

Wally Firth

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WF - ...by *Morris Lafferty* from Simpson. I made suggestion that that has to be put on disc or another tape soon because that tape gets brittle. That historical stuff. *Morris* was one of the really fine fiddlers of the North, of the younger generation. *Morris* is about my age, and he was good, but he had suffered a stroke, and he lost the use of his arm. He's in a senior's home, like I am, in Fort Simpson.

MMS - In Fort Simpson? Okay. All of those names and their contribution ... I've been concentrating on the popular music. So a lot of the music that came out of Akaitcho Hall and the young rock bands [crosstalk 00:01:06]

WF - Oh yeah. Yeah.

MMS - I also recognized that the fiddle has been just instrumental-

WF - It was mainstay for years.

MMS - Oh, exactly, and stories like yours and Angus' ... I only wish I could've got *Frank Cockney* in his time. I did get a chance to play with *Ed Lafferty*. Would *Ed (Lafferty)* have been *Morris (Lafferty)* brother?

WF - Yep.

MMS - *Ed Lafferty*?

WF - Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

MMS - Yeah, he would've been *Morris*' brother. Right?

WF - Yeah, he died a heart attack.

MMS - Yep, but I got to record with him a couple of times and also with his son, *Herbie*. *Herb-*

WF - Oh. Oh, yeah, I'll be. Okay.

MMS - *Herb Lafferty*. Sorry.

WF - Yeah.

MMS - *Herb Lafferty*. Of course, Herb is gone as well.

WF - Yeah.

MMS - He died very young. So, yeah, these names are important to document and to tell stories. Otherwise, they're, kind of, forgotten. Even more so, like you say, if there's recordings of them, that those recordings-

WF - Did you talk to *Richard Lafferty*?

MMS - Yes, I did.

WF - Okay.

MMS - I got a snootful....

WF - Richard knows the history. He lived it.

MMS - Yeah.

WF - Nobody left in Providence that I know of that still play ... a few guitar men. No fiddlers. *Angus Beaulieu*. Angus is one of the few I know who does a little bit of Clogging. My Dad clogged very ... with moccasins, believe it. He was damned good. I'd never, ever heard anybody else that clogged like that, but I saw one day, I was watching Angus and Angus clogged and he had his own style, but it was quite good. Yeah.

MMS - So, where would that clogging have come from...

WF - Well, it comes back from way back before guitars, then.

MMS - Oh, of course, yeah.

WF - So that was one that we see. When my Dad played the fiddle, his whole personality goes into it. He held the fiddle on his arm like so and he had complete control of that bow, and it was all in the wrist. See? He would clog. It's really something when I think back on it. You know? It's great. I don't know where it began, but I'm sure that a lot of the older players would've clogged. I hear about it. You know? Each person would have their own individual style of clogging. Eh? Yeah.

MMS - Maybe more from the French Canadian, as opposed to-

WF - The Metis along-

MMS - Metis. Yeah.

WF - ... Manitoba or Saskatchewan. Yeah, and they had a style of fiddling that nobody but nobody can do it now. There's no way it can be taught. You can't teach it. It was really ... I don't know what's the right term to use to try to explain it. None of it's on records as far as I know. It's kind of a lilt that fits in with their playing. Yeah.

MMS - Exactly. Yeah, and like you say, would be individually stylistic and it would be accompanying-

WF - Yeah.

MMS - ... and playing [crosstalk 00:04:45]-

WF - Yeah. I'll show you another thing on the net where somebody had recorded me long time ago at Midway Lake Music Fest. It was good. It's a good story behind that because the tune I played was one that was written by *Joe Blondin* from Fort Norman. He never gave it a title. I don't know what it ... We called it, "Yesterday Before." Anyway, it's a really fine country waltz. Yeah. It's recorded and it's done quite well. The guy who was playing guitar with me, he just died about two or three months ago, *Alvie Larocque*. Yeah.

MMS - Alfie?

WF - Alvie.

MMS - Al B.

WF - Alvin, I guess was-

MMS - Alvin-

WF - Yeah.

MMS - *Alvin Larocque*.

WF - (Gwitchin language). His grandmother brought him up, but that was how she called him. My grandchild, *Helvie*. Yeah, (Gwitchin language), *Helvie*. Yeah. *Charlie Peter* used to come over from Old Crow by dog team in the winter time for New Year's dance. That's when he used to come when he learned a few tunes from my Dad, yeah.

MMS - He would take a dog team all the way from where?

WF - Old Crow.

MMS - From Old Crow, holy smokes.

WF - Well, he was the main fiddler in Old Crow for years. Well, just about time for the New Year's dance, and this is a thing that happens those days we didn't have extra strings or rosin and all that

kind of good stuff, and one day he's got, "Oh my god I got no string, what are we going to play for the dance?" There was a visitor in the village, a white man from down south. He said, "Do you have a lynx carcass?" I said, "Yeah." "Bring that lynx carcass in." They brought it in, thawed it out. The guy opened it up, he took the guts out there and he strung it out, he got gut strings, lots of gut strings. He put a rock on one end, a rock and throw it over a beam so the next day he had all kind of fiddle strings. Yeah.

MMS - Boy oh boy. Some of the stuff that you had to do.

WF - Yeah. He had no hair for the bow so he used fishing line.

MMS - That's a good idea.

WF - To make a bow. We managed to do what they can to have music for the dance. *Charlie Peter*, he was the main fiddler in Old Crow. He and *Paul Ben Kassi* and getting ready for the New Year's dance and they're trying to put a fiddle together, oh my goodness we don't have enough strings. It was a visitor, this guy from down south somewhere. He said, "Do you have a lynx carcass?" "Yeah there's one out there somewhere." "Go bring in that lynx carcass." They brought it in overnight, thawed it out. The guy opened it up and pulled the guts out of the thing. The next thing you know, he had some gut strings. He made gut strings for the fiddle but the bow didn't have any horsehair. How am I going to fix that? He got some fishing line and he used some fishing line to make a bow. Strings from a lynx and fishing line and that's all they had to put it together for the New Year's dance but I like the history about what my Dad was saying when he was fiddling at home, I think it was even before we got guitars. There was only one fiddle shared between Arctic Red (River) and (Fort) McPherson. So the New Year's dance tonight, that's the main dance of the year.

