



photos by rex reddick

# “SO, YOU WANT TO BE A STRAIGHT DANCER.”

*by Robby Robinson*

**A** few weeks ago there was a week, that a day did not go by that the postman was without a letter from someone wanting to know something about straight dancing. So, instead of trying to answer these questions on an individual basis, I will attempt to put it all in one article. I am glad to see so many persons interested and know there are many others who have not expressed themselves, at least to me.

There are a few things I would like to say first: Avoid wholesale criticism by Indians. Some parts of the costume has special significance which non-Indians tend to regard too lightly. Some minor parts should be given to the dancer and are recognized by such as personal honors. Although the costume is fairly well standardized throughout, most of Oklahoma, certain minor variations do occur. Some is due to the lack of materials and a use of a substitute has been used. Also, likes and dislikes have had their part to play. It must be kept in mind that the costume has undergone constant change in the past and is still in the process of change. Certain items however, have become standard and should be copied.

Straight dancing is the name given to the old original style of War Dancing. It does not indicate a straight position of the body as many are prone to believe, but rather just plain good old style dancing, without any of the modern fancy movements so common today. There are others who believe this, this being the most difficult part of a fancy dancer converting to straight dancing. One cannot fancy dance one minute and straight dance the next, because the dance is one of dignity and poise and not what fancy moves you can make with your feet. Excellent demonstrations of straight dancing can be observed annually at Pawnee, Pawhuska, Hominy and Anadarko, Oklahoma.

I will attempt to describe the costume starting from the top and working down:



## headdress

Almost without exception, the hair roach is the universal head piece. A few of the Chiefs wear war bonnets or fur turbans but they are for the minority. One feather is used and attached to a swivel base so that it can pivot around during the dance. Feather is left in it's natural state, but occasionally a porcupine quill ornament on the shaft may be seen. Do not use tip plumes.

Another item worn along with the roach are the "Scalp Feathers". These are generally tied to one of the roach strings in such a way that they dangle over the forehead. There is no side, but most are worn on the right. They may be any stiff cut down feather. Most used are Eagle, hawk, pheasant, etc. The feathers signify your family or clan ties. These are generally made by someone outside your immediate family and presented to you as an honor. The decoration is up to the maker. There is no special way this is done. However, these are attached to a beaded rosette or pine conch shell. Sometimes bead strings hang down with these feathers.

## headband

The old style straight dancer did not wear the head band at all. The one now used is a handkerchief folded to about 3/4 to one inch in width and tied in the middle of the forehead with a small square knot. White is the most popular color (symbolized purity). I have heard and read accounts of this being worn by peyote members, but to my knowledge this is not true today, it may have been at one time, I will not say it was not.



