Frances Densmore Papers

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Radio talk No. 1. Feb. 23, 1932, Sioux and Chippewa Music

The American Indian was our first musician yet we seldom think of him in that light. Indian music in Minnesota is inherited from two great tribes-- the Sioux and the Chippewa. The native names are Dakota and Ojibway but I use the English names by which they are commonly known for the Indians are all Americans now. Other tribes lived here long ago but left no songs. When the Chippewa came from northern Wisconsin their hardest fighting was with the Sioux-- those splendid warriors of the plains. A few bands of Sioux remain in the southern part of the state, but the northern part of Minnesota was entirely taken over by the Chippewa.

The Indians knew how to make peace as well as war. When the Sioux and Chippewa made peace they smoked the peace pipe-- a public and most impressive proceeding. The warriors of the two tribes came toward each other with the women walking in front of them. Everybody sang in praise of the warriors on the opposite side. The tune was the same and each tribe sang the words in its own language. The words meant "He is a great leader," and the Sioux put in the names of the Chippewa warriors while the Chippewa put in the names of the Sioux warriors. Over and over they sang the song, putting in different words. Thus the Chippewa might put in the names of Little Crow and Shakopee, using their Chippewa names, while the Sioux put in the names of Bugonegijig and Wabejic, whom we know as Hole-in-the-day, Great Marten. Then both tribes fired their guns into the air and did not reload, this being a disarmament conference. Next, the tribe that had asked for peace sent forward a man carrying a pipe. He held the

bowl bowl in his hands and offered the stem to each leader of the other side while the people sang a song about the peace-pipe. The other tribe did the same, and when all the leading warriors had puffed the pipe of their former enemies they shook hands. The tribes camped near each other so as to get acquainted. They danced together, and each learned songs and dances from the other. This was a pleasant interlude, but the peace did not always last long.

The native religion of the Chippewa is commonly known as the Grand Medicine; the native name is the Midewiwin. This religion made such an impression on some of the Mdewakonton Sioux that they adopted it, calling it the Medicine Lodge. I have recorded songs of this Medicine Lodge and it is interesting to find them different in structure from the Chippewa songs though the ceremonies are quite similar.

The Sioux have a pleasant custom of singing songs in honor of their great men and I recorded two songs in honor of Gabriel Renville, head chief of the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of Sioux, the songs being recorded by his son, Moses Renville. You may remember that Gabriel Renville was chief of the scouts under General Sibley and went to Washington with the makers of the treaty of 1867. His Sioux name was Tipiwakan, meaning Holy House. One of the songs in his honor has these words-- "Holy House has said, a soldier am I. It is but a short time I have to live."

Another Sioux song which I recorded is about a man named Fierce Face-- Itehinyanza. He, with some other Sioux, fired on some white men who had lost their way in the Red River country and entered on territory where the Sioux war parties were in the habit of going. The Sioux mistook the white men for enemies and fired, killing one or more of them. Fierce Face was the only one that the chiefs could find afterward and they knew he ought to be punished by the white man's law. So Fierce Face went alone to his judgement, to show the good faith of the Sioux.

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He went without escort from one camp to another down the Minnesota River , then down the Mississippi River to Prairie du Chien where he gave himself up to the authorities.. ~~It is said that he died in prison~~ At each camp the Indians sang a song to cheer and praise him and it had these words-- "Fierce Face, you should not run away. Your friends, (the white men) have borrowed you." It is said that he died in prison, but his name and deed are preserved by this song. The recording of this song is in the collection at the Library of Congress.

My study of Indian music for the Bureau of American Ethnology began at Onigum, on Leech Lake, in 1907.. There I became acquainted with a number of old men who were members of the Midewiwin and they sang its songs for me, which was a great honor. These songs are represented by little drawings, or mnemonics, on birchbark which is the nearest to a musical notation that the Indians ever had. A person familiar with the symbolism and knowing the songs can sing a song when he sees the picture.

The Chippewa doctors sang when they treated the sick. They did not always give medicine but they always sang, and sometimes the words of the song told the sick person that he would surely recover. A song for a lame man was recorded by Najobitun of Leech Lake and the words are,"You will recover. You will walk again. It is I who say it. My power is great,"

The Chippewa had many songs connected with magic and all were received in dreams.. A spirit appeared to a man in a dream and gave him a song, the spirit also promised to help the man when he sang the song, provided he lived up to certain requirements.. Every medicine man had this spirit power back of him, and he had his own songs, but the old ~~medi~~ medicine men led lives of strict discipline.

