



Frances Densmore Papers

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Prelude to the Study of Indian Music in Minnesota
by Frances Densmore

A large undertaking does not begin abruptly but the events that lead up to it are seldom included in its story. My present purpose is to relate a few events that led to my study of Chippewa and Sioux music in Minnesota and to pay tribute, as far as possible, to friends, both white and Indian, who made possible the beginning of that work.

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In 1896 a Canadian Chippewa from Walpole Island, Ontario, entered Seabury Divinity School at Faribault, Minnesota, as a student. Dr. Alford A. Butler, then warden of Seabury, knew of my interest in Indian music and told me of this student. His Chippewa name was Kah-o-sed, meaning "Hunter," and he wanted to use the English equivalent but Dr. Butler advised him to retain his Chippewa name. Later, as the Rev. Edward Coley Kah-o-sed he was in charge of missions on the Red Lake and White Earth reservations. There he encouraged and aided the beginning of my work among the Chippewa.

A personal acquaintance with the Rt. Rev. Henry Benjamin Whipple, Bishop of Minnesota, and an interest in the missions of the Episcopal Church opened the way to other contacts with the Chippewa. The Rev. Joseph A. Gilfillan was in charge of St. Columba's Mission at White Earth and a correspondence regarding Christmas gifts for the Indians led to a pleasant personal friendship. He had an expert knowledge of the idioms of the Chippewa language and in 1908, when he had retired from active work and was living with his son in Washington, D.C. he explained the meaning of certain difficult Chippewa words, recorded with their songs. He also interpreted for a group of Chippewa who enacted part of a Midewiwin (Grand Medicine Society) ceremony at my first lecture in Washington. The Indians were there

with a delegation on tribal business and, having known me on the reservation, consented to do this as a favor. The lecture was before the Anthropological Society of Washington, at the Cosmos Club.

My first contact with the Chippewa was in 1901 when my sister Margaret and I went to Port Arthur, Ontario, on a pleasure trip. Like other tourists we went to Fort William, and near there we talked with a few mixed-blood Chippewa, one of their little girls going with us to gather blueberries on Mt. McKay. Four years later we went to Grand Marais, Minnesota, where I employed an interpreter for the first time. This man was Caribou, a well-known guide, who took us to called on a medicine man named Shingibis and on several other Chippewa. The Indians posed for photographs, we crossed the entrance of the harbor in Caribou's leaky birchbark canoe, and it all seemed quite an adventure.

From Grand Marais we went by boat to Port Arthur, Ontario, where we made the acquaintance of Mr. Finger, connected with the Pigeon River Lumber Company. He had been a "timber looker" in the Hudson Bay country and told interesting stories of his experience in that region. More and more clearly I was hearing the call of the wilderness. At the close of our stay at Port Arthur, Mr. Finger said that he was taking his wife and a neice to Grand Portage, Minnesota, and invited us to join the party. Grand Portage was on our way back to Duluth and we accepted the invitation with pleasure. The trip was made on the Pigeon ^{River} Lumber Company's tug. We left Port Arthur one morning, stopped for lunch at the Pigeon River Lumber camp, and arrived late at night at the island on which Peter Gagnon's trading post was located. The water was too shallow for the tug to land and we were rowed ashore in a wide, flat boat while dogs barked and lights began to flicker at the trading post. Mr. Finger had known Gagnon for many

years and we were shown a cordial hospitality. The Chippewa village is on the mainland, in sight of Gagnon's island, and we went thither in a sailboat with the man who carried the mail. A Government farmer was in charge of the Chippewa and he gave us all needed information concerning them.

Little Spruce (Minagunz) was chief of the Chippewa at Grand Portage and after the departure of Mr. Finger and his party, Little Spruce and his son enacted a simple form of Midewiwin ceremony for us. A Mide pole, with the proper decoration for Little Spruce's rank in the society, was erected in his house and the songs were sung in all sincerity, with prayers and other procedure in which some members of his family joined. The son of Little Spruce explained it to us as clearly as possible and I understood it better a few years later, when studying the subject. Little Spruce sang a song for me one day, repeating it as I wrote it down with the translation of the words-- "Manido (spirit) is looking at me." This song, with a description of our visit to the Chippewa village was printed later,¹ and the ceremony was the subject of my first contribution to THE AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST on the subject of Indian music.² Little Spruce posed for a picture with his two

¹✓ The Song of Minagunz, the Ojibwa, in Indian School Journal, Chilocco, Oklahoma, November, 1906.

