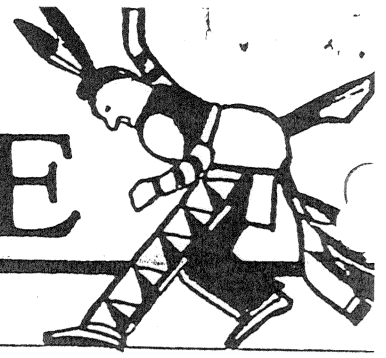




THE BUSTLE



CENTRAL PLAINS WAR DANCE BUSTLES

by RICK HEWITT

*Illustrated by
Sumner Heman*

During the examination of reservation period war dance bustles in various collections, a number of recurring factors could be noted. The bustle found among the tribes on the Central Plains during the 1880-1920 era may be composed of up to six standard features: a base, two nearly upright spikes, trailer(s), belt, tail unit, and wheel. The main purpose of this article will be to examine and compare variations commonly used for each of these six standard features.

Lakota dancers, c.1890. Dancers in the center are wearing bustles without trailers.
Photo by John Anderson courtesy the Nebraska State Historical Society, neg.no.A547-257.

Frontpiece photo by Joe Kazumura.



THE BASE

Most often made from rawhide, the base was well worked so it was somewhat pliable. It was not uncommon to reuse an old parfleche container as noted by several bases still containing traces of painted designs. Commercial leather, while used, was not that common, even in the specimens collected in the twentieth century. The range of sizes for bases varied from 4" to 8.5" deep and 4" to 7.5" wide. Many were square when folded. The base may be prepared in three styles; folded, pillow, and rolled.

A. FOLDED

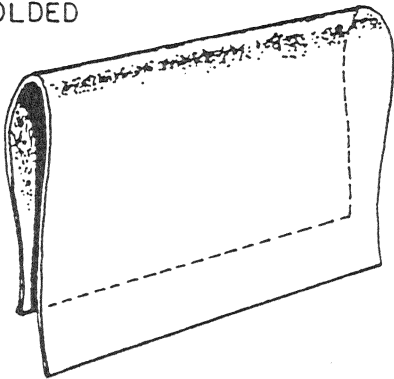


Figure A - Folded: The piece was bent in half and often secured with ties which hold the spikes in a permanent position. The back may be shorter than the front.

B. PILLOW

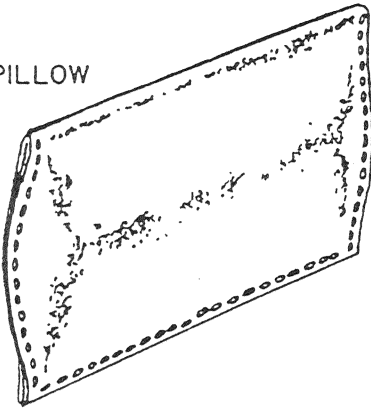


Figure B - Pillow: Modification of the above. First filled with cloth, hair, grass, etc., and then sewn along the three open sides. Least common of the three.

C. ROLLED

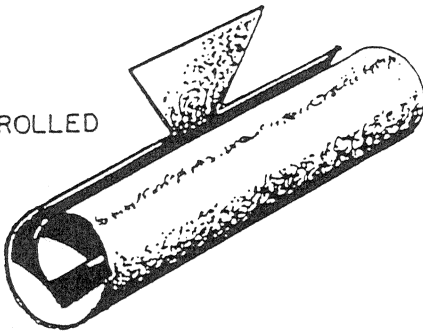


Figure C - Rolled: The hide is loosely rolled. Sometimes a flap may extend from the roll to hold the wheel or the tail.

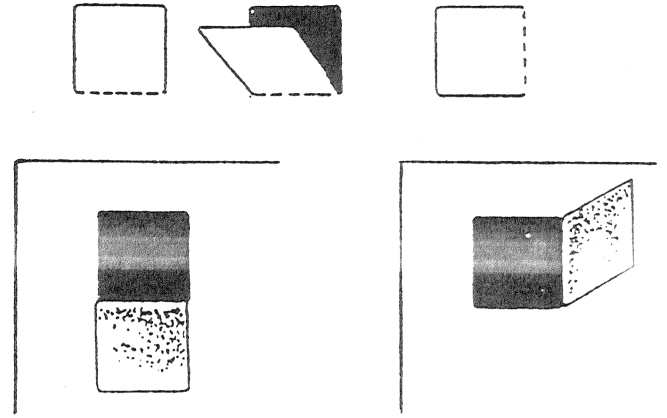
The three most common ways the base was prepared to receive the spikes:

Figure D: This hole was made with two cuts. It was usually found in the top-front of the base.

Figure E: This may be either a vertical or horizontal flap. Also found in the upper-front corner of the base.

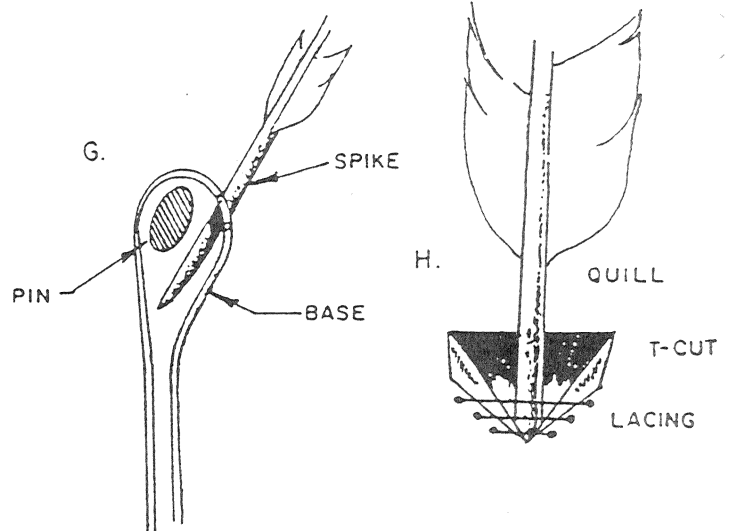
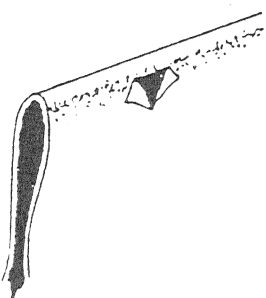
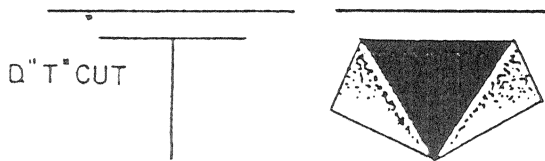
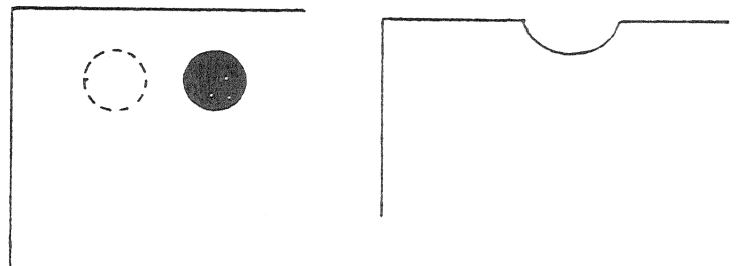
Figure F: Complete hole, Varies in size as to how much material will fit into the hole. Top-front or top-edge of base.

