



FRANCES DENSMORE GETS THE DEPRESSION BLUES

Joan M. Jensen

FRANCES DENSMORE WAS JUST A MONTH SHY of her sixty-sixth birthday in April 1933 when she received news that the Bureau of American Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution would no longer financially support her research on Native American music. In a word, she was fired. The Minnesota native, who had built a career as a self-trained ethnologist and ethnomusicologist, had been paid through an annual stipend for more than 25 years. Effective July 1, though, the New Deal government was downsizing and cutting costs, retaining all civil-service employees but eliminating all contract workers. At the same time, the administration was expanding its social services to the unemployed. Now Densmore was among them.

Like many others in this era, Densmore was feeling the vulnerability of a dedicated professional accustomed

to a middle-class work style that repaid effort with a sense of personal and financial worth. She had grown up in a comfortable middle-class family in the small community of Red Wing, located on the Mississippi River and known principally for the production of sturdy work shoes. One grandfather who settled there in 1857 became a judge. Her father, a graduate in civil engineering from Beloit College, owned a successful iron works. Her mother was prominent in civic and church affairs. Her parents had supported her studies at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and further musical education in Boston but ex-

ABOVE: Frances Densmore, 1928, at the height of her career as a musicologist. Fashionably yet plainly dressed, she wished to convey the poise and confidence of a well-established professional woman.

pected her to work for a living. She taught music, clerked in a music store, worked as a church organist, and lectured on music. Visiting the Chicago's World Fair in 1893, she heard Native American and Filipino music, then read anthropologist Alice Fletcher's new study of Omaha music and contacted her.¹

Fletcher had already achieved national recognition for recording the stories and music of various tribes. Densmore would go far beyond Fletcher in her vast project to record thousands of Native American songs, but both were part of a historic transition in women's work, as females moved from the accepted sphere of civic reform to become "new women," professionals who contributed to the advancement of scientific knowledge. This trend among middle-class women coincided with a new American fascination with antiquities and cultures that were considered to be pre-modern. What has come to be called the "Indian Craze" provided scientific and popular impetus for studying Native American communities, while the erroneous idea that all native cultures would disappear imparted a special urgency to those studies. Fletcher encouraged Densmore in her work of recording Indian music and in 1905 put her in touch with W. J. McGee, past director of the Bureau of American Ethnology. Densmore sent her first article on music to McGee for criticism and, on his advice, submitted it to Frederick W. Hodge, editor of the Smithsonian journal *American Anthropologist*. He immediately accepted it for publication. Hodge would also be influential in awarding Densmore her first stipend to do fieldwork recording music.²

Fletcher also gave Densmore permission to use her Sioux (probably Lakota or Dakota) recordings in lectures and urged her to study music more systematically. Densmore had gone on to do this, not only studying but conducting fieldwork, recording and transcribing the music, then producing manuscripts that placed the music in cultural settings. The Bureau of American Ethnology (BAE) had published 17 of her area studies on the music of individual tribes, along with monographs on Ojibwe customs and uses of plants. "Research work is only worthwhile when its results are transmitted to others," Densmore wrote in 1927. Now, her work was being interrupted.³

Densmore had depended on BAE grants to support her professional work since 1907 when the bureau gave her \$150 to record Ojibwe songs. Over the years, as she became an authority on native music, the grants increased to \$3,000 yearly (about \$49,000 today). Although the BAE did not hire her as a regular staff

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member, it gave her the official title of collaborator and an office in the Smithsonian for a number of years, where she worked each winter before going into the field to record. It also published all of her research reports as official government bulletins.⁴

In 1933 Densmore had just completed what she considered to be one of her most successful field trips to record Seminole music in Florida. During three forays between January 1931 and February 1933, she had visited the two main Seminole groups in their homes and two exhibition villages. She sought out the advice of the most influential Euro-American women and men who had formed non-governmental organizations to work with tribal leaders. These people arranged to have headman, Robert Oceola, act as her interpreter. He instructed her on protocol, introduced her to Seminole leaders, and arranged for her to be invited to their annual Green Corn dances. Through these experiences, Densmore was able to understand the economic importance of the tourist industry and the work of women, whose sales of "Seminole patchwork" helped the tribe to earn money after sales of hides and bird plumage declined. Densmore's vivid descriptions of Seminole women working with their hand-cranked sewing machines while listening to music on their phonographs were especially memorable.⁵

Coming at the end of this successful trip, the BAE's announcement of her termination left Densmore stunned. To soften the blow a bit, bureau chief Matthew W. Stirling added another \$500 to her current appropriation. She

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Margaret Densmore, Mille Lacs, about 1915. The sisters bought a Model T for their field trips (Margaret usually drove) and stayed in canvas cabins, pictured here.