WF - You see, his Dad was a Scotsman. Dad learned a whole lot of Scottish music and dances and so on so he played for the dance. The fiddle is in Arctic Red (River) and the dance is tonight. Tomorrow night, tomorrow night. Dad got up at 4:00 in the morning, hitched up his dog team, went over to Arctic Red (River), found the fiddle. He didn't have a case, there's no case for the fiddle. His cousin was there, lend me your towel. I need the bath towel to wrap the fiddle in. He put the fiddle in the towel and bring it over back to (Fort) McPherson, got back in time for the start of the dance and then played until 4:00 in the morning. They don't make them like that anymore.

You know, I often wondered about, Dad didn't tell me a whole lot about how he was able to learn all these beautiful tunes. He grew up in the early 1900s. He was born in 1895. When he was born and raised there was no radio, no tape recorders or any kind of stuff like that. He was able to learn from the Hudson's Bay craftsmen. When the Hudson's Bay Company was setting up the spool share up and down the Mackenzie River they built a house for the manager and they built a store and a warehouse. They had these craftsmen, carpenters and blacksmith, I remember those two in particular. Some of them were good fiddlers. They were able, Dad was able to learn from them. Then the guys would stay in the community a couple of years until they built the home for the manager, a store, a warehouse, the fur baling equipment. Then they moved to the next community. Well, from (Fort) Macpherson the guys moved over to Fort Yukon, Hudson Bay had the post there but they had to leave when Alaska, the Russians sold, 1867 I think it was or 1860, somewhere,

sold that to the American government for pennies and so the Bay had to leave. That was interesting because they closed down the place in Fort Yukon.

They had two little posts, one in a place called Rampart House and the other was Lapierre House. They had to close that down because it was too expensive to operate, to get merchandise, to get trade goods. They had to bring it down the Mackenzie River across the mountains by packing or by dog team in the winter. They closed them. That's where my grandfather worked when he first came to (Fort) McPherson. *John Firth*, my Dad's father, didn't have any music, he didn't dance, he didn't sing, didn't play but my Dad was a wonderful fiddler. He played for years and years. When we had a small community hall, for the main dances he would play and he would play until midnight. At midnight he'd put the fiddle down and he'd look around for me, by this time I was starting to play. I'd come over and pick up the fiddle and all the old people would leave. Just the young people would stay behind. I'd play for the waltz, schottische, two slow country waltzes mostly. I played for a few square dances that was it. Dad played for what we called the old, mostly Scottish dances.

One of them I remember was a duck dance, which is a well-known dance. He played very, very well indeed. He taught me a wee bit about the fiddle. He told me a little bit about learning the fiddle. The thing is, at home he played what he enjoyed. Then when he went to the dance he played the dance music but at home it was a different set of tunes that he played. I learned two or three of them, which I played and I have yet to hear anybody else play those tunes. I'll give you an example of that later on the piano. That's what I'm playing now because I don't play the fiddle anymore.

MMS - Those would be the Scottish tunes?

WF - I'm not sure. I'm not really sure, he never told me the title so I call it my Dad's, I call it "William's Minuet". It's a beautiful tune. That one and "Kingdom Coming", which came out of the American Civil War. Then "Darcy's Dooley", I don't know where that came from but those are three, I remember learning from my Dad. I did play a little bit, for a little while, the "Red River Jig", which is a very special tune and very, very hard to play it properly. Very, very hard.

MMS - What makes the "Red River Jig" special?

WF - Well, it's one that it's really hard to learn, very hard to play and you've got to be a good fiddler to be able to do that. Right now the only person I know alive today who can play it quite well is *Stanley Beaulieu* in Hay River. He put it on tape, it's out there. Dad said he used to get mandolin strings, the E and the A and use mandolin strings. In those days that is what was available. The two bigger ones, just regular fiddle strings. The bow, he said you need to wash the bow at least once a year and then to re-rosin back on that bow it's not easy. You powdered the rosin, put it on both sides like this and pull the bow through that and get it started. It was interesting how he held the fiddle on his arm like this, not under his chin-

MMS - Oh, his forearm.

WF - ... like modern day. The handle of the bow you could see all the movement was in the wrist. You didn't see this, you just saw that. I never forget a kind comment I heard not too long ago. We

had, in Macpherson we had a beautiful community hall that was built about 1930, 1940, somewhere around there. That was our main entertainment. All we had was old time music, fiddles and guitars, piano, accordion and the dances. I remember hearing some young person say, "We enjoyed that, we had that beautiful dance. The music was provided by *William Firth* and his boys." I thought that was a good one because I played, my brother Frank played, my brother *Frederick (Firth)* played and Angus. Music provided by *William Firth* and his boys. I really felt complimented with that one. The guys come in from Old Crow, Aklavik, Arctic Red (River) to learn from my Dad. There was one fiddler from Arctic Red (River), he was my Dad's nephew, *Fred Cardinal*. He was, I don't know about 40 years old I think when I first met him. He played my Dad's style. He was the last one I know. Other fiddlers at that time who were well known were *Joe Greenland* in Aklavik, *Johnny Macpherson* in Fort Simpson and *Chiga (Johnny) Berens*, Fort Smith. Those were the three fiddlers along the Mackenzie way back then, all at the same time, the same age in that time, in the 1920s and 30s and 40s.

MMS - Wow.

WF - Yes. The other thing is we don't have a fancy, the poetic style square dance calling which was great. Nobody else that I know of, *Fred Blake* in Macpherson was the last guy I know who had that style of calling. It was great to hear them.

MMS - Okay. Talking about getting mandolin strings or even instruments and bows, how would you go about getting those or were the Hudson Bay people bringing them with them and leaving them behind? How did you actually acquire an instrument to play...