E. THREESIDED CUT



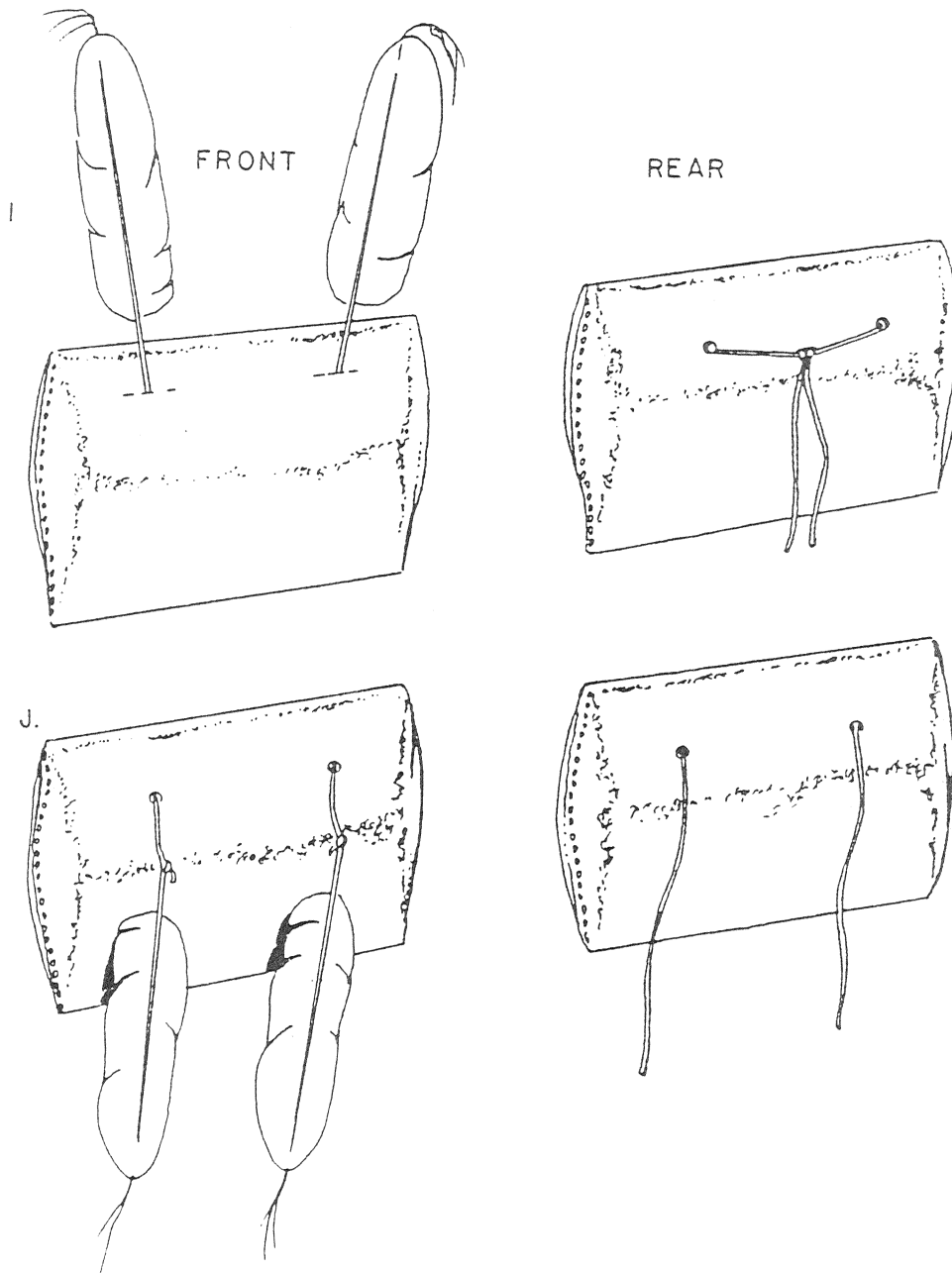
To help reinforce the spikes and help maintain their nearly vertical position several techniques were employed. Some spikes were reinforced by the presence of a wood pin (approx. 3/8" diameter times the base width) located inside the base near the top (Figure G). When using the "T-cut" or the "Three sided cut", additional stability could be gained by binding the flap(s) against the spike and/or stockade (Figure H).

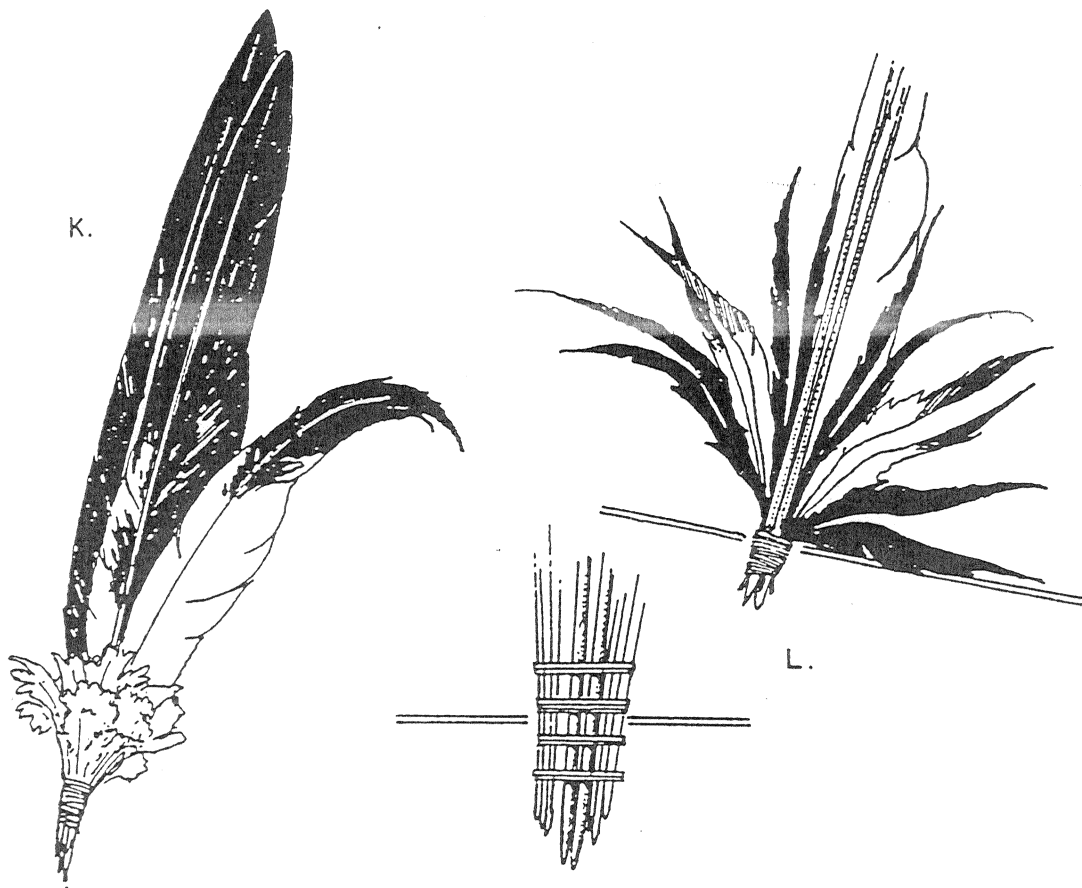
F. ROUND HOLE



THE SPIKES

The second unit, the spikes, are nearly always multiple. The most frequent combination seems to be composed of the first three feathers from the bird's wing. The two longer feathers are attached to each other along the full length, but the first shorter feather is only attached at the base and may even be permanently shaped to bend out and downwards from the other two (Figure K). As many as five wing-pointer feathers have been used to make a single spike. Not all spikes were held permanently to the base. Many were attached to laces which could be drawn into position when the bustle was worn (Figure I), or loosened for storage and transportation (Figure J).

