

## Birch Bark Records Among the Chippewa

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Picture writing was a trait with a wide distribution among the North American Indians. Among the Algonquian speaking tribes there were few, if any, breaks in the distribution of the practice. The techniques used were principally line drawings in ashes or sand, charcoal on blazed surfaces of trees, paints on leather, and incisions on pieces of bark, wood, or rock.

Examples of picture writing that may be definitely attributed to the Chippewa are fairly common, principally because of their residence in the growing range of the birch tree. The bark of this tree served them for many purposes—to cover their dwellings, to make containers and utensils of various sorts, to build canoes, and to carry records. The drawings in sand or ashes and on trees were not very permanent, and the drawings or paintings on rock, while permanent, were not portable and hence did not remain in the possession of the maker or his heirs. Birch bark, however, was not only obtained but worked and preserved with ease. Wooden tablets possessed the same attributes of permanence and portability, but they are not as numerous as the birch bark rolls, probably because they required more exertion and skill in manufacture. The only differences between the wooden tablets and the birch bark rolls, aside from the material, are the greater use of color and the generally better workmanship in the tablets. The one difference is explained by the fact that birch bark does not take color readily. On the other point it must be added that some of the figures on birch bark were equal or superior in artistry to those on the wooden tablets.

The purpose of an individual record determined the type of symbols used, the size of the record, and perhaps also the excellence of the delineation. The drawings were of two general types on the basis of the subject matter: first, those in which the subject matter was understood only by instructed persons, and, second, those intended to be understood by the general public. The second type included totem marks, names of persons, messages left by travellers, records of time, *et cetera*. The first type consisted principally of the records and songs of the Midewiwin, other songs, records of dreams and drawings used as charms.

The figures used in the records of the public type were mainly descriptive in character and possibly also related to the sign language of the Indians as maintained by Rafinesque (1). The figures used in the records of the Midewiwin were ideographic, esoteric, and mnemonic although they may have had their origin in the sign language, that is, they suggested an idea to a person who had had the proper instruction and served to recall definite words which were not indicated in the drawing. Not only was instruction as to the meaning of each figure required but also information on which was the initial figure and the direction of reading in each record. The Chippewa never

standardized the direction of their writing, and, consequently, one roll will read from left to right, another from right to left; others progressed clockwise or counter-clockwise around the edge of a piece of bark, and some of several rows of figures had alternate rows read in opposite directions.

The bark pieces varied in size from a few square inches for a charm drawing to a roll three or four feet in width and fifteen feet or so in length for a chart showing the origin or the degrees of the Midewiwin.

The excellence of the drawing on different bark records varied with the purpose and the skill of the artist. Some were very crude and some were very carefully executed. A birch bark conveying a message of only temporary importance would not have the care lavished on it that might be bestowed upon the record of a band's migration or its success in war which might be cherished for several generations. The same difference in execution is found in the birch bark records relating to the Midewiwin as in the records of the public type. Ordinarily, the records of songs were made by each individual to remind him of the exact words and order of the songs as he learned them. These were his personal possessions and were either buried with him or burned after his decease. The pictographs were often hastily sketched as pictographic excellence was subordinate to a grasp of the meaning of the song and its exact words. On the other hand, the birch bark rolls showing the origin of the Midewiwin, the charts of the different degrees, and the movements in each ceremony were used in instruction, shown to the assembled initiates, and were expected to be handed down from generation to generation. Naturally, these usually show much more care in their manufacture than the song records of individuals.

The first birch bark writings mentioned by the early explorers were messages left by travellers on their abandonment of campsites. Other messages and maps received occasional notice during the next century or so, but it was not until about the beginning of the nineteenth century that the Midewiwin charts and other song records were given much attention. Cass and Schoolcraft called the song records "music boards." They both collected numerous examples, and the latter reproduced many of them (5, 2, 5, and 6). Kohl collected many "bark books," as he called them, in his travels around Lake Superior. Some of these he reproduced in his published account with the explanations he received for them from the Indians (4, pp. 157, 287, 292). He kept looking for musical notes on the birch barks, but in vain (4, p. 286). As Hoffman, who obtained or copied many rolls relating to the Midewiwin, said, the musical rendering of a song by one person might be so different from that of the person from whom he learned it as to be unrecognizable without the words (3).

In more recent years Miss Frances Densmore obtained accompanying drawings for the songs she collected among the Chippewa of northern Minnesota. These drawings, she found, were recognized in distant localities and elicited the same songs. Also, on playing over a song obtained in one community to a member of a distant one, she was shown the proper drawing to accompany it (2).

My efforts to find bark records among the inhabitants of a Chippewa village in northern Michigan this past summer were fruitless. One man was pointed out as the owner of some but he denied having any. In the meetings of the Midewiwin, which are still held several times a year, sand drawings are used to instruct the candidates instead of bark charts. There is a vestige of inscribed wooden tablets to be found in the little paddle-shaped wooden sticks marking each grave in their cemetery. On these sticks the only figure is the totem of the deceased placed upside down to denote death.

#### Literature Cited

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4. Kohl, Johann G., 1860. *Kitchi-Gami*. London.
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