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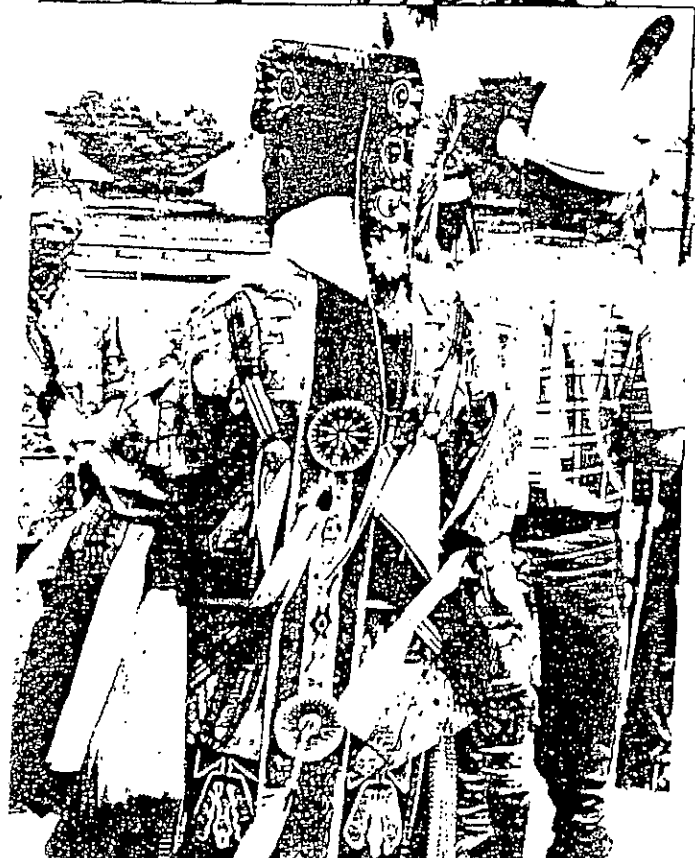
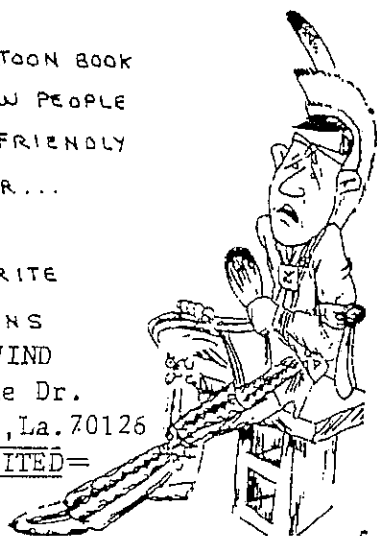
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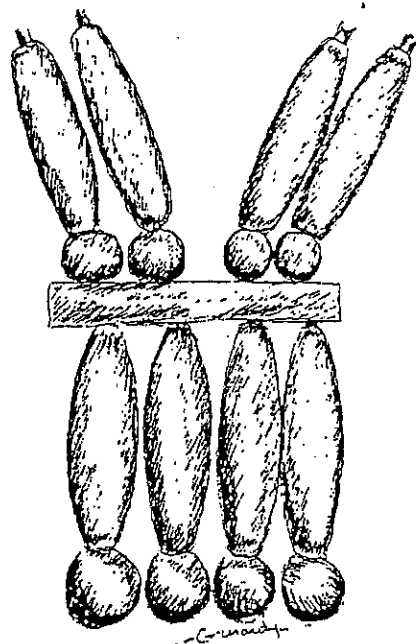
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## necklaces

Bead strings are worn over one or both shoulders. Make them from large beads, or an assortment of beads and hair pipes. Old brass beads are good. Sashes consist of either two, three or four rows of beads and pipes separated by leather spacers. Make the strings long enough to hang approximately three inches below the waist line. Sometimes when two are worn, one is beads and hair pipes and the other is of plain brass beads. Mesquite beans are also used in making these sashes. The bead strings may be worn either inside or outside the belt. May I suggest you wear them inside as they are rather clumsy when dancing and this helps to hold them in place. Having slightly round shoulders, I pin mine at the shoulder with small safety pins.



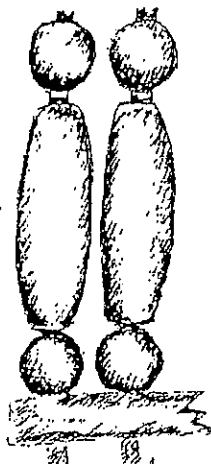
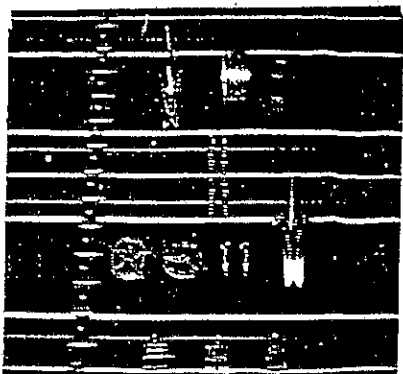
## shirts

These are called ribbon shirts. As they are made of material usually in a solid color and trimmed with narrow ribbons at the shoulders and cuffs. The shirt should fit very loosely and hang about 7 or 8 inches below the waist line. Some dancers further decorate the shirt by the addition of small beaded rosettes or clusters of small feathers such as flicker tails at each shoulder, sometimes both are used.



