

Above, Bergman Esmailka plays "Eagle Island Blues". Right, newcomer, Lawrence Houle, an Objibway from Manitoba, joins the festivities at Eagle's Hall in Fairbanks. Photos by Rob Stapleton



Old Time Fiddlers Festival

By Rob Stapleton

Fairbanks — When fiddler Bergman Esmailka and Poldine Carlo took the stage at the Eagles Hall to play and sing "Eagle Island Blues" Sat. night, they proved a point. When Elders speak, everybody listens and listen they did. Hundreds of people from down river villages on the Yukon to the up river villages of Ft. Yukon and Arctic Village, some from Anchorage and Fairbanks and one fiddler from as far away as Winnipeg, Manitoba gathered in Fairbanks to heal, play, and dance their woes away to this and other traditional favorites at the 10th Annual Athabascan Old Time Fiddling Festival.

Ten years ago, the first festival was met with some skepticism, a lot of enthusiasm and massive amounts of optimism. The parent sponsor of the yearly event, the Institute of Alaska Native Arts, decided to tackle the festival after sending Mabel Generous, then an IANA secretary and the daughter of famed fiddler and trapper from Nulato, Bergman Esmailka, to the Yukon River villages to do a study and record some of the fiddlers for a book project. The idea took hold and the word went out to the fiddlers and their accompanist the event would be held in Fairbanks in Nov.

At the time, only a few people in each village remembered the tunes played by their grandfathers and great-grandfathers which were handed down by learning from

gold miners along the lower Yukon at the turn of the century or from as far back as the first contact with white people when the Hudson Bay Company sent fur buyers who worked their way west from the eastern seaboard of Canada. Most of those few in each village were Elders who wished that the young people would take all interest in the folk, country-western style music of the old days.

The idea of passing down the music became an edict fiddlers that have since died, and those left behind the likes of Poldine Carlo, and Hannah Solomon, still carry the torch for fiddling music. "Fiddling is a very happy time for the Native people ever since I remember. In the early days, they celebrated only Christmas, New Year and Fourth of July. When everyone came to Ft. Yukon, they were so happy to see each other, just like we do now for the Fiddling Festival," says 83 year old Solomon.

Poldine Carlo stood proud and powerful as she sang the popular "Eagle Island Blues" in Athabascan to the sounds of Esmailka's fiddle. Elderly men and women stood up and soon the dance floor was filled with couples waltzing to the story of a lover who had married another. A song that takes everyone back to the waves and currents of the Yukon River around Eagle Island, and to the days of youth and memories that life brings.

The future of this event seems

to be in the hands of the fiddlers and back up musicians who seem to have reached the desired status in their communities. As Carlo was opening up the last night of the three day event, all the players were in the tune-up room trying out new licks and tuning up for the next round of players. As they moved in and out of the small room off the hallway across from the bathrooms, people were taking pictures and asking for autographs from the out of towners and local well knowns Trimble Gilbert of

Arctic Village, Bill Stevens, one of the original organizers from Ft. Yukon and Tony Sam of Huslia.

One popular newcomer was Lawrence Houle, an Objibway Indian from Manitoba. The reknown fiddler from Canda met up with Stevens at the American Folklife Festival at the

Smithsonian earlier this year. Houle, who was invited to the Fairbanks event by Stevens, said "This is absolutely great. Let's keep young people busy and happy."

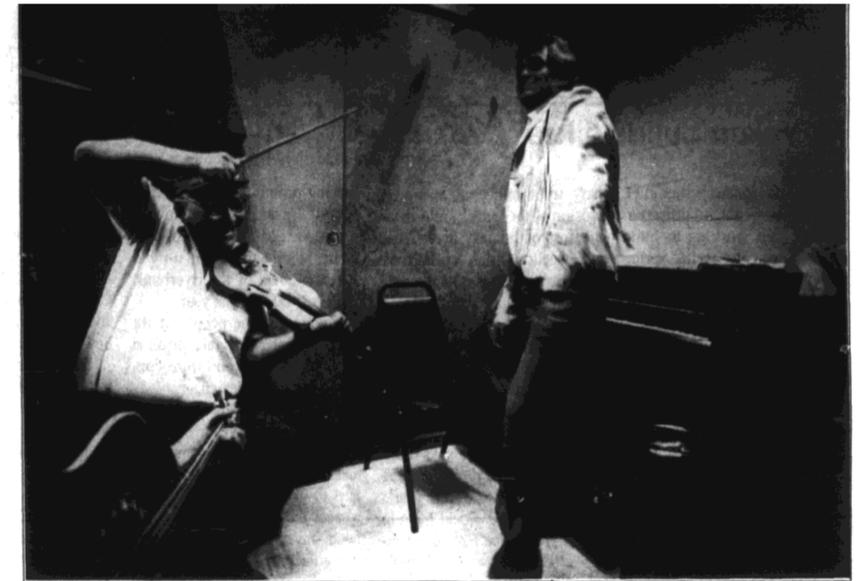
"The future looks very good for the festival even though IANA
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Frank Cockney



Poldine Carlo got 'dem "Eagle Island Blues."