WF - It wasn't easy. I remember *George Robert* telling a story about how he managed to get a fiddle, there was a guy by the name of, they called him *Old Man Blake*. He had a trading post in the Husky River. George gave him some money to get him a fiddle. He waited a couple of years. One day George said, "*Old Man Blake* said, 'Come and pick up your fiddle.' I got in my canoe, I paddled down the Husky River which is what, 10, 12 miles away, picked up my fiddle and come back home." He said, "I couldn't wait. I parked where I land, I went ashore and I took up the fiddle and tried it. Didn't know how to tune it so I tried anyway. I got home and I'm trying to learn to play the fiddle and we live in a tent. My mother said, "Put that thing away". Oh God why. So I moved my tent quite away back and I tried to play and I asked my sister, 'Can you still here me?'" He worked hard at it to learn how to play but after a while he did play some. Never, not real up to the style or level of some of the old timers but he loved the music, no question about it.

I don't know how, there weren't very many fiddles around. Like I said, even when I was playing as a teenager I think there were two fiddles in the community. It was actually owned by the community. You never worried about them getting broken, people respected the instrument. So they're gonna dance, "Where is the fiddle?" "Oh it's over at Joe's place. You've got to go pick it up." People looked after them. That was it. Then when I started, by that time there were three or four guitars in town. My brother Angus, *Jim Blake*, *William Smith*, *Alvie's* uncle and *Matthew Kendy*, those were the only guitar players. And so it took a little while for people but whoever can tried. People didn't even own an instrument but they were able to borrow one and learn. The music was really, really important to the people.

MMS - What year would the guitars have shown up?

WF - The guitars would have showed up around say about 1930, somewhere around in there. *Jim Blake* was a good guitar man. There was a guy, he died of tuberculosis. We had an outbreak, epidemic of tuberculosis. We lost some really fine people.

MMS - Would that have been around the same time, the 30s or would that have been later?

WF - The tuberculosis was in the 50s.

MMS - Okay. Getting instruments is one thing. When you talk about (*Jim*) *Blake* being one of the better guitar players you have to hear other guitar players play so that you can imitate them.

WF - That's, most often that's the way you learn. You learn from others. But when you're the only guy with a guitar you have to do it yourself.

MMS - By that point in time would radio, would you have been able to pick up-

WF - The radio was just coming on. Alaska had two powerful radio stations, KFAR and KENI, Anchorage Alaska and Fairbanks. But there was also a very powerful radio station down in the states. XERF, Del Rio Texas. They played all country music. It was a powerful station, 50,000 watts on AM. They played a lot of country music and soul, what's it called? Snake Oil or whatever, send your name and address and we'll send you a bottle of this which can cure anything. That was their ad. But it was great to have that. XERF, Del Rio Texas. Then after that, by that time some other stations started to pop up here and there. And then very, very slowly the Northwest Territories had, here and there, one or two little community stations that, where they got equipment I don't know but they had the volunteers and people would donate towards maintenance and running. The famous one was in Aklavik, CHAK Aklavik, "your friendly voice of the Arctic". Then there was CKBY, Yellow Knife. Yeah, "the golden voice of the Arctic". Fort Smith had a private station and Hay River. (Fort) Simpson had a very successful community radio station for quite a few years. That helped the culture too, people could share their music and their stories and so on.

MMS - Be able to learn new songs-

WF - Yeah, oh yeah.

MMS - ... or play along and get better and learn how to play. The radio was coming along. Would there be times that you can remember when they wouldn't have been coming through to play music but like you said the Hudson Bay guys would be there to do something else, build buildings or they'd be trapping and traveling through the community? Would that have been going on as well?

WF - In the summer.

MMS - Okay.

WF - There are one or two fiddlers, accordion, guitar players who were working as deck hands or firemen on the steamboat. It was a big event whenever the steamboat came into (Fort) McPherson. They unload their freight and everything and then put one whole night into dancing and having a great time in our hall. Here you would hear different square dance callers, different musicians, there's a big occasion until next year. I remember one guy who was just, I think his name was *George Loutitt* from Fort Providence. He was a well-known square dance caller. I don't remember the names of the fiddlers but what's his name who plays now in Fort Good Hope. Thomas, *Thomas Manual*. He worked on the steamboat as a deck hand. I don't remember meeting him at that time but years and years later he told me, he said, "You know I was working on the boat and it was raining but the guys said, 'There's a dance on up in (Fort) McPherson up at the hall.' I went up, poked my head in to watch" he said, "And there you were. You were playing "Rubber Dolly." That's a long time ago. That was the first tune I ever played for people to dance to my music. I played the Rubber Dolly and my cousin Edward, *Edward Blake* would play the guitar. *Edward* and *Herbert Firth*, they were the two main guitar players for me.

MMS - The steamboat would have been coming from?

WF - Fort Smith.

MMS - All the way?

WF - Yeah. Two boats, first boat and second boat. The first boat would come in about the first week in July and it would go all the way back, come back. Although there were two steamboats, the "Distributor" and the "Mackenzie". There would be two trips anyway into (Fort) McPherson to bring in the freight, everything that's needed for the whole year.

MMS - To take out probably pelts and furs and stuff like that too.

WF - Yeah. That's right.

MMS - Whatever was being shipped out from the Hudson Bay?

WF - Mm-hmm (affirmative). That was my first job as a trainee with the (Hudson) Bay was to do fur baling. I fur baled thousands and thousands and thousands of pelts. I used to put 800 muskrat to a bale in the trapping season and then I would put 1000 pelts per bale when they were hunting by .22s, .22 rifles. Till today I remember addressing the fur balers for the first sales department, Hudson Bay Company, first sales department, 465 Dorchester Street, Montreal, PQ.

MMS - You still remember that address.

WF - Yeah. I wrote that address over and over.

MMS - Thousands and thousands and thousands of times.

WF - Yeah. I see those fur balers are still there. It looks like a contraption but it's quite a genuine thing they use for fur baling.

MMS - You probably get pretty good at it after a few thousand of tens of thousands.

WF - That's true, yeah.

