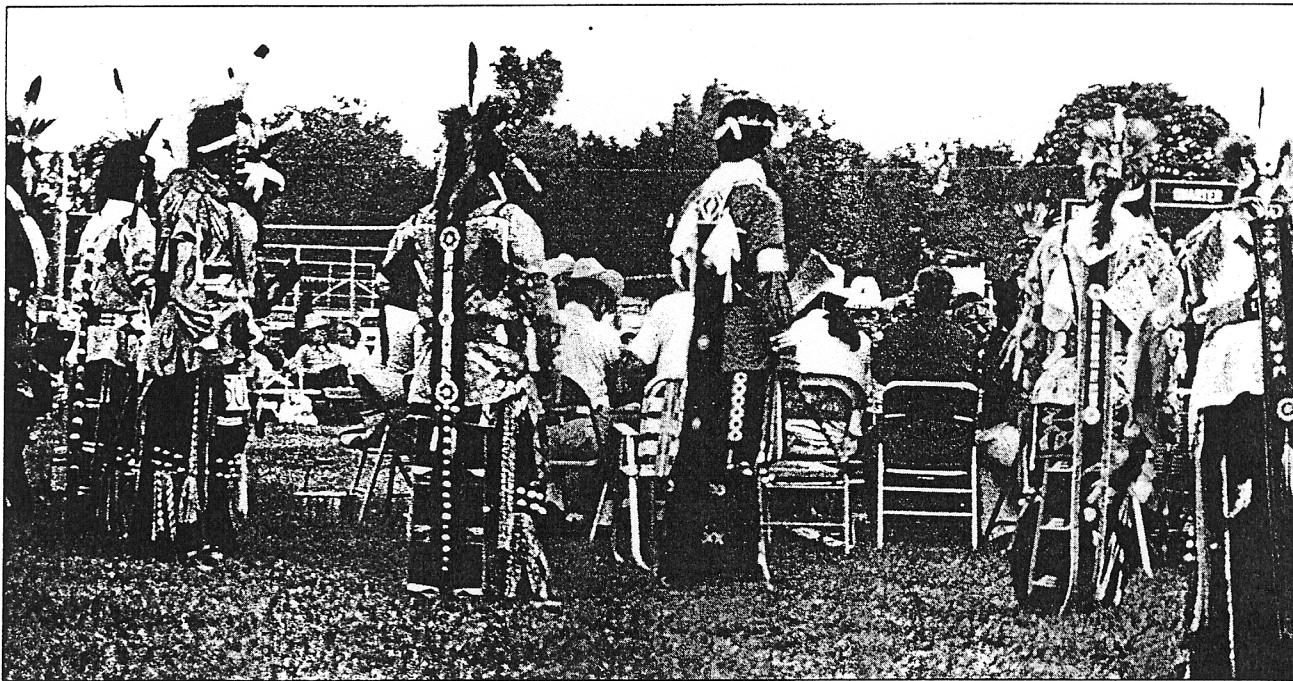


OTTER DRAGGER



One of the more spectacular articles worn by the Oklahoma straight dancer is the otter drop/otter trailer or dragger. This trailer is tied to the neck and hangs to the ground. The ribbon trim applied to the otter backing and ornaments attached to the trailer make it a focal point when viewing the dancer from the back. Though the ornaments have varied through the decades, the size and shape of the otter trailer has remained the same. The following description presents the otter trailer as seen today in Oklahoma.

OTTER PELT

Basic to this costume article is the otter pelt or otter fur. Pelts are available from traders and furriers and, up to three trailers may be cut from a large otter pelt. To insure maximum use of the pelt, wet the tanned side, stretch the pelt out (tanned side up) on a large board by tacking the edges down and then letting it dry. Since the otter strip must extend from the neck to the ground, the majority of the otter drops must be pieced by sewing two or three pieces together.

The width of the fur piece varies from 3 1/2" to 4 1/2". A choice drop is a 4" strip cut out of the center of the pelt, from between the ears to the

tip of the tail. Additional drops are cut from either side of the center section. Since the tail tapers to a point, the last 18" to 20" of the drop often tapers to a point as shown in Fig. 2: When cutting the pelt, use a pencil and yardstick to outline the section to be cut, then use a razor blade to cut down the line drawn. Never cut on the fur side.

