

THE HISTORY OF METIS FIDDLERS OF THE MACKENZIE AS I KNOW IT

By: Morris D. Lafferty, Fort Simpson, N.W.T.

By far the best known and most respected old time Metis fiddler of his time and still well remembered in modern day was non other than old Joe, Joseph Villeneuve. He was from the long lineage of an old French family of Quebec. His grandfather Jean Baptiste Villeneuve was a French man from lower Canada. His grandmother was Julie Morin. She was born at the Red River colony and she was a Metis.

Their son, David was old Joe=s father who had come to the North on a York boat crew for the Hudson=s Bay Company on a contract from 1865 to 1868. He escaped to the North after he served as a Metis Horseman (Police) at Red River and had experienced many conflicts. Father Grouard blessed his marriage to Lalouise in the presence of Louison Laferté on September 8th of 1867 at Fort Simpson. No surname was registered for Lalouise, but it is believed that was a Mackay.

Joseph was baptized here at 2 months on August 24, 1868 by Father Grouard in the presence of Joseph and Catherine Bouvier. He was married to Rose, the daughter of Louison Laferté and they went to St. Albert. His cousin, Francois Villeneuve=s granddaughter, Thelma Chalifoux, the National Metis Senator of St. Albert told me, Old Joe had come out there by ox cart from Fort Providence. She said, □that=s what they say out here□. I remember him telling a visitor about Salt River and Fort Vermillion so I believe they traveled the Old Salt River Trail.

It was unfortunate that Rose and their three children died out there at St. Albert. It is believed they were buried in an old graveyard on the flat by the Sturgeon River next to the bridge. It was then that Old Joe went to Prince Albert where other Villeneuve=s were and still live just East of there. Of course, you=ve heard of the town of Villeneuve. Old Joe=s cousin from St. Albert was a North West Territory member of the Legislative Assembly there from 1896 to 1904 when Alberta became a province. (Metis history found at Edmonton library).

Lawrence Villeneuve stopped at Paddle Prairie on his way up here and established the Metis colony there. They have oil and gas royalties there now, so Villeneuve was intelligent and had fore-sight. Old Joe was illiterate as his spirit had been broken by the harsh conditions of the Fort Providence residential school so he could only make his mark to be witnessed by others. Because he spoke seven languages: French, Cree, Chipewyan, Slavey, Dogrib, Loucheaux and a bit of English, he was an Interpreter for the Indian agency on his return to Fort Simpson.

Judging by the talent and his fiddling ability, I assume he must have been an accomplished fiddler when he went South. A good fiddler can learn a tune by hearing it just once, so I guess that was the way he learnt all the new Metis tunes he came back with. It was just before the turn of the century when he came through Fort Chipewyan and the old timers remembered him playing for a dance there. He married Marie Augustine Bouvier at Fort Providence and Joe Jr. was born in 1899. He came to work here for the Indian Agency around 1911 and he settled here. They were my maternal grandparents, Old Joe and Marie.

Old Joe had built his house with the trap door to the attic next to the stove pipe. He kept his fiddle warm there in winter and after his supper he would light his pipe and take his fiddle down. He would only tap the bow on the strings in practice and he only applied the bow in full swing after all the dancers were on the floor and ready to go to the dances. There was no fion, fion about Old Joe, he was a fiddler.

I was sitting there watching him one day when he put his fiddle on me and said in French, "Play the Little Rabbit." My grandmother told him. "He's pitiful, he cannot reach the strings yet." She also spoke in French which was our first language. He played the first three notes of the Rabbit Dance and it registered and it was branded on my brain. I can't understand the kids today who don't seem to be able to play the fiddle that just comes naturally.

My mother remembered Uncle Philip Lafferty sitting in the steps of his dad, Alexis' place and playing the Red River Jig when he was only eight years old. He told me that he carried his fiddle in his pack sack on the trap line for thirty-five years. At the end of a long day, he would sit by the campfire to relax to a few fiddle tunes. He played the Red River Jig for me in his later years and said, "That's the way it sounded to me when Old Joe played it." So everyone copied Old Joe, but few could play most of his tunes. Ed said some of his tunes were in minor chord. I think they only had changes that weren't familiar.

Old Joe had to get up at 5 o'clock in the morning to feed a team of oxen, so he usually went to bed early. Because of this, he refused to play for some dances though he was usually offered good money. But when they came to the door with forty or forty-five dollars, then he would get out of bed to play for a dance. Forty dollars at that time was three quarters of his government salary for a month. Government employees got a ration supplement in them days.

