

Remembering Women Fiddlers in Manitoba: A Conversation with Fiddler Beatrice Durupt

Monique Giroux, York University

Every summer I spend a weekend at Metisfest, a Metis-run festival originally held at the International Peace Garden, North Dakota, but now held in Killarney, a small town situated on the edge of the Turtle Mountains in southwestern Manitoba. Last summer while attending the event, I came across a copy of a local publication titled *Vantage Points: Stories from Turtle Mountain Métis Elders and Manitoba's Southwest Corner* (Neufeld 2010). Based on oral histories, the book is filled with short articles on a wide range of topics related to local history and Metis life. It even includes recipes for traditional Metis foods (e.g., a recipe for “boulettes” made from deer meat). As an ethnomusicologist specializing in fiddle music, my eyes were quickly drawn to a photo of two young women taken in the late 1940s; one was playing a guitar, while the other was playing a fiddle. The caption stated that music was very important for dances among the Metis families in the region and noted that the women in this picture were Ida Gosselin (guitar) and Rose Gosselin (fiddle). The article that accompanied the image did not reference the photo or mention a single woman fiddler, although several men were noted for their regionally renowned abilities on the fiddle. (A man by the name of Billy Gosselin was said to be “well known for his talent with the fiddle” (2010, 24). Was he, perhaps, their father?) The inclusion of this photo, taken more than 70 years ago, felt particularly salient in the context of Metisfest, since the musicians at the event are mostly boys and men.

A short time later I had a conversation with Metis fiddler Garry Lepine (b. 1950). Lepine and his son Jason (b. 1974) are well-known in Manitoba's Metis and old-time circuits (and are, in fact, both regulars at Metisfest). I grew up listening to them compete at old-time fiddle contests, and in 2001, Jason and I (with three other Manitobans) headed to Nepean, Ontario, as Manitoba's representatives at the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Competition. In more recent years, I have watched both Garry and Jason perform at Metis events across Manitoba. Although we certainly do not have a close personal relationship, I felt, having listened to them fiddle for about 22 years, that I knew them musically. In any case, I was writing a short biography of Garry for my dissertation and wanted to know a little about how he learned to play. His response was typical of fiddlers from the older generation. (Garry Lepine was born about 30 years before approaches to learning the fid-

dle began to change in Manitoba, moving away from learning by ear and without a teacher to more formalized methods of learning that includes one-on-one lessons.) Lepine told me that he came from a family of fiddlers. His uncles fiddled, his dad fiddled, and his mom and sisters fiddled!¹ Now this may not seem shocking to most readers, but I was more than a little surprised. After all, I had seen Garry and Jason compete and entertain for so many years, but had never heard of any women fiddlers in the Lepine family.

The idea that there were women fiddlers in Manitoba at least by mid-century was certainly not completely new to me. I had recently finished extensive research into public discourse on fiddling in Manitoba throughout the 20th Century and found that, while women did not emerge as fiddlers in large numbers on Manitoba's public/professional stage until the 1980s and 90s, women had been taking part in public events (fiddle contests in particular) since the 1950s. However, at that time, their place on the competitive stage was a place of novelty. This sentiment is clearly expressed in an article printed in the *Manitoba Leader*, which noted that:

The first entry ever received from a woman for the Manitoba Championship Old Time Fiddling Contest has been received here by the Portage Curling Club, sponsors of the event. The Lady entrant is Mrs. Barbara Beesco, of Winnipeg. (“Woman Entrant” 1950, 16)

Shortly afterwards, the same newspaper reported that, in the end, *two* women had taken part in the competition:

The two history-making women entrants, Mrs. Barbara Beesco, of Winnipeg, and Mrs. Albert Montpetit,² of Prairie Grove, were defeated in the semi-finals. However, Mrs. Beesco appeared at the final as a guest, and she was acclaimed by the crowd in a manner equally as enthusiastic as that accorded the trophy winner. (“Poplar Point Man” 1950, 1)

While competing at fiddle contests may have been acceptable mid-century, it was certainly considered a novel occurrence to see a woman on stage competing, given that the women who took part at the 1950 Manitoba Championship made headlines.

