

**Richard Lafferty Interview**  
**Traditional Métis Fiddle Project - June 10, 2001**

Post recording interview session at the Gabriel Dumont Institute, 505 23<sup>rd</sup> Street  
East

Present in the room is Leah Dorion, Herb Lafferty and Richard Lafferty.

**SIDE A**

**Leah:** Richard, welcome to our interview for this project. This is the Métis fiddle project. I guess what we want to do is we want to talk about your background and get your perspectives as a Métis fiddle player. So I guess to start, what people need to know is, they need to know a bit about your family background. Tell us a bit about that. Where you come from?

**Richard:** Okay. First of all, I'm from the Northwest Territories. I was born in a small community along the shore of Great Slave Lake. I now live in Hay River, which is only another 120 kilometres south of it. But our family has been in the North now since late 1700s, early 1800s. Came over and that's where we came from originally.

**Leah:** Did you grow up right in the community of Hay River? Did you go to school in Hay River?

**Richard:** I grew up right in Fort Providence. I always did live at home. I was never in residential school. They had a residential school there too, but, we lived right at home in town.

**Leah:** Richard I know you've been playing for a long time. Were you raised in a musical family? Can you tell us a bit about your family?

**Richard:** I come from a very musical family background as far back as I can remember. The music was always right in the house and it's always fell back to the Métis style music, which involved a lot of fiddle and guitars and banjos and mandolins. So I grew up listening to the music.

**Leah:** Richard, at what age did you start playing the fiddle?

**Richard:** I started in my early teens, but like I said you know, I been listening to fiddle music since I was in a you know, a small junior all the way through.

**Leah:** I think one of the things young people want to know Richard, how much practice did it take to get to learn your first fiddle tune?

**Richard:** Yes, that's one thing, it does take a lot of practice and to me, fiddle music is, you're learning all the way through as you go. Even if you've played it for a hundred years. There's still things to learn on the fiddle. But you know the way you pick it up, like I did, I can't read music so all my music is played by ear and

from listening to other people play and what you gather. Then you pick up an instrument and you watch how people do it and you try to follow suit on your own.

**Leah:** Richard, what's the first tune that you learned to play on your fiddle?

**Richard:** The first tune that I can remember right now, I think it was the Rubber Dolly, really, yah, Rubber Dolly, and I used to listen to my uncle and them play fiddle and once in a while I'd take his fiddle while he was out of the house and try it and when he found out I used it well, he used to hide it upstairs in the attic. But I knew where it was and so I got in a lot of trouble trying to learn this fiddle. But anyway, eventually I picked up enough that I was able to play a tune anyway.

**Leah:** How did you personalize your fiddle? Did you do anything to your fiddle to make it more your own when you got your first fiddle?

**Richard:** I just pretty well left it the way it was, other than maybe change the strings on it. There's all types of different strings that makes your fiddle, you know, changes the tune or whatever, so that's about all that I did to my fiddle.

**Leah:** As far as instruments, I know you're a very musical person. The other day in the studio, I saw you grabbing almost every instrument in the room. Can you tell us in this interview what instruments you play and what kind?

**Richard:** That goes way back to, in my teens. I started off, I did a lot of guitar playing. Right at home in the house accompanying fiddle music. Home grown stuff. Home grown music and everybody sat around and played different kinds of music. Some sang and fiddle and dances and eventually I learned how to pick a few notes on the banjo so I did a little bit of that. I did quite a bit of mandolin when I was involved in a school band. We formed a school band. We were called the Arctic Ramblers and there was a group about six of us together and played mandolin and guitar and tried to sing once in a while and fiddle. We interchanged instruments among ourself and that was all played by ear.

**Leah:** Richard, who was in your group? Can you name some of other people in the Arctic Ramblers?

**Richard:** I can recall there was a fellow by the name of Danny McDonald from Norman Wells and Harvey McClure out of Hay River. Leo Sanderson from Hay River and Howey Jones from Norman Wells. So there was quite a few of us involved. ??? from Fort ?? also played a little bit of fiddle.

**Leah:** Now learning to play the fiddle and all these other instruments, did you have a mentor or someone you looked up to, to learn to play?

