

**Traditional Métis Fiddle Project
Edward "Fly" Villeneuve Interview
Fort Simpson, NT
Friday, August 17, 2001**

Side A

What year were you born?

Fly:

July 14, 1938. I was born in Willow River.

Do you remember any fiddle music down at the Willow River camp?

Fly:

Yeah, there was a few. They played lots of fiddle music down there.

You were good friends with my dad, Eddie Lafferty. Do you remember him learning to play the fiddle or were you trying to learn to play the fiddle, too?

Fly:

--Cannot understand response--

Do you remember Dad as a teenager learning to play violin?

Fly:

Yes.

What did he do when he was learning to play?

Fly:

We were working in the daytime. In the evening all the boys would get together and we would play guitar, and try to learn how to play guitar, and they showed me how. Your grandmother, Margaret Lafferty, she was a good accordion player.

Did she play the fiddle tunes on the accordion?

Fly:

The boys would play the violin and Margaret, she was good, and all the boys were playing, copying her. Your grandfather would join in sometimes. I remember sitting on the wood box at Granny's house. She would sit me on the wood box, and she played the harmonica to me. She was a good harmonica player. I think I remember Dad saying that she played fiddle tunes to him on the harmonica.

Fly:

??? (4.6 – 5.3)

I'm interested in who my dad was listening to, besides his Mom and Jim, who played the fiddle. Who else did he follow around?

Fly:

Sometimes I'd see your grandfather playing down there with...he must have come from Quebec...

Marie Augustine Bouvier?

Fly:

Yes.

Do you remember Old Joe playing fiddle at my grandfather, Jim's?

Fly:

Yes. Your dad was there...Jim and I, Margaret. The boys were really small and they'd just sit with Old Joe and listen to him playing, and your grandmother and your dad and Frank...

So they were following Old Joe to learn how to play the fiddle? They actually learned some of his tunes because much later, my dad played some of Old Joe's reels.

Fly:

Joe was teaching...very musical, good fiddler.

That's what we hear. We only wish that there was tape recorders in them days. Do you remember going to any of the fiddle dances where Old Joe played fiddle?

Fly:

There was no tape recorder...

Do you remember going to any of the fiddle dances where Old Joe played fiddle?

Fly:

???

What were those dances like?

Fly:

Good...

Did he have a guitar player with him, or did he play by himself?

Fly:

Just by himself. There was no money to pay the talent in those days. So he teaches some...Pat...his son, he bought himself a guitar and he started teaching him how to play guitar, so he plays for...and paid for his gas...and his older son, Joe. He was a good caller too. He used to call for square dances.

Was Joe Villeneuve Jr., was he Old Joe's oldest son?

Fly:

Yeah.

What was your dad's name again?

Fly:

Isadore.

Or Ginger, they called him?

Fly:

Yes.

Were there any other sons or daughters?

Fly:

Baptiste, Pat, Jean, Margaret, Elizabeth.

Who was Elizabeth married to?

Fly:

Louise Antoine. There were four boys and three girls...every night we'd go into town...music just booming...all the people would go down and watch them.

So the north wind would blow the sound of the fiddle music and then people would hear it and go down?

Fly:

Yeah...just like up at George McPherson's house...there was no drinking in those days, no liquor store...everybody had lots of fun.

Nobody was hung over in them days?

Fly:

No...nothing, no whiskey, nothing.

Where were you working when you were young, as a teenager?

Fly:

Well I was working all over...(lists places)...in those days you don't work for hardly anything.

When you were a teenager, how much did an axe cost?

Fly:

About a dollar...from Hudson's Bay, small ones were 75 cents, 50 cents. Those days five dollars would buy 30 cans of Carnation milk. Hudson's Bay, they were six for a dollar.

When Old Joe was playing for fiddle dances, you said sometimes the fiddle dances went all night?

Fly:

Yeah.

What time would they end in the morning?

Fly:

Sometimes five, six o'clock in the morning.

They must have been in good shape to dance all night.

Fly:

Yeah.

I wonder what dances they did?

Fly:

Squares.

Square dances?

Fly:

At one dance there was five fiddlers. My dad, ____, and Baptiste, his brother...sometimes your dad. Five fiddlers and they'd just go all night, no rest; never stop...keep going and going and going, square dance. There was a lot of people in Andy's hall. The fiddlers would just take turns...five fiddlers and two guitar players.

Can you name those five fiddlers?

Fly:

My dad, Baptiste, George McPherson, Walter McPherson, and your dad was just learning.

Did he join them?

Fly:

Yeah. They'd keep him for the last square dance.

They kept him for the last? I wonder how come?

Fly:

He was just learning.

Was Old Joe amongst them, too?

