

## FINNS IN AUSTRALIA: FAMILY MEMORIES AND EVERYDAY HERITAGE ON FACEBOOK

In 2018, a Facebook group was founded for “those Finns who left loved ones and the life they knew behind and immigrated to Australia - some to return home and the others to stay”. I had awaited such a group since 2012, when I first became interested in how Finnish descendants explore and represent their history in Australia. The group’s focus is less on nostalgia and more on highlighting the largely invisible role of Finnish immigrants in Australian history. In this article, I examine the group’s hybrid memory practices as everyday, vernacular history-making and discuss methodological and ethical challenges of studying these types of Facebook groups.

Keywords: everyday heritage, Facebook, family memories, Finns in Australia, online memories

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Today, the internet and social media are ubiquitous, a vital feature of everyday life, and crucial for connecting with and maintaining social networks among family members and friends, especially among transnational families and diasporic communities (see e.g. Dekker & Engbersen 2013; Andersson 2019; Ponzanesi 2020). However, social media sites are not all the same. Some are well suited for following and promoting certain topics, whereas others are better for keeping contact with family and friends. Though Instagram has gained popularity for sharing family photos (Barnwell, Neves, and Ravn 2023), it does not offer the same advantages for sharing family memories and stories as Facebook.

For nearly a decade, I have studied Facebook groups, which focus on the history of Finnish migration in North America and Australia (see e.g. Heimo 2017; Heimo 2021; Heimo under review).<sup>1</sup> I am especially interested in Facebook groups, which have been created independently from the “bottom up” by and for a specific community like the Facebook group *The History of Finns in Australia* (*Suomalaisten historia Australiassa*), which I focus on in this article.

Compared to Instagram and other popular social media platforms, Facebook is used more for the everyday exchange of stories and allows for the posting of various kinds of materials, from photos and videos to links, which makes it particularly popular within memory communities and groups. Often these groups “involve a retrospective gaze – a focus, an interest, and an emotional attachment to the past – that acts as the glue that ties these groups together” as Robin Ekelund has characterized these types of Facebook groups (Ekelund 2024, 2). However, in addition to sharing nostalgic content, in many groups, the focus is specifically on raising interest in and sharing knowledge of a certain aspect as is the case in the groups I have studied. At the same time the members are actively involved in the creating of *everyday heritage* (Ireland et al. 2025) –an emic view of what they themselves perceive as their heritage.

### Facebook connecting Finns in Australia

Since the 1850s, more than 24,000 Finns have moved to Australia, nearly half of whom have at some point returned to Finland. The dying out of distinctly Finnish communities in Australia has been predicted for decades. Many scholars have believed that the loss of language will be the final

<sup>1</sup> My interest in Finnish migration stems partially from my own background. I have lived in Australia as a child and have family and friends in Australia.

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straw. However, time has proved such predictions to be premature. First websites, and later on social media, have provided new means for connecting Finns living in different parts of Australia. One of the oldest groups, and still one of the most popular Facebook groups with over 11,000 members, *Australian Suomalaiset* ['Finns in Australia'], was created in 2012. In this group, Finns planning to visit or move to Australia inquire about visas, jobs and social security, and search for contacts in different parts of the country. In 2017, a new group called *Australiassa pysyvästi asuvat suomalaiset* ['Finns living permanently in Australia'] was founded for Finns living in Australia to network, share information about various events and matters relevant to the Finnish community. At this time, many local Facebook groups were being founded around Australia for similar purposes. Many individuals belong to several of these groups.

I am aware that not all people of Finnish ancestry in Australia identify themselves as Finnish, see themselves as belonging to the Finnish community or have an interest in their roots (see Cola & Brusa, 2014, 110–111). I also acknowledge the fact that people may feel that their ancestry is a mixture and they do belong to just one specific ethnic community. Nonetheless, those who do join these groups have at least some interest in their Finnish roots and feel a need to maintain what they regard as their heritage and to be in connection with others with Finnish ancestry.

