

# Feathers for Bead-strings

by Tom Risdon

At any given dance where there are several straight dancers in attendance, one or more will be wearing what appear to be very small loose fans attached to each bandolier rather than the more common scarfs. These feathered ornaments are shown in the adjacent photos. Small feathers bunched together and worn on clothing is not a recent invention. Old photos indicate that similar feather bunches were attached to skin shirts, to otter caps and to the hair in addition to bead strings. These early types were simply several feathers attached to a single tie and then the tie was in turn tied to the fringe of a shirt or lock of hair. The highly refined version seen today features decorated feathers attached to a peyote beaded dowel held on with the ties of a matching beaded medallion. It is easy to speculate that a talented fanmaker was given a set of small feathers to "fix" for a bead string decoration and - a miniature loose fan resulted. One slight difference occurs in that the feathers are set to have more freedom of movement. The feathers flit about as the dancer moves. Occasionally one such ornament is made and tied on the left side bead string and worn in the front. If the dancer wears only a single bandolier, naturally only one ornament is made. The traditional aspects, movement and decorative nature of the feathers and beadwork make these ornaments a desirable item. Of the dancers pictured in the article on the Inlonchka, Moccasin Tracks Feb. 1980, 3 dancers can be detected wearing feathers on their bead strings.

## TYPES OF FEATHERS

Several types of small feathers are needed for these ornaments. Those in the photos are: Eastern

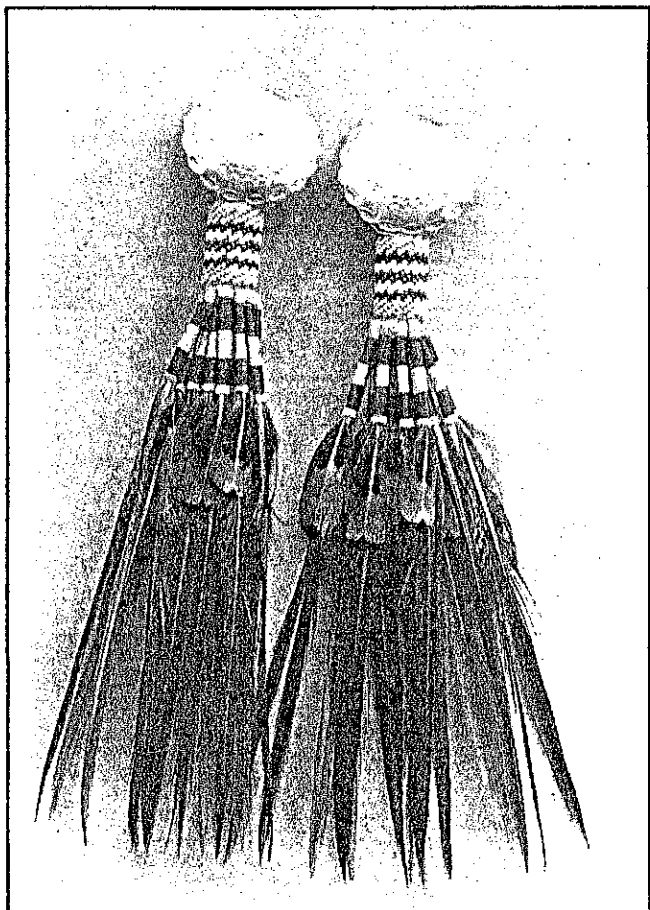
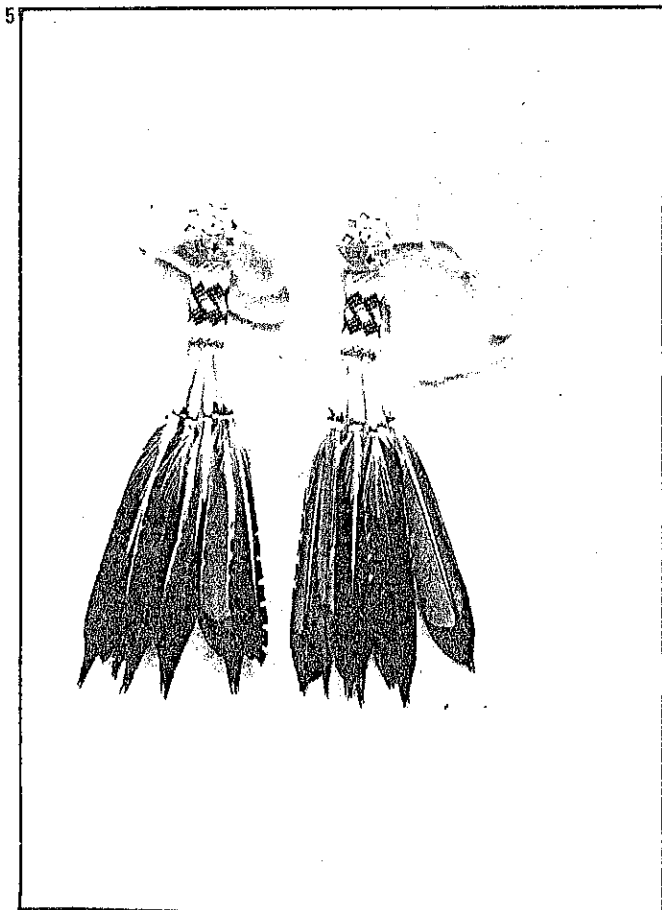
Blue Jay tail feathers (photo 1 & 2), 15 female Sparrow Hawk and 2 Magpie (photo 3), 12 male Sparrow Hawk (photo 4) and 12 Red-Shafted Flicker (photo 5). Magpie, small hawk tail feathers or trimmed down hawk feathers and Yellow-Shafted Flicker represent other feathers used in these decorations. Today, one might resort to using Golden Pheasant red tips as in the handsome set in photo 6 or even to Lady Amherst orange tips. One set the author recalls was made from small white goose feathers in which the tips were dyed or painted black to represent eagle tail feathers.

