

Children Learn Traditional Athabascan Dances

"They say you have to go a certain way: they say to follow the sun when you dance in a circle," explains Della Mae Northway, instructor of the Northway Dancers.

At a potlatch, singers who are seated to the side of the dancing area start off by singing memorial songs (songs for the deceased). When they stand and begin singing the war dance and wash songs, the dancing begins. When the drummer starts drumming, the

women start to make a circle. The women stay mostly in one place, making their movements from the waist up, holding a scarf or wearing gloves. They sway back and forth to the rhythm of the music. The "wash tub dance" derives its name from these movements which are similar to those of washing clothes.

The men dance inside the circle. The head dancer carries the gun hawk, a stick with beads and feathers. All the dancers face the drum-

mer and head dancer.

Women wear knee length dresses and men wear waist length shirts decorated with fringe beads and feathers. They are made out of cloth, moosehide or caribou skin. Their moc-casins or skin boots are trimmed with fur and beadwork. Some dancers wear dentalium shell necklaces, which was once a sign of wealth.

There are certain dances for songs with different

meanings. For example, when the white man first brought his dances to the Native people, the villagers had no white man music. In its place, Indian songs were made to dance square dances and the more modern twist.

There are also songs telling a story, imitating the characters or animals in the song. In the "Porcupine Dance," the dancers waddle on their knees with their hands behind their backs like a porcupine.

When gifts are to be given away at a potlatch, yards and yards of cloth are held by everyone dancing in a circle. At the end of the dance, everyone lines up and they have a tug of war with the cloth. Afterwards it's gathered up and is given away.

Children begin learning to dance as soon as they learn to walk, carrying on the tradition of singing and dancing from one generation to the next.



Athabascan children dancing