

# Folk artist shares Sioux culture

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Sun Staff Writer

As the Sioux Native Americans tell the story, the first flute was created by a woodpecker, who pecked holes in a branch of a red cedar tree. When the wind sailed through the holes, it created beautiful music that drew a young boy to it.

"This was the first song," says Brian Akipa, a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Sioux Tribe.

The spellbound boy asked the woodpecker if he could take the branch home, and when the woodpecker said yes, he broke the branch off the tree and left with it. But he couldn't make the same beautiful music until the woodpecker returned to show him how to use it.

"Not too many people play these old Indian flutes anymore," Akipa told a group of youngsters at Washington Grade School Wednesday.

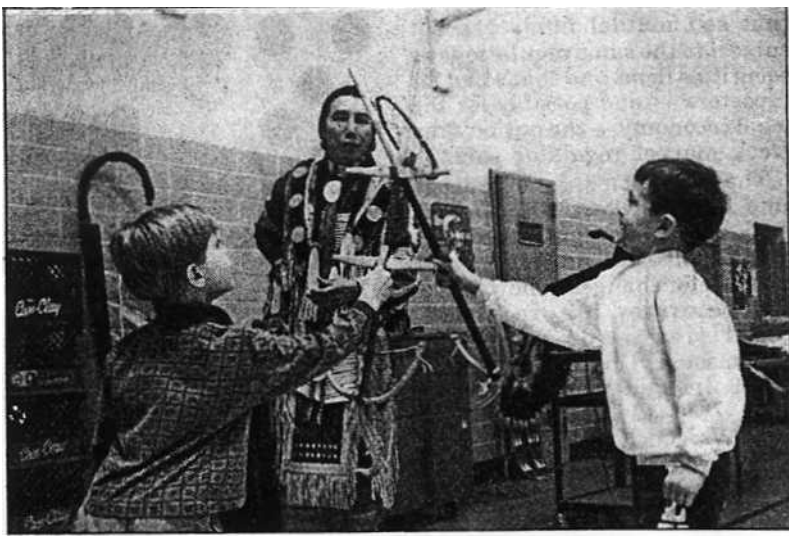
But Akipa does. He also carves and sells them. He is a folk artist-in-residence appearing in Jamestown through Friday. His visit is sponsored by the North Dakota Council on the Arts folk arts program, Don Wilhelm, Inc., the North Dakota State Hospital and the Jamestown Fine Arts Association.

The Folk Artist-in-Residence program tries to preserve aspects of different cultures and bring them to the public, said Taylor Barnes, program coordinator. A criteria to serve as one of the select few artists in the program is the artistic merit, she adds.

Akipa doesn't just carve or play flutes made of red cedar. He dresses in full Sioux powwow dance costume as he weaves the history of the music with story, dance or games to help expose audiences of all ages to his culture.

"I try to show some of the best of the old things we have," he explains. "They all have a history."

The children at Washington Grade School stood respectfully quiet while he held a flag made of eagle feathers and



SUN PHOTOS BY JOHN M. STEINER

**Kindergarteners Andrew Rott, left, and Shea Syverson vie for the hoop in one of the Native American games Brian Akipa showed students at Washington Grade School.**

staff as his Native American national anthem played. Then he talked about the significance of eagle feathers.

"They wore these eagle feathers to represent all the goodness that they know and all the strength that they know," he said.

Akipa has been presenting his program for 10 years. The former elementary school teacher just returned from Sweden, where he appeared at a museum for two weeks. He has also made appearances in

Italy, Germany and Finland, as well as across the United States.

What started as a part-time interest became a full-time occupation two years ago, when he received a grant from the South Dakota Arts Council after developing an educational program to present to children in the schools. He is also a member of the North Dakota Council on the Arts.

"Every place there's an interest," he says. The

response has surprised him, in more ways than one.

"I didn't know so many people didn't know these things," he says. They are "things" he grew up learning naturally from friends and relatives as part of his heritage. He has no formal education on the subject, but he believes he's been researching it on a graduate level of oral history.

Akipa prefers to get his audiences involved in his demonstrations. He asked the children to yell, "Hoka hey" before he started each dance. It means once you start, there's no turning back, or once you start you have to finish, he says. It is a way of offering support and encouragement.

"They get enthusiastic about it because I try to get them involved," he said. They have also told him they didn't know games Native American children played could be so fun.

Akipa will perform from 7 to 9 p.m. Thursday at The Arts Center. He will also continue appearances at the high school and elementary schools Thursday and Friday.