

The Finns

Peter Tsicalas

Into the 20th century jumping ship was the favoured method of emigration for the Finns, with Sydney, where a Finnish Seaman's Missionary Society was established, becoming the most popular port of entry. The approved immigrants, the non-queue jumpers, mainly went to Queensland after they were offered free passage from London. In 1899 200 settled in QLD, 78 of whom founded a utopian colony. The Finns were heavily into communes and such inclinations made them naturals for Mullumbimby where, post WW1, they built the largest enclave of Finns in New South Wales outside Sydney and Newcastle. By the 1930s they were amongst the largest alien groups in the district. Those who formed this banana-growing commune came mainly from the Swedish-speaking communities of the north west coast, while NSW's next largest Finnish enclave at Gosford was predominantly Finnish speaking.

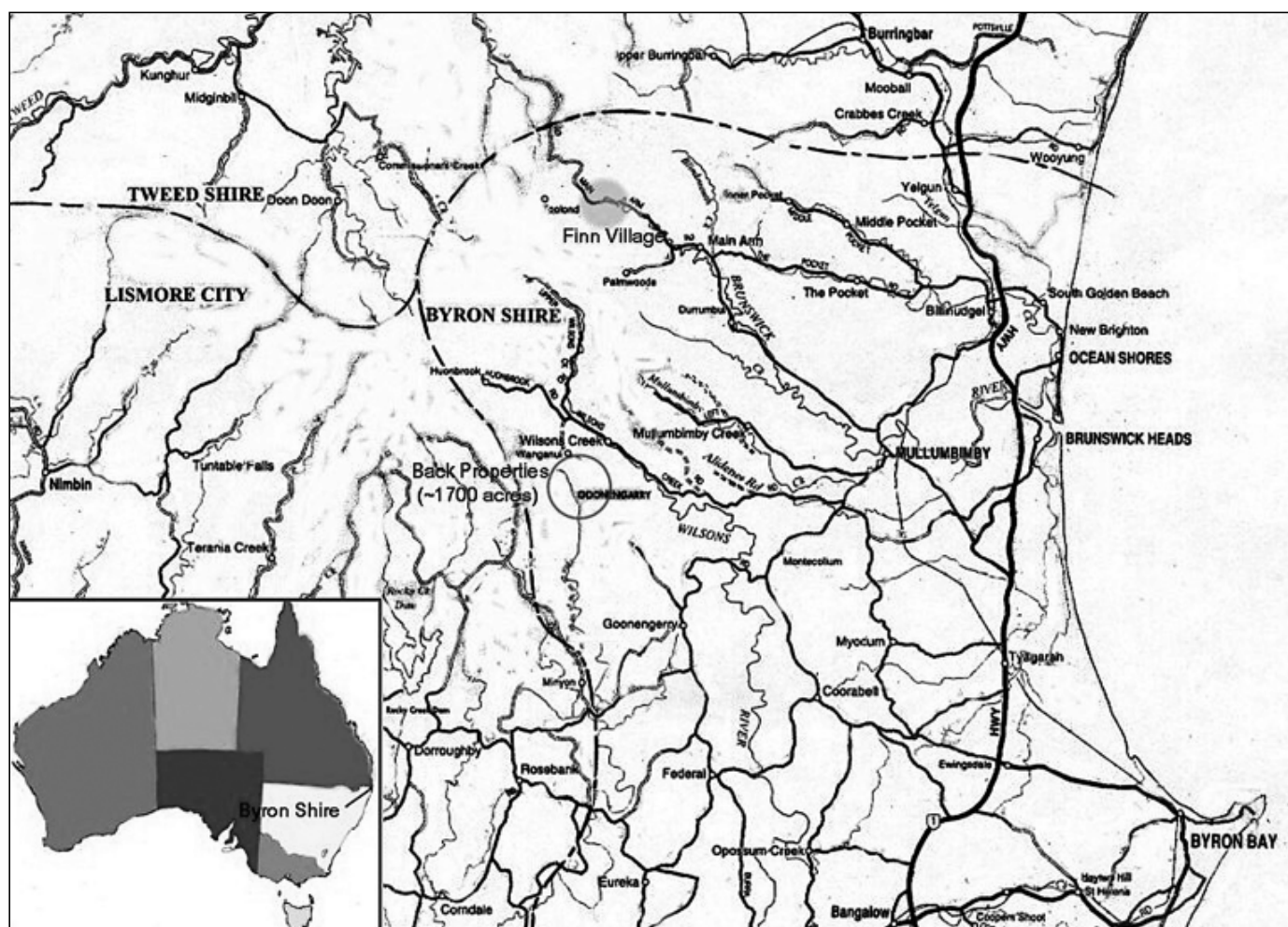
Up to 1920 all Finns were designated as Russians, but figures for 1921 show only 1358 Australian residents had taken the liberty to proclaim themselves as 'Finns', with 550, by far the largest group, in NSW. Shortly afterwards the USA introduced immigration restrictions, resulting in another 1000 'Finns' diverting to Australia, most finding employment in the sugar cane fields of Queensland. But by the late 1930s a lot had returned home such that numbers and distribution remained much the same as 1921 – the National Register of late 1939 sprung a mere 1109 'Finns' across the whole country, compiled just as the Russian-German non-aggression pact gave the Soviets a free pass into Finland. Unfortunately for their compatriots in Australia the Finns then sought help from Germany to prevent further Soviet invasion and expansion, resulting

