



Photo by Joe Kazumura

# Chokers



by Loren Woerpel

Illustrated by Mark Ford

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**C**hoker necklaces made of beads and bones have become a universal cultural expression through out Indian Country. While today many are made of plastic beads, plastic bone, and commercial tanned leathers, the materials have their roots in natural materials of long ago.

This project is a good starting experience for all ages in making a bone and bead necklace. The younger choker makers may need some help with tying good sound knots with the waxed sinew cord, however.

## Materials needed:

- Fourteen 1 inch plastic or bone hairpipe
- Optional shell discs, concho, or ribbons
- Up to 35 crow beads
- 1 yard of waxed sinew cord
- 3 leather spacers
- A soft leather thong of at least 40 inches.

For tools, all you need are scissors.

## Steps:

Lay out the bone and the beads in the order shown in Figure 1. Place a spacer at each end and one in the middle. For small children, this might be shortened by using only 8 bones and place the extra 4 beads in the center or at the ends as in Figure 2.

For right handed people, start at the right side of your layout and begin stringing the items in order, starting with the leather spacer (Figure 3). String both strands at the same time. For left handed people, start at the left of your layout.

When all of the beads and bone are strung, string on the last leather spacer. Before tying the knot, check the length by tying around your neck. It should come no closer than 1 inch in the back to leave room to tie the thongs. If it turns out to be too long for you, remove some beads from your pattern. You might have to strip out all the way back to the start to get the right length and a symmetrical pattern.

When everything is OK, wrap each end of sinew cord around the spacer through the holes as shown in Figure 4 and tie the ends together. Use at least three overhand knots. Pull the knots good and tight.

Cut the soft leather thong into two 10 inch pieces, and one 18 to 20 inches long. Tie one 10 inch length on each end of your choker as in

Figure 5. Parents or teachers might need to help small children with this step.

The remaining bone, beads, and thong are used to make dangles that hang from the center spacer as in Figure 6. Different arrangements of bone and beads along with shell discs or conchos might be used according to your liking.



Low Dog, Hunkpapa Dakota, wearing a dentalium choker with medal bead spacers. Photographed in 1904 at Standing Rock, North Dakota.

