

Straight Dance by Jan Hackett

Sometimes called the "Southern Traditional" and often referred to as the "Old man's" dance the Straight Dance finds its roots in the warrior societies of the Hethuska. The outfit is comprised of many pieces and care must be taken to coordinate the various parts. The dance clothes combined with the graceful and stately movements of the dancers come together to create a stunning dance style.

Let us discuss these items as a dancer gets ready to enter the arena. The first item put on by most dancers is a pair of leggings. You will find two distinct styles of leggings, the first style is made of trade cloth with elaborate ribbon work on the inside of the flaps. The ribbon work is exposed by holding the flap open with the garters and bells that are worn just below the knee. This style of leggings are found commonly among the Osage, Fox and the Ponca. The other style of leggings are typically made of white or natural leather and have a tab extending downward from just above the knee. The inside of the tab should be covered with trade cloth and edge beading finishes the tabs nicely. This style of leggings is typical of the Kiowa and Comanche.

The next item will be the trailer and apron set, these are generally made from trade cloth, although you will sometimes find other types of materials being used. When making your apron and trailer keep in mind that the color red is reserved for the oldest son. The better apron and trailer sets will have elaborate Osage style ribbon work. If you wear trade cloth leggings the ribbon work should coordinate with the apron and trailer set.



The next item to be put on is the ribbon shirt, the colors and patterns used in this traditional shirt are endless. The one rule is that the ribbon on the shirt matches the color of the neckerchief and scarf set.

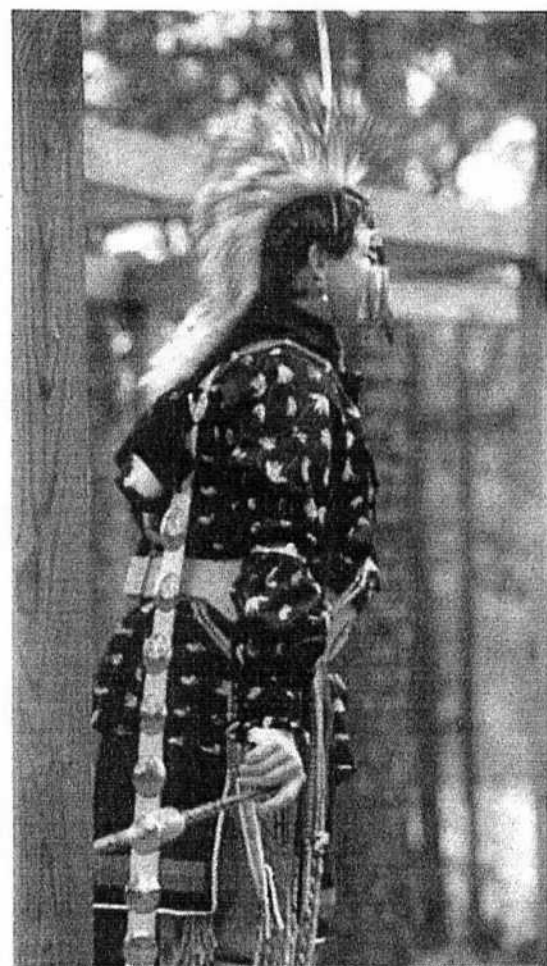
The next item to be put on is the bandoliers, there are two of them one worn over each shoulder. The items used in the construction of bandoliers varies greatly, you will find bone, horn, pony beads, old shell casings, brass beads, silver beads and more. Usually attached to the bandoliers at the shoulder blades is the scarf "set" (note some dancers attach them directly to the ribbon shirt) the important thing to remember here is that the color matches the ribbon on the shirt and neckerchief. The scarves will sometimes have conchos, feathers, plumes or other adornments attached to them. Some dancers will have a ball of sweetgrass tied in the center of the scarves and then attached to the shirt or bandoliers. You must be cautious of this as some will say this is a peyote sign, while others say it is to keep the dance clothes fresh.

The next item to put on is the choker, the materials used in its construction should match the materials used in the bandoliers. There is generally four rows in the choker and a conch shell in the center. Next we add the drag or otter strip, it attaches around the neck and hangs down the back touching the floor. Probably the most common is a full otter skin or a simulated otter strip mounted to broad cloth and decorated with beading, feathers, mirrors, rosettes and more. The other common drop/drag is conchos or silver hair plates mounted to a piece of leather. The ends of the drag or otter will sometimes be adorned with horse hair and peyote beading. Once the drag and choker are in place it is time for your neckerchief and slide. The slide is typically made of German silver and the color of the neckerchief is the same as the ribbon on the shirt and scarves.

The next piece of the outfit to put on is the assumption belt, it is made from yarn using the traditional finger weaving process. The belt should be long enough that the ends hang to your knees. You will see the belt worn in two manners, the ends of the belt hanging at both knees. The other way is with both ends hanging from the right side. On top of the assumption belt will be a heavy leather belt. There are many different ways to decorate this leather belt the most common being conchos or a large piece of loom beadwork. One note of interest here is the belt covers the bandoliers in the back but not in the front.