**Richard:** That falls right back to home. Right back to home where I, right all the way back to my uncles. They were all involved. They all gather and there,

watching them play and eventually just joining them and that's how I picked up.

**Leah:** What would be the name of some of those family members? Can you name them?

**Richard:** Well, one of my uncles, Danny Bouvier, who is still alive today. I believe he might be close to eighty years old but he hasn't done too much fiddling now but, all through his younger years, to me he was one of the top fiddlers in the Northwest Territories. But, he was the type of fiddler that wouldn't go out of the house to play for a dance outside in the dance hall or anything. He kept his Métis style and music to himself and he just wouldn't perform at a local dance downtown, but he was a pro and he'd play upstairs in the attic and that's where I'd go up there with the guitar and play with him. Once in a while he'd come downstairs and play for the family only but, he wasn't a public person.

**Leah:** So there's a difference then. Three personalities that...people who don't like to perform?

**Richard:** Yes I believe there is and it was just the way he was. To me he was a professional fiddler and he never had music or anything but, he did some very, very fine fiddling.

**Leah:** The other thing we definitely want to get your opinion on is the Red River Jig. I don't think there's one Métis person who doesn't know the Red River Jig. Can you share with us information about the origins of the Red River Jig or things you've heard about the Red River Jig?

**Richard:** The Red River Jig, from what I've gathered over the years in talking to different people, there's all different types of opinions and stories on it but, it was originated down in Manitoba, then it came up North of course with the settlers and everybody that came along and as the Red River Jig is played when you go from Manitoba to the Coast up North in Tuck. You hear quite a few different versions of it and everybody has their own style and ways of playing the Red River Jig. The Red River Jig is the way the person picks it up, I hear, so naturally it gets changed as you travel, style. Some parts are there and some are not, but, when you go back to the originator, it originated down there in Red River, Manitoba.

**Leah:** Herb has a question. Which one did you want to a...did I miss?

**Herb:** Number ten.

**Leah:** Number five. Thank you very much. We have another question for you about, just a general question. What has fiddling brought into your life and what does it mean to you?

**Richard:** Fiddling to me has brought total satisfaction. I enjoy music and I love

playing music for dances and stuff like that and seeing people enjoy themselves and enjoy the music.

**Leah:** Can you recall any unusual stories about Métis fiddling and dancing in your family or your home community. Funny stories or something that you heard.

**Richard:** Not...

**Leah:** Not really? Another question you have on the list here. It's, many of our old time fiddlers grew up without radios, tape recorders and record players, so how did you learn fiddle tunes? I think we spoke a bit about that already.

**Richard:** Yah, I think I referred to it a little bit further back but, everything was picked up by ear. Prior to even the records and cassettes, tape decks and CDs or whatever is available today. Years ago there was only, maybe a AM/FM radio around and a lot of that music was captured through a radio and they had no way of recording that tune that they heard for them to get to know the whole tune. So a lot of it, some of it was picked up, whatever they could gather from hearing that tune maybe once or twice over the radio station and then the other way was just from different fiddlers coming along with the river.

**Leah:** Richard, I have a question that's not on the list, but I want to ask you, do you think it's important to record Métis fiddle music?

**Richard:** Yes. I think it's very, very important and that's what I love doing is promoting our style, the Métis style of fiddling. It's nice to see our culture well and alive. Trying to revive it.

**Leah:** Richard, I know you've made recordings, but can you tell us when you made your first recording. Your own album.

**Richard:** I believe it was in the early '80s I recorded in the studio in Yellowknife. I had four cassette tapes out. Today I have just the one available right now.

**Leah:** And what's the name of that one, Richard?

**Richard:** That one is called *The Muskeg Fiddlers*.

**Leah:** Now as far as going back to the fiddle music and from your area of Hay River and the Northwest Territories, what types of fiddle tunes were popular in your community? Songs?

**Richard:** There was a lot of square dancing done back home and also, actually, you might say they're traditional Métis dances, such as the Red River Jig and the Duck Dance and Drops of Brandy, Handkerchief Dance...and all those dances were done back home.

**Leah:** Is there any other...when you were young and you'd go to community dances, were there any fiddlers that commonly performed and could you name them for us? Who would play at those dances? Any names come to mind?