Frank Cockney plays "Red River Jig" and Lawrence Houle dances.



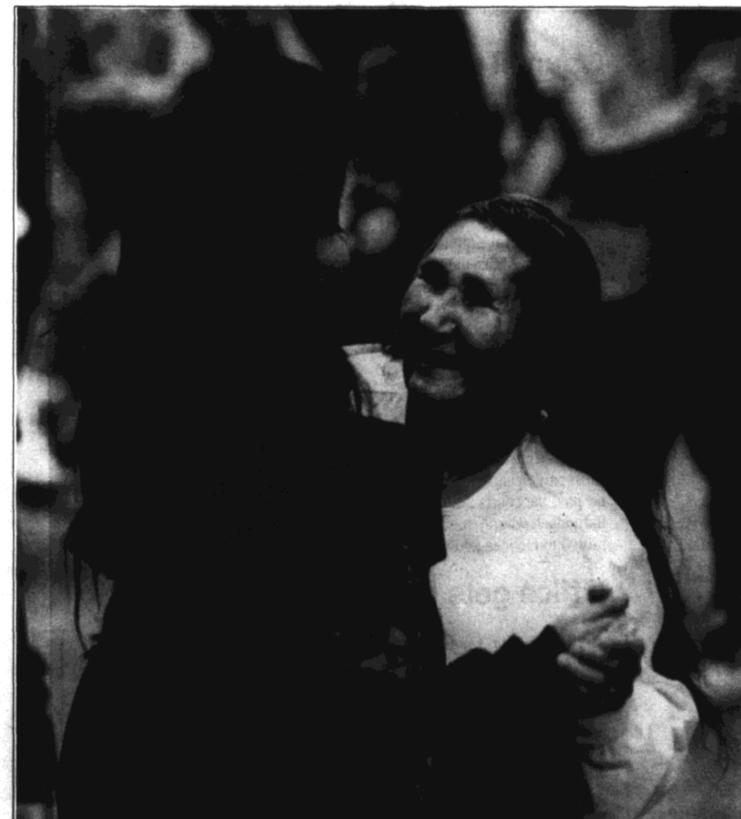
"Paddy" Nolner of Galena shows fiddlin' beats Karoke any day.

Athabaskan Old Time Fiddlers Festival

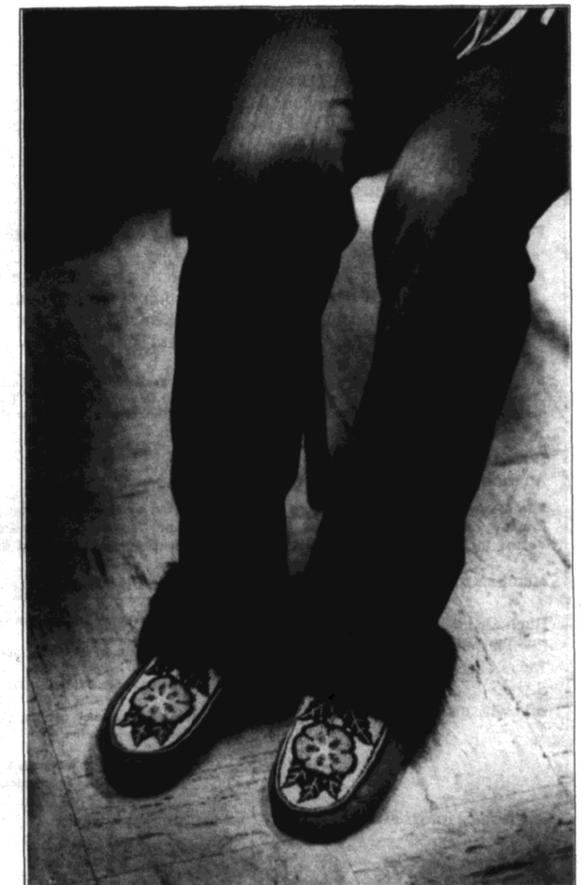
*Dancing
and
jigging
with
no
strings
attached*



Vincent Yaska on stage.



Josephine Riley, Minto, teaches a Denali Elementary School student how to waltz.



Fiddlers new beaded slippers tapping out a tune.

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will no longer be the main sponsor for the festival," according to festival coordinator Dixie Alexander. The board of trustees for the Institute agreed that the tradition of old time fiddling in Athabaskan communities is not endangered and the festival should be returned to the people

who run the tradition — Athabaskan organizations and musicians.

The festival was recorded for a cassette tape and be available for purchase after the first of the year. This and a fiddlers association, with dues by the musicians and mini-festivals, will help to

raise money for next year's get together she adds.

After the last one was played at 2:20 a.m. Sunday, people filed out of the hall onto Second Ave. and into their cars and trucks with the memory of favorite tunes in their heads waving and yelling "see you next year, eh."

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