

Stop the Folkin' Music!:

How I (Kinda) Found My Place at Winnipeg Folk Festival Camping

Janet Macaulay

I must admit that I had ulterior motives for choosing Festival Camping (the "noisy" or "rowdy" campsite at the WFF) as my "beat" for this session of fieldwork. A weekend listening to and pondering about folk music would probably have driven me batty. I like stuff with more of an edge, stuff that is dangerous, and Festival Camping (FC) is edgy and dangerous, so it's also the part of the WFF that interests me the most (except perhaps for the backstage food discussed by Danielle Carignan Svenne in this issue!).

Angus Gillespie's "Folk Festival and Festival Folk in Twentieth-Century America" (in *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, edited by Alessandro Falassi, University of New Mexico Press, 1987) inspired me to start thinking about FC for my field session at WFF '95. It defined the demographics of a festival as composed of three groups: the outlaws (drug dealers, bikers, etc.), the family set, and the folkniks (who bring their own instruments with them, just in case). I did not

feel as though I belonged to any of these categories. When I go to the WFF (which I have done for the past three years, despite my feelings about most of the music), I want to feel relaxed and safe, and I want to have the opportunity to experience some really good music (which, much to my surprise, happens occasionally). These things are guaranteed to happen on the WFF site proper. The opposite happens at the FC site. It is rowdy, uncivilised, and somewhat frightening. I asked myself this year, "Where do I fit in?" and "What, if any, of the groups at the WFF-FC do I belong to?" What follows is a chronicle of my alienation.

Appropriately enough, I started my WFF-FC experience in the rain. The WFF has always been a test against the elements; every year I think I have brought all I need, and then at night I will be wishing I had brought mitts. The following year I bring mitts, but wish I had brought a sun screen with SPF 30 instead of 15. This year I wished I had brought a

better raincoat and rubber boots. I put up the tent in the rain, then sat in it and braced myself for a tough weekend. It was Wednesday evening—could I last until Sunday night? My fieldnotes show a list of stuff I had forgotten to bring, and a wish that it should stop raining before I ran out of dry socks. I evaluated my site. Drummers were moving in behind me, and guitarists were setting up camp opposite. FC is known for its percussion-playing patrons. Hippie-ish people with drums and shakers of all kinds flock into the site—often, it seems, just for the music that happens there. The bongo sessions that go on until daybreak are legendary.

Back in May, I had attended a meeting at the WFF offices with coordinators of the Quiet Campground, FC, and Camping Security, as well as various WFF staff. As the logistical issues of supplies and the need for improved regulation were worked out, there was an overriding concern to honour the traditions held by the FCers. The discussion culminated in a pledge to tighten security and admission to the site. As I heard the first whoops and hollers of the weekend ring through the campsite, I wondered whether this pledge would make a difference to my weekend. Just how much sleep would I get?

And when I was awakened the first night by some people setting up their site across the way, my thoughts turned to the discussion that took place at the QC/FC/Security meeting: "What is it about the FC site that turns respectable people into belligerent fools?" We have had a great deal of discussion in our research group about attitudes towards our "subjects." We are committed to avoid seeing them in a wholly negative light. Rather we seek to accord them agency in their situation. Seeing people only as dupes, dopes, or drunken hooligans was not on. How was I going to get around this? It stopped raining eventually, and I slept quite well that first night. I had a wonderful breakfast at my Coleman stove. Food always tastes better in the great outdoors: "What is this? This is great! I never thought shoe leather could taste so good! Yum! Yum!" Early morning is always a treat, because it is the quietest time in FC.

The FC site is laid out in a large, open field, peppered with fire pits and copses of trees, about one km from the WFF site. Campers have to pay to get in, and they have to show proof that they are actually attending the WFF. It is not uncommon for people to try to enter the site simply for the big party that goes on in FC. I heard a story that one vehicle pulled up to the campsite with a trunk full of 40 ounce liquor bottles. The occupants

did not know who was playing at main stage; in fact, they had but a vague awareness of a music festival happening.

Many campers arrive early to get a good spot. People have different criteria for choosing their campsite. I wanted one sheltered from the wind, close to a biffy and source of water (there are taps of potable water on the site), and away from the noisier people. Finding a spot that could be easily located was also important to me. This usually means camping close to a landmark. The best known landmark of FC is the Big Teepee, which is set up every year in the same place. When telling others how to find their campsite, people will say something like, "Oh, we're camped two fire pits down from the Big Teepee." I was in the copse of pine trees, one fire pit over from the Big Teepee, back about 250 m from the main path. Many campers adorn their location with flags or others markers, making it easy to identify, much like the tarp markers at main stage on the WFF site (as discussed by Lisa Hagen-Smith in this issue). Regardless of how much care you take in choosing where you camp, it will be noisy. The pamphlet that is handed out to you upon entry states that explicitly.