MMS - What's next here. You're hitting the bulls eye on my questions here because maybe you can talk some more about this but when you look at any river delta anywhere in the world, whether it's the Mackenzie Delta or the Mississippi Delta or the Amazon River Delta down in South America or over in Africa. If there is a river delta, it's usually a point of trade. In those place you have these different cultures coming together because they're all trading their commodities and whatever it is. But they also bring their food and their cultures and their music. So, when you talk about the steamboat coming up and that happening there, also about the Hudson Bay and they're bringing their music and maybe this is, maybe I made this up in my own mind but with the whalers, when they were coming through on the top, would their music have had any influence?

WF - The whalers?

MMS - Yeah.

WF - No, the whalers, they were up in the border between Alaska and Canada, Herschel Island. They came down from British Columbia, not British, yeah, the western coast. The sailboats. They would sail up around Alaska into Herschel Island there was a community there. As a matter of fact, it was a good sized community in Herschel Island and they, winter time they did some, I don't know what the right term for plays on stage. They did all that. There's an important bit of history there in as much as when they were trading out of Herschel Island into Canada, my grandfather who was a chief factor for the Hudson Bay had to go up and bargain with these guys. Said, "Look." The whalers were bringing trade goods. They didn't mean to but they had to have ballast for the sailboats, heavy flour, sugar and stuff like that. They would trade with the Inuk. So, my grandfather said, "Look, you're Americans, Alaska, that's your land. You could do your thing there but this way, from this land this way, they were right close to the border of Canada. Hudson Bay trading rates here. Now I'll tell you what. I'll make a deal with you, you guys. Don't trade this side. Stay away from here and you can trade over there. I'll let you use our mail service."

There was an old postal service at the time but the Hudson Bay Company provided the mail service on the boats in the summer, the steamboat and by dog team in the winter. "If we let you use the Hudson Bay mail service you can get your, reply to your Valentines six months earlier." They thought that was great, we'll get an answer to our mail six months earlier by using ... The bargain was sealed. "We won't trade into Canada, that's yours." Because of some of these things that my grandfather did, when the dominion surveyors were surveying the border between Alaska and Canada, they named the Firth River after my grandfather. The Firth River begins in Alaska and comes into Yukon Northwest Territories, right there close to Herschel Island. People say that Grandpa negotiated this agreement on the postage stamp, although they didn't use postage stamps at the time. Grandpa actually got the community of Aklavik started. They used to have what they call outposts, they would supply a trapper with some trade goods so they could buy furs and bring it in. Grandfather outfitted a guy by the name of *Kenneth Stewart* who had a whale boat, put in some flour, sugar, tea, tobacco and so on. The guy went up to Aklavik and established a little trading post there.

The community of Aklavik began there. At one time, Aklavik was the metropolis for the whole Northwest Territories. It was the biggest community. That's where this guy *Joe Blondin* became well known fiddler because he used to come down in the spring from Fort Norman, come down to Mackenzie to Aklavik to play his fiddle and play poker. Big poker games at the end of the trapping season. Then another community that Grandpa started was Kittigazuit but it never became a community. It just didn't grow. So they shot it down. Where was the other one? I think those were the only ones. But Grandpa had personally, with his own money, financed *Vilhjalmur Stefansson's* first expedition up in the Arctic. So *Vilhjalmur* went out on the ice, he learned to live like the Inuk, he learned how to survive one year and then he went down to New York I think it was and he had the Arctic Institute there finance his five year expedition. *Vilhjalmur Stefansson* spent the five years, he raised a family there and he never recognized them. He left and just left the family behind, never recognized them, never, ever thanked my grandfather for supplying the money, two dog teams and supply of food for a year. My grandfather paid for that out of his own pocket. *Stefansson*, not a good man.

MMS - ...and so his offspring-

WF - I knew them. Yeah. I knew his boy.

MMS - What last name would they have gone by? Would they have gone by *Stefansson*?

WF - Stefansson. Yeah. They were Stefansson. *Alex Stefansson*, *Rosie Stefansson*, two I remember. Yeah.

MMS - It was the Americans who were coming up over Alaska and going as far as Herschel Island. So, there wasn't any Europeans coming through as far as the Mackenzie Delta?

WF - Not as far as I can remember. They would have been, they must have been but I don't know much about that. I don't know.

MMS - Okay, when you're talking the Scottish influence on fiddle music that would have come primarily from the Hudson Bay Company.

WF - Yep, Hudson Bay craftsmen.

MMS - Hudson Bay craftsmen. That's right to. Okay, the people coming up on the steamboat, those players would have been what, Metis, like you said?

WF - Yep, the Metis players.

MMS - So, they would have been bringing up the French Canadian sort of tradition.

WF - Yeah. The square dance callers and the fiddlers. As a matter of fact, *George Loutitt* who was a well-known square dance caller, his daughter lives here in Victoria, Georgina. *Georgina Loutitt*.

MMS - Okay. So that answers a big question for me because, like I said, in a river delta it's almost like new musics are born as a result of just that mix, that gumbo of different cultures of music. I've always thought the different musicians that come out of the delta area, they have a different beat. They march to a different drummer.

WF - Sure.

MMS - There's something about it and you can't quite put your finger on it. They're playing blues music or they're playing traditional fiddle music or rock and roll even but there's a different underlying pulse that's happening there.

WF - That's right. Absolutely.

MMS - You don't hear it anywhere else.

WF - No, not at all.

MMS - That's been my curiosity.

WF - The clogging, it didn't, not very many people were into clogging expect *Alec*, I mean, what's his name in Fort Resolution? *Angus, Angus Beaulieu*. He does some clogging.

MMS - As you said, the only way you could learn a song was if somebody came and sat down and taught you the song or you were able to play along. Then radio came along and so with those different, you can call them technologies, those would have changed the music. So did you have a sense of it being, like you say, more traditional music to begin with and then as the country music came in, it kind of changed things?

WF - A wee bit.

MMS - A wee bit?

