

The Challenges of Culture



"Indians singing for Miss Densmore at site of last Sun Dance south of Fort Yates ND"
Photo by Franke Fiske, SHSND #1952-1610

"Music is intertwined with the life of every race. We understand the people better if we know their music and we appreciate their music better if we know the people."

From "The American Indians and Their Music" By Frances Densmore, 1926

Frances Densmore had previous experience working with indigenous peoples when she first arrived at the Standing Rock Reservation in North Dakota in 1911. Her first book, *Chippewa Music*, was published in 1910 and represented years of her work with the Ojibwa/Anishinaabe tribes in Minnesota. She learned tribal protocols through her meetings with tribal elders and use of interpreters. At Standing Rock things seemed to come into place for her. In a 1941 Smithsonian bulletin she described her working conditions at Fort Yates:



"Fort Yates - kitchen of the old fort Densmore first office"
Library of Congress

"I remember with queer affection an office at Fort Yates, North Dakota, that had been part of the kitchen of the old fort. Subsequently it had been used as a coal shed, and it had neither door nor windows when I took over. The agent let a prisoner from the guardhouse help me fix it up and he suggested boring holes in the floor to let the water run through, when the floor was cleaned. He made steps, rehung the door, and nailed window sash over the openings, and I pasted paper over the broken plaster and used packing boxes as tables. For many weeks I used that office, and the Indians felt at home there, which is important...It is a rare combination if I have a comfortable place to stay, an interpreter, singers and a place to record all at the same time."

This rare combination led to the publication of Densmore's noted work; *Teton Sioux Music*, commonly regarded as the benchmark of Sioux ethnology studies.

Councils with the elders at Standing Rock lasted for several weeks, and included the only man still alive who had acted as an intercessor at the last Sun Dance held in 1881. 15 men took part, and about 40 others were interviewed. These informants, who were carefully selected, lived within a radius of about 80 miles. In her book she includes brief biographies, and in some cases photographs, of the main informants from the council. These elders retained control of what they would share and reviewed her material thoroughly to insure its accuracy.

Densmore was still faced with the awkward cultural issue of being a single white woman recording the testimony and singing of tribal men. The origin of the solution is unclear, but at a council meeting in July of 1911 Thokála Lúta (Red Fox) declared his intention to adopt Densmore as his daughter.

Red Fox had the right to do this as had he lost his own daughter and it was the accepted custom to “adopt” a new one. This made Densmore a member of the tribe, a position she exploited to her own advantage. Densmore later wrote:

“My adoption into the tribe will be of the greatest help in this study as it is widely understood that I am entitled to anything which a member of the tribe is entitled to... old men would not hold back anything from me”

Source: *Travels With Frances Densmore*, Michelle Wick Patterson

Near the end of Teton Sioux Music, Densmore includes a number of honoring songs dedicated to Two White Buffalo, which was name given to her by Red Fox.

Suggested link: <https://vimeo.com/723370113>

Song 227 Whenever the Tribe Assembles-Honoring Two White Buffalo (3:24)