²✓ An Ojibwa prayer ceremony, in The American Anthropologist, June 1907.

wives and I was allowed to take as many pictures as I wished in the village; We returned to Duluth in a Booth ^{Fisheries} ~~AAA~~ Company boat that "called in" at Gagnon's trading post for fish, caught by the Indians.

My first impression of Sioux (Dakota) music was received when I was a ^{small} ~~tiny~~ child. The Sioux camped on an island in the Mississippi River opposite my native town of Red Wing and I fell asleep to the sound of their drum, when they danced at night. The first Indian songs that I "wrote down by ear" were Sioux (except the song of Geronimo, heard in 1904 at the St. Louis ^{Exposition} ~~Exposition~~). A village of Sioux was only a few miles from Red Wing ^{in 1906} and I asked two of the women to come to my home and sing for me. They sang two excellent old songs connected with war, and I wrote them down, ³ adding a piano accompaniment like that used by Miss Alice C. Fletcher in her Omaha songs. ⁴ My subsequent study of Sioux music was done with a phonograph, in North and South Dakota.

³ Dakota
Two ~~Dakota~~ songs, in Indian School Journal, Chillico, Oklahoma, April 1907.

⁴ A Study of Omaha Indian Music, Alice C. Fletcher, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge, Mass. 1893.

Resuming the story of my early acquaintance with the Chippewa-- in 1906 I gave a lecture on Indian music at Tower, Minnesota, for the benefit of their Public Library. The lecture was under the auspices of the local Episcopal church and was given in a hall over a vacant store, known as the Opera House. Pink handbills announced the event and the seats were rows of boards on which little squares of pasteboard were laid, indicating ^{by number} the spaces for sittings. I played Miss Fletcher's Omaha songs, with her permission, and showed a Hide drum and set of birchbark rattles that had been obtained for me by the Rev. E. C.

Kah-o-sed. On the following day I visited the Vermilion Lake Indian School, not realizing how many such schools would be my abiding places, in years to come. I was also taken to call on a Chippewa medicine man. ~~of the local reservation~~ He was not at home but dead owls, suspended by their necks, hung from the branches of trees. Owls were used in some forms of magic by medicine men.

My destination was White Earth, Minnesota, and the Celebration of the Chippewa on the Fourteenth of June, the anniversary of their removal to that reservation. As I had a day to spare, I stopped at Cass Lake, Minnesota, made inquiries concerning resident Chippewa and obtained some interesting stories.

Arriving at White Earth on the morning of the fourteenth, after a drive across the prairie from the railroad, I was entertained at the rectory of St. Columba's Episcopal Church by the Rev. Benjamin M. Brigham and Mrs. F. C. Wiswell, a missionary who assisted him in his work. A gathering was held at the church prior to the celebration and I met several ^{Chippewa} ~~clergymen~~, from various parts of the reservation, including the Rev. Kah-o-sed who was stationed at Beaulieu. Under their escort I went to my first Fourteen of June Celebration, and they introduced me to the old Chippewa chiefs and leaders as well as to members of my own race, present on that occasion.

Chippewa came from distant reservations to attend this celebration many arriving by wagon and camping on the prairie. Hundreds of Indians were there, and for the first time I saw the Chippewa in full dance regalia, brilliant in the summer sunshine. I heard the big drum and saw the great circle of dancers move around it. There were war dances in which veterans of wars against the Sioux enacted their triumphs, and gift dances in which beadwork and lengths of calico given with each invitation to join the dance. That evening I gave a

talk on Indian music at the White Earth Indian School, again under the escort of the Episcopal clergy. It was not the first time I presented the piano arrangements of Omaha songs by Miss Fletcher to Indian students, as I spoke at the Indian School at Morris, Minnesota, several years before. ~~xxx~~ It must have seemed strange to young Indians to hear this presentation of their songs but they were a polite and interested audience.