could continue to use the title of collaborator. As for financing any further work, after June 30 she was on her own in an economy that was tightening its belt, leaving many cultural workers outside its circle of support. It would be two long years before the Works Progress (later, Projects) Administration was created to provide employment to such workers.⁶

Being jobless after all these years was almost unbelievable. Densmore described the BAE notification as the “Edict of April 15, 1933;” the event, “a fall.” Stirling had assured her that he was interested in her continued research and intended to keep publishing her work, but he had been instructed to discontinue all contracts. After the initial anger, Densmore huddled with her younger sister Margaret. As usual, Margaret was reassuring. She had been a constant companion and then part-time assistant as Densmore expanded her work for the BAE. Margaret eventually abandoned her teaching job to participate full time in the life work of her older sister. Competent, level-headed, and resourceful, Margaret managed the household, including cooking and finances, both at home and in the field, typed up manuscripts, arranged

transportation, and often drove their Model T. She had, Densmore once wrote to a friend, an exceptionally good rapport with the native people they visited each summer, especially remembering Ojibwe names. She was a good listener and excellent judge of manuscripts. Densmore later wrote, “Margaret is a *wonder* and my work would never have been done so thoroughly without her.” In return for her help, Densmore had promised to support Margaret at home, in Washington, and on their frequent field trips.⁷

Margaret reassured Frances that they could probably survive for eight months without the BAE stipend. Densmore had resisted the temptation to move to Washington to be close to the bureau. Instead, she and Margaret had stayed in Red Wing. They still had the family house to live in and some interest from family securities to live on, although their value was falling drastically. If economic conditions improved, the BAE might be able to restore her stipend for the following year. Meanwhile, they agreed, Frances could busy herself applying for grants from other institutions or individual patrons, obtain stints lecturing on native music and culture, and shape

her research into articles that could be sold to popular magazines.⁸

Densmore still had the tools of her trade. Her files were bulging with the accumulated notes and recordings from over 30 years of fieldwork. Her Columbia Graphophone, which she had bought with her own funds, served her so well in the field that she had stockpiled three second-hand machines for spare parts. A few years earlier her old typewriter had worn out, so she had a new one in good working order. Frances headed for the typewriter.⁹



Densmore's Graphophone, which she purchased in 1908 and used until 1940 for all recordings. An 1897 Sears, Roebuck catalog priced the "talking machine," carrying case, recording diaphragm, reproducing diaphragm, speaking tube, bottle of oil, screw driver, 12 records, hearing tube, and small horn at \$35.

FIRST, SHE SOUGHT the advice of mentors such as Frederick Hodge. Once director at the BAE, then employed at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City, and now director of the Museum of the Southwest in Los Angeles, Hodge sent Densmore a list of people to contact. She wrote back to him in early May, optimistically reporting her search: "My work is highly specialized but that narrows the competition, and my work has had a degree of publicity which should help." She closed by adding, "I have worked so exceedingly hard the past year that it would be good for me to have less pressure for a few months, and I hope that by that time the general situation will be better. My sister and I have our pleasant home, among old friends, and I am very glad that I have not cut loose from Red Wing."¹⁰

In order to receive the full stipend and the additional \$500, Densmore had to complete all of the work for her last contract. Her working arrangement was to request funds based on her field expenses and the length of her report and then receive portions of the allotted payment each time she submitted a manuscript. In 1932 she had managed to mail her last manuscript to the BAE before the July 1 deadline but then went off on a two-week field trip instead of resting as planned. As soon as the 1932–33 stipend was assured, she began sending in manuscripts. In September she submitted the first two on Winnebago (Ho-Chunk), Iroquois, Pueblo, and Seminole music. In November she left for a Gulf States recording trip, including a brief return to record more Seminole music. She submitted the year's third and fourth manuscripts

just before receiving the notice that her funding would end. She had to finish a fifth manuscript in May and the final one before the end of June.¹¹

By July 1933, when the pressure had lessened, Densmore's search for a job grew more frantic. A flurry of New Deal initiatives had stabilized banks and offered money to the states for relief and some jobs, but the depression continued to deepen. Millions of Americans were now jobless. As her file of correspondence grew, so did her discouragement. At the end of July, she summarized her first three months' search in a letter to Emily Davis at the Smithsonian's Science Service. This agency had been established in 1920 to help popularize the work of scientists, and Davis had advised Densmore on style and helped publicize her work during the 1920s. "I corresponded with all the Foundations," Densmore now confided, "but the outlook there is not good. They give grants only to Institutions, which must do the actual asking. Of course the Smithsonian can not ask. It may receive cooperation but cannot make any advances. The Foundations do not make their grants until Fall, and I shall still try for some connection."¹²