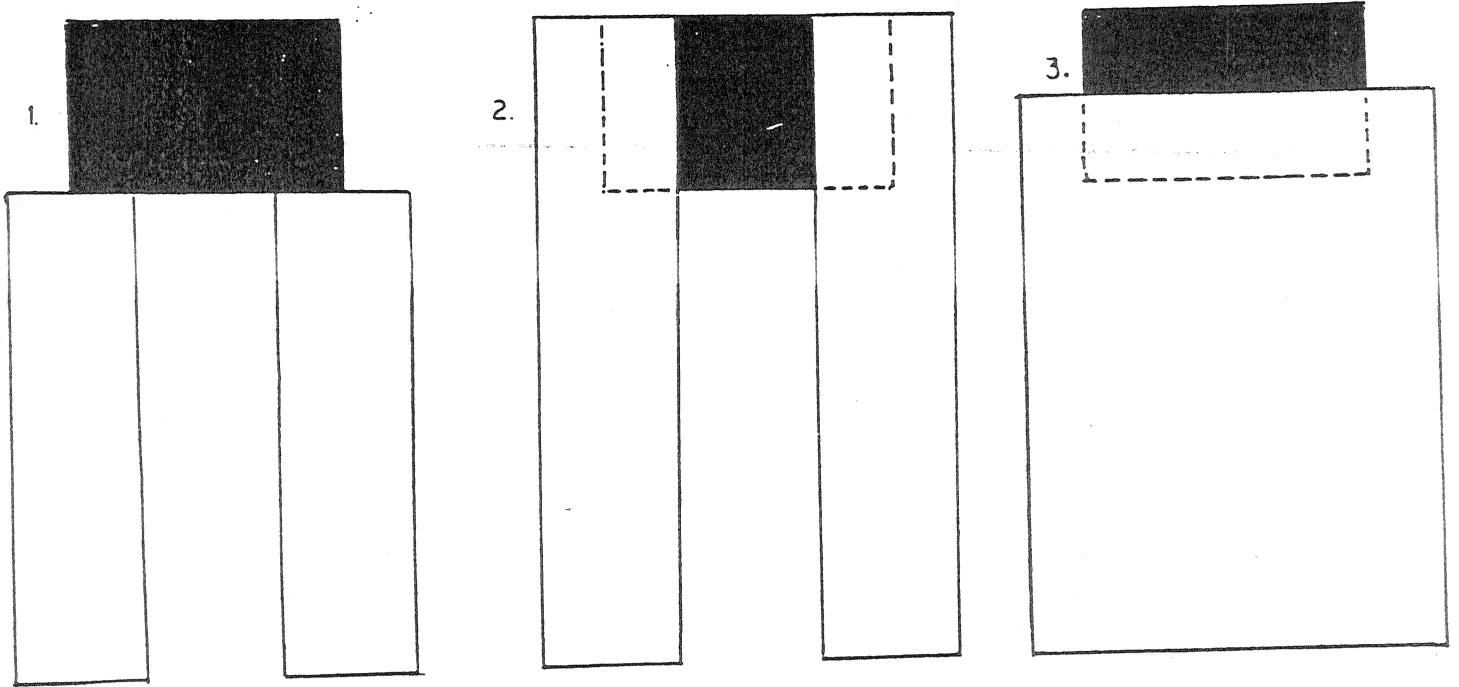




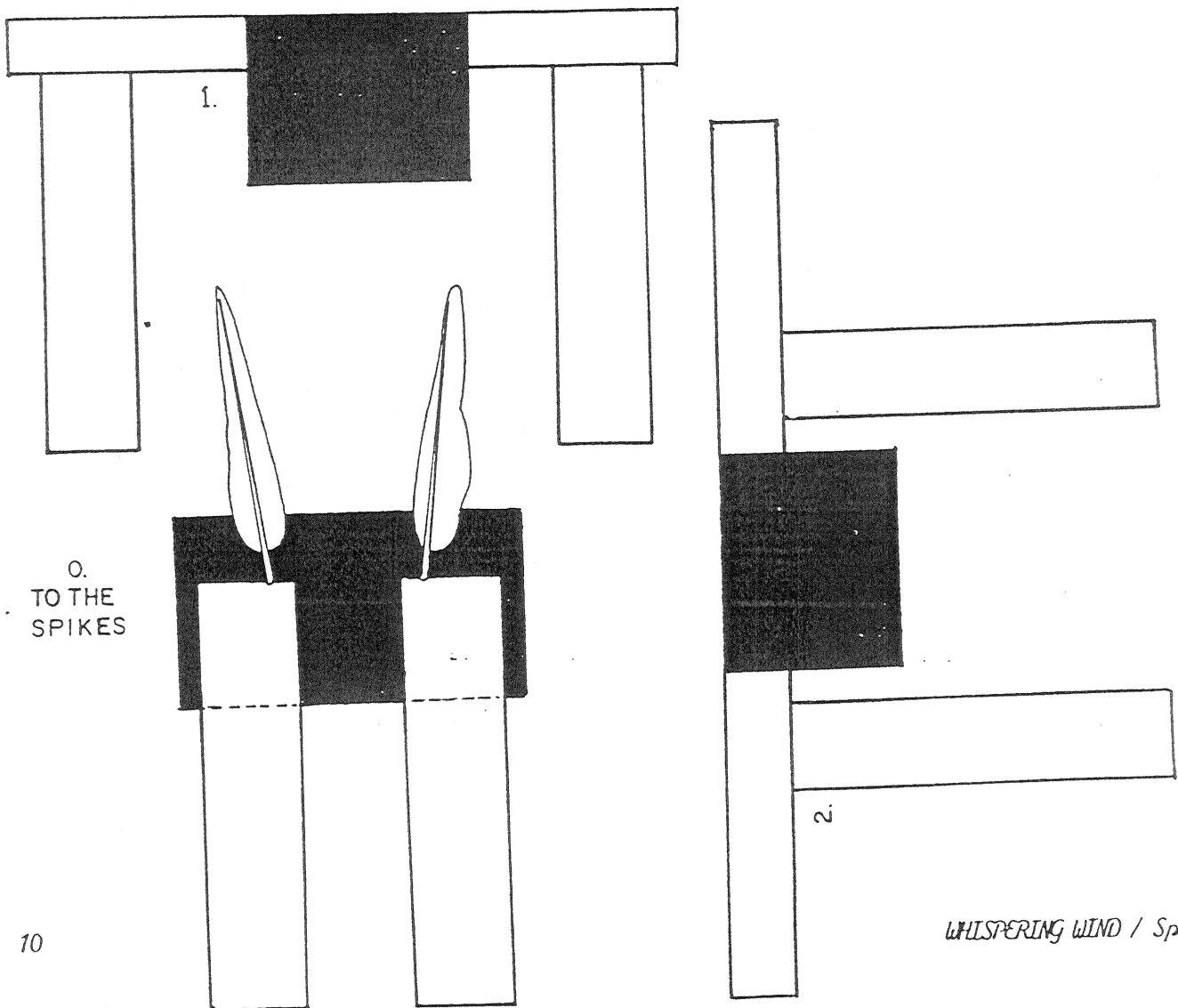
Decoration of the spikes was rather standard. A loose, but full, group of stripped feathers is found at the bottom of the spike standing vertically and surrounding the spike. This group of feathers, or stockade, may be composed of up to three layers of dyed, stripped, owl and/or hawk feathers. The stockade is often wrapped tightly above the primary lacing, and may be set just inside the base for added stability (Figure L).

Decoration along the shafts of the spikes is accomplished through quill wrapped rawhide strips, braids of sweetgrass, and strings of hawk bells. A few bustles used narrow wood slats wrapped with thread in place of quillwork. The tips of the spikes may have a collar of ermine, quill wrapped thong, beading, or cloth; loose hanging items such as ribbons, hair, fluffs, feathers, etc., may also hang from the tips. Some items that may hang from the bottom to the spikes are feathers, sweetgrass braids, fluffs, or even trailers.

M. TO THE BASE



N. TO THE BELT



O.
TO THE
SPIKES

THE TRAILERS

Made of either blue or red stroud material, trailers were often backed and/or edge bound with cotton print cloth, sacking, muslin, or strouding. The trailers were usually in pairs and attached at a wide variety of points; the base, the belt, or the spikes.

A small stick was often sewn into the top hem of each trailer to give it an even hang. Very seldom was one stick used to hang both trailers. The trailers were covered with wing feathers. The feathers were almost always neatly and evenly placed on the cloth. Four rows of three feathers was the most common arrangement. The feathers may be attached by the self looping technique (Figure S-1). with no

decoration or they were "fully dressed" in the manner of a bonnet feather with the fire-cracker wrapped base and fluffs at the base and tip. Quilled strips along the shafts were occasionally used. The common adhesive to attach hair and fluffs to the end of feathers was a gypsum paste.

