

Red River Jigging: “Traditional”, “Contemporary”, and in Unexpected Places

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The Red River Jig is a fiddle tune and a dance that many Aboriginal peoples appreciate as dancers and spectators, especially in Western Canada. Today, as a dance it occurs most commonly in competitions and exhibitions, usually performed on stages or designated dance floors for an audience. Nevertheless, it remains a favored social dance at old-time fiddle dances in venues such as at Back to Batoche and the John Arcand Fiddle Fest in Saskatchewan, at Métis festivals across the Prairie Provinces, at Keplinfest in North Dakota, and at events further north.¹

The Red River Jig is a form of step-dancing with various origin stories, like the tune that accompanies it. Nonetheless, most agree that it was adopted by Native peoples through their interactions and involvement with the fur trade industry during the 18th and 19th centuries (see Quick 2008 for a lengthier discussion on these origins). While the tune that is identified as the antecedent to the “Red River Jig” is in 6/4, most versions of the “Red River Jig” sound more like a reel or a duple-time tune, although its metre is not necessarily strict and varies according to fiddler and version (Dueck 2013; Gibbons 1981; Lederman 1986, 2010; Quick 2008). The dance follows the two main parts in the tune. For the first and higher part, dancers use a standard step – some jigging in place, some travelling in patterns – and these steps may vary between dancers. For the second and lower part, dancers perform “the change” – which are the steps that vary as the tune/dance is repeated.² “The changes” are the steps that show the dancer’s skill, and while there are a number of change steps that almost all jiggers know, there are also some that only a few perform. Dancers also invent steps, although these may not be considered “authentic” to the tradition (more on this later).

A dancer’s reputation rests on the prowess exhibited within these changes, but also in the transitions between the first and the second parts. A good dancer is always “in time” and “in sync” with the melody of the fiddler’s rendition of the “Red River Jig”; that is, when the fiddler begins the second part of the tune, the dancer begins his or her varying steps. Ideally, the dancer is no sooner or later than the exact moment that the fiddler begins the lower notes within this section. This transition sounds easier than it is to execute, especially since fiddlers play the “Red River Jig” with varying versions and lengths for each section. On occasion, fiddlers may also lengthen and

shorten the second section during the change, which Dueck has asserted may coincide with the fiddler’s appreciation or disapproval of the jigging skills of the dancer (2013: 169-177), although this may be a subconscious reaction.

In the summers of 2011 and 2012, I revisited some of the same venues I had investigated for my dissertation fieldwork and traveled to new places in order to better understand what is most commonly known as “jigging” by those who perform it. Besides interviewing dancers I had known previously or for whom I had contact information, I recruited dancers performing at events in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Montana, and North Dakota.³ Since many dancers travel from quite a distance to compete or are also hired performers at these events, I was able to meet dancers from nearby locations as well as from Manitoba and from more northern areas in Saskatchewan and Alberta. I asked each dancer to describe their initial jigging background, the kinds of settings in which they had performed over their lifetimes, the number of steps they knew, any jigging terminology they knew (in any language), the reasons why they jig, other dance forms they knew, whether they were also musicians, and any other relevant information they thought I should know.⁴ To date I have interviewed 26 dancers: 12 females and 14 males. Their ages at the time of the interviews ranged from mid-20s to elders in their eighties, the oldest born in 1929. Nine dancers grew up in Alberta, seven in Saskatchewan, five in Manitoba, three in North Dakota, and two in Montana. Most identified as Métis, but some identified as First Nations or as both Métis and First Nations – and these included Cree, Saulteaux (or Ojibwe), and Dene backgrounds – besides the three dancers I interviewed from the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota, where they often identify as both Métis and “Chippewa”.⁵ Finally, one of the dancers from Manitoba identifies more as French than Métis.

Learning, Performing, and Competing: People and Places

The majority of the dancers I interviewed started jigging in their pre-teen years, a couple dancers saying they started as soon as they were walking. All of these dancers mentioned family members, immediate and more distant, as the ones they learned from, usu-

ally informally by watching. Of the relatives mentioned – mothers, fathers, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and cousins – mothers and grandmothers were noted the most. Many also highlighted that they had fiddler relatives, implying that the fiddlers inspired dance in their families and communities and for them personally. Those that learned later started in their mid-teens or early 20s; two first learned through instructional programs and two others because they had been recruited to join dance troupes. Many that jigged earlier in their lives, learning first from family members, also spoke of being on a jigging hiatus for a number of years before coming back to it.