To get lecture engagements, Densmore continued, she had contacted a manager in New York. Enclosing a brochure advertising her availability to speak on Indian music, she told Davis: "I appreciate publicity, and shall need all the help I can get from my friends! It has not

been easy for me to go into the lecture field. I like my own, individual work much better, but this came to me, and I had to take whatever came to hand. It is 'diffusion of knowledge,' and perhaps will yield funds." Densmore was learning the facts of life on the lecture circuit: "It is hard to get dates near enough together to pay. I did not expect much from the lecture venture but thought it would keep my name familiar in some sections, and serve to 'tide over' until times became better. I am afraid, from present indications, that it will be some time before anything favorable appears in our outlook as a nation."

There were some small successes, but the Great Depression undercut many of Densmore's possibilities. She reported later to Hodge that she had received enthusiastic support from the Women's Club of Minneapolis and a lecture engagement for January 1934. The University of Iowa asked her to speak in February. The Daughters of the American Revolution arranged for her to make two radio broadcasts but offered no compensation at all. Women's groups had been the mainstay for the lecture circuit, but interest in and funds for speakers declined during the depression. Lectures brought in very little.¹³

Her efforts to write for money were not much more successful. Before working for the BAE, Densmore had published some stories for children, and Davis had placed several short children's articles in the 1920s, but Densmore never quite got the knack of writing popular stories—for adults or children. She now sold three articles to mass-market music magazines, including *Music America*. One brought her only three dollars.¹⁴

In addition to corresponding with old friends and the foundations and individuals they suggested, Densmore wrote a series of long letters between July 1933 and January 1934 to the popular western author Mary Austin. These missives track Densmore's hopes and disappointments as she continued to look for work. Hodge had put the two women in touch during the 1920s, when Austin was experimenting with recording Indian voices. Austin, who drew on the lives of California Indians for her popular books, moved to Santa Fe in 1924, where she



Makawastewin (Susan Windgrow), a Prairie Island Dakota, explaining the uses of plants to Densmore, about 1930

campaigned to conserve native arts and handicrafts as well as Pueblo land and religion.¹⁵

Austin had asked Densmore to visit her in Santa Fe, but Densmore could not breathe well at high altitudes. Instead, she sent long letters to a woman she knew was sympathetic to her efforts to preserve native culture through study and publication. Austin was getting very little from royalties but had signed a lucrative contract for her autobiography, which brought her an advance of \$10,000. Densmore, however, considered herself a scientist, not a scribe who wrote about Indians for a popular audience. Nor did she consider her personal life a possible subject for autobiography or biography. She gave interviews reluctantly and later, when she wrote her will, ordered all her personal correspondence destroyed.

In her letters to Austin, Densmore reprised her work now stopped in midstream. She counted 17 published books between 1910 and 1932, with another manuscript ready for the printer. She had in her study 200 songs still to be transcribed, including a group of Seminole songs just recorded in Florida, along with piles of notes ready to be written up. "Unless some financial support is found my work is going to absolutely stop and I shall have to find some cheap commercial job—perhaps in a *store*," she complained in August 1933, not realizing, perhaps, how difficult it would be to find *any* job. "Fear my career with relation to Indians is almost over." Four months later, she

wrote: "It is very hard not to blame myself for keeping in, or entering research work. . . . I am now unfitted to earn my living in any commercial way and my sister, who was formerly a school teacher, is also without 'business connections.'" And in January 1934, she told Austin: "My work is in the state of any large, going concern, stopped short with no warning."¹⁶

AS SHE GREW MORE DESPERATE, DENSMORE looked to state funding for relief. In December 1933 she wrote to Austin of her absolute failure to earn money through her regular work. "I have carried the strain of this situation for eight months and am beginning to feel the effect, as every effort fails." The following January she wrote, "I have made every effort in logical lines—now I shall have to wait for Fate to lead something to me."

By early 1934 she had resigned herself to seeking employment with the Public Works Administration (PWA) in Minnesota. She did not qualify, they told her, because she owned her home and had no dependents. She and her sister were not classed as "needy." She tried to get a job as a matron in a state institution, but that did not seem promising. Noticing well-dressed men, she said it did not appear that everyone who got PWA assistance was a charity case.¹⁷

The State of Minnesota offered some jobs but few that would utilize her training and abilities. Women in Minnesota could braid rugs for rugs and mend books, which paid \$15 to \$21 a week and was practically limited to those in need of food. "Even were I willing to endure the humiliation," she told Hodge, she would not be eligible for this aid. Densmore had collected a number of objects for the Minnesota Historical Society in the early 1930s, but any new funding seemed doubtful. She was aware that conditions in other countries were much worse for cultural workers. A Russian scholar had written to tell her that he had read her books. He himself had wrecked his health doing manual labor and was almost starving. At least she was better off than that.¹⁸

One year after her loss of BAE funding, Densmore and her sister had managed to patch together enough income to survive, but the future still looked bleak. Now resigned to the fact that her contract with the BAE would not resume, Densmore was still looking elsewhere for a similar source of income. She had asked the National Research Council for funding to study recordings at the National Museum of Canada. She hoped to get Edgar L.