A four inch wide trailer was the most popular with a range from 2.5" to 8.5". Trailer length ranged from 24" to 34". In addition to the regular rows of feathers a limited number of "special" items might be found. A red feather or a bell might denote a battle wound or other charms might be found. These were not common, however, and there was seldom a cluttered appearance to the trailers. Feathers were attached by the techniques shown in Figure S-1,2,3,4.

(LEFT) Plains style bustle with leather belt. Feathers in the bustle cluster are decorated with red fluffs. Denver Art Museum. J. Heriard photo. (RIGHT) Plateau style bustle with a one piece trailer and feather cluster at the top. Two upright spikes are attached to a folded base. This bustle is housed in the Community Center Museum, Wellpinit, WA.

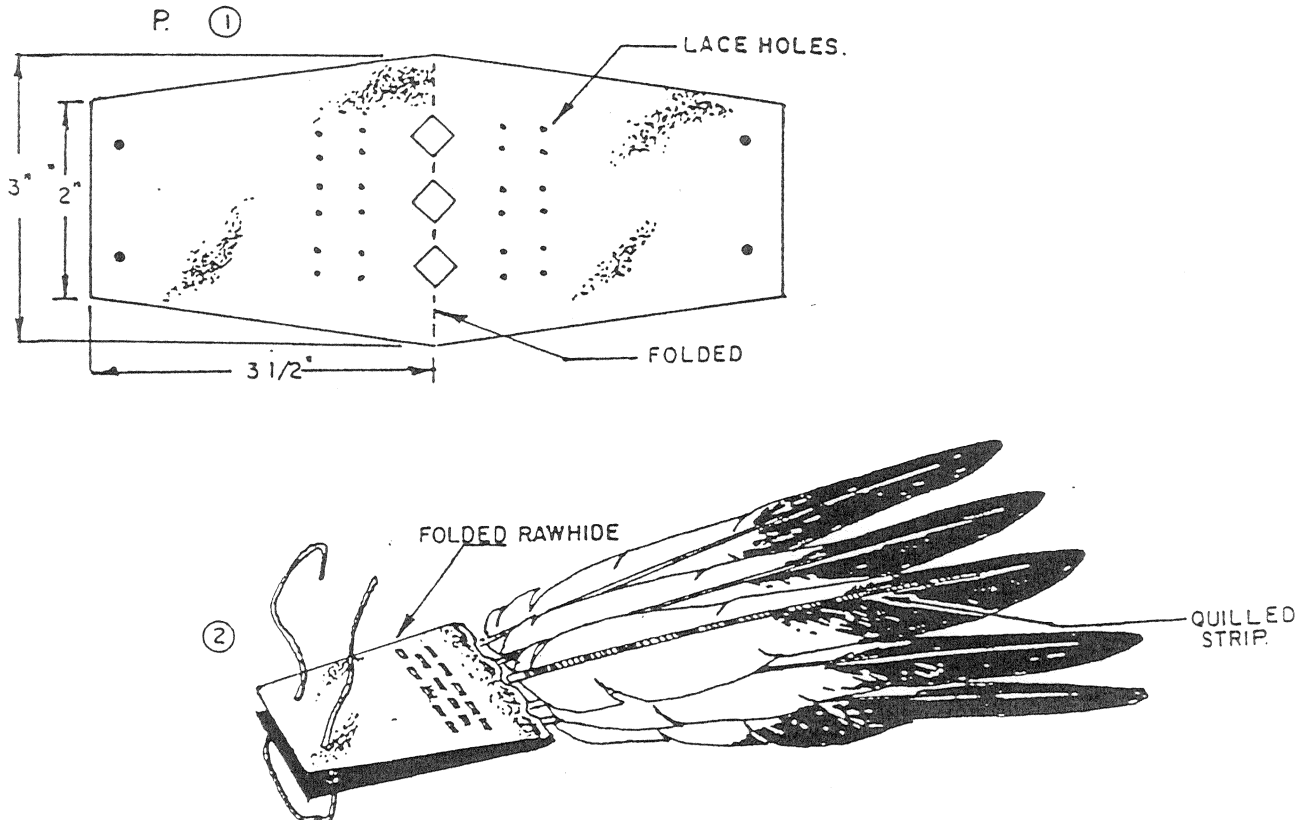


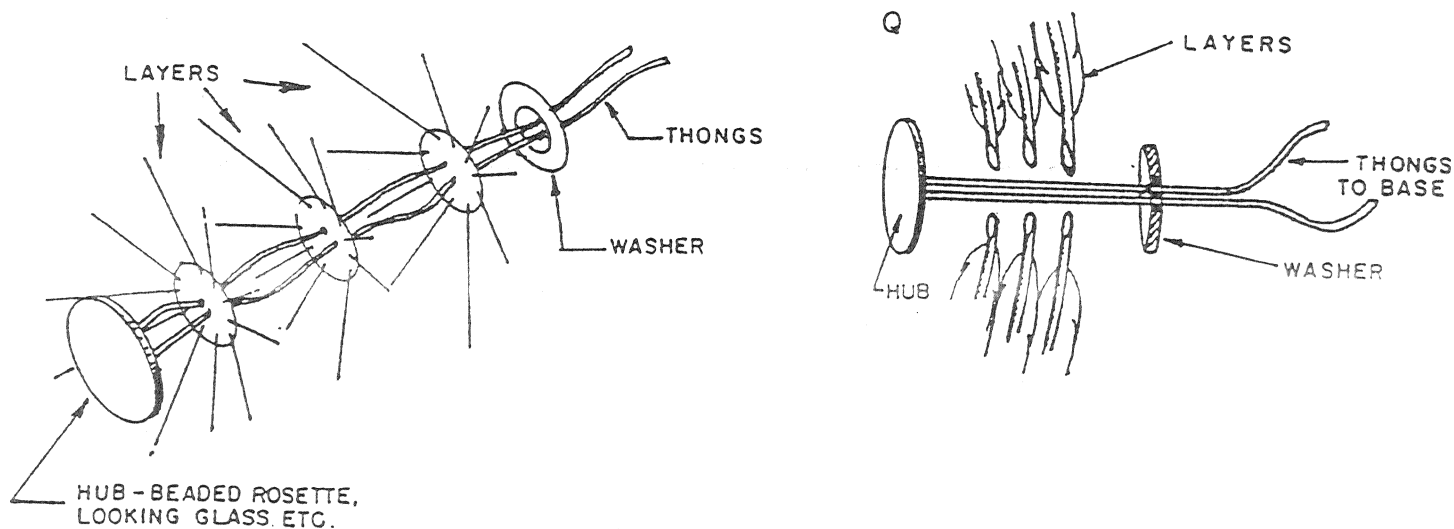
THE BELT

Belts were not always present on the specimens examined, but certainly were necessary to hold this style bustle to the dancer. Strips of muslin, net sashes, a wool neck scarf, and a commercial belt covered with red stroud were among some of the belts still attached. No doubt decorative sashes and belts could have covered the less fancy ties. It is possible that many of the original belts may have been kept by the original owner, or may have been removed to be stored in another collection area.

THE TAIL

It is quite common for a person reconstructing a bustle of this style to overlook or omit the tail unit. The tail was present on 75% of the bustles examined. The tail was often composed of five tail feathers set into tapering, folded piece of rawhide. Other feathers were also used (one tail unit held nine hawk tail feathers). An average tail foundation may measure three inches at the folded end holding the feathers, two inches at the open end, and 3.5 inches long. A single quillwrapped rawhide slat usually decorated the shaft of the center feather (Figure P).



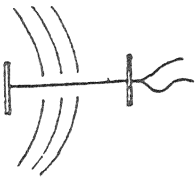


THE WHEEL

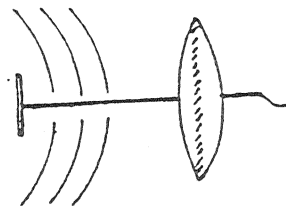
Usually when speaking of a bustle the person thinks of a large cluster of feathers. The examples used in this study contained wheels only half the time. Many without wheels showed they had been constructed to hold wheels but this feature may have again been kept by a previous owner or disposed of in some other manner. The wheel is composed of a "hub", a given number of feather circles, a thong to hold the unit together, and occasionally a "washer" or back-up cup (Figure Q).

