

Finnish Settlements in Rural Thunder Bay:

Changes in an Ethnic Community



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The most significant influx of Finnish immigrants to North America is known as the "great emigration." Begun in the 1860s, this eventually became a virtual exodus with more than 350,000 of Finland's citizens ultimately leaving their homeland in search of a better life in America (Aaltio 1969). Political oppression by Russia, overpopulation, lack of work in the homeland, famines, curiosity, adventure, escape from rural seclusion, and escape from domineering parents have all been cited as push factors for this mass migration. Abundant jobs, good wages, available land, and enticing letters from relatives were the most common attractions for Finns to America (Wargelin 1924; Kolehmainen and Hill 1951; Wasatjerna 1957; Kero 1969; Kilpi 1979; Bell 1989).

Upon settling in the Lake Superior region, small villages were established which were often comprised entirely of Finns. During the early 1900s, these communities were well-known for their distinctive Finnish social institutions such as temperance societies, Lutheran churches, co-operative stores and dairies, and political organizations. These institutions sponsored sporting events, plays, musicals,

hikes, trips, dances and a variety of other activities which were well-attended and which earned the settlements reputations as places of spirited animation. Certain other distinctive cultural features that appeared within these settlements included Finnish building methods, barn and house styles, saunas, farming techniques, and Finnish — the hybrid language developed amongst North American Finns. Today, however, little is left in these villages that can attest to their once-thriving Finnish character (Timothy 1993).

Mention has been made by a few authors of the marked decline in Finnish cultural vitality in the rural townships around Thunder Bay (Kouhi et al. 1976; Danton 1992), yet very few people, if any, seem to have studied the extent of this decline. The Thunder Bay Finnish-Canadian Historical Society (Kouhi et al. 1976) has published an invaluable description of the rural Finnish settlements around Thunder Bay as they appeared in the early part of this century, during their peak of activity. However, there is a general lack of literature regarding what exists in these settlements today. This paper briefly outlines the settlement of Finns in the Thunder Bay area and reviews