Written Heritage Collection



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 3

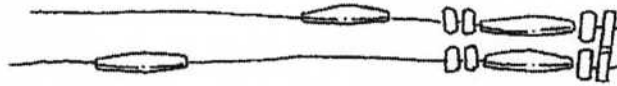


Fig. 4

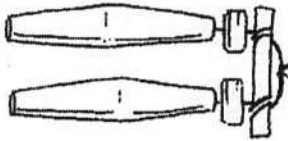


Fig. 5

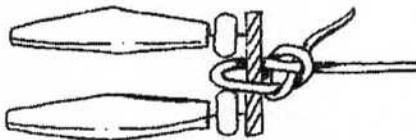
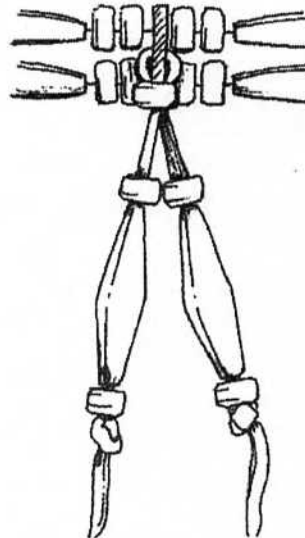
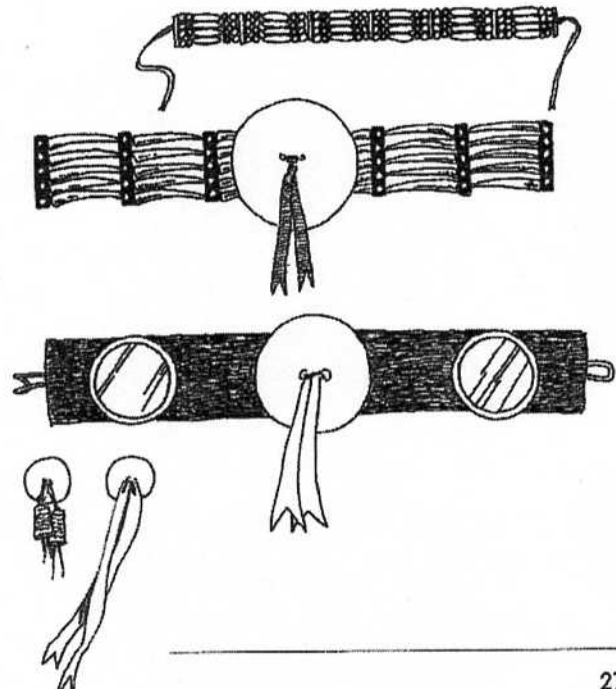
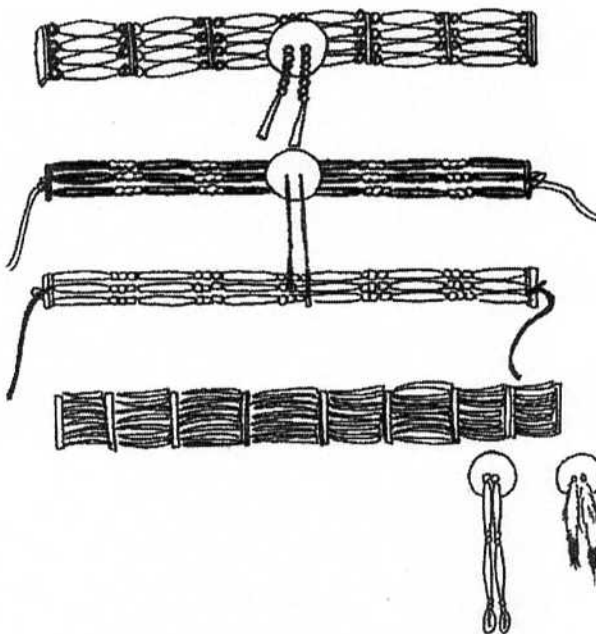
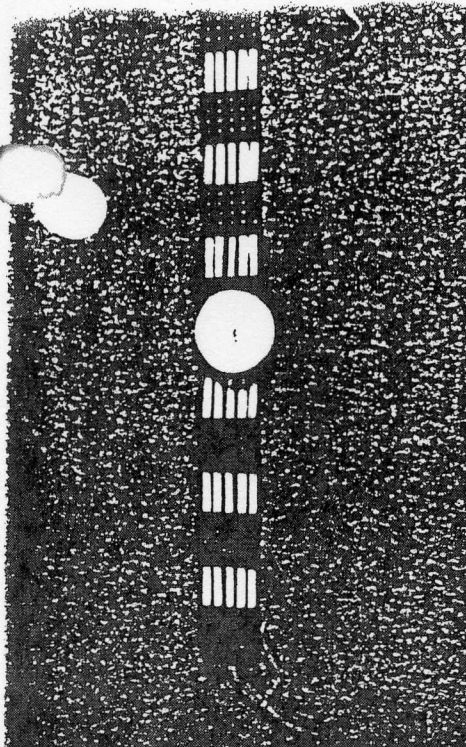


Fig. 6



Illustrated by Mark Ford





# MODERN CHOKERS





Almost without exception the Oklahoma feather dancer wears some type of choker. The choker serves to decorate the neck area and to hide the neck bustle ties. A silk scarf or loom beaded strip may serve as a choker, but a large number of fancy dancers now wear a simple choker of bone hairpipes and beads. This choker, as shown in photo 1, may consist of several strands of small hairpipes in combination with other large beads spaced by pieces of heavy leather.

Chokers worn today are modern versions of simple chokers worn in the Plains in the first quarter of the century. A choker of dentalium shells strung between spacers studded with brass tacks is certainly an early forerunner (photo 3). Other simple chokers of small bone hairpipes and brass beads also enjoyed widespread popularity. To show early (1922) evidence on the Southern Plains, witness the choker worn by an Omaha dancer in photo 4. Similar chokers were worn by early straight dancers from Pawhuska (photo 5). The chokers worn by women in buckskin outfits as well as those worn by straight dancers may account for the recent (1960 on) rise in popularity. Of course the ready availability of inexpensive materials with which to make the choker has not been a hinderance.

### MATERIALS

Two basic types of bone or imitation bone hairpipes are used today: 1" tubular or 1-1/2" shaped. The tubular bones are the most prevalent. Real bone is preferred although imitation hairpipe looks genuine and is less expensive.

Often large beads (as compared to seed beads) are strung with the hairpipe. Tile beads are a popular choice as they are approximately the same diameter as the tubular hairpipe. Tile beads are also inexpensive and come in a large variety of colors. Large necklace drop beads, silver (chrome) beads, and cut glass beads are also used.

The leather spacers that each strand must pass through are made of thick strap leather (latigo) or other stiff leather. The dimensions of the spacers will vary according to the number of rows and to the type of beads or bones used. The width of the spa-

cer should be equal to the diameter of the bone or bead placed next to it. The height of the spacer would be the number of rows times the width of the spacer. For example, 5 rows of 1" tubular bone 1/4" in diameter in combination with tile beads is 1/4" times 1-1/4".