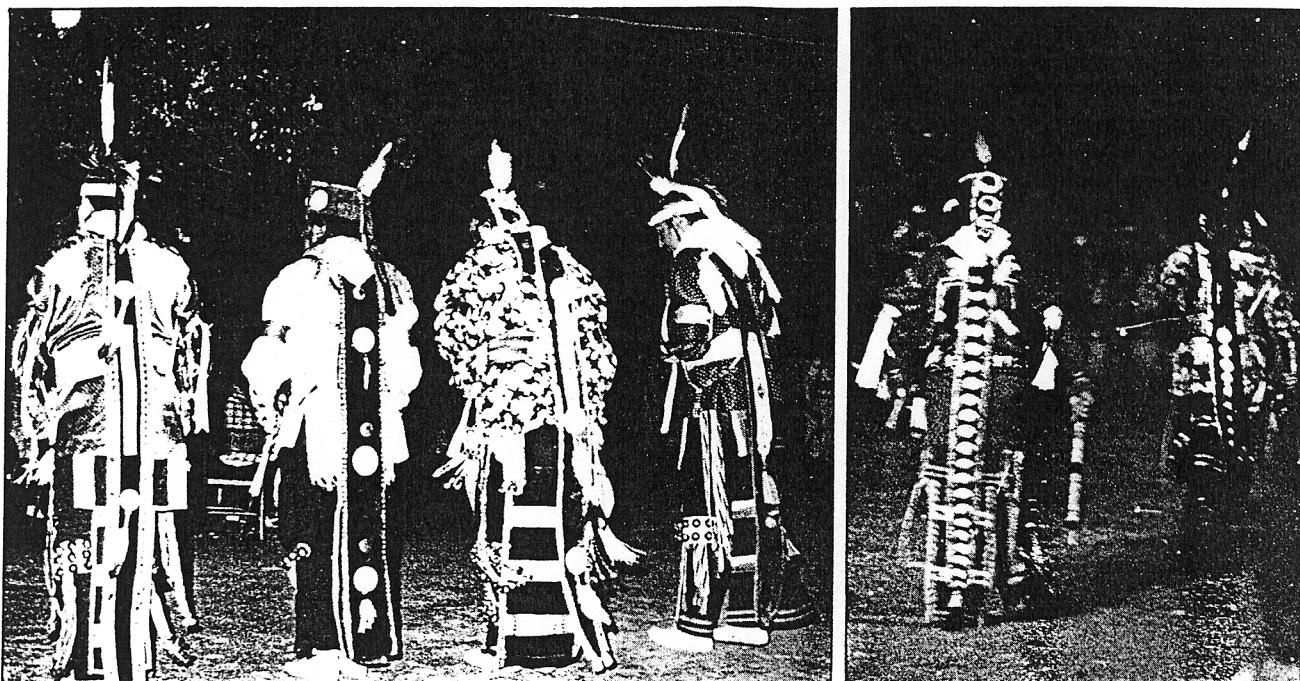
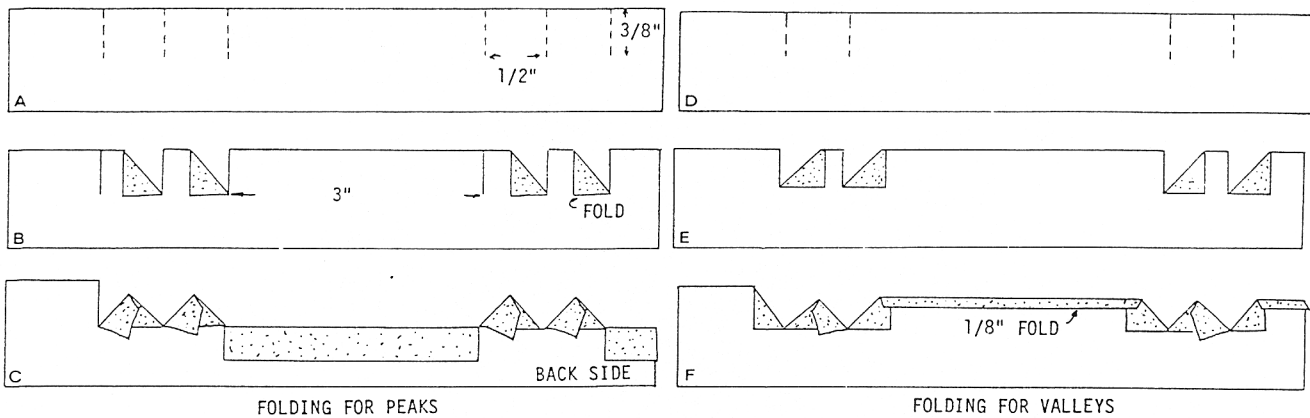
OTTER BACKING

The backing is cut from a piece of red or blue broadcloth (rainbow selvage). A good heavy grade of red or blue wool substitutes since it is not seen. The width of the backing is about 1 3/4" wider than the otter fur strip or wide enough to provide for a 1/2" or 3/4" strip of ribbonwork trim to show on either side of the fur. The backing length is two inches longer than the otter strip. This allows for a two inch turn over at the top, creating a loop so that a tie passing through the loop and tied to the neck attaches the otter trailer to the dancer. (See Fig. 2)

RIBBONWORK TRIM

A 1/2" to 3/4" strip of ribbonwork is applied to each side of the backing and may hang 1 1/2" past the

FIGURE 1 (A - F)



bottom of the trailer (see Fig. 2). Ideally the colors used in the ribbon strips match those used in other ribbonwork on the costume. A two-ribbon, two-color design is most common. Though other patterns are used, see Fig. 6, too many ribbons produces an increase in the width of the ribbon strips, detracting from the otter strip and its ornaments.

The ribbon used is Swiss rayon taffeta ribbon (or taffeta yardage) cut into strips. Each strip is cut at precise points and folded to form a design. (See Fig. 1) The folded edge is then basted in place by hand and then sewn down by machine using a straight stitch.

The following steps outline the process of making a two-ribbon edge pattern shown in Figure 1A,B,C.

1. Cut two ribbons to an inchwidth. If taffeta yardage is used, piece ribbons together to form ribbons 1 1/2" longer than the backing. Use a darker color for the outside ribbon; a light color inside.
2. Cut each ribbon precisely as follows: every five inches make three 1/2" apart 3/8" deep incisions. Fig. 1A.
3. Fold using iron or fingernails each ribbon

as shown. Fig. 1B.

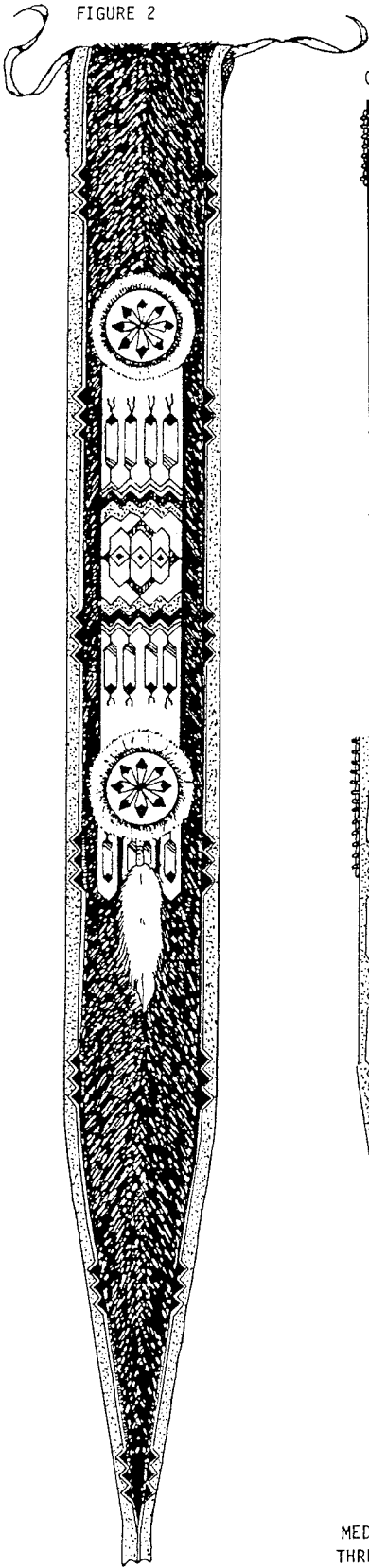
4. Baste folded ribbon in place, 5/8" from the backing edge.
5. Sew down folded edge using straight stitch, raising foot of machine several times as the stitch often changes direction.
6. Take out basting stitches.
7. Repeat steps 1 - 6 with second ribbon.
8. Fold second ribbon edge to under side of backing to form a binding. Sew down with a 3/16" seam. Fig. 4.