## FEATHER PREPARATION

A set of these feathers consists of 7-20 feathers. Feather length should be about 6". Usually the tips are left plain with simple or no base decoration for each feather. The preparation and construction steps are much the same as preparing feathers for a loose fan. See the June 1979 issue of Moccasin Tracks for the construction of a loose fan.

All the feathers should be of the same length. An exception would be the incorporation of a pair of "fancy" feathers; a rare occurrence. The feathers that need to be longer can be extended with a toothpick glued into the end of the cut off feather quill. If a feather needs to be shortened, cut the quill to the correct length and pull off the excess veins.

- \* Next glue on the small body feathers and/or finest of hackles that will decorate the feather base. Glue to both front and back if desired. Make each hackle the same length and glue it on each feather



in exactly the same spot.

Cut thin white buckskin into strips to dimensions  $\frac{3}{8}$ " longer than the quill length and wide enough to generously wrap around the thickest quill. Cut one for each feather. Glue leather about each quill using white glue, but do not let the glue reach the last  $\frac{3}{8}$ ". Pinch the leather tightly together with pliers or fingers. When dry, trim off the excess leather with scissors, see Fig. 1. Thread-work as in photo 7, can be added at this point.

Photo 8 exposes an alternate means of fixing the feathers. A very narrow  $\frac{1}{8}$ " piece of leather is glued to the top of each quill from the point at which the veins start to  $\frac{1}{2}$ " beyond the end of the quill. The entire quill is then wrapped with thread-work leaving the  $\frac{1}{2}$ " leather tab; Fig. 3.

#### THE DOWEL BASE & FINAL STEPS

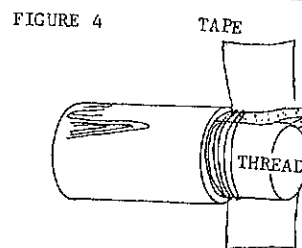
After each feather is fixed, they are wrapped in position about the carved end of a  $\frac{3}{8}$ " dowel whose dimensions are shown in Fig. 2. Use thread to wrap the feathers in place the first time making adjustments of placement then unwrap and use glue the second time. The diameter of the carved end should accommodate 8-12 feathers set side by side. Create a second row if more feathers are used. Tape around the wrapped segment of the dowel to bring it to a full  $\frac{3}{8}$ " diameter if needed; Fig. 4.

Glue buckskin about the dowel base with about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " overhang; pinch together, let dry and trim off the excess. Punch a hole in the extra leather as shown in photo 8 to accommodate the medallion ties.

The final step is to bead the  $\frac{1}{2}$ " dowel piece using a net beadwork technique, either peyote style or Comanche style. The small diameter of the dowel almost demands the use of 13/0 or 13/0 cut beads. A  $\frac{1}{2}$ " diameter medallion beaded in the same colors completes a set of bead string feathers, see photos 1, 2 and 3. A German silver concho may also be used in place of the medallion.

In wearing these feathers, they are decorative enough to stand alone on the bead strings and need not be worn with scarfs.

FIGURE 3 BUCKSKIN  
WRAP WITH THREAD-WORK



#### References

- Risdon, Tom; "Pheasant Feather Loose Fans", Moccasin Tracks June, 1979.  
Smith, Jerry; "Peyote Beadwork", Moccasin Tracks, March, 1979.  
"Comanche Style Net Beadwork", Moccasin Tracks, April, 1980.  
Stewart, Tyrone; "peyote Beadwork Part I," Singing Wire Jan. 1969.  
"Peyote Beadwork Part II", American Indian Crafts & Culture, Nov. 1969.

#### Photo credits:

- #1 & #2 Straight dancers at Pawhuska, Oklahoma 1967 by Sandy Rhoades.  
#3 Made by Hans Duddenhaus from the editors collection.  
#4 & #5 Ornaments made by the author from the collections of J. Smith and B. Wantz.  
#6 Made by Paul Sheppard.