Besides learning to jig from relatives at home, the elder dancers mentioned house parties, weddings, community hall dances, and New Year's festivities as events with jigging in their early years. Treaty Days were also mentioned by Kathleen Steinhauer as a time when jigging and related dances had taken place on Saddle Lake reserve in Alberta in the 1930s and 1940s, and Byron Dueck (2013) has also written about Treaty Days featuring jigging competitions in Manitoba more recently. The North Dakota dancers described house parties as events that would be arranged between a couple of families and known as "bush dances" (see also Loukinen 1991; Vrooman 1992). Many also mentioned attending old-time dances and Native Friendship Centre dances, and for some, the Friendship Centre was a venue at which they continued to learn or began to perform more publicly. The Friendship Centre dances are also sometimes referred to as "Dry dances" or "Sober dances", since they purposefully ban alcohol on their premises, but local country bars may also have jigging and jigging contests, especially if a fiddler is featured. All of the dancers related that they also participated in other types of old-time dances. Couples' dances like two-steps and foxtrots, as well as square dancing, were most commonly mentioned, but so were what are often thought of as the other traditional Métis dances: the Duck Dance, Reel of Eight, Reel of Four, and the Drops of Brandy. Many dancers (about half) also referenced their roles in teaching others to jig or in helping someone perfect particular steps. They taught their children, nieces and nephews, and grandchildren, and a few taught jigging to beginners, novices, and even more advanced dancers in more formalized settings ranging from workshops at festival events to after-school programs, to programs on particular First Nations reserves or available through particular organizations.

Besides festivals, dancers from Alberta mentioned performing in talent shows, jamborees, rodeos, and floats in parades. Others from across the Prairie provinces had competed or performed in exhibition events

sponsored by the Métis National Council or its provincial affiliates, and one elder jigger, Winston Wuttenee, originally from western Saskatchewan, even recalled performing in the 1970s for the Métis National Council's predecessor, the Native Council of Canada in Ottawa (more on this later). Some jiggers noted that they or their dance group had performed with well-known entertainers (fiddlers or country singers) and at some rather grand stages in North America – the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, the Smithsonian Folklife festival in Washington, D.C., the Commonwealth Games in 1978 held in Edmonton, as well as the Vancouver Expo in 1986 and the Vancouver Winter Olympics in 2010. Yvonne Chartrand, originally from Manitoba, has performed in many settings in Vancouver with her group *Compaigni V'Ni Dansi*, but she recalled two outdoor re-enactment performances – one at the Batoche National Historic Site – as significant since they were in historical settings where Métis communities had once thrived. A few dancers also noted their performances for Canadian government officials, as well as outside of North America, including Mexico, Italy, Siberia, Australia, China, and Hawaii.

Many dancers were regulars at Red River Jigging competitions, often traveling beyond their region, province, or state to compete. Nearly half mentioned competing at Back to Batoche Days in Saskatchewan, and other events commonly noted were Métis festivals in various locales across the prairies, including the Festival du Voyageur and Asham Stomperfest in Manitoba, and the John Arcand Fiddle Fest in Saskatchewan. In addition, Brad Haineault, a Dene jigger from La Loche in northern Saskatchewan, who ventured south to compete in the John Arcand Fiddle Fest, told me that he had won many informal contests at a host of northern villages in Saskatchewan. Joseph Nayhowtow, originally from Sturgeon Lake Reserve in Saskatchewan, traveled in the North for educational programs and also witnessed an informal jigging contest where everyone would jig together, competing simultaneously. The top two or three dancers would be selected out of the group. At contests further south, dancers compete solo, although at Batoche, during the preliminary stages, competing dancers are often grouped by three at a time.

Steps and Terminology

Although some dancers were unable to recall specifically how many changes or varying steps they knew for the second part of the Red River Jig, those that did varied significantly in their estimations. The smallest number mentioned was three changes, and the largest was seventy-eight.⁶ Many dancers ex-

plained that although they knew more changes, the ones that they regularly performed were a smaller number, since the contests they performed at limited the changes to three or four. Nevertheless, nine dancers estimated that they knew twenty or more changes, and these dancers were either professional or semi-professional members of dance troupes or regular performers in exhibition settings.

All the dancers referred to this form of dancing as “jigging”, and a few provided words or phrases used in other languages. Two elder female dancers provided *nîso simowin*, which directly translates from Cree as “two people dancing”, and an elder male also shared the phrase in Cree for “I am jigging”: *Ineh sasimowin niya*. Saulteaux dancer Raymond Shumi speaks English as a second language, and although I recorded his term for the Red River Jig in Ojibwe on video camera, I have not felt comfortable writing it out without further assistance. He translated it as “French people dance” or “Métis people dance”. Yvonne Chartrand used the Michif expression *V’ni dansi* in the course of our interview to exclaim, “Come and dance!” Finally, elder dancer Kathleen Steinhauer recalled a Cree phrase that described a particularly awkward dancer – *eh sikankit*⁷ – and this phrase was warranted for dancers who either had an odd movement within their style of jigging or could not keep time.