Some men had songs that gave success in hunting, so they could always get deer. Others had songs for success in war, or in playing the moccasin game. We call it gambling but to the Indian it was "big business,"-- it was a regular way by which he increased his wealth-- that and stealing horses from the Sioux. In these practical uses of music you see the difference between Indian music and our own. Their music was not art in our sense of the term. It had a purpose. Of course there were social dances with the commonplace songs, but I am speaking of the best music, sung by those we would call the best people.

The Indian love songs presented to the public have become so standardized that they are not Indian any more. I found three forms of love songs among the Chippewa-- one very old, another dating back a hundred years and another comparatively modern. The very old form of love song was used in connection with a charm, such as a little wooden image and a bit of the hair of the person to be affected by it. Such songs were represented by little pictures, like the Grand Medicine songs. All those I recorded were sung by women and were songs of attraction. The second form of love songs were plaintive. Some of these were brought from Madeline Island about 90 years ago, and were recorded by Mrs. Julia Spears and Mrs. Mary Warren English, sisters of William Warren, the historian of the Chippewa. The words of one of Mrs. English's songs are very poetic and are as follows- "I thought it was a loon but it was my lover's splashing oar. He has gone to Sault St. Marie. Never again can I see him." I was fortunate in obtaining a number of these plaintive love songs from the older people. The third class of love songs, strictly modern, are of no value. They are sung in an artificial tone, something like crooning, and are always about disappointment or a change in affection.

Do not think that an Indian singer knows only a few songs. A good Indian singer knows several hundred songs and all without any notes. An old man at White Earth named Ojibwe recorded more than 80 and was not near the end of his supply.

You do not really hear Indian music unless you have the atmosphere of it.

Many years ago I was at Red Lake on the Fourth of July. I expected to hear firecrackers or some form of noise early in the morning but instead I heard the low throb of a drum in the distance. The sky was red above the pine trees. The little village was quiet but one Indian, somewhere in the pine woods, was singing alone with the beauty of the dawn. That was his way of beginning the National holiday and it was true Indian music.

Radio talk No. 2. March 2, 1932, Chippewa chiefs

It is the custom of the Sioux Indians to announce an important song before it is sung and the men who recorded songs about Sioux chiefs followed this custom. Before singing, one of them recorded the following sentences which were recorded and were translated later by the interpreter. He said, "I hold my pipe to record a song about the chiefs." Then he gave the formal announcement, as he would at a public gathering, saying, in the manner of an announcer, "Tribe, listen to me. I will sing a song of the dead chiefs. What are you saying? The chiefs have come to an end and I will sing their song. I wish I could do as they have done but I will try to sing their song." Then he recorded a song with these words, "Friend, what you are saying is true.. The chiefs are gone so I myself will try it."

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This afternoon I am going to tell you about the old Chippewa chiefs, those men of the past who made history. Let us begin with White Fisher, the greatest of them all. His Chippewa name was Wobijiga. His father was a chief before him, the family living at Grand Portage, on the north shore of Lake Superior, near the Pigeon River. From there they moved to the south shore of Lake Superior, living on Madeline Island opposite the present city of Superior, Wisconsin.

White Fisher succeeded his father as chief of the Chippewa in northern Wisconsin. He was born in 1747 and died in 1793, his life extending over the most important and eventful period in the life of the tribe. White Fisher was a great warrior and it is said that every war party he joined or led was successful. It was he and his warriors who defeated the Sioux and Fox Indians in the battle of St. Croix Falls. About 300 warriors came from Wisconsin, some coming from as

far east ~~as far~~ as Soo St. Marie and travelling at least 250 miles in their birchbark canoes from La Pointe to St. Croix Falls. There they were reinforced by warriors from Sandy Lake. It was a great victory for the Chippewa and the defeat for the Fox Indians was so heavy that they never returned to fight again.

The Chippewa were ~~always~~ friendly to the French but the tide turned and White Fisher was at Niagara when the French garrison surrendered to the English under Sir William Johnston. The negotiations must have been very picturesque, the Indians offering belts of wampum and receiving medals from the English. Tradition says that White Fisher received a silver gorget from Sir Williamm Johnston. About ten years later he visited Sir Johnston at his home in New York and the great Englishman mentioned him in a letter, saying "I took particular notice of him at Niagara, since which he has behaved well, and now came to be informed of my sentiments on the uneasy state of the Indians to the westward. He told me his people would quietly wait his return before they took any resolutions."