At this point it is time for your garters, they are worn just below the knee on the outside of the leggings. A simple over hand will hold them in place and the ends should touch the ground. The garters are made in the same fashion as the assumption belt and with the same materials. It is now time to add your "noise" makers. With cloth leggings sleigh bells mounted to heavy leather are worn on top of your garters. If you choose to wear Kiowa or Commanche style leggings it is acceptable to wear deer hoof clackers or bells. Add a pair of plains style moccasins that are partially beaded and you are just about ready for the Grand Entry. Southern Cheyenne style moccasins are popular among dancers but watch out for those dusters.

It is now time to put on your German Silver arm bands, they are worn just above the elbows helping to keep the sleeves of your ribbon shirt in place while dancing. Often you will see ribbons hanging from the arm bands. These ribbons should match the ribbon found on the shirt and hang down to your waist.



The roach is the last item to put on, it is made of porcupine guard hair along with a row of deer hair on the outside and or inside. The shortest hairs are used at the back of the roach and gradually get longer towards the front they should stand upright from the base. A more prized roach is one made of turkey beards and deer hair. You will sometimes see dancers with a white hankie worn as a head band. This is another item that some say is a peyote sign and some say it is just to keep your face dry. The roach is attached with the use of a spreader and roach pin, the spreader is made of German Silver and has one socket for a single eagle feather. The roach pin attaches the roach to the head through the spreader. In days past a small braid of hair would be pulled through the hole in the spreader and the roach pin pushed through the braid keeping the roach in place, and some dancers still use this method today. The scalp feathers attach at the base of the roach and are secured around one of the roach ties and hair. At one time the way these feathers were cut and decorated showed your family or society associations, today most dancers simply wear them. If you are inclined to wear ear rings this is the time to put them on.

The last things you need are hand held items. A fan is always a must and you will see flat and loose feather types. Some dancers carry a pouch of white deerskin, with beaded decoration or other types of bags. You will see some dancers with a tail stick, it originated as the badge of office for Tail Dancers in the Hethuska. The tail stick is the one item you are not aloud to make for yourself. It is the custom that someone else presents it to you. Often times an experienced dancer will present you with your tail stick but family members and close friends have been known to do

this also. If you have not been given a tail stick then a mirror board is what you should carry.

The art of Straight dancing is in the many parts that make up the outfit and the slow majestic movement. Often times the greatness of a dancer is in the little and unnoticed things. A powerful sense of pride combined with a exactness with songs and dance etiquette is the mark of an outstanding Straight dancer.

The Ponca Hethuska

Though the Ponca Tribe was stripped of many of its possessions as they were forced from their home in Nebraska to "Indian Territory" in 1877, they brought with them their songs and dances. Foremost among these dances was the Hethuska, a warrior dance organization whose basis was founded on the "Grass Dance" of the Omaha, when the Ponca and Omaha were one tribe. The songs of this dance organization tell of their deeds as warriors. One says, "Young Sioux, get your shield and prepare to fight." And another tells of a Pawnee who was knocked off his horse and ran away crying." Another songs say of the Hethuska, Wa-Kon-Da, "God gave it to us." Still others who have composed songs for the Hethuska ask if they will be able to uphold the requirements of the dance, while others say the Hethuska has ceased to exist, meaning the old days and old ways are dying. However, they live today in the minds and thoughts of those Ponca men who still dance the Hethuska and remember the tales told to them by their grandfathers as they dance to the songs and in the manners of their forefathers.

Purpose

In the old days, the Hethuska organization was composed of tribal leaders that were considered to be good citizens, as they lived up to the ideals and standards set by the tribe. It was a benevolent society that looked after members of the tribe in time of need. Their purpose is much the same today as they honor their veterans, care for the elders of the tribe, the widowed, and orphans. The organization hosts a feast for members of the tribe that are in mourning. Today, anyone attending the dance is fed and groceries are given to elders of the tribe and guests. This is the "difficult way" of the Hethuska, the giving, giving much of what one has to help others. The financial burdens are great.

Giving

During the depression years, the Ponca could no longer financially uphold the traditions of the organization and stopped dancing the Hethuska. Previous to discontinuing the dance, the Ponca gave the "Drum", meaning the right to perform this dance, to the Gray Horse District of the Osage (1880) and the Kaw Tribe. The Kaw in turn "gave away" the Drum to the other Osage Districts of Hominy and Pauhaska. Economically, the Osage had no problem filling the requirements of the dance as they had oil royalties. The Osage used Ponca singers to sing the Hethuska songs for their version of the dance, the EE-Lon-Ska.

With the songs of the Hethuska still alive, Mr. Sylvester Warrior, whose grandfather, Standing Buffalo, had passed the drum to the Osage, was able to revive the Hethuska among the Poncas in the early 1950's. It took many years of gathering information from the elders who remembered the dance and it's ways, before he could form his committee and dance. The Ponca Hethuska has had three Nudahongas since Sylvester Warrior died. They were Johnny Steele, Abe Conklin and the present leader Damon Roughface.

