
Interview With Mel Bedard

Date: February 27, 2001

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Interviewed by John Arcand

Tape One: Side A

00.5 Mel: My given names, I was born February 8, 1929 and my given names or baptized in the Catholic faith was Melvin Joseph Clifford Bedard. All through my life when I was a kid my nickname was buddy and when I grew up it became Mel. My mother came from _____ River Indian Reservation was where she was from and she was born in 1898. My dad was born in _____ Quebec, north of Montreal in 1888. They migrated to Selkirk in 1899 and my grandfather was a shoemaker by trade and that is what brought them out west. From there on I had three brothers and two sisters and that was basically our family. Of course we were being raised through the hungry thirties where it was really tough going and my dad always seemed to have a job, he was a teamster by trade which is a truck driver nowadays. I was born in Selkirk and we stayed there for about five years and then we moved up to a mine, the mine was called the central because it was in the central part of the province, the central gold mine, it was east of _____ some 35 miles or something like that. We stayed there for maybe perhaps two or three years and the mine closed off and we moved back to Little Black River where my dad tried to homestead but the territory was unorganized so there was no decent school to go to so we had to give that up move back to Selkirk, that would be about 1941 when we moved back to Selkirk. My dad's health kind of failed, he used to have attacks every three months, he couldn't hold down a job so my older brother he had to quit school at 12 years old and go to work. I in turn was able to stay at home with a little bit of elementary education and I quite school when I was 15 and had to get working, we didn't have a welfare system like we do now so I had to get out to help the family in making a decent living for a family. Basically that was it from then on I kind of wandered around different places and started working, road construction and what not as a lumberjack around Thunder Bay Ontario and I was ____ big time so I went to B.C. for awhile logging on the BC industry along the coast and various places and then I came home for a visit in 1950/1951 and I got a job on a dressing operation with the federal government at that time and supposedly it was just temporary but I ended up being there stayed there and made it my career for 37 years and retired in 1988/99. From there on I was able to pursue my hobby, playing fiddle. So I was fortunate in a way that an interesting part, I was not only employed with the federal government they wanted my certificate, registration certificate and they found out I wasn't

registered but I had the birth certificate, luckily the midwife was still living, I was delivered by a midwife, so it wasn't too much of a problem in order to get registered. At that particular time I was thinking what could I do should I make myself two years older or two years younger so I could stay a bit longer on the work force or retire earlier but however honesty paid off and I was born in 1929 as the baptismal certificate stated like I was also conserved in that faith too but kind of left it aside when we got married through objections of the priest and what not, however I am not sorry for it. The fiddling part, I might as well finish the part when I went to school in Selkirk in the elementary grades, music was compulsory and for some reason or another music was my best subject and yet I had no inclination of playing a musical instrument but I did love the sound of the fiddle because we were brought up when they had a dance somewhere, that was the entertainment we had was the fiddle and the dancing, it was a good recreational activity for the community. So the music somehow made sense to me and I never really started getting interested and started playing the guitar didn't take music lessons or anything but I started playing the guitar and learned the chord structure at 14 and then wandering around various places I still heard the fiddle no matter where you went in the bush camp or wherever. It was always the form of entertainment, just before my 21st birthday I came home from British Columbia my dad had an old fiddle and I took it upon myself just to see if I could learn. They had three Don Messer records and two of them had medleys and he had tunes on them that played in every key, so I learned to play a tune in every key in the six weeks before my birthday. Finally when I went up on my birthday to do a little bit of celebrating of course I met some of the fiddle players and what not and I was invited to a house party, a jam session and of course I was a guitar player. So after all the players took a turn playing there was about 14 fiddle players that I can remember, I can remember some of the names but not all of them, later in the evening, of course in those days everybody commuted by taxi to a place so you didn't go home until daylight. So they would stay up and then sleep wherever they were sitting or whatever. Of course they were just beer drinkers in those days, not real heavy but just enough to keep a good sociable evening going. So when they started to fall asleep I picked up the fiddle and I played It's a Long ___ ___ in b flat and the whole gang got up and they said they wanted me to play it over and over again and I was amazed that they didn't know the key of b flat, these fiddlers various ages up to 60 and older never ever played in that key. They used to play Lover's Break Down in the key of a, I guess for that reason they didn't know the scale at all on the fiddle so that was it intrigued me and I was wondering that there has got to be something in this so there I was hooked to the fiddle now. Since then I have been just going one tune after another and I always thought maybe one time I would here a nice tune and say oh there can't be anymore but they just brand new ones continuously, you can't begin to learn them all to tell you the truth, there are so many tunes, variations

included and the tunes can lay dormant for a long while, then somebody will come along and do a little variation and it is right back in the picture again. That is the beauty of the instrument and so many styles, it is unbelievable the different styles there is, it just amazes me what you can get out of that one particular instrument it is just extraordinary. The tunes are made, the tunes are named there are really not too many tunes with lyrics in them outside some that come from Scotland have lyrics to them, they're horn pipes I guess they would be, I have been searching for a tape, I have a tape at home somewhere but I have not been able to put my hands on it recently, but when I do find it I am certainly going to pass it around. Basically that is about it, I am playing the fiddle, I started entering contests, I think it may have been after I played for about eight years, I entered a contest and of course as usual your first contest, your knees are shaking and everything, a little apprehensive about it and then from there you get hooked, there too you enjoy it, you're under stress for awhile and then you can hardly wait for the next contest to come along. Finally you get a little bit better and then you have competitors that you have to try and stay with you know so, Res Bouvette and I was always close and we made the show at many, many fiddle contests, with Marcel Miller, and Alex Carrier, that was about the four big guns around Winnipeg for years. I didn't catch any of the contests when Andy played but he was judged a lot of them, there was a lot of good players in Winnipeg but for some reason or another, they didn't record and you don't here their stuff or their material unless they are preserved in the archives or something. I remember we used to have a fellow but the name on Genton or something like that, it was a cousin of Andy's I think, not quite sure of that but I do believe it is a cousin and he had some records that were played the regular traditional way and I would like to here that record again, especially the Duck Dance, he had a special way of presenting that. The other guy was that was in Winnipeg was a Pete Peture, I think if you recall there is a Pete's Break Down and that was his, he used to have a show on the CBC on a Saturday night called lets go square dancing, he was the guy that provided the music but down east style playing. Then after that Andy started coming on, had a radio show every Saturday night, a half hour show, his style is just about what he has produced on his records but he would play a lot of nice fox trots. They were the tunes that were on the hits for eighties, he would play those tunes whether they were Latin American style of tunes or songs whatever that is what he would play. He had a nice vibe rattle, it came right from the shoulder when he played, it came right like that, there was none of this from the hand, it was just the whole thing and I heard it said that when he held a note you would swear that he had a bow that was ten feet long and he could sustain that note, you couldn't here the bow turn back on it. When *Oh My Stars* started playing, it was playing because I learned the Don Messer style I stayed with that style for quite awhile until I got to know Andy and switched the style and kind of got away from that now because there are so many other tunes you

here in different styles and you start doing there and it is easy to lose this Red River style, really easy.

13.7 John: What about dances, did you ever dance yourself?

13.8 Mel: Oh yeah, I used to dance.

13.9 John: The Red River Jig?

13.9 Mel: Never done the Red River jig but there was the young and lively, full of vinegar you know be polkas, two steps, no too many square dances, the waltz, I had a difficult time with the waltz, my feet didn't work for a waltz, took awhile, so finally I could get by on a waltz but if I was on the dance floor for a little while boy I would get _____. Of course the old dances years ago we tried a few, when my dad tried homesteading it was near a reservation so we used to go down there or have a dance at a house party but there was no halls, it was usually where you cleared the kitchen table and you had the whole kitchen where they would even take the stove out, whether it was a cook stove or a box stove wherever you were dancing. I remember the first ones, it was just straight fiddle, there'd be a second fiddle there but the second fiddle, they didn't know that many and they would play mostly tunes in the key of f, g, or d and the guy would just use his bow and chord. That was for the longest while and finally they got a guitar started coming into the picture and they would use a steel on it hey, acoustic and finally they started playing what you call it, chords with your finger what is the name of that style where you play with your hand instead of steel. So then finally they come to the piano, but the piano was a bit of a more populated areas like the towns and the cities, the piano was the thing but outline places couldn't afford a piano I don't imagine so it was a guitar. And of course they kept time with their feet, I remember a fiddler coming, he'd have his little pack sack with him and his fiddle was in it and his shoes that he kept time with, yes that was the way it went.

16.4 John: What about the Red River Jig, did you know a lot of people that were dancing that?

16.5 Mel: Yes, I knew lots of people that, seen lots of people and later on I was playing for them. And probably the best one that I have ever seen was a fellow by the name, I don't know if you ever heard of a fellow by the name of Jella Kolep. He was a good, an excellent fiddle player and he had all these fancy steps, he was strictly a nice entertainer, a Red River Jigger and a good fiddle player, Red River style. I think there is an album out of him that he has, he came from the portage area and that is probably the best one that I ever saw and then of course Freddy Flet and that is all he done was dance, excellent jigger and he is the guy that introduced the triple double shuffle or whatever they called it when they are dancing the Red River jig in the

Winnipeg area and that was the last one I have seen. Another fellow by the name of Aqua Deboosteps was a fellow by the name of Alcott and he had some 67 steps and terrific talent and he could dance for as long as a fiddle player could go, you could say 15 to 20 minutes and he wasn't even puffing you know and terrific, terrific and it is somebody may have taken a video of him, it would be nice if it was preserved somewhere and I don't know if he is still with us. A year or two ago he had a lung operation and had a spot on his lung so I don't know if he is still around, so that is about all I can tell you.