His repertoire of Metis tunes included the particular music played for such dances as the Reel of Eight, the Reel of Four, the Red River Jig and the Double Jig. The Rabbit Dance and the Duck Dance, the Handkerchief Dance and the Kissing Dance. I don't remember seeing the Double Jig done in my time, but these dances were done here.

Old Joe played a medley for the Reel of Eight which I learnt from my mother. He added a tune known as Whiskey Before Breakfast, but in his own version, perhaps it was from Prince Albert;

however, when the dance was going well, he would finish the set with an old tune the Indians had put their lyrics to for an Indian love song. Mother said the old ladies liked that change so much that they=d let go with a yell of delight when Old Joe brought them home.

Most of the French Metis tunes are from Quebec where French music was blended with the Irish fiddle tunes of these immigrants in the backwoods country. The Metis had moved to Red River and on to the prairie country and the Northwest Territories. On French Metis, a Poitras was at the Great Slave Lake before he had cooking pots and said, □The South was getting a little too over populated for him.□ So there=s no telling when fiddle music had first been played here in the North.

Though the fur trade activity began in the North during the 1700's, it is doubtful they had time for fiddle entertainment back then. There were a few Metis who lived among the Indian population since then, but the majority of the families arrived with the Hudson Bay Company. The Northwest Company from Montreal employed the French Metis and they amalgamated with the Hudson Bay Company, whose employees were their own Scot Half Breeds. But, they required the help of the French Metis for survival when it came to that.

The Fort of the Forks was established in 1804 and when the Hudson Bay Company and the Northwest Company merged in 1821, Fort Simpson was named after the Governor, George Simpson. George was at Fort Chipewyan, but never at Fort Simpson. By the 1850's, Fort Simpson required a minister to conduct marriages and baptize the offspring of many couples at the Fort. The Hudson Bay Company factor requested an Anglican minister who arrived with his family from London. But a Roman Catholic Bishop had been granted permission in writing from Winnipeg to send a priest on the same York boat to Fort Simpson. The factor had not been pleased.

The landing of both missionaries was witnessed by two hundred Metis, fifty whites and fifty Indians on the Hudson=s Bay bank on August 16, 1858 at 3 p.m. The Hudson Bay Company had vacated five buildings when they relocated so the Anglican mission opened a school, a hospital and a church there. The first Anglican cathedral west of Winnipeg was then built at Fort Simpson and the Roman Catholic church did establish a following here among the Metis, but not a permanent residency until 1894. By 1916 the Roman Catholic had built a hospital, a school and they were self-sufficient in farming as well. The church was built in 192?.

An Anglican minister=s wife wrote in the Journal of St. David=s church in the 1920's. □I went to a dance at the Fort Simpson=s hotel last night. It was very nice. All the ladies wore nice evening dresses and they round danced to the gramo-phone. Joe Villeneuve and Jim Lafferty played the fiddle for the country dances that were nice. (Round dances are waltzes etc., danced by couples.)

Old Joe and my dad had played for the dance and the minister=s wife said in her comments that the fiddle tunes played by the natives were brought here by a Scotsman. Apparently, there was an employee of the Hudson Bay Company here long ago that was a fiddler. He loved to play his fiddle at every opportunity and he played his tunes at every out post he traveled to. But, I know they

were not the tunes that my grandfather played.

I don't know which of the traditional dances of the Metis would come from the Scot half breeds that descended from the Hudson Bay Company fur traders. I only know of the Firth's up North and the McPhersons here that played fiddle during the time that I remember. Old Johnny McPherson played his own tunes and his favorite one was "Whistle and Rufus". I kind of doubt that one would make it to the Metis repertoire of Old Joe Villeneuve.

I heard that there were fiddlers in Manitoba that played a style of the White Horse plain and that would be the Scot Half Breed country. It would be interesting for the ones who like to research to find out the truth about this. The Western square dances are from the folk dances of Scotland is all that I know and the Metis dances would have been from original dances of their forefathers.

You won't find the Reel of Eight or the Drops of Brandy in any foreign land. The Metis and the Half Breed would have made changes to the dances of their fore fathers to make them suitable to the savage spirit of this new land. A courtesy to the corner lady and a bow here and there was replaced with a wild flurry of the masculine moccasin stomp that was later refined to a jig. This was referred to as, "Showing your steps." (This is my common knowledge.)

The development of sophistication at an earlier age might have brought some intelligent Metis youth of the woods to set the unruly folk dance to a regular pattern of timing. The fiddler who always played for the dancer and not for showmanship in them days had definite timing because he clogged out the beat with his feet. "You've got to cut it." My mother told me, but I was never able to play fiddle to her satisfaction. I wasn't in my grandfather, Old Joe's class, though I played as close as I could to the Grand Ole Opry style of Tommy Jackson.