Dancers also agreed on a few common English terms used to describe the formal qualities of jigging. All acknowledged “the changes” as a term they used or had heard to describe the second varying part, and many mentioned “the basic step” as a descriptor for the stepping done in the first part of the Red River Jig. A couple of dancers also called the change steps “the fancy steps” in passing.⁸ Kathleen Steinhauer noted that she had not heard these terms growing up, but later, when jigging was being revitalized through the Canadian Friendship Centre instruction in Edmonton starting in the 1960s (see Quick 2009 for more of this history). Other dancers referred also to “the double step” or “the heel toe” as the kind of basic stepping that most tried to emulate during the first part (see Dueck 2013; Quick 2008 for rhythmic charts for this stepping). This stepping requires a quicker shift between the feet midway through the sequence of steps. For some it is a shift between their heel and toe, and for others it looks more like “a shuffle” on the front of their feet. “Shuffles” appear in some change steps as well.

While all dancers acknowledged that there are no standard terms for the variant changes, some dancers had pegged English descriptors for themselves or had heard such terms in instructional settings or in their dance troupes. These were used either to help them keep track of the different changes as an individual or

to communicate the particular change they were performing within a group. These terms were generally very descriptive of the foot movements such as “the heel heel, toe toe”, “the cross over”, or the “slide glide”. A couple of dancers also mentioned Cree phrases describing particular steps. Corbin Poitras, from Elk Point but living in Edmonton, Alberta, cited the Cree term for rabbit (*wapos*) as used for a hopping change step. Similarly, Celina Jones from the Thunderchild reserve in northwest Saskatchewan, who now makes her home on the Fort Belknap reservation in Montana, remembered her mother using a Cree phrase that roughly translates to “flicking it off” in reference to each foot sliding and then flicking on its tip forcefully behind the other.

“Contemporary” vs. “Traditional”

Dancers readily discussed which steps were considered more or less traditional. Steps could be seen as less traditional because they were adopted from other traditions (clogging and tap were the two most mentioned), were combinations of single change forms, or were recent innovations. Kathleen Steinhauer called such steps “Army and Navy” steps, since they had initially been adopted by soldiers who had travelled during the two world wars. “The Charleston”, or “The Chicken Step”, two names for the same step, was also noted as an untraditional step by a couple of dancers. Other dancers acknowledged that they were open to adopting elements from clogging or tap dance combined with what they saw as more traditional steps, or in combining existing change steps in order to create new change steps. Corbin Poitras, a dancer in his twenties, thought that these innovations signaled that jigging was an evolving tradition and such fusions should not be seen with trepidation or solely as inauthentic.

Although I did not prompt them with a question focused on distinct styles, many dancers differentiated between “traditional” and “contemporary” for overall jigging styles as well as individual steps; these terms were used to identify a dancer’s general orientation towards jigging. The traditional style is associated with jigging closer to the floor, less exuberant movements overall, and steps that require stepping patterns directly touching the floor. Foot-shaking or feet above the ground, by contrast, is *not* considered traditional. The contemporary style is sometimes faster, is definitely showier, and some dancers appreciated its emphasis on bigger movements – both vertical (off the ground) as well as horizontal (travelling around the stage).

Dancers saw each style as having its place, although they would usually voice their preference for one or the other for themselves. For example, Scott

Duffee, a jigger from Saskatchewan, explained that when he first learned in an instructional setting, he learned the contemporary style, which he described as flashy and showy. Later, he shifted towards a more traditional style (see [this video](#)), which he felt was actually more difficult because it takes more control.

This emphasis on controlled decorum also aligns with gendered notions for ideal behaviour. For example, Celina Jones learned from her mother, who emphasized “the old style” in which only the feet moved during jigging, and she said that she taught her to move “like a lady”, without any excess movements. Yvonne Chartrand also spoke to these ideals when contrasting traditional to contemporary jigging, this difference encompassing movement and attire in an appreciation of the past:

To me the thing that comes to my mind first is the traditional and the contemporary. Then and now... [To] wear that traditional outfit, have the beadwork and honour that dressing style.... Nowadays people are swinging their arms really fast and really hard. Everything's [in the past] more gentle, like the men were gentlemen and the ladies were ladies, it was more ladylike and delicate. And you know, you put a long dress on, and you put that traditional outfit on, and it's different. It's a completely different feeling than putting on a square dance outfit and twirl[ing] and spinning.