## arm bands

German Silver bands are most common and preferred type. They may be stamped or plain. Range in size from 3/4 to 2 inches wide, 1 or 1 1/2 inch seams most common. Worn slightly above the elbow. Very often they are decorated with dangling ribbons or small silk handkerchiefs or even a feather. Sometimes a beaded rosette is used over the silver. Beaded arm bands are seldom worn.





## neckerchief

This is a very essential part of the costume. It is worn exactly as a Boy Scout might wear one and also about the same size. Material generally is the large silk kerchief of the type sold in variety stores. These are imported from Japan and come in a number of solid colors, any color may be used. You can still find them, but they are not as plentiful as they once were. A Straight Dancer will accumulate quite a collection of various colors. You may see some satin with floral prints, but this is not as common as the solid color. A slide is worn to hold the neckerchief together. The most common is German Silver. However, silver rings, beaded cylinders, or rosettes may be used. Do not tie the loose ends, let them dangle.

## chokers

These are not entirely necessary, as the neckerchief covers most of the neck region. However, they are attractive when viewed from the front. There are two general types used when worn. Either solid beaded or a combination of beads and hair pipes. The small necklace hair pipes about one inch are preferred. Sometimes a large conch shell is added to the front of the choker for extra decoration, as the one I occasionally wear, which was given to me by Br. J. Howard.

## charms

They are made of small silk handkerchiefs which match the color of the neckerchief. They are either tied to the bead strings about 4 or 5 inches below the shoulders or tied directly to the shirt back at the shoulder blades. A peyote member may use a small ball of tobacco to make his charms. Non-members and non-Indians use a small ball of sweetgrass, this also works as a deodorant, watch the girls trail you as you dance. You may desire to just pin or tie them on straight, it has been noted lately that the handkerchief is folded into a small square and pinned to the shoulders like two small diamonds.





(TOP LEFT) Note necklaces (bandoliers), shirt patterns, scalp feathers (l) Don Earhart, Illinois; (c) W.J. Scott, Oklahoma; (r) Ron Wrona, Wisconsin. Photo by Joe Kazumura.

(TOP RIGHT) Shirt pattern, scarf, beaded belt, matching ribbonwork.

Ty Stewart, Oklahoma. Photo by Joe Kazumura  
(MIDDLE) Straight Dancers, LIHA Powwow, 1971. Photo by Dick Madaus.

(BOTTOM) Sashes hanging under beaded belt. Photo by Joe Kazumura.



## belts

Beautiful wide beaded belts; loom beaded in a geometric design; 4 or 5 inches wide. (This) Beaded strip is mounted on a leather strap with one or more small buckles. The buckles may be worn front or back. Sometimes brass spots are placed on either side of the beaded strip to give added width.

## sash

Most dancers wear finger woven sashes of regular commercial wool yarn under the shirt. Some sashes have pony beads woven right in with the yarn. The fringe is usually woven just like the main body of the sash but in narrow sections. Generally the sash is tied on the right side and let the fringe hang down the side. Occasionally tied on the left, fringe may hang down one side or both. Some today do not bother with the body of the sash, it does not show anyway, just using fringe sections tied to a belt under the shirt. Also noted that occasionally narrow loom beaded strips are used to hang down the sides.

## garters

These mentioned now as they should be exactly like the sashes, except they are smaller. Worn directly below the knees with the fringe to the outside and hold the leggings flap in place. They are covered by the bells and serve as decorative fringe.