**Richard:** There were a few local fiddlers in ? There was old Jimmy B? and Vital Brody who were the fiddlers of the day back then and my uncle back home of course. He never did go out to the dances and then as people travelled there was always one around that showed up all of a sudden and there he was, so they took turns playing the fiddle and that's how their tunes came to be.

**Leah:** This may seem like an interesting question. Now you grew up with the Duck Dance and the reels. Did you play those tunes?

**Richard:** Yes I did. I did when we had we had our NWT Métis Reelers. We formed a dance group in 1983 and we were called NWT Métis Reelers and we brought a dance group from Edmonton. Art Burt came up that year. He was the fiddler with them and Rita North and her husband. I forgot his name now, but then they came up and brought two couples with them and did a few presentations for our group and we exchanged our ideas with the other Edmonton group. Then from there we took it on our own and they were doing the Duck Dance and Handkerchief Dance? Red River Jig. We formed the NWT Métis Reelers and we did quite a few all around the North, in fact, all across Canada.

**Leah:** So they were a good group to work with?

**Richard:** Very, very nice people, yes.

**Leah:** Here's our next question. Beginners are sometimes discouraged from scratching out tunes on their fiddles. Were you ever discouraged as a beginner by people, friends or even loved ones when you tried to play your favourite fiddle tunes?

**Richard:** Well, I don't think it sounds very, very good when you first start to rub on fiddle strings and try to tune a guitar, especially if someone is around the house or something. Yes, sometimes it becomes kind of frustrating. You hear a few items on it as you're trying to learn your tunes, but when you're determined and want to learn, it's in your system so you find a way, even if you have to go out behind the shack and scrape it on over there, it'll work. One way or the other, you'll get it.

**Leah:** Can you tell us of your first recollection of your first paying gig where you played the fiddle?

**Richard:** That I mentioned earlier. We had formed a school band in the early '60s. It would be 1960 or 61 and I was in Yellowknife. We were going to school there and a bunch of boys in the dorm got together that were able to play a few tunes

and eventually we formed a band, the Arctic Ramblers. I mentioned a few earlier back, but we played right in Yellowknife up at the Elks Hall. We were raising funding for our group so that we could buy instruments and improve our systems. We did that for actually two or three years, school seasons. On weekends when we were able, they would book us in the Elks Hall. We'd go down there and play and raise some funding for our us to travel around Great Slave Lake. We toured different communities. From Yellowknife we went to Fort ? by road of course and Fort Providence. It was in the spring of the year we got there and there's an ice bridge there on the McKenzie River that was closed so we couldn't drive across, so we ended up putting all our toboggans on sleighs and we walked and pulled the sleighs across the McKenzie River. Somebody picked us up on the South side. We went to play in Hay River for the weekend. We did those little goodies.

**Leah:** Did you get paid very much for doing your gig?

**Richard:** We didn't get paid directly to our pocket, but it went towards our band and we got better equipment, you know, drums, whatever was needed, and it covered our travel costs.

**Leah:** Did old time Métis fiddlers accompany themselves with their feet or by clogging before the arrival of guitars and pianos and other instruments used to chord the fiddle? Can you tell us a bit about what you know about that?

**Richard:** In fact, some of them still do. They use their feet. They do a lot of clogging and at times one of them would play with the spoons to accompany to get the rhythm and some of them would accompany the fiddler with the drum, a homemade drum. So they had ways of accompanying themselves.

**Leah:** Do you do any clogging with your feet?

**Richard:** I do some of it, yes.

**Leah:** The next question we want your opinion on is, the practice of doubling on fiddle is remembered by many players as something they did with their relatives. Do you recall playing some tunes together with your relatives or mentors to capture the older sound of melody in different octaves and improvising harmonies on chords? We might have to reword that one, Herb. Can you speak on that issue about doubling?

**Richard:** At home there's lots of that stuff when you get together and you're playing around the house and there's two fiddlers, two, three guitars...whoever can play just joins the group. You exchange notes, ideas and different ways of how they do it amongst one another. That's how it's passed on.

**Leah:** Because there did not seem to be any pianos in community halls and homes, the fiddle by and large were played unaccompanied by guitars into the late 1940s.

