

What is a Finntown?

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Introduction

A phenomenon of the Finnish-American life and culture, especially in the first half of the 20th century, was the finntown. This pattern included both work and leisure time, typical features being a group of emigrants from Finland working together and: boarding-houses, ethnic churches, temperance and labour movement societies with halls for meeting, groceries, co-operatives, public saunas etc. In the finntowns there were also bands, choruses, drama groups and many sport activities as well as ethnic newspapers and publications. Most of the first generation immigrants worked in industrial and domestic work, and there were only a few professionals, until the second generation. The finntown also maintained an interrelationship, not only with Finland, the old country, to get new arrivals, but also with Finnish settlements in the surrounding rural areas and other finntowns. (1)

For the immigrants from Finland the finntown was a result of the challenges of the new country, especially the foreign language and culture. But also emigrants from other countries from Europe or oth-

er continents developed their own ethnic agglomerations, examples being many Little Italy suburbs and Chinatowns in the United States.

The theme of the finntown is so wide and polyphasic to present in a short article as it covers all the aspects of the human life. Consequently only some appearances of the finntown will be discussed in the following presentation.

Roots of the Finntown in Finland

The origins of the finntown, all over the world, can be found in the old villages and parishes in rural Finland in the 19th century. The most typical feature of the Finnish emigration has been the "chain migration", which started when seamen, gold-diggers and early settlers invited their relatives and friends to join them beyond seas. Sometimes money or a pre-paid ticket was sent to a relative or a friend in Finland. The pioneer settler was often able to provide the newcomers with accommodation and work on his own farm or with the neighbours. The early emigration from Finland could well be called as the "individual emigration".

Later when emigration became a mass movement, dozens of young

men travelled together to remote destinations, sometimes led by a former emigrant with some knowledge of the English language. This "group emigration" could include dozens of young men originating from the same neighbourhood. Then later wives and girlfriends were to follow either individually or in minor groups.

There were really effective "push and pull" factors operating on the both sides of the ocean. The pattern of Finnish emigration to New Zealand since the the 1850's holds good also to Finnish emigration to all over the world. (2)

Early Finntowns

Concerning the Finnish settlement in the United States the first finntowns were those by Finnish seamen and gold-miners followed by the agglomerations in New York after the passing through the examination on the Ellis Island. The first finntowns, since the middle of the 19th century, were the areas near harbour where Finnish seamen, as well as sailors of other nationalities, lived when not on the high seas. An examples of this is Cherry Street in the lower part of Manhattan in New York. (3) The Finnish seaman settlement in Pyrmont, near the Sydney harbour, is another good example from the

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other side of the globe in the second half of the 19th century. (4)

Also in St. Petersburg, Russia, some finntowns developed when Finns started to settle in the town in larger numbers after Russia had conquered Finland in 1809. These Finnish agglomerations were mainly on the Northern side of the River Neva, especially in the suburbs of Kasan and Vyborg. (See Figure 3.) The explanation was mainly the work available, first in handcraft occupations and later in industry, eg. in the Nobel metal factories. The highest proportion of the Finns of the total population was over 12 per cent in the suburb of Vyborg in 1881. A reason here was the railway station of Finland in the vicinity and accommodation available to rent. The Finns in St. Petersburg were mainly manual workers and in service occupations. Women often worked as housemaids, a pattern much similar with the Finnish women in New York later. The St. Petersburg Finns, also Swedish speaking, had churches, schools, and other national institutions to maintain their ethnic identity. (5)

Concerning the Finnish emigration to the USA after a stop, even for a few years, in the New York finntowns, especially in Harlem and Brooklyn, many of the Finnish emigrants went on to the Middle West to Michigan and Minnesota, especially to Hancock area in Michigan and to Northern Minnesota for mining. Many Finnish immigrants went directly to Middle West. Also here the first place of residence was usually a Finnish boarding house where friends and relatives from the old country could be found. The work was also

available in the same or a neighbouring mine, and it was relatively easy to settle down in the existing Finnish community. (6)

Some Finns preferred to work in the forests instead of going underground to mines. Also in the primitive log cabins in big forests the Finns stuck together working in groups – as well as spending together their leisure hours. In history of migration these first years in a foreign country are sometimes called as "dog's years" when greenhorns tried to find their place in a foreign culture and language. Often this "niche" was found in the finntowns both in cities and rural settlements.

In the second phase of adjustment the Finns often moved more to West and settled on land. The Finnish emigrants were often sons and daughters of farmers in the old country, and the ultimate goal of them had to have a piece of land of their own either after the return to Finland or at least in America. When settling on land in the USA and Canada, the Finns stuck together. Many communities got even a Finnish name, as Aura, Kaleva, etc. A reason for Finns to settle on land was the dangerous work in the American mines as well as long lasting strikes and fatal accidents. In 1900 in Scofield, Utah, 63 Finnish miners died in an accident and in 1903 in Hanna, Wyoming, no less than 93 Finnish miners lost their lives.