The radius of the wheel ranged from 7" to 11". Decorating techniques included partially stripping the vane from the shaft to give a fluttering effect, splitting the shaft (among the Crow the shaft would often be split lengthwise and the inside of the shaft would be colored, or whitened if the vane had been dyed), dying the entire feather, attaching colored fluffs, hair, gypsum, and using decorative hubs. The practice of looping the quill end into itself (Figure S-1) was used almost exclusively to prepare the quill for the primary lace. A secondary lacing, or bridle, along the middle of the shaft (Figure S-8) was seldom used. This, along with the practice of removing the bared quill from a partly stripped feather, gave a very full and free effect to the wheel. This helped to give this style the name "mess bustle". To give still additional fullness, pieces of stripped vanes can be added to the existing quills.

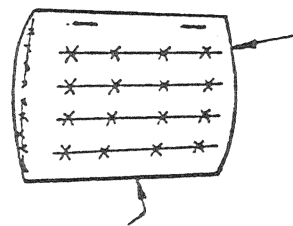
R. 1 TO WASHER



2. TO BASE



TO THONGS

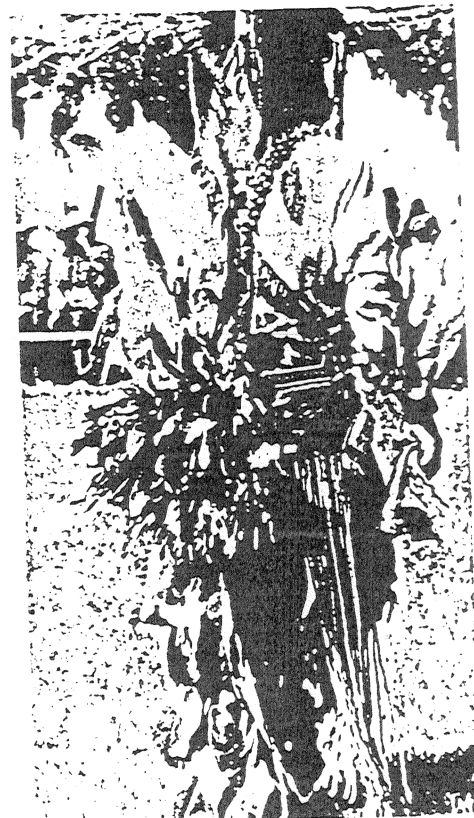


A concave effect is often achieved by setting the feathers into the wheel with the underside out. The number of layers may vary from four to perhaps over a dozen. By 1930 many of the bustles among South Dakota dancers featured rather flattened wheels composed of several layers of colored feathers positioned to present a pattern as opposed to the earlier full and fluttering feather styles. Many trailers were found to the side of the dancer as noted in Figure N-1.

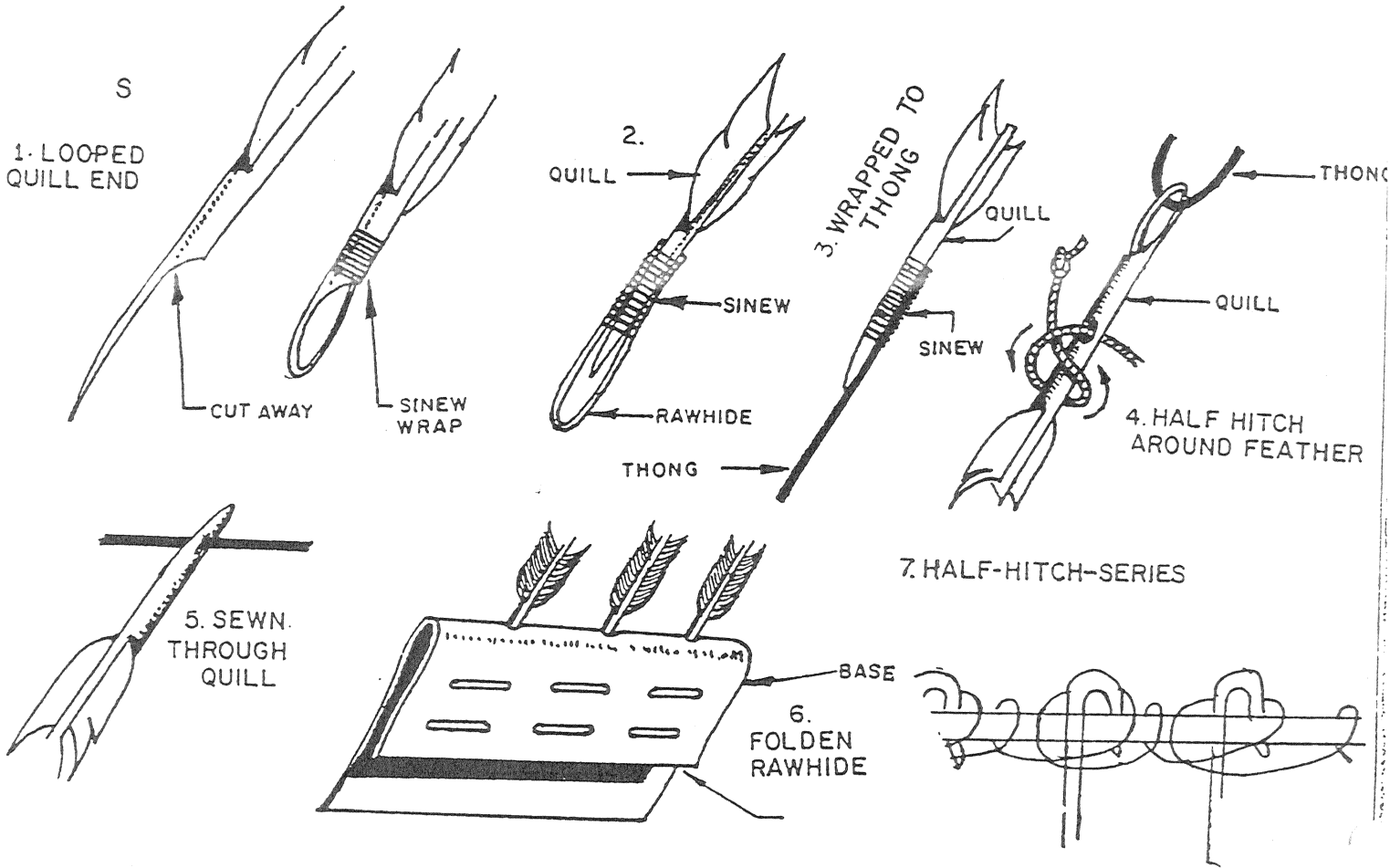
Wheels may be attached either with or without a washer. In the latter case the wheel may be tied directly to the base which will act as the washer. In one case, collected from the Crow in 1901, the "wheel" was composed of several collapsed feather circles tied individually to horizontal thongs attached to the base. The resulting effect was a very full "mess" wheel. This technique (Figure R) is one still used widely among the Crow today.