"You've got to cut it." I learned too late after I lost the use of my right arm at 33 years of age on January 3rd, 1968 after a brain operation. Actually, it was Christmas morning when I found my arm was paralyzed so I consider it my gift of life. I had been struck on the head when I was a child and I bumped my head in the same spot, after, I was very sick and weak.

Now, I know what my mother meant by cutting it, but it's thirty-three years too late. It's to have a definite stop of the bow in your timing. For instance, in the tune my father liked to play, "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

Don Messer was probably the last fiddler to record this tune as "The Girl I Left Behind Me" is an ancient one. That tune is perfect to illustrate the three note grouping in a beat of time. My dad played this with gusto and a lot better than Don Messer's more or less flat version of it in comparison. When an old timer played the fiddle, you could hear three notes in a grouping of three. The dead air in between these three notes of timing made the music lively and precise with a lot of

expression that was the Metis style.

The whole note at the end of a measure was sometimes over exaggerated in some tunes. The fiddler would hold the duration and apply more volume to this note and strain the timing to utmost as they seemed to do with other notes. Now, I don't know, but I once seen a seventy year old man kick both his heels to his butt at that precise note in 1951. So, maybe there are some things that don't meet the eye here. Just like the square dance call of , □Jump up two and come down four.□

The old time dancers seemed to listen to the music back then and they=d change their steps with the tune. So the fiddler would play a part in the dance and not only be there for a performance in showmanship. This is where some of today=s musicians have gone stale for an old timer like me. There=s not one fiddler in this community of 1200 today and the beginners cannot play by ear anymore. There are too many outside interests.

There was a time when we were the Mecca and home of the best fiddlers in the North. Old Joe Villeneuve had introduced Metis fiddle music at it=s best at the turn of the century and many good fiddlers had kept the tradition alive during the next two generations that followed.

I like to think that 142 years of experience in continuous live Metis music qualifies me to list the fiddlers I=ve known in my time. I was nine years old in 1943 when I made my first public appearance in grandeur that night my grandfather brought me home. Old Joe was seventy-five years old when I accompanied him and we brought the house down. He was playing fiddle for an American army general and the boys, when Uncle Pat put this huge guitar in my lap. I strummed it like I knew how to play, but it must have come naturally, because I don=t remember learning or laboriously working on chords.

The bleachers were filled to the ceiling and the house was packed in Andy Whittington=s hall. There was a concert and plays at this bazaar farewell party for the American General. Someone brought a fiddle that wasn=t Old Joe=s, but he was asked to play and Pat said, □here=s his grandson.□ The crowd closed in around us and I heard a soldier say to his buddy, □just like the Ozarks.= I=ve never forgotten that, as it=s close the Grand Ole Opry.

That was the closest I was to come to fame when Old Joe had brought me there. After that grand night, I played the guitar at most of the dances I used to attend and pretty soon the fiddlers sat me next to them. I accompanied the fiddler who had replaced Old Joe after he had quit playing before 1940. He was George McPherson who=s father Johnnie, who was also a fiddler. Johnnie had been a Scot half-breed, but he hadn=t played at dances during his time. They use to call a tune, Johnnie McPherson=s tune and Ed Lafferty found it to be □Whislin= Rufus□ after he learned to play by music that he taught himself.

George McPherson, as I remember well, had been the main fiddler. These men were trappers and dog mushers so there were times when they were out of town when the young people wanted to put on a dance, but there was always someone that could play and with the help of some beginners, we always managed to keep a dance going. George's brother, Walter played, but some dancers said he played too fast and Andy didn't like him stomp=n his feet too loud.

Stomp=n Walter would kick the fiddler=s Rostrum away from his chair. The young people would have to keep readjusting this platform Andy had made for Old Joe. Walter would be laughing and holding one note and bowing the rhythm on this one note to tease some girl on the floor. He was quite a guy and he would sooner dance.

Their younger brother, David McPherson strummed guitar too, but his fiddling had not developed like his brothers. We had a lot of fun playing for dances in a dusty shack on the flats in summer. We played seven nights a week there and without lights on Sundays so the cops would not stop the dance as they outlawed this.

Back before my time, there was Jimmy and Johnny Sanchez from Jean Marie River who played fiddle at dances to spell off fiddlers like Walter and George. They played tunes they picked up from the Calgary Old Timer on CFCN in the 1940's. My uncle, Philip Lafferty had been a very good fiddler too and some said that he was better than George McPherson, but he played too slow. He was only in for the summers from his trapline and I guess he wasn't used to playing for dances so his timing lagged on the Red River Jig is what I heard say.