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Hewitt, formerly at the BAE, to request a Rockefeller Grant through the University of Southern California where he now taught. Nothing came of either request, and without the backing of a university, she doubted that she could get any grant.¹⁹

She turned to politics. Densmore sent a report of her work directly to Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, urging his support of her recording of native music. She wrote optimistically to Austin in March 1934 that Collier had replied, saying it seemed important to find a way to keep her working in the field. "I hope he shows it to the President and asks him if I had better junk my accumulation of material, unfinished, and take boarders, or do something else that will wreck my health in a few months." This did sound whiny, but at 66, with several bouts of serious illness behind her, there was reason for her to whine a bit. Her energy must have been flagging.²⁰

In July she grumped to Hodge that although President Roosevelt in May had sent a message to the National Folk Festival at St. Louis that he valued native arts, he apparently did not consider music to be an art. Any employment, she felt, would be for Indians themselves; for example, hiring youths to work and elders to teach songs. "I think Collier would rather preserve the songs in that way," she wrote. After years of officially banning native dances, the Bureau of Indian Affairs under Collier had lifted all injunctions. Although most people had continued to dance in secrecy—and some in public performances sanctioned by the bureau—communities could now publicly continue to practice their dance traditions.²¹

At the same time, Densmore grumbled that government policy seemed to be different with regard to African American music, which the Library of Congress was collecting for its Archive of American Folk Song. She believed that longstanding academic and public interest in Indian music as "the" authentic American music was being replaced by public fascination with jazz and the blues, which were becoming the most popular "folk"



Densmore family home, Red Wing, about 1920. Frances and Margaret lived and worked here for the rest of their lives.

music. Government programs now seemed to be refocusing on native arts and crafts rather than continuing support for her music-recording project.²²

Densmore attributed the growing interest in African American work songs, blues, and jazz to a shift away from an “intellectual” interest in cultural expression toward a “popular” involvement with folk culture. People seemed to be looking for folk music in which they could participate through singing and dancing. It is true that public interest in Native American visual and performing arts diminished during this time. Whatever the causes, later scholars have documented a definite shrinking of the non-native audience for Indian expressive culture during the 1930s, less interest in learning from and incorporating it into mainstream culture, and a flourishing of interest in African American music.²³

While Densmore detected a decline of an earlier public fascination with Indian art and music, she continued to maintain that the roots of American music must be found in native America as well as in Europe and Africa. She considered Asian music to be the distant relative of Indian music, and thus American music had a kinship to the broad areas of the world.

As for coping with her own “blues,” Densmore finally resorted to prayer. “I am renewing my own prayers for a solution of my problems,” she wrote to Austin in March 1934. “One learns a great deal from the Indians, and realizes how little we ourselves are, and how great are the mysterious forces around us.” She had attended church with the Episcopalians, Christian Scientists, Unitarians, and even Catholics on reservations with no Protestant churches. “With it all, I now have the feeling that I am going to be able to make the best of whatever comes to me,” she wrote to Austin a few months later. Not one to rely on prayers alone, Densmore persisted in her search for funding. In 1935 she managed to find private support through the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles for a two-month recording trip to the Cheyenne-Arapaho reservation in El Reno, Oklahoma.²⁴

That same year, the Federal Writers’ Project had received funds to prepare state guides, but it was dogged by struggles between federal and state administrators. Mabel S. Ulrich, director of the Minnesota program, seemed unfamiliar with Minnesota writers. She hired journalists, was not interested in folklore, and conceived of Indian history as mainly suitable for children.²⁵

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Finally, three long years after Densmore left the BAE, the State of Minnesota found a way to employ her. In March 1936 the Works Progress Administration hired her as supervisor of Indian handicrafts. She was sent to Cass Lake to study women's use of birch-bark cutouts, apparently to help adapt patterns for use on items suitable for sale to tourists. While this undoubtedly seemed better than taking in boarders, Densmore must have felt relief when her efforts to obtain major research funding finally proved successful. On July 1, 1936, she resigned from the Cass Lake project when the Southwest Museum funded new recording projects. She held a final tea in St. Paul to exhibit Ojibwe women's work, gave a talk for the Minnesota Archaeological Society at the craft show at the Walker Art Museum in Minneapolis, and spoke about the project over KSTP radio at the invitation of the *Minneapolis Journal*. By the end of July she was in California. The funding gave Densmore the opportunity to resume fieldwork and recording, use the museum's important archival sources, receive editorial counsel from director Hodge, and see her new work through to publication.²⁶