18.3 John: Well ah, there are going to be competitions around?

18.4 Mel: Yeah, the jigging contest is kind of falling away side and it is just the select same few that come out all the time, there is no new ones but mind you I guess they are teaching them but I haven't seen any new ones lately.

18.7 John: Yeah, the younger ones are not much good anyway because they have not been taught properly.

18.8 Mel: No, yeah they do maybe a polka step rather than, yah maybe some of them are taking Irish step dancing is what it is really.

19.1 John: What about your kids? Any of them play?

19.1 Mel: None of them, I spent lots of money on them and piano, accordion and none of them, mind you the four girls ___ the boy, the boy had an accordion and all of a sudden his lessons fell behind and I had a guitar tuned it up and left it on his bed and he was playing it in a couple of weeks but he has not got interest to pursue and keep on as entertaining thing, his cup of tea is with cars, he knows every bolt in every car and what not and is one of the quickest mechanics that I have ever seen to work at something to work around and go back, that sort of thing.

19.9 John: What about your brothers and sisters?

20.0 Mel: I had a brother who made a living with a singer and played a guitar, base, piano, keyboard and he finally settled in Minneapolis and unfortunately he had a blocked artery blowing up in the side of his neck here and then they cleared it out and his last gig was on a Sunday, Monday he went for the operation and it left him paralyzed on the left side and that was about three years ago and there is no hope of him ever being able to play the guitar again.

20.6 John: What about your cousins?

20.7 Mel: I haven't got any cousins that are musically inclined at all, I just seem to be one that come out of the whole family, everybody tried a

hand at the fiddle but they could only go so far and then they never ever got any better.

21.0 John: Yeah, that is the way I am.

21.1 Mel: Oh, I can't really say that I thought that you were one of the players that I have ever seen.

21.2 John: No, I mean none of my cousin's play.

21.3 Mel: Oh, I see, right.

21.4 John: None of my siblings.

21.4 Mel: Yeah, one time it is kind of an interesting thing, maybe it is the era, maybe when TV started coming in, there was too many things to be entertained on so that is why the music is gone away.

21.7 John: Like they often say the TV is the downfall of many children

21.8 Mel: Yeah, there was a family in the Laport area right where they have the bridge there and the father that worked in the law office and all the kids played and then the TV came and he bought a TV and then he noticed all their lessons were they weren't doing anything you know, so the first TV's that came around, they burn tubes out of, they broke down and he left it that way and the kids picked up on their music again. So there are obligations but they haven't really taken advantage of it to make it better for themselves.

22.6 John: Was your dad a fiddler?

22.6 Mel: He tried playing but he was one those people that could only get so far, like he played that *Rabbit Dance* and he knew that tune and *Jacket Trimmed in Blue* and he liked *Sedan's Reel*, which is an old backbone of all fiddle music I guess.

23.0 John: What about your grandfather, he must have played the fiddle.

23.0 Mel: No, none of the grandparents while it was too poor, they didn't have an instrument, there was in Little Black River probably a population of about 300 people, there was one fiddler there but we owned the fiddle, it was passed on to us from a deceased uncle, he starting to play the fiddle and then he had appendicitis and died from it, so then it left us with the fiddle, that is how we come to have a fiddle.

23.7 John: And that is where you got your start.

23.7 Mel: That is where I got my start, yeah.

23.8 John: Well I hope you have a lot more good years under your belt and I am really glad to have you come down and help us out with our project here.

24.0 Mel: Thank-you, it was a big honor, I have been kind of tied up in other things like I belong to the Masonic system and there is so many concortent bodies, there is a lot of memory work to do and visitations and it takes up your time, your most valuable time that you could be practicing an instrument so now I am through with that and so, but it almost when your on a downhill side I don't know how long you can keep going, but it is good therapy to play fiddle, the thing is don't seem to want to come clean off the finger board and they kind of stray away form the regular beat structure of the music.

24.9 John: Well, that is typical Métis though.

24.9 Mel: Yeah, that's right. I heard guys at a dance, they would come there and there'd be a dance on and the people would be waiting for the fiddler to get a tune on and he would be practicing and practicing and finally by gees he would have a tune going and away he would go and they dancers would jump right up right now and they would giver.

25.3 John: Yeah, it doesn't matter how many beats are over or under as long as the timing is right everybody just gives her.

25.4 Mel: Yeah, it's terrific.

25.5 John: None of this White man stuff. *Ha, ha.*

25.5 Mel: I did have an uncle that played fiddle, but he was married to my mother's sister and he played fiddle, but he had tough luck with his family, he really liked his fiddle and the dances so he had a big family, about 8 and he lost about 5 of them to TB and he though it was a bad thing, he figured the fiddle brought him omen, bad luck so then he left it alone and one time when I had a birthday he happened to come along and he picked the fiddle up and played and that was the only time I ever heard him play, he played about five numbers and that was it. We didn't have a tape recorder so, but he was one of those really good fiddle players he played if I can remember correctly it was *McDonalds* or even there was another one there, I can't really recall that one, I know I will recall it later on but I can't think of it but that is the tough part, when you get a little older you can't remember the names of the tunes.

26.9 John: *Ha, ha.* Join the crowd I am always like that. *Ha, ha.* Well I guess that is all I can ask you right now but.

- 27.2 Mel:** Yeah, well I am sure we will think of lots of things afterward which you can only say so much and recall so much.
- 27.3 John:** Anyway, we'll have this on record as, what do you think of honoring our society?
- 27.5 Mel:** I think it's great and it is long overdo.
- 27.7 John:** And it is all going to be society members that are in this tape and that is the god thing about it and everything in it is going to be _____ and nobody can say that any part of it is fake.
- 28.0 Mel:** I really like when you do the old traditional way of playing and probably with the fellow that I will speak very highly of, Frank Bruner, how he can pick up right away and do an extra two beats or three beats in any number, it doesn't matter, it is terrific talent.
- 28.4 John:** People, piano players especially, they have a hard time with the extra beats.
- 28.6 Mel:** Yeah, yeah because they are trained with their left hand you can end up an extra beat can leave you on the wrong side of the note I guess because I know and I have done it before right away they complain right away hey, you've missed a...
- 29.0 John:** That's not right.
- 29.0 Mel:** Yeah, that's right. *Ha, ha.*
- 29.1 John:** All right then Mel; next time you come around we will talk to you more.
- 29.2 Mel:** Okay, thank-you very much, the pleasure is mine.

First Interview Ends at 29.3

Interview with Mel Bedard

Date: August 9, 2001

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Interviewed by Herb Lafferty

Also present Leah Dorion-Paquin

Tape One: Side A starts at 29.4

29.5 Mel: Recorders that we got last winter but I haven't really used it, didn't learn how to use it, the buttons are too small for the fingers you know you need some a little bit larger.

29.6 Leah: Okay we are back and running.

29.7 Herb: Okay Mel, a little technical difficulty there, we'll just back up to question number two because I can hear your voice in my headphones when I ask a question. We were leading into the question did you come from a musical family and tell how that may have influenced you to pick up the fiddle.

30.1 Mel: Well not really a musical family, my father had a it was a hand me down, a fiddle that came from my uncles side, the maternal side so we inherited probably because of the boys in the family. My dad learned to play; he could just scrape by with possibly about a half a dozen tunes like *St. Anne's Reel*, *Little Brown Jug*, and *The Rabbit Dance*, those tunes. So those were the tunes we heard all the time, there was no radio, that was before we ever had radio and basically that is all that we heard was the fiddle no matter where you go if it was a birthday party, wedding or anything like that or they dance any time through the week when they felt they could have some recreational something so the tunes were in my mind quite early, I knew the tunes. Eventually when the guitar came on the scene I started playing the guitar, never bothered the fiddle at all so coming home, this is jumping a long ways ahead like we go from the 40's to ten years later when I was 21 years old when this fiddle had broke and one day quite a few years before that they used to have the ornamentation, like you have a string around the end of the stroll and hang it on the wall and one day at noon we were having diner and the fiddle fell down, the string broke by itself. It fell and broke open at the back and it stayed like that for a couple of years until I come home in 1950 at New Year's I came home. Six weeks before my birthday and my dad had a fiddle and he was itching to try and play it but it wouldn't play right because e it was broke open so I glued it together and he had three Don Messer records and they were all in different keys, every tune was in a different key. So I learned to play these tunes, seven tunes in all the different keys, actually I should get back to that I had to play the guitar from about '42, I played the guitar for about eight years and then I got onto the fiddle. When I got onto the fiddle, I knew the chord structure so then that is why it didn't take me as long to learn to play, like six weeks is not long, I can't believe I learned in six weeks but then I would play from daylight until dark to get these tunes until I got them perfect. I was 21 years old, February 8 and that would be six weeks until New Years at that point in time when I couldn't get into the pub before that and they all knew that I played the guitar because I would go play once in awhile with a fellow in a dance, play the guitar. So when finally when I was 21 years old I _____ pub close at ten o'clock, nobody had cars, they go in a taxi to

a house and it was 14 different fiddle players locally and they all played and I chorded for all of them and seeing that nobody had their own vehicles at that time so they all just stayed until daylight until the taxi before the taxi started going again and then they could go home. Anyway they were playing and after when I thought some of them were falling asleep on the chesterfield you know, sitting up some of them, and I though I would get a hold of the fiddle myself and tuned it to the key of b flat and this tune is called _____ *Breakdown* and I played that and these guys all, every one of them come wide awake and they said play that again, play that again, play Don Messer and I was just, I don't know what I thought, here is all these players that didn't know that key. So from there I was hooked on it, I just forgot about the guitar and I just kept on with the fiddling. A long while back as you kept expanding your repertoire there're some tunes I couldn't, you learn them by ear, couldn't pick up the notes that were being played so when I was going to school music was compulsory and for some reason or another music seemed to be my best subject, I was really good. So then at one particular tune I think it was *Big John, Big Nail* the way Don Messer played it is a lot of quick notes that come in there and I couldn't really pick them out the way it should be and I went and got a music book and I could play it within two hours, that quick and I was amazed by it so that is what kept me going. Back thirty or forty years ago we figured there can't be anymore new tunes and how wrong I was, you know and now they are composing numbers like crazy, you just can't catch up, that is how it has progressed.