The Facebook group *The history of Finns in Australia (Suomalaisten historia Australiassa)* was created in 2018. I had been waiting for such a group to be created since 2012, when I first became interested as a researcher in how people of Finnish ancestry were exploring and representing their history in Australia. The group was originally created as a public group, but like many other Facebook groups since then, it became a private group in 2019, but remained still findable. The group keeps on gradually growing and has to date nearly 1,700 members. The original name, *Finns in Australia (Suomalaiset Australiassa)*, was changed to its current name in September 2019 to highlight the group's key purpose.

This group is dedicated to those Finns who left loved ones and the life they knew behind and immigrated to Australia - some to return home and the others to stay. There are other history groups to learn about Australia and Finland but this group is specific to learning about the Finnish immigration story in honour of those Finns who contributed to our Australian history, our

economy and our multicultural culture. They not only built roads, they cleared the land, they cut cane, they grew and harvested tobacco, they mined, they represented us in sport and some even served our country. All this and more in the stinking hot and humid conditions of the tropics. Amazing. Totally amazing when you realise where they came from. Their stories have to be told and recorded. (*The History of Finns in Australia*, 2019.)

The description of the group encompasses many aspects of the typical settler-migrant narrative: the claiming of land and a climate that differed dramatically from the settler-migrants' home country (see e.g. Barnwell 2021; Attebery 2022; Saramo 2022). This is not surprising considering the background of the administrator. The great-grandfather of the administrator was a Finn, which she had only discovered near the time when she chose to create the group and which in fact inspired her to create the group.

When I started this group, I did so because I felt there was so very little known about Finns in Australia - Far North Queensland in particular. We touched on different ethnic groups when I was studying history at University but not the Finns. When I discovered I had Finnish ancestry, I became intrigued and did some local research. What I found, astounded me - particularly after I discovered we had a very real Finnish presence in North Queensland. We had the tobacco growers on the Atherton Tablelands, the road builders in Cairns, the cane cutters in the Ingham area and the miners in Mt Isa. We also had the utopian dreamers - the followers of Matti Kurikka. I wanted a place to tell their stories - so this group was born. (*The History of Finns in Australia*, 2023.)

Similar to the administrator many of the group members are either second or third generation Finns, whose parents or grandparents moved to Australia during the two major waves of migration from Finland. In the 1920s, hundreds of Finns especially from Ostrobothnia moved to Northern Queensland. In the 1950s and 1960s many head to the mining city of Mount Isa or wherever they could find work like my own parents did in the late 1950s (Koivukangas 1974; Koivukangas 1986; Heimo 2023.)

The administrator also calls out for the recognition of the role of Finnish immigrants in Australia.

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lian history. Due to the size of the Finnish community<sup>2</sup> the Finns are virtually invisible in Australia and they and their role in Australian history and society goes largely unrecognised.

I want their stories told - loud and bold. I don't want them lost in what Captain Cook did, and the First Fleet or any other part of Australian history - unless they were there. I'm proud of what these immigrants have done and I want to ensure that we who follow them, know what they did as well. (*The History of Finns in Australia*, March 2023.)

### Facebook groups as a form of everyday and vernacular history making

I mostly follow the Facebook group quite passively, except for the occasional "like". However, though the posts interest me on a personal level, as a researcher analysing the group's shared memories and narratives, I did not want to interfere with the activities of the group. Sometimes, this even means refraining from sharing information that most likely would interest the members. For all my prior studies on Facebook groups, I informed the administrators of my personal interest and background as well as of my role as a researcher when joining the group. For this study, I contacted the administrator and posted an announcement in the group about my interest in the group and its activities in October 2024. This post almost immediately received 64 reactions (55 likes, 7 hearts and 1 care) and seven comments. The commentators were happy and supportive about my plans to study the group and several shared their story of migration to Australia in their comment. I have considered carefully what and how I may use material posted in the Facebook group since I am aware that my choice of topic might not be what the members had anticipated.