Around the same time, Florence Roberts organized a competition specifically aimed at young fiddlers.³ The Manitoba Junior Fiddle Championship was intended for youth under the age of 19 (with the age limit changed to 20 the second year the contest was held). Although there were fewer girls competing at the juniors (generally one to three girls and about eight to ten boys), girls were always a part of these early competitions. In fact, girls and young women were even hired as the entertainment (dancing, singing, and playing instruments), performing as the judges deliberated. In this setting, girls playing fiddle was not considered a novelty, in contrast to the performances by women fiddlers at the Manitoba Championship. The importance of this event in encouraging girls to compete was significant, given that, after it ended (likely in the late 1950s),⁴ references to girls or women taking part in fiddle contests disappear from Manitoba newspapers until the 1980s, when Canadian champion Patti Kusturok began competing.⁵ By the 1990s when I was competing, there were more and more girls taking part in the junior categories (which were, by then, integrated into most fiddle contests). Yet because there is still only a rare example of a senior woman competing at Manitoba's fiddle contests, I believed, like many others in the fiddle scene, that it was unusual for a woman to fiddle prior to the late 20th Century.⁶

After seeing the image of the young woman fiddling in *Vantage Points* and speaking with Lepine, I began to understand that, regardless of how unusual it was to see women on stage at major competitions and at big concerts or dances, fiddling was an everyday activity for many women in Manitoba throughout the 20th Century; it was not unusual for women, even those born early in the century, to fiddle at home (where, undoubtedly, their children would have been listening), at house parties, and for local dances.⁷ In many cases this would have been unpaid (i.e., amateur) labour, but it was, nonetheless, important to community life; through this usually unpaid labour, women fiddlers played a significant role in the transmission of tradition. Studying music in "private" or semi-private venues does, of course, present unique challenges for researchers and has often been seen as less important in recounting histories (Koskoff 1987, 1). Yet, due to the exclusion of these private venues (or the skimming over of these venues), the contributions of women fiddlers have been largely ignored and forgotten. That is, the lack of women in ethnomusicological research has more to do with "the worldview and resulting methodologies

... than the lack of women's musical activities" (ibid., 2).

In the spirit of acknowledging and remembering some of Manitoba's fantastic senior women fiddlers, the following focuses on the life of 89-year-old fiddler Beatrice Durupt (nee Morisseau), originally from Haywood, Manitoba, but now living in Winnipeg. It builds on the work of ethnomusicologists who have demonstrated the value of life histories (e.g., see Diamond 2000, and Vander 1988) and published interviews (e.g., see the numerous interviews included in Hoefnagels and Diamond 2012). While an increasing number of fiddle scholars are recognizing that a "comprehensive cross-cultural examination of gender in fiddling" is long overdue (Forsyth 2011, 202), Sherry Johnson's articles on fiddling in Ontario (2000a, 2000b) and Beverley Diamond's article on women musicians (including one woman fiddler) in Prince Edward Island (2000) remain singular examples of articles that take the role of women and gender relations in Canadian fiddling as a central focus; the remaining articles and books on fiddling are satisfied with simply a passing reference to women, or the lack of women, in the tradition.⁸ By focusing on one woman fiddler, this article therefore begins to fill a significant gap in the literature on Canada's fiddle scenes.

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I met Beatrice Durupt in 2010, when I joined the Southglen Fiddlers, a group of primarily seniors who get together in the basement of a church in St. Vital (southeast Winnipeg) at 9:30 every Thursday morning during the autumn, winter, and spring months. I was quickly drawn to Durupt for a number of reasons. Although the top of her head barely reaches my chin – she can't be more than about 5 feet tall – she is feisty and energetic, with an infectious love for the fiddle. I was impressed with her ability to remember tunes and learn new tunes quickly by ear. Although she can read music, she rarely looks at the sheets handed out at Southglen rehearsals, peeking at them only if she can't remember how a tune starts. Not only is she one of just a handful of women in the Southglen Fiddlers, she's also one of their strongest players. I had the opportunity to sit down with her (and even jam with her) on a cloudy, dreary morning in October 2012. We talked about how she got started on the fiddle, what kept her going for so many years, what kinds of events she performed at, and what it was like growing up as a Metis girl in southern Manitoba. Here are a few excerpts from our conversation.⁹



**Figure 1: Beatrice Durupt and Monique Giroux “jamming” in Durupt’s living room
Photo credit: Monique Giroux**

MG: Tell me about how you started fiddling.

BD: I had a sister Rose who was a wonderful fiddler. We grew up right on the farm. We always had a piano and a violin sitting on our piano. So she came one time to visit. I was 11 years old. She said to me, “Beatrice, take that violin there and see if you can follow me.” So she played “Love in Bloom” and I followed her right away. Seeing that I could do it, I kept on. You know, little by little I kept on playing.