- 36.0 Herb:** From the time you seriously picked up a fiddle, correct me if I am wrong, you were 21 years old and to play a complete tune it only took you about six weeks.
- 36.2 Mel:** Six weeks to play a key outside of e flat, I didn't know, I didn't get to e flat yet so I thought that was, when I think back now and people tell me like how long did I play and they often wonder why did I take so long but I know it was practice and I used to go and work in a lumber camp later on and I would see these guys and as soon as they got up in the morning, they would have a wake-up bell or breakfast bell at like six o'clock and some of these fiddle players that was there, they would pick up their fiddle first thing and play a few tunes, then have their smoke, go wash up, then go for breakfast, that seemed to be the way it was.
- 37.0 Herb:** I imagine you were playing the, or practicing the same way.
- 37.2 Mel:** A little later on, when I was at home yes, I was doing the same thing. When I got to be I used to take my fiddle out when I was a dredging master out on the dredge and if we happened to be moving or windy days I would practice, practice, practice, you know. Then you leave the music for awhile, you kind of become dependent on music and then you leave that, you can memorize the numbers then if

you have so much of a repertoire then eventually you can't remember the tunes, you have got to come back to your music then it is kind of a cheater, if you use your music now it makes you lazy, you won't memorize the tunes. I found that out, I play with, they call themselves The South_____ Fiddlers, I go up and been doing that for about a year now and it's all music, I know all the music in it but I don't usually bother setting my music up because I can glance over at a musician on either side of me and use their music. You can see from a long distance, you know exactly where it is going.

38.4 Herb: So what was the name of the very first tune that you learned?

38.5 Mel: My dad's favorite tune was *St. Anne's Reel* and it would have to be that one and that was in the key of d. Then it would be *John McNeal*, that was in the key of a and then of course I mentioned *The _____ Breakdown*, and there was also one called *The Role Away Horn Pipes* in the key of f I believe, the key of f and c. _____ *Breakdown* was in c, *Angus Campbell* was in a, and there was *Rippling Water Jig* was in it, so that would go into e, from a into the e chord and *Maple Sugar* didn't come for awhile, it just wasn't popular yet at that time in '50, it was just coming on.

39.3 Herb: Well, it sure must have made it interesting for you guitar player to follow all those keys.

39.4 Mel: I never really had a guitar player, oh yeah I had a guitar player, his name was Badiski, he was a Métis and he was a good guitar player and his favorite was too he liked fiddle tunes so he was a really good accompanist to have, they kind of hard to come by. If you get a guitar player that is into vocals and singing, they don't turn out to be the best accompanist on the fiddle because they haven't trained their ear to it but if you give them the notation, the book they can follow you good.

40.2 Herb: We were talking earlier off camera about how some fiddlers would personalize their fiddle, some would hang mini sashes on the scroll or paint roses on the fiddles, did you personalize your fiddle in any way?

40.5 Mel: The only thing I have done to personalize is my fingers are fairly chubby sort of thing so I'd have the strings set apart at the bridge so it would accommodate when I come up into the other positions. See that was another thing that the fiddlers didn't do in the days back, they didn't go to those other positions, they just stayed down in the one spot, in the first position. It was quite awhile before I seen them go into another position so that was about the only personalizing that I have done to my fiddle outside of for awhile I had a string that was actually from a tassel, a silk tassel and I used that because it was like a nylon or something so I used that to hang my fiddle on a nail and

eventually I got afraid of that because I had seen what had happened to the fiddle we had, since then I moved that and I don't have anything else on it.

Side A ends at 41.6

Cassette #1: Side B begins when Mini DV is at 12:09

Tape One: Side B

- 00.1 Herb:** You mentioned that you played the guitar before you picked up the fiddle, did you play any other instruments or try and play any other instruments?
- 00.2 Mel:** No, this we just didn't have any around, as it was the guitar, the first one that came on the scene a I think I mentioned in the biography there that the first I didn't see the fingering until a couple of years later, they were using the steel tuning and when they started using the fingering I ran across a Wolf Carter book I think and they had the guitar fingering positions in the book so from there, the chords and that is basically what I had done and then in my mind I would play the guitar so I could go to a fiddle tune and that is the way it went. One time a fellow came to the house and he had heard, he knew me but he didn't know that I had played the guitar that much so he said I am looking for a guitar player, he come to the house about six o'clock and the dance started at about nine or something and he said get your guitar out and he had his fiddle and he played some tunes and I chorded for him and then I came to a country waltz and one part went into an e and I was missing that, I couldn't get my ear to it and he says you go to e chord and so the second take around I played it and he says come with me, we are going to play for a dance. So that is how quick, if you know your chords you get hired right away. I can't remember what I got for playing that night it may have been, that was about 1949 maybe '49 or whatever it was, no that would be about 1095 about the same time I was playing the fiddle already.
- 02.4 Herb:** So when you made the switch from guitar to fiddle you must have had a musical influence or a mentor or a fiddler that you were watching and following, could you maybe tell us about who that fiddler might have been?
- 02.7 Mel:** Oh, yeah sure. It started with we were the first ones to have a radio in our community, we lived at the Little Black Reserve for a couple of years and Andy Desjarlais had a program on it on Saturday nights, so I heard that music but the people didn't, my dad didn't fall into it, he didn't care for it because he thought it was jumpy sort of a thing because he didn't understand he had the other style in mind, the Din Messer style, it was more smooth, more even flow. I followed that to begin with until it went for quite a few years and I hear Andy

playing every now and again and he was off during the war years and then I started hearing him again maybe in '48 or around there, so it went on and he started having a weekly half and hour program starting about '53 and then I could here this Red River style of music, there was a few guys that played it, not everybody played the Red River style. I could actually name the guys, there was a clan called Wheelers and they were Métis and everybody played the fiddle, all the boys, the father, and the girls played too. And they played this Red River style, distinctive notes, individual notes stick out in the playing sort of thing and all different length notes so it differed very much from the down east style. The down east style is up tempo and the Red River style is nice danceable tempo, so I changed after I met Andy Desjarlais I switched probably about six or seven years later I started doing his stuff and I took about two years to develop that style and the bowing is very different in it, very, very different. Don Messer starts on the, Desjarlais starts on the up-bow for the intro notes and then it's down-bow from then on. Don Messer have to always do some of his melodies, he just goes mostly up-bow, very, very different.

05.5 Herb: That pretty much answers the question where did you learn your songs from? Were there other fiddlers that you were listening to other than what you heard of Andy Desjarlais' music on the radio?

05.8 Mel: Yeah, well Gell Santione, he used to play once and awhile to, I would hear him, I am sure he was on that CJRC but I can't say for sure and then I heard his record and the playing his recording, he may have had two recordings now they probably '78 because he had the *Duck Dance* on one of them, now I had heard Desjarlais used to have now I don't know what you call it, the acetate and there was the tunes on it *The Duck Dance*, and probably the *Red River Jig* and I can't remember the other tunes but I had listened to these tunes at Andy's place and I liked the style and for some even now I still like Andy Desjarlais way of playing, strictly Red River, there is nobody doing it outside of Marcel Miller, he is kind of drifting away and I would like to encourage some of those players to go back and preserve that tune, that music there.

07.0 Herb: Is there a history of music in the Bedard family?

07.2 Mel: Uh, no, no I asked my uncle, I left my uncle here not too long ago he was the youngest brother of all the boys and he said, he told me right straight, your dad tried to play but he said, he would never ever have been a fiddler, he just went to that certain level and he couldn't advance any further. He would get after me for saying that but it was true.