Other shapes for ends of trailer are shown in Figure 3.

To complete the ribbon trim a two-bead or three bead pekoe edging is sewn to both edges of the trailer. White beads (11/o) are always used for this purpose.

After completing the ribbon trim and edge beading, pin the otter in place two inches from the top of the backing and between the two ribbon strips. Next, blind stitch both sides of the otter fur strip to the backing. Gluing is definitely not recommended. It results in an extremely stiff otter that usually comes apart.

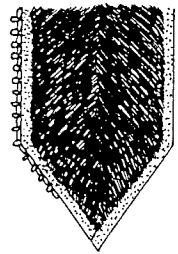
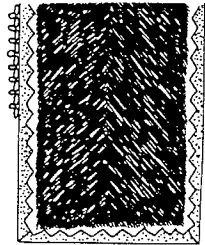
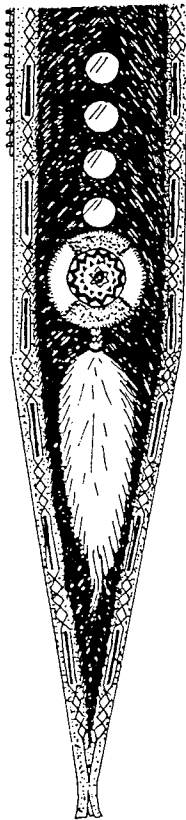
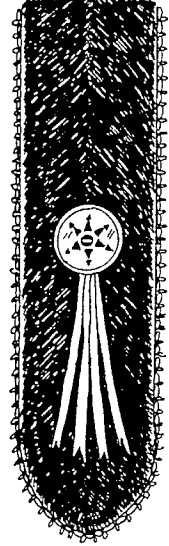
FIGURE 2



ONLY PORTIONS OF EDGE BEADING SHOWN



MEDALLION



SINGLE RIBBON BINDING

MEDALLION & MIRRORS
THREE-RIBBON PATTERN
TWO COLORS OF FLUFF BACKING

GERMAN SILVER
WATERBIRD PIN
&
BEADED
MEDALLION

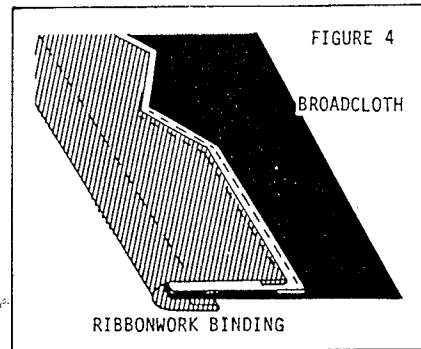
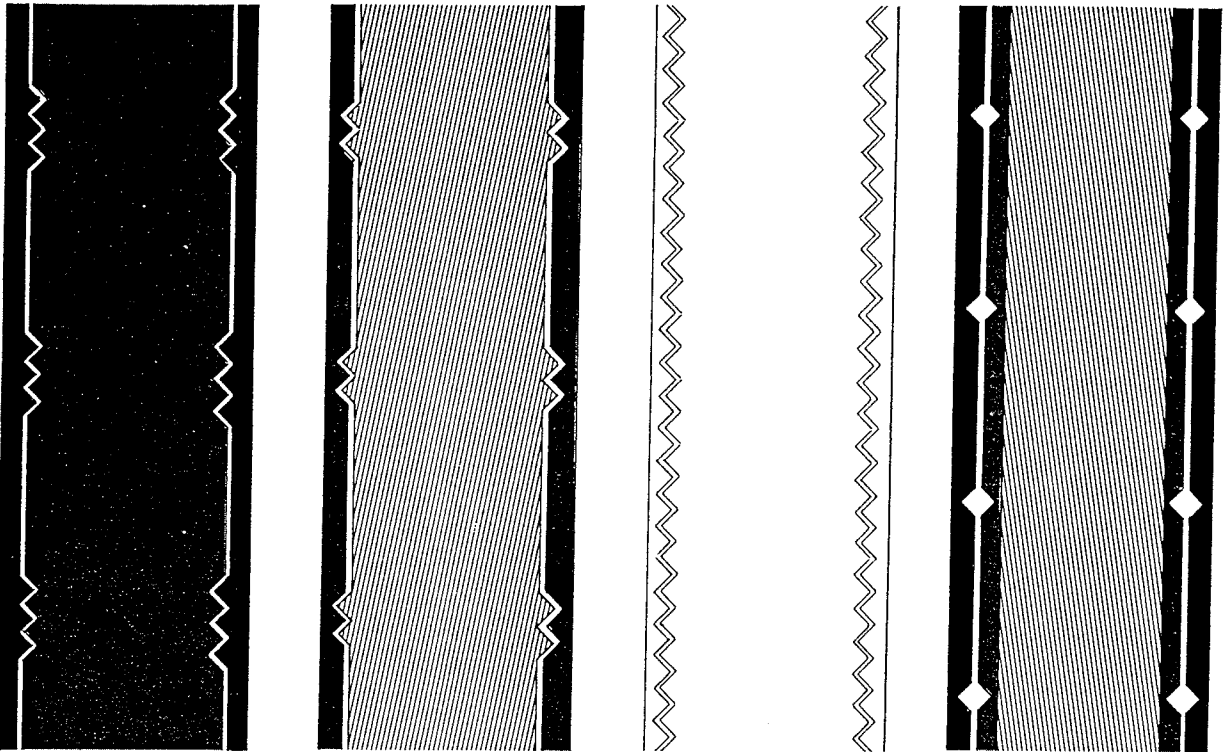