Fly:

Yeah, he was there. He was playing...he'd play some and he'd get tired and he'd rest. That's why there was five fiddlers; one gets tired, another one plays...all night, they'd never quit. Especially a jig or a square dance and the kissing dance.

The kissing dance? How did that work?

Fly:

--cannot understand response--

Sounds like fun.

Fly:

It was lots of fun. A lot of people...

We hear that sometimes they would wait until midnight to play "The Devil's Dream" or "The Devil's Reel." Was it like that at all the fiddle dances? How come they wait until midnight?

Fly:

I don't know. Have you ever heard it?

I've heard my dad playing "The Devil's Dream" and "The Devil's Reel." I'll play for you, I brought it with me. How did the crowd react when they heard "Devil's Dream"?

Fly:

Hopping and jumping around. Everybody was just laughing and the _____ were noisy.

Was it exciting when "The Devil's Dream" was played?

Fly:

Yeah. Andy was a good dancer, too. He likes fiddle music.

I guess that's why he didn't mind renting his hall all night.

Fly:

Yeah. He'd dance, and cook, and serve coffee. A piece of pie and a cup of coffee were 30 cents.

Did they have food all evening? You could have pie or a sandwich?

Fly:

Yeah...he'd just serve coffee and pie. He makes about 50 to 75 pies every weekend. A cup of coffee and a piece of pie was 30 cents.

Did you have to pay anything to get into those dances?

Fly:

No.

Did they pay the fiddlers?

Fly:

No, they don't pay the fiddlers. Not that I know of. They liked to play and they liked music and they liked fun, I guess. "The Devil's Dream" was played, and they'd just go crazy.

Were there any songs that they went crazy about?

Fly:

No, just "The Devil's Dream." That's good music.

What about "The Red River Jig"?

Fly:

Yeah. They'd play that; they'd go crazy for that, too.

Did they play "The Red River Jig" at a certain time of the night?

Fly:

Yeah. Two-thirty in the morning; towards the morning they would play the jig. Just to make the people cheer.

We heard of something called the "Double Jig." You ever hear of that term?

Fly:

No.

Did they have jigging contests in them days?

Fly:

Yeah, lots of times they had jigging contests.

Did they have fiddling contests?

Fly:

Yeah, sometimes. I don't know what they gave them, but I know they had jigging contests.

How often did they have those?

Fly:

Two or three times a year. New Year's and Christmas and Easter.

The old people where I'm from loved New Year's. They would go for days, worship four days in a row. They'd dance and feast. How many people could they get into Andy ___'s hall?

Fly:

Lots.

Hundreds?

Fly:

Some nights I'd look in the window...square dancers would get so hot...lots of fun.

In the old days, what did they wear to dance, dress up?

Fly:

In those days, everybody would dress up and girls would wear dresses, not wear jeans like now; see them wear a dress all the time. In the sixties is when jeans started...skirt, blouse, and slippers, and dance.

They'd dance in moccasins?

Fly:

No, slippers, they make those moccasin slippers.

Morris said that everyone would wear their finest slippers to the dances.

Fly:

Yeah. The square dancers would wear dresses and skirts. You never seen them wear jeans...

Even when they worked?

Fly:

Yeah, they wore no jeans.

Shawls, too? Women wore shawls?

Fly:

Yeah.

Did the men wear sashes? The Métis sash?

Fly:

Yeah...

Did you ever see the parish priest at the fiddle dance?

Fly:

Yeah...

Did he ever get up to dance?

Fly:

No. I never seen the priest dance, but he'd come there.

Do you think Father Jesse, or any of the parish priests, did they mind if the Métis had fiddle dances all night?

Fly:

No, they don't mind, because on Sunday, everybody goes to church in those days.

Even if they danced all night?

Fly:

Yeah, there was no drinking and it was good. Everybody would go home and play crib and get together...

Did they ever have fiddle dances outside?

Fly:

Yeah, on the flats.

Did everybody in town—like the experimental farm, the game warden, the police—did the white people go to the fiddle dances, too?

Fly:

Yeah.

So everybody mixed?

Fly:

Yeah everybody went—white and Native people—everybody. In those days (they were) just crazy for the music.

When Old Joe played at the fiddle dances, can you maybe tell us, when he came into the dance hall before he played, what did he do? What was it like?

Fly:

When he comes into the dance hall, everybody is cheering and yelling. It doesn't matter, he's a good fiddler; everybody would just go crazy when they see him walk in. So he'd get his fiddle and take it out and he'd start playing a waltz. They want him to play waltzes, everybody was catching up to him, "Just play!"

It sounds like they had a lot of respect for him and his abilities.

Fly:

He'd come from Quebec...

Big man.

Fly:

Yeah. Kind of like your friend, I don't know what is his name.

