

Honoring Ceremony

by Clydia Nahwooksy

When President Theodore Roosevelt visited the Comanches and other tribes during a hunting expedition to the Southern Plains in 1903, he was honored at Indian give-away ceremonies. Among the gifts that the President received from his hosts were buffalo robes, braided ropes, and an eagle feather war-bonnet. President Roosevelt was probably informed that this was a long standing tradition among these people and therefore responded graciously to the feasts, songs, dances, and gifts that were given in his honor.

It is difficult for non-Indian people, as well as Indians who do not practice the give-away tradition, to understand the concept of being honored or receiving gifts at such a celebration. The honoring ceremony (sometimes called honoring dance, or give-away) is usually sponsored by a family or group in recognition of the accomplishments of some individual. Formerly, honoring dances were held for warriors returning from battle. Today, an honoring ceremony may occur as a separate event or be incorporated into a larger Plains powwow as one component. It is a forum in which the larger community highlights, recognizes, and shows appreciation for the person honored, who may be a member of the military returning from duty, a community elder, or some other person deserving of recognition.

The family that is having the ceremony will present gifts to friends and acquaintances who have been an important part of their lives and the life of the individual who is being honored. On occasion, gifts are also given to strangers or even casual acquaintances who have somehow distinguished themselves. Nowadays, such gifts might be shawls, blankets, beaded items, or money.

The honoring ceremony includes a dance, a feast, and the giving of presents (the "give-away"). Belying characteristic Indian generosity, the term "Indian giver" has often been used, meaning someone who gives and then takes back. The honoring ceremony gives testimony to the true spirit and joy of giving long evident among Native Americans; it is a sharing of accomplishment and an opportunity to thank people for their support and friendship.