FIGURE 4

BROADCLOTH

RIBBONWORK BINDING



DESIGNS COULD BE ALTERED TO TWO OR THREE PEAKS AND VALLEYS OR DIAMONDS

OTTER ORNAMENTS

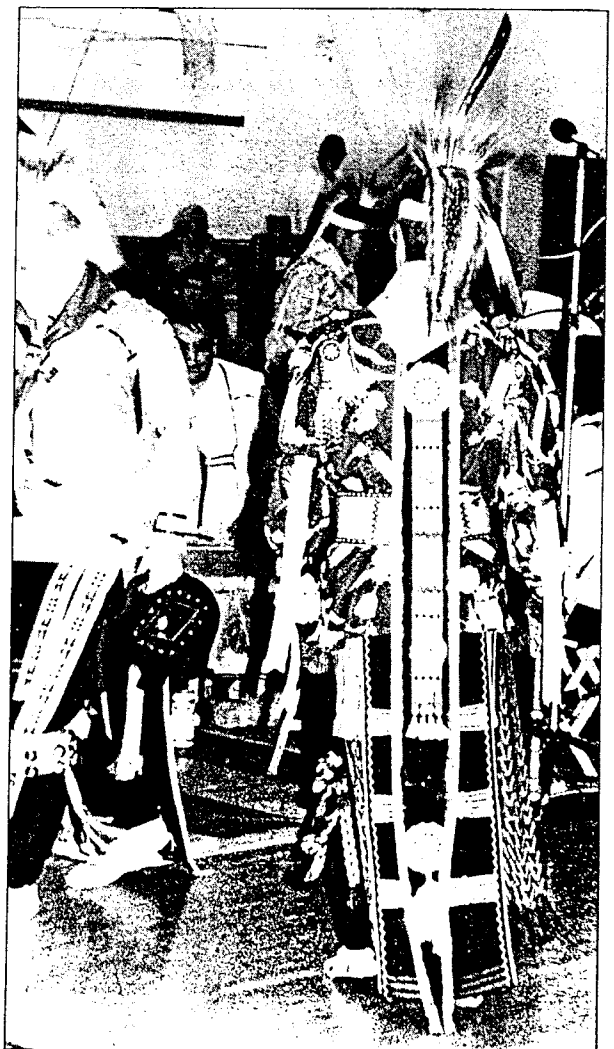
Once the pelt is in place beaded medallions, beaded strips and feather ornaments are added to complete the otter. There is such a variety of ornaments and arrangement of these ornaments that each otter is truly unique. Yet, these are a few standard arrangements that can be outlined.

1. Very standard is three medallions - two large and one small at bottom - with a pair of trimmed eagle feathers attached to the upper two and an eagle plume attached to the lower medallion, see Figure Y. without bead strip.
2. The arrangement in Figure 1 - the bead strip on some otters matches the belt design of the dancer; however, this is exception rather than a rule.
3. Bead strip could extend to third medallion. Obviously the width of the beadwork varies and a small width would be appropriate here.
4. A set of 15-18 German silver conchos (hair-plates) of graduated diameter attached to the otter.

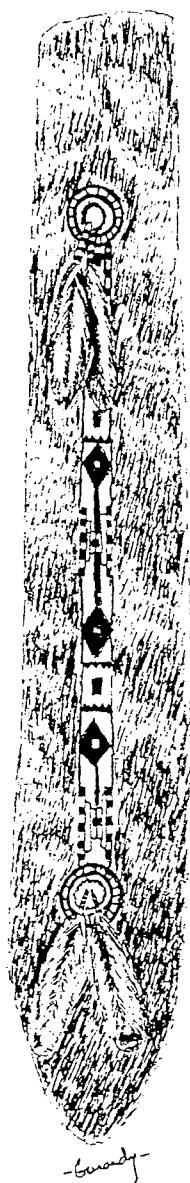
Sometimes mirrors, shells or conchos are used in place of beaded medallions but beaded medallions are definitely the most common. Also, other furs such as mink, horse hide, sheered steer, lion, kangaroo and imitation fur are used as substitutes for otter - but otter is most definitely preferred.

Medallions are tied on to the otter via the leather ties attached to the medallions. Holes are punched through both the otter hide and the backing. The medallion ties are threaded through the holes and tied at the back.

Since the shapes and border designs are somewhat limited, the uniqueness of each otter and its real beauty is found in its ornaments. Often there is much more work and time in the ornaments than in the otter itself. No matter how simple the ornaments may be, the otter is not worn undecorated as it would then cease to be the focal point of the back view of the straight dancer.



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OTTER DRAGGERS

by *Rex Reddick*

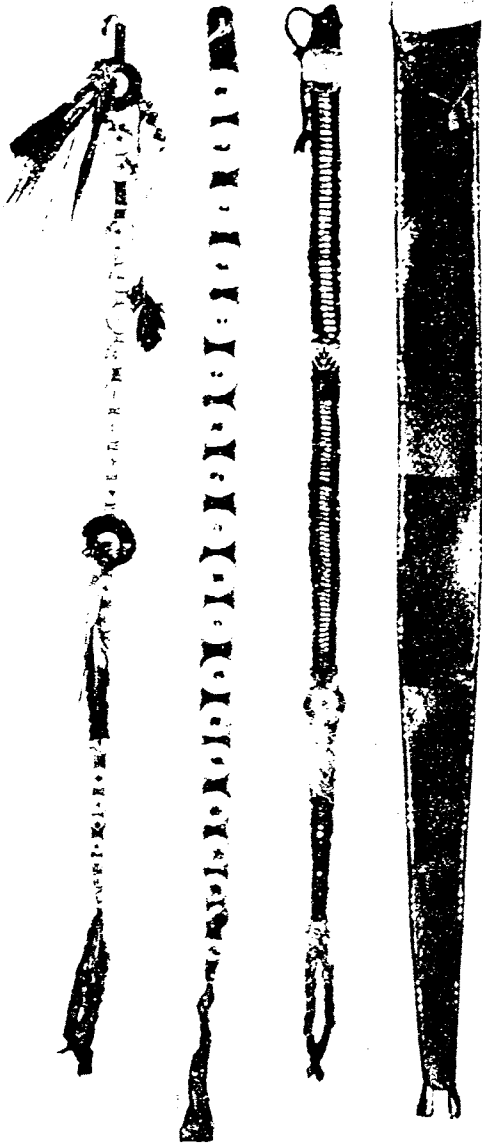
It is the purpose of this article to present what is currently in vogue today, with the greatest emphasis being placed upon the typical and most representative examples. For the sake of completeness, unusual and seldom seen examples will be mentioned only briefly.