in invitations to the subversives to attend Australian internment camps.

While the earliest Finn so far identified around the Northern Rivers was Andrew Williams, who landed in 1890, aged 30, it was Karl Johan (aka Jacky) Back who led the Finn invasion of Mullum in 1902. He was of Swedish descent, born in Munsala (Ostrobothnia) under the old family name Ohls in 1877, and migrated to Australia in 1899 to slip the conscription agents of the Russian Czar. Probably with stake money provided by his father, he acquired three blocks (640, 510 and 22 acres) at Goonengerry and shortly afterwards started construction of a sawmill on the smallest block, Devil's Lookout, adjacent to which his brother, William Andrew, and his father, Andrew William, acquired respective 442 and 65 acre blocks shortly afterwards. The mill was a massive undertaking, but it never got operational and the huge hardwood logs stood up on the skyline for about 40 years until a bushfire destroyed the place. (The blocks subsequently passed through a few private hands until acquired by the Banana Growers Federation in the 1940s, providing a major source of timber for banana packing cases over many years. In 1985 the blocks were absorbed into the Goonengerry State Forest and in 1999 became part of the Goonengerry National Park.)

His father, Anders (Andrew), and 16yr old brother, Vilhelm Anders (Billy, aka W. A.) Back, arrived at Bangalow station in early 1903 in the middle of a heat wave. The story goes that they walked through the Big Scrub all the way to Goonengerry, and Andrew, decked out in fur-lined clothes suitable for the arctic winter, was attacked by hundreds of leeches dropping from the canopy. Whether it was this experience, or snakes and other nasties, unheard of in Finland, that turned him off the promised land is unknown, but Andrew promptly returned home and left his sons to get on with the job on their own. He is believed to have been a man-of-means in Finland and to have made another trip at some stage.

The writer, Peter Tsicalas, was born and bred in Lismore in 1945, the son of Spiro, who was in turn born in Bangalow in 1920, the son of George, an immigrant from the Greek island of Kythera. This article is an extract from his book: "Greeks and other aliens around the Tweed & Brunswick".



A short time later K. J. and W. A. made their way along the bullockies' tracks to Wilson's Creek where Jacky became the pioneer sawmiller on site. After a swag of surrounding scrub had been felled and burnt and all the stumps removed he diversified into farming and market gardening. Billy meanwhile had branched out on his own and established a farm at Burringbar, having mortgaged his Goonengerry block to the NSW State Savings Bank. He won the hand of Miss Christina Hart in 1908 and subsequently was credited with driving the first motorcar over the tracks to Wilson's Creek to visit his in-laws. Upon settling in Mullum he became an elder and keen worker for the Presbyterian Church.

Jacky, 'a backwards philosopher' says Finn historian Koivukangas, has the distinction of being the first Finnish author in Australia, a remarkable feat for a bloke who never had a day's schooling in the English language in his life. Using the pseudonym 'Australianus', he wrote a book of verse and stories called 'The Royal Toast', of which he had several hundred printed. He also wrote a book on economics and con-

tributed articles to the Sydney Bulletin. In the middle of the Depression he tried to save the world with his book 'A Solution to the World's Financial Problems', published in 1932. He gained a reputation as an eccentric and colourful character who could turn his hand to anything. He seems to have become a banana grower at Yelgun sometime in the 1930s before retiring to live with his Holm rellies at Billinudgel. He died in 1962 aged 84 and lies in Mullum cemetery.

As for W. A., the Tweed Times and Brunswick Advocate was prescient in early 1909: 'Mr W. Back of Burringbar was offered by auction at Burringbar £16 per acre for his farm of 296 acres...' and he '... owns over 1000 acres of prime land along the railway line and 1280 acres at Mullumbimby. As Mr Back is a very young man, there must be looming in front of him the vision of a millionaire's wealth.' His Burringbar farm supplied the poles for the Lismore to Casino telephone line.