Now most players do not like to play without guitar accompaniment. Do you prefer guitar or piano accompaniment or any other musical accompaniment?

**Richard:** It's like most of the time, it's me and my fiddle. I don't have a band. But, there's times, I have friends that accompany me all the time. So whatever is available. The keyboard is very, very nice to have if it's available. Most of the time, up North where we're at, you see quite a bit of guitar behind you, rhythm guitar, acoustic type, electric nowadays. Also if you walk into a dance hall where there's a good band playing. I just use the whole band. The drummer is there. The bass player is there and the rhythm guitar players are there. It works.

**Leah:** Before the age of fiddle pick-ups, microphones and amplifiers, did you do anything different in order to be heard above a lively dance crowd?

**Richard:** In earlier days everything was acoustic. They never had any problem with it really. Everybody just played with acoustic guitar and regular fiddles and they managed with that and they were good dancers too.

**Leah:** Does anybody come to mind? Any dancers that you remember?

**Richard:** You're referring to...?

**Leah:** The old time dancing in your community? Fort Providence?

**Richard:** Actually, there was no dance hall back home in the early years that I recall. Most of the time, they just selected someone's home to have a dance in and that's how they did it. I remember being a young fellow and eventually joining them and dancing with them, but I seen times when they took the old stove out and put a pillow in the stove pipe so the soot wouldn't fall on their head and away they went for the night. Different fiddlers would exchange and away you go.

**Leah:** Where did Métis fiddlers in your area purchase their fiddles?

**Richard:** Some of the settlers brought them right along with them. The Hudson's Bay Company had what was called back in the early years, I believe that they were able to purchase the odd fiddle and instruments. Guitars in the later years and also through the catalogue, because there was no stores at that time that handled musical instruments back in them days so you had to order it.

**Leah:** Richard, when you were shopping for a fiddle, what qualities do you look for in a fiddle before making a purchase or buying it?

**Richard:** What I do is generally ? music in Vancouver in Expo '86 I walked into a music store there and there must have been about eight, nine hundred fiddles hanging there on the rack, used fiddles. What I did was walk around and looked at the wood grain, the quality, but the most important thing is I wanted something

that had a sound that I like. It took me a while to select the one that I have today. It's a hand made fiddle. It was made by a French settler I believe, according to two different appraisals between 1927 and 1930. The guy that made my fiddle, his name was Pierre Claudio and it's a copy of ? But, it's a French made fiddle and I like the wood grain on it, because on the back when you rub your fingers on the back of it, you could actually feel the wood grain in it. It's not a factory built fiddle, hand made. So I enjoy myself with that one.

**Leah:** The other thing I want to ask you Richard is, many fiddles' tuning problems with tuning pegs slipping, do you have any special way of preventing your fiddle...?

**Richard:** Well I seen that right from day one. You know a lot of times these different old time fiddlers are trying to tune their fiddles before they got all the little fancier type tail piece and non slip keys on them on them with fine tuners and everything. There was just regular straight tuning and a lot of times the keys would slip back on them but, they used water and some of them even spit on it and it stuck on it for the day.

**Leah:** Recall hearing some old time Métis fiddlers using spruce gum when they ran out of store bought fiddle bow rosin. Can you recall any times where people used spruce gum instead of rosin?

**Richard:** Yes, I've seen it done. I've seen it done back home because, there was no musical stores or anything around so it was a little hard to get the rosin. Once in a while whenever the Bay ran out, or whoever was handling did run out, but I've seen that spruce gum in quite a few fiddle boxes up there.

**Leah:** Now do you have a preference as to the type of fiddle strings you use?

**Richard:** Well for the fiddle that I described to you earlier back, I tried all types different strings on it and the type that I'm using now is made by Domestic and it's a pearl ? on string and I find that it gives my fiddle more of a mellow tune to it and that's what I like. So that's what I use, but every fiddler has their own and you know, you select to your liking.

**Leah:** Here's my next question. Do you know what old time Métis fiddlers used when they could not get strings?

**Richard:** There's times at the dance hall when you broke a fiddle string. Sometimes you would take a string off a guitar or a mandolin or whatever was around if it could be used and put it on the fiddle. Chop the end off and it worked.

**Leah:** If there weren't strings available, do you know of any stories or any instances where people had to make their own.

