

Fancy Shawl Dancer

As told to Cynthia Graber • Photos by Cynthia Graber



My name is Chelaine Knudsen. I'm eleven years old and in the sixth grade. I live in Lake Andes, South Dakota. That's on the Yankton Sioux Reservation.

I've been dancing in powwows since I was three years old. A powwow is a gathering where Native Americans from all over come to dance, play the drums, sing, and just be together. I've been to powwows in South Dakota, Nebraska, and New Mexico.

I like to go to the powwows and see different people. Sometimes I'm shy

when I first get to a powwow. But after a while, I start talking with people. I think it's easier to meet people when everyone is dancing together.

No one ever taught me how to dance. When I was younger, I just watched the other dancers and copied them. My family used to live in a house right across from the powwow field in Lake Andes. We would walk over there, and I would see everyone dance. My grandma made me an outfit—a skirt, shirt, and shawl—so I just started dancing with the people there.

Last year, I was crowned Miss Yankton Sioux. It's a dance competition featuring fancy shawl dancing, jingle dancing, and traditional dancing. As Miss Yankton Sioux,





Chelaine's grandmother adjusts the Miss Yankton Sioux sash on Chelaine's costume. Chelaine currently holds the title of Jr. Miss Fort Randall 1995 and 1996.

Chelaine dances with her shadow as she practices her shawl and foot movements.



I represented the tribe and went to different powwows.

For fancy shawl dancing, I have to keep the shawl moving at all times, because it doesn't look good if the shawl is still.

I did jingle dress dancing, where the dress has little silver jingles sewn on it, for a few years. Jingle dancing is sort of like fancy shawl dancing, but I can't spin around, and there are some different movements. Most of the fancy shawl songs go fast, but the jingle dress songs don't go as fast.

Dancers are judged on the movement of their feet. They have to stop exactly when the music stops. There are lots of songs in different languages that people sing and play, so I don't know exactly when a song is going to end.

First the drummers start slowly, and then the music gets faster. When the drums are hit really hard, I know the song is somewhere in the middle. After a few minutes, I know the end of the dance is near. I've danced so many times that I can tell when the music will stop.

I think I will be dancing forever, because it's so much fun. Dancing just makes me feel proud of myself. ★