07.7 Herb: Excuse me for a moment Mel. (Audio trouble)

- 08.7 Herb:** That brings us to the next question. Now that you have enjoyed this many years of fiddling maybe could you tell us what fiddling has brought into your life and what fiddle playing means to you at this point in your life?
- 09.0 Mel:** When the Red River style of playing, when they shortened the tunes, they done away with the old Métis style where they done the extra three beats at the end of a tune or whatever it is, they took that off and brought the tunes done to the proper measure of music like 16 measures repeated like an a and b part, where the b part is different. Followed that form and I think it was done for a purpose when probably more than Andy Desjarlais had done it, they'd drop the three beats and bring it back to a standard and the reason being that they could go somewhere higher players and they wouldn't confuse them by having extra measures in a melody. Of course they are becoming more educated too, the evolution of music, the Don Messer era, he was playing 16 measures, there was nothing that he ever changed it was all broken up. From there like finally you get, after 30 or 40 years, like John Arcand is a gem, when he introduced some of this stuff like where you put in the arrangements it brings up all the interest again that come back in it and Calvin moved in on that right away and he said John Arcand is a jewel and he is you know, I can't imagine how a person can compose this music with that stuff back in it, see in my playing there is so much music, I never even thought of experimenting to even compose a tune, there is too much stuff there for me to learn from, to keep you busy.
- 11.1 Herb:** That will lead into, I was going to ask the question did you learn to read music and do you think being able to read music would help or hinder your Métis style of fiddling?
- 11.4 Mel:** I don't think so because you can remember the tunes, you can be more accurate if you can remember because you just have to specialize the certain tunes not to be able to do that sort of playing but reading music is nice, you can come back to it, you can leave it alone for a month and come back to it. If you memorize a tune you almost have to play it suppose you had a repertoire of 500 tunes, now you've got to come back to them and listen you them again, nothing comes back by itself, you've got to hear the music then maybe it will come back to you. What amazes me we'll say, I know John reads music, Calvin claims he can read it and know the music and how he can remember those melodies, no matter what it is Calvin can play it without even, sometimes he will be a little modest and say oh I have to practice that tune when I know he doesn't. When Calvin is feeling great he can play the tune without even practicing it and throw in some of the tunes, fantastic fiddle player.
- 12.9 Herb:** They seem to improvise on the spot at times it seems.

- 13.0 Mel:** Yeah, he can improvise going to a maybe an I don't know what you call it, not another off day but the harmonic melody of the track, he can go into that.
- 13.2 Herb:** And then come back and finish the tune, and still finish it off.
- 13.3 Mel:** Yeah, yeah. And I have always thought I used to hear Graham Towns, never a Don Messer tune but they say that he did, when they are playing a medley of tunes that I thought _____ used to follow a format so I asked Calvin do you do, do you follow a format I said and no he said, he can go in any key at any time and I believe him he can do that.
- 13.8 Herb:** I remember a cousin Richard Lafferty who is also on the fiddling project saying that even though you read music and learn tunes by music eventually you are still going to go back to your own style of fiddling anyway so music and being able to read music doesn't really hurt a fiddler, what do you think?
- 14.2 Mel:** No, it an asset to be able to read music, if you are not sure of something like I just can't fathom a person being able to hear all the notes in the music. Like I was saying earlier Trent Bruner, I don't know if you can hear some of those raised notes or whatever but he knows that they are there, he may not hear them and that is what amazes me I know lots of times, some of Andy's music he plays because all his recordings are done with one microphone sometimes you loose track of the fiddle, you can't here what notes he is playing but you can figure out what notes are supposed to be there, that is what I am talking about. You can't hear, I can name several tunes where you can't hear Andy's, you don't know what the fiddle is doing and what notes he is playing but you know what they are.
- 15.3 Herb:** While we are on the subject of things that hinder a fiddle player, lets go back in time a little bit and earlier I was mentioning that it said by some old timers the church discouraged Métis fiddle dances by rounding up and burning the fiddles because the local commissioners wouldn't show up for Sunday morning mass. Was this true in your community or do you know of any stories that or similar incidents where Métis fiddle music was not welcome?
- 16.1 Mel:** Not in our community because we had the _____ in there too, so there wasn't that many communities with the Catholic faith in it, they would be far apart. So then I heard of interfering with Fort Alec had a lot of fiddle players and had a Catholic church there and a school for the kids, residential schools, so I have never heard of the fiddle burning thing or destroying any of the fiddles. I was in Minnesota and this fellow has, they have this video of the Native or Métis people trying to capture some of their, reserve some of their old tunes that they played and there is a story there that this fellow, there was four

fiddle players and the priest asked them to bring down, he kind of conned them into it, he said bring the fiddle down and I will bless your fiddle so now they bring down the fiddle and he says just a minute, I'll be right back and he goes outside and he comes back and the fiddle is all smashed to pieces and it is in the back. These guys, it is true and that is on a video and I made a note of it anyway of going down there this coming week and I will try and get that video and sent it to you, that would be an ideal place for it.

17.9 Herb: That would be nice to be able to include that in the book portion of the Métis fiddle project, the readers would find it _____ stories that are true and people ought to hear, I think that would make for a very interesting reading.

18.4 Mel: That other thing that we were talking about before with the connection that the fiddle had influence of the devil with it was different people always talked about that, it was _____ like you would say if you want to become a fiddle player you go out to a barn at midnight and you play your fiddle in the barn and you have to sacrifice your first child or something like that or some favorite relative and you can play the fiddle the devil will grant you this gift of playing the fiddle, that was one of the stories. The other story that I, when I was on the Peter Gzowski show, no it wasn't the Peter Gzowski show, it was the Jim Hiscott was the guy that was interviewing me so he was asking me about some of these stories so I told him down at the bottom of Lake Winnipeg, there is a, it is called the Grand Moray, Acconia. Where there is a reservation there Scannerberry, they call it Broken Head is a kind of a muskeg area there and there is buggy tracks there like a swamp anyways there was tracks and a little bit of water here like a muskeg and what not, so this fellow was coming home, he loved to play the fiddle this fellow, I think his name was Orton Mungmun, I think his name was so anyway he is telling this to a fellow by the name of Louis Wheeler, who was also a fiddle player, Bill Louis, so anyway he said Mungmun was telling him this, he was coming home and just breaking daylight, there was kind of a fog, he was playing all night at a dance and he has his fiddle with him and he heard somebody coming up behind him, coming up really fast and the guy is clearing his throat, uhm, uhm, going like that. So then when the fellow he glanced back and this guy had a black shirt on and his collar was up and he had a black top hat and he shook his head at him and when he went back, he didn't notice right away this fellow had horse hooves, so he thought it was the devil.

20.9 to 21.9 Technical difficulties- fuzz

21.9 Mel: When the fellow passed him as he went back he just nodded his head at him, he didn't say nothing, and then when he went beyond him he could see that he had horse hooves, what do you call them, the fetlocks and everything, so that is where that story ended and if there

are to be more questions asked I didn't know, but the horse was always depicted as being the horse of evil also, you knew that didn't you?

23.2 Herb: No.

23.6 Mel: Yes, I know because my grandparents used to tell me that the reason a horse gets up the way he does is because he doesn't worship at all, when a cow, cattle, bovine gets up, they always backend up first and then they kneel and then they get up, so that is the reason the horse is always depicted as being an evil animal sort of thing, I think that may be one of the reasons they don't eat horse, they do in other places but I never heard about anybody eating horse in, maybe I have but nobody I know ever eats horse meat.

23.7 Herb: Well back home, there was a little general store and they used to have a sign; fresh meat from all over the world but underneath it would be prepped, clicked, and cam and it was kind of a running joke and was click made from horsemeat?

24.6 Mel: Well, not in Canada I don't think.

28.7 Herb: Well if it was, and if our northern fiddlers, they ate a lot of it. I want to talk a little bit about the Red River Jig, there are some mixed stories on the origin of the Red River Jig and I have since learned that you are friends with Andy Desjarlais and you are aware of Andy's father Pierre who was also a friend of Frederick John ___ and since you fiddlers are all connected we were wondering if you could share with us your knowledge or ideas about the origin of the Red River Jig from what you have heard in your community or your friendship with these other fiddlers.

29.5 Mel: Well I never really, when I was a kid and we used to have our dances they would always have the red River Jig the would end up, part of the night would be the Red River Jig, because then the people could, anybody had nice what you call it, their own version of dancing, their own steps and all that and they kind of took part in that, at a certain time at night they would play the Red River Jig. I think it kind of, the different fiddlers, why there are so many different versions is that they kind of choreograph the playing to the jigger. I kind of think that is the reason different community had their own fiddling because they change fiddle players. If somebody from way down the river, Selkirk, wanted to dance the Red River Jig, he would ask somebody else to play and the tune would be different, different length and that. We used to have a very prolific dancer, let's talk about him for a little bit. His name was John Thomas, I think his name was, now this guy was a I don't now whether if he was a show off or something but anyway when he was dancing he would look back at his feet to see what his feet were doing and then he would the other side when he

changed step. The crowd would, he thought he was being applauded for his footwork but they were applauding to see what he was doing because he had to look at his feet while he was doing his steps. As soon as he would go you now he was gone home, another Red River Jigger would get up there and he would mock this guy and it would bring the house down, doing the same thing. *Ha, ha*. So that was the kind of fun that they had so as far as the jig goes when I got to learn, the first guy that I knew played it and recorded it was a fellow by the last name of Tanner and he gave a copy of it to King Gannem and that is the one the King Gannem plays and then Don Messer finally played a version of the same thing not long after, he must of got the same, they used to produce a little you could go get a tape or record cut and that is how that was done in order to be given to other people and finally all of a sudden Andy Desjarlais started doing his and I kind of love his because it is such a variety and it always came back to the same thing, it didn't vary, so that is what I liked about his. What else can I say about that jig, the origins of it, they started talking about the origins, now because of the Grand Jig Simple symbol, the grand juries from Quebec, I would say the Red River Jig was born in the Red River, I don't hear it anywhere else none of the old fiddlers from Quebec seem to know it, Cap Breton Fiddler league primo didn't seem to know of it, you know and Nova Scotia didn't hear of it until Don Messer played that version like it is without tuning that g-string to an a position he just played like I used to hear him refer to it as play it the White man way and that is what they would say if they didn't bother tuning the string up, you got to tune it the Michif way you know, tune that g to a, so that is how that come to be.