(text continued on page 19)

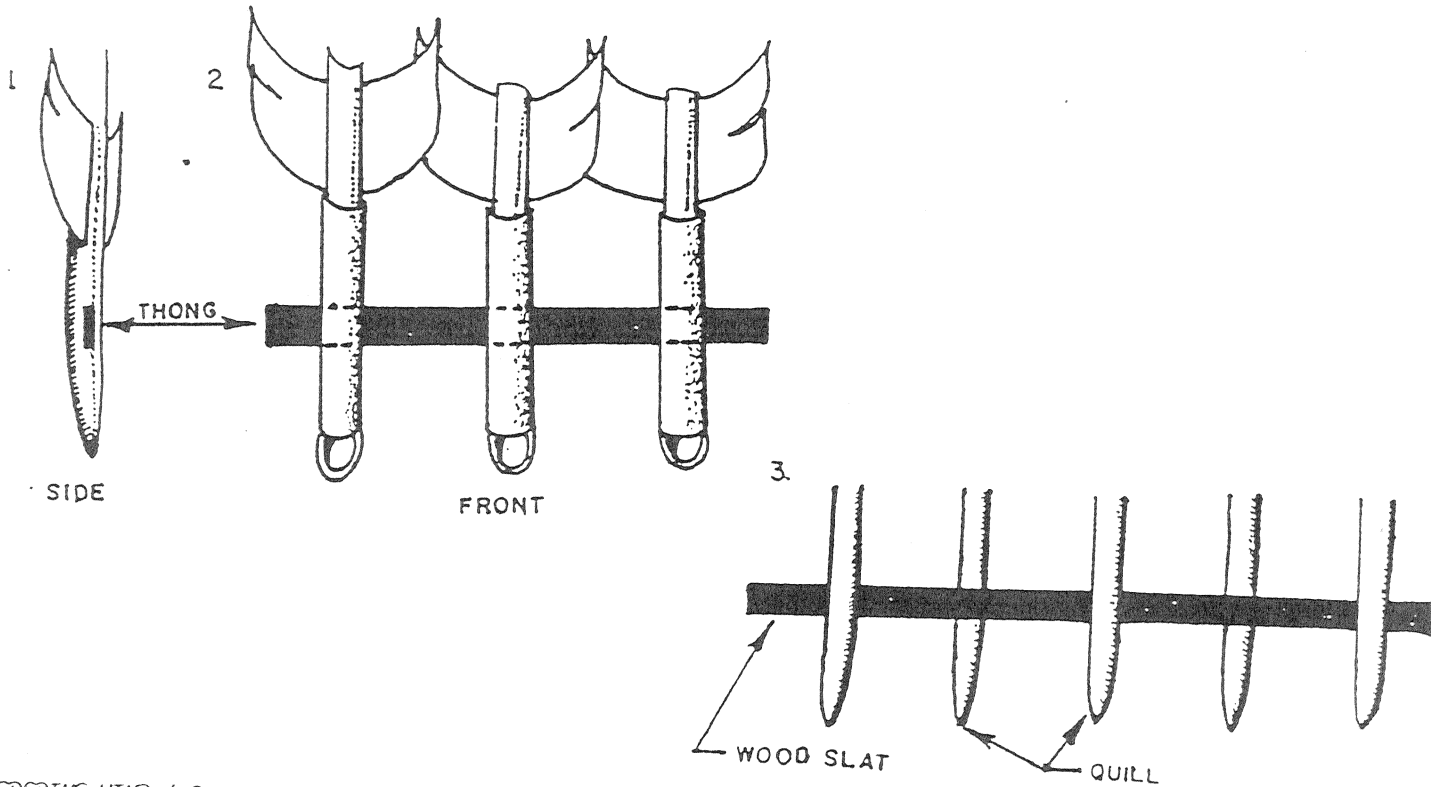
Northern traditional "old Style" dancer wearing a "mess" bustle.
Photo by Joe Kazumura



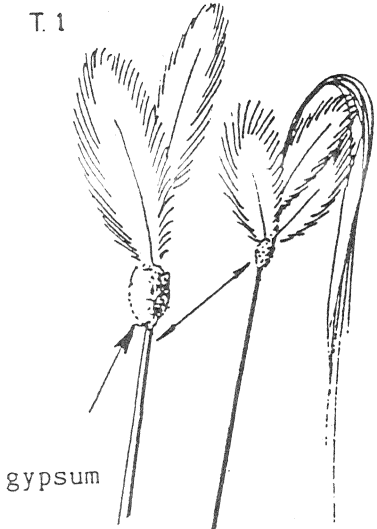
DIFFERENT METHODS OF SECURING FEATHERS



9. REINFORCEMENT TECHNIQUES

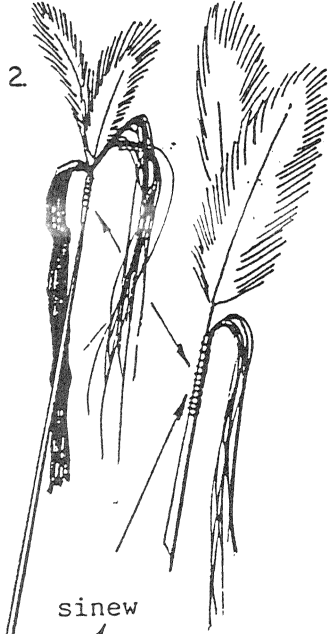


T.1



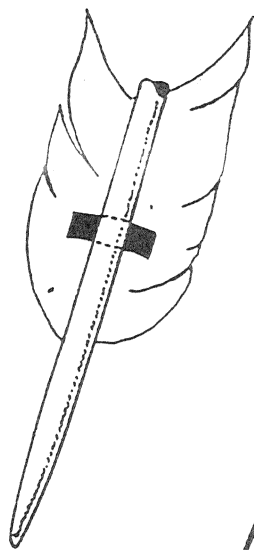
gypsum

2



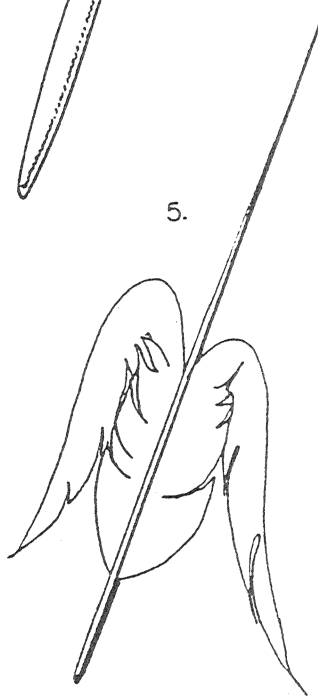
sinew

3.

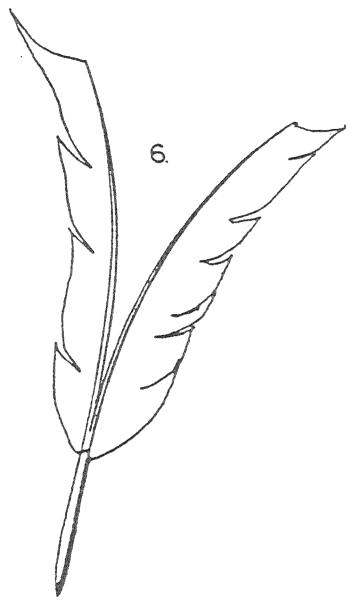


Pulling material through quill fluffs

5.



6.

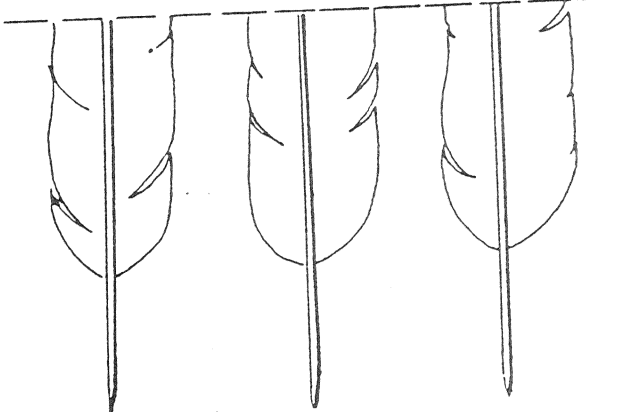


Stripping vanes from the shaft.

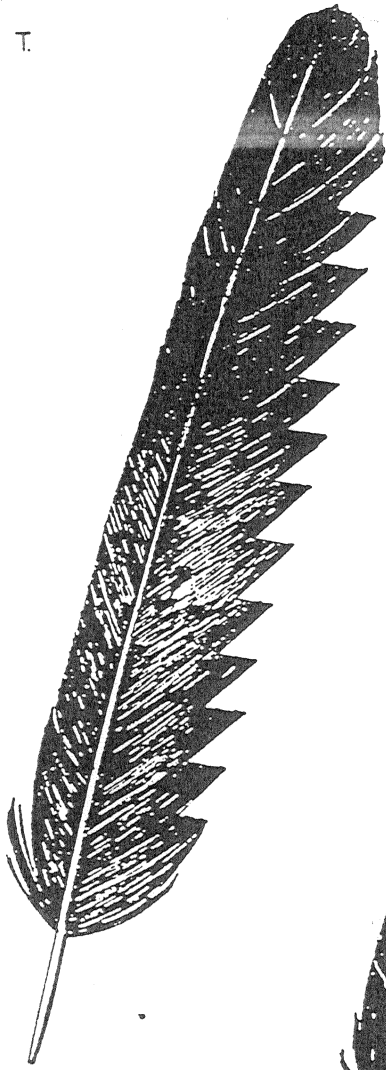
Splitting the shaft.