Perhaps the most striking accessory of the Oklahoma straight dancer's costume is the long strip of otter fur that hangs down the length of his back from his neck to his heels. With its ribbonwork edging, beadwork, and feathers, it adds a measure of completeness to the outfit. Aside from the straight dancer's ribbonwork suit, this dragger, or drop as it is sometimes called, is usually one of the most expensive articles of the costume. This is why the straight dancer automatically reaches back and pulls his dragger around over one leg before sitting down. To sit on one's otter would be unthinkable.

This present day dragger has evolved from two things: namely the men's old time hair plate sets and the long fur trailers on grizzly claw necklaces. Both of these hang down the wearer's back similar to otter draggers of today with their many refinements and additions that have taken place over the years. An excellent series of photographs from the Museum of the American Indian showing this evolution appears on page 5.

MATERIALS

Although the preferred material is generally otter, several substitutes are acceptable for the drag. These are mentioned because they are in widespread use due to the scarcity of the otter. Probably the most common variant is simulated otter fur, a good imitation available as a yard good in some of the larger fabric stores and Indian craft suppliers. The cost is usually 50¢ to \$2.00 per square foot. Another substitute is the use of the broadcloth backing without any type of fur, similar to the older sets of hairplates. This is usually red in color. Other substitutes observed occasionally were muskrat, beaver, horsehide with the hair intact, and sections cut from old fur coats.



Probable evolution of the modern straight dance otter dragger. L - R: A set of hair plates on a leather strap; a set of hair plates on an otter fur strip; a straight dancer dragger with two silver brooches; and a modern style straight dance trailer without decoration. Courtesy of the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation. Photographed by Carmello Guadagno.

CONSTRUCTION

The length of the dragger is the distance from the neck of the dancer to one to three inches above the floor. This clearance is necessary in order to prevent its being stepped on, either by the wearer himself or by other dancers. Nothing is more annoying than to be dancing along in a slightly bent over position and become the first person to be "hung" while wearing straight dance clothes, or to look back after a sickening tug at the throat and see a half dozen people dancing on your otter.

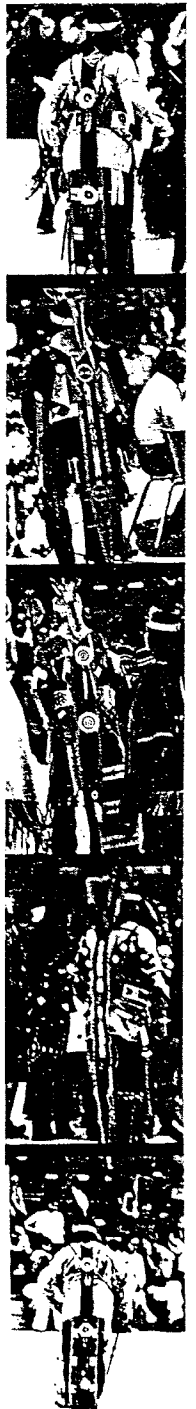
The width of the piece of fur itself depends on the individual as well as his

personal taste. Most fur averages four inches(4") in width, but can be anywhere from two and one-half(2½") to five inches (5") in width. The top section of the fur is an elongated rectangle, and the last 1/4 to 1/3 of the piece is tapered almost to a point.

CUTTING THE HIDE

Ideally, this strip is cut from the back center of the skin, (Fig.1). This is the darkest and most desirable section of fur and the method utilizes the entire tail of the animal, thus forming this tapered section. It is rare indeed to find an animal of the considerable length necessary for the average size person, so most drags have an added section spliced on at the tip. Usually, this splice can be positioned so that it is under one of the medallions and thus is invisible. It is cut from the leftover section of belly fur of the hide which is a somewhat lighter color than the center portion.

When cutting the hide, it should be stretched slightly and tacked, with the hair side down, to a large piece of plywood. It can then be measured with a yardstick and marked with a ballpoint pen. All cutting is done from the flesh side, starting at the head and cutting towards the tail. Cut very lightly, only deep enough to cut through the skin, and be sure to use a brand new single-edge razor blade. Even slightly used blades are dull and tend to rip the hide instead of cutting it, causing the cut edges to be ragged.



