

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Omaha Indian Music: Historic Recordings from the Fletcher/LaFlesche Collection. Edited by Dorothy Sara Lee and Maria LaVigna.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/429584cb>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 10(3)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Vernnum, Thomas, Jr.

Publication Date

1986-06-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

elderly Clallam women residing at Lower Elwha, Jamestown and Port Gamble, WA, between 1974 and 1975, finding them similar. Eells' Clallam data, as concerns these limited accounts, seem reliable.

The strong contribution and anthropological value of Eells' work, as Professor Elmendorf suggests, is his first-hand reporting. Not only should serious students of Northwest Coast peoples read Eells' comprehensive descriptions, they may also wish to read Gunther's *Klallam Ethnography* and Elmendorf's *The Structure of Twana Culture* (1960). As Castile notes, Barnett's work, *Indian Shakers* (1957), is necessary, too, in adding perspective to Eell's discussion of Shaker religion; Elmendorf thinks the Eells' Shaker data are a "first-rate historical source material leading up to and into the early development of the Indian Shaker Church at Skokomish" (pp. 453-54).

When reading these research materials, keeping Eell's data in perspective, the value of Eells' work as first-hand reporting is highlighted. As already noted, even Eells' cultural and personal biases may be significant in developing an understanding of the process of culture change that affected the shape and direction of Puget Sound and Olympic Peninsula native cultures.

Eells' subjectiveness, then, may be an added contribution to Northwest Coast studies, as the unself-consciously reported biases of a late-1800s missionary. Identifying and understanding these biases, which guided his observations and molded and constrained his commentary, will allow the reader to gain an appreciation of Eells' personal vision of the Puget Salish.

Mark S. Fleisher
Washington State University

Omaha Indian Music: Historic Recordings from the Fletcher/LaFlesche Collection. Edited by Dorothy Sara Lee and Maria LaVigna. Washington: American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, in cooperation with the Omaha Tribal Council, 1985. Disc or cassette plus one pamphlet. 19 pp. \$10.95.

Omaha Indian Music is a tribute not only to the 19 fine singers on the recording but also to the engineers and scholars who assembled the material and accompanying notes. The publication is a

by-product of the Federal Cylinder Project, inaugurated in 1979 by the American Folklife Center to rescue material collected on wax cylinders beginning in 1890 and scattered throughout various federal agencies. The more than 8000 cylinders contain songs and spoken words of American Indians, usually collected in the field for scientific study by linguists, musicologists and anthropologists fearing Indian culture would soon be irretrievably lost. Over the years many of the cylinders were transferred from one agency to another; in the process, many were lost, damaged or discarded. Ultimately they were moved to their present repository, the Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress.

The Project's immediate concern—preservation of cylinder programs by rerecording them onto master tapes—has been finished. The documentation phase nears completion with the publication of 6 catalogue volumes, organized by areal considerations along the lines of the *Handbook of North American Indians*. The American Folklife Center is now actively returning copies of the recordings to the various tribes to add to their archives and make these historic documents accessible to the descendants of those whose voices are on them. *Omaha Indian Music* represents part of this dissemination effort and by all reports has been well received by the Omaha people. Indeed, since its publication, young Omaha, upon graduation from high school are given a cassette copy of the recording by the *Hethu'ska* society to remind them of their heritage.

The accompanying, handsomely designed pamphlet is an indispensable complement to the recording. The participation of Omaha people in the selection and documentation of songs enhances its usefulness to non-Omaha as well. The thumbprint of Omaha culture pervades the publication; the album cover design, for instance, is based on a manuscript drawing of an Omaha decorated tipi by George Miller (b. ca. 1852), himself a singer of two love songs on the recording. The oversize reproductions of 14 appropriate photographs of singers and dancers from 1890–1983 enliven the text while providing historical perspective. In one instance, the juxtaposition of two photos of *Hethu'shka* dancers—one taken in 1925, the other in 1983—shows vividly the continuity of tradition: not only are the dancers in the same postures, but the essential items of their costuming, 60 years apart, are nearly identical, from the feathered wands in the right hand, the traditional grass dance feather bustle with its two erect

horns, the roaches with eagle feathers, bells around the calf, and bone pipe chestplates. Indeed the only perceptible difference is what each dancer carries in the left hand—the older *Hethu'shka* member a mirrorboard, the 1983 dancer a gunstock tomahawk. The editors and Omaha elders who were consulted are to be congratulated on painstaking identification of subjects pictured (13 of 16 dancers photographed in one 1922 scene), and providing the genealogies and both English and Omaha names of all the singers with probable birthdates.

