December 1951, in Penticton. The band consisted of Al Saharachuk on piano-accordion, Wayne Birch on bass, Cliff Merriot on guitar and vocals, Fred's brother-in-law Ray Pridie on guitar, Helen Mulligan on piano and Fred on the fiddle.

The Okanagan Ranch Hands played old time dance music. By late 1950, early 1951, they played for an old time dance club at the Odd Fellows Hall in Penticton every Saturday Night. They had a radio show on CKOK Penticton three times a week, and the first half hour of each Saturday night dance was broadcast live.

Here is a transcription of an interview taped March 1994 where Fred tells a few stories about the years 1945-1955:

...But anyway, then Cliff [guitarist Cliff Merriot, who lived nearby] started comin' over to my house. And then finally he had a buddy there played bass, Wayne Birch, and next thing I know, why, Cliff lost his job. [And Fred couldn't get a good job because people had heard that he had a heart problem, and his job driving taxi wasn't earning him enough money.] And one day I says to him "Ah, to hell with this, Cliff." I said, "Let's go to Prince George." And he just laughed, you know, and the next day, he came over, and he said to me, "Are you serious about goin' to Prince George?" And I said, "Well, ya!" I said, "What the hell, nobody'd hire me here." I said, "And you can't make money playin' for dances. Let's go try it up there." So, we each took a blanket and rolled it up and put some coffee and just stuff that we could carry. and we hitch hiked. I even had, I lost it now, but I even had a diary of that trip. And, god, we made it to Kamloops the first day, and we slept out underneath a big tree, and the ants...! All we had was this little blanket.

So, we finally got to Prince George in three days. It took us three days hitchhikin' up there, and it took us about two dollars. You know, that's what it cost us to eat.

I can remember, just north of Williams Lake, we found a nice spot. A crik and the bridge was above us there, and we'd a hot sun. And so we decided, we built a little camp fire right under the bridge, and we were heatin' up our can a beans and just gettin' ready to eat. And a vehicle went across the bridge, and all this dirt and stuff come down and spoiled our supper. [Laughs] We had to do it all over again. We scraped the top of it all off, you know, and next day we finally got into Prince George, that evening. And the next morning, bright and early,
judging there. They had about nine big shots from the States come up and judge. But, anyway, they entered me in two. Two places, in the North West Contest and in the World Champion. Well [Laughs], I won the World Champion (and $500.00). I couldn't believe it, you know.

Rod: Do you remember what you played?

Fred: I played “Rock Valley Jig” and “Arkansas Traveller.” But I don’t remember which waltz I played. In 1950, in August. Yes, that $500.00. Man! That’s just like $10,000.00 today, you know. It paid bills and looked after things.

After the contest, then, I come back to Penticton, and then I met Al Saharachuk, the accordion player, and Helen Mulligan, who I knew already, and Wayne Birch, and then there was me and Cliff. Four of us, five of us, actually, for dances. But we got started, with the Old Timers Club. I’d like to see somebody start that here, you know. That’s a hell of a good deal. Twice a month, or once a month. And strictly a … program. It’s not all “Let’s do this” or “Let’s do that.” It’s laid out. By the People. You vote on it. OK, “Well, it’s a waltz, the first one, see. And then the second dance, the second one is a schottische, and the third one is a polka. And then we’ll have one square dance, and they’ll decide when to put that in, see. And then there’ll be a waltz and then a two step in between.” And, all laid out by the club itself, and then [the band has to] figure out the tunes to go with it, see.

Rod: What radio stations did you listen to at this time?

Fred: CKOV. Kelowna, was the first radio station, see. And
then, in the late 40's, Penticton got a radio station, CKOK. And that’s where we played. And they, they welcomed you with open arms, anybody to go in and play. Because they had lots of air time, you know. Not like today where they don’t want you at all.

Rod: Did you have a radio to listen to in the late 40’s?

Fred: We had. But you didn’t have time. You were workin’, you know.

Rod: So, despite what the doctor said about not working, you kept working.

Fred: I had to go back to work. I couldn’t believe him. So, when the Calgary Range Riders came through [in December 1951], they needed a fiddle player. Why, I decided to go. I said, “To hell with it,” that’s what I said to my wife. I said “I want to play. That’s my life! is violin.” So I went.

Rod: How did you find out about the Hillbilly Jewels?

Fred: I heard them on their radio show. It was right after ours [The Calgary Range Riders]. We came on at, what, 3:30 and they came on at 4 o’clock. They were on CFOS, Owen Sound, and we were on CFOR, Orillia.

