

Jim Razer

Jim Razer was born in 1928 and is an enrolled member of the Fond du Lac Band of Ojibway--a band occupying lands just south of Duluth and near the Wisconsin border. As an infant, however, he was placed in a school run by the state of Minnesota. His earliest memories are of the place. Although well aware that he was an Indian, Razer was cut off from his cultural heritage and made to feel ashamed of it. Fortunately he soon rejected the prevailing white view of his people as savage and began a lifelong search to reclaim a sense of his roots.

Razer began to read, learning that his grandmother, Mrs. Frank Razer, was prominently mentioned for her crafts in Frances Densmore's Chippewa Customs. Eventually he began talking to elders. Active as a dancer, Razer began to fashion traditional garments and accoutrements of the sort that were made prior to white contact with Woodland peoples. Early in the 1980s, after raising his family and retiring from work as a journeyman electrician for the state of Wisconsin, Razer began to present public programs involving Ojibway dance, crafts, and dress.

Razer does not consider himself an artist and he is obviously engaged in historic reconstruction, yet this revitalization impulse is a common one among native peoples. Among the articles Razer fashions are many musical instruments. They include: warrior's whistles made from eagles' wingbones, turtle shell rattles, deer toe jingles to adorn buckskin leggings, small hand drums to accompany moccassin games, and larger social drums fashioned from hollowed-out cottonwood stumps. Razer would like to make a water drum as well, although he has not made one yet.

For traditional reasons, a number of these instruments either would not be available for exhibit, or would have to be altered for public display. The warrior's whistles would have to be made from turkey bone. Elders would have to be consulted about the appropriateness of turtle shell rattles since such instruments are used in curing and other sacred ceremonies. The water drum is likewise exclusively associated with sacred traditions. The big drum, appropriate for intertribal social singing, could not have gone through a ceremony, nor would it be painted. No restrictions affect the decorative deer toe jingles; the same is true for the hand drum used to sing taunting songs while moccassin games are played.

Supplementary materials: 1) taped interview and index; 2) color slides and B&W photos.

Availability of materials: Razer has the deer toe jingles on hand, but would have to make everything else. He is quite willing to do so, however, and I recommend that we ask for the turkey bone version of the warrior's whistle, the small hand drum for moccassin games, and, if elders approve, the turtle shell rattle.

Special Considerations: Although Razer could make a social dance drum, he reckons that Joe Ackley would be a much better person for the task since he is widely respected as a drummaker. In addition to making artifacts, Razer is willing to write up explanatory statements on each of them. Like many of the other instrument-makers, give Razer as much advance notice as possible.

TAPE LOG COVER SHEET

Wisconsin Folk Museum/for
Cedarburg Cultural Center
Mount Horeb, Wisconsin 53572

Date(s): November 8, 1989

Interviewee: Jim Razer

Address: c/o Kim Henderson

Tony, Wisconsin 54563

Phone: [REDACTED]

Equipment Used: Superscope C-202LP

Stereo: no Dolby: no

Tape Brand/Length: Sony HF-60

Amount Used: Side 1: all

Side 2:

General Subject: musical instrument
making

Fieldworker(s): James P. Leary,
Lewis Koch

Recording Location: Henderson home

Other People Present: Henderson

SUMMARY OF RECORDING CONTEXT AND TAPE CONTENTS

Jim Razer is staying with Kim Henderson and his family on the Flambeau River near Tony just east of Ladysmith. The interview was conducted in the spacious modern living room looking out on the river. Later we adjourned to the garage which is being converted into a winterized workshop. There Razer has wood, hides, and tools for making various artifacts.

Henderson and another houseguest, an ethnobotanist whose name, unfortunately, I don't recall, were a quiet but attentive audience throughout the interview and during the subsequent photo session. The bulk of the interview concerned Razer's experience with making a number of Ojibwa instruments.