He went on to become a mover and shaker in the business world – 'Beyond doubt the wealthiest Finnish



The Back Brothers. (W.A. Back left ~1930. K.J. Back right ~1910). They were possibly the most eminent Finns in Australia: W.A. was the richest Finn in Australia, if not one of the wealthiest Australians in Australia, while K.J. was the first Finnish author in Australia.

immigrant in Australia' says Koivukangas. Just before the war he left Burringbar and settled in Mullum where, in 1918, he built 'Cedarholm', now 'Cedar House Antiques', with cedar milled by his brother Jacky. In Mullum he became an auctioneer and stock and station agent and began buying up large properties and subdividing, including 'Jasper Hall' at Rosebank and 'Morrison Farm' fronting the Brunswick, which took up about a quarter of the Mullum municipality. He is credited with building 100 houses in Mullum and creating 30 dairy farms. Later he moved into Queensland and acquired a large station at Winton, amongst others, before developing the suburb of St Lucia in Brisbane. Sydney properties were also in the portfolio.

Through the 1930s and 40s his real estate company was the leading broker of banana plantations, but the growth of his Queensland business interests forced a move to Brisbane in the late 1940s. Both he and Christina died in Brisbane (he in 1974 aged 87 and she in 1970 aged 83) but lie in Mullum cemetery.

The Backs acted as the nucleus for the later chain migration of their compatriots. Their father Andrew no doubt passed the word around of the success of his sons in Australia and W. A.'s holiday back home in 1923/24 generated much interest. Some of those

who followed the Backs include the Kastren, Holmkvist, Holmnas, Fors, Melen, Tuohimaki, Roos, Snabb and Soderholm families. (Possibly connected to the farming Soderholms was Captain Soderholm, the Finnish Master of the 'SS Bonalbo' doing regular runs between Ballina and Sydney through to the early 1930s.) The Kastrens acquired Park Farm, *'the best known farm and one of the oldest in the district,'* from W. A. sometime in the early 1940s. It covered the area from the railway line in east Mullum and extended way into the Byron Shire. A portion was developed by the Back Real Estate Company in the late 1940s as the Kastren Subdivision, which created the site for the Primary School and all the surrounding lots as far as Argyle Street. By 1957 the remainder was in the hands of Ellen Fors.

Olavi Koivukangas remarks that the Back farm at Wilsons Creek was *'the staging post'* for Finns proceeding into Queensland, particularly those making for the Finn Commune at Nambour. *'The Backs were followed by other migrants from Swedish-speaking Finland, including members of their own family. The Finnish community at Mullumbimby grew during the 1920s... and became firmly established during the 1930s.'*

The Main street of Mullumbimby 1909.



W. A.'s farms were also the initial source of employment for many new arrivals who later moved on to north Queensland. One such, Nestori Karhula, the driving force behind the Cairns Finnish Commune, arrived in 1921. He left a memoir listing *'over twenty adults together with their children'* who were resident in the Mullum district in 1935. This figure indicates that the Finns were amongst the largest alien groups in the district at this time. *'In the course of time, therefore, Mullumbimby developed into a Finnish-Swedish colony, whose connections with Finland have survived to the present day.'* Mullumbimby became the *'best known settlement of Swedish speakers from Finland.'*

The Back's sister Anna, Mrs Erik J. Holm (Nyholm), landed with her husband and five children in 1921. They lived and worked at Main Arm for 6 yrs before acquiring a 275 acre farm at Billinudgel, where they remained until 1968. Another sister, Sofia, remained in Finland, where their father, Andrew, died in 1928 and mother, Sanna, in 1937. That such remote deaths in Finland should be highlighted in the Tweed Daily probably suggests the prominence of W. A. at that time.

W. A. certainly had pull. During WW1 it wasn't safe to speak with an accent in Mullum and in mid 1915 the Star found it necessary to say *'It has been said that Mr. W. Back of this town is of German nationality. On Mr Back's naturalization papers, 18Feb1908, the*

place of birth is given as Munsala, Finland, a Swedish part.' The next paragraph continued in the same vein: *'Mr E. J. Erichs, a native of Denmark....'*

But no such consideration was given to other aliens, who had to pay for their own adverts. One such, Mr G. T. Wonstrom, a Jeweller and Optician in the Nelson Building, pleaded *'As some person interested has been circulating that I am a German I wish to state that I am a British subject. I have never been in Germany; I was born in Traryd (Sweden) from an old Swedish family. Moreover, I always made it a point even before the war, not to deal from German or Jewish firms, on account of their filibustering methods, and I consider I have every right to ply my calling as I have not 'jumped into' the trade. I have served proper apprenticeship in the thorough manner of the old country – all above statements I can prove.'* Apparently nobody was convinced as three weeks later he had a closing down sale and advertised his intention to enlist.

