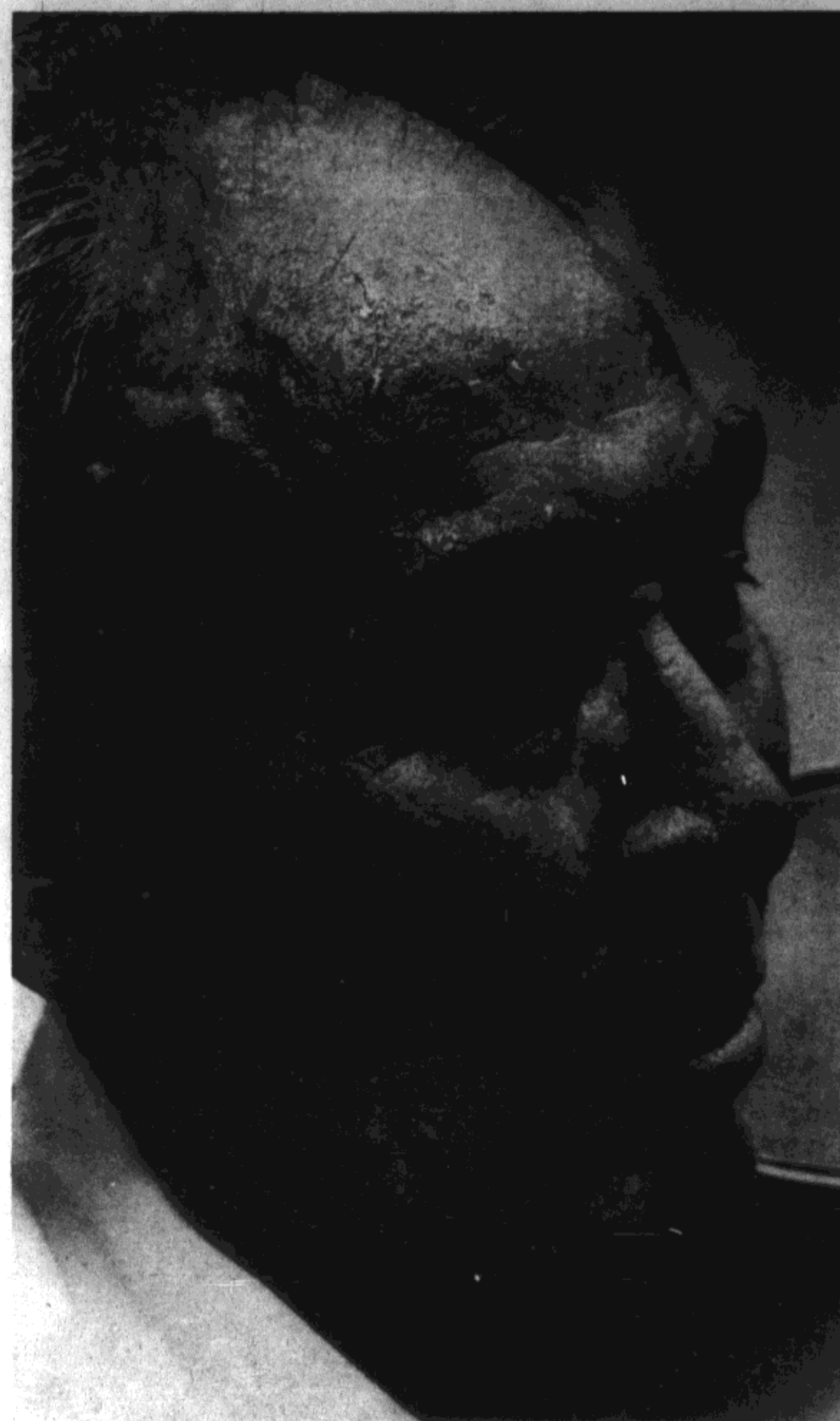


# Athabascan fiddling leads to some good, old-time fun



Drops of sweat gather on the face of Charlie Peter Charlie (above) as his moccasined feet (below) furiously tap out the timing to a fast fiddle piece he is playing. Charlie is from Old Crow, in the Yukon Territory, where he says there are many fiddlers. Charlie hopes for more interaction between Alaskan and Yukon Athabascan musicians. He is also working to keep the tradition alive in his homeland. The tennis-shoed feet belong to his son, Douglas Charlie, who backed him up with guitar. Charlie is also teaching Douglas to fiddle, and says the lad is doing quite well with it.



Amy Kalloch-Johnson - Tanana



Jerry Evans - Fairbanks.



Berchman Silas - Minto.



Billy Demoski - Galena

PHOTOS BY BILL HESS



Deep lines etch the fingertips of Huslia fiddler Tony Sam as he plays for a moment on open strings during his village's turn to perform. The fiddlers from the interior all play by ear. Their music is rooted in the tradition created when they blended their own music with the jigs and reels brought into their country

by Scottish and Orcadian trappers and French-Canadian voyageurs. "I had an uncle who tried to teach me how to play," recalls Rampart's fiddler Harold Woods. "I learned three notes and said the hell with this. After that, I just started playing. Listening, and playing what I heard." Still, says Woods, it takes considerable practice for a fiddler to be any good.



The fiddling festival was a time for fun. When Edward Pitka and Viska Yaska of Galena made a slight mistake, they didn't get angry - they laughed!



The dancers were having as much fun as the fiddlers.

"That old boy, he sure can handle it!" Sebastian McGinty offered this praise as he watched 68-year-old Richard Derendoff of Huslia put a hauntingly beautiful tune out of his fiddle. "He made that song about 1938, for his sister who died. Now he's been in the hospital, nearly blind, hardly able to move, but listen to him play!"

Of all the fiddlers performing

at the Athabascan Old Time Fiddling Festival, perhaps none made a greater accomplishment than did Derendoff. A recent stroke, his second, had left him numb on one side and seemingly unable to do much of anything.

To hear, Derendoff needed a strong hearing aid. He had gone blind. Fortunately, a recent operation restored some sight to one eye. His daughter,

Glenda Moore, noted that he was suffering many other ailments as well.

In fact, it was not the festival which brought Derendoff into Fairbanks, but rather a trip to see the doctors.

"They invited me to play, but I told them no," Derendoff, who took up the fiddle when he was 15, recalled. "I had tried, but my hands were too slow and stiff. I couldn't get them to do what I wanted them to do. I was numb on one side."

When the fiddling began, Derendoff had to try. Soon, no listener could tell he was suffering such handicaps. His hands were not slow, and they definitely did what he wanted them to. Those who praised him as being among the very best fiddlers there were not just being nice, they were being honest.

"While I was playing, it didn't bother me. I was pretty proud, because I didn't think I could ever play again," Derendoff said. Not only did he play, but he put his cane aside two different times to get out and dance with daughter Moore, who is in a wheelchair herself, while others fiddled.

"That was really nice," he said afterward. "I can't even dance, but I danced!"

Derendoff ended his performance with "Happy Days Are Here Again."

Richard Derendoff fiddles (above) and dances (below) with his daughter, Glenda Moore. When he came to Fairbanks for a hospital visit from Huslia, Derendoff was suffering so many handicaps he did not believe he would ever fiddle or dance again.