photos right by dick madaus

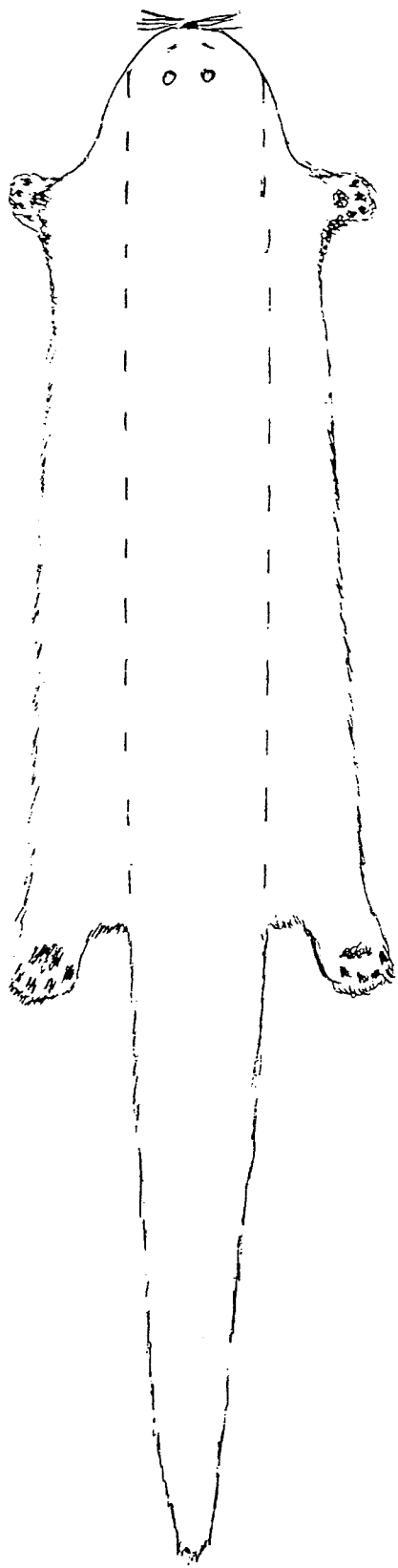


Fig. 1

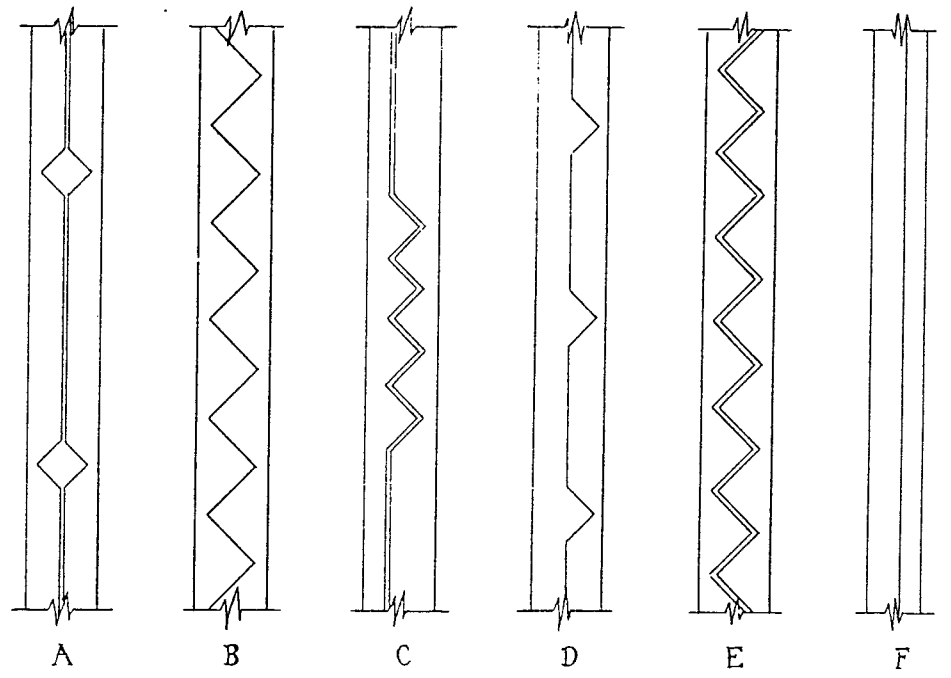
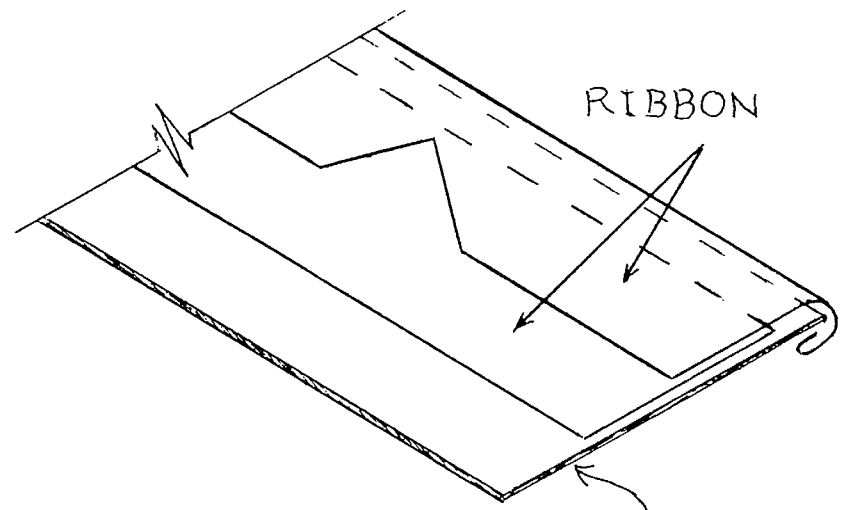


Fig. 2



EDGING DETAIL

Fig. 3

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
 REX
 REDDICK

The next step is splicing the fur. Simply place the two pieces together, fur-to-fur, and whip stitch, taking about one-eighth (1/8) inch stitches from the flesh side. Then unfold the piece and make certain that none of the hair has been caught in the stitching. This will make a joint that is very hard to see, even at a distance of several feet or less.

MOUNTING THE FUR

To mount the fur on the backing, a good thread to use is the new clear nylon monofilament. Its elasticity can be eliminated by stretching it almost to the breaking point before threading the needle. Its clearness renders it virtually invisible after being sewn into place. A whip stitch or blind stitch may be used.

The backing used for the otter should be somewhat wider than the strip of fur and its edges finished with two or three colors of ribbonwork. A good backing material is a strip of broadcloth that matches the leggings and aprons, though it rarely does. If broadcloth is used, it is cut from the cloth so that the selvedge edge runs across the top and bottom of the dragger. This, of course, is the most economical method. (See Dec. 72 & April, 73 issues of WHISPERING WIND Mag.). A good grade of wool cloth or wool felt is often used if broadcloth is not available.

RIBBONWORK DECORATION

The outside edges of this strip of cloth are finished with ribbonwork similar to that used on the leggings and breechcloth, although only two or three ribbons are used. (See Figure 7 for appropriate designs).

Choose a light color for the inside ribbon so as to contrast with the dark fur, and for the outside ribbon, a darker color can be used. This will contrast with the light color ribbon and the white edge beading that goes down both sides of the dragger.

Another method of ribbonwork (other than that of cutting, folding under, and sewing down) that might be used here is the "zig-zag" type. This lends itself particularly well to any two ribbon designs such as those shown in FIG. 2 - B & D.

Still another technique is that of using two ribbons and merely stitching them down without cutting. This is by far the easiest and fastest method, and is illustrated in FIG. 2 - F.



TOP - Forrest Kassinavoid, Comanche;
Dallas, Texas

PHOTOS BY JOE KAZUMURA





photo by joe kazumura

DRAGGER DECORATION

Now the dragger is ready for its decorations, which are as many and varied as there are dancers. Each one is decorated according to the owner's taste, although there are several basic outlines of decoration that are almost universally followed. These are illustrated in FIG'S. 4 - 8. To achieve individuality many of the decorations are mixed according to the particular desires of the individual dancers.