MG: How old was your sister Rose?

BD: Okay, my sister. I’m the youngest. She was, ah, I was 11, my sister Rose about 27.

MG: Did all of your sisters play fiddle?

BD: No, not all of them. There was my sister Clara, my sister Rose, and I would say the other ones fooled around a little bit. Irene was pretty good. And Almire died at 29 so she didn’t have much of a chance.

MG: Did your mom play fiddle?

BD: Yeah, she played the fiddle.

MG: And your dad?

BD: My dad played the fiddle, and the button accordion, and the guitar. And I never saw my mom sit at the piano. Never. No, and I never questioned it.

MG: How big was your family?

BD: Nine girls and three boys.

MG: Do you remember the first time you played in public?

BD: Ah, I was about 17 I think. I used to play at the school dances.

MG: Who did you play with?

BD: We just had some different chorders, like, you know, guitar players.

MG: What was it like when you played at your first dance?

BD: I can’t remember. I guess it was okay. They danced anyways! As far as I know (laughing).

MG: So it turned out all right!

BD: Yeah, yeah! I used to play off and on [at that time].

MG: Many people talk about how it was hard for women to play fiddle in public because they weren’t allowed in bars or because people believed that women shouldn’t play for dances. Did you find any of this to be true?

BD: No. No. We played just like the men.

MG: You never felt that people told you that you shouldn’t play?

BD: No. Never.

MG: Outside of your family, were there other women fiddlers around?

BD: Well, I guess at that time there was, years ago, when I was a little girl, there was the Dumont girl that used to play the violin. There was the Berard girl [Ethel]. She played the violin. I think she was the only one in that family. She played for dances too. Nobody told the ladies they couldn't play! The ladies who played were never told that they couldn't play dances. I never had a problem!

MG: Tell me about the house dances that your family used to have.

BD: Well, on New Year's our place was the place for dances. Never invited nobody, but everybody came [laughter]. All the ones who wanted to come came. We never had to invite. We had a piano, and musicians. We had Richard Lapointe, Herman Lapointe, and Wilfred Lapointe. Good fiddlers.

MG: Your family would provide the music?

BD: And our friends.

MG: So whoever came with a fiddle?

BD: [Nodding.] We provided the lunch, though [laughter].

MG: How many people would come?

BD: Oh my gosh, 40? Maybe sometimes 50.

MG: Wow! How big was your parents' house?

BD: Well at first when we came we didn't have a kitchen, just a great big house when we first built it. And then we left it like that because, just because we knew that people liked...

MG: It was perfect for dances?

BD: Yeah, that was it.

MG: How old were you when these dances were happening?

BD: I was a young girl. Mom passed away when I was 17 and that was the end of the [house] dances. After she passed away. Before that we'd have birthday dances, we had a New Year's dance...

MG: Did you have a dance for each of your birthdays?

BD: Not for us kids. But we used to have them for mom and dad. Yeah. One in January and one in February.

MG: Were you playing fiddle for these house parties?

BD: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I played the fiddle. Oh sure! Most of [my family] did. Like the girls used to chord on the piano, and I chordeo on the piano. And then my brothers all played the violin.

MG: And you played the fiddle as well?

BD: Oh yes, oh yes. I sure did.

MG: So you did a little bit of everything.

BD: [laughter] Yeah, I think so!

MG: Did other people in the area have house dances too?

BD: I think they used to do them at the Lapointe's. Richard Lapointe's. That's about it. Not too many other ones did it, but you'd be surprised how they [people from the nearby town] used to come out to the country to dances. 7 miles! With sleighs in the wintertime, too. [They travelled] seven miles from Haywood. And then the next time [the house dance] was at Richard's. He was about the same six, seven miles [from town]. We had good times. And there used to be house dances in Layland too. Yeah.

MG: Did you ever play for a dance in Layland?

BD: Well, yes! Yes I did. They had local guitar players for us [to play with]. Like, we didn't have a piano [in the school house]. We had a guitar. One was a McNabb boy. Name was McNabb. He was a chorder.

MG: Were you invited to the dances? Or did you just show up and whoever showed up played?

BD: Anybody could play. Yeah, anybody could play. But lots of times I used to play lots of it myself.

MG: Really!

BD: Well, yeah, I had to!

MG: Because there weren't other people to play?

BD: Yes. Not too many.

MG: You were about 17 at the time?