FEATHER DECORATING TECHNIQUES

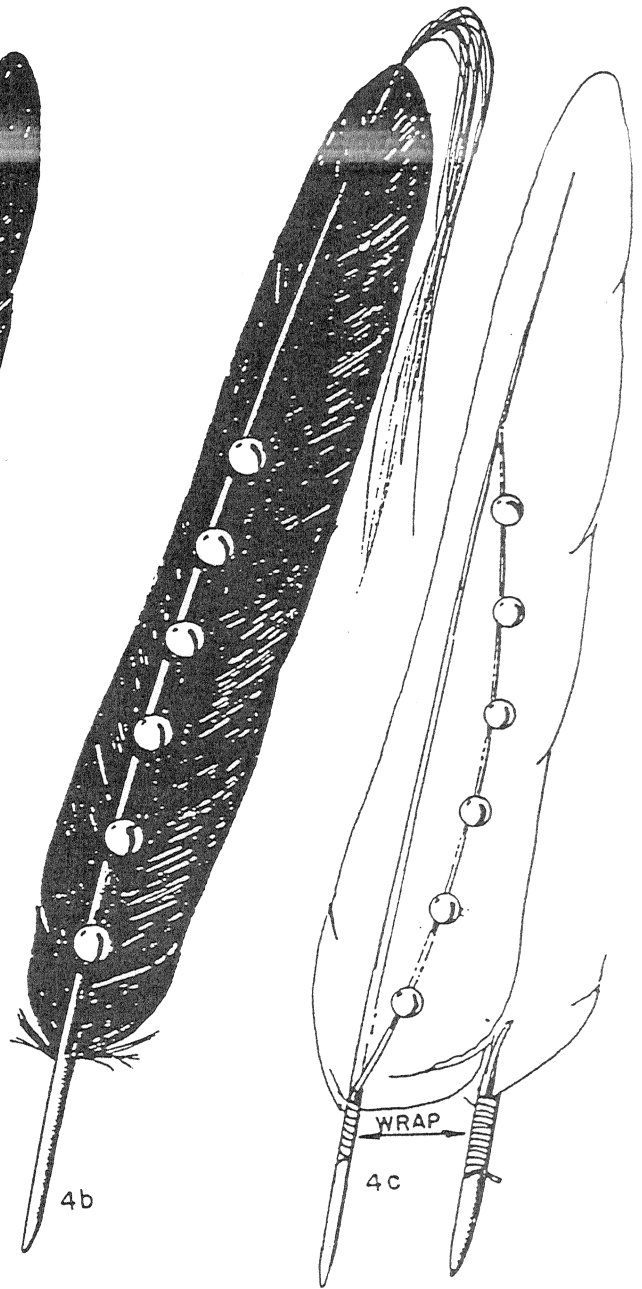
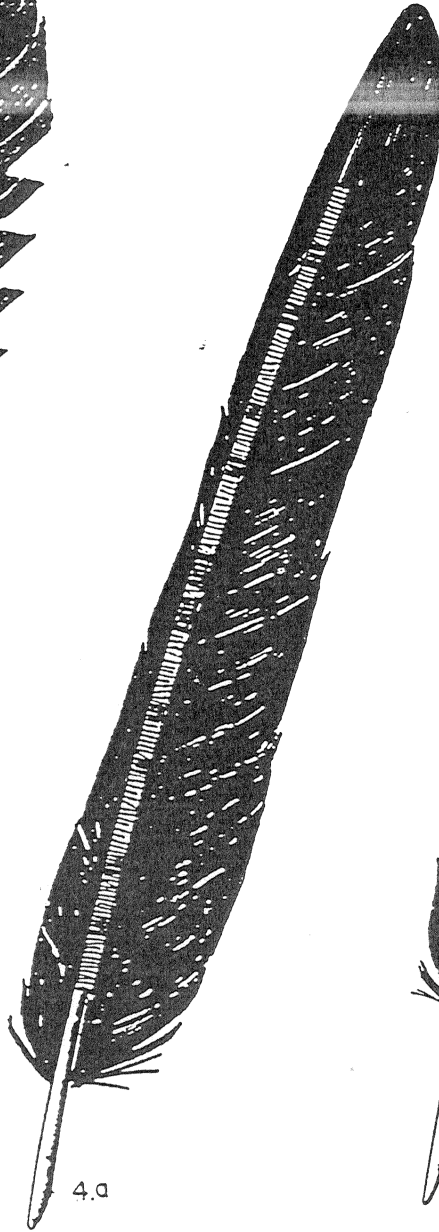
8 Trimming or cutting to size