The one item that is always used is some type of medallion. They may be in the form of beaded medallions (by far the most common) german silver brooches, or mirrors. Preferably these match, but it is not uncommon to see two beaded rosettes of different design and color used on the same otter. They may be the same size, or they may be graduated, with the largest at the top. Their diameter is usually a fraction less than the width of the fur, but many can be observed from as small as one-half this width, to as large as an inch or so wider.

The most common number of these medallions used is two or three, and quite often a loom beaded strip (in geometric designs) is placed between the two upper ones.

This strip may either stop at the middle medallion or extend on towards the bottom of the dragger, sometimes ending in tabs as shown in FIG'S. 5 & 6. The width of this strip varies from approximately one inch to almost as wide as the fur itself and its length may range from about 1/6 to about 1/2 the length of the dragger.

As often as not, rosettes of horsehair, deerhair, or clipped fluffs are placed under the medallions, thus adding 1/2 inch to an inch to the overall diameter. These are usually of a contrasting color to the medallion's background. Examples are FIG'S. 5, 7, & 8.

FEATHER DECORATION

The other principal type of decoration used is the highly decorated feather, such as that used in loose fans and for scalp feathers. Customarily, these are used in pairs, with one exception; the large eagle tail plume which is found so often toward the bottom of the otter. This type of decoration occurs in FIG'S 4, 5, & 7.

The bases of the feathers are frequently beaded with gourd stitch or covered with leather and decorated with threadwork, with decorative feathers such as hackles, small pheasant, macaw, or other parrot at their bases. Occasionally the tips of these feathers are decorated, also.

Types of feathers used are tail feathers from the eagle, which are by far the most common; the macaw and any of the numerous varieties of hawks, from red-tail to Harris. When tail feathers are not available, straightened wing feathers are often substituted. (See April, 1973 issue, WHISPERING WIND Mag. for methods of feather decoration and straightening).

