The first Ojibwe from the area of Gull Lake and Crow Wing arrived at what is now Gaa-waabaabiganikaag (White Earth Reservation) on June 14, 1868. A few years later, around 1872, an Ojibwe leader and Episcopal minister named Enmegabowh helped create a celebration that became an annual event held on June 14—or the weekend closest to the date—to commemorate the arrival at White Earth.¹

Not only did members from White Earth participate, but visitors ranged from far and wide, especially from the Dakotas. The planning and fundraising for the festive occasion, led by the White Earth Nation, took time. Invitations and other commemoratives, like this 1899 birch bark invitation, have been a consistent element of the event. Over time, lacrosse games, horse races, and mock battles have made way for activities such as golf tournaments and 5K races.

Traditional singing, dancing, and drumming have always been central to the celebration. One cannot visit the grounds during the celebration without hearing the drum. The drum represents the heartbeat of the people and is a commonality found not only at White Earth celebrations but also at powwows (Ojibwe) and wacipis (Dakota) all over North America.

Historically, these events allowed indigenous people to freely share and honor traditions without repercussions. The US government banned many ceremonies and traditions before and during the creation of the reservations. These restrictions remained in force until the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed in 1978.

The 2018 White Earth Annual Celebration and Powwow, which had more than 800 registered dancers, marked the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the Ojibwe to Gaa-waabaabiganikaag. Once again, the White Earth community, along with friends, family, and peers from all over, came together to celebrate with singing and dancing. While the materials found on regalia and the goods sold by vendors have changed, the excitement and unity among the participants and visitors remain the same.

—Rita Walaszek, collections associate and enrolled member of the White Earth Nation of Ojibwe

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