Mullum rioting was close. On the 30Dec1915, the last edition of the year, under a heading *'Smashing-Up Rumours'*, the Star reported: *'All last week there were rumours about town that several places were to be smashed up on Christmas Eve, but they came to naught. In Lismore it did happen and several shops had their windows broken and the contents taken. ... In town here again are rumours of disturbances to take place on New Year's Eve. ...'* The next edition

wasn't until 13Jan1916 and contained no reports of New Year's Eve festivities. (Lismore's Christmas Eve entertainment programme included the trashing of 4 'German' shops, 3 of which were owned and operated by born and bred Australians.)

It's hard to get a grip on whether the Returned Soldiers League and Banana Growers Federation were including Finns in their railing against 'aliens' and 'enemy aliens' during the next war. The only specific reference to Finns occurred during a district council meeting of the BGF in late 1941 when they were trying to get a bit more serious about cleaning up the glut and inferior fruit problems. A number of remedial measures, mainly put by Tom Mott of Upper Main Arm, were discussed, but one bloke couldn't help himself by adding *'that the Government wasn't waking up to the fact that we have the enemy amongst us, and cited a case where it was alleged an alien ...'* When Mr Gaggin mischievously asked *'if the Finns would be countered as enemy aliens'*, the hanrahan was indignant and ambiguously replied *'I've nothing against the Finns'*, maybe because he was afraid of incurring the wrath of the powerful Billy Back, his fellow Elder at the Presbyterian Church.

Twelve months later Tom Mott was the President of the Brunswick Valley District Council of the BGF and *'made a plea for the small Finnish growers who were dependent on the industry for their living. He moved that the Federation be asked to consider making application to the Minister for Agriculture (Mr Dunn) to grant permits to plant bananas to naturalized British subjects of Finnish origin, provided such permits do not exceed a reasonable living area. Seconding the motion, Mr Gaggin said "the Finns were friends of Democracy and had no anti British feelings". He spoke in eulogy of their industry, integrity and honesty. The motion was carried by 10 votes to 4.'* The authorities were unsympathetic and two months later sprung Anton Lennart Snabb, a Finn of Possum Shoot, planting out 250 new plants on his 7acre lease. (Jacky Back had been sprung at Yelgun 2yrs earlier.)

At the start of the war Finland was amongst the first countries to start generating refugees, prompting calls for them to be allowed into Australia – *'Australia's experience had proved that migrants from Finland and other Scandinavian countries would become accept-*

able Australians....' Nevertheless, Finnish migration to Australia generally dried up after the war – in the 10yrs to 1958 only 993 Finns had settled. Some of those who came to Mullum include the Uppgard, Hager, Nylund, Ostring, Liljestrom and Smolin families. Most congregated with the prewar arrivals at the top of Main Arm, where the place had earned the colloquial name of *Finn Village* in the early 1920s. Their acceptance was made easier because *'the northern Europeans are of the same quality as the British...'* and less likely to pollute the Australian gene pool. (In the early 1970s 'Finn Village' morphed into 'Kohinur', the first hippie commune in Northern NSW. By 1972 there were about 100 naked bunyips moon dancing around the place.)

In late 1958, the Murwillumbah-based Daily News, which by the mid 1950s had morphed into a strong advocate for migration and a leading regional newspaper in lending its muscle to help migrants settle into the community, said *'New Citizens from overseas are helping to build not only Australia's numbers but her general progress towards attainment of greater nationhood. Increases in the Commonwealth grant towards the fares of approved migrants from Scandinavia, Finland, Switzerland and the United States are operative. ... Mr Downer has estimated that an intake of 5000 migrants a year from Finland may be developed. It is emphasised that a flow from this source and from other parts of northern Europe should be fully exploited because people from these areas can be readily assimilated in this country. ... Mr Downer has pointed out that with increased prosperity overseas, it is evident that migrants are not available to be picked up as and when desired by Australia....'*

At the time of the 1947 census only 476 people in NSW nominated themselves as Finnish born, and only another 18 in 1954. The census compilers didn't bother listing the numbers in Tweed-Byron, burying them under the 90 'others'. Peak years of migration were 1959 and 1969, coincidental with peaks in unemployment in Finland, but by 1990 only just over 9000 had settled permanently, about 40 % of them having decided to return home or move on elsewhere. Most are now in NSW and QLD and have gravitated to the capital cities and Mt Isa. They dominated the Gold Coast construction industry into the 1980s, and provided the golfing industry with Greg Norman.