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# The “Sweat-Bath-Men” and “Children of Nature”

## A Historian’s Insight into the Social Interaction between Finns and Native Americans

**Keywords:** Finnish American, Native American, Ojibwa, Social Interaction, Attitudes, North America.

*This article focuses on the social interaction between ethnic Finns and Native Americans in North America c. 1850–1950 and is based on my Master’s thesis research in which I covered the nature of the interaction phenomenon in question as well as the social statuses of both groups and the attitudes expressed by them concerning the other. The analysis is based on biographical source material supported by documents, interviews and academic literature emphasizing both the Finns and the Native Americans who were in contact with each other during the aforementioned era.*

*Most of the interaction between Finns and Native Americans took place in the wilderness, workplaces and schools. The interaction was most commonly motivated by either cooperation or bargaining. The situations of encounter were generally perceived as either positive or neutral experiences by both groups. The Finns and the Native Americans shared knowledge with each other and taught skills and techniques to one another. The Finns held some negative attitudes and prejudices towards the Native Americans during the early ages of the era under examination but along the 20th century started to represent them with either positive or neutral discourses. The Native Americans represented Finns with generally*

*positive or neutral discourses throughout the time frame of the research.*

### Finnish names on Ojibwa graves

During the summer of 2016 I had a chance to visit the Protestant cemetery of the Keweenaw Bay Indian Community in L’Anse reservation, located in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula. As a Finn, it was very interesting to see gravesites vastly different from the ones I’m used to seeing at home. Small houses or cottages in front of the gravestones build for the spirits of the deceased, in which people had placed presents such as food, drink or tobacco to honor their loved ones who had passed away, accompanied with plastic flowers, ribbons and even small plastic carnival windmills on some sites. Despite all the oddity my eyes faced, they were caught on one familiar yet peculiar detail: at the surname section, several stones had Haataja, Holappa, Kemppainen or something similar carved on them – Finnish names on Ojibwa Indian graves!

My observation itself can be disregarded merely as a semi-interesting minor coincidence and anomaly, but it reflects a much larger phenomenon which is nowadays largely forgotten in North America, even at the

heartlands of its former existence: the interaction and side-by-side living which took place between the Finnish immigrants and several Native American tribes in United States and Canada during the "Great Migration Years" of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I became interested on the subject due to a family story of a relative of mine who went to the U.S. in search of a better life and ended up being executed after killing a Native American man due to a game of cards, in which my relative was sure the Indian man had cheated him. It remains a mystery whether the story is true or not, but I was able to get myself a 6-month-long internship at the Finnish American Heritage Center in Hancock, Michigan, working at their Finnish American Historical Archive as an archival intern. During my internship, I had the possibility to obtain various archival data discussing the interaction between the Finns and various Native American tribes, such as the Ojibwa and the Cree.

On top of the work done going through the archives, I also had the honor and the privilege to visit the L'Anse Indian reservation near Hancock, which is close by to locations that many Finnish immigrants settled during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and interview several elders of the local Ojibwa tribe and collect the memories they had about the interaction between the Finns and the Natives. As a result, I could write my Master's thesis of general history titled *"Hikikylpymiehet" ja "luonnonlapset": Suomalaisten ja intiaanien kanssakäyminen, sosiaalinen asema ja näkemykset toisistaan Pohjois-Amerikassa n. 1850–1950*, in which I discuss the interaction phenomenon based on documentary and oral historical material. In this article, I shall address some of my major findings and arguments deriving from my research work.

## Campfires and schoolyards

Where did the Finns and the Natives encounter and interact with each other? When trying to answer the question, certain trends can be found. One of the most common environments of contact were various places of work and livelihood. Especially lumber camps were typical workplaces for both the Finns and the Native Americans in states such as Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as in the province of Ontario in Canada's side. A great deal of Finnish immigrants occupied themselves as lumberjacks for some part of the year, as many of them were acquainted with logging already from Finland where it was one of the main seasonal chores at rural areas, and the Native American men of the Great Woods were as well used to swinging the axe.

An Ojibwa Indian Paul Peter Buffalo worked at lumber camps as a youngster with several Finns, and in his biography, he describes the cooperation of Finns and Natives as successful and efficient, saying that "The Finlanders and the Indians work together very well. They get along very good. They work together like a team of horses."

For the younger generations, schools played a key role as areas of interaction, where children deriving from different ethnicities confronted each other. For example, in Michigan's Baraga and L'Anse the local Finnish and Ojibwa kids attended the same classes, and the schools also provided another arena for inter-ethnic cooperation, the sports teams. Basketball and American football turned out to be a significant interaction-form especially for the boys of both ethnic groups.

Workplaces, schools and other formal milieus of contact were not the only places for Finns and Natives to encounter. Hunting and trapping as a livelihood and part-time business were common activities among both ethnic groups, and in my thesis's source material the wilderness appears as one of the most usual environments where Finns and Natives interacted, especially those individuals who did not know each other already from other activities. In comparison to most of the immigrant people, Finns had a tendency to move to more rural areas as farmers and part time hunters, and a great part of the Indian tribes such as the Ojibwa or the Cree were living in the woods or near them where they were hunting and fishing like the Finns, especially until the early 1930s when the Great Recession gave a kick-start for the corrosion of traditional Native ways of life, like the semi-nomadism of the Ojibwa and the Cree. It is wise to keep in mind, that the men of both groups had more chances to interact than the women due to their working and hunting which typically took place away from home and towns, which were more common spheres of influence for both the Finnish and the Native American women of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Helping and bargaining: mutual benefits