These projects sustained her through the most difficult years of the depression. While Hodge offered important institutional support, the financing came from a private source. Densmore dedicated the three resulting books to Eleanor Hague. Today Hague is remembered as a pioneer Latin Americanist who collected, transcribed, and preserved Spanish-language folksongs. In the 1930s she financed Densmore's fieldwork,

offered her much-needed encouragement, and probably provided hospitality at her Pasadena home while Densmore worked at the nearby museum. The funding allowed Densmore to record the songs of a Santo Domingo Pueblo singer temporarily in Los Angeles and of the California Maidu. Gone now were comments about the "disappearing" race. She wrote that her purpose was to find and record the Indian songs that pertained to the old life and still survived among people living under modern conditions. The Southwest Museum also published several of Densmore's articles in its journal, *Masterkey*.²⁷

As these projects were winding down, the Minnesota Writer's Project finally produced a job. In the fall of 1937 Densmore was hired to write "A Short History of the Indians in Minnesota for Use in School." She completed this assignment in September 1938.²⁸

SOMEHOW FRANCES AND MARGARET MANAGED. While the BAE published her accumulated research sporadically after 1938, the results of her Seminole research, completed in 1932, did not appear until 1956. The bureau never again sponsored her fieldwork, although she drummed up other support in the 1940s to record songs in the Wisconsin Dells, travel to Nebraska to revisit some of Fletcher's work among the Omaha, and survey Michigan Indians. Her anger at the abrupt rupture with the BAE remained. In 1941 the National Archives hired her as a temporary consultant, and she returned to



Displaying the project's accomplishments at the Minnesota State Fair

Washington for five months to work on organizing her own archive. Densmore arranged to transfer her papers and recordings from the BAE to the National Archives and to the Archive of American Folk Song at the Library of Congress. She told a *Time* magazine reporter in 1938, “Nothing downs me.” To a friend she wrote, “I have refused to stop,” but despite her determination to continue writing, her active fieldwork was pretty well over.²⁹

Like many who lose their jobs in hard economic times, Densmore went through the expected stages of anger, denial, determined efforts to find new work, and finally resignation to cobbling together support from public programs, short-term grants from institutions, and private sources. Lacking an institutional base such as a university or a museum, where few women were able to obtain positions during the 1930s, she had to fall back on family, friends, and personal contacts.

Determined to preserve what she had achieved, Densmore devoted the last 20 years of her life to writing up what she had collected and to saving her records, notes, and memorabilia. She retyped material and placed it in the National Archives, donated her scrapbooks to the Library of Congress, gave objects, photographs, and documents to the Minnesota Historical Society. She continued to correspond with younger scholars in the field but ordered that all of her own personal correspondence be destroyed at her death.³⁰

Densmore complained about the lack of recognition for her work in letters to the young anthropologist Charles Hofmann during the 1940s. Like many other women scientists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, she believed that research and publishing would bring her this acclaim. Like others, she had kept a low profile in her institution while developing networks and supporters. Such strategies had allowed these “new women” to survive and even flourish, but recognition for their work was slow in coming. For Densmore, it came belatedly, when she was in her seventies. Much of it was local rather than national, and little came from the anthropological profession, now securely ensconced within the walls of academia. By the 1950s, anthropology as a whole was not interested in expressive culture; the visual arts were usually left to art historians. We can see that transition now, in retrospect, but Densmore must have felt it keenly as she struggled to preserve her legacy in a field that would later become known as Native American studies. Still, she compiled her archive and left it as she wished it to be. She was exceptionally proud of her honorary doctorate, granted by Macalester College in



Densmore, aged 87, receiving an award from Harold Dean Cater, director of the Minnesota Historical Society, 1954

St. Paul in 1950, and wanted it listed after her name. In 1957 she celebrated her ninetieth birthday in Red Wing and died there shortly after.

AS FOR DENSMORE’S LEGACY: TODAY, SCHOLARS, both Indian and non-Indian, are seeking to assess her work. The decades during which she recorded the music of native communities were decades of destruction and survival. She worked for a government that suppressed Indian cultures at a time when communities needed their traditions to resist pressure to relinquish their land and lifeways. Mainstream America romanticized the “disappearing Indian,” prizing selective parts of Indian cultures while supporting their disappearance. Euro-American scholar Melissa Meyer movingly described Densmore’s era in *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation*. Yet Meyer and others still consult Densmore’s work to describe what that dispossession meant to the Ojibwe people.