The consolation of the Finntown

The hay day of the finntown settlement in the USA was the time

from the late 19th century to the depression of the 1930's. When the finntowns grew bigger they developed four major types of institutions:

1. churches
2. temperance and other fraternal societies
3. consumer co-operatives
4. political organizations

In the early stage in the finntown there were congregations first established in the 19th century followed by labour movement or socialist societies soon followed by temperance and labour movements. There was really active social life in these finntowns. There were different opinions among the Finns and not only between the church people and socialist but also inside the temperance activities. There were temperance societies among church people and among more secular or liberal persons. According to Sakari Sariola there were nearly 300 Finnish pubs but less than 100 Finnish churches. In these pubs there was often a room for dancing and this increased the tension between the church and temperance people. (7)

The first Finnish temperance society, based on the Goodtemplar philosophy (secret ceremonies, abstinence promises etc.), was the Pohjantähti in Quincy, Mass. in 1885 followed by the "Onnen Aika" in Republic, Mich. Soon almost in every finntown there were temperance societies under such names as: Väinö, Aura, Onnen Tähti, Pohjan Leimu, Lännen Rusko, Armon Lähde, Nuorison Kaunistus etc. (8)

But soon these first Finnish temperance societies left the

Scandinavians and formed their own societies. These were much more than just abstaining from drinking alcohol. They were a network of economic, social and cultural activities in the finntowns. Before the year 1902 there were 161 Finnish temperance societies, with more than 13 000 members, belonging to the federal association. The temperance hall became another home to many immigrants between the boarding house and the pub. (9)

In addition to drinking also violence was a feature of the finntowns. The use of knife, the "puukko", was quite common, and there were violence not only between the Finns but also with other nationalities. Often the Irishmen were mentioned in this connection to have been similar fighters as the Finns. A reason to the violence may have been the origin of the immigrants. Nearly half of the emigrants came from the province of Vaasa, and many young men had involved in knife fights in their old home country before emigration. Drinking and fighting may have been a reason for leaving the country, an example being Oskari Tokoi, who later returned to Finland to become the first Prime Minister of Finland in 1917. (10)

The Finnish emigrants brought to America not only the drinking habit but also their religion and culture. The heavy drinking among immigrants was a major reason to call priests from Finland to serve their countrymen in America. A problem was that there were many sects among the church people. The early emigrants came from Northern Finland via Norway and they often belonged the Laestadi-



Figure 4. The Harlem Finntown on Manhattan, New York. – Source: Tommola 1989, p. 114.

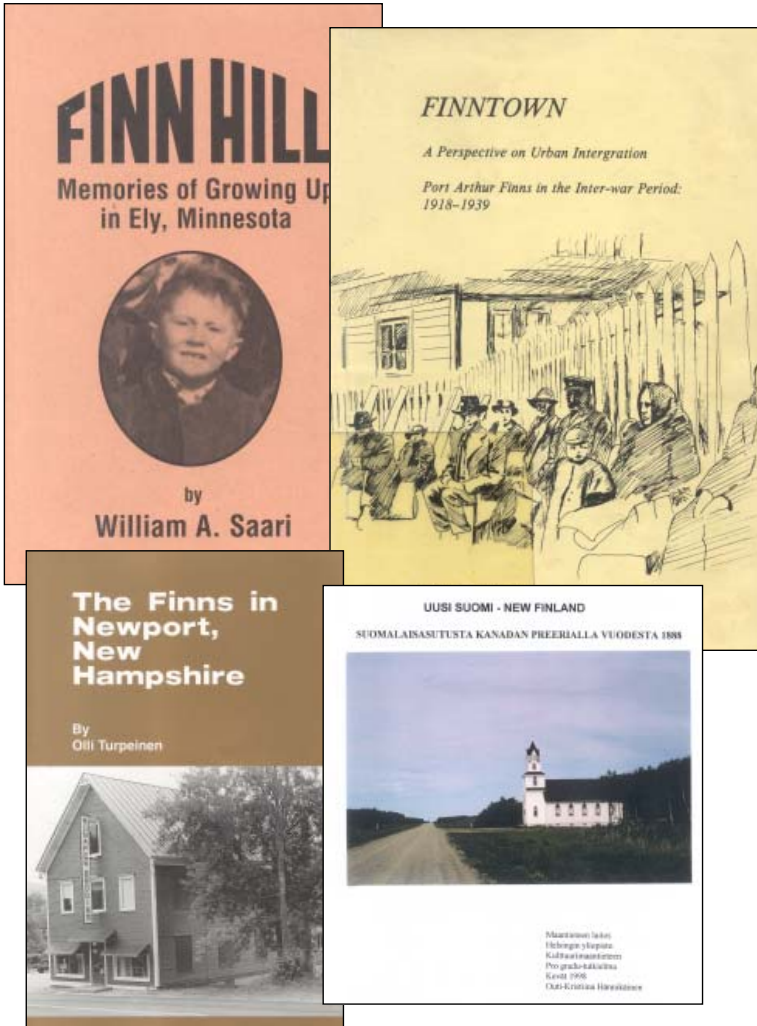
an group, which was more or less in opposition with the Lutheran State Church. In 1906 there were 68 Finnish Laestadian congregations in America with over 8 000 members. This church became known as the Apostolic Church, which got its leaders from Finland.