WF - Oh yeah. The big influence from "*The Carter Family*". The one famous old time waltz, "I'll Be All Smiles Tonight" that's over 100 years old and just about every fiddler I know plays that now. This one. One or two others, I can't just recall them right now but yeah, some of us learned a few tunes from the radio. A guy in Inuvik, he just died. I only knew his Inuk name. I asked him one time, he was a darn good guitar man. He played rock and roll very, very well, old style. I said, "Tell me about you." He said, "Well I heard *Joe Greenland* playing the fiddle on old GHAK and I said I have to be able to do that but I had no instrument so, but I had some rabbit wire and something else and I made myself a guitar." He said, "That's where I got started." He never told me where he did get his actual first guitar but he learned to play very, very well. Next thing you know, he had his own band. He called it "The Good Time Band". And he, *Nuluk, Nuluk*. I can't remember his Christian name. He just died about a year ago. He donated his fiddle to my nephew who is now a very, very, very good fiddler. Two of my nephews are doing well, they play together. Two brothers.

MMS - What are their names?

WF - *Brendon and Brandon* I think, I never got it correct, *Firth*. They're in demand in Alaska. They played in Yellowknife too I think. Played in (Fort) Good Hope and White Horse. I don't know where they are right now. One of the guys lived in Alaska for a little while the past year. The other one, the younger one was still in school. He might be finished by now. Finished with high school anyway. They play for dances. Very, very popular. One time, those two boys with their uncle, they went to visit the family in Aklavik and a guy pulled out his fiddle and started playing, the woman said, "*Wally Firth*." He probably played a tune he learned from me. Yeah. I have this one guy, *Michael Francis*, I taught him how to play. He now plays for dances here and there. I never, ever forget when I first started to teach him we were at his house and he had a fiddle. They got the first two or three lines of a Christmas Carol. His mother was sitting there, his face just lit up, didn't believe he could do it. That's where that one started. I taught two or three other kids but they didn't keep it up. The day I left they put their fiddles away. Too bad.

MMS - Yeah. But you've taught and mentored other people over the years.

WF - Oh yeah. I had a niece, *Jessie*, was doing very well. She was taking home prizes. The fiddle music helped her through high school. She was the top of the class from kindergarten to grade 12, every year top of the class. Then she decided it's more fun to have babies. That's what she's doing now. She's on baby number two now I hear.

MMS - You think them playing the fiddle and learning the fiddle helped them in school.

WF - Oh yeah, no question.

MMS - They've done studies on that.

WF - No question about that. Music is a wonderful, wonderful medicine. I'll try to show you that one, a couple of tunes I learned from my Dad on the piano if I can do it.

MMS - Okay.

WF - Maybe I brag too quick.

Plays piano

WF - It sounds a lot better on the fiddle.

MMS - That sounds great.

WF - *plays more piano*

WF - Yeah? I call that one "William's Minuet". I don't play it very well but I'm still learning.

MMS - It sounds lovely.

WF - Something like that.

MMS - I'll just get a picture of you there like that. That's great. That's beautiful. Thank you. You play very well.

WF - Huh?

MMS - You play very well.

WF - I'm learning. Something like that. There was another one I can't remember but that's okay. My forgetter is turned up on high.

MMS - You were saying.

WF - What else?

MMS - Can you think of any of the other musicians you've mentored over the years?

WF - Yeah. My cousin, Edward, was a man. We lost him in the Mackenzie River, he was on the cat, went through the ice instantly he was gone. He was *Jim Blake's* nephew. I remember when he got his first guitar from Eatons coming up on the steamboat, a long time ago. I don't know why the (Hudson) Bay didn't do anything about it. The Bay guys, not many of them were into music or dances. They were a different category of people, a different class I guess is the right word.

MMS - Staples and whatever practical stuff that was needed. They didn't carry any instruments or any strings or anything like that.

WF - Nope.

MMS - If you wanted to order any of that stuff from Eatons you had to write a letter?

WF - Well, Eatons or Simpsons.

MMS - But you'd have to write a letter and put-

WF - Eatons and Simpsons used to send out a catalog every six months. There would be a form in the catalog. You put in the numbers, put it in the post office. When the catalogs came up in the mail plane every six months and this guy in Aklavik, he didn't know how to read or write. Not very many people did. He asked his buddy, "What is this? What's this about?" "You see the picture there, you see these numbers, they'll tell you how much you have to pay. You write it out on this form and that's what you'll get in the mail." "Okay." The mail plane come in once a month, the guys down there, nothing. So, one day he come in and he got a little parcel. Took it home, put it under the bed. He went down to meet the plane again, finally he says, "You know I think maybe my wife might be on the next plane because she already sent me her dress." He saw the picture of this woman in this beautiful dress, he took the numbers and put the money in the envelope, he got the dress but no woman.

MMS - Mail order brides.

WF - Yeah.

MMS - Wow. Okay. That's a similar story from Fort Resolution, the young guys ordering stuff from the, well the Hudson Bay down there would carry guitar strings and picks and everything else that they needed. You mentioned that you ended up buying some instruments or an instrument from *Harold Glick*.

WF - Yeah.

MMS - At YK radio.

WF - Yeah. I remember, he had a big music store in Yellowknife and I went, I bought the fiddle. I used it for a couple of years and that's when, my niece has it now but it's under the bed. When I was in (Fort) Liard I had a fiddle and a guitar. I was going to move right now and I was like, "What do I do with this fiddle and guitar?" A guy down there, his name was *David Deneyoua* from (Fort) Simpson. I said, "Here you are, here's a fiddle." He said, "Really?" I said, "Look, only one condition, the next time I see you, you're going to be playing." He didn't say anything but he accepted. Years later I was at a music fest at the Midway Lake, *Stanley Beaulieu* was there. He says, "You recognize this?" I said, "No, why should I?" He said, "You used to own that. I got it from David."

MMS - The instruments would make their way from player to player to player to player.

WF - Yeah.

MMS - There's some interesting stories about that too, for sure.

WF - Yeah.

MMS - You've kept music in your life and a fiddle, have you always had a fiddle around or..