Her immense archive of ethnological data, musical recordings and transcriptions, and objects continues to provide researchers with new insights and raise new questions about Densmore. Along with ethnomusicolo-



One of Densmore's many photos documenting women's work: Papagine (Mary Razer) drying fish nets, White Earth Reservation, 1910s

gists, historians of women and of native peoples are among the scholars who bring new perspectives to an evaluation of her era, life, and work. Native scholars, in particular, are intensely involved in reevaluating this period of history. They are still sorting out Densmore's relations to the Ojibwe people, with whom she had her longest contact. Some have bitterly criticized workers like Densmore who visited Indian communities simply to transmit observations to a government and nation intent on destroying those communities. Other scholars have used Densmore's research as part of their efforts to reconstruct their own history. Native musicians and linguists consider Densmore's archive a rich resource for the preservation and reintroduction of older traditions into new expressive culture. Her studies of ethnobotany seem newly important, as food studies and efforts to preserve botanical diversity raise fresh questions and priorities.³¹

American studies scholar Brenda Child has found much in Densmore's work that is valuable both as a link to her own Ojibwe cultural heritage and to the world at large. In her introduction to a reprint of Densmore's 1928 book on Ojibwe ethnobotany, Child wrote that the study "remains an important introduction to how Ojibwe, especially women, used plants in the early twentieth

Over a long life, Densmore learned from the people who ostensibly were her subjects.

century." Child concluded that Densmore "remarkably . . . overcame many of the biases of her cultural milieu and learned to appreciate the specialized knowledge that Ojibwe people living in remote places like Red Lake offered the rest of the world."³²

Using Densmore's photographs of Minnesota Anishinaabeg in a recent book, anthropologist Bruce White concluded that Densmore's photographic record of White Earth Reservation is evidence not just of her research abilities but also of her collaboration with skilled Ojibwe people who interpreted their culture for her.³³ As these visions and revisions progress, there is still much to be learned from all that Densmore collected and created. More material is still being reconstructed from letters that have survived in collections of other people's correspondence.

AS A PIONEERING ANTHROPOLOGIST AND “NEW woman” at a time when women had little access to institutional support or careers, Densmore was one of a small group of mostly self-trained scholars who opened the field for women scientists. She now ranks among those few Euro-American women who carved out an important place in American intellectual history despite the odds against them.

For all of this reassessment, Densmore’s life and work remain embedded in the early-twentieth century, when repressive government policies and negative popular prejudices coexisted uneasily with a movement to preserve parts of Indian culture. Over a long life, Densmore learned from the people who ostensibly were her subjects. Native people realized that such a collaborator could help them retain what they needed and wanted as they faced long odds against maintaining their traditions. Densmore could not have done her work without the cooperation of native people determined to retain their culture even while changing it. They taught Densmore what was important to them. Thus her work, started to

record a “vanishing race,” became one way in which native people preserved their culture and defied predictions that they would vanish.

Densmore herself expected to preserve her life’s work for future study. The fragmentation of her career in the 1930s was partly due to her own decision to move into the new field of ethnography and study Native American music instead of the more popular nineteenth-century European music. In doing so, she helped bring Americans home to study their own New World musical heritage in addition to classical Old World traditions. But the path she chose also led her to an insecure future, and ultimately, an often-forgotten place in American musicology. Partly, it was timing. Her generation found its work interrupted by the most severe depression Americans had ever experienced. That fate left her at mid-career adrift with other cultural workers. She did not starve and she did not have to do manual labor. But she labored nonetheless at her typewriter and, like other middle-class professionals devastated by the collapse of the economy as they knew it, survived. □

Notes

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1. Nina Marchetti Archabal, “Frances Densmore: Pioneer in the Study of American Indian Music,” in *Women of Minnesota: Selected Biographical Essays*, ed. Barbara Stuhler and Gretchen Kreuter (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), 94–115; Thomas Vennum Jr., “Frances Theresa Densmore,” in *Notable American Women: The Modern Period*, ed. Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 185–86; Nancy Oestreich Lurie, “Women in Early American Anthropology,” in *Pioneers of American Anthropology: The Uses of Biography*, ed. June Helm (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966), 68–72. Charles Hofmann, comp. and ed., *Frances Densmore and American Indian Music*, Contributions from the Museum of the

American Indian, Heye Foundation, vol. 23 (New York, 1968) contains the most complete list of her publications. Michelle W. Patterson, “To be Remembered and Recognized: Frances Densmore’s Creation of Herself as a Professional Female Anthropologist,” delivered at the Women’s and Gender History of the Midwest Conference, June 27–28, 2008, discusses Densmore’s early career in detail.