32.0 Herb: Not very long ago when I was trying to learn more about Frederick Jack Don and his relationship with the fiddler Andy Desjarlais, I was referred to Marcel Meyer and since found out that Marcel as you know had played fiddle with Andy Desjarlais for about 35 years and I asked Marcel where did Andy Desjarlais learn his version of the Red River Jig from and Marcel Meyer said Frederick Jack Don. What do you know of Frederick Jack Don?

32.3 Mel: Well, Frederick Jack Don, like we were listening to that version and it was written very different so if Andy got it, it would have to be from somewhere else, like from his dad. Like I wasn't really aware of that specific sound and I couldn't decipher it in the music book, the Frederick Jack Don version so I would probably be strictly the Desjarlais family and Marcel Meyer comes form Fisher Branch area, so he was actually I don't know if he played the Red River Style, there was actually another Meyer, they call him Reginald, Reg Meyer, Regis they call him, they used to be three fiddles with Andy at times and but Marcel was the one that played the nice harmony so he enhanced the music by playing probably one on the best harmony player I ever heard for the Red River style of playing is Marcel. Then there was a fellow form Fort Alec, his name was John Arcansen, he was a real,

probably the best fiddle player that ever came out of that reserve as far as I can remember and he played the Red River Jig but he had four parts to it, four distinct parts and when I was talking to Andy one time I was saying you know this fellow has four distinct parts but they are different from what you play and he said why didn't you tape him but you know the day is now and you think what in the heck am I ever going to do with that and the guy since died and never ever got a chance to tape him, so his version was different. If there is four parts most of them is, well Andy kind of has his four parts to it but it is going from one to another and it was in the a and b part and you could say they were a little bit different, you could say there was four parts I suppose but this guys version was really different, very different.

34.2 Herb: We'll move on to playing at dances, if you were to play the fiddle at a dance or on the radio or any other special functions are there any special preparations that you go through before you play?

34.5 Mel: Yeah, for sure. If I have a booking for say this weekend, the whole week I got to go through my music so I will know so I won't forget these numbers. It happens to the best of them, I heard that Andy Desjarlais was playing a waltz and he ended up to a different waltz but the next time around he came back to his original tune so you can get lost because so many tunes are so much alike it can lead you into something else. So you have to prepare so that you have an idea what you are going to play, sometimes people come and ask you can you play this and the tune just seems to come to you like this and you can just play it right now and it is just you know, it amazes me sometimes. One time I was jamming at the Russian Ados and that is a threshermans reunion and there was a fellow from the Okanogan valley from down east and I used to come down there lots and we were there with some real top notch fiddle players like Donny Read, John Cosbin, he lives now in Calgary and this guy would ask tunes what we were to play and I knew them all, I was just lucky maybe that I knew every tune and later on he was telling me you know he said that you knew more tunes than everybody around, maybe at a time, sort of like Calvin you know, you know a lot of tunes.

37.0 Herb: Coming up to the fiddle fest weekend, John Arcand's Windy Acres, we are going to be hearing a lot of Métis fiddling and does one tune come to your mind that would define Métis fiddling?

37.6 Mel: Well I would think the tunes that go into the, some of the more contemporary time like John Arcand's era that he has composed, any of those tunes define Métis fiddling. Coming back the old way, they always say what goes around comes around again, what started what was in the beginning comes back again as an era so I think maybe I was talking to that one person, he is from Vancouver, he is producing that movie and he says I think it is the Métis turn now, you've have had Cape Breton playing, I think it is your turn. Louisiana fiddling is

different again, they play where they short meter their tune but they have lyrics to their tunes so they can make it fit that song. The big tall guy from Louisiana, ___ ___ have learn some of his tunes and one particular tune I kind of forget the title for it but anyway, I was trying to figure out how he could play this tune in the key of f and here he was playing, I was just about to find out I was going the wrong way, like I have one of these pitch control things on my recorder and if I would have gone the other way I would have found out that he was tuning to g instead of the a chord. So when he was playing in the key of g he was getting f in the sound, very, if I would have just waited another day, but he was in Winnipeg and I said to him on this one tune how did you get that sound? Oh he said I will tell you he says, I tuned it to the key of g, so there you go and before I was telling you that Ashley MacIsaac goes the other way, he goes a half tone, a to a sharp and then he comes in with the bagpipes, he is in b flat when he plays the melody.

38.7 Herb: Do you recall hearing that story of, getting back to the origin of the Red River Jig where there was an Indian fiddler was on the east bank of where the Assiniboia and the Red River meet and he heard the wind blowing the Scottish bagpipes across the river and it was coming from the bagpipes and do you think it is possible that the fiddler tuned his fiddle to the bagpipes?

39.1 Mel: Yeah, yes, the f sharp and maybe people didn't know if it sounded good but it is awful tough on the string, the e string is really tough on it but at that time you wouldn't know what kind of strings they would have. You know I have seen strings where they have this guy just be real careful with the strings you know and one time he had to replace them now they would do everything to preserve that so I think maybe a lot of the fiddle was tuned down. Now this particular person that was playing we'll say at the forks there, well he'd have to have his fiddle tuned up to b to be exactly in tune with the bagpipes but hen he may have imitated the sound, just memorized the tune and then..

39.6 Herb: Play it in standard.

39.6 Mel: Yeah, yeah because the Scottish have their ___ thing type of tunes in there so they step all over, when they step all over the place there.

39.7 Herb: We'll go back to the family and the home community, I was wondering if you recall any unusual stories about Métis fiddling or dancing in your community, do you have any funny or unusual stories about your community?

39.7 Mel: No, just that fellow that was jigging hey you know that looked at his feet, you know he would twist way over and look at his feet while

he was dancing which was unique and I have seen people like if you are having a picnic, they will take their little tie their 2 x 4 or a 1 x 4 and lay it on the ground and you can dance on that, just out in the grass and have a whale of a time, funny you know. That is the Red River Jig on that part. *Ha, ha.* There was that other fellow there, he always liked to dance, like I say these special times they would have and do the Red River Jig, this fellow he had done, he did have some footwork but he moved around the stage a lot, so all of a sudden he would do like a horse galloping and he would be going around the stage like he would be whipping a horse type of thing, different you know and I often think of that if some of these fellows that play fiddle by themselves, play the Red River Jig and dance like that, if they were to incorporate that act in there and just at the end just get hold of the fiddle by the neck and whip your horse with your bow. *Ha, ha.* Maybe somebody can get an idea from that, there used to be a fellow by the name of _____ in here from Portage Le Prairie and he was played, kind of looked like Andy Desjarlais this guy, and he could dance the Red River Jig and he had a variety of steps and he would play the fiddle and dance at the same time and he would go across here, if the floor was this big, he would go from one corner, he would go with his right foot like this, just like weeding something and then he would dance backward just like he was taking it out and then he would go to the other corner and go the other way and now he would use his left foot, this guy was a terrific entertainer this guy _____, maybe you will run across his name someday. But he played identical Red River style to Andy, same thing.

41.4 Leah: Do you know how many steps, do you know the maximum number of steps a person can dance in the Red River Jig.

Side B ends at 41.5

Cassette # 2 begins when Mini DV is at 53:20

Tape Two: Side A

00.2 Mel: Well there is a fellow by the name of Alcott or something like that, Burrel Bouvette, if you know Burrel Bouvette tell this guy could dance something like 67 steps and he just and this guy could dance, he could dance for half an hour to dance all those steps, he would have a chord playing and the guy with a clubbed foot and all these different things like that you know.

00.7 Leah: Did you ever dance?

00.7 Mel: I did a long time ago, years ago. Too busy playing the fiddle after that, I always if you do something you stay with it and do it well and I figure to make people dance is a gift and to be able to dance is a

gift, especially when they can do all the different steps you know to really create stepping.

01.3 Herb: Are there any old Métis fiddlers from the Selkirk area that you remember?

01.5 Mel: Yes, there was a fellow by the name of, the guy that hired me to go play at a dance right now, his name was Sinclair. I forget, Norman was his first name, terrific fiddle player and he is one of those fellows that never had a record, too poor to have a record player but he had a fiddle and he could remember a tune that he heard on the radio and he could play it right away, that is the kind of fiddle players there were. There was another fellow by the name of Martin Bruce, he was all through the war and he brought back a fiddle with him and he was playing right from when he was young but he had a style of his own and nobodies style, it was different from the Red River style and those are about the ones that I can remember that were really at the head of the class sort of thing.

02.4 Herb: Were there any particular fiddle tunes that were really popular in your community or still are popular with people in your community?

