

Background Information

The Sun Dance is a traditional ceremonial observance of the Arapaho tribe and has always been of central importance in the religious and social life of the people. In former times the Sun Dance was the climax of a series of ceremonial and social activities held in mid-summer, the whole of which contributed greatly to tribal integration. The various bands of Arapahoes came together and camped in a large circle. For a period of several weeks a number of activities were carried on, including the annual dances and initiation ceremonies of the several age-graded men's societies, the purchasing and transferring and renewing of medicine bundles, the meeting together of the chiefs and subchiefs to discuss matters affecting the whole tribe, and a host of purely social and recreational activities such as dancing, feasting, gambling, horse and foot racing, and story telling. The enactment of the Sun Dance itself was considered to benefit and bring a blessing upon the whole tribe, as well as individual participants.

George A. Dorsey, an ethnologist working for the Field Columbian Museum of Chicago, witnessed the Sun Dances held in Oklahoma in 1902 and 1903, and wrote a lengthy monograph on this ceremonial complete with photographs and detailed descriptions of various component ceremonies. At that time the government was exerting considerable pressure on Indian tribes to abandon their traditional religious observances, and he was of the opinion that the Sun Dance would disappear within a few years. It is interesting to point out that the Sun Dance continued to be performed in Oklahoma until 1940, and in Wyoming to the present day.

Dorsey's monograph provides a wealth of substantive data which could be used as a baseline for a comparative study of the Arapaho Sun Dance at different time periods almost 70 years apart. Such a study could not, of course, be made solely on the basis of information gained on my trip and contained in this report, for my trip had the major objective of getting better acquainted with Oklahoma Arapa-