What happened was, there was a guy from Australia, Tex Morton, he was a hypnotist, plus he did, a cowboy song, bit, in his show, and he wrote his own little songs. And he, he had a Australia guitar outfit, made these guitars and, he [was playing with the Calgary Range Riders and wanted to make a recording]. But there was no recording outfit in Orillia, so we had to go to Owen Sound to do this recording. And while we were there I met the Jewels, see. Joe Brown he came out, and he introduced himself, and finally he said, “Well, this is my sister (Vivian), and this is her boy friend (Randy Stewart).” And I didn’t know that they had a little band playin’ there or anything, see. But, anyway, after we finished our recording, he said, “Well, anytime you’re stuck for playin’,” he said, “Come on down and see us.” “Oh,” I says, “You got a band.” He says, “Ya, we got a little [Laughs] band here.” So, that’s what I did.

Rod: What was it like playing for Wilf Carter?

Fred: Well, you didn’t practice anything with Wilf. Because he [Laughs] never did it the same the next time anyhow. Wilf was easy ta play with and hard to play with. He was easy to play with in that he didn’t want you to do anything. He didn’t expect you to do anything, see. And he’d get out and he’d sing his songs. But [Laughs] every once in a while you’d have to watch. He’d back up and you’d have to go in and play. And [Laughs] if you weren’t payin’ attention, what the hell was he doin’, you know? That was the hard part. Other than that, he was very easy. And if the crowd give you a hand while you were playin’, he’d say, “Play it again!” He’d say, “Play it again, they like you!” Oh ya, he was quite a guy! Old Wilf was terrific.

Rod: Did you have a radio to listen to in the late 40’s?

Fred: We had. But you didn’t have time. You were workin’, you know.

Rod: So, despite what the doctor said about not working, you kept working.

Fred: I had to go back to work. I couldn’t believe him. So, when the Calgary Range Riders came through [in December 1951], they needed a fiddle player. Why, I decided to go. I said, “To hell with it,” that’s what I said to my wife. I said “I want to play. That’s my life! is violin.” So I went.

1955 to the Present

After Fred left the Wilf Carter Show to go back and be with his wife, he spent the rest of the 50s, the 60s, and most of the 70s in Prince Rupert working at the salmon cannery supporting his family. In the mid 70s, he and his wife split up, and Fred spent a few very memorable and musically productive years working on fire towers in BC. Here he composed a number of fiddle tunes including "Jim Forbes Reel," "Smokey Valley," "Blizzard in August," and "Sneaky Owl."

In about 1977, Fred moved to Alberta. For a while, he played with Edmonton guitarist Frank Gay. They can be seen and heard playing at the beginning of the feature film Silence of the North, which was filmed around Fawcett, Alberta, about 150 km north of Edmonton.

Fred remarried in 1981 and moved to Lac la Nonne, just northwest of Edmonton. Here Fred continued to play fiddle and compose fiddle tunes. Fred also successfully dealt with an alcohol problem.

Fred dedicated himself to improving his fiddle playing and to writing "the great Canadian fiddle tune." Fred’s motivation, drive, and energy is quite inspiring. Fred often is up at 6 in the morning, playing the fiddle and composing tunes for hours in the morning.

Much of Fred’s musical life, however, has been quite solitary over the years, either by choice or by circumstances. The fiddle contest culture hasn’t really encouraged original fiddle tunes or his particular style of playing. So Fred no longer participates in fiddle contests in Alberta.10

At the same time, it is rare when Fred has been able to locate and play regularly with local musicians whose styles are similar to his. There are notable exceptions over the years such as Edmonton area musicians George Bayard on banjo, and Doug McKay, who played guitar on his lap like Jeff Healy does.
For the most part, though, Fred remained fairly isolated, musically, while he lived at Lac la Nonne. He was able to keep good contact with his grandchildren here. The musical culture here, however, was not enough. Fred chose to move back to BC in April 1994. He returned to Lac la Nonne in October 1994, but he went back again to BC in May 1995. In many ways, BC, especially the Okanagan Valley, is home for Fred. He grew up here, and there are a number of people who still remember when he played regularly in the Okanagan Valley area. He now lives near Merritt, close to friends with whom he has played music before. Fred still hopes to compose that "great Canadian fiddle tune," and maybe in the rarefied air of mountain BC, he will.

Notes

1 Fred met Don Messer a number of times during his travels. He saw Messer's huge collection of printed fiddle music in Prince Edward Island, and he gave "Gill Netter's Jig" and other tunes to add to his collection. Don Messer played "Gill Netter's Jig" on his Jubilee television show, but he never recorded it.