WF - Pretty well, yeah. I've always had access to a fiddle but the thing is, like I said, I cannot play a cheap fiddle now. What happened, you have to work at it. That's not playing anymore. There's no pleasure there. I was at a Christmas party one time in Inuvik and quite a family there. Somebody had their fiddle there. They were like, "Come on Firth, you've got to give us a tune." So I picked up a fiddle and man that thing didn't want to stop. It was beautiful. That was the first time I ever played a fiddle of that class. It belonged to Hanson, what's his name? I forgot his first name but anyway his wife got that fiddle for him for his birthday years ago. Well, he wanted to play the fiddle. He learned music, he was at University, he learned music, he can play the organ perfect, beautiful but the fiddle, he just don't quite have it, he can play that tune but that's all he knows. We say he's playing the notes for that tune but the music is not there and he knows it. He couldn't do it. That's the way it is, it's sad in a way. I know a few people who just would love to play this, there's no way possible. They're partially tone deaf. It's sad. I had another story and it just escaped there. What were you talking about?

MMS - I was asking you how the fiddle, from your time you got the fiddle in your hand and you're playing dances. How was the fiddle continued on in your life since then as a young man?

WF - When I was in Wrigley, the Bay sent in a wind up gramophone and a stack of records, old 78s. Like anybody else, those people loved their music. This one guy, man he had some money, he bought the whole thing. The next day he came back with all those records, he said, "They're no good. I don't want them." "I don't understand." "It's the wrong kind of music." He just dumped the stuff in the garbage and he left, he kept one record. He lived in a tent and this was in the summer time. I heard "Luther Played the Boogie" over and over. It was the only record he had. "Luther Played the Boogie". What's his name, *Freddie Beaulieu*, he lives in Hay River, he loves this. He plays the button accordion. We were talking about this not very long ago. He said, "You know when I was a kid growing up in Fort Resolution" he says, "Every home you went to there was a guitar or a fiddle or some instrument. That's the way it is and the people grew up with that." That's how come you have these good musicians coming out of Fort Resolution. The same thing in Old Crow. Same thing in Fort Good Hope. For a while it was in Arctic Red (River). My village, (Fort) McPherson, just a little bit different. I guess because people just took it for granted they're going to have good music, it would be my Dad. My Dad wasn't going to live forever either. He's gone. Same with *Angus (Firth)*, Angus is gone, *Frederick (Firth)* is gone, *Wally Firth* is down in Victoria for crumb's sake. Now the younger people, some of them would love to learn but you don't have people to learn from. It's no use learning to read music.

I found that out personally. I tried. I can read. I can play from notes but that's all I'd be able to play. I'll get those notes but that's not music. I keep trying to encourage the people in Aklavik, (Fort) McPherson, whatever, they do not have church organists. It's not hard to learn. We used to have one or two organ people who could play church music. That's something the people way back in the 40s all, they were really taken by the Anglican Church especially. Some of them would love to become priests and play the organ and so on. Did you ever see the old pump organs? There's one on the net now for free here in Victoria. I'm tempted to put it there but anyway, *Andrew Kunnizzi* bought one for his family. *Peter Alexi* bought one for his family. *Peter Thompson* bought one for his family, there were those three plus the two at the church. What was her name? She played quite well, not too bad. She played church music.

Andrew Kunnizzi was a church man. He became a priest and he bought this organ so his kids would learn. Well, old man "Zak" played that organ beautifully but he never played one hymn. He just played country music. One night we're having a dance and said, "William please why don't you bring that damn thing into the community hall?" A couple hours later they put it on the toboggan, pulled it down, put it in the hall there he played away.

MMS - Country tunes?

WF - Yeah. I saw that, it's still on the Kijiji. Pump organ. There's two in Arctic Red (River), one in the old church and one in the church manse I guess they call it. There was a guy there by the name of *Levesque*, *Father Levesque* was a good musician. He used to play. And at my time there was a guy by the name *Alec Dewdney*, he played the pump organ and he could. Those pump organs, the one that's on the net there for free, it's big. It's very big. There's that one and then there's the

other one that's about that size. There's one around (Fort) McPherson, it's out in storage somewhere I guess. A few of them learned, not many.

MMS - Those instruments maybe would have gone up the coast too for some of the missions and stuff that were up the west coast and stuff too. Maybe that's how it made its way back down here.

WF - I suggest to people in Arctic Red (River), (Fort) McPherson, I said, "Look. Get together all, (Fort) McPherson, Aklavik, Arctic Red (River), Old Crow all have a need for church organists. Get together. Put your money together and hire a teacher. I won't take long. Within a year you can teach that style of music within a year." Nothing's happening. I was going to call the minister in (Fort) McPherson in a day or so to try again. Yesterday I was talking to *John Norbert* in Arctic Red (River), they all agree with me but then nothing happens. People don't take music seriously. They love the stuff, they like it and enjoy but do nothing about it. Not even learning. Not enough people learning.

Some of the things that took place over the years during the time of the tuberculosis times, Charles Counsel Hospital. The patient would be sent down there, they'd be there for a year, two, three years. Some of them never came back. The ones that came back, some of them were able to play. People donated fiddles and guitars to the hospitals and there was one guy from Fort Rae, they called him *Freddie the Freeloader*. He was down there and those days the medical people would try different things how to cure that tuberculosis. Some of the doctors would go in surgery, go into a damaged lung and try to fix them. Freddie, he had to give up two ribs on this side. He healed, he was okay. Went back home and he learned to play the fiddle. By jingle those two ribs, "I don't need them now. I can fit the fiddle right in there." He's long gone now too. There was a few, *Alfred Francis* in (Fort) McPherson, he learned to play when he was in the hospital and it was really different. He played his own style and our kind of music, he played not too badly but he played, his bow was always going like this. Strange but he did it. I don't know who else, one or two others I think learned in the hospital. Now one or two learned to play while they were in the correctional institute in Yellowknife. I think there's a guy in (Fort) McPherson who did most of his learning of the fiddle in that place.

MMS - That's a great idea.

WF - Quite a few people learned the harmonica. That was my first instrument.

MMS - Is that right?