02.6 Mel: Well they like the square dancing and square dancing would be maybe like *The Rippling Water Jig* because it was in that key structure and but they liked *The St. Anne's Reel*, *Flowers at Edinburgh*, *Whiskey Before Breakfast*, *Romeo's First Change*, *Waltzes* went to many of them at the beginning and finally when the people started having cars there was less energy and they used to be able to dance like a jig, the first change, the second change, and then the third change and now people can't do that, they can only dance two. Same with the waltzes, they used to play three waltzes and now it is down to two, two steps, same thing with polkas down to two because people are soft, I'm sure they are soft, it has to be the car that done it and I bet you it will get worse. We got computers now and people are not moving.

03.9 Leah: I'm running out of tape, so I am just going to change it now.
1, 2, 3 we are rolling Herb, anytime you want to get started.

03.9 Mini DV # 2 begins

04.0 Herb: Some of the popular Métis dance tunes such as the *Duck Dance*, *Reel of Eight*, *Reel of Four*, *Drops of Brandy*, or the *Square Dances* are still being played today and most likely you played those tunes, what are your memories of those tunes and how say people react when those tunes are being played?

04.5 Mel: Well when they played them in the years back like it is a long time now, they have gone to a what do you call it, a choreograph sort of dancing you know what do they call this dancing that they bring in

from the U.S. where they dance with certain things that they do, that is what they are into now but there is only *Seven Step*, *The Ordinary Polka Waltz*, *The Two Step* and *Square Dances* going to two and that is basically it. They don't do *The Rabbit Dance*, they don't do back home they do that *Reel of Four*, or what is the other one where they have the 16 dancers, what do they call that, is that *The Reel of Eight*, is that *The Reel of Eight* when they do that one, they don't do that, and even *The Butterfly* was popular for awhile and they don't do that anymore. They don't do *The Broom Dance*, they don't do it's actually gone in the archives in Manitoba it's called a *Swing Tucker*, it's the dance with an extra person in it, it is five males and four women imagine you could put nine men and eight women, they have a caller do it, the reason being like when they decide to swing to get a partner again, the person has to be unaware, the extra person that has no girl, if it is a man, that he is not aware, he's not looking for the same girl, he hadn't got a girl so he has to steal one, that is a really fun dance. The last time they done that dance has got to be thirty years ago, as far as I know it went in the archives in Manitoba and _____ hotels where they used to call that *The Spoiler Dance* so he is the other person that knows about it, so that is lost.

- 07.0 Leah:** Have you ever heard of a quadrille?
- 07.1 Mel:** Yes, well the quadrille is only like the jig and then they just call off to it, like *The Waltz Quadrille* is one of them.
- 07.3 Herb:** While we are reminiscing if you would have been playing fiddle in the war years, I'm thinking more the mid 1940's did those war years have any affect on fiddle playing in general?
- 07.6 Mel:** Yes, that and the dances in general, there were just too many for the lack of the young men and men were gone and the only time you may get a dance is at New Year's and that is basically how it was.
- 08.0 Herb:** Beginning fiddlers are sometimes discouraged from scratching out tunes on their fiddles were you ever discouraged as to a beginner by people friends even loved ones as you were learning to play the fiddle because when you are learning to play the fiddle, it doesn't always sound nice, were you ever felt discouraged?
- 08.4 Mel:** Well I was kind of trying to kept quiet I thought, at first I didn't know that everybody was real good, really like the fiddle music, I thought it was only myself and a few of our Métis friends and Natives you know, the Aboriginal. So I was actually ashamed of it sort of thing, hey this guy likes the fiddle music and you know, then later on I find out that there are fiddle players all over you know and then later on when the years go by and you go into the US there are all these guys you know I used to know this guy his name was Skidmore, he was a big time judge down there and he played fiddle. Then there was

an airline pilot, his name was Frank Ferrel of Port Towns, Washington, he was a commercial airline pilot who could fly over to the island and then there was a bank manager, dentist in Thunder Bay, then there is a surgeon that I know he is in Rochester Minnesota, he plays damn nice fiddle, he is a surgeon but apparently he is specializing in being an anesthetist there, so I have got a girl and she is in nursing there and she plays fiddle so then she is working there now and I said you find out if Bill Schafer is there, she said okay I'll see and I says, he plays good fiddle and he does so I am anxious to see her, maybe I will see her next week. He plays a tune, Wally Tralket composes a tune that is called *Snowflake Breakdown* and this kid plays it he goes into a minor with it, he has developed it more and son of a gun it's and I have never ever got, I know a fellow who recorded it but the fellow since died so I have no way of getting a copy of the melody that he played with it.

10.6 Herb: Before the age of radios and gramophones, fiddle tunes had to be passed on through several generations by ear, did you learn by watching?

10.9 Mel: Everything I watched, I watched everything as a tune, the melodies I could memorize that is before I knew the metering system but I knew the melodies, certain guys had certain tunes I would remember that and basically I guess that was at the bowing direction, the bowing I was very interested in and still I can be very mesmerized by bowing techniques like Calvin's bowing technique is very, very different, I have never seen anybody with that bowing technique, just like he whips the bow every here and there you know. Lee Primeau has a Cape Breton style of where you do the bunch of short bows you know and that is the Cape Breton style of music and well the Rankin's do it a little bit, but not too much, a very unique style of playing, very different.

12.0 Herb: Do you remember learning tunes from 78 rpm's?

12.1 Mel: Oh yeah, those 78 rpm records were the Don Messer ones that I had that had a few tunes on them, the medleys would be on those and in order to get some of them, some of the records I think may have had the 45, was that a 45 when they used to have a small disc. When they started coming to that, you could slow it down so you could get half speed I think it was a half speed from a 78 to a 45, maybe it was less than that.

12.6 Herb: I think I remember seeing a 16 like a 33.

12.7 Mel: Yeah when they got the 33, they had the other 3 speeds so you could learn from that but it was a time thing where you got to keep putting the what you call it the thing over back and forth to the other tune.

- 13.1 Herb:** After you comfortable with some tunes, you must have got to the point where you were ready to play your first dance, do you remember the first gig you played at or the first dance you played at?
- 13.3 Mel:** To tell you the truth, oh yeah I went and played at a local legion, that was the first time. At first I was playing with that Ray St. Germain and my brother Bob were playing there and Jack Padget was the other one, so I didn't play a whole whack of tunes but it was enough for a dance maybe the waltz and the two steps and that was about it. But to play fiddle itself, it will be a long while back I was hired to do a wedding I think it was and of course I had an accordion player and there was no vocalist so we were able to do the whole dance.
- 14.0 Herb:** About what year was that?
- 14.1 Mel:** Oh, that would have to be about '68, oh it was before that '67, it was a ____ year, okay I was already playing, I had a stage down in our park, I played for the voyagers the ones that paddled from Cumberland House all the way down to Ottawa, so I was already playing then, so I can't really say what that was when I played, about I would probably think about '58, eight years later.
- 14.8 Herb:** Back in those days, before the arrival of guitar and pianos did the old time Métis fiddlers accompany themselves with their feet, like clogging?
- 15.0 Mel:** Yes, with the feet, you know that just one shuffle sort of thing and then one of the, if they accompanied with another fiddle he wouldn't play, I didn't hear harmony then. It would be similar playing, like they would so the whole whack of fiddlers they would all play on the same notes, so it would enhance it, gives it more volume and then if a person if some of the fiddles didn't play then they would chop on the d and g string because most of the tunes were d and g, when it came to the Red River Jig then it was an a, so they could still keep with that fiddle. And then they would use a couple of sticks on a g and d string while the fiddler was playing, that was the other, stand beside there an bang away at those strings there like *tkg tkg tkg, tkg tkg*.
- 16.0 Herb:** We have read about the term dubbling on the fiddle and this practice of dubbling on the fiddle is remembered by a lot of players as something they did with their relatives, do you recall playing some tunes together with your relatives or your mentors to capture that sound of playing the melody say in different octaves and improvising harmonies and chords?
- 16.6 Mel:** No, I never had that opportunity because my location, when I was away all summer there was nobody else around, no relatives like

sometimes and then I would go out and work in the wintertime also I never got to see the kids as they were growing up half of the time because I was away somewhere, working, and the fiddle was a biggest time of practicing was when I was out on the boat out on the dredge and if I was at home, it would be at practices on the weekend or something like that, days off.

- 17.4 Herb:** Because there didn't seem to be any pianos in the community halls or in homes, the fiddle remained unaccompanied until the guitar came in the late 1940's, do you find that is that a true statement?
- 17.7 Mel:** Yes, I started accompanying these couple of fiddlers in Selkirk and finally we would go to a house, he knew that these guys had a piano there and the women played or maybe there was a guy, a _____ guy who played the piano so that was the first time. And then there was another, I was I don't know, there was a fellow and his name was, he was very well known around town as the community entertainer or whatever he was, he would always organize dances at his house and I never knew why until I went there. He had a baby grand piano this guy and he was a trapper because in the spring of the year his hands were, you know how Muskrat trapper is a guy that had been out in the marsh, his fingers were all kind of dirty looking and weather beating and this guy he would get on that god damn piano and he was a good player, his name was J.J Rat.
- 19.0 Herb:** Before the age of fiddle pick-ups, microphones, and amplifiers did you do anything different in order to be heard above the sound of a lively dance crowd?
- 19.2 Mel:** Well I personally already had the, you can get not so much the pick up but a microphone that you could play into so that you could get the natural sound, there was nothing, no reverb that sort of thing, it was just kind of a dry sound and nobody could afford a good amplifier, it was the cheap harmonizing that sort of thing but they still, if you played good in them they still come out a good sound and of course for the back, before the amplifiers, they played two fiddles or three fiddle players that brought the music out.
- 19.9 Herb:** Where did Métis fiddlers in particular in your Selkirk area, where did they buy their fiddles?
- 20.1 Mel:** I kind of think they, a lot of them were brought later on, brought back from the war and probably both wars and then Eaton's used to put out fiddles in their catalogue, it would be a range anywhere from \$25 to \$80 for fiddle case and bow, there was a lot of those around and then lots of homemade ones, there was people who didn't even play fiddle and they made them. Because I had a fellow from Selkirk, as soon as he finished a fiddle he would bring it over to me to try it out and I don't know where his fiddles are gone, his name was Wilfred

Agwin and I have been looking around, they have to be somewhere, I am sure they didn't throw them in the garbage.