But the most of the Finnish congregations belonged the Suomi Synod since 1890. In 1906 the Suomi Synod had over 100 churches and 13 000 members, to increase to 28 000 in 1910. (11)

An area, especially neglected in migration history research, is theosophy, expressed in the Kalevala philosophy and especially in the ideas of Matti Kurikka, a utopian socialist thinker, much ahead of his time in women liberalization.

When talking about finntowns we should not forget the Harmony Island of Matti Kurikka on the Malcolm Island, Vancouver, in the early years of the 20th century. (12)

But the strongest movement, after the religious ones, was however socialism, especially in the mining finntowns. Between 1906 and 1913 the number of socialist chapters increased from 53 to 260. Before the WW I the number of members of the Finnish Socialist Organization rose up to 13 000. (13) It was much more than just a political labour movement. To become a socialist in a finntown was like a religious awakening resulting sober behaviour, healthy life, interest in literature and culture, in short, it was quite a new way of life.



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Olli Turpeinen, The Finns in Newport, New Hampshire, USA 2000.

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there was a big Norwegian settlement of 40 000 persons. (15)

The decline of the Finntown

The finntowns started to lose their ethnic strength in the 1930's and during and after the World War II. A reason was that many Finns had to leave the finntown to find employment in the other parts of the USA. Many had also returned back to Finland during the years, about 20–25 per cent of all the Finnish immigrants. (16)

In the finntowns there lived many single women and bachelor men who more often than families went back to Finland. Another major reason for the decline of the finntown was, that the first generation started to pass away or had adjusted well enough to the American way of life. In the 1960's the population of the finntowns, especially in New York, declined drastically because of deaths, return to Finland – or movement to the warmer climate of Florida. When

Small and big Finntowns

The population of the finntown could be from a quite a small number to thousands Finnish immigrants. There are no official statistics but just estimations. The biggest finntowns were found in New York: Harlem on Manhattan and Brooklyn around the Sunset Park. According to Esko Tommola in the 1920's and 1930's there were 8 000–9 000 Finns in Harlem and in

Brooklyn a few decades later even more, perhaps 10 000 Finns. (14)

In Manhattan the Finns concentrated between 120th and 130 Streets near Madison Avenue. The Finns in Harlem were mainly house maids, carpenters and other construction workers as well as some tailors. Also in the Brooklyn finntown the first settlers were seamen, carpenters and tailors. In the neighbourhood there were other ethnic agglomerations. North of Sunset Park in Brooklyn

black population took over the Manhattan finntown, in Brooklyn the immigrants from the Caribbean Sea, especially from Puerto Rico, started to arrive in large numbers in the 1950's. Then in the early 1980's the Korean, Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants started to arrive in large numbers into New York. (17)

The history and research of the Finntown

A good thing is that the second generation of the Finnish immigrants in finntowns have started to write their memories and experiences in these Finnish enclaves, examples being the books by Olli Turpeinen and William A. Saari (see p. 10). Concerning the research of the finntown as such, there are only a few minor research, the studies by Ahti Tolvanen and Outi-Kristiina Hännikäinen.

But what really is needed is scientific and comprehensive research of the finntown phenomenon from the beginning to the very end. This should cover a period of 100 years and even more. The research should be on the Ph. Thesis or Post Doctoral level. Although the topic is very wide and complicated I hope that young scholars on both the sides of the Atlantic would take up the challenge. A major problem, as usually, would be the financing of the research.

Concluding comment

While reading literature and writing this article I was impressed by the many aspects of the finntown phenomenon. I was wondering how this story could be preserved

for future generations both in America and Finland.

Especially I was considering how in the proposed Finnish Emigrant Museum in Peräseinäjoki we could present with modern technology the real images of the Finntown. It would be a real challenge, as the finntown covers all the aspects of the human life of Finnish immigrants in the new world. But the story includes also the descendants of the immigrants and their life of the divided heart between the two or more cultures in the multiethnic communities not only in the United States of America and Canada but all over the world.

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