## breechclout

The clout, leggings and dance trailer should all hang together in color and design. They are all made of one of the many types of "list cloth", usually with a rainbow type selvage edge. Preferred dark blue. They are decorated with ribbon applique. Width is generally about 13 inches. An equal amount of the clout hangs down front and back. Both panels are decorated the same. Loose ends of the ribbon hang over the bottom. White seed beads may be used in a standard two bead edging all along the ribbon strip.

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## leggings

Should be of the same material and same design and colors of ribbons as used to make the clout. The ribbon decoration goes completely up the outside edge of the legging and not inside the seam as beaded strips on plains leggings. You may measure your inseam from crotch to just below your ankle, and add about 4 inches and you will have the right length. The rainbow selvage runs up the full length on the back flap. There is a slight taper in the flap, usually 11 inches at the bottom and 14 inches at the top will do. Of course, measurements depend on wearer. This will give you an idea of the taper. The edge beading is also used on the outside edge of the ribbonwork. A row of sequins may also be put on the inside strip, fastened in place with a seed bead. The straight dancers wear their leggings on the opposite leg as would seem natural; that is the ribbonwork is in the back when first put on. The flap is folded over to the front. This puts the ribbonwork now down the center in the middle of the leg. This flap is kept in place by garters and bells.

## bells

Long straps of small (or should I say) medium size bells 30 to 36 inches long. The preferred is brass. Worn just below the knees, the leggings are folded over. Tie on leg bands then the bells over this. In olden days the bells were worn at the ankles, thus the garters served another purpose. Today bells are worn only one place, (at the knees).

## dance trailers

This is a strip of the same material and ribbonwork as for the clout and leggings. This varies in length depending on wearer. It hangs from the waist in back over the clout and reaches to the ground. The width should be so that it fits just inside the ribbonwork on the edge of the back flap of the clout which should be about 8 inches to 10 inches wide. Ribbonwork is placed across the width, two or three rows may be used. Spaced 6 or 8 inches apart. Addition of sequins, metallic fringe and beads may be used for additional trim. If three rows of ribbonwork is used, the middle one can have the colors used in reverse.

## otter trailer

This is a necessary part of your straight dance outfit. You should not try to be one (straight dancer) without it. The essential element is a strip of otter fur. This may be 2 to 4 inches wide and long enough to reach from your neck down to the ground. This will have to be pieced together to get the required length. The decoration on these varies considerably. May have a ribbon applique trim down one or both sides. Other items of decoration may be used, are, beaded rooseets sometimes with a fluff, feather pendants, short loom beaded strips, etc. Don't let your thoughts get too wild. They are worn tied around the neck under the neckerchief and let hang free down the back.

## canes

A decorated stick approximately 18 inches long. They are decorated with peyote or basket weave beadwork. May have one or more strips of otter fur trim. Also may have one or two feathers or fluffs hanging off the end. This is another item which should be given to you. It is the mark of honor someone has bestowed upon you. In dancing with Indians in Oklahoma, this must not be carried unless you are an appointed tail dancer. Tail dancers are appointed by important tribal members, such as a chief or whip man. When one war dance round has ended, a part of the same song is sung while the dancers retire. A chosen few, picked, dance the complete round. Usually the best of the straight dancers have this honor. This is known as the tail dance. So when in Oklahoma do not dance the tails unless asked to do so.

## fans

A fan of some type is generally carried by all straight dancers. Feathers can be most anything, one idea can be a full tail with a beaded handle and long fine twisted fringe.

## blankets

Are carried in and used to set on and mark your place in the dance circle. Do not set on another person's blanket unless asked to do so. This is considered an insult.

## moccasins

Any type of plains moccasin will do. Partially or fully beaded, whichever you have.

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Various parts of the Straight Dancers clothes will be presented in forth coming issues of WHISPERING WIND Magazine. Many more photos will be presented with illustrations by our staff artists and photographers. Articles that will be presented in the next few issues:

OTTER DROPS  
PLAINS MOCCASINS  
HAIR ROACHES  
SCALP FEATHERS  
THE TROT DANCE

by Rex Reddick  
by Karl Kaup  
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