Since the revival of the Hethuska, the "drum" has been given to the Comanches and to four other organizations. They are the California Hethuska, the Lone Star War Dance Society, The New England War Dance Society and the White Bear Society.

The Ponca Hethuska Committee and Membership

The committee of the Hethuska led by the Nudahonga, consists of "four members" and the following other committee members; a Head Cook, a Whipman, Head Singer, a Crier, a Historian, two Tail Dancers and two Water Boys. Committee members help the Nudahonga in his arrangements for the dance and act as dance officials. The Head Cook, a man is in charge of the meal or feast between dance sessions. Under his direction several women of the tribe prepare and serve the meal, which usually consists of the traditional steam fry or corn soup, fry bread, drink and dessert. The Whipman escorts the dancers to their seats. Members have been given position on the bench they have paid for and sit their each time. The Whipman also initiates each dance. The Tail Dancers are chosen to dance the tail, a short encore, of each song while the other dancers remain seated. The Water Boys are to bring water to the dancers after each set of songs. To bring water, the essence of life, to fellow dancers is indeed an honor.

A dancer that has been accorded the honor of a position in the Hethuska, given a seat, will pay for his position at the dance between sets of songs. A young man that is dancing for the first time asks one of the committee members to tie on his roach, and place the feather in the spreader early in the dance. The committeeman is given a gift, sometimes a blanket and the family will give-away later on in the dance to honor their boy to show their appreciation for the honor by giving to the organization and the singers. They may have one of the members announce this fact, such as the Whip Man and then give-away.

The Dance

It is a grand sight to see all the dancers parade into the arena, all dressed in their finely tailored "straight dance clothes". Only men dance inside the benches. Ladies may dance in place behind the benches. Any one may dance the tail of the song in the arena, but must, excluding the tail dancers, pay for the privilege.

The dance arena is bordered by benches formed into a circular pattern with an opening to the east. The Nudahonga sits on the West Side of the arena facing east, along with his committee. The singers sit in the center of the arena with the Head Singer facing the Nudahonga. All activity in the arena is done in a clockwise direction. Even the water when passed around the drum is passed clockwise.

When everyone is seated, the Nudahonga welcome everyone and prays. Today a memorial song is sung to remember those who have passed since the last dance. When all these preliminary activities are complete, the Nudahonga will direct the head singer to sing the calling song. The song is not danced to but sets the mood of the dance. The dancing begins on the second song. The Whip Man is the first man off the bench and only he moves counter clockwise until he determines that all dancers are off the bench and dancing. He then reverses direction and dances clockwise with everyone else. The Whip Man ensures that everyone dances. When the song ends, all dancers proceed to their assigned seats in a clockwise manner. When everyone is seated, the singers sing the "tail" of the song. The assigned Tail Dancers dance each tail. Anyone may dance the tail, but are required to give-away when the song ends. The Nudahonga will designate which

visiting group will be allowed to tail dance. The Ponca Hethuska does not permit the Tail Dancers to call for everyone to dance the tail by raising their sticks, as is the case in other war dance organizations.

After a set of songs (8-12), the dancers and singers take a water break, and the Waterboys bring water to the dancers usually with a bucket and ladle. Food and drink are not allowed to be given to the dancers from outside the arena. It shows disrespect to the organization and poor judgement on the offender's part. Only water from the Waterboys is permitted.

If, during the dance, an item is dropped only the Whip Man is permitted to pick it up. Do not pick up any dropped items. The Whip Man will return the items during the water break. Payment is expected when the item is returned.

At the Nudahongas direction, the afternoon session will end. All dancers will walk out single file led by the Whip Man. No items or blankets are left on the benches. The meal is very much a part of the Hethuska. Dancers and Singers should be fed first, so they can get ready for the next session. Everyone is fed.

An evening dance session, much like the first, is the last activity of the Hethuska. It also has four sets of 8 to 12 songs. During the evening session committee songs are sung. They include two Committee songs, the first is the Nudahonga's song and the second is for the committee, followed by the Whipman's song, the Cooks song, and the Lady Singers song. The Head Singer may have a song also. These songs can be danced by anyone who wants to honor the person who holds that position in the organization. If you dance the committee song, you should give away, usually to the person being honored. The singers do not stop at the tail for the dancers to be seated as all will automatically dance the tail and give away.

The singers characteristically sing the songs in such a progression that the pitch and tempo increases from song to song and set to set. The high point of the evening are the songs where they "roll the drum" (snake and buffalo songs) and all the young dancers and young at heart dance their best and fastest. These songs are followed by four "trot" songs and maybe a No-stop song just for fun. The dance and Hethuska end with a quitting song, a prayer and the parade out of the dancers. At one time the Ponca danced this dance for four days, but without a permanent dance arbor they only dance for one day, but what a dance it is.

Note: the original author of the paper is unknown. It was updated by George Hoyt in January, 1997.