FIGURE 1

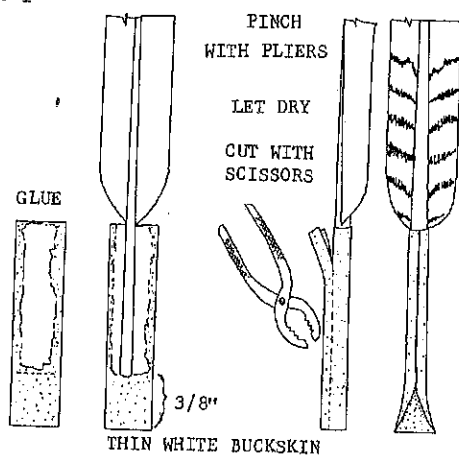
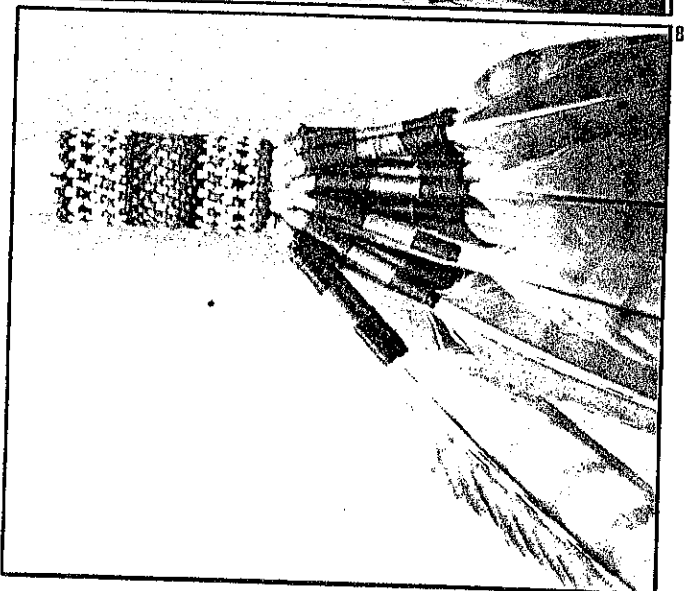
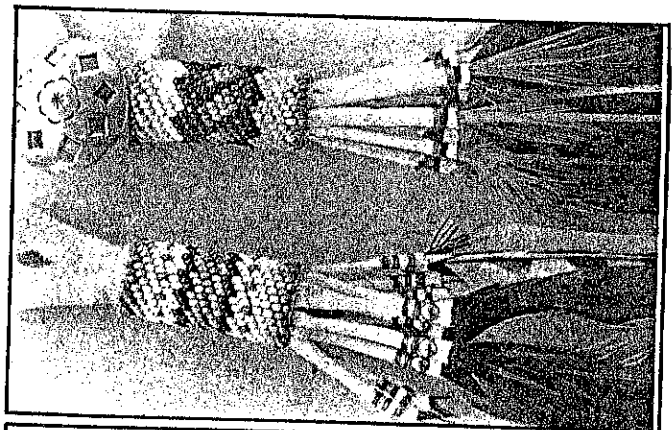
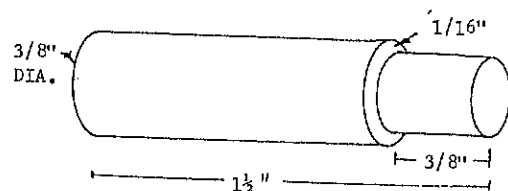


FIGURE 2



## TAIL FANS

The second type of fan, the tail fan, will be a bit more of a challenge, but it is not beyond the ability of any craftsman who has the desire to try.

1 - Begin with feathers that are as closely matched as you can get. Steam them over the tea-kettle and straighten them out as best you can. If you use a complete tail, great, if not use at least five good plumes and set them into place ( D ). Note that the left and right bends are reversed.

The reason for this is so that the fan takes a compact shape and is wider in the center and not the top (see photos on page 6). If you want it wider at the top, put the rights on the right side and the lefts on the left. Illustration ( D ) is exaggerated and the tips will actually be closer than indicated. They should be about two to three inches from the outer feather vane to outer feather vane ( E ).

2 - Carve a WOODEN HANDLE in the shape that you want. The handle can be any shape that you want it to be, but the most common shapes are illustrated in ( F ).

3 - Once you have the handle whittled into a rough shape, finish it with sandpaper or a file and smooth it up.

4 - With a saw, cut the handle carefully in two, splitting it down the middle in the direction that you want the feathers to be on the finished fan ( G ).

5 - Taking the two halves, carefully carve out a section of each half so that the feathers fit into the hollow that you have made. Fit the feathers so that when the two pieces are put together, they will appear as a single unit and not buldge or spread because of the feathers. Refer to illustration ( H ).

6 - After placing feathers into position, glue halves together and clamp till dry. Smooth rough spots on handle.

