



**FOOT STOMPING** — Anna Verbonac, 8, left, bends an eager ear to John and Vicki Arcand's evening performance at Leask Community School in November. The Saskatoon couple, right, use music to teach Prairie children about important aspects of Métis history and culture.



# Muted Métis music revived by flying fiddles

Story and photos  
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for Rural Roots

**T**HE SOUND of fiddle and feet fill the gym at the Leask Community School on a snowy Saturday in late November.

About 50 elementary students with eager ears are gathered in the gym to hear Métis fiddler John Arcand use his music to bring the history of the Métis people to life.

It is the first time many of them have heard Métis fiddling. Some of the students don't even know what the word Métis means.

John plays the Lucky Trapper Reel while his wife and co-presenter, Vicki, talks about trappers coming down the Prairie waterways. John then launches into Whiskey Before Breakfast while Vicki talks about the tune's namesake — former Prime Minister John A. MacDonald.

John and Vicki have spent the last four years using fiddle music to introduce ele-

mentary students to important aspects of Métis history and culture.

Vicki says their program is a colourful way to represent Métis history.

"They will remember Lucky Trapper when they learn about the fur trade," she says.

Anna Verbonac, 8, attended the presentation. The brown-haired girl with the big

grin already knows about Métis history from school, but she likes how the Arcands connect the history to the tunes. Verbonac, who started taking fiddle lesson this fall, admires John's playing skills.

"He's very fast," she says.

The fiddle came to the Prairies with the Scottish, Irish and French fur traders in the late 1700s.

As the music and men mingled with local aboriginals, a new style of sound was born. New tunes grew out of the one or two bars of music trappers recalled hearing back home.

It was feet that formed the foundation of Métis fiddling, says Vicki.

"Métis people loved to dance."

Composers wrote tunes tailored to pattern dances such as the quadrille or rabbit dance. Each dance had a certain set of steps; when the dancers fell behind the music, the fiddler was forced to add a beat or bar to compensate. Even though very few of these traditional dances are still performed today, the extra bars and beats have become the style's trademark.

"To the average person this music is crooked'er than hell," says John.

With piano and guitars inaccessible, fiddlers used their feet to keep time to the music.

"It was a crude music ... most of these people didn't know one note from the other. It didn't matter if a bar (of music) was too long or too short, as long as the beat kept going," says John.

The Métis music thrived on the Prairies until the Riel Rebellion. After the North West Mounted Police defeated Riel's dream of self government for the Métis people at Batoche in 1885, it wasn't "cool" to be Métis, says Vicki.

Métis music became muted; tunes fell silent and feet were stilled. While a handful of fiddlers kept the music from extinction, the reel revival is a recent event.

John has played an important role in raising the profile Métis music, says Vicki. After learning traditional tunes from his



**MASTER OF METIS MUSIC** — Métis fiddler John Arcand was in Leask to give a workshop at the local school in November.

## Métis mainstays

Traditional Métis dances included:

- **Quadrilles** — Like square dances, quadrilles are done in groups of four couples with a caller who shouts out the pattern.

- **Rabbit Dance** — Dancers try to catch a figurative rabbit before it gets to the bush.

- **Duck Dance** — The duck dance imitates a mother duck with her babies toddling behind.

- **Red River Jig** — The Red River Jig is a solo dance with an endless variety of steps. In the old days, the person who knew the most steps would win a jiggling contest.

- When a contest was tied, each competitor danced a series of steps with a saucer containing a full glass of wine on his head. Whomever had the most wine left in the glass at the end of the tune was declared the winner.

- Female jiggers danced extremely close to the floor as it was considered obscene for a woman to show her ankles.



**JIGGIN' IN STYLE** — Red River Jigger Rocky Corrigan from Prince Albert struts his stuff in Leask.

father while growing up near Debden, John chose to spend the next six decades performing the Red River jig and Duck dance for crowds from Cape Breton to Colorado.

A prolific composer, John has also written more than 200 tunes, many of them preserved on his nine albums.

While John has raised the profile of Métis people and their music among non-Métis, the music continues to drown in modernity in most Métis communities.

Out of John's 100 cousins, there's "not a fiddler in the bunch," he says. Only two of his 31 private music students are Métis.

John hopes the school presentation will open the door for both Métis and non-Métis to "come and learn" about the music.

John and Vicki Arcand, who live near Saskatoon, have performed at 25 schools in the past four years.

"This is a whole 45 minute presentation and it works like a damn," says Vicki.

For more information call Vicki at (306) 382-0111.