Additionally the pamphlet includes a brief technical note by Erika Brady, the Federal Cylinder Project's recording engineer, who discusses both problems and solutions in producing the album; an essay by Nebraska folklorist Roger Welsch, a noted collector of Omaha legends and trickster tales, describing his earliest encounter with Omaha music—a handgame in the cellar of a rummage goods shop in a Lincoln slum—his polite but guarded reception, his faux-pas, and his gradual understanding and appreciation of Omaha music (Welsch later helped negotiate the release of the recording with approval of the Tribal Council and Omaha elders); brief biographies of the song collectors, Alice C. Fletcher and the Omaha Francis LaFlesche, Jr., and the story of their research collaboration in Omaha culture. (Several of LaFlesche's own songs are included on the album.) Particularly appropriate are the sensitive introductory "Reflections" of Omaha tribal historian Dennis Hastings, depicting his odyssey to Washington to find the cylinders, having learned of their existence from the collectors' fieldnotes. Hastings is unquestionably correct in asserting: "I was probably the first Omaha to hear them in eighty years." Clearly a spiritual event for him, Hastings reacted: "When I listened to them, then I knew what my purpose was: to take the songs back to the people." Since the return of these recordings, Omaha singers have begun to incorporate some of the old songs in their repertoires and perform them publicly at powwows.

The collection is broadly representative of Omaha song genres current or remembered ca. 1900. In addition to *Hethu'shka* songs are songs of the *Wa'waan* pipe ceremony and *He'dewachi* (tribal dance), as well as funeral, love, maize ritual, wolf, war captive, victory and Night Dance Society songs, and songs performed by men about women but never in their presence. The "Notes on the Selections," however, could have been more complete and

better organized. This is always a problem in anthology recordings; here the editors have opted for brief citations from the collectors "to speak for themselves" with supplemental information taken from their field notes. A brief introductory paragraph or two on the history of a given society, its influences elsewhere on the Plains and the usual context of the performance would have been useful additions. At least a good general bibliography is provided for those wishing to pursue such questions.

The release of early American Indian recordings such as these is to be welcomed by students of Native American music. Gradually, a history of Indian music is beginning to emerge—one which can help enlighten general questions concerning tribal histories, geographic movements, cultural contacts, the process of song transmission and the like. For instance, the *Hethu'shka* songs on the present album show a close affinity to the repertoires of the central Algonquian Drum Societies, which were transmitted as the grass dance gradually spread from the Santee Dakota to the Ojibway, thence to the Menominee and others. In stylistic matters, such as tonal material, song form, peculiarities of vocal pulsations, melodic contours, vocable selection, they are nearly identical to drum dance songs recorded by Densmore, Slotkin, Michelson and others. These *Hethu'shka* songs were recorded in 1897, and it is intriguing that La Flesche identified them as "new songs, possibly Kickapoo or Winnebago in origin." The Wisconsin Winnebago never accepted the rituals of the drum dance, despite Ojibway proseletyzing. But La Flesche may here refer to the nearby Nebraska Winnebago. The Kickapoo did embrace the drum dance. Thus the whole complexity of song movement on the northern Plains at the end of the 19th century is at issue. It is hoped that the American Folklife Center will continue to make accessible these priceless historical documents both for study and for return to the people whose heritage they represent.

Thomas Vennum, Jr.
Smithsonian Institution

A History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years. By Garrick Bailey and Roberta Glenn Bailey. Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1986. 360 pp. \$30.00 Cloth.