2 High speed tempos play an important part in Fred's style. Available recordings from some of Fred's early radio programs, his early 78 records, and available recordings of Fred and his contemporaries playing at the World Fiddle Championship held at the Pacific National Exhibition in Vancouver in August 1950 show that high speed playing has long been a big part of Fred's style and that of his contemporaries as well.

Fred's contemporaries include King Ganam, who Fred competed against in the 1950 World Fiddle Championship, and Frankie Rodgers and Alfie Myhre (from Edmonton), who played a double fiddle routine with Wilf Carter after Fred left the Carter show in 1954.

3 According to Fred, the recording of "Curly Hair" happened accidentally. The band, Buddy Reynolds and the Calgary Range Riders, was having trouble recording a particular song. With the recording equipment of the time, music was recorded live and direct to a 78 master disc, which could be used only once. Each time a take was no good, the master disc was virtually useless, and a new one was needed at a cost of about $25.00. They had already ruined 2 or 3 master discs, so the recording engineer told the band just to relax and play something that they all knew well. Fred and the band started playing "Curly Hair." The recording engineer said "Wait a minute," and chose to record this song instead. "Curly Hair" became a minor hit for Fred and the band.

4 Fred met Wally Troggett in Ontario in the early 50. Wally composed "Snowflake Breakdown.

5 At the same time, fiddle contests have helped to develop and promote some distinct regional Canadian styles. They have also helped to develop the talent of some fiddlers.

6 Al Saharachuk, who Fred played with in the Okanagan Ranch Hands Band.

7 Fred still speaks with some regret at having made the decision to leave professional music behind so that he could be with his family. Fred loves his family dearly, but he feels he gave up a lot to be with them.

8"Country music," also known as "country and western," in the late 50s and early 60s was called "western music.

9 Fred also played music with guitarist Ray Pridie, his wife's brother, from about 1946 until about 1948. Ray chose soon afterwards to move to the United States, where he was an entertainer for many years.

10 There has been a kind of "protectionist" attitude towards certain, fairly limited fiddle styles and tunes in Alberta fiddle contests. At the Westlock contest, for example, the rules state that the Southern (meaning either Texas or Bluegrass, presumably) style is not acceptable. Fred's style is often interpreted as sounding "not Canadian enough," a charge which he resents: "I was born in Canada and have lived in Canada all my life. How much more Canadian can I be than that?"

However, Fred won the Gold Fiddle at a major event at the Red Barn, north of Edmonton, in 1980. Fiddle contests, and maybe fiddlers too, in Alberta are starting to change. For example, there is more acceptance and encouragement of original fiddle tunes. There is also a greater variety of music, such as Celtic, American and Métis styles, being encouraged and promoted by some fiddle contests.
Discographical Notes

Fred and The Calgary Range Riders recorded five 78 singles with Buddy Reynolds on Aragon records: "Valley of the Saints" (AR-176A, With The Petrie Sisters, From the Motion Picture Squaredance Katy), "(Can’t You See) I Want To Be Your Valentine" (AR-184-A), "Waltz of the Stream" (AR-184B), "Rocky Mountain Rhythm" (AR-205 A), "Curly Hair" (Fiddle Instrumental, AR-205-B). These records are all held at the Centre for Ethnomusicology at the University of Alberta.

In 1952, Fred was staff fiddler for Quality Records in Toronto. He played there regularly for Sunday recording sessions. One of his memorable musical contemporaries there was the banjo player Maurice Bolyer.

Fred has made a number of other recordings at home and at various studios over the years, but none of them have been duplicated and made available to the greater public.

A recording of some of Fred’s compositions, played by Fred, Rod Olstad and others, should be available to the public in the fall of 1995. (Watch for a review of this recording in an upcoming Bulletin!)

CATTLE RECORDS (Reimar B. Ginge, Moenchstockeim, Rosenstrasse 12, D-8722 Sulzheim, West Germany) MONO LP 89 -- (1986). Ramblin’ Man: "Dixie" Bill Hilton and The Calgary Range Riders. 4 titles include Lang -- In the liner notes, Calgary collector Keith Titterington writes, "...Freddie Lang was last heard of in Northern Alberta...."

The Northern Alberta Fiddle Project
Rod Olstad, of the Alberta Society of Fiddlers, has recently received a research grant from the Alberta Historical Resources Foundation. The grant is to cover the cost of travel, subsistence and materials to audio- and videotape some of the significant fiddlers of Alberta. Rod is hoping to produce or co-produce some creative radio and/or video or film programming flowing from this project.

The indexed video and audio recordings, and transcripts of the collected oral histories, will be housed at the recently opened Centre for Ethnomusicology located at the University of Alberta.

Rod’s Fishin’ Reel

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