

Richard Calihoo Interview
March 27, 2001

Richard: My name is Richard Calihoo and my parents were Jim Calihoo and my mother's name was Mary Louise L'Hirondelle.

When were you born?

Richard: I was born in 1920, February 25, 1920. I'm 81 years old now.

Sounds good. How are you feeling?

Richard: I'm feeling fine this morning.

Tell me a little bit about your family – how you grew up and how you ended up playing fiddle.

Richard: I started out, our family was kind of musical I would say. My dad used to play the violin – a lot of my aunts and uncles used to play, also. My brothers played, too, they played violin and guitar, and I used to play a tenor banjo as well when we first started. But, the way I started playing the violin was Dad was repairing this violin, it was an old Steiner violin and I thought he was repairing it for himself. I was only 13 at that time and Dad was setting up this old violin, and I thought he was fixing it up for himself. All of a sudden, he played two or three tunes on the violin, and all of a sudden he said, "Here, you can start the same way I did." And that's how I got started. Of course, my brother-in-laws, well, some of them, like Ed Laderoute used to be a very good violin player. I copied a lot from him and once I got going, I copied a lot from Don Messer and a lot of other musicians that I used to hear and kept right on going...to this day, and I hope my fingers still hold out for a while, yet.

**What kind of lifestyle did you have when you were just growing?
Was your dad a farmer?**

Richard: Yeah, we had a farm. We used to be in that Michael Reserve at one time until I was eight years old and Dad didn't like it there, for some reason or another. There was a little bit of conflict among...mostly his brothers, I don't know, but anyway, first chance he had to get out of that reserve, he got out of there. We lived just...four miles from...

(interruption in tape)

You were talking about the conflict?

Richard: The first chance Dad had to get out of that reserve, we got out of there. We weren't any more treaty ever since I was eight years old. Up until

1984, I think, they passed that Bill C31 or 32 was it? I reinstated myself back to treaty. I would imagine Dad would've turned over in his grave if he'd have known, however, they said there was a bit of a break...and one thing or another...you know, and there's a nine cent discount. I don't smoke, I don't have to use that...like I do, myself, but my wife don't.

Were you involved with the war effort at all?

Richard: No, I was called up in 1941, I believe, it was either '40 or '41. I went for my medical and everything, but my eyesight was so bad at that time that they disqualified me. I would have probably had to go in time, if the war hadn't ended. Anyway, I was off on account of my eye problem.

You have brothers that went though?

Richard: Yeah, my brother Francis went. He was called up and he was in training, but the war ended and he didn't have to go across, but he did take his training.

Where did your people originate from?

Richard: Well, actually, we are right from Alberta there, well, Grandpa came from down east, I think from Oka or whatever it is. He was a kind of Iroquois or Mohawk or whatever he was. There was quite a few of the Calihos came from down there and they settled down in Alberta on that north end. Some of them didn't, but Grandpa did take that piece of land there.

Did some of them go back then?

Richard: No, that reserve is all sold out; there's no more reserve there.

What was the reason for that?

Richard: I don't know. For some reason or another they, as far as I know, they just wanted to have the money. They were sorry after they did sell their rights because there's oil rights and mineral rights and there's always so much gravel on that place and that's money. I don't get no royalty or nothing, which I should be.

How did your parents make a living?

Richard: We farmed there at the grove, eh? We had a farm, we had our own implements, we had a tractor and a separator and we had pretty well all the equipment anybody would want for a farm.

Did your mom grow a garden?

Richard: Yeah, we had a garden. We always had a bunch of potatoes and we grew wheat and would trade it at St. Albert for flour. We had a bunch of cattle and we had horses, as well. Most of the time, when people did any farming they had to use their horses.

What about church? When you were growing up, did you have to go to church?

Richard: Yeah. I'm still a Roman Catholic.

Your parents?

Richard: Oh yeah, they were Catholic.

You went to church in St. Albert?

Richard: No, I went to church, catechism, in Spruce Grove. There was a little Catholic church there at Spruce Grove, about one mile east of Spruce Grove.

Is it still there?

Richard: No, it burned down. It was in between the railroad and the highway. There wasn't too much space in between, but it was enough.

What about the language? What did your mom and dad speak?

Richard: My mother mainly spoke the Cree language. My dad was ___ because he went to school way up, on the other side of town, what do they call that school?

