

# "Mesquakie Powwow Keeps Tradition Alive" Essay from *The Goldfinch*, 1998

## Mesquakie Powwows Keeps Traditions Alive

by Bridgett Williams-Searle

The sun begins to set.

Drumbeats start.

Drummers sing an ancient honor song. Native American dancers follow flags into the dance circle. First elders, then honored guests, then men, women, and kids in brightly colored outfits dance past the crowd in the bleachers. Everyone keeps time with their hands and their feet. Some men wear huge headdresses. Women wear shawls and carry fans made from feathers. Girls jingle as they dance, shaking the silver beads on their dresses. Boys stomp by, twisting low and then jumping high in rhythm to the ancient song. Welcome to the Mesquakie Powwow's Grand Entry!

The Mesquakie Powwow, held near Tama, is more than just a party. Although everyone is welcome to attend, the powwow has special meaning for Native American peoples. Indians from all over the United States come to the powwow to dance with the Mesquakie. Mesquakies use the annual gathering as a time to honor their history through dancing, singing, and feasting. They also see it as a time to look forward and envision a better future. During the powwow, Indian kids learn to take pride in their past, but they also learn to become the leaders of tomorrow.

The Mesquakie celebrate their heritage in many ways. Any Mesquakies believe that drum music is sacred, so listening, singing, and dancing to the drum is a powerful experience. Powwow music is very old. The songs-many written before the Europeans arrived in Iowa-celebrate a good harvest, hunt, or victory. Drummers proudly sing Mesquakie words to traditional melodies, reminding listeners of a time before everyone spoke English. Older people teach kids how to sing along so the Mesquakie language is not forgotten.

Another important part of the Mesquakie Powwow is great Indian food and crafts. Hungry dancers and guests fill up their plates with Indian Tacos, frybread, and other treats. Native American artists sell jewelry, clothing, and other stuff.

The dancing, though, is what brings people together. Powwow dancers spend a lot of time creating their outfits by hand. Each outfit has a special meaning and expresses the spirit of the dance itself. The grass dancers, for example, wear shaggy suits with long bright fringe-when they dance, they sound like the wind in prairie grass. The fancy dancers, with their graceful shawls, look like butterflies. Good dancers know the basic steps, but have their own style. The best win prizes. There are special dance contests just for kids.

Finally, the Powwow emphasizes not only friendly competition, but also generosity. Elders organize giveaways so that people who need help can get money or food from the dancers. Kids learn that the Mesquakie still take care of each other, even though their lives have changed a lot in the last century. The young still learn from the old; the weak can still depend on the strong. The community needs everyone. Traditional ways endure, even now, and they make good sense.

Mesquakie kids love the powwow. They make friends, sing songs, and celebrate their people's history. Best of all, they learn how to dance old dances in new ways, preparing them to lead their people into the 21st Century.