White Fisher was like Pontiac and Tecumseh in his suspicion of the white man. At Soo St. Marie there lived an Irishman named Johnston who was famous for his intelligence and polished manners. This man wanted to marry White Fisher's daughter and the chief said, "White man, I have noticed your behavior, it has been correct but, white man, your color is deceitful. You say you are going to Montreal. Go, and if you return I shall be satisfied of your sincerity and will give you my daughter." The Irishman with the polite manners went to Montreal, came back, and married the daughter of White Fisher, the Chippewa chief. A daughter of this marriage became the wife of Henry, R. Schoolcraft, who wrote so much about the Indians and about this part of the country.

Not all the Chippewa chiefs held that office by inheritance. Some were chosen by the band or tribe and some prominent Indians received the title of chief from the Government. Such a man in Minnesota was named White Fisher but was in no way connected with the chief of the same name in Wisconsin. This man received a medal after the treaty of Fond du Lac in 1826 and was a sub-chief on the Upper Mississippi. It was ths custom to give medals to prominent Indians, on important occasions, and the traders recommended their favorites for thst honor. It is said that White Fisher, however,, was given his medal "solely for the strikingly mild and pleasant expression of his face." He must have been an early politician!

This man, White Fisher, had a son named Wabanaquot who is still remembered by the older Chippewa. Wabanaquot, meaning White Cloud, was head chief of the Mississippi Chippewa after Hole-in-the-day was killed. He had been the leading warrior under Hole-in-the-day, and was elected to take his place. Wabanaquot was a great orator and father of the Rev. Charles Wright, an Episcopal clergyman ~~now living~~ at Cass Lake. The State of Minnesota erected a monument over the grave of Wabanaquot, an honor which the state has given to no other Indian.

The Chippewa around Leech Lake have been known as the Pillager Band since 1781, having gained that name by a rather unpleasant incident. They were only loosely connected with the Mississippi Chippewa and even made treaties by themselves. Their great chief was Flat Mouth-- Eshkebugokoshe-- who was born in 1774 and lived to be more than 90 years of age, highly respected by both white men and Indians. Flat Mouth was not a chief by inheritance. His father, named Yellow Hair, was not a chief but gained ascendency over the village by his knowledge of medicines, especially poisons to destroy human life. He had a most vindictive

temper, many incidents being told to show this. Flat Mouth, However, was an entirely different type of man.

At the opening of the war of 1812 the Pillagers were invited to join the British but Flat Mouth sent back the wampum belts saying he would as soon ask the white men to aid him in his wars as take part in a qualrrel between the whites.

His son succeeded him as chief and was commonly called Flat Mouth but his name was Niganibines, which means "Leading bird of prey." This man died at Onigun, on Leech Lake, in July, 1907. The ceremonies of the Grand Medicine, or native religion, were held during his last hours. I was present during those ceremonies and heard the songs by the old medicine men, sung in deepest sincerity and affection for the dying chief. Later I was allowed to take a photograph of Niganibines as he lay in state, wearing his war regalia and with his gun beside him. Later I saw him buried under the pines he loved -- the last chief of the Pillagers.

At the time when Flat Mouth was chief of the Pillager Band there was an equally famous man who was chief of the Mississippi Band-- Hole-in-the-day, whose Chippewa name was Bugonegijig. History tells us of their being together at Fort Snelling for a council in 1827. The son of Hole-in-the-day had the same name, succeeded him as chief, and was assassinated by men of his own band in 1868. His war parties ranged along the Minnesota River, fighting the Sioux. I recorded a song of one of his battles at Shakopee's village, the song being recorded by one of his leading warriors.

The name Wadena was held by chiefs at both Gull Lake and Mille Lacs. The Wadena for whom the town was named is said to have been chief of the Otter Tail Band. He was strictly conservative and never adopted the white man's style of clothing. I saw him in 1907 and

photographed him, wearing his blanket with native dignity and grace. A different type of man was Mejakigijig who was made a chief at White Earth. He was a tall, fine-looking man and wore a frock coat given him by Bishop Whipple. At the dance on the 14th of June, at White Earth, however, he appeared in full Indian regalia, with feathers, and bright beadwork glistening in the sun. Mejakigijig was the last survivor of the representatives of the tribe who selected White Earth as the abode of the Chippewa under the treaty of 1867. He went to Washington several times on tribal business and I knew him there, as well as on the reservation. In 1911, one of his last years, he told me of his dream as a boy. He fasted 5 days and nights and dreamed that he killed a Sioux. Later he went on the warpath and came home with three Sioux scalps, avenging the death of his father who was killed by the Sioux.