WF - The first instrument I ever played I was 10 or 12 years old. I played the harmonica. A little plastic thing for \$1. I remember in Midway Lake festival there were two senior ladies, two grandmothers that were up there playing away. I'm trying to remember the names. *Eunice Mitchell* and *Caroline Kay* I think. They had good sized harmonicas, they played quite well.

MMS - Those would have come up probably on the steamboats then.

WF - Could be, yeah. Or maybe even from Eatons, I don't know. Somebody would have introduced them to the harmonica.

MMS - *George Mandeville* was another one that learned how to play because he had TB. He's from Fort Res.

WF - That's right.

MMS - He was down and he learned to play and he came back up.

WF - Yeah. He's a good guitar man.

MMS - He is amazing. I've been playing with him and his son *Lee* on and off for years. It was a couple of summers ago I was playing with him, I hadn't played with him in a long time. I'm playing the bass guitar and I'm watching his left hand to see where that finger is going because that's my root note so I can play along. I couldn't keep up to *George*. There was just no way, he was playing the bass, he was playing the guitar, he was playing the melody lines, doubling up with *Lee*. He was just amazing. Afterwards I just went, "George I'm sorry man. I've never appreciated your playing but I've never heard anybody else play the way that you do."

WF - That's right.

MMS - He kind of nodded and he said, it was one of the *Laffertys'*, it's not *Morris*, one of the guitar players that was really, really good and he's living in the Yukon now.

WF - Oh that's *Peter*.

MMS - *Peter*. Thank you very much. That's all he said was he said, "*Peter Lafferty*"

WF - Man alive what a musician. You know, I first heard *Peter Lafferty* when I was in (Fort) Wrigley. I turned on the radio and I forget the call letters of the station in Edmonton, that's when I first heard *Peter Lafferty*. I know *Peter* personally. He can, that guitar, he can make it sing anything. He gave up music. He was making his living as a musician for a woman. She was not a very, put that damn thing away. *Peter* was learning the banjo, "Put it away." She would grab the thing and smash it. He stayed with her. Somebody said he's back on the stage again. I really hope so because he's not getting younger anymore but he's just absolutely fantastically beautiful musician. Beautiful musicians are important people but some of them don't realize it and they don't think about it that way. But they are. I think if you're a dancer you feel it, you know? When I played, I never learned to dance. I was always playing for the music. One of the things I'll never forget, when my fiddle was ran into, Edward was right on with the guitar and the dancers, everything came together and I would meet eye to eye with the dancers. You can't get any better than that. That's a long time ago. Eye to eye with the dancers and everything would just fly in that old community hall in McPherson. Dammit, I don't know why they tore it down. It would have been a shrine to our people. But anyway, we get some people with crazy ideas.

MMS - There's something, like you say, something to be said. I mean, when I'm playing a waltz, "Tennessee waltz"...

WF - Oh yeah.

MMS - ... straight up, square waltz and all the rest of that stuff. Sometimes I'll be singing it and even if I'm playing it, in my mind I'm imagining how it feels. I'm imagining myself on the dance floor. It's like, nope, this is a little bit too fast. Slow it down, see that dress just swishing there.

WF - Right.

MMS - You imagine that and then, like you say, then it's there. Music is to dance to as that goes. There's a movement involved there. It's really magical when that happens, that's for sure. The other thing too, you're talking before about playing notes as opposed to playing the music. Sometimes if you sort of break it down into smaller increments, it's almost like the swing. I guess maybe this ties into that pulse that I'm talking about and the beat and the delta music and how, in different regions it's different. In different regions and different cultures obviously but there is a swing that is there. I think that either just happens naturally or you have to pay attention to it or learn it and get it under your hand so that you feel it. Then you'll know when you're swinging just right and it's right there.

WF - That's the way with the "Red River Jig". My Dad played the "Red River Jig" perfectly. What he would do, he turned the G string up to an A. I was able to do that for a while. Maybe a couple of months I might be able to do it again but anyway that's a certain part, the "Red River Jig" is in three parts. The big part here, people you just can't sit down. I don't know anybody else excepting *Stanley Beaulieu* to come close but not the same.

MMS - Not the same.

WF - Yeah. That's the way it was.

MMS - That's the first I've heard of tuning that string up to an A. That's a good trick to know.

WF - Yeah. Otherwise you've got to do a far reach. You don't have to do that with the thing, it's already there.

MMS - You don't have to work so hard.

WF - Whether this guy is still alive, I've not heard him but I know of him, this name of *Lockhart* in Snowdrift. I play one of his tunes here, I think I may have just played it. I played what I call "Dad's Minuet", "Darcy's Dooley" and "Kingdom Coming". Those three fiddle tunes are all that one class of music. "Darcy's Dooley" I think, what's his name, *Lockhart* in Snowdrift played that quite well I heard. He has a nephew who is a real good guitar man, Alfred. *Alfred Lockhart*. He used to be part of the band from Akaitcho hall.

WF - So, who's left then? Was it *Thrasher*? There was a *Thrasher* on that band too, from the Arctic.

MMS - *Eddie Bazie*.

WF - I'm pretty sure it was a *Thrasher*. (*Lawrence Thrasher*)

MMS - Yes there was.

WF - He was a guitar man.

MMS - I'm trying to remember his first name.

WF - *Eddie Bazie* is gone, he was the drummer. Then oh God-

MMS - *Tom Hudson* was singing with that band.

WF - He was the leader of the band there.

MMS - I talked with *Tommy* about that. I've got some really incredible pictures from another guitar player that was in that band, *David Evalik*.

WF - That must be the guy. Not (*Lawrence*) *Thrasher*, it was *David Evalik*.

MMS – But (*Lawrence*) *Thrasher* was in the scene right around that time. I'm going to see *David* here in a couple of weeks. I'm going to Cambridge Bay for another job and but he came to Yellowknife, I asked him to bring the photographs and he has pictures of all of these guys, young men, it was pretty amazing. I also made some connections with people who were really good friends with *Eddie Bazie*.