George McPherson was a very good old time fiddler who played all the tunes for the Metis dances that I=ve seen them do. The square dance tunes were learnt from the radio by then and they were sets of three. The first change was slow and the tune, □ When the Work=s all done this Fall, □ or □ Buffalo Gals □ was the right tempo. The second change was a jig time and □ The Irish Washerwomen □, would be suitable, but there were other tunes in 7/8 time.

The breakdown was done to a reel and there were a few like the □ Devil=s Reel □ and the □ Devil=s Dream □, which every fiddler knew. Some played their own versions of these, but the guitar drowned out the many flaws. I learnt my versions under my mother=s guidance and she demanded perfection. She knew all of her father=s tunes, but some of them were better left in her memory only. They would play in >A= with a fast change in >D= and that made them difficult like the old jig.

My dad, who played for dances during Old Joe=s time had played the □ Red River Jig □, and the □ Old Jig □, as he called them. Today, they play what I would consider the □ New Jig □. That=s the one Andy Desjarlais recorded. And then you have the Reg Bouvette style of the same Red River Jig which could be the difference I spoke of earlier when I mentioned the White Horse Plain music.

This, I don't even pretend to know anything about and I'm only bringing this to your well educated attention.

Note: Had I not been handicapped for the past 33 years, dear Herby, you know I would have demonstrated. But today, I don't wish to be taken to task for anything I say, because I don't know any fiddlers except Koal Crook and I don't listen to any fiddlers. They've all out-classed me, Morris.

In the olden days when dad and Philip would get to Hay River on the mail run or whatever, the people there would always put on a dance to have them play. I've never heard of any old time fiddlers there, except for Harry Martel. Joe Lafferty told me that Harry played a good jig. There was fiddlers among the natives who would only know how to play that Red River Jig. Albert Tonka was the man to play the jig here and he said he had learnt it from his father, Francis Tonka. There were other old timers that played also.

While I'm on the topic, some fiddlers had only one favorite tune. The five dollar tune was Ginger Villeneuve's tune, because he wouldn't play it for less. Albert Champlain also had a tune and Alfred Bernard had a tune, but Alfred as you know, had been a pretty good fiddler. Albert had been from Kenora, Ontario and Alfred from Fort Chipewyan, but he had been in Camrose doing time.

Moving on to Fort Resolution, I only knew of Johnny Beaulieu and Louis Mackay as the old time fiddlers there. Angus Beaulieu was the younger fiddler and he seemed to have revived an old Slave Lake style or developed one of his own. Whichever it might be, it's unique when he gets it under full amplification and throws it into automatic or so it seems to me.

Since I can't play anymore, I learnt a lot about the right hand and the control of the bow theory. I've watched the classical violinist on T.V. and the whole hand and fingers are used on the bow. The individual fingers control the pressure on the bow for the expression and the attack control of it all. If I was to play again, I would concentrate on the bow.

I'll stop here to include information on fiddlers that I've known and know about from other communities from my earliest recollections to the present day. It was before 1940 when I first remember some Metis fellas that would come from Fort Providence and live in a tent next door to Old Joe's. In recent years I asked my cousin Danny Bouvier of Fort Providence about this and he said. □ It was my brother George and Joe Le Mouel, they use to go there to listen to Old Joe play his fiddle tunes. □

Danny, in turn, had learnt these tunes from Joe LeMouel and he eventually became the best fiddler of these traditional Metis tunes. I think Joe and George had been very good fiddlers in their day, but Danny had gone on to learn the modern tunes we all learned from the radio and records as they

became available. As a fiddler myself, I know Danny was the best fiddler in the Northwest Territories when it came to the traditional tunes. I think I would have given him a run for his money only on the Devil=s Reel and the Devil=s Dream.

He could cut it, and had the Metis style of the old timers, while I leaned toward accomplishing a style that was more of a Western Barn Dance I learnt from the fiddlers in Edmonton and Camrose. I should add that I was hoping to accomplish this style which a fiddler told me that you couldn=t teach. It had to come naturally. I was told by a square dancer that I was a good fiddler, but I was like all the native fiddlers he danced to in every dance hall across Canada. According to Johnson, we all had a thing he couldn=t put his finger on, missing. He was a White man trying to dance to the Metis beat! After years of thinking this over, I realized he was in the wrong dance halls all across Canada. We, the Metis have a beat.