

**MOCCASIN TELEGRAPH – SPECIAL EDITION – THE NORTHERNAIRS –
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Each year for the past 52 years Bill and Rusty Reid have been spreading joy through their love of music. I expect most will recall dances where the Northernairs played and the dancing didn't stop until the music stopped.

Rusty has been kind enough to gather up the following material to share with us.

Thank you, Rusty and thank you Bill for finding your lovely lady and bringing her north.

Thank you to Darrell Hookey writer and Sam Holloway of the Yukoner Magazine for sharing the following story on the Northernairs.

This edition will be followed later by another special edition to celebrate the 50 years of the Northernairs.

The Northernairs

By Darrell Hookey and published in the Yukoner Magazine.

Bill and Rusty Reid just don't understand that they are Yukon treasures.

Yes, they agree, they have many friends (more than they can count); and sure, they have won awards (filling an entire room in their Porter Creek home); and they have been playing music in the north for a long time (fifty years).

But not knowing all this and just listening to Bill talk, you would think they were just a well-dressed bar band.

The truth is that Bill Reid's Northernairs have spread the genuine joy of music to many far-flung northern communities, relieving countless audiences of their isolation.

The image of a lively Rusty, elbows up and hands poised to bring bow and string together on her fiddle, and of Bill commanding the keyboard of a piano with a warm smile on a tough man's face, is an icon of a glorious Yukon party.



This part-time job of theirs is a noble profession, contributing a valuable and welcome element to the northern experience.

Bill does allow himself to feel pride for the fact his band has never missed a date in 50 years. Whether they needed to be in Dawson City one night and then Atlin the next, or in Ross River at -55 degrees Celsius, they can put any modern band to shame.

And Bill is proud they can play 95 percent of requests brought to them. Tears form in eyes of those who are reminded of precious times in their lives, a nostalgia that blends nicely with the rollicking good times on the dance floor.

His pride is borne of a firefighter's work ethic (which he comes by honestly, having served Whitehorse for 32 years).

Besides the pride of a job well done, he is most grateful for the chance to play music with his wife. "Just wonderful," he says today. "I don't like playing without her and seldom do. The experience goes from 0 percent to 100 percent when she is there."

They had met on a Vancouver street in 1949 when Bill was visiting his sister. He had taken a job there and was out driving with a co-worker, who was Rusty's old boyfriend. They went to a dance that weekend where he proved to Rusty he was a good dancer. "That was important," Rusty says today, nodding her agreement with this fact of life. Three weeks later, Bill was in Rusty's living room waiting on her for a date. He sat at the family piano and started playing. "Have to look this one over," Rusty whispered to her mother.

Bill saw them enter and then pointed to a fiddle hanging on the wall: "Who plays the fiddle?"

They had each just found out the other had come from a musical family.

Born in Wallace, Nova Scotia, in 1930, Bill saw music as an integral part of community life. Other than church, the only time the town got together was to dance to the music of George Reid's Orchestra two or three times a month.

His father played fiddle and his mother, Retha, played piano.

Of 12 children in the family, nine of them played an instrument. Bill's chance to join the band came when he was 14. He was paid three dollars -- a princely amount for a teenager as the country edged from the depression to the war years.

Years later he would take Rusty to the "huge" hall he first played in. He was shocked to find it was actually the size of their living room today.

Rusty's father, Harold Parker, came from an Irish musical family. Their own home would be taken over by friends and family as they gathered around Harold's piano and

sang songs. Rusty remembers her mother, Mabel, looking out the window at new arrivals, as she would take out another potato to feed her guests. They came and they went until Sunday evening.

Rusty was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, in 1929, where her father worked as a railroader. The family later moved to Vancouver where he took a job as a bill collector for the Vancouver Province newspaper.

Her introduction to the fiddle began at age 11, when she was caught sneaking a try with her grandfather's that had been inherited by the family. Her parent's reaction was to arrange lessons from a family friend who knew a few tunes. They exchanged Sunday dinner for the lessons for a year and a half until he suggested she continue with "real" lessons.

She joined the 35-piece Vancouver Junior Symphony playing the violin (which is the same as the fiddle, just played differently). On the side, she played with an all-girl ensemble at garden parties and such.

Meeting Bill and finding out he was musically inclined was almost perfect ... but then she had to admit she had never heard of Don Messer.

Can a piano player, rooted in Old Time Music from down east, find happiness with a classically trained violinist? Obviously so, because he proposed 10 months later.

Bill then started a two-week vacation visiting his sister in Whitehorse. But he found a job the next day building houses. He called Rusty and said he would stay the summer and earn a lot of money to bring back. But she decided to come up for a two-week visit and she was offered a job at the Bank of Commerce.



1953 Heading for Atlin, BC, in our Pontiac

They both decided to stay, Rusty living above the bank where the Toronto Dominion Bank now stands, and Bill living on the air base in the civilian barracks.

As fate would have it, Rusty's roommate introduced her to Harry Johannes, who was looking for a band to play at the Elk's Hall. Asked if she would play the fiddle for them, she answered, "Yes, if Bill will play".

They were only supposed to play for one night, but they ended up playing every weekend for the next two years ... and another 48 years beyond that.

At first, they called themselves “Reid’s Rhythm Ramblers”. But then they changed it to “Bill Reid’s Northernairs”, named for the clear northern air of Whitehorse.

As was the style of the day, they dressed in matching outfits. It is a tradition they continue today because they want to look nice for the audience, even it is just jeans for a barn dance or tuxedos for the Commissioner’ Ball.