21.0 Herb: How many fiddles a year do you think this Agwin could make?

21.0 Mel: This fellow, I'm sure he was up around 15 or so, so there has got to be some somewhere, there was one real good fiddle maker from Winnipeg, his name was Iout, now he used to be a cabinet maker and does really nice woodwork and he made about 28 fiddles and they are in a museum in St. Boniface, Marcel plays one and there not all good, some are good on the high side but not as good on the low side and some of them are reverse, like the high side is not as good as the low side, they are not well balanced.

21.9 Herb: When you are looking for a fiddle what qualities do you look at for in a fiddle?

22.0 Mel: Well, I have been playing raw fiddle for quite awhile, they are quite expensive, you are looking at two or three grand for it, now Calvin's played one and Patty has got something the same, I think they are probably around three or four grand for those fiddles, those raw and as far as sound wise, they are not let's say, the sound kind of sweet melody sort of thing and I was going to leave until tomorrow to show you this fiddle. After I bought this fiddle that was in the studio today, it was made in France that one, okay my buddy, my trucking buddy, he was telling this cousin of his that I went and bought this fiddle so the fellow says "oh I have got my dad's fiddle here, I wonder if he would take it if I give it to him." He said, "Sure go have it," so he brought me the fiddle. Now it is a fiddle that has been made in Checkle Slovakia and I don't know how it came to this country or when but then the top must have been broke because the top is overhang, like an overhang on a roof, it is too big, you know this gosh darn fiddle is like that is the fiddle I want to finish my, end my days playing it. It's got that Red River style of fiddle sound to it, so we will play it sometime tomorrow and show you what I mean.

23.7 Herb: Many fiddles experience tuning problems with the tuning pegs slipping, do you have a special way of preventing tuning pegs from slipping?

23.9 Mel: I, they dress them with something but I don't know if it is a powder thing like chalk, I don't know, you would have to ask these fellows that does that. If mine starts slipping I take it to the boys that I know and right away they fix it for me, it is some kind of special dressing that they have for it.

24.3 Herb: Up north I recall hearing of some old time Métis fiddlers using spruce gum when they ran out of store bought fiddle bow rod, do you recall any incidents where they used spruce gum instead of rosin?

24.6 Mel: Yes, yes I saw that back in the '30's all of a sudden the bow is not working right so they send a guy out with a lantern and away they gone in the bush and they got rosin, now that rosin is good, it is really hard, it has been in the tree for ages and it is just as good as the other rosin.

25.1 Herb: That store bought rosin, where did they get that stuff from?

25.1 Mel: That must be, it has got to be from the same thing, it's got to be from a spruce I would think, I don't think it is an artificial thing that is made, it is not a generic gum, I don't think.

25.3 Herb: It must come from a spruce tree.

25.3 Mel: All them glues that they use, special glues for the fiddle that you can take apart when you want to take it apart, if you see carpenters glue, it is a no, no because you can't take the fiddle apart afterwards and it re-breaks so that is a no good glue.

25.8 Herb: Have you heard of them, the fiddles when they crack what kind of glue do you use, I heard it abreak, do you remember?

26.0 Mel: I don't know the terms I don't know the names of the glue but I had a fiddle break, crack somehow and that is my good fiddle and the guy says take the top off, I said I need it Thursday and this was a Monday I went to them and then when I went back to pick it up it was overlapped and I said hey, that is not the way, you didn't take the top off, I said did you take the top off and he said no, well I said _____, oh that is nothing he said, you bring it back to me and I'll plane it down on the top so it is even and varnish it and you won't even know it is there. So I said no way that is going to spoil the sound, this fiddle is two thousand bucks so then I went to Phoenix to go and play in the arts and the airline broke the base bar. So now there was a fellow by the name of, he is with that Manitoba fiddle magazine that they produce, his name is Larry Martiknow, I was talking to him and he had a little kid that was born, like what do you call that when the kid is born and he can't walk and all that, so anyway I said, and he was playing the fiddle, Martiknow himself, so I said what do you do for a living, he says I am an insurance adjuster for airlines. Oh, I said, they just broke a fiddle on me now and it was the only one and they gave me \$110 or \$120 bucks for it or something like that and he said did you accept it? I said no, he said well bring the fiddle to me and I will have a look at it. So I had already taken it to a fellow and he had already fixed it, the base part, and I told him do you want to take the top off and he said yeah, I said try and fix that part where it is out like this, so he said I couldn't break that part again. So I went and took that fiddle to Martiknow and he said that is a good thing that you didn't settle for it. I'll tell you what I can do, well I tell you what, I

said, you take the fiddle, he got his training at Crofts music in Winnipeg, you know Crofts, but he had practiced there for quite awhile, so I said I tell you what, you take the fiddle and whatever you get from the insurance company and take the top off and take that apart again and he said okay it is a deal. He got \$960 from the airline, U.S. and I says if you have money left over give it to the boy, the fiddle boy. So now when I go there with my fiddles and he just fixes them for nothing, but it took that three months to get that apart, where it was overlapping a little bit. He said he could soak it with water every couple of days and finally he got it apart, so now my fiddle is all fixed up.

28.9 Herb: So do you have any preference to the type of fiddle strings you use?

29.0 Mel: I have been trying to change and experiment, I used to use those Perloff strings, you know, they are perastrial olives but then when you go out in the light outside, they stretch, you are forever tuning them but they have an error tolerance when you are playing, like they can gradually go out of tune and I don't know whether you automatically adjust but they sound alright, they are on pitch until you try the damn thing when you stop playing and it is out of tune, it is either too high or too low. So I got away from those and now I use the prinks or a thomestic string.

29.8 Herb: Dr. Thomestic?

29.8 Mel: Yeah, and then but prims are nice.

29.9 Herb: Do you know what old time Métis fiddlers use when they couldn't get store bought strings? If they broke a string and they didn't have a spare e or whatever.

30.2 Mel: I'm sure they always had, they probably had the cat, gut strings you know and you could always save old strings sort of thing, tie them in a knot, I've seen them tie it in a knot so they can play.

30.5 Herb: Up north I have heard of some fiddlers using that old brass or copper snare wire, have you ever seen that done?

30.7 Mel: I think as a patch up in between for the regular string, like if the string was too short, so they were able to tie a knot at the back end and bring it almost up to the bridge enough so that they could wind it. Or else they would switch the string on the peg, I've seen them do that because it wasn't long enough, like supposing it was an a string and they would put it to the e peg which is closer, I have seen them do that. Nobody threw an old string away, if a string broke, they would keep it because they might use it for a splice.

- 31.5 Herb:** Yeah, it is hard to waste that for sure. Do you have any personal playing strategies you use when playing for old time fiddle dances?
- 31.7 Mel:** Well I just stay with that good dance book quality, like I say the Red River style playing and it gives it kind of a nice lift, I count in beats of four and you are always saying to people they seem to like that, dance four beats emphasized the fourth beat sort of thing and it works alright.
- 32.2 Herb:** Where have you performed and do you have any special memories of performances?
- 32.3 Mel:** Yeah, lots of them from very prestigious places sort of thing, like I played at what they call a smocking night Gordy Tap was there, Al Shurney, Torithm pals and I played in the big arena in Winnipeg, the place was just packed and I played like a medley of tunes, like a traditional thing you know you play a *Waltz Clog*, *Step Dance*, and then a real fast tune and that was re-memorable and then I went down afterwards and had a nice chat with Gordy Tap, had supper with him, that sort of thing. And then from there, I had already met Al Shurney so from then on we were a little bit more we'd chat, like he would know me if he seen me so I met him up here in Carrot River, Red Deer, Alberta and he used to play in a pub right close to my brothers place in Beverly in Edmonton. So if he was playing there, Al Shurney was a guy who would put on a show, he would just play the same old regular old tunes hey, never change the format, ten years ago he played and he is still playing ___ ____, so I said to my brother we'll go see him at the Drake he was playing, it was his friend that owned the place, that is how he would get to play every now and again. So I went to the back door and sat back and Al Shurney could play double stop, you would think that there was two fiddlers playing and he played lots of stuff, why didn't he play that style when he was doing his shows I often wondered. It is just such a waste of talent I thought, you know.
- 34.3 Herb:** In the Red River Jig many players will retune their fiddle, do you prefer to play the Red River Jig in standard tuning, correct me if I am wrong but is it g, a, d, e? And the high a tuning, I couldn't tell you that though, maybe you could.
- 34.7 Mel:** Yeah, well the g string you tune to a, I like that, it kind of resonates the fiddle in that e... (*fuzz*) that melody, so then it gives that resonance to it and they have a fiddle called the Heartinger fiddle, it has got four strings underneath like below the pitch, like you don't play the ones under the ___ board and those fiddles that is what that is designed and you can tune it to whatever you are playing and it resonates in that key. You could tune a g tuning, c tuning, and there is another tuning that you do with it, so you can do the melodies in the