The residential school?

Richard: Yeah, a lot of them took up trades there. Somebody like old Vital and Docs and them, they were steam engineers. They got their papers from out there. Dad was well-posted.

You grew up amongst the Métis community, more or less?

Richard: When we were in Spruce Grove, there was a mixture of Scotch, German, and different nationality of people, so when we went to school like that, when we had that farm in Spruce Grove, he gave a piece of land away for the school, well he donated it, those four acres of land, and they built the school on it because he didn't want us to go to the convent. That's where we went to school, was at Michael's school. It was named after my grandfather. That school doesn't exist there anymore. Apparently, the municipality sold

it, but we never got nothing out of it for the land. They up and sold it like their own. It should've come back to the family, wouldn't you think?

I would think so, yeah.

Richard: But, they didn't. I mean, they claimed it.

The main language was mixed?

Richard: Well, it was a mixture of English and Cree.

And French?

Richard: Well, a little bit of French went with it. There was a lot of things that they named in French, like salt and pepper and milk and that kind of stuff and their table. Chairs were _____, that's in Cree, salt and pepper was sel and poivre and _____ was all in French, but it could be slang.

Yeah, that's Michif. That's what we call Michif here.

Richard: There was one French guy was talking to me and he said he was working in a plant down east. He said he was only about 14 or 15, but they made this kind of a cheese. He said this stuff that come out of the milk, he said, "I know how to say it in French, but I don't know how to say it in English." And I said, "It wouldn't be le caillé?" And he said, " Yeah, that's what it is."

How many kids did you have?

Richard: We had eleven natural births. My wife was Evelyn, well, she was a _____. We had eleven kids and two of them, one of the kids, the little girl, my youngest daughter drowned when they had a ball team going when we were up in _____ Centre. And, of course, we were away at the time when that happened. We were at a birthday party in East Prairie and all of a sudden we got this message saying our little girl drowned. They crossed this Red Willow River, or something. Boy, that was quite a knock down for us.

Oh yeah. How long ago was that?

Richard: About 1975. The girl was 13 years old at the time.

Do any of your kids play anything?

Richard: No, not one of them ever played. I tried to learn one of the boys and he started to play the violin a little bit, and I guess he more or less gave it up.

Tell me a little bit about the Red River Jig.

Richard: Years ago, there was what was called the Michael's School, where they used to hold a dance there all the time after it was built and they raised their funds for different clubs or whatever. But, every, well, around midnight we'd have a lunch and then, after lunch, the Red River Jig. And they danced the Red River Jig while people was competing, like...(inaudible)...was the best Red River jigger. I don't know how many steps they would have to step, I was just a kid then, you know, I don't know just how many steps they'd have to step. More or less maybe two or three or maybe even more. Some of them knew more than others.

Can you explain how they danced it? There was a first part?

Richard: Well they didn't dance the clog. They didn't clog, it was just straight??? what they call. That was the way it was classed. Years ago if they clogged and what in there, you were disqualified.

Really?

Richard: Oh yah, well see they used have that in the old timers banquet in the McDonald's hotel years ago eh? One of my aunts there she lived until she was 105, but that's where she took lots of her first prizes and stuff and her and this Freddy L'Hirondelle we used to call him, but he was a very good jigger, but he was just a straight, well I just said ?? whatever you call that. They didn't clog. Otherwise they were disqualified eh? That was years ago, but I remember my dad playing for that contest in the McDonald hotel. That was years ago. In fact, they had their picture in the paper eh? In the journal, but we lost that paper. We kept it for ever so long. We moved a few times and it seemed like most of the time, some of the things we kept disappeared.

Well I imagine you could still get it if you wanted to from the newspaper.

Richard: I suppose eh? There was him and Pat. That was another Calihoo that corded on the piano with Dad, but it was more or less a comedy picture. They had Dad with a great big crooked nose on, but it was in the journal at the time they had that contest at the McDonald.

Tell me about the first part then. The first part is where they're dancing, watching each other, right?

Richard: Well, they danced the first part, the high part like you know, like they dance around there until they come to the jiggling part, eh?

But, I heard a lot of people saying that, like, the only reason they danced around in a circle was to watch each other so that when one guy made one step. ..

Richard: Yah, well that's the way they done it. I mean they both danced identical step.

Till you run out?