WF - That story has got to be told more. You know, in 1967 *Eddie Bazie's* last day in school, Akaitcho Hall, he got on a Centennial Barge with the band went all the way up to Tuktoyaktuk and back home to Yellowknife. School the next day, that's the first time he can remember that he was not going back to residential school. Where is the next thing as compared to a residential school? He went to the Con Mine cookhouse, stole a tin of orange juice, opened it up and sat there to be arrested. So they picked him up, put him in jail. I think he earned one week. A week before his week was up he ran away. Okay. Now they've got to put him in jail again. He's not in residential school, this is the next thing to the residential school. This went on and on until he earned two years. When you get two years you go to penitentiary. So he went to penitentiary to be released, he ran away. Put him back again. About to be released he stole the laundry truck, back in again. Finally he hung himself. That's the story of *Eddie Bazie*, a beautiful man. He was a great drummer, he was just the most wonderful guy you could ever meet and this happened to him.

That's his life story. I don't know who the guy is but if I remember correctly I was talking to *Maurice Zoe* and we tried to get some information before *Eddie Bazie* killed himself he wrote a poem and that poem was published in the Yellowknife paper. Some way or the other I'm pretty sure I managed to get a copy and I sent whatever information I had to *Maurice Zoe*. *Maurice* said, "You should write a book." I said, "I'm not a writer. I just don't have the patience to write." I think I could, I know I could but I just don't have the drive. That was the story of *Eddie Bazie*. I remember *Eddie* when he was trying to get attention we're going down the Mackenzie on the barge, we stop at a community, put on a party, dance and so on. Then opened the store, he would go to the store, he'd have some jewelry or something. He'd say, "Look at this." Throw it away. Next thing, he

didn't need that but he was asking for attention. It didn't click with me or anyone else that I know of that did anything about it until he came back to Yellowknife and that was the story.

I don't know how many other stories like that but you know when I was talking to others about the importance of music I said, "Look. We have to do more." I said, "You know, you'll never see a good musician committing suicide." He's got something he's proud of that he can share with people and without giving it serious thought he's proud of himself. He's got something, he's doing something that all humans have to do one way or the other is to share. You're sharing music, you're sharing your story, you're sharing your brew pot, whatever. And I said, "I can't recall or ever think about a good musician committing suicide." Young people, especially in the Arctic it's happening there. It's like an epidemic. Four of them in my family. A niece, a nephew, two cousins. Suicide. Yeah. It's pretty hard to, people don't want to hear you preaching but I have to do it because I know how, to me it's the most important thing they could do is to encourage music and the dance. Two art forms you put together and you enjoy life. That's the way it is. I think where you can learn some of that, look at a really old Ukrainian village, Ukrainian home, Ukrainian town. They are good dancers and they play a kind of, I call it a little bit on the rough side, they play polkas. They really can polka.

MMS - *Kole Crook*. Did you ever bump into *Kole*?

WF - He lived with me for a little while.

MMS - Really?

WF - I knew him quite well. *Kole* was traveling with (*Andrea*) *Hanson*.

MMS - *Andrea* (*Hanson*).

WF - I knew *Kole* quite well. You see when *Kole* was starting to play and I guess his parents are Metis and they understand, I believe they got him a good fiddle. A \$3000 fiddle. Then when *Kole* was playing that and that little one I bought from Yellowknife he liked that better than \$3000 fiddle. That is a good fiddle. It's in Arctic Red (River) now I gave it to my niece but anyway, *Kole* did very, very well and one day he was visiting relatives in Saskatchewan and he phoned me up. He said, "Wally, do you play that "Eagle Island Blues"?" I said, "Yeah." "I want to learn." He said, "Can you play it for me on the phone?" So I played it for him on the phone. I don't know if he learned it, he must have because it was a simple tune.

MMS - How old would *Kole Crook* have been when he was spending time with you?

WF - He would have been maybe 27, 28, somewhere around there.

MMS - He wasn't that old when he passed on.

WF - Eh?

MMS - That would have been later, he would have been a young man in those days, not a kid.

WF - Yeah.

MMS - He must have been fairly far along then as far as his fiddle capabilities.

WF - He was playing quite well by that time. He had that \$3000 fiddle which was coming alive. I don't know whatever happened to it.

WF - September 1967.

MMS - So there's all kinds of stories about what's going on.

WF - Yeah. That was quite the year all right. I remember I was working as a reporter on the Centennial Barge, it went up the Mackenzie. And it very ... they tried to do it on the cheap so it was a disappointment. They found an old, what you call those...

MMS - Ferris wheel?

WF - Ferris wheel somewhere and they put that on the barge and it didn't work. They get to ... and they had a really good mechanic on board. They'd come into the village and these kids, their eyes, "Oh we're going to ride on the Ferris wheel." So they'd get on there and they go two or three turns and it quit. It was disappointing.

MMS - So you were on that barge?

WF - Yeah. Yeah.

MMS - Were you on the barge for the whole summer?

WF - Yeah.

MMS - Holy smokes Wally.

WF - Yeah. We left Hay River and went all the way up the Mackenzie, right to Tuk (Tuktoyaktuk). And then I flew back from there. And then that's when I got to know *Eddie Bazie*, *Tom Hudson* and what was the, *Evalik*?

MMS - Yeah.

WF - *David Evalik*.

MMS - *David Evalik*. Yeah.

WF - These musicians, and there was a couple too. I forgot their names. They were singers.

MMS - That would be *Ted Wesley*?

WF - *Ted Wesley*, yeah.

WF - Yeah. And the one that people never really so far as I can remember anybody talking about music and the dance, but it was very, very important to them. And I remember at home, my home was down the far end of (Fort) McPherson there was a path along the top of that bank there and the Hudson Bay Store and then there was the village. And every once in a while they'd see *Sarah Simon* coming down to visit. So she'd come and Mom would have the teapot on and bannock and some jam and she'd sit down and got served and sit. After a while Sarah would say, "Well, William, you know why I'm here. We want to dance." And important, very important to get William to play for the dance tonight.

MMS - Beautiful.

WF - Yeah. "You know why I'm here. We want to dance."