

May 23 – Minute for Right Relations

Pow-wows

It's pow-wow season! And I can't think of a better way to get to know your First Nations neighbours.

For many years, from the mid-1800s until well into the 1900s, it was a punishable offense for indigenous people to gather together to drum and dance in regalia – unless the Government wanted to trot us out to “entertain” visiting royalty and European dignitaries. However, with the activism of the 1960s and 70s, this started to change. Indigenous peoples gradually began to reclaim their culture. In 1961, Rosemary Odjig, of Wikwemikong Unceded Indian Reserve, on Manitoulin Island, organized “Wikwemikong Indian Days” in order to revive and preserve native culture.* The “Wikwemikong Cultural Festival”, as it is now called, takes place every Civic weekend in August. It's a very large pow-wow featuring many dancers in beautiful regalia and several big drums, also known as Grandfather drums. Many beautiful handmade crafts and artwork can be purchased. It is also possible to attend a variety of teachings and arts and crafts demonstrations. And, of course, there is food galore – “Indian” or “Nish” tacos, pickerel dinners, buffalo burgers, corn soup and much more.

Everyone is welcome at a pow-wow as long as they are respectful. Pow-wows are social events, but there are parts that are considered sacred. The MC will always tell you when to stand, take off your hat or refrain from taking photographs for an Honour Song or prayer. He will also announce an “Intertribal” when visitors are invited to join in the dancing. A sacred fire, tended by a fire-keeper, burns throughout the pow-wow, and it is there that sacred medicines can be placed in the fire and prayers offered to the Creator.

Most First Nations now hold a pow-wow annually, often on the same weekend each year. They tend to be much smaller and more intimate than the Wikwemikong Cultural Festival but can be just as enjoyable. Some of those close to Sudbury and North Bay are at Dokis First Nation on the fourth weekend of June, the Atikameksheng Anishnawbek Pow-wow on the fourth weekend of July, the Wahnapeetae First Nation on the third weekend of August and the N'biising Anishinabek on the Labour Day Weekend. There are several pow-wows on Manitoulin Island and the North Shore, starting with the the Aundeck Omni Kaning Pow-wow on the first weekend of June and ending with M'Chigeeng First Nation Pow-wow on the Labour Day weekend. In the Spirit Dancing area, the Constant Lake First Nation is holding a pow-wow this year from August 11-13.

If there is a First Nation near you, call the Band office and ask if they are holding a pow-wow. Or check the Union of Ontario Indians website where a new Pow-wow Guide should soon be found. The Guide explains the different dances and protocol. Make an effort to attend a pow-wow this summer. Getting to know your neighbours is part of the work of reconciliation.

By Carol Germa on behalf of the Manitou Right Relations Group. *Wikwemikong Website.