Richard: Yah, until you run out and I would imagine, my aunt there, she would have danced many steps because she took prizes, eh? She was one of the top old time Red River jiggers.

Oh right on! What about square dancing?

Richard: Square dances... Well, we used to play, most of the time, we played the first change. Like the slow jig. The next one, well, it could be a fast one or sometimes they have two jigs and then the last one, they'd play a fast one, eh? A reel.

A breakdown?

Richard: Yah, a breakdown. That's the way it was played.

What about other dances? The Hankerchief Dance or...

Richard: Well, I don't know so much about them. I mean they mostly danced, Reel of Eight, Duck Dance and stuff like that.

Yah right on and Reel of Four?

Richard: Reel of Four, yes that was danced. But they danced in two couples, eh? Because that's just like Red River jig, eh? Same thing. But that's the only thing they danced on Lord McDonald's Reel. That's what they called the Reel of Four.

What about the Rabbit Dance?

Richard: Rabbit Dance... no I never. I had no experience in that whatsoever. I think they had made up, more or less, a lot of these things, in these other reserves the further north you went, but like us there was more or less just Métis dances. It was Reel of Four, Reel of Eight and Duck Dance and Drops of Brandy. Sometimes I think they did, well I did play that once for a group that wanted to dance it, but that was only once that I remember playing it.

Do you still play them?

Richard: Well I haven't played that, oh for years. I don't know, maybe I would make a lot of mistakes in it, you know. But, I suppose if I practiced it, I could play it again.

What about waltzes? Like the old dance waltzes?

Richard: Yah I play the old time waltzes. I can play the modern ones now too, thanks to my wife here. She learned me how to go about playing the modern waltzes. You know like these slow ones. Well we play lot of them for these old folks in the homes. Actually, they have never played them before, you know, to ever play them for a dance. Now well they're the ones that, well it's more or less a timing on a slow waltz. But I can play quite a few of them now. But I've got a few more to learn.

What about Andy Desjarlais? What did you think of him?

Richard: Well there was a lot of the tunes. I play a lot of his tunes. I don't know the names of them. You probably know the ones I play. ? two-step. I know quite a few of them, like?? and there's another one. There's several ones of two step I know of Andy's.

Have you ever met him?

Richard: No, I've never met Andy. I met Al Churney. Graham Townsend, I met him.

What about different fiddlers that influenced your fiddling? Like years and years ago even?

Richard: Well one time, I was working up in Jasper and course we got together with a guy that was looking after the pony barn there at the lodge and he invited us to go to this, they were having a party there, but the lodge where they have all these high dudes that come there in the summertime. Well the couple that used to run that, there when they had that party, they used to play for those people, because there was waitresses want? that used to come to that party and of course mind you there was all kinds of drink and they just piled up the beer and of course, my brother-in-law starting saying this to this guy, you know?? was playing the violin and his wife was playing the guitar. You know, he says, my brother-in-law here plays just like Don Messer you know and the guy is feeling pretty damn good. I didn't admit it, who'd say that, you know. In fact, he just kind of put me on the spot and this guy, nothing would do, but I had to play and I played a few tunes. Well, the son of a gun, he wouldn't let me go then, you know and every time he met me, he'd ask me to go and sit down at their table. He was with some of these dudes from I don't know what the heck they were. They were dressed up in these kind of dresses. I'll tell you what I felt pretty small, I'll tell you and I was just working, you know and I was dirty and this guy says, "It doesn't matter to me," he says, "If I like somebody," he says, "I don't care

how you're dressed or anything," he says. But, I still felt so, I just felt so small, I could have sunk. But he told me, he say, "Anytime you come to Edmonton, I'm in the McDonald Hotel. He told me his name and everything. He says, "I want you to come in and see me." And I never did go. I was kind of stupid. There was kind of an opportunity, probably was knocking and I didn't accept it. Funny how things happen sometime.

Oh yah, I know, but when you came down here, you flew and that was the first time you've ever flown in your life.

Richard: The first time in my life I was ever up in the plane, but it didn't actually bother me at all except, like I said, from Calgary I was kind of running short of air, like, you know, I couldn't take a deep breath and I thought maybe I'd have to put one of them oxygen tanks on, but I didn't I mean I just kept talking to myself that I just, trying to ease up on that and I ordered a glass of apple juice and it seemed like as soon as I started drinking the apple juice it just calmed me, you know.