Jack RIGGET (lead guitar), Ron SHORTT (clarinet & sax), Rusty REID (clarinet & fiddle)
Ken EASTMAN (drums), Ward LAMOUREUX (bass), Dave REID (trumpet), Bill REID (piano)
CENTENNIAL BALL - REC CENTER 1973 (Airport) WHITEHORSE, YUKON

After a year of construction, Bill joined the Fire and Ambulance Service until his retirement in 1985. At first he worked 24 hours on and 24 hours off making it difficult to play at a function. Trading off with a co-worker made it possible most of the time, but he couldn’t leave in the middle of a fire.

In these cases he would be replaced on stage, instead. Yet he has only missed seven dances in 50 years. And after much negotiation he has never missed a New Year’s dance. Rusty worked at the Bank of Commerce for a year and then went to work at the White Pass office. She then spent time at home with her children, David and Shelley (now, Bidden). From there she worked in a doctor’s office and then the library until retirement in 1985.

As the only woman in the group, which grew to five members after four years, Rusty has tried to be “one of the boys”. That is, until, she had to straighten a tie or head off to her own change room.

The original foursome included Chuck Dickson on guitar and Chuck Choquette on drums. They lasted two years and eighteen months, respectively. In the years that

followed, Bill and Rusty were joined by 38 other performers. Many would leave because they had to leave the Yukon. Others left because they got married.

Rusty explains that new wives know musicians are tempting targets for rooms full of girls who are drinking and partying.

Regardless of what happens on the dance floor, Bill says his band has never gotten into booze and drugs. It has always been important to keep families together and the band together.



NORTHERNAIRS DIXIELAND BAND 1969

Stan YUCKIN (trombone) Jack EARLE (trumpet) Dave BURROWS (drums)

Guest Singer, Rusty REID (fiddle, clarinet, vocals) Bill REID (piano)

TAKHINI RECREATION HALL - WHITEHORSE, YUKON

Rusty felt safe enough to bring their children to dances they performed at, preferring that to leaving them with babysitters. They would bring coats or sleeping bags for them to snuggle into. They would only awaken when the music stopped.

Both children learned a little piano at first, but David went on to become a “fantastic” piano player, and then the trumpet, says Rusty. He started his own band, “The Notables” when he was 18, after filling in from time to time with the Northernairs for three years. Although they competed for the same jobs, Bill says they gladly watched him take the teenage crowds off their hands.

Once, in 1978, Bill asked his son if he could play trumpet for a performance in Elsa. David had been a pilot with Air Canada for only a year at that time and would be in Montreal that day. It didn’t look good.

But he dead headed to Edmonton starting at 8 a.m., caught a connecting flight to Whitehorse just 20 minutes later and took the family plane to Mayo. After borrowing a truck, he surprised them on stage just 15 minutes before the performance was to start. Now, as a pilot with some seniority, he can often make it back to join the Northernairs for special occasions.

Such as the 50th Anniversary performance for New Year's Eve. They rented the largest room in Whitehorse and sold tickets for half of the going rate. Invitations went out to their favourite audience members and they were left with a waiting list of 40 hoping for a ticket.

They even hired two other bands to allow them a chance to meet and greet their friends, about a dozen of whom were former band members that they brought up on stage for a jam session.

A 50th Anniversary may sound like the end of an era for anything. But not for Bill Reid's Northernairs. They still perform three or four times a month. They even have bookings a year from now.

Today they prefer playing to audiences aged 35 to 70. These crowds tend to love to dance and don't like loud music in a smoky room. They also call on the band to play everything from polkas to rock; from Latin music to country; and from waltzes to Motown.

Bill continues to pick just the right songs to fill the dance floor. Once, in Carcross, they played Achey, Breaky Heart and watched with great concern as the rafters swayed with the stomping crowd. They were asked to play it twice more.

Then there was the time they played at the final dance at the Army Sergeants Mess. They finished up at 2 a.m., but were asked to play another hour. At 3 a.m. they said, "Going good, play another hour." At 3 a.m.: "Going good, play another hour." By 5 a.m. they fed them breakfast and had them play again until 7 a.m. It was the longest dance they ever played at and the room stayed full. Nobody wanted to leave.

Like a lot of new Yukoners, Bill and Rusty left the territory once. It was after their first year when they packed up and moved to Nova Scotia. But they returned to their "home" 11 weeks later.

They were hooked on the clean water, the people, the small-town feel and the mountains. They can't leave on vacation for too long because they start to get home sick. "Just look out the window," says Bill, pointing at Grey Mountain filling the view.

They both love the Yukon. And they prove it just about everyday these past 50 years with their contributions to worthy causes. They have played at Macaulay Lodge most every Wednesday night for 22 years. They have played for the Golden Age Society, Yukon Order of Pioneers, Elder Active, every Remembrance Day afternoon at the Royal Canadian Legion for the past 40 years, at the Sourdough Rendezvous since it started, the United Way and the latest City of Whitehorse Anniversary.

Bill has been president of the ski club for 14 years, director of the Civil Air Search and Rescue Association (Rusty is treasurer), president of the Yukon Flying club and has held every job with Softball Yukon over 30 years.

Rusty has pushed a tuck cart at the hospital, been a charter member of the Yukon Order of Pioneers Ladies Auxiliary since it began 29 years ago, president of the Whitehorse Photography Club for 20 years and been involved with the Yukon Old-Time Fiddlers, Softball Yukon and the Whitehorse Ladies Basketball.

When not performing or volunteering, they enjoy the retirement they began at age 55. They have their toys -- an airplane, boat, cottage on a lake, snowmobiles -- and a glow of health owing to an honest life of hard work and play ... lots of play.