The next year (1907) I returned to White Earth for the Celebration of June Fourteenth accompanied by my sister Margaret who has shared so many of my experiences. The celebration was even larger than the previous year and we heard the memorable speech of Senator Moses Clapp that affected the whole future of the Chippewa. More white people were in attendance and the gathering was changing from a tribal occasion to an exhibition, with a political significance.

After a few days at the rectory ~~were~~ were invited to the home of Mrs. Charles W. Mee, a neice of William W. Warrer, the historian of the tribe. There we remained more than two weeks while I wrote down Chippewa stories and became acquainted with the Indians. Too much appreciation can not be expressed for the aid and encouragement given by Mrs. Mee and her mother, Mrs. Julia Warren Spears, at that time and throughout my work. Mrs. Mee helped me contact the Indians, often acting as interpreter, her mother related many incidents of historic interest, and her aunt, Mrs. Mary Warren English, was my principal interpreter for more than ten years in my work for the Bureau of American Ethnology. I also met members of the Beaulieu family who were influential among the Indians and who encouraged and aided my work.

With Mrs. Mee and her family we went to Detroit (now Detroit Lakes) to attend the celebration of the Fourth of July. The Chippewa from

White Earth danced on this occasion and I had another opportunity to hear ~~their~~ ^{Indian} singing around the drum. Big Bear (Kitchimakwa) was among these singers and consented to record a few of his songs at the local music store, where a recording phonograph was available. He was an excellent singer and ~~inxxxxxxx~~ I obtained my first phonographic records of Indian songs. My future was gradually taking shape.

With the precious cylinder records in a pasteboard box, my sister and I went to the Red Lake Indian Agency to collect stories and information and to become better acquainted with the Chippewa. Mrs. Mee was with us part of the time, and we stayed at a hotel kept by her brother, William Spears. Among my new friends was an old Chippewa woman who sang a Mide song for me and drew its mnemonics or picture. A few months later I showed this little drawing to a member of the Midewiwin at White Earth who recognized it and sang the same song.

My sister went home from Red Lake but I stopped at Walker and crossed Leech Lake to the Leech Lake Indian Agency in search of more material. There I found that Flat Mouth, chief of the Pillager Band of Chippewa was dying. The Government doctor had done everything possible and the Indians were allowed to hold a ceremony of the Midewiwin for him. Once more let me pay a tribute of gratitude to an Episcopal missionary for it was with the encouragement of Miss Pauline Colby, missionary at Onigum, that I stayed and watched this remarkable ceremony. I was the only white person present and stood hour after hour beside the large circle of Indians, listening to the songs and watching the medicine men as they moved around their dying chief. As the end approached, he was carried into a teepee and a gun was fired when his spirit passed away. A funeral feast was held the next day and the Indians let me go into the teepee where they were assembled. They drew back the curtain that hung before the body of the chief and let me take a photograph of him,

in his best apparel.⁵ Then I asked an Indian boy to go into the woods with me to gather pine branches. With these we made a wreath for Flat Mouth's coffin and I stood with the Indians as he was lowered into the grave. He had loved the pines and ~~someway~~ I was glad that a few branches went with him, into his resting place.

With my notebooks, photograph films and the precious box of cylinder records I returned to my home in Red Wing and wrote to the Bureau of American Ethnology, telling of my experiences and of the rapid passing of opportunities to secure material from the old Chippewa Indians. An allotment of funds was made, ~~with which~~ I bought the best phonographic equipment available ~~at the time~~, and on September 25, 1907, I returned to the Leech Lake Agency at Onigum to begin the serious study of Indian music. That study has extended from British Columbia to the Everglades of Florida, including representative tribes in the principal areas. The phonographic recordings (1907-1941) have been transferred from the Bureau of American Ethnology to the National Archives, with the title of the Smithsonian-Densmore collection of *Sound* recordings of Indian songs, and among them are some of the records made by Big Bear in the music store at Detroit. Funds have been provided for transferring the entire collection to a permanent base from which copies can be made. This is delayed by the war emergency, but the ^{Chippewa} songs of my friends on the White Earth, Red Lake and Leech Lake reservations, with the songs of many other tribes, are preserved for posterity.

⁵ Chippewa Music, Bull. 45, Bureau American Ethnology, Pl. 7.