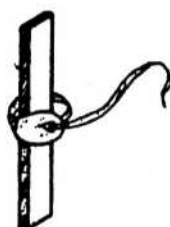


FIG 1

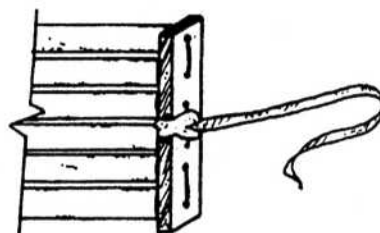


FIG 2

The choker is strung with leather thongs, strong-test fishing line or other strong lacing. The choker is tied around the neck with the pair of buckskin thongs or shoe-string ties attached to the last spacer on each end (Figs 1 or 2).

### CONSTRUCTION

Assemble all the bones and beads to be used. The amount of bones and beads depends on the length desired and the length of each section. (Section: from one spacer to the next spacer.) Make the choker about 2" shorter than your neck size. The choker may only have an odd or even number of sections. Determine the number of beads and/or bone per section and order according to the number of sections desired.

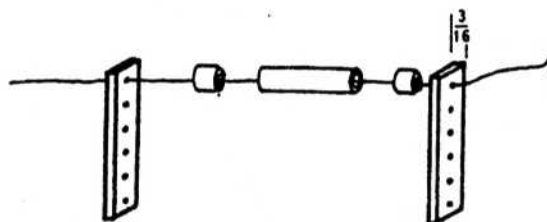


FIG 3

Cut out spacers (dimensions given above). Using an awl, leather punch or drill, punch evenly spaced holes down the length of each spacer, one hole for each row (Fig 3). There must be one more spacer than the number of sections. Spacers may be painted with mineral oil, dyed with black leather dye or left plain.

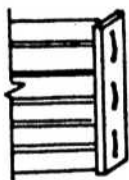


FIG 4

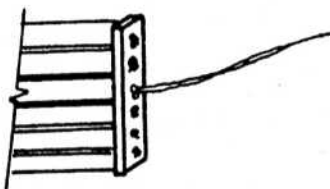


FIG 5

To put the choker together (Fig 3), string each row separately, knotting the lacing at the beginning and end of each row (Fig 5) or string each row on a continuous strand of lacing (Fig 4). All spacers must be strung with the first row. "First aid" for getting leather through the long bones: Place glue on the tapered end of the thong and let dry.

### VARIATIONS

A huge number of different chokers may be made from a given set of materials simply by varying the arrangement of bones, beads and colors of beads within the section(s). The sketches (Figs 7 to 12) show some of the possible combinations. The number of rows range from 3-6 using 1" tubular hairpipe, and from 3-4 with 1-1/2" shaped bone. Notice that only one type of bone hairpipe is used in each choker. Arrangements vary from an all hairpipe choker (Fig 12) to a choker that alternates sections of hairpipe and beads (Fig 7 and photo 2); however, most chokers combine beads and hairpipe in the same sections (Figs 8 to 11). When using beads stick to the primary colors: black, white and shades of red and blue. Most arrangements seem to place dark beads next to the bones to give a contrast between sections. Each of the 3-6 rows matches the row above or below (no checks). Rarely will two sets of bones be placed in the same section. Keep arrangements simple.

As already mentioned, straight dancers and women in taffeta or buckskin outfits wear much the same choker (photo 6). Women's chokers are more dainty; they lack the center conch shells and medallions; they often use fewer spacers, only 2-5 rows and lighter shades of beads. The beads used in the choker will match the beads decorating the fringe or the cut glass beads in the large necklaces (necklace drop beads or cut glass beads). Straight dancers wear chokers just like those described above; however, they may use more cut beads to match those used in their bandoliers.