TAPE INDEX

Tape 1, Side 1

1. Announcement.
2. Born in Minnesota, member of the Fond du Lac band of Chippewas. Raised for 14 years in a state of Minnesota school. B. 1928.
3. Interest in making traditional artifacts derived from his negative reaction to mainstream notions that Indians were "bad," "dirty," "backwards." Motivated to prove that "old stuff could be beautiful."
4. Learned by talking to elders, reading books. Great-grandmother was written up in Densmore's Ojibwa Customs, Mrs. Frank Razer, White Earth reservation. Mentioned there in connection with a dreamcatcher and also in connection with her beadwork. J never knew her.
5. J wasn't allowed to communicate with his Indian relatives, was put in the state school at five months, was the only Indian in the school. Feels very resentful about this.
6. Began in the institution to think about his Indian heritage. Was told that he had been saved from his own people. Was about 35 when he actually started making things for himself in the Indian way. Had been researching prior to that. Has only been involved in public programs the last few years.
7. Catlin, Remington, and other people who drew or painted Indians formed images that have been canonized. Jim reckons there was much more variation than can be seen from those few images, tries to include that variation in the stuff he makes.
8. On making deer toe rattles. "First you got to catch the deer." Nowadays goes to locker plant for toes, cuts them off with a bandsaw, simmers for about fifteen hours, takes out the toe bone, dries the toes slowly at room temperature out of the sun so that they dry uniformly and don't curl up; then drills a hole in the toes, strings them with leather, and uses them.
9. Has also made rattles with a stick going into a turtle shell, with dewclaws hanging on the outside to rattle against the shell. The turtle is important as a sacred animal because the world in legend was made on the back of a turtle. Might not be possible to let a turtle shell rattle be in the exhibit.
10. Couldn't make an eagle bone whistle, but could make a turkey bone rattle with ornamentation.
11. Turtle shell rattle used for curing ceremonies. Out west gourd rattles made for green corn dance, with seeds inside. Jim would want to get approval of people on the reservation for writing up an explanation of the turtle shell rattle.
12. The whistle was used as a signal whistle by warriors in battle. It's usually the wing bone of an eagle. The Lakota people use it in the sun dance with eagle fluffing on the end of it. Widely found from the woodlands to the high plains.

13. J reckons Joe Ackley a better drummaker than he is, best to get a drum from him. J is willing to make whatever we'd like him to make. Would make a drum as long as it hadn't been consecrated. J is curious about Joe Ackley's drum. J doesn't use barrels or anything manufactured, but his drum "wouldn't be as nice as" Joe's because "I'm not a drum artist."

14. On making the drum. Has to find the right tree, would get the stump of a cottonwood, take of the bark, cut out and shave down the insides, test so that you have a thickness that allows the wood to resonate, try to get the wood as thin as you can get it without it falling apart. The rawhide will hold the drum together. Rawhide from deerskin that has been cleaned, dried, sanded until it is even, then soaked so the two drum heads can be cut out. Lots of rawhide left over so that strings/strips can be made from them to lace the top hide to the bottom.

15. Jim hasn't made a water drum but thinks he could. Hollows the top of a log, fills the log with water, covers with rawhide, can vary the tone by varying the amount of water.

16. Jim has made a few dance drums. He has also made a lot of small hand drums for hand games. It takes a lot of time to make a big drum.

17. Some of the bigger drums Jim has made have been used in ceremonies, but he is not part of a singing group, so his drums haven't been used by a "drum." Many of those groups use band drums, but "traditional people still use handmade drums."

18. Once J finishes making larger drums, he often paints them. His current drum is painted red, the color of difficulty and war. J usually leaves them unpainted, but painted this to protect it since he travels with it. Singing groups often paint a name on the head for their group or clan.

19. Drums often given a name in a small ceremony by a spiritual leader. Then the drum should be wrapped up when transported and taken care of. That's why you can't give away a drum then. The owner or one member of the singing group is responsible for the drum then.

20. J dances with a regular singing groups. Does the hoop dance too. Got involved in dancing to recover a sense of his cultural past. Danced at powwows for many years before giving dance demonstrations in public.

21. J knows songs, but doesn't have the voice for it, lacks the quality. Believes, however, that anyone who listens to the drum and feels it in his heart is a dancer.

22. Small drums are big and thin with just one head, can vary the tone by stretching the skin. Have a nice sound with deerhide. [Use with next quote for DHD.]

23. Moccassin games. Shell put under rabbit fur (formerly mocassins) and moved around while the singer sings a mocking song. Similar to hand game. Can go on for hours. J has gone to sleep with the games going on far into the night. [Use for DHD in some edited version.]

24. Over the years J has been a journeyman electrician, worked part of the time for the state of Wisconsin. Now retired. One daughter graduating from Eau Claire with an accounting degree, another sells insurance in Menomonie.

25. J doesn't know any Indian fiddlers from the Fond du Lac reservation.

End of Session