

Red River Jig

It is said that all Metis fiddle music is dance music. The Red River Jig is the traditional dance of the Metis and the song has become the unofficial anthem of the people. The dance combines Plains Indian, Scottish, French Canadian and Irish dance forms. The Metis change their fiddle tuning to play the jig; the bottom string is raised from a G up to A. Oral history suggests that the low A of the Red River Jig is an imitation of a bagpipe's B flat drone. The Metis jigging style is different from the Scots-Irish way. The uneven and irregular beats in traditional Metis fiddling create a bounce in their jigging and "scruff" steps that are as unique as the fiddling. Extra beats are introduced which makes for a rapid dance.

Manton Marble describes a Metis dance at Pembina:¹

Opening the door, and entering the log house, we were greeted by a chorus of 'Ho! Ho! Ho!' All around the room, sitting upon the floor as Indians and tailors sit, were men and women, boys and girls - twenty or thirty in all.

Jigs, reels and quadrilles were danced in rapid succession, fresh dancers taking the place of those on the floor every two or three moments. The men wore trousers, belts and moccasins and the women wore gowns which had no hoops. A black eyed beauty in blue calico and a strapping Bois Brule would jump up from the floor and outdo their predecessors in figure and velocity, the lights and shadows chasing each other faster and faster over the rafters; the flame, too, swaying wildly hither



and thither; and above the thumps of the dancers heels and the frequent 'Ho! Ho!' and the loud laughter, rose the monomaniac fiddle-shrieks of the trembling strings, as if the devil was at the bow.

This was the commalty. The next night when Joe Rolette gave a dance in his house we saw the aristocracy of Pembina. There was a better fiddle, and a better fiddler, and better dancing. Joe's little boy of eleven, home from school at the Red River settlement, and his father-in-law of near seventy, were the best dancers. The latter was as tireless as if his aged limbs had lost no strength, and little Joe had extra double-shuffles and intricate steps, and miraculously lively movements."

¹ Manton Marble. "To Red River and Beyond," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August 1860: 289-311.



The Red River Jig: Woodcut on paper by Walter J. Phillips c. 1931.

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