I have approached the Facebook group as an active and evolving collection of posts. Instead of applying digitised methods, like online ethnography, I use hybrid methodologies to grasp the complexity and messiness related to the creating of everyday heritage in the Facebook group (Ekelund 2024, 5; see also Merrill 2025.) First, I looked

<sup>2</sup> Australia has a population of 27.4 million, of which 8 million (30%) were born overseas. The latest 2021 census recorded 7 831 Finnish-born people in Australia, with more than 50% of them being over 65 years of age (Australian Bureau of Statistics, People in Australia who were Born in Finland). The number of Finnish-born persons was highest in 1971, when 10 359 Finns were residing in Australia (Watson 1997).



at the collection as a whole to obtain a general view of the group and their activities. Then, I read through the posts to gain an overall understanding of the kinds of topics the group is interested in and chose my cases using both search words and scrolling through the photos. In addition to paying attention to the topics discussed with in the posts, I also analysed the posts against the grain to discover what topics were missing. In addition to textual analysis, I also applied visual discourse analysis (Rose 2012) and analysed photos, screenshots and other images published in the group. In many cases, images have more to say than the text. The images posted in the group were clearly chosen for their contents and not their aesthetic qualities. Images attract attention, but especially old photos are commonly used to commemorate and to comment on what has changed (Gregory 2024). All the themes can be regarded as typical of the group and can also be found in published local and family histories of migrant and settler communities elsewhere (see e.g. Barnwell 2021; Attebery 2022; Samamo 2022).

Compared to other similar, mostly North American, Facebook groups that I have studied (e.g. Heimo 2017; Heimo 2021), this group is quite small and not very active, but it continues to grow little by little. In contrast to the other Facebook groups for Finns in Australia, the main language of this group is English. The posts are usually brief, mundane and about topics that the members can easily relate to. They are non-provocative and rarely result in heated discussions or debates. The posts include mostly references to books, studies or pieces of news about Finns in Australia. Family photos or old newspaper clippings are often shared when someone has come across them at home. Such posts attract more attention and are often commented on with references to the commentators' own family history.

A typical example of popular posts are two separate posts published in the group in July 2025. Both of the posts celebrated nearly six decades of living in Australia by members, who had moved as young children to Australia with their families. One of the posts included a photo of the group member's visit to Finland that summer, the other a childhood photo of the member and her brother taken before they moved to Australia. Both posts were greeted with great enthusiasm by the group members and they received a great many likes and hearts each as well as comments. Especially the post on visiting Finland prompted plenty of reactions (159 likes, 31 comments). Many of these comments included expressions of mutual feelings of what it feels like to visit Finland and when



the commentators themselves had last been there. Both posts also received comments, which told briefly of the commentators own families' migration to Australia. The sharing of family histories is a common characteristic for these types of Facebook groups.

The more active group members do not rely only on their own personal collections, but also clearly search for suitable information from various sources, for instance archives, newspapers and websites, to share in the group. They also give guidance to other group members on where and how to search for information. The reactions and comments reveal the urgent need felt by many members to know more about the history of Finns in Australia. Many of the group members do not know much about this history, and so time and again, they respond to the posts with expressions of gratitude.

## Conclusions

In the Facebook group *The History of Finns in Australia*, everyday heritage is produced by sharing family stories, which consist of text, photos, newspaper clippings, books and images of objects connected to family and community history. People respond to posts that they can relate to by exchanging similar kinds of memories and experiences. Engagement in Facebook groups like the *The History of Finns in Australia* is an easy way to share family memories within a group one feels connected to even when they do not know each other or have to commit to too seriously. The stories tell us who we are and where we belong,

and they are therefore considered trustworthy sources whose reliability is rarely questioned. The Facebook group offers people a place to reminiscence, to learn about their mutual history and to celebrate and showcase their heritage in a pleasant and supportive atmosphere without having to deal with the hardships and less successful sides of immigration. Furthermore, in a situation where the history of the Finnish community in Australia is not well known, the Facebook group *The History of Finns in Australia* offers a much desired place to showcase the history of Finnish migration to Australia and the role Finnish immigrants have had in the building of Australia.

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