

Notes from the Field

The Cree Fiddlers of James Bay

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Introduction

From October to December 2011, I spent two months conducting fieldwork among two Cree communities in the James Bay area of Canada. This was funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Foundation for Canadian Studies in the U.K., and the aim was to research the region's fiddle tradition and its shared musical history with Scotland through its Hudson's Bay Company connections. James Bay fiddlers have a strong historical connection with Scotland, particularly the Orkney Islands, and see their musical heritage as rooted in the traditions of employees of the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) who travelled to the region from the late 1600s. The fiddle was first introduced to the region in the late seventeenth century, and the Cree population embraced the instrument and its associated repertoire, reshaping the music and dancing over time to produce a distinctly Cree musical tradition.

This transatlantic musical flow between Scotland and James Bay is a piece of Scotland's history which has not been previously studied in depth. The project combined ethnographic fieldwork (field notes, field recordings, ethnovideography, interviews, and photography) with archive and library-based research to begin the task of piecing together the Cree fiddle tradition in terms of repertoire, playing style, history, and musicians.

The research trip was in three stages. The first was a three-week stay in the Cree community of Wemindji, which is situated roughly halfway up the eastern side of James Bay in the province of Quebec. Wemindji is a First Nations town of just under two thousand inhabitants, most of whom are Cree Indians who speak Cree as their first language. The town is linked to surrounding communities by air (Air Creebec) and road (the James Bay Highway). The nearest communities, Chi-

sasibi and Eastmain, are roughly equidistant north and south from Wemindji, and are around three and a half hours away by road. The town has been in existence only since 1959, when the Cree living at Old Factory, an island just along the coast from Wemindji and a former fur trading post, relocated to this mainland site. This historical connection with the Hudson's Bay Company still remains in the collective memories of the inhabitants of Wemindji and there is a strong tradition of step and square dancing to fiddle music as part of the wedding festivities. This tradition is believed to have been brought to the region by the Scots of the Hudson's Bay Company and adopted by the Cree who joined in with dances at the fur trading posts.

The second leg of the research trip was to the island of Moose Factory, a historic meeting place for the Cree Indians and a former HBC trading post dating from 1673. Moose Factory has a population of roughly 2,500, most of whom are Cree, and is a two-day train journey north of Toronto. Moose Factory is home to a number of musicians, including James Cheechoo, a performer of some of the older James Bay fiddle tunes and known to many as the 'last of the James Bay fiddlers'. I spent just under three weeks in Moose Factory before travelling onwards to Winnipeg for the final week to visit the HBC archives at the Archives of Manitoba.

Below are extracts from notes taken during my time in James Bay about some of the features of the music and dancing which I came across during my research. Further concise notes can be found on my blog, which I kept daily during my visits to the communities, at www.jamesbayfiddle.blogspot.com. For a map of the journey, starting in Toronto, to Wemindji and on to Moose Factory, please see Figure 1.



Figure 1: Map showing Journey to Wemindji and Moose Factory

Wemindji

27 October 2011 – Arrival in Wemindji

Finally arrived in Wemindji! The plane was a 20-seater, but was incredibly smooth – I didn't even notice taking off/landing a lot of the time (we did this about four times as were hopping from one village to the next up to Wemindji). There were no cabin staff, just a pilot and co-pilot, who gave us some safety information and opened the door for us each time we disembarked.

I was met at the airport by Dorothy Stewart, the Director of Communities Services here in the town, and anthropologist Katherine Scott, who is currently living here and working on her PhD at McGill University. I was put in contact with Dorothy by the Chief of Wemindji when I first contacted the band council about the research project back in July, and she kindly agreed to help me with my project while I am here, set up interviews with some of the musicians in the community, and host some fiddle and dance events while I am here. Dorothy has a personal interest in the project, as she is from a family of musicians and step dancers. Her uncle, James Stewart, is a well-known fiddler in the region, and she is a keen step dancer. I will be staying with Katherine in a Band Council-owned house, and she showed me around the town this afternoon and filled me in on some very useful information on the expected behaviour and etiquette in the town.

There is a wedding happening tomorrow and I've been invited along by Dorothy to the dance in the evening, which will be starting at around ten o'clock and continuing into the early hours of the next morning. All I know at the moment is that there will be a band playing and dancing, and it will be taking place at the community hall following the wedding feast. While the feast is by invitation only, the wedding dance (as per tradition) is open to everyone in the community. I've been told that I should bring along recording equipment to document the event.