Alexi?

Fly:

They both come from Quebec, that's where their grandfather...their grandfather...their grandfather tried working...

Did Old Joe's wife, Marie, go to the dances, too?

Fly:

Yeah...

The (Villeneuve?) family came from Quebec, so they brought all that good fiddle music with them. Old Joe spent some time in Prince Albert we hear from Morris. Morris thinks that Old Joe brought a lot of new fiddle tunes from Prince Albert up here. He was saying that Old Joe could listen to a tune once and play it.

Fly:

Yeah...

Was Old Joe a good story teller? Did he have stories that he told you kids?

Fly:

He told us stories...he told some good stories...I forget them.

(Conversation about interviewer and his family.)

I'm really interested in the old fiddle music. We're trying to preserve some of that old fiddle music and the only way we can save Old Joe's fiddle music is by recording on these CDs. A CD will last for 80 years and for four of Old Joe's reels we have the sheet music now. So a fiddler that can read music could actually learn to play those four Old Joe's reels. I wish there were more.

Fly:

Back then, there was nothing to record with...

I think Dad might have taken some of that music with him when he left us. I think he was the only one that could play Old Joe's stuff.

Fly:

Yeah...I know he'd (spent) a lot of time with him...your dad used to...

How old would my dad have been when he was going to visit Old Joe?

Fly:

I don't know, I know he was young, but I don't know how old he was.

Dad was born in '27 and Old Joe played until about 1940. So, I think my dad would have been about 12 or 13 years old, just a kid. You and Dad were the same age.

Fly:

???

On the other side of the river?

Fly:

Yeah, across.

You and Dad cut wood together?

Fly:

Yeah.

How many cords of wood could you cut in a day?

Fly:

Three cords...???

Who did you cut that wood for?

Fly:

???

Did any of those Army soldiers ever go to these fiddle dances?

Fly:

They were too busy...war...they didn't see nothing.

They just went straight to the airport, to build that airport?

Fly:

Yeah...

(discussion about guns, army, and war; can't understand most of it)

In the forties when the American army was here, they figured the Japanese were going to come over. Did the local people have to do anything, like turn off their lights or anything?

Fly:

No, there was no power in those days. They used gasoline lamps. It was dark, no street lights or anything. There was a lantern...used to work for me to wake and feed the horses...___'s barn there, just down there.

I used to play in that barn when I was a kid.

Fly:

???

Side B

When people went to the fiddle dances at Andy ___'s hall, what did they do with the children, like babies on the back?

Fly:

In those days, all the kids had to be home at nine...just the babies...the rest would stay home...you didn't see no kids at the dance.

Where did they put the babies while they were dancing?

Fly:

Some other woman would take the baby while she was dancing...everybody used to be friendly and helped each other, but now they don't do that.

**A lot of babies must have heard fiddle music when they were little.
A nice way to grow up, to fiddle music.**

Did you ever go to school?

Fly:

Yeah, I took school at the Mission school...five years, never come home, stay there.

Was that a lonely time?

Fly:

I never got to come home. You stay there and work in the garden...pray, pray, pray, pray.

Did you have to pray in the morning?

Fly:

Pray in the morning and go to church and after mass and breakfast you pray, go to school and pray, after school you pray. Pray all the time. Towards the end...I just went to grade two...in five years, until they send me to (Carrot River?)...in a convent...Catholic nuns, they were strict. You couldn't talk to any girls, they kept the boys separate...one year, didn't learn nothing...work, work, work. My dad took me home and said there was no use going to school...you work, you might as well work for me...we cut wood...Saturday we don't work...we don't work on Saturday and Sunday...

Where did you get married? At what age did you get married?

Fly:

I don't know what year, See that picture there?

You're young.

Fly:

1958, I think.

You got married in '58?

Fly:

...'56 or '58...

Did you meet here in Simpson?

Fly:

I was working ____ and she worked up there...

Did they have a fiddle dance after the wedding?

Fly:

Yeah...and a jig...she didn't know how to jig...

Who played fiddle at your wedding?

Fly:

My dad (Ginger) and George McPherson and Walter and your dad and grandfather...your dad used to play good. He was catching up really fast...just like going to school.

When everybody got together to play fiddle it was like going to music school?

Fly:

Yeah...they brought guitar, fiddle, accordion...

During that time, were there any girls that you remember that played fiddle?

Fly:

No. Just, ____ have you seen the picture...(Linda?)...she was playing with your dad and Peter...and she was good.

We're almost out of time. Is there any special memory that you have of my dad, Eddie, and Old Joe?

Fly:

No...

I think you've told us lots, and we really appreciate it. We're really happy that we found you so you could tell us stories about fiddle music from back then. Thank you very much.