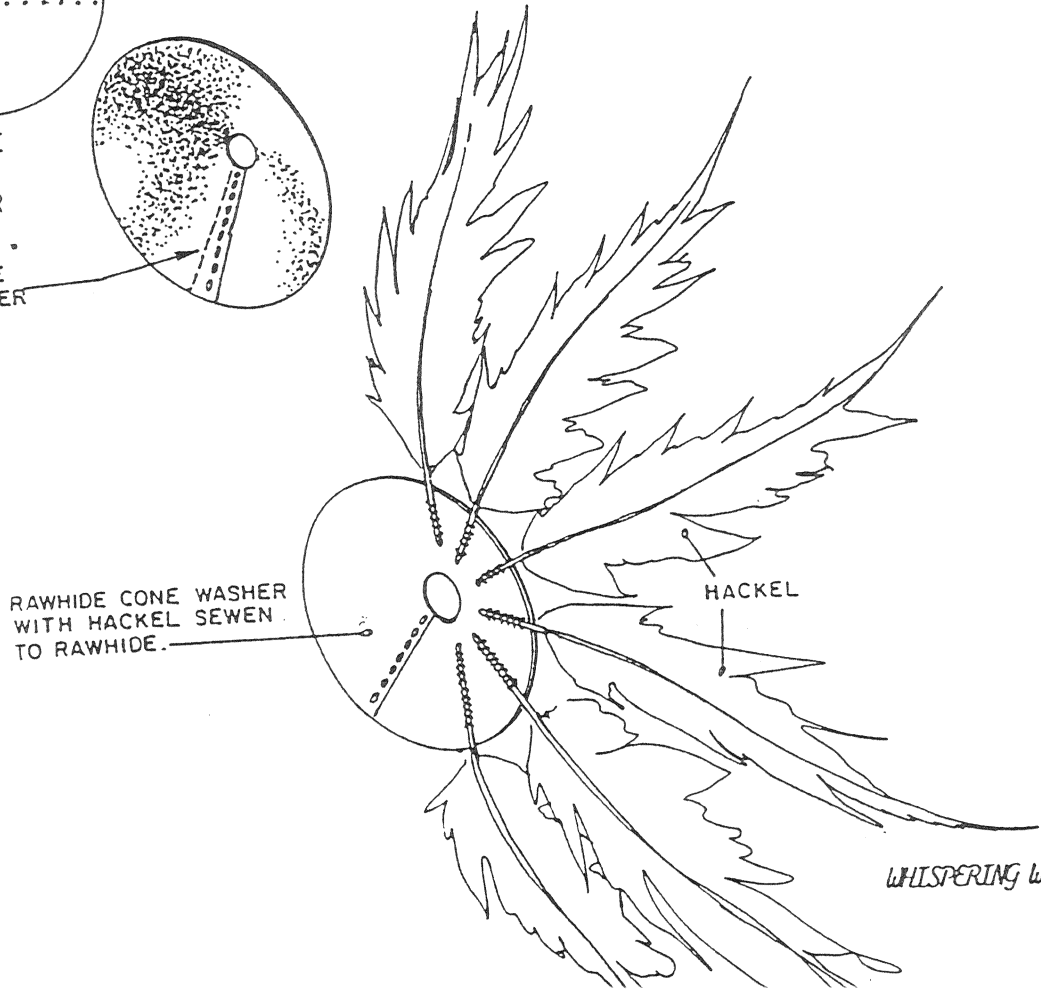
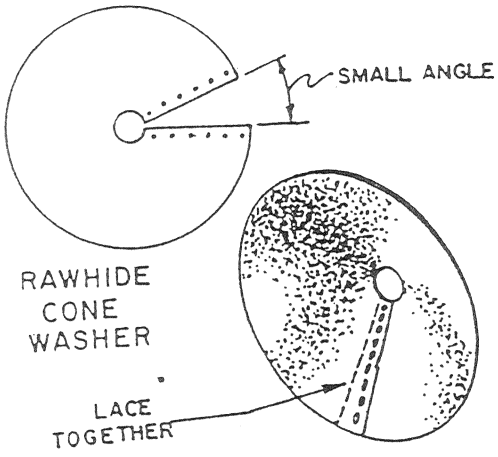
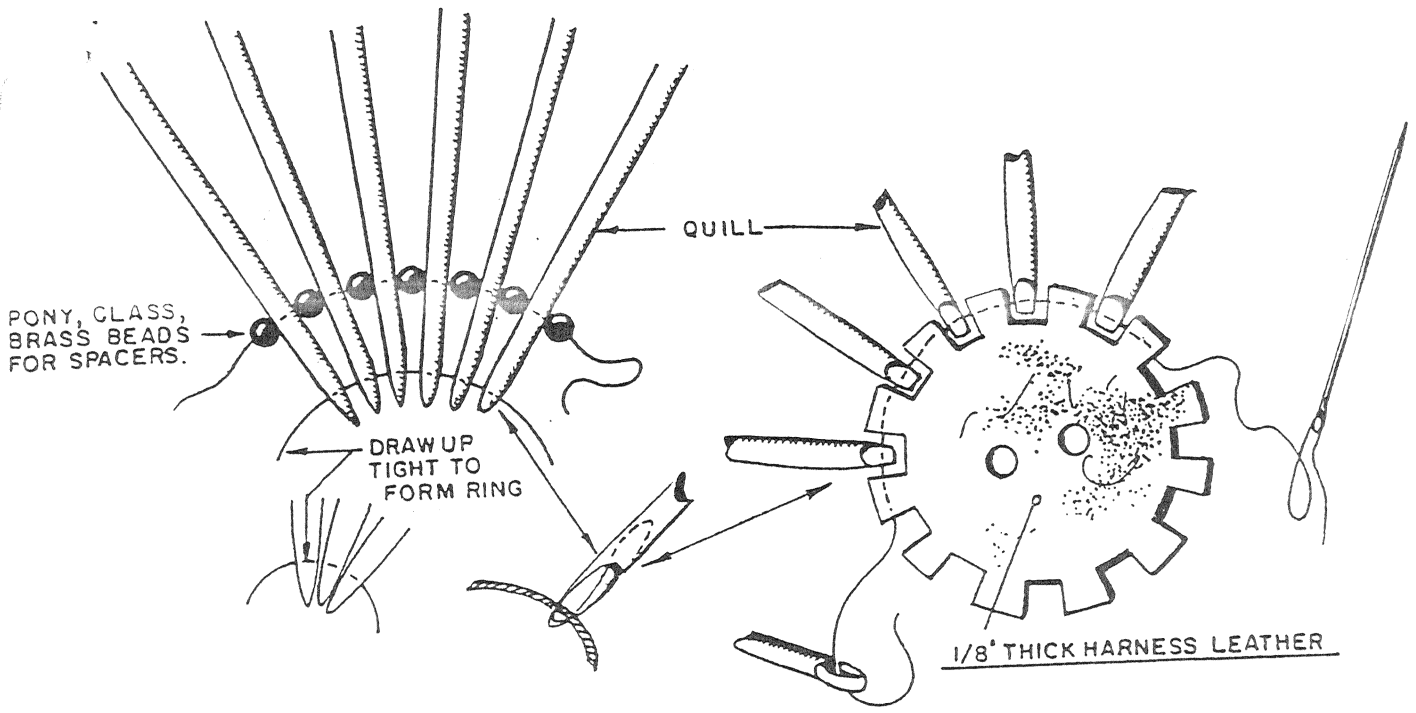
T.



7.
Notching or
trimming edge.



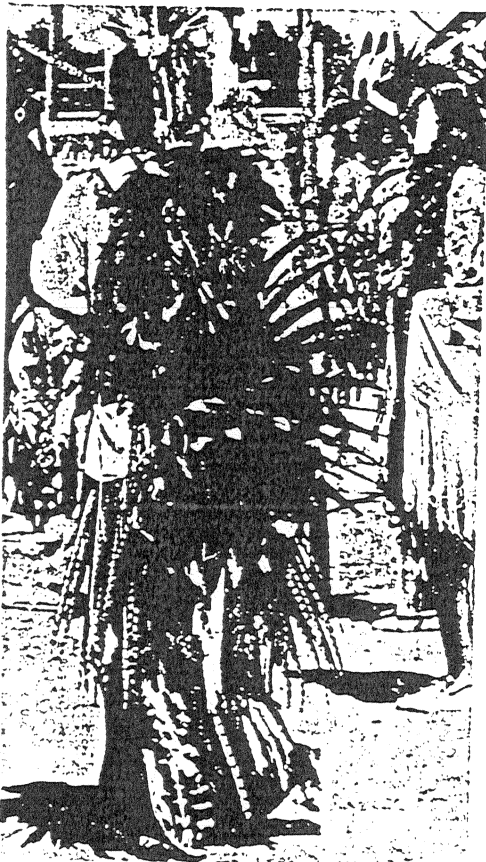
Attaching strips
of quills, sweetgrass, bells along the shaft.



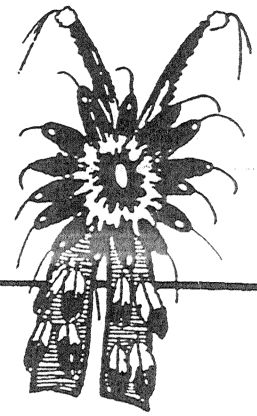
THE BUSTLE continued...

In the early days, the Plains tribes were highly mobile, and even today it helps if you can easily "break down" without breaking up your prized bustle. After years of use, blatant poor storage conditions, and general wear and tear, many of the specimens examined look far better than several seen on contemporary dancers. Traditional and old-style bustles should not be abused either by design or inconsideration.

SPECIAL THANKS is given to Dennis Lessard, Henry Rubin, Dr. James Howard, and Bill Powers for their information and support. The over two dozen specimens in this study are located in the Smithsonian, Museum of the American Indian / Heye Foundation, Chicago Field Museum, St. Francis Rosebud Museum, American Museum of Natural History, Plume Trading Museum, and others.



WHISPERING WIND / Spring 1987



THE PHEASANT BUSTLE

If you plan to wear a pheasant bustle, be sure to date your dance outfit as 1920 or later.

A Sioux pheasant bustle collected about 1920, apparently was a singular specimen. It should be noted that about this time some Sioux bustles began to use a single layer butterfly arrangement of various feathers around the wheel. There is an example stored in the Smithsonian using hawk wing feathers.

While a few pheasants were said to have been introduced as novelties from England in 1789 by George Washington, it was not until much later that the birds began to reach the West. In 1880 some birds were imported from China to Oregon. By 1892 there was an open season of ten weeks resulting in an estimated kill of 50,000 birds in Oregon.

South Dakota did not begin to receive pheasants until 1891. The following years saw several unsuccessful attempts to introduce flocks of birds that would sustain a hunting season. Not until the 1912-1915 period did the pheasant game bird population grow to a size that would popularize the bird outside the confines of a few farmers experimenting with this new colorful bird. By 1918 South Dakota was releasing 7,000 birds a year to open fields.

Traditional pheasant bustle.
Joe Kazumura photo.