The peace of a breakfast at dawn does not last long. Even in the morning, there are lingering parties, accompanied by wolf calls raised up by the partiers. These yells are really quite extraordinary. I audiotaped them, just so others could get an idea of what they're like. One person (usually a man) will start up, and another will follow, and just like in the wild with real wolves, the whole campsite will erupt into unearthly howling. Like the wave at sports events, it goes around FC, then starts again. This goes on all night.

I slept at home in the city on Friday night, anticipating that I would be up all the next night whether I wanted to or not. Saturday night is traditionally the biggest party of the weekend, and I was going to take advantage of an inevitably sleepless night to take it all in. I spent a good part of that evening walking through the campsite, audiotaping various rowdy goings-on. Cultural identity politics go on even in the

dark, accentuated by alcohol; a group of young men, whom I assumed were Americans, were standing around their fire singing "The Star Spangled Banner." They were so overt and proud about their nationality, it stopped me in my tracks. Once finished singing, they shouted about how they (meaning the U.S.A., I assume) "ruled the world, man." It was frightening and awesome at the same time to sense their feeling of power, even though it



Loogans

Photograph by Janet Macaulay

may have been the booze talking. I was pleased to see a long-haired young man wearing a kilt walk by their site singing "O Canada." How nice.

FC seems to be a male-centred phenomenon, with male-ness and male power rampant. The percussionists are primarily men, and there is no escaping their music during a stay at this campsite. For the most part, they are mild-mannered, nice, hippie-ish guys. And I hated them, almost as much as I hated the beer-swilling loogans, the rowdies who whooped and hollered loud enough to wake the dead. From my perspective, I had as much right as they did to be there, and they were depriving me of my sleep. That was not fair. My resentment shocked my fellow researchers, and even led to a mild admonishment by Pauline after I berated one such loogan for his inflated ego, after he had consented to have his picture taken for our research purposes.

On Saturday night, the drumming takes place on Pope's Hill, a little hillock (if it was any bigger, we Prairie folk would call it a mountain, but it is quite puny) upon which the Pope delivered mass the last time he was in Winnipeg. It is the jurisdiction of the Bird's Hill Natural Resources staff, not FC Security. I walked up there with my tape recorder to take it in. I was not thinking of staying long, as it was already about two in the morning. There were about 20 or so men, each playing a different rhythm, all of it coming together as one big beat. I sat down in the grass and listened. It was quite tremendous from within the drummers. Every year at the WFF, I wait for the musical epiphany, and here, in loathsome FC, amidst the hated drummers, I was unexpectedly moved. I was beginning to understand what was so appealing about the percussive rhythms, layered into a harmony. It was beautiful. The stars were out, the moon was shining, and I was content.

Then something astounding happened. A woman stood in the field in front of Pope's Hill and twirled fire batons. The drummers increased their tempo, and their playing became frenzied as the fire-twirler increased the speed at which she spun the fire around her body and head. I had to give my head a shake, because it seemed to me that these inconsiderate men were making beautiful music and honouring this woman with their creation. It may only be a thought that could come out of the end of a sleep-deprived weekend, but it has stayed with me ever since. I still do not think that the FC campground noise is good, but sometimes it is beautiful. And by extension I guess I must grudgingly concede that the people who drum are not *bad*.

Epiphanies of an addled mind aside, FC does not always seem to me a safe place by many measures. Its atmosphere can lead to frightening situations. There is occasional vandalism; people in FC do not always respect others' rights to privacy and property. Some subcultures which participate enthusiastically and actively in FC find it provides an opportunity for gathering others to their causes, be they anarchism or religion. Camping Security is a squad of volunteers who patrol on foot in groups of two. Their job is to monitor FC to make sure that the rules are being followed and to respond to any complaints.

It is against the rules to walk from campsite to campsite with open liquor, or to consume illegal drugs (these things are also against the law). But the rules are difficult to enforce, and one person commented, "If we busted everyone who had drugs at the campsite, the site would be empty by Saturday."

I was also disturbed by my sense of a lack of sexual safety on the FC site. This is obviously a situation in which a lot of sex will happen. You can sometimes even hear it as you walk around. There are no condoms available on the site; the nearest place to purchase them is the general store set up at the entrance, which can be as much as two km away. I know through my work at the Women's Health Clinic and my undergraduate research on sexuality and safer sex that this is a problematic situation for preventing both unwanted pregnancy and the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. I am not sure what the folks at FC could do about it, aside from handing out free condoms from a golf cart (hey, that's not a bad idea!).

