

A Festival of Crows

by Anne Kemmerle

People everywhere love to celebrate. Across the world every year, thousands of celebrations occur in festivals or fairs. In North America alone, there are music festivals, art festivals, riverboat festivals, sweet-corn festivals, and pumpkin festivals. One of the largest, best-known festivals is the Crow Indian Fair and Rodeo in southern Montana.

Late in August every year, the Crow Indians gather in the valley of the Little Big Horn River. They come from all over their Montana reservation. About a mile from the site of the Battle of Little Big Horn took place, the Crow put up their tepees. Joining the Crow are many Blackfoot, Blood, Cree, and Shoshone Indians. Other Native Americans join them, too. Some travel from as far south as Mexico. They all come together for a week of dancing, parades, and rodeos.

The Crow work hard getting ready for their big fair. In fact, as soon as each year's fair ends, they start planning for the next year's fair.

The Crow women begin by making native costumes. They make shirts, dresses, and moccasins. Pieces of buckskin become hair ties, belts, and purses. Later the women add colored beads to the costumes. A few women know how to make shapes with beads. Carefully taking just one bead at a time, they tie the beads to the buckskin.

In July, Crow families go to the mountains to cut lodgepole pine trees. These pines have soft, light wood. Before the trees dry out, the Crow strip the branches. Then they peel off the bark. The wood is then used to make tall, straight poles for tepees.

Many of the lodgepoles are used to set up the Crow's camp. First they build a long open-air arbor. Straight posts going up and down make the sides. Poles that cross each other make a

flat roof. Leafy branches piled on top finish the arbor. Inside, each family finds a spot for its tables, tubs, and beds.

Along the outside of the arbor, the Crow put up their tepees. For each tepee, four of the biggest poles are stood on their ends. A few feet apart. Then the tops of these poles are tied together. Finally the Crow put heavy cloth over the poles. They fix the top so it will open or close. What a sight all these tepees make! In fact, because so many Native Americans camp there each year, the Crow Indian Fair is called the “Tepee Capital of the World.”

Most mornings at the fair begin with the Parade Dance. Everyone dresses in native costume. The long parade through the camp is a special kind of ceremony. The colors and shapes show the Crows’ strong ties to the animal world.

Every afternoon brings the all-Indian rodeo. People from almost every tribe in the U.S. and Canada compete in the contests. There is horse racing, too, which has long been a favorite sport of the Crow.

At dark, drums and songs call everyone to the dance arbor. The Crow might begin the dance with the Men’s and Women’s Traditional Dance. Soon members of other tribes are called to join in. Through their costumes and their motion, the dancers show the different ways of their tribes. They dance about ten songs in a row, each song faster than the one before.

On the last night of the fair, the dancers, drummers, and singers perform all night long. They finish with the Dance Around the Camps. Only the Crow Indians take part in this special dance. It shows the flight of the eagle, a bird the Crow have always admired. A scout on horseback leads the way, deciding the path the dancers will take. During and after the dance, the Crow give gifts to one another.

The Crow Indian Fair and Rodeo lasts just a week. But in that short time, the Crow and other Indian people make lasting friendships. They feel their families grow close together. They keep their customs alive – until the next year.