



The Grand Entry—Let the Powwow Begin

The honor drum begins, the beat pulsing, palpable, touching everyone here. The singers' voices rise creating an air of excitement and anticipation. Something special is about to happen. From the far side of the arbor the steady rhythm of the drum is picked up by hundreds of feet, accompanied by the rattle of hooves and the jingle of bells. The earth seems to vibrate. Spectators rise, respectfully removing hats that do not have an eagle feather attached, as the Grand Entry begins. What a sight to see—the color, the movement, the sound, the sense of pride is almost overwhelming.

The Flag Bearers enter proudly carrying the Eagle Staff, the flags of Canada and the United States, their feet lightly touching the ground, their heads held high. The Squamish Nation has dedicated their powwow to youth and young dancers are honored by being asked to be Flag Bearers. They walk tall as they lead the Grand Entry into the arbor.

Veterans who fought for their country follow them, next come the Head Man and Head Lady dancers and the Princesses who are ambassadors representing their various bands. The dancers enter the arbor behind this honored group. The Elders are greatly respected, therefore, they are the first dancers to enter the arbor. Most of the men wear the traditional regalia of buckskin, feathers and bustles; the women wear the beautiful beaded northern regalia. The Men's Traditional Dancers, the Grass Dancers and the Fancy Dancers follow close behind creating a ribbon of color. The Women's Traditional, Fancy and Jingle Dancers enter the arbor next. Their braided hair shining, fans held high, their moccasins touching the





ground like feathers as the sound of the Jingle Dancers keeps time with the drum. The final groups to enter are the Teens, aged thirteen to eighteen and the Juniors aged six to twelve. These young people may be the last to enter but they have enough energy to light up the whole place. When every dancer is in the arbor the drumming and dancing stops.

Feathers, beads, fans, shawls and bustles pale beside the powerful sense of spirit reaching out from the faces and eyes of these dancers as they stand in silence and the ceremonies begin.

A respected elder delivers a welcome and prayer in his or her own language. The Great Creator is thanked for bringing everyone together and is asked for a successful powwow and for the safety of all there. Pride is expressed in seeing all the dancers, especially the youth, taking part. The dancers and drummers are told from the heart, "It is important to be proud of who you are and of the powerful culture you belong to." The invocation closes with a moment of silence, which is broken by the sound of the Honor Drum as it begins the Flag Song. The arbor remains quiet, the dancers standing respectfully as the Honor Drum moves into the Victory Song. The Flag Bearers hand them over to be posted in full view until the powwow closes for the evening. They will take them again at the closing and keep them safe and ready for the next Grand Entry, held either that evening or the next day.

After the posting of the flags the honored speaker stands to address the dancers, drums and audience. The committee invites the closing speaker because he or she has a life experience to share or because he or she is a positive role model for youth. History and the importance of ancestors and culture are part of the speech, and youth is told of the advantages of a drug- and alcohol-free life and of the freedom education can give them. A veteran tells of how he fought for his country and the effect it has on his life or a recovering alcoholic talks of his fight to save himself and his spirit. Whoever speaks has the ear of the dancers and the people in the stands because they speak from experience and with passion. The speaker is usually the one who closes the opening ceremonies and is followed by the Honor



Drum singing and drumming as the dancers leave the arbor to get ready for the beginning of the competition.

Watching the Grand Entry from the stands is exciting. It is impossible not to move with the rhythm of the drum and be caught up in the energy. At the same time one wonders, “What is it like to be down there? What does it feel like to be a part of this powerful, vibrant ceremony?”

Keith Nahanee, kwetsimet, shares his personal thoughts and experiences with the Grand Entry. “Dancing the Grand Entry for me is one of the best parts of the powwow, whether it’s an intertribal or competition powwow, because to me it represents one of the spiritual parts of the powwow. The way I was told is when they dance in the flags and the colors they’re bringing in the spirits of the ones who have gone before us and they are dancing there with us, like we are taking part in something old and something sacred. It gives me a good feeling. The really special time is when they honor you and ask you to carry in an Eagle Staff, or flag, because you are right at the beginning of the Grand Entry. Most of the time it is somebody they respect or somebody when they look at them makes them feel good. It might be the Arena Director or somebody from the committee who chooses. It’s just the way you make them feel when they see you. When I first started dancing, probably in my first or second year, they asked me to be a Flag Bearer; I was so honored because just being a beginner, it was something special to be asked to do that.”

The excitement of the drums and the dancers, young and old, blends with the sense of pride and connection to their culture and revered ancestors. At the same time each person has their own personal spiritual experience and moments of feeling honor and respect during Grand Entry. This creates an interesting sense of togetherness and at the same time an awareness of each individual dancer for the observant person in the stands. It is a unique experience and creates the mood and the energy that clearly says, “Let the powwow begin.”