When the Chippewa meet in council at the present time it is the young men who rise and talk. I remember many old men whom I, even in my limited contact with the tribe, have seen in tribal councils and who have passed away. The Indians have a respect for old age much greater than that of the white men. Perhaps they sometimes seem to hear the voices of those old chiefs saying,

We are the dead chiefs, sitting beside you in the council,
watching by your campfire,
We are come from the land of the spirits--come to help you and
to tell you again
That with the Indians there will always be mysterious spirits
While the grass grows and the water runs.
Courage, our children, courage,
The dead chiefs have spoken to you.

Radio talk No. 3, March 9, 1932, Chippewa stories and industries

The American Indians had a wonderful background for their stories and it was a background with which they were familiar. The tribes that lived by the ocean had stories about strange creatures that lived in the water, and those that lived near the mountains had stories about little people who lived in tiny stone houses, far up the mountains, and they said, "If you see a light under the trees, on the mountain, it may be a light in the little man's stone house." Their stories did not create a background, they put imaginery beings into the background that everyone knew about, and no tribe had a lovelier background than the Chippewa, amid the pines and white birches and shining lakes of northern Minnesota.

Long ago I heard the Chippewa stories told by the light of a campfire-- told late at night by an old Indian-- far from civilization. The fire light shone on the thick pine trees and overhead were the brilliant stars-- to me it was picturesque but the Chippewa felt so much more than is possible for a white person. They knew about the wood-spirit that lives in the woods and breaks off a branch to warn its friend if there is danger ahead. When the northern lights flamed up the sky, a Chippewa knew the old story that they are spirit warriors dancing, and that the color is their bright head-dresses, moving up and down as they dance. And a spirit lived in the water. Was it not known that travellers used to put an offering in the water if they wanted to cross and found the lake was rough?? The water spirit was not angry. It only happened that the people came when the water was rough, but someone who was a friend of the water-spirit could ask, as a favor, that the waves would quiet down and the always did.

Every Indian tribe puts into its own environment a mythical personage known as a ~~culture~~ culture hero. He is like themselves, but he has

power to overcome difficulties, and he teaches them how to do so. He usually has a sense of humor, doing things with a smile because they are so easy for him, and lettimg the people play kokes on him,, pretending he is not so capable as he is, because he knows he can show his full power in the end.

The stories told around our campfires, so long ago, were about Winabojo, the hero of stories among all the Algonquin tribes, under various names, such as Nanabush and Nanabijou. Probably you know the story of Winabojo and the ducks, how he made the ducks dance with their eyes shut, telling them their eyes would be red if they opened them. So the ducks danced, while Winabojo sang, and one after another he popped them into a bag. At last a little hell-diver duck opened its eyes, saw what was happening and cried "Winabojo is killing us." And it happened as Winabojo had said,, the eyes of that sort of ducks are red to this day.

There is a hidden meaning in these old stories-- just as there were two currents of thought among the Indians, one being very deep and full of subtle wisdom. The old men knew that Winabojo was a personification of Life ,and his tricks were to show that Life is stronger than all its enemies. When Winabojo seemed to be defeated and then came out victorious they recognized it as the triumph of Life itself-- not the trick of a funny man. Winabojo gave the Indians the knowledge of their best medicines so their lives would be prolonged, and he taught the animals all their tricks of escape, and gave them their protective coloring so that their lives would be prolonged. He called the animals his little brothers. His own life was so strong that he appeared in a different form after they thought he was killed, and he could change to a stump, or anything he liked, because the life in him

was so strong. There is a vast number of stories about Winabojo and his doings.

The Chippewa had stories of what they called the First Earth, which they say was "right around here." At that time the Indians had no clothing, they did not know how to make fire, and they did not know how to prepare their food. All this was taught them by a messenger from the master of life. Such stories are long and have a cosmic significance.

A new type of stories came to the Chippewa with the coming of the white man. They say that the wives of early settlers told European fairy stories to the Indians, who of course adapted them and retold them in Chippewa. These were called adizoke, and some were told to me by Maingans, a lame man at White Earth who spoke practically no English. One of his stories contained 1600 words, and I probably did not get it all. It went on and on, about a boat that went instantly from place to place and a boy who was so great that a cannon was fired with every step he took. There was a beautiful maiden in it who was going back to her own country and a man said, "Tomorrow you will start in a large boat, with two flags and two cannon. You will take ten thousand men with you, and eight officers and five hundred sailors who know all about the ship in case you get into a war." Evidently some stories had come to the Indians about slavery for the story said that a man saw a negro whipping a white woman with a great pine tree. He rescued her, of course, and she was the beautiful maiden who was being returned to her ~~on~~ our country in the ship with two flags, two cannon and eight officers.