**Richard:** Actually, I haven't heard of anyone making their own, but I've seen as

much as rabbit snares being used on them. They'd try whatever was around.

**Leah:** Richard do you have any personal playing strategies you use when you play for old time dances?

**Richard:** I use the fiddle in Fort Smith when I first started in a place called the Roaring Rapids Hall. The people, the community there, they loved that old time music. Well that's their style. There's a lot of Métis in Fort Smith and there's a small place called the Roaring Rapids Hall there and I can recall when we used to fill the whole dance floor. You start playing a tune and they'd just seem to all get up, young and old. Whether it was an old time waltz or jig or square dance. What I do is generally, I watch the dancers and I kind of set my eyes on a good dancing couple and it's just amazing what it does to you because you see people are enjoying themselves and you're happy and just seem to relax and you don't even know you're fiddling when you're following the couple. Everything just seems to flow out of you and they're real, real satisfying.

The normal country dance and it just saves a little time from having to retune. If you have two fiddles it's fine. You keep the second one tuned up for those special and this way it's not time consuming. Because you could have the crowd around on you right after square dancing, they all want to jig and next thing you know, they want to jig back again. Back and forth, so it prevents you from having to tune up if you don't have a second fiddle around. That's the reason I put my versions of it in it anyway.

**Leah:** The down East style of fiddling has been referred to as playing one string at a time, whereas the Métis of style of fiddling is where fiddlers are playing on many strings at once. Which style do you like to play?

**Richard:** Actually, I play a little bit of both, but you know, playing the Métis style where you play double, two, three strings at a time once in a while, to me it's got the most beautiful sound. I guess it's because of the type and style of music that I like. You know, everybody's different. Some people play classical. Some people play different styles. But, we have our own unique way of enjoying our music. Sometimes it's not necessarily always on time. It's a little bit off a beat, but it's good.

**Leah:** Do you think it is important to play a fiddle by the book?

**Richard:** Yah, it's, when you play by the book, it's nice to able to read music, because that's one thing I never had the opportunity or I never put any effort into it to learn how to read it. I guess that's why I don't. I always stress that to beginners or anyone that's willing to learn or trying to learn. I think that's something that every musician should have. You should be able to go downtown or borrow a book or something. If you know the tune that you like is on sheet music, then you could take it home or wherever and you learn it off the book note for note until you get to

know where the notes or you get to pick up the tune and then it's going to go back to your style anyway, but you got it.

**Leah:** In all the years you've been playing the fiddle, can you recall one moment when you were you were most proud to be an old time Métis fiddle player?

**Richard:** In 1994, that was one of them. I was selected NWT fiddler for the Royal visit in Yellowknife and I had young dancers from Fort Smith that were doing Métis traditional dances and we did a performance there at the culture section. The royal family was there and it was nice to see the young dancers that were performing there, different square dances and jigs and everything and they were watching us playing on the stage and watching the audience and everything. Next thing I know I looked at Queen Elizabeth and she was keeping tempo with our Métis style of music so I thought that was really special. That just goes to show that music attracts all walks of life.

**Leah:** Richard, what is meant by Métis style of fiddling? I think you've mentioned the different strings, playing several strings at once. Can you elaborate for us or is there anything you want to say?

**Richard:** I really, I don't have anything on it right now.

**Leah:** What would be your, be your advice to any beginner or novice fiddle player? Did you want to comment on that?

**Richard:** Yes. Anyone that's a beginner or interested in learning, I recommend that they get some assistance from a music class or wherever they could get involved or someone that knows how to read music and because it's something that will help you down the road and eventually, like I said earlier, once you learn and you pick up, you go back to your own style with it.

**Leah:** Richard, as an old time Métis fiddler, how would you like your grandchildren to remember you?

**Richard:** I'd like to see the family remember me for the love I have for my style of fiddling and promoting our culture and enjoying myself with the fiddle, trying to keep up our Métis traditions, especially our dance performances, different performances.

**Leah:** How do you feel about participating in Gabriel Dumont Institute's Métis fiddle compilation project?

**Richard:** That, actually it's an honour for me. Especially when you called me to see if I was interested in doing something like that. I thought, I didn't even think twice of it. I was all for it right away and this is something I've always wanted to do all through the years and it's an opportunity for me to have a little input into this

project and I think it's a very worthwhile project.