BD: About that. About 17. My first experience was, not with playing, but I remember being told that I was 4 years old, and my oldest niece and I – my sister played the violin, my sister Rose – and there was a concert at a school, and apparently what happened when she was playing, her and I [Durupt's niece and her] both got up and, I was 4 years old, we both got up and we danced the waltz on stage. I don't remember that but nobody asked us. We just got up!

MG: Where is Layland?

BD: Layland was just a little horse town, one little store there. But there was people around. Nice people too. There was the Layland school, and this little store. And nice people. There was Ukrainian people out there, too that were very nice. French, Metis. We got along very good.

MG: Did you speak French at home?

BD: Yes, we did. But broken French.

MG: Metis French? You call it broken French?

BD: Michif. I had a cousin Rose. She was raised by the nuns. So naturally she spoke French really fluently. So she used to come and live with us. She was comical. So of course we'd talk French. She'd say, "C'est pas comme ça qu'on dit ça!" She'd correct us [laughter].

MG: When you got older, did you start speaking French in what was considered the "proper" way? Or did you keep speaking Michif?

BD: I tried to talk in the proper way. But I'm scared to talk French. Joe [her late husband] said, Beatrice, you can talk good if you want to.

MG: Was your family proud to be Metis or was this something that your family tried to hide from you? Were you made to feel a sense of shame?

BD: There might have been some [who felt shame]. I think there was one of the girls. My oldest sister's daughter, one of them. She was kind of, she was kind of ashamed of our nationality. But no. The rest no. I'm happy to be Metis, and proud of it.

MG: Did you ever feel like people looked down on you?

BD: Yes, I did. I felt like people, the French people looked down on us. Not Ukrainians. But I felt like French people, some of them looked down on us. Yeah. And I was always scared to go to dances in St. Claude and those places because of, there was too much French people looking down on us. I liked to go to Layland, where there was Metis, there was Ukrainians.

MG: So you felt like you had to separate yourself...

BD: Yeah, I had to. I felt it. It's a shame to feel like that. But I got over it now. I think people are different today now.

MG: Going back to your career as a fiddler, did you continue to play for dances until you got married?

BD: Ah, well, let's see. I played more, yes, I played more when I was single, you know, then after I got married. After I got married we moved to Saskatchewan and we had a band there. I was playing with a band. I was about 24, 23, 24 then. We were living there in Reserve, Saskatchewan. It had a wood mill, and then they had a community centre there. So people used to play for the dance there. Our wage was a dollar an hour. That was in the '40s! And then we'd play. We were paid a dollar an hour, and if they wanted us to play some more for another hour we'd get paid another dollar [laughter].

MG: Big wages!

BD: Yeah, but we had fun! You know, we didn't have no microphones. We were up on the stage, and the minute we'd get up, the minute we'd start to play, everybody was on the floor. And that's when we didn't even have a microphone! Yeah, isn't that something!

MG: What was the band called?

BD: Oh, it was just a little group. They didn't have no name. It was just a group. I used to play the violin, and then we had my husband on guitar, my sister used to play the piano, and then we had an accordion player.

MG: Who came out to the dance? Families? Or seniors?

BD: Oh, all kinds of people came, people that lived in the district that worked together. They'd all come to the dance.

MG: How long did you live in Saskatchewan?

BD: Ah, let's see, it was about a couple years, that's all.

MG: Did you continue playing after you moved back to Manitoba?

BD: No, after I came back, I didn't play for a while.

MG: You were too busy?

BD: Well, I was taking care of my little guy [her son]. And, well, I guess I sometimes had opportunities to go [play], but [due to family obligations] I didn't go. The first 20 years [after marriage], I'd play off and on. I would go visit my sister in Neelin, because she had a piano. My sister Irene came to visit. She used to chord too.

MG: You also mentioned that you used to play at the Festival du Voyageur.

BD: Yes, I did. When I was in Ste. Anne. We moved out there in 1988. It was in the '90s, we [Bernie Elastic and his Rubber Band] played for the Festival du Voyageur.

MG: How did you get those gigs?

BD: They just asked me to go with the Vermette Orchestra [Bernie Elastic]. That's how come I got to play at the Festival. And we used to play for dances around [Ste. Anne]. We used to play at the hotel, and we used to play for senior's homes in Ste. Anne.

MG: So you played quite a bit in the 1990s?

BD: Yeah, I did.

MG: You also now play for the Legion, right?

BD: Oh, off and on. Off and on. When they ask me. I don't have my own band. I just play when they ask me.