Did you have a window seat or?

Richard: I think so.

Did you look out?

Richard: Oh yah I was looking out all the way.

Pretty nice out there?

Richard: Oh yah, but it just seemed like the plane was barely moving. No it didn't bother me. It was more or less just like riding in a car.

I don't know if you're aware of what we're doing here, but all these are going to end up in a book someday, like all your music and all the music that we collect here goes to the Métis cause. The archives.

Richard: Oh I see.

These videos, someday they're going to know who Richard Calihoo is just by seeing your picture on a video.

Richard: Oh yah, awesome! We used to play for a lot of dances like you know, when I first started. That's where I suppose, that's where I got to know a lot of way to play round dances. Most of the time, I don't know the old time music just come more or less natural to me, eh? But you take my brother, he was two years older than I was. He was just the other way around. He was a good round dance player, but other than playing reels and then he was just, he couldn't play a reel the way they should be played. He

always kind of crippled it up. Not that he didn't play them. He played you know, but I mean, it just wasn't his style at all.

He butchered them?

Richard: He butchered them.

What about Gilbert? Tell me a little about Gilbert Anderson.

Richard: Well Gilbert, I mean say...

Your grew up with him kind of?

Richard: Not really, no Gilbert was in a different. Well he's a relative of mine. Its Uncle Albert's daughter was his mother eh? Celina was his mother eh? She'd be my first cousin, but then again, Uncle Albert that was Dad's stepbrother eh? What you call them?? same father, old Michael was their dad. My dad ?? but like I said, there's only the mothers difference eh? But they'd still be my first cousin, I mean no matter which way you look at it.

How is his music different than yours?

Richard: Well, I mean, everybody's got their own style, eh. I mean say we're grow up to be the way that I play I mean, more or less the way like way my dad used to play, I guess. It just come more or less natural.

He's gone on to become a real hero in fiddle music too, like he can play very, very, very well and I'm just glad ??? like this all the great fiddlers in Western Canada. You among them.

Richard: Yes, I've won quite a few trophies. The first North American trophy I won it was 1984. In 1986 I won another one, I won the North American one. In 1987 I won another North American one. Then I had to drop out then eh? Because you could only win it twice in a row.

So you would have won again?

Richard: Well I probably might have, but that was a gamble. I mean you can never say that you're going to win because it all depends how you come up with your tunes eh? Actually I would have come up with the open class in North American. But I don't know whether somebody done one of these witchcraft on me or something. But you know something, I played my first two and the last one that was the second round. I was up against this guy, from ?ville. I was going to play my last two and you think I could play. My hands were just paralyzed. Now what the heck would cause that. I had to walk off the stage. I still come in second spot. But that was one of the worst happenings ever happened to me. I'm sure I would have won that.

Did that happen to you again?

Richard: Well that was the number one there that was, I was playing competing for the top ?? on the open class and then when my fingers just went haywire and they thought I was getting a heart attack. This guy, well he was more or less the head of that violin there, what the hell you call, I don't know, well anyway, he come there and he start rubbing my arm and everything, but it was feeling fine other than that, but I always say it's something. Maybe I'm wrong, but why would my hand go like that.

Who would have competed against you that knew about your stuff?

Richard: Well this is it, I'm not going to name or point anybody because I could be wrong.

So you believe in medicine?

Richard: Well, okay another one incident that happened like that to me. It was out in Grande Prairie. We were competing the day before our competition, we were playing just like, you know, the tunes we were going to play. I never had a problem. This one guy, one particular guy, he's passed away and I'm not going to name him. As I was coming off the stage, he grabbed a hold of my violin and he says you know I never played your violin before, he said and next day, I couldn't even play them tunes. The same tunes I that going to play, I had a heck of a time to play just any old, old tunes that I played for years. Now what kind of crap would anybody do something like that.

I didn't do any good.

Richard: I just couldn't play.

Well that was really good and we'll take you to the studio now and we'll put together some of the stuff you've learned over the years from your different fiddlers that you learned from and the tunes that were passed on to you and we'll just go from there.

Richard: Okay that will be fine with me. I can only do my best that's all I can say.

That's all we can expect from anybody. You're here because your one of our hero's. Like the best Métis fiddler we have and it's an honour to have you sit down and have an interview with us.

Richard: Okay thank you very much.