different keys and it will resonate in that key. Those are called Heartinger fiddles, they are, I think they are Switzerland fiddle with a little shorter neck, they have very color, you have seen them, but they have eight pegs, you know it looks odd to see four pegs on each side and they usually dressed up they are very bigtrest or artistic design, ebony or whatever it is _____, very nice looking fiddle. But then before I get too far off, the other prestigious places that I end up playing was we done the Louis Riel revealing at the legislative buildings in Manitoba, so there was Patty, Jimmy Flet, I forget who my accompanists were, so after the revealing we performed at a stage. The legislative buildings are actually front steps on both sides, when they were using the river as their transportation route many years ago, that was the front part of the building now it is all cars, the backside is the front now. Very unique, how did these guys know it was going to be like in this day and age 100 years later, is going to be the back became the front.

37.0 Herb: That is a good question.

37.0 Mel: Yes it is very, the buildings are both designed, they both look the same, the riverside as it is from the back, from what was supposed to be the back. From there we done that, we played there and two weeks later I get a call to go and play for the Canada Days celebration in Ottawa and that is where I met this Ashley MacIsaac and a little _____ the two Meyers, there was a whole bunch of us, Rusty, I forget her name now, she is from Whitehorse, plays fiddle, Read, Rusty Read I think is her name and the other guys name was, the other fellow was from Great Slave somewhere, I forget his name now, he was the other guest from the North West Territories, there was fiddlers from every province. I was the only one from Manitoba, tow Meyers were from Edmonton, that has to be about '98.

38.6 Herb: It might have been Richard Lafferty, or there was an old Inuit fiddler Frank Cokeney.

38.8 Mel: No, it was Angus something.

39.0 Herb: Boleo, Angus Boleo. We're actually going up there to interview him amongst other old fiddlers next week and Angus recorded a two CD set at Calvin ___ studio.

39.3 Mel: Oh I see, just ask him if my name is familiar. If he is the same one and ask him if he has ever been there in Ottawa.

39.5 Herb: While we are down east, the down east style of fiddling has been referred to as playing one string at a time, where as the Métis style of fiddling is where the fiddlers playing on many strings at once, do you have a preference as to which style?

- 39.9 Mel:** I kind of got away from that Ottawa style of fiddling, I don't know it doesn't, what do you call that, it doesn't grab you anymore sort of thing, you know.
- 40.2 Herb:** Do you think it is important to play a fiddle tune note for note of by the book as they say?
- 40.3 Mel:** Yeah. I have been always like the not for note thing for some reason or another if somebody changes it, improvise but then again on the same note, if a tune is left all of a sudden and nobody plays it you can tell right away everybody has gotten tired of that tune. So they will come along and improvise maybe only two measures in it a little bit and it is a brand new tune again, you know everybody wants to play it now, everybody wants to hear it, so that is the funny part about music, they call it the evolution of a fiddle tune.
- 41.1 Herb:** In all the years that you have been playing the fiddle, can you recall one moment when you were the most proud to be an old time Métis fiddler?

Side A ends at 41.1

Tape Two: Side B

- 00.0 Mel:** Oh I don't know, not really in particular, but the moments that I like is when the people come and talk to you and they will say, as an example one time I was in Duluth and along comes this television outfit and they are asking who and who is and they said what is your name? Mel Bedard. Oh, this lady says oh he is famous, look at him, interview him and you know and right away they started asking questions how are you going to make out in this contest? Well I said I so do it just for the entertainment lie to do on a show and they just kind of home in on you before the judges ever decide or them every talking to anybody, I ended up being the winner. It is not through the interview but somehow they sense that you are going to be at the top of the beep sort of thing. This is just I don't know why, I don't know why, why that happens.
- 01.2 Herb:** Is that just after having heard you?
- 01.3 Mel:** No, nobody seen the interview or nothing, the judges never saw it or nothing when it was rebroadcast and yet you end up being the winner. So those things amaze you and it must be something in this fiddle music, the style of playing, I think they like when the notes stick out individually sort of thing, like some notes are longer, a lot of Métis music all the tunes are some notes are longer than the others, they may be just a fraction longer. You look at the music sheet, you see how they are written and they got the little dot after a note and a bunch of little raised notes, that's Métis style, very distinctive.

- 02.1 Herb:** That probably answers my next question but can you maybe elaborate on that, what is meant by the Métis style of fiddling?
- 02.2 Mel:** You know it has to be something in the blood it is already there, either you are used to the Aboriginal days when you heard the drumming sort of thing and then they go and chant into a minor sort of thing you know I forget. There used to be a minister by the name of Cuthand if you have heard of him and he used to talk about that, he figured there was only so many notes in the Aboriginal language or music sort of thing and that is where all the minor chords come from, it is distinctive, you can tell if the tune is from the north whether it will say the _____ or Reg Bouvette, those ones they call the Bull Berry Jig, you can actually hear the music, you can see why the tune is named that, it has the title adapted to it.
- 03.5 Herb:** There is a certain amount of superstition surrounding playing fiddle tunes and open keyed tuning as some players refuse to play them for dancing and telling stories of how fiddlers and dancers in the past have come possessed while playing fiddle tunes and sat these open tunings, what an example may be is the *Devil's Reel* or *Devil's Dream*, have you heard of such stories.
- 04.0 Mel:** Not really, the *Devil's Dream* is sort of a difficult tune really because the bowing is fast and the fingering is to get into that minor chord and it is not every person and it is kind of a repetitious step anyway, so that was is known about the *Devil's Dream* but for some reason if you are practicing, it is always a necessity that you learn that tune, I kind of think.
- 04.6 Herb:** The *Devil's Dream*?
- 04.6 Mel:** Yes.
- 04.7 Herb:** The *Devil's Dream* or *The Devil's Reel*?
- 04.7 Mel:** It would be the same one, *Devil's Reel*, *Devil's Dream*, as far as I know.
- 04.7 Herb:** Are they the same tune?
- 04.7 Mel:** As far as I know it is, yes.
- 04.8 Herb:** Well we are getting near to the end of our interview Mel, what would be your advice to a beginning fiddler or a novice fiddler?
- 05.1 Mel:** Well I would think my advice would be, there is a lot of kids coming out that I have seen they do the Suzuki, learn the Suzuki method first and then you can start memorizing the tunes, start

learning them and then go into the music so that you don't get spoiled. Because if you go to the music right off the bat you become classically trained and it shows up in your playing and it is hard to get rid of, we have got fiddlers and that who have done that and it becomes classical and then switch back and they just can't get rid of that classical sound and they lose lots of contests or lose points like crazy because of that. There is a young kid, he is only 17 from Victoria that I met, Adrian is his name and he learned the Suzuki method from when he was four years old and he can play that John Carrion stuff now and but he is just doing the Red River stuff, he is switching to the Red River stuff now and perfect player, that John Carrion stuff is difficult and he does it and he is very modest little young fellow. Adrian, I forget hi last name but Francine Watson knows him anyway. So he played terrific, he wants to hear other people play it so I asked him I said do you know John Carrion was Andy Desjarlais' favorite fiddle player in the end and I said, do you do any of his stuff, do you ever listen to it? Yeah, he said and he played *Banks ___pipe* for instance and there was another one that he played, just perfect. So the Suzuki method was definitely the route to go and Patty's little boy, she used to have him for a couple of years just with a bow, have a mock fiddle like thing, just playing with a bow, that little guy is going to be good, he is playing already, he is winning his classes.

07.5 Herb: So as a traditional old time Métis fiddler how would you like your grandchildren to remember you?

07.7 Mel: Well I know the music that they are hooked on and I don't think they will ever be, they may not like the fiddle but sometimes when I play I say isn't that a nice tune now and they will say, I guess they are modest they'll _____. Like I was telling you about that little fellow who was four years old, the oldest grandson is 13, so when he comes to the house, like he is only 4 and grandma says to him do you want to watch TV for awhile? Yeah he says, but I don't want to watch that shit that Joseph watches. *Ha, ha.*

08.3 Herb: So how do you feel about participating in the Gabriel Dumont Institute's Métis fiddle project?

08.4 Mel: Great, great, yeah it is really great, it is sure time, like I am talking to different people and they say it is about time they done that and this fellow from Vancouver, _____ making that movie, he is going to be out there I forget his name now, but he says I think it is our turn now, I think it is Métis turn and he starts with the Louisiana fiddlers, but that is different though, Louisiana fiddlers are different from us even the guys look different. Have you ever been to Louisiana? Yeah, they're different, they look at me like I am from a different world.

09.2 Herb: Thank-you very much Mel, I enjoyed listening to you very much.

09.3 Mel: Thanks; I hope I have been of some help to you, your collection.

Side B ends at 9.5