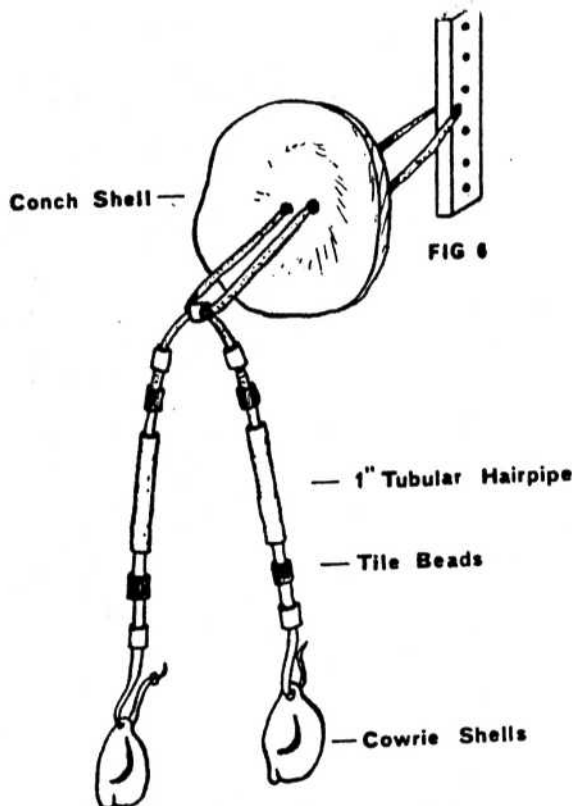


FIG 6

### DECORATIONS

The center of the choker is often decorated with a conch shell and/or beaded medallion about 1" to 1-3/4" in diameter. From the center of the conch shell beads and bones to match those used in the choker are strung on the ties that hold the shell to the choker (Fig 6). See Figs 7 to 12 for other ideas and details. Attach medallion or conch shell to center spacer (Fig 6) or to the middle row in the center of the section. Note: If a scarf is used to tie on the neck bustle, then the choker is worn over the scarf (photo 8).

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Photos courtesy of: (1) Hans Duddenha, (2) Johnny Whitecloud, (3) Southwest Museum, (4) Nebraska State Historical Society, (5) Denver Art Museum, (6) unidentified, (7) Kathy Tucker, and (8) B.

