



# THE TOM-TOM

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## Nawakwa 85th Anniversary 1919-2004

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### **NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN PROCESSION**

“Once in a while something happens for which history seems to stand still just for a moment,” said W. Richard West, Jr., founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

Such a “something” was the Museum’s Grand Opening Procession, September 21, 2004, in Washington, D.C. In America’s new world of terror, it was a perhaps oasis, minus screening, searching and checking of identification, with law enforcers helping rather than watching for trouble.

As honorary members of the Intertribal Women’s Circle, Marcia Clawson and I, both members of the William Byrd Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, were invited to march with the Circle at this event. We left the James River Bus Station in Richmond at 4:30 a.m. on a bus chartered by the Circle.

We arrived at the RFK Stadium parking lot around 6:30 a.m.



Rose Powhatan and her husband, Michael, had breakfast waiting. They had hoisted an American Flag so that we could find their van easily.

Dressed in our new, black Intertribal Women’s Circle shirts, and stuffed with fruit, biscuits, sweet rolls and coffee, we helped

others dress in their regalia until all were ready.

The bus dropped us off a few blocks from the procession staging area, where we met the rest of our group. We could hear drums in the distance.

There was a chill in the air as we began to walk faster the closer



we got to the sound of the drums. The area was filled with thousands of native people from more than 500 Tribes in a myriad of colorful regalia. We could hardly walk for looking.

The area was marked with signs that had numbers and colored backgrounds. An announcer would call for the group at “yellow three” sign or “blue two” sign. We waited a long time for the Native Nations to process in alphabetical order before it was time for the organizations to line up.

We watched the procession on a big screen and swayed and bobbed to the sounds of the drums, which seemed to surround us. Our hearts beat with excitement in the same rhythm.

At last it was time for us to move between the “yellow threes,” and then we were marching to

the drums. People clapped and cheered for us. Someone said they were applauding because we were women.

The procession along the National Mall was slow, with many stops. We walked toward a huge banner that said, “First American Festival.” Behind it we could see the Capitol dome.

A man on the sidelines held a placard that said, “Put an end to stealing land and water from indigenous people. Pay reparations.”

Another wore a gray tee shirt with black lettering proclaiming, “All my heroes have killed cowboys.”

After the procession, we were guided to seats in the shade, for the opening ceremonies. Following the presentation of the Colors was a series of speakers, to which the

crowd listened politely. Shows and exhibits were not scheduled to open until 1 p.m., after the retiring of the Colors.

Speakers such as West and Lawrence Small, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, welcomed us to what West called a “powerful spiritual and cultural marker” to honor our first citizens. Small mentioned the symbolic link between the museum and the capitol rotunda.

Someone said that America’s first endangered species were its native people, who had no vote until 1924. Another pointed out that the first citizens gave the world the concept of democracy because their council system was copied by Benjamin Franklin.

The reemergence of native people after decades of poverty





and despair was heralded. Senator Daniel Inouye of Hawaii told of more than 18,000 skulls gathered from battlefields and desecrated graveyards.

Another speaker read a poem: "Beauty is all around me. With it I wander."

More and more we realized how overdue was this "cultural reconciliation that for so long [had] eluded American people."

The museum, we were told, would "use the voices of Native Peoples themselves to tell their stories" and would stand in the future as a symbol that the hearts and minds of all Americans would be open to Native People. First Americans would finally be able to look forward rather than to say, "It is hard to see the future with tears in your eyes."

We were reminded of words spoken more than 100 years ago by Chief Joseph: "All men were made

by the same Great Spirit. They are brothers."

Also quoted were the Cheyenne words: "The Great Spirit walks beside you and touches all the good that you attempt."

In closing, West said, "To non-natives, welcome. To descendants of natives, welcome home."

After the ceremony, we visited the stages and exhibits of regalia arts and instrumental arts. The sun beat down upon us, and the tents were crowded. People smiled at us and stood aside so that we could see.

We saw no souvenirs for sale. The newspaper, Indian Country, had been handed out free of charge in the parking lot. We were given program booklets and old-fashioned cardboard-and-tongue-depressor fans. Oranges, apples and water were provided, and volunteers came with boxes and bags to collect rubbish.

Just before catching the shuttle to meet our bus, we were invited to join in the dancing. It seemed as if all Washington were vibrating with



the Indian drums. I felt the ground under my thin moccasins as I moved in rhythm with the other dancers. I knew, with or without genealogical verification, that in my heart beat a First American drum.

Another day we would return to tour the inside of the Museum. For now, we would take with us the feeling of an earlier speaker: "What a glorious day the Grandfather Spirit has given to us." 🌿

*Frances Broaddus-Crutchfield*