My concern about the safety in FC is by no means gender-neutral. I sense that women are more at danger in FC than men. I could be wrong, but I think that when men dominate a situation, whether it be with their bodies or with the noise they make, it creates a situation in which women are restricted or even endangered. The female fire-twirler was an exception to this, but whenever I saw women walking around the site drunk or high, or saw women openly expressing affection with one another, I was worried. Perhaps this comes mainly from my own feeling of lacking agency over my own safety in FC; I did not feel very powerful or secure at FC, and was at a loss as to how to change this.

Most folks who camp at FC do have agency over their situation. But it is not enough to identify agency and leave it at that. While it is worthwhile to see subjects as having power over their situations in their lives, I also have to critically evaluate the choices they make. Some, like the drummers and the fire-twirler, exercise their agency by creating beauty. Others use their power to damage property and disturb other people's peace. A critical approach has allowed me to be open to the beauty of watching the sun rise at Pope's Hill with the sound of drums all around me, but allows me to draw the line at belligerence and violence.

The WFF is like Christmas. I look forward to both every year, and every year find them trying and tiring (see Leslie Bella's *The Christmas Imperative: Leisure, Family and Women's Work*, Fernwood Publishing, 1992). I have high expectations, and usually end up being bothered by the whole experience. I feel guilty for not liking them, because I should, so the problem must be me. Each year I am glad they are over, and by the next year, I have forgotten, and look forward to them again. Soon I'll be getting excited about Christmas. And I will probably go to the Winnipeg Folk Festival again next year, and I will likely stay in Festival Camping. And maybe I will take up twirling firesticks.

Notes to WFF Essays

- ¹ This work would not be possible without funding support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and from the CareerStart (Province of Manitoba) and Challenge (Government of Canada) student employment programs. We thank them. The research project began May 1, 1995.
- ² I'm grateful for the permission and co-operation of Pierre Guérin, Executive Director, in making this possible.
- ³ Thanks to Lisa Hagen-Smith for coming up with this idea, and to Danielle Carignan Svenne for recognising its significance.
- ⁴ The University of Winnipeg's Senate ethical regulations state that researchers must obtain written permission from any agency outside the University which is the subject of research.
- ⁵ Unfortunately, feature articles were not as progressive. The *Winnipeg Free Press* (July 6, 1995, C1) opening feature on the WFF focused on its literal installation of heterosexuality—three married couples who met (including one actually married) at the WFF. Their closing feature (July 11, 1995, C4) echoed this theme, asserting youth volunteers' long-time family connections with the WFF, including attendance in utero. Later that week, they also commented on a marriage proposal made via performers Moxy Frivous at a mainstage performance (July 13, 1995, C1).
- ⁶ A Folk Festival favourite, Whale's Tails resemble crepes, deep fried and smothered with honey, cinnamon, and other delicious toppings. Traditionally, friends use the booth as a meeting place.
- ⁷ Thanks to Pauline Greenhill for the title idea. She has (once again) been able to understand and represent what I am trying to express: the fractured self (diced, sliced, and puréed) struggling to reconcile work, play, community, loyalty, expression and, above all, passion.
- ⁸ In the WFF world, these are the primary identities and roles.
- ⁹ These are large, metal, insulated containers which keep food warm. We don't know what their real names are, so we termed them in honour of Michael, who obtained them for us.
- ¹⁰ The tent in which volunteers and performers can obtain cold and hot drinks.
- ¹¹ The area in which we keep dry goods, such as canned tomatoes and paper plates.
- ¹² Alcohol is restricted on site, so we disguise the wine with which we toast the La Cuisine crew on Sunday night of the festival as "chef prep."
- ¹³ Newcomers can be called "newbies"—a term co-opted from the Internet—or "rookies."
- ¹⁴ Schleppers are responsible for moving stuff around the site—performers and their equipment usually take priority. These volunteers have a cushy job with many perks; you sit around all day in a golf cart chatting with performers. It is next to impossible to get on this crew.



With so many families among the settlers, the need for a school soon became apparent. Fairdale, Westdale, and Highland Park School districts were all formed that fall, 1911. That winter they had the lumber all piled up to build Highland Park School when some of the young fellows decided there should be a dance, though there was no place to dance. Leonard Jacobson had a little shack near the Johnny Jones place, so he went to the trustees and asked if the lumber could be used for a dance hall. They gave their consent, so they loaded up the lumber and built the "hall" tight up against his shack. The roof was flat and the floor just tacked down. A stove was put in, and they had the dance that night. Everybody and his wife was there and all had a wonderful time. Lester Huston and Lawrence Patterson supplied the music and the caller was up from Sounding Creek. Jack Davies was the master of ceremonies and instigator of the whole affair. After the dance, the lumber was all moved back to the schoolground.

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