What were the common factors which motivated Finns and Native Americans to engage themselves into inter-ethnic interaction? To this question, an unusually simple and short answer can be given: mutual interests and benefits. In hunting, for example, chasing and ambushing big game tended to be much easier with an extra pair of hands, and it was not uncommon for the Finns and the Natives to join their forces to ease the hunt. E. Lahtin-

en, a Finnish hunter and trapper who roamed the vast wilderness areas of Northern Ontario during the 1930s, got helped by the local Ojibwa or Cree hunters several times during his hunting and trapping expeditions. In his memoirs, Lahtinen tells about an occasion where he met an old Indian man in the woods, and in the middle of their conversation they spotted a moose nearby, and together managed to take the moose down, drag it near Lahtinen's camp and share the meat which provided nutrition for them both for several days. Later, Lahtinen assumes he is helped by the same man when a lynx gets caught in one of his traps, and when he arrives to the spot, he notices that someone has given the lynx a deadly strike and has lifted it on top of tree branches so that scavengers could not eat it and ruin the precious fur.

Bargaining can also be seen as one form of interacting where both groups were driven by mutual benefits. An Ojibwa Indian Rose Hill tells in a radio interview how his father used to travel from house to house around the Keweenaw Bay in Michigan selling fish which he had caught from Lake Superior. It was the depression time of the 1930s, and everyone was short on cash. Hill remembered Finnish families saying to his father, that they did not have any money, but a lot of potatoes: her father took the disappointment lightly by saying "it's ok, I need potatoes", and exchanged his fish for the potatoes the Finns had grown. This is only one example on how both ethnic groups helped each other survive during the hard times of the Great Depression. It is good to remember that most of the Finnish farmer families were practically living without any monetary income in North American countryside as late as the 1930s.

### Through the eyes of the other: attitudes and perceptions

What did the Finns and the Native Americans think of each other? This question is far more complex in nature when compared to the ones I've addressed earlier in this article. Though perceptions are always defined most by the personality and point of view of the individual making the evaluation, certain generalizations can be drawn when discussing how the Finns and the Natives saw each other.

During the early stages of Finn-Native interaction in North America Finns had a tendency of seeing the Native Americans as something bizarre and exotic. The main things separating the two groups in the perception of Finnish immigrants were way of life and time usage. Finns described the Natives as living nomadically without a permanent place of residence, and

what they seemed to find most peculiar was the fact that many Indian tribes they encountered did not farm or engage themselves in agriculture the same way as the Finns, of whom most were raised in agricultural communities and therefore took that way of life as the default style of living. At the same time, though, Finns tended to appreciate the skills of the Natives in wood work, food preserving and hunting. Many Finns also perceived the Native way of using time as short-sighted and inefficient. For example, trapper E. Lahtinen described the Natives way of life saying, that "the Indian eats and lays down as long as he can, and only moves when the circumstances force him to do so". Later on, though, the Finns' attitudes started to soften, and by the 1940s "we just didn't see any difference (in comparison to ourselves)", as a Finnish American Dorothy Mayo told me when I was interviewing her on the matter. Finns also had a tendency of admiring the calmness of the Natives, especially the Ojibwas, in front of hardship and difficulties – a characteristic valued commonly in Finnish culture.

In the eyes of the Native Americans the Finns were a minor yet unique people in comparison to the entirety of different ethnicities arriving as immigrants to North America. Finns stood out due to three main reasons: their non-expressive way of communicating, their handiness in moving in the woods and taking use of nature as a friend and not an enemy, and their obscure language. Ojibwa Indian Paul Peter Buffalo describes in his biography how the Ojibwas and the Norwegians used to joke about the Finns by calling them "frogs". The reason behind the nickname was phonetical and caused by the way the Finnish language sounded in their ears, as can be seen in this quote taken from his memories on the Finns:

A Norwegian says, muk-ah-kii. 'Frog'. Well, the Indian uses that too. You know, when they get together, the Finns sound just like a bunch of frogs. You couldn't understand them, 'la-dada-peli-labla wii-hIss wiwi awa wa'. Muk-ah-kii means frog. Indians and Norwegians call the Finns frogs because they don't listen to one another. They could all talk at the same time and still know what they're talking about because that language is so simple for them. They could talk, and listen to this other guy at the same time. The Finns sound like they could be a bullfrog: 'Wii-y-sla-boa'. Oh gosh! It's nice to listen to them. We don't make fun of them, but we imagine what they sound like . . . and that's frogs!

### Concluding thoughts

The most common arenas for Finnish – Native American contact were workplaces, schools

and the wilderness. Both ethnic groups found shared interests in hunting, cooperation and bargaining. They also found many things similar in each other such as the way of interacting with nature and using it as a source of livelihood, and they appreciated each other's way of communicating. Especially the Finns held prejudices towards the Natives, but by time those prejudices started to loosen up. In the eyes of the Natives, Finns continued to be a unique group of people until they assimilated verbally, and to a great extent also culturally, into the mainstream American society.

The interaction between the Finns and the Native Americans was a small-scaled and a minor phenomenon when put into the context of the overall interaction between Euro-

pean immigrants and Native American peoples, but on a regional level it was common and influential for the local communities in places such as Michigan's Upper Peninsula, North-Eastern Minnesota and certain parts of Ontario, all of which surround the Lake Superior on the border of United States and Canada, the main destination of Finnish migration to North America during the "Great Migration Years". The Ojibwa graves with Finnish names of which I mentioned at the beginning of this article are one of the last remaining proofs of the once so vivid interaction between the ethnic groups, despite some individuals with Finnish-Native heritage who are still trying to keep the memories of the unique intercultural contact alive in United States and Canada.

My analysis and arguments can be read in Finnish in a much larger and detailed extent from my Master's thesis found from the online thesis database of the University of Jyväskylä:  
<https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/53364>



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