photo by joe kazumura



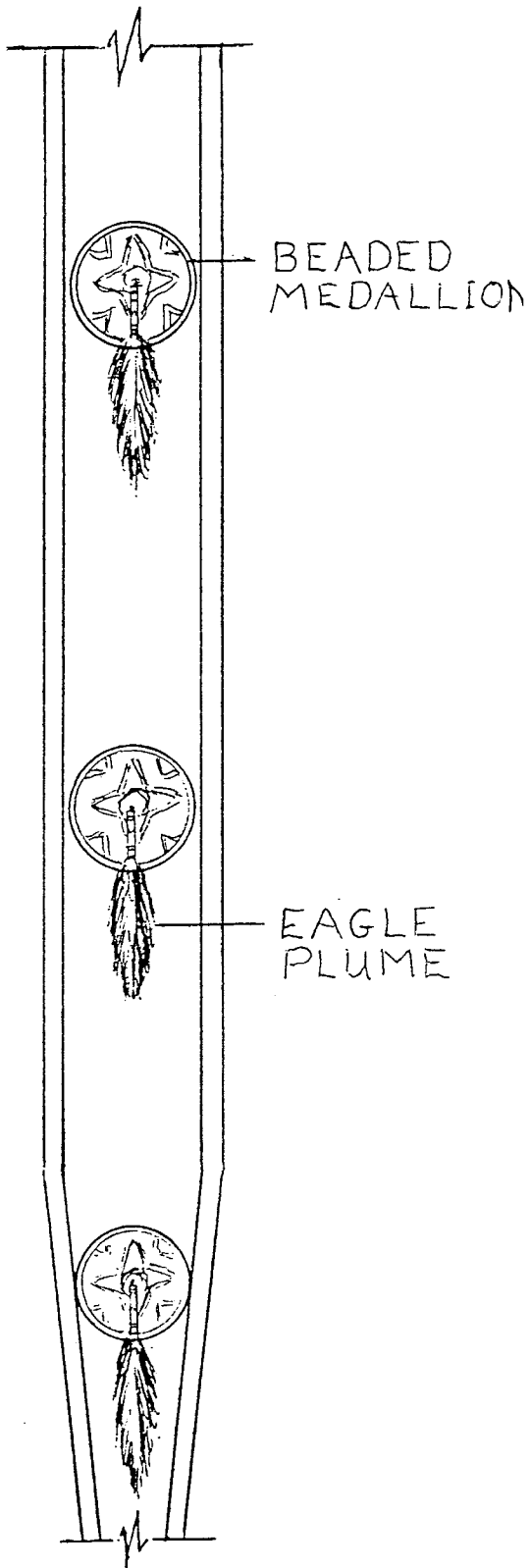


Fig. 4

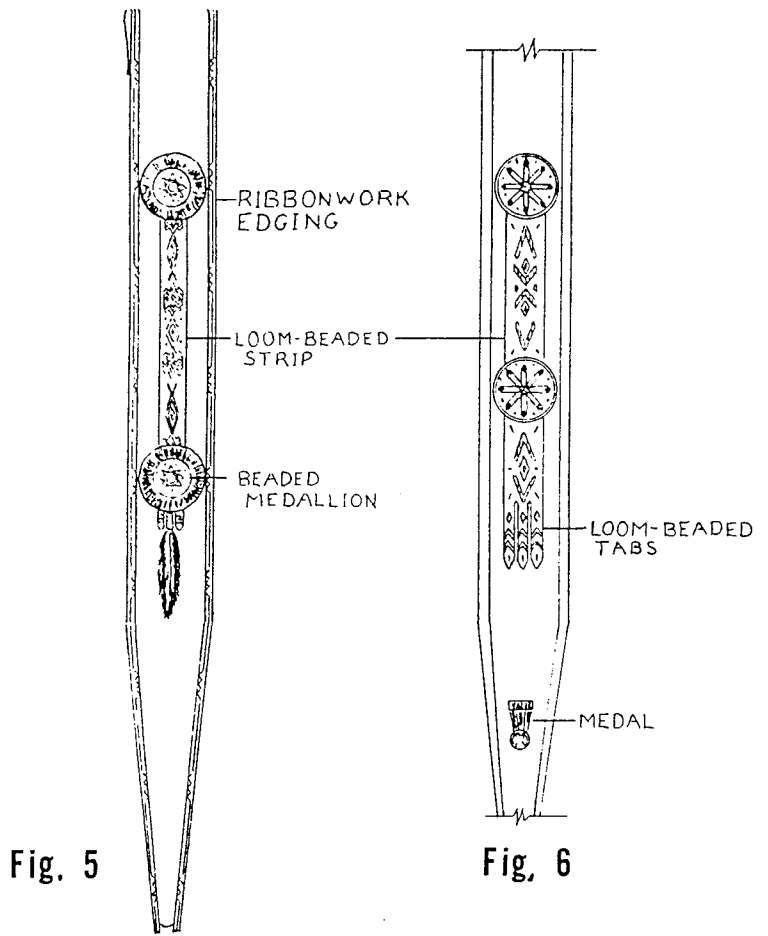


Fig. 5

Fig. 6

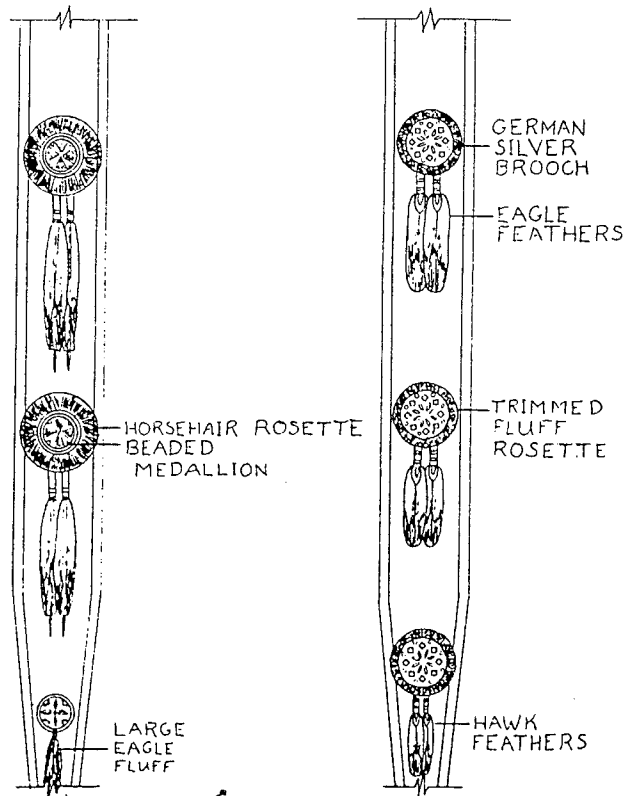
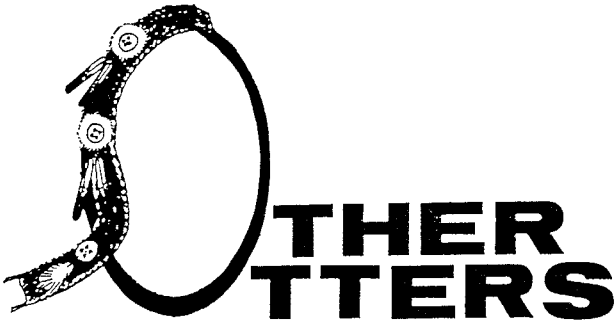


Fig. 7

Fig. 8



OTTER TTERS

by Jerry Smith

Once in awhile we seem to stereotype Indian items and it appears that we are somewhat guilty of this when it comes to dragger shapes. The standard is the version shown in Fig. 1, which tapers to a point the last 27" or 18". Perhaps many otter draggers taper to a point like this because the maker used the tail of the otter hide. However, when other hides are used or the tail of the otter is not used the end of the dragger may be shaped as those shown in the following diagrams and photos. The squared off end in Fig. 2 is seen quite frequently. The width of fur strips will vary from $3\frac{1}{2}$ " - 5" not counting the ribbon trim. Some ribbon trim patterns are indicated in Fig. 1-7 also see Jan. '75 issue of TRACKS details on "Two Ribbon Bindings."

Variety also exists in the fur used to fashion these otter draggers. Of course, otter or at times plucked otter are the traditional, standard and most desired material, but there are several good substitutes. Black and brown horse hide, mink and other furs that approximate the color of otter fur are used. Mr. Abe Conklin, Ponca, wears a dragger of Kangaroo hide and the late Mr. Jonas Steel, Ponca, owned a dragger cut from a lion skin. A fantastic brown and white pinto horse hide otter dragger was among the items for sale at Mohunk Lodge, Clinton, Oklahoma back in 1967. Also, there are many great new synthetic fake furs available at yardage shops that make good substitutes for otter.

Reference: "OTTER DROP", THE SINGING WIRE, April 1968.



Orange County Indian Center Powwow, Calif

Figure 2

Figure 1

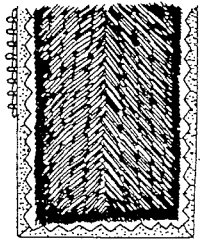
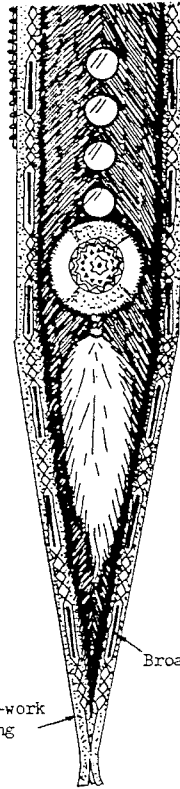
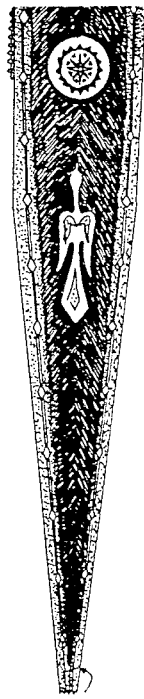


Figure 3

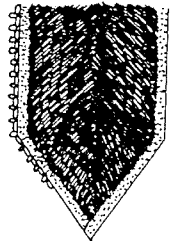
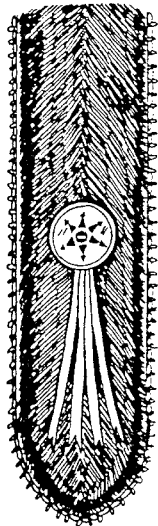


Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7



edge
beaded

Pawnee Powwow, Pawnee, Oklahoma