MG: How long have you been doing that for? Since you moved to Winnipeg?

BD: Oh, I would say in the last year. I didn't start right away. Because I started going to the Legion about a year ago. So it took a few years.

MG: When did you move to Winnipeg?

BD: From Ste. Anne? I moved in 1995. Then I joined Southglen in 2001. And the next year they got me to join the senior Melody Group. Mr. Deacon, who used to play with Southglen, said, "Beatrice, why don't you come and try and play with the Melody Group?" That's how I got started with them. Then I quit for a year, for some reason. And then I told Joe, I said, "You know, they asked me to come. I like it. I'll come. I'm going to go back." I've been with them ever since.

MG: Why have you kept fiddling all these years?

BD: Because I liked it. And I still like it. But I wish I wouldn't have quit when I did, and I wish I would have made my CD when I was able to play better. I don't like it [her CD].

MG: Why not?

BD: I don't like that first piece. I told him, "Don't put that on," and he did.

MG: Tell me about your latest CD! Has it been released?

BD: No, it hasn't. I should get it done. It's up to me. I just need to tell them that I want some CDs done. The thing is, I figured I wasn't, it wasn't quite good enough, and that we should go over it. Maybe I'm too fussy, I don't know.

Over the past few years, Durupt has become more active on the public stage. She started competing at fiddle contests a couple of years ago (and is now generally the only senior woman at the competitions) and plays at her local Legion hall and with two seniors groups. Although she spent little or no time with her fiddle when her responsibilities as a mother were at their peak, her youth and senior years were filled with fiddling. Durupt's story adds to the growing evidence that women fiddlers were not all that rare in Manitoba even in the early 20th Century (after all, her sister Rose was born in 1908 and her mom, who also fiddled, was born in 1879). Thinking back on our conversation, I chuckle at my naively phrased question suggesting that she *must* have been told that it was not appropriate for her to fiddle and my sur-

prise when she stated that her mom fiddled, as did several of her sisters. Her resounding insistence that "ladies were never told that they couldn't play for dances" provides a refreshing contrast to the novel "lady entrant" ("Woman Entrant" 1950) who made headlines and was acclaimed by the crowd attending the Manitoba Open Championship Old Time Fiddling Contest 15 years after Durupt first picked up a fiddle. While women fiddlers may not have entered "big" venues in large numbers until quite recently, it is becoming more and more evident that women made important contributions to fiddling in Manitoba throughout the 20th Century.

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Notes

¹ Lepine, Garry. 2012. Interview with Monique Giroux, August 28.

² Mrs. Albert Montpetit was Clara Montpetit (nee Morisseau). She was Beatrice Durupt's oldest sister.

³ The competition was first held in 1953.

⁴ By the mid-1970s, a junior championship had been integrated into the Manitoba Open Old-Time Championship. There is no available information on a junior championship between 1960 and 1974.

⁵ Some have suggested that childrearing responsibilities made it difficult for women to continue fiddling after they married. The combination of these two factors would provide a good explanation of why these young girls were not seen at contests as adults (see, e.g., the discussion in Johnson 2006, 22-25). In some cases, women were discouraged from playing in public by their husbands (personal conversation 2012).

⁶ In the 1990s, I often saw fiddler Ella Cook (1913–2005) compete at competitions. I have also come across references to her competing as early as 1977 (Wrightman 1977, 14). Currently, the only senior woman who competes is Beatrice Durupt.

⁷ Sherry Johnson's anthology *Bellows and Bows* (2012) includes many women fiddlers born in the early 20th Century. She does not, however, include women fiddlers from the Canadian prairies, likely due to the fact that there are no academic articles about women fiddlers in the region, or even articles that include mention of senior women fiddlers. Interestingly, Harold Newlove's book *Fiddlers of the Canadian West* (1976) includes numerous biographies of women fiddlers from around Swift Current, Saskatchewan (and a few from elsewhere). Although very amateur in presentation, Newlove's book adds to the evidence that women from the Canadian prairies were active as fiddlers early in the 20th Century.

⁸ While simply including mentions of women in passing was common in ethnomusicological scholarship prior to the 1990s (Koskoff 1987, 2), Diamond and Moisala point out that by the year 2000 gender-related studies had shaped nearly every aspect of music scholarship (2000, 1).

⁹ This conversation is edited and includes some of the information from a follow-up phone interview on March 5, 2013. Some of the information has been rearranged for easier reading. Durupt also read a draft and made a few small corrections.