29 October 2011 – Wedding Dance in Wemindji

The wedding dance last night was fun and a real insight into the music and dancing which takes place in this

community. Weddings are the main arenas for fiddle music and square dancing, and it is rare that a dance is held at any other time. Last night there were around 250-300 people in attendance, which started at 10:30 p.m. The band didn't have a name as far as I could tell, and were made up of four instrumentalists in total: David Ratt, a man in his 30s, on fiddle (possibly the main fiddle player in Wemindji at the moment) with backing musicians on electric guitar, acoustic guitar, and bass. As I've been told is common in the James Bay region, the band used an electronic drum machine instead of a percussionist, and had only the one fiddler to provide the melody.

Most of the dancing was done by the wedding party (eight men and eight women, including the bride and groom) and their families (see Figure 2), but other people rose to dance later in the night. Those not on the floor were seated on the sidelines watching the dancing. I've been told that this is typical of Wemindji, which is a place where dancing is considered a spectator sport rather than an inclusive activity. The fiddler played a small selection of tunes (perhaps only around eight or ten in total), and the favourite was most definitely "The Soldier's Joy", which was played regularly during the night and I'm told is the definitive wedding tune here. Other tunes included "St. Anne's Reel", "Boil 'em Cabbage Down", and "Orange Blossom Special". For each dance, just one tune is played repeatedly, which is very different from Scotland, where playing the same tune more than three times in a row is normally considered a breach of etiquette. It also appears that there are certain tunes linked to particular dances, and this is something I'm hoping to find out more about during my time here. The dancers combine square dancing with step dancing, and this combination is a constant form of entertainment to the onlookers.

At the moment, it seems that much of the musical influence is from the Canadian or American tradition rather than from Scottish fur trade links, but I'm hoping that by hearing more musicians and speaking to people with knowledge in this area, I'll come across a more varied repertoire beneath the surface.



Figure 2: Wedding Dancers in Wemindji, November 2011

3 November 2011 – A Full Two Days of Interviewing

Over the last couple of days I've been busy conducting interviews. The first was with the minister and his wife, both of whom have in-depth knowledge about the James Bay region, having lived in the area for a number of years. They lead Cree hymn singing in the church using hymn books which have been translated from English into Cree syllabics. They also have a keen interest in other genres of music that are performed in the area. Following this interview, I visited Denise Georgekish, the widow of the late Fred Georgekish, who was a highly respected member of the community in his time and an active musician (fiddler, guitarist, gospel singer, and step dancer), writer, and member of the church. He died from leukaemia around twenty years ago, when he was only in his late 40s. Denise told me many stories about her late husband and the role he held as a fiddle player in his youth. He had been a popular musician for wedding dances, and held jam sessions regularly at their home with members of his family. He was one of a number of brothers, some of whom, now in their early 70s, are also fiddle players.

Today, I was fortunate to meet one of Fred Georgekish's brothers, Bobby, who is well-known as a fiddler in the town, but because to his age and failing sight hardly plays in public at all anymore. He walked over to the house where I am staying, bringing his fiddle with him, after agreeing to an interview. He knows very little English, so Dorothy offered to sit with us and translate. It was a great afternoon, and he played a number of tunes on his fiddle, some of which, including the "Wemindji Bridge Reel", were his own compositions (see Figure 3). I asked Bobby about how the fiddle might have first taken root in the area, and he believed that the instrument was introduced when the ships of the Hudson's Bay Company would stop off at Old Factory Island and deliver supplies to the fur trading post there. He didn't know any names of any of the people who might have brought the fiddle over, but spoke about some of the older fiddlers who he would see playing in Old Factory. He also mentioned an old New Year's custom very similar to the custom of "first-footing" or "guizing" found in Scotland and Shetland. This is when a fiddler visited every home in his neighbourhood playing a tune in each house to welcome in the New Year.

A lot of the music that Bobby played was similar to the repertoire of David Ratt, and consisted of a number of well-known Canadian and American tunes. He said that he had mostly picked these up from listening to recordings, so it was hard to recognise any obvious links between what he played and the music which would have been brought over by the Scottish traders. However, I have heard that there are a number of fiddlers in Chisasibi, the next community north of here,

some of whom play some of the older tunes of the James Bay region. I'm hoping that before I leave here it will be possible to meet up with some of these fiddlers to find out more about their traditions.