Some dancers saw traditional jigging as more authentic, while others viewed contemporary jigging as more entertaining. For example, Arnold Asham, from Manitoba, saw the flashier, contemporary style as a way to bring excitement and to maintain the tradition by providing entertainment and recognition to more fans. He admitted that the taps on the shoes and other features that his dance troupe, the Asham Stompers, have adopted are not all traditional but are still appreciated by those attending shows. Nevertheless, he felt certain core elements were needed for it to be considered Red River Jigging; the fiddle is one of them (see [this video](#) for an example of the Asham Stompers performing the Red River Jig as a group before they begin square dancing). Asham referred to Sakeeng's Finest, the trio of jiggers from Sakeeng First Nations in Manitoba who won the nationally televised Canada's Got Talent in 2012, and how their jigging was transformed by the end of the show – in part because they did not use the fiddle for their backup music. Still, Asham was proud that they had won and is currently their manager (Sakeeng's Finest 2015).

Many dancers discussed where and how they position themselves between the two styles of jigging, or they offered their thoughts on jigging as it had

changed during their lifetimes. Some also pointed to particular competitions emphasizing one or the other style; the John Arcand Fiddle Fest as well as Back to Batoche (more recently) emphasize the traditional style.⁹

Jigging in Unexpected Places

Sakeeng's Finest and their appearance on national TV was a revelation to some that Native peoples perform a style of step-dancing, even though the show did not fully acknowledge the Red River Jig and “jigging” as a tradition that Native peoples have been performing as long as other step-dancing traditions in North America. In the course of these interviews, I learned about jigging in other unexpected places that indicate its resilience and adaptability to variation and venue. Winston Wutteenec, an entertainer whom I have previously described (Quick 2008), created a jigging comedy skit at a Native Council of Canada meeting first in the 1970s in order to get the attendees “to lighten up”, and has since brought this cast of jigging characters to many venues where jigging would not have otherwise appeared (see [this video](#)). At an earlier time and in a more somber place for Native peoples, Kathleen Steinhauer recalled jigging in secret at residential school in the 1940s, where they used an elaborate warning system of girls listening at doors and stairwells so that those jigging in the basement would not be caught and presumably punished. While it continues to evolve in function and form, jigging remains ever present in the lives of many Native peoples.

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Notes

¹ Researchers have reported on the "Red River Jig" as a fiddle tune and dance form in many settings, although most are in Western and Northwestern Canada. See Dueck (2013), Gibbons (1981), Lederman (2010), Mishler (1993), Quick (2008), and Vrooman (1992).

² Any quotes appearing in this article are actual words or phrases that performers use to describe the formal qualities of this dance. I will indicate if the quoted word or phrase was offered by a few or solely an individual.

³ I attended an exhibition of jigging at the Capital Ex in Edmonton and the jigging contest at Lac La Biche Powwow Days in Alberta, jigging contests at Back to Batoche and the John Arcand Fiddle Fest in Saskatchewan,

and jigging exhibitions at Keplinfest on the Turtle Mountain Chippewa reservation in North Dakota. I was able to interview dancers recruited at the 2011 Lewistown Metis Celebration in Montana the next summer.

⁴ The length of each interview varied from 10 minutes to 3 hours and depended on how well I knew the interviewee, the setting, language barriers, and their age or lifetime of experiences with the "Red River Jig". I also have contact information for several other dancers I video-recorded, and hope to interview them in the future.

⁵ The U.S. government adopted the term "Chippewa" for those indigenous groups also called Ojibwe or Ojibway around the Great Lakes, some of whom migrated onto the Plains and are also still known as the French term Saulteaux in Canada. More generally, Ojibwe and other Algonquian-speaking groups identify as Anishinaabeg. The Turtle Mountain Chippewa tribe includes many Métis members, some refugees from the "Riel Rebellions" in Canada.

⁶ Yvonne Chartrand was the one who mentioned knowing 78 changes, the most of any dancer, in part because of her collaboration with John Arcand to document and preserve as many traditional Red River Jig steps as possible. For more information, see her [online biography](#) on her dance company V'ni Dansi's website.

⁷ I have not been able to verify the pronunciation and spelling of this phrase. *The Alberta Elder's Cree Dictionary* provides the term *kayekicikawihk* as someone being awkward and clumsy (LeClaire and Cardinal 1998).

⁸ During an earlier fieldwork visit (2002-2003), a consultant from Norway House, Manitoba, told me that they referred to the overall number of renditions of the Red River Jig as "rounds."

⁹ The John Arcand Fiddle Fest has since stopped offering Red River Jigging competition, although workshops emphasizing the traditional style are still offered. I do not know if Back to Batoche is still promoting the more traditional style of jigging in its competitions at this time.

