attaching the feather to a medallion (C). Again, the seam should be on the back side.



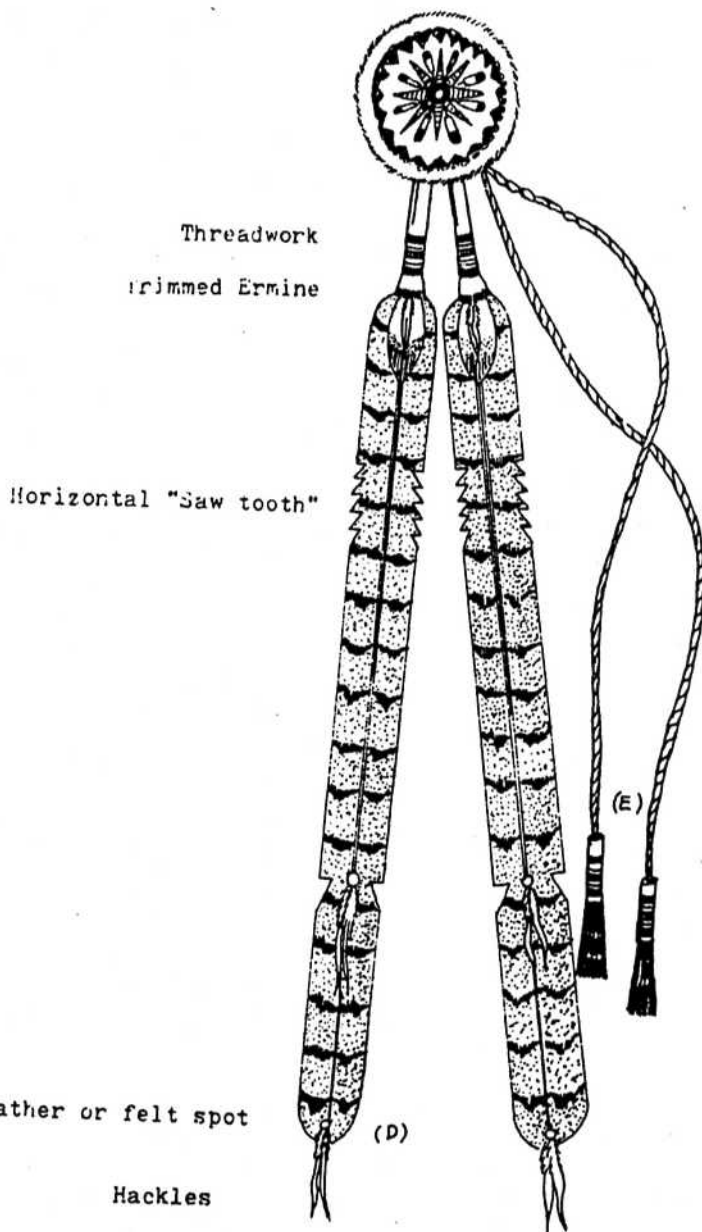
Next comes the part that sounds real simple, but, takes a lot of patience to make look good, threadwork. Basically it involves wrapping various bands of colored thread around the quills for decorations. The main thing to remember is to not overlap the thread and to keep in even rows. The colors used should utilize the colors of the decorative feathers in contrasting bands. Generally you will have one color as a background.

To complete your scalp feathers add a beaded medallion, German silver concha, or a conch shell at the top. Frequently one or two dangles of rolled leather fringe with German silver pendants or horsehair bunches covered with leather and wrapped with threadwork are added (E).

Men wear their scalp feathers attached to the front roach tie right at the base of the roach. Women's usually are worn about an inch below either side of the crown of the head just behind the ear. Personal preference dictates either the right or left side for wear.

SOME IDEAS FOR VARIATIONS INCLUDE:

1. "Peyote" style beadwork in place of threadwork.
2. Small fluff in place of ermine and decorative feathers.



3. German silver band as a buffer between ermine and threadwork.

4. Strung rhinestones in place of rolled fringe.

For more information on scalp feathers see American Indian Crafts and Cultures (AICC) May 1971, Volume 5, Number 5.