Figure 3: Bobby Georgekish Playing Fiddle Tunes Wemindji, November 2011

13 November 2011 – Fiddling and Dancing Weekend

This is my last weekend in Wemindji, and it has been incredibly busy, with lots of fiddle music and dancing on Friday evening and yesterday afternoon and evening, much of which I have been documenting (see Figure 4). The two events were put on by Dorothy in response to my visit here, and were open events for the whole community. I felt very privileged that these took place for my benefit. They were valuable in terms of documenting the dancing and fiddle tunes and also in having the chance to play alongside the musicians on the stage (see Figure 5). The main fiddlers were Bobby Georgekish from Wemindji and James Stewart, who came over from Chisasibi yesterday for the event. Square and step dancing took place throughout the evenings and there was a hugely positive atmosphere at the events, attended by people of all ages. There has been some very good feedback from people in attendance over the weekend and it has been suggested that the community start holding regular dance nights in the future. Perhaps this is the start of more events of this nature in Wemindji.

The weekend brought other visitors from Chisasibi, including three of the children of the late Ray Spencer, who was widely considered to have been the 'best fiddler of James Bay' in his time. Ray Spencer died in 1982, and although he never recorded his music commercially, his daughter has retained copies of his fiddle tunes on reel-to-reel tape and is planning to release these on CD in the near future. Ray played a number of older fiddle tunes, including the one he is best known for, "The Girl I Left Behind Me".



Figure 4: Doing fieldwork in Wemindji, November 2011



Figure 5: Playing Tunes alongside Fiddlers Bobby Georgekish and James Stewart Wemindji, November 2011

Moose Factory

26 November 2011 – Tunes in Moose Factory

This place is so busy! The last couple of days I've been meeting many people involved with and interested in music, and have been playing tunes with some of the fiddlers who live in the area. Moose Factory is quite a different experience to Wemindji. The historical connection with Scotland is visibly strong here, a product of hundreds of years of interaction with the Hudson's Bay Company on the island, and this can be seen in the repertoire of tunes and dances known in the area. I

have spent much of the time since I arrived sitting with James Cheechoo, who has been teaching me some of his repertoire, what he believes are the original James Bay fiddle tunes from the HBC workers. The tunes are very closely linked to some of the older dances of the area, including the Kissing Dance, the Scratching Dance, and the Otter Dance. James performs regularly with his wife Daisy, who plays the spoons. Although James is now in his early 80s, he and Daisy travel regularly to events in Canada to perform and teach these rare tunes.

There is a strong tradition of jamming at home here, and I have been enjoying going to people's homes to play music with them and learning about some of the older fiddlers who used to play in Moose Factory, such as Robert MacLeod and Clarence Louttit. The connection with Scotland can be seen not only in the music, but also possibly in some of the language used. Older people say "boy" here a lot, in a similar way to Shetland, and "give us a tune" used to be a common expression here. This is a phrase that I hear constantly in music sessions back home in Aberdeen!

The interviewing has been going much slower since I arrived in Moose Factory. In Wemindji, people were, on the whole, happy to have our conversations formally recorded, but in Moose Factory it is much harder to pin people down for an interview. On the other hand, I have had many informal conversations with people who are only too happy to tell me about the fiddlers of the past and the traditions that can be found here. There are also many more opportunities for hearing and playing music with people here because there is such a strong tradition of playing music at home, and this has been a great help with my research, as it is enabling me to learn and play alongside the musicians.

29 November 2011 – Recording James Cheechoo

This evening I visited with James and Daisy Cheechoo to listen to and record more of their stories about music and dancing in the old days. Fiddle music in James Bay is learned mostly within the family, and in James' case, he learned with his siblings at home on his father's fiddle. The Cheechoo family is well-known in Moose Factory as an accomplished musical family. James' brother, Sinclair Cheechoo, was a renowned fiddler in his day, while a number of his children are also performers. Daisy Cheechoo is originally from Chisasibi, on the east coast of James Bay, and is also from a very musical family. She is the sister of the late Ray Spencer and spent much of her early life accompanying his music on the spoons. After speaking for some time, James played a few tunes on the fiddle, including a very old version of "Soldier's Joy", which he calls "Old-timer".

It was a great evening, and at the end we danced to James' fiddle in the living room (see Figure 6). Rita, his daughter, showed me a very old dance called the Otter Dance, and then demonstrated the Kissing Dance with James playing the corresponding tune on his fiddle.



Figure 6: James Cheechoo, Moose Factory, November 2011