2. Frances Densmore to Frederick W. Hodge, May 14, 1906, Frederick W. Hodge/Frances Densmore Correspondence, Autry National Center/Braun Research Center, Los Angeles (ANC/BRC; all correspondence cited between the two is in this collection). For McGee’s role in fostering the work of early women anthropologists, see Darlis A. Miller, *Matilda Cox Stevenson: Pioneering Anthropologist* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 88–89. See also Alessandra Lorini, “Alice Fletcher and the Search for Women’s Public Recognition in Professionalizing Anthropology,” *Cromohs* 8 (2003): 1–25, or www.cromohs.unifi.it/8_2003/lorini.html (accessed Mar. 7, 2011); Elizabeth Hutchinson, *The Indian Craze: Primitivism, Modernism, and Transculturation in American Art, 1890–1915* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

3. Frances Densmore to Emily Davis, Mar. 19, 1927, Science Service Records, Re-

cord Unit 7091, box 94, folder 5, Smithsonian Institution Archives, hereinafter cited as RU 7091.

4. Densmore had an annual appropriation from Congress, which was paid out as she completed manuscripts and requested payment; Densmore to H. W. Dorsey, Feb. 1, 1932, explains this system. See also Densmore to Matthew W. Stirling, June 17, 1933, both in Series 1, Correspondence, Letters Received, box 153, National Anthropological Archives (NAA), Suitland, MD.

5. Frances Densmore, *Seminole Music*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 161 (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1956), v–vi, xxv–xxviii. Although Densmore returned to Florida in 1954 to lecture, she did not add any new material to her 1930s account. It is not clear exactly when she finished the manuscript, but she was working on the index in January 1939 at the BAE.

6. On the formal notification and Densmore’s response, see Matthew W. Stirling to Frances Densmore, Apr. 22, 1933, and Densmore to Stirling, Apr. 25, 1933, box 153, NAA. She expected this to be a hiatus, not a termination. See also Densmore, Apr. 22 (penned in), Densmore Scrapbook, vol. 5, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress (AFC/LC). She also refers to the notification in a letter to Mary Austin, Aug. 29, 1933, Mary Austin Papers, box 74,

Huntington Library, San Marino, CA (HL; all letters cited are in this box). Kenneth H. Hendrickson Jr., "The WPA Federal Art Projects in Minnesota," *Minnesota History* 53 (Spring 1993): 170–83.

7. "Edict" in Frances Densmore to Charles Hofmann, July 16, 1945, vol. 5, Stephen Smith Collection, AFC/LC; comments about Margaret in Densmore to Hofmann, Oct. 9, Nov. 1, 1945, vol. 6, Smith collection. Margaret died in January 1947 after a short illness. While researching for his public-radio documentary on Densmore, Smith obtained copies of her letters to anthropologist Hofmann and later deposited them in the archive.

8. Frances Densmore to Mary Austin, Aug. 29, 1933, Austin papers, HL.

9. "Report on recording equipment used in recording Indian songs for the Bureau of American Ethnology," original appended to Frances Densmore to H. W. Dorsey, Mar. 28, 1940, NAA, copy from Marcia Anderson, MHS. On the new typewriter, see Frances Densmore to Emily Davis, May 8, 1931, box 126, folder 2, RU 7091.

10. Frances Densmore to Frederick Hodge, May 6, 1933, ANC/BRC.

11. Frances Densmore to H. W. Dorsey, Sept. 2, 1932, and Densmore to Matthew Stirling, Sept. 30, 1932, Mar. 25, Apr. 25, May 15, 1933—all in box 153, NAA.

12. Here and below, Frances Densmore to Emily Davis, July 25, 1933, box 145, folder 3, RU 7091.

13. Frances Densmore to Frederick Hodge, Nov. 8, 1933, ANC/BRC.

14. Emily Davis to Frances Densmore, Sept. 17, 1934, box 153, folder 9; Densmore to Edwin E. Slosson, May 28, Sept. 20, 1929, Slosson to Densmore, Sept. 4, 16, 1929, and Memorandum WD [Watson Davis?] to Slosson, Sept. 14, 1929, box 39, folder 4—all RU 7091. On selling articles, see Frances Densmore to Mary Austin, Dec. 26, 1933, Austin papers, HL.

15. Here and below, Frances Densmore to Mary Austin, July 24, 1933, Jan. 18, 1934, Austin papers, HL. On Austin, see Joan M. Jensen, *One Foot on the Rockies: Women and Creativity in the Modern American West* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 67–73; on her financial success and involvement in cultural and political issues, see Margaret D. Jacobs, *Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879–1934* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 112–13.