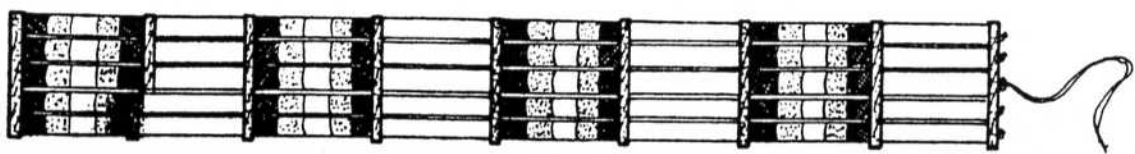


Fig. 7

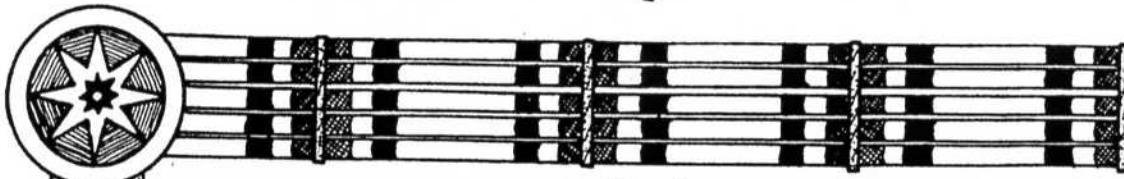


Fig. 8

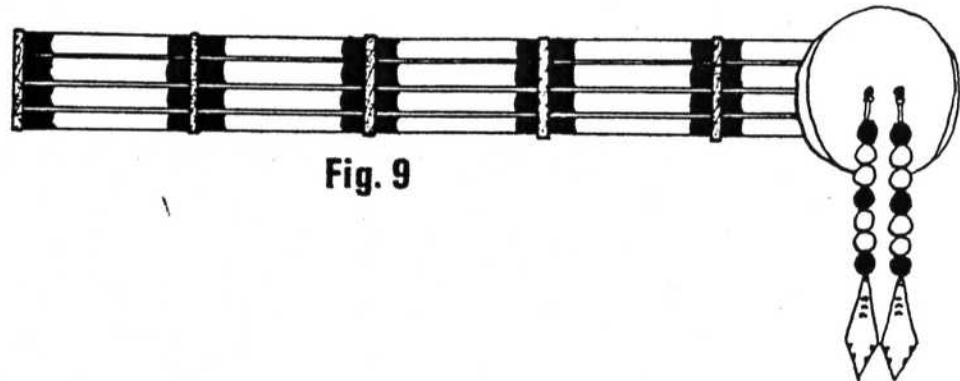


Fig. 9

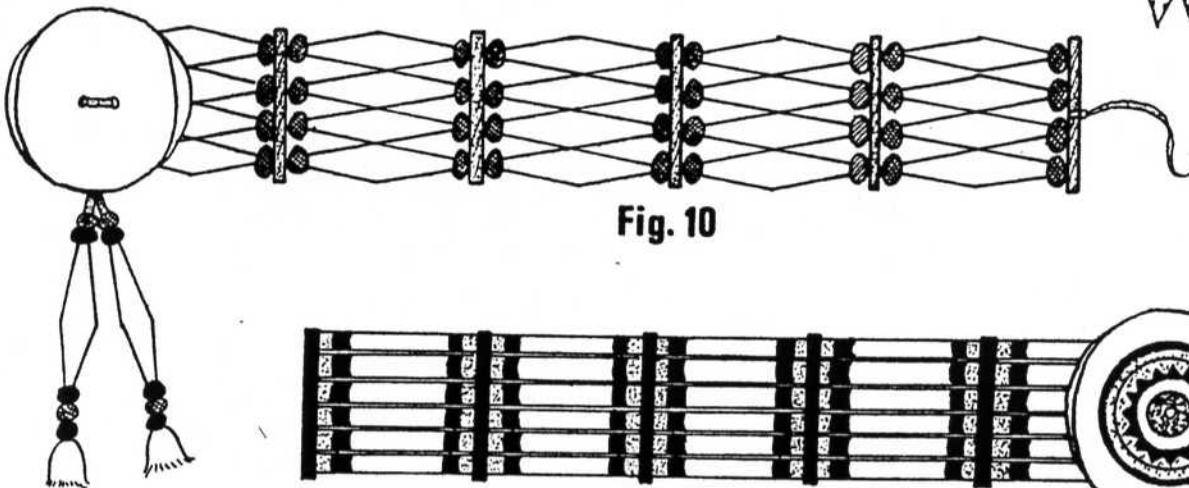


Fig. 10

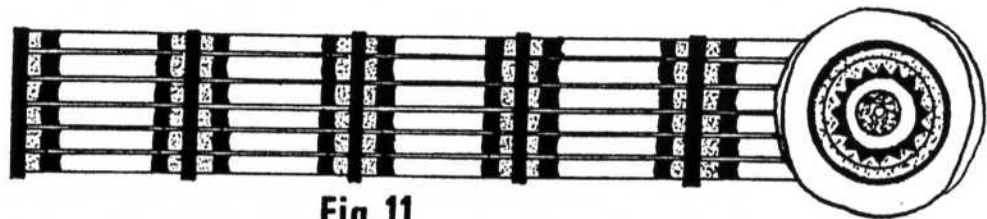


Fig. 11

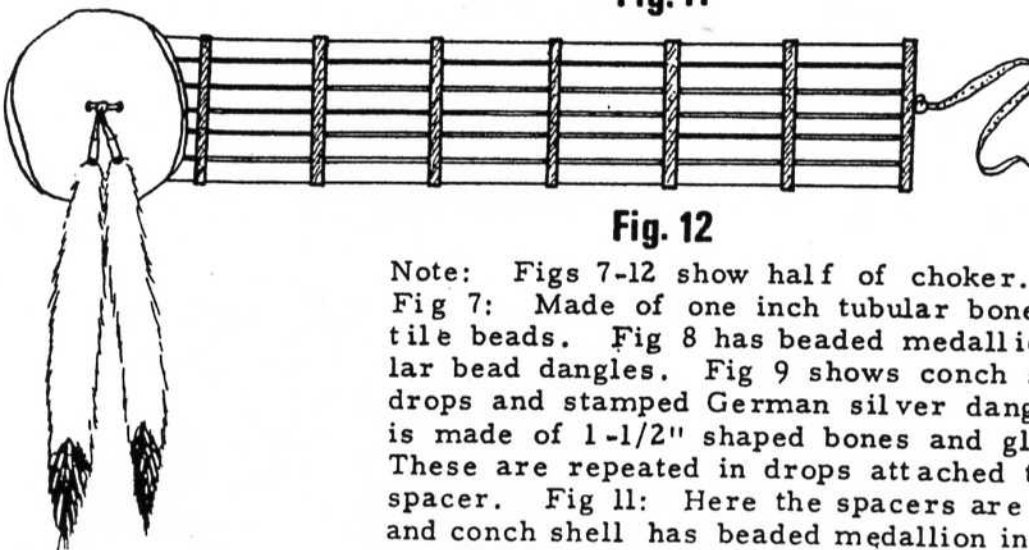


Fig. 12

Note: Figs 7-12 show half of choker.

Fig 7: Made of one inch tubular bone hairpipe with tile beads. Fig 8 has beaded medallions and tubular bead dangles. Fig 9 shows conch shell with bead drops and stamped German silver dangles. Fig 10 is made of 1-1/2" shaped bones and glass beads. These are repeated in drops attached to the center spacer. Fig 11: Here the spacers are dyed black and conch shell has beaded medallion in center. Fig 12: All tubular bone choker with ermine tails