**Leah:** Herb is there any questions arising from here that you have? Just anything informally we have, because I always like to do that at the end. If there's anything you think. Like I don't know if we asked about, has he competed? Did we even ask about competitions? Cause you hadn't competed?

**Richard:** Oh many, many, many times.

**Herb:** ? personally aware that Richard participated in quite a number of competitions and although when you do travel amongst the smaller northern communities sometimes the hometown fiddler will have in the package where a fiddle competition will actually turn out to be a popularity contest, but maybe you could tell us some of the competitions you've been to where there would have been say a Canadian fiddle champion as you would have mentioned? Townsend and maybe some of the other well known fiddle champions that where they judged the competitions. Can you maybe tell us of some of those?

**Richard:** Well, I could refer to the one, the annual one, that's being held in Hay River. The Friendship Centre started that a few years ago. We put it together just to try and promote fiddle music. That's all it is, all weekend is fiddle music and the last four, five years, I see fiddle players come from all over the place. Gilbert Anderson was there from Edmonton and Richard Calihoo from ?, Alberta. People come from even Saskatchewan and it's a good thing you know. They exchange their different thoughts on different styles of music and it's very, very nice to see for a small community up North to attract that many people from other provinces, makes it nice and they bring up Alfred Myers out of Edmonton who's a guest fiddler and at the same time he's one of the judges which is very nice to see.

**Leah:** Richard, you haven't done any judging yourself?

**Richard:** No, I haven't.

**Leah:** Anything else you can think of Herb, while we have this informal time?

**Herb:** Richard this is probably a question more out of personal interest, but what I know is, you're first cousins with my Dad, Ed Lafferty, who is also a well know fiddler up North. I was just wondering maybe if you could tell us a little about the musical relationship you've had with Eddy over the years?

**Richard:** Yes, your Dad and I played music together many times. We were involved practically on an annual fiddle festival put on by CBC North. Our annual fiddle festival they called it and CBC selected different communities along the South Slave on their annual fiddle festival so we covered pretty well most of the communities. They also brought fiddlers from Fort Chip and Fort Smith, wherever, Resolution, Providence, and did different communities. One year it was in Fort

Providence, next year it was in Hay River and we ended up in Fort Chip one year.

## **END OF SIDE A**

## **BEGINNING OF SIDE B**

**Leah:** Anything else you want to add? I'm glad you got him speaking about that northern area.

**Herb:** Maybe another family related type of question, but there was also another fiddler in the Lafferty family who we haven't heard much about lately, but he was also well known, popular, and a very good Métis fiddler and that was your cousin, and my uncle, Morris Lafferty. Can you tell us a little bit about Morris's fiddling? I think we're going to be interviewing him for the project and I know you keep in touch with him. Maybe you could tell us about Morris and Morris's fiddling and the kind of fiddling relationship you've had with Morris over the years.

**Richard:** I recall back in the early '60s, '59, '60, we were living in Inuvik at that time, we were going to school up there for one season. Morris's two younger sisters were up there also and ?? who is now a Senator. We were all in school in Inuvik and they used to exchange music to reel to reel tape recorders and that was one way of communicating. You couldn't phone home. There was no phone in those days. You wrote a letter, it took two weeks or whatever. Anyway they communicated like that and Peter, who was one of the top guitar players up North, that's your uncle also, but anyway, they used to play music back home and then they would send it to Inuvik and we'd put all our little parts in it over there, back and forth. It was one way of communicating, but no, Morris, yes, he was also one of the top fiddlers until he had his mishap and he kind of laid the fiddle back and but, he's into other types, trying the bass and different things ??? was talking to him, but he hasn't been playing in public now for quite a few years.

**Leah:** Is there anything else? That was a good question. Especially northern, we captured a lot of good northern material.

**Herb:** Maybe aside from the Gabriel Dumont Institute Métis fiddle project, do you have any plans in the future for maybe recording another fiddle album?

**Richard:** I'm looking to actually, yah, put out a few in the future. Cassettes, CD form and you know, just so it's around. Those are my plans.

**THE END.**