16. Here and below, Frances Densmore to Mary Austin, Aug. 29, 1933, Dec. 26, 1933, Jan. 8, 1934, Austin papers, HL.

17. Frances Densmore to Mary Austin, Jan. 18, 1934, Austin papers, HL.

18. Frances Densmore to Frederick Hodge, Nov. 8, 1933, Oct. 3, 1934, ANC/BRC.

19. Frances Densmore to Frederick Hodge, July 25, 1934, ANC/BRC.

20. Frances Densmore to Mary Austin, Mar. 22, 1934, Austin papers, HL.

21. Frances Densmore to Frederick Hodge, July 25, 1934, ANC/BRC.

22. The folk song archive (today part of the American Folklife Center) was founded at the Library of Congress in 1928. Early directors John Lomax and his son Alan supported recording African American (and other "grassroots") music in the 1930s; James Hardin, "The Archive of Folk Culture at 75: A National Project with Many Workers," *Folklife Center News*, Spring 2003, p. 3–4.

23. See especially Densmore to Hofmann, July 24, 1943, Apr. 26, 1944, June 1, 1944, Nov. 4, 1944, Jan. 13, 1945, Jan. 18, 1945, Smith collection, AFC/LC. For the rise and decline of mainstream interest in Native American culture, especially art and music, see Michael V. Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Hutchinson, *Indian Craze*.

24. Frances Densmore to Mary Austin, Mar. 22, June 4, 1934, Austin papers, HL; Frances Densmore, *Cheyenne and Arapaho Music*, Southwest Museum Papers, No. 10 (Los Angeles, 1936), 13.

25. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 56; Hendrickson, "WPA Federal Arts Projects," 176–77.

26. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 56; Frances Densmore, "Modern Chippewa Handiwork," *Minnesota Archaeologist*, Aug. 1936, p. 1; *Red Wing Daily Republican*, July 2, 1936, Densmore Scrapbook, vol. 6, 1934–38, AFL/LC; Frances Densmore, *Music of Santo Domingo Pueblo, New Mexico*, Southwest Museum Papers, No. 12 (Los Angeles, 1938).

27. Elizabeth Waldo, "Eleanor Hague (1875–1954)," *Western Folklore* 14 (Oct. 1955): 279–80; Densmore Scrapbook, vol. 6, July 1938, AFC/LC, for references to Hague and photographs of her home. Two later letters from Densmore to Hague (Nov. 6, 1942, Sept. 6, 1944, mss. 203, folders 10b, 10a, Eleanor Hague Collection, ANC/BRC) record their continued friendship. In the 1944 letter Densmore said that she had earned nothing in a year and had written to everyone she could think of. See also Frances Densmore to Charles Hofmann, July 16,

1945, vol. 5, Smith collection, AFC/LC.

The third volume was not published for two decades: Frances Densmore, *Music of the Maidu Indians of California*, Frederick Webb Hodge Anniversary Publication Fund VII (Los Angeles, 1958). Densmore corrected the galley proofs just before she died in June 1957.

28. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 56. This history is on microfilm at MHS.

29. Hofmann, *Frances Densmore*, 57–60; "Whoop Collector," *Time* Nov. 7, 1938, p. 25; Frances Densmore to Charles Hofmann, Apr. 13, 1943, vol. 2, Smith collection, AFC/LC.

30. Here and below, "Introduction, Author Stephen Smith's Observations on the Interior Life of Frances Densmore," and "Frances Densmore: Song Catcher," in Stephen Smith, "Song Catcher—Frances Densmore and Red Wing," American RadioWorks documentary, Feb. 1997, <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/densmore/docs/index.shtml> (accessed Mar. 10, 2011); Shirley A. Leckie and Nancy J. Parezo, eds., *Their Own Frontier: Women Intellectuals Re-Visioning the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 23–24.

31. See, for example, Thomas Vennum Jr.'s evaluations of Densmore's recordings in "The Changing Role of Women in Ojibway Music History," in *Women in North American Indian Music: Six Essays*, ed. Richard Keeling, Society for Musicology, Special Series No. 6, 1989, p. 13–21, and "Introduction," in *Frances Densmore's Chippewa Music* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1973), a reprint of two volumes published by the BAE in 1910 and 1913. For negative Native American reactions, see Michael F. Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 21–22.

32. Brenda J. Child, "Introduction," in *Strength of the Earth: The Classic Guide to Ojibwe Uses of Native Plants* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), vi, xi, reprint of "Uses of Plants by the Chippewa Indians," *44th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1926–1927* (Washington, D.C., 1928).

33. Bruce M. White, *We Are At Home: Pictures of the Ojibwe People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), especially 138–44.

All photographs are in MHS collections; p. 219 is by Eric Mortenson, MHS.



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