I found Indian versions of Cinderella, who lived in a wigwam, sitting under the smoke hole or beside the hearth, and also recognized the story of Little Claus and Big Claus, and other Hans Christian Anderson fairy

tales changed to the Indian background.

The customs that I will tell you about are those of the industrial year. I might tell you the customs of he life of an individual, from the ceremonial naming of a baby to the erecting of a wooden marker at a man's grave, with the drawing of the man's dodem, or spirit animal, on the marker, upside down to show that the man was dead. Or we might consider the customs of war, with its dog feast before the men started out, and the scalp dance after they came home.. The Chippewa are wonderfully interesting people in every phase of their life, but we are industrially minded at present to I will take that series.

The Chippewa took up one industry after another, through the year. One of my best informants on this subject was Nidinens, a member of the Mille Lacs band, and she said that when she was ~~long~~ young her father kept count of the days on a stick. He had a stick long enough to last a year, and he always began a new stick in the fall. He cut a notch for the first day of he new moon and a small notch for each of the other days. She began her story at the time when her father began a new counting stick.

The food gathered in the summer and fall was carefully stored away and the women wove mats for the sides of he wigwm and to put on the ground, doing all this in the competent way of the old Indian women. Her home was at Mille Lacs, and when the ~~he~~ ice froze on the lake they started for the winter hunt, going to a place where they thought there would be plenty of game. There were six families in her little group, and they had a big fire in the middle of the camp, and over the fire was a huge rack for drying the meat that was brought in by the hunters, The hides were tanned with the hair on, and were spread on cedar boughs along the edge of the wigwam. The children sat on these soft hides in the evening, while their ~~father talped~~ father talked to them,

evening while their father talked to them, telling them that they must always be kind to the poor and old,, and other things that a Chippewa chi child was taught.

In the early spring the Chippewa went to the maple sugar camps and this was the most enjoyable social event of the year. A few families were together in this, as in all Chippewa industries. The women got out the birchbark utensils that had been stored the previous season and the big brass kettles bought from the English traders, and the tin pails from the American traders.. The maple trees were tapped and the sugar making began. This was near Mille Lacs, and the men cut holes in the ice and caught fish which supplied the camp with food, while some were dried over the fire..

When the sugar making was done, the Chippewa went to a place where they made gardens, planting popatoes, corn and pumpkins. There was a ceremony for success in this as in every other activity for the people looked to the leaders in the Midewiwin, or native religion, for help in everything they did.

In the spring they had pigeons to eat, and a little later the blueberries,, gooseberries and June berries were ripe along the lake shore. Housekeeping was not so easy as it might seem, and the women were always busy storing whatever fruit or vegetable was in season.

There was fishing all the year round, and in late summer came the gathering and drying of vegetables. All summer the old medicine men and women were gathering and drying herbs so they would have a good supply of medicines and remedies of all sorts.

In the fall they gathered wild rice, which was the staple article of food among the Chippewa. Each family or small group of families had a portion of a rice field, outlined by stakes and near there they camped. Early in the morning the canoes started for the rice

field, and a canoeful of rice was considered a day's work, the kernels being knocked into the canoe, leaving the stalks standing, with any kernels that were not quite ripe. So they would go over the same part of the rice field several times until enough had been gathered. They always let some fall into the water for seed, or strewed it on the water. There are many stages in the process of preparing wild rice, commonly called "making" the rice, snd everyone in the camp had something to do.

Then came the duck hunting, and the venison to eat with the wild rice. There was good hunting and trapping all through Minnesota in those days, and the Chippewa hunters got deer, moose, foxes and wolves. Before the Chippewa had steel traps they caught the otter with nets made of nettle-stalk fiber, and also caught rabbits with nets. Various sorts of home-made traps were used for catching mink, marten, bears and other animals.

There was a great variety in Chippewa industries and each called for the best powers of both men and women because the comfort of the home and the health of the people depended on their success.

After a while the wild rice was stored, the hunting season was complete, and the time came when the father of Nodinens would cut another long stick, ready to note the days of the next year, with a big notch for the first day of the new moon and a little notch for each of the other days.

And now the Chippewa Indians and I will bid you farewell.