

Frances Densmore Chippewa/Ojibwe Cylinder Collection (1907-1910)

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Essay by Michelle Wick Patterson (guest post)*



Frances Densmore

Growing up in the Mississippi River town of Red Wing, Minnesota, Frances Densmore (1867-1957) claimed that from an early age, “I heard an Indian drum.” She recalled hearing the drumming of her Dakota neighbors as a child and reflected, “Others have heard the same drum and the sound was soon forgotten but I have followed it all these years.” Her childhood experiences eventually led to a long career as an ethnomusicologist of Native American music. From her first forays into Indian song in the 1890s to her eventual employment as a researcher for the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnography from 1907 to 1933, Densmore devoted her life to the study of Native American music.

The 1950 release of her album “Chippewa Music,” along with subsequent albums from other groups under the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress (AFS), served as a culmination of her life’s work. Densmore intended the collection of songs to “make available to students and scholars the hitherto inaccessible and extraordinarily valuable original recordings,” as she noted in the pamphlet accompanying the album. She envisioned the album as a compliment to her published studies, “Chippewa Music” (1910) and “Chippewa Music II” (1913). Accordingly, the album featured 30 songs from 16 singers, and covered six genres of music (Dream Songs, War Songs, Miscellaneous Songs, Songs Used in the Treatment of the Sick, Songs of the Midéwiwin [a religious society], and Love Songs). Liner notes included direct references to her published work on the tribe and provided context for the singing of the songs, descriptions of their performances, biographies of the singers, and details on the recording process.

Frances Densmore recorded mainly from 1907-1911. Prior to this fieldwork, she worked as a classically trained musician (she studied at Oberlin Conservatory in the 1880s) in the

Twin Cities and as a lecturer for women's musical clubs. The publication of Alice Fletcher's "Omaha Indian Music" inspired Densmore to add, "The Music of the American Indians" to her lecture circuit repertoire (with Fletcher's permission to use her work). A trip to the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1904 further propelled her to begin research on her own. An article on Filipino music at the Fair, paved the way for a \$150 research fund from the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1907. Densmore bought a new phonograph with these funds to record songs on wax cylinders. Seen as cutting edge technology at the time, the phonograph had the additional benefit of being portable and useful on the remote reservations Densmore visited, although the short recording time of the cylinders and the need to constantly monitor the equipment limited her efforts to capture songs in their original context.

Armed with her phonograph, Densmore and her sister, Margaret, journeyed to reservations in Minnesota, including White Earth, Red Lake, and other Ojibwe communities ("Ojibwe" or "Anishinaabe" being terms generally used by these groups today). She collaborated with "mixed blood" tribal members, often other women, and interpreters to locate and record the oldest songs from the oldest singers, generally men. At home, she transcribed the songs into Western musical notation, a problematic approach, but few alternate models of study existed in these early years of what came to be known as ethnomusicology. Her annual reports to the Bureau on her research formed the bases for her two publications on the topic. Densmore engaged with Ojibwe communities even as she expanded her study of Native American music to their Lakota neighbors in the Dakotas in the 1910s and to numerous other Indian groups into the 1950s. She collected Ojibwe material culture for museums, studied the ethnobotany of the tribe, and published "Chippewa Customs" in 1929.

As she saw her career drawing to a close in the 1940s, Densmore labored to establish an archive of her work. She donated manuscripts, photographs, correspondence, and items of Native American material culture to several organizations. Most significantly, the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress, received over 2,000 wax cylinders from her decades of fieldwork. Densmore worked closely with AFS staff on the duplication project to preserve her recordings on more modern media and to preserve her archive for future scholars. Her album, "Songs of the Chippewa," in many ways, became a testament to her life's work. Densmore labored to ensure the songs selected for it represented the best recordings available, that the album validated her research methods, and that allowing musicians and other scholars to hear the actual songs would generate new appreciation for Indian music.

In his study of Densmore's "Chippewa Music," Thomas J. Vennum, Jr. remarks, "The field recordings—unique for their time in number, variety, and excellence of recording quality—are Densmore's greatest contribution." Vennum and other ethnomusicologists have raised questions about her methods and the Euro-centric assumptions she brought to the study of Native American music. Still, the publications and the album served as a repository for cultural products that no longer persisted in Ojibwe communities. Upon the completion of "Songs of the Chippewa" in 1950, Densmore expressed some interest in sharing the collection with descendants of the original singers but seemed to have little

interest in their contemporary musical culture. Her focus on preserving the oldest songs, and seeing these old songs as the only authentic expression of Native music, led to an uneasy relationship with tribal members at the time. Additionally, her willingness to record sacred songs, especially from the Midéwiwin society, violated Ojibwe customs and practices. Present-day Ojibwe communities have raised questions about Densmore's methods and motives. Marcie R. Rendon's play, "Song Catcher," which examines the impact Densmore's collection had on Ojibwe communities in the past and present, exemplifies the conflicting desires to recover musical customs lost to the impact of colonialism or to reject her work for its problematic nature.

The Densmore album "Songs of the Chippewa," remains a significant album today for many reasons. As Densmore hoped, it provides modern listeners with the actual sounds of Ojibwe singing from the early 20th century, capturing songs that emerged from an even earlier time. Her assumptions and motives for this collection reveal the ethnocentrism of non-Native scholars who benefited from the study of the music while paying little attention to the struggles of the people whose music they studied. It, further, reminds us of the struggles of modern Native Americans to resist and recover their cultures after centuries of American colonialism.

Michelle Wick Patterson teaches American women's and Native American history at Mount St. Mary's University in Maryland. She, along with Joan M. Jensen, edited and wrote "Travels with Frances Densmore. Her Life, Work, and Legacy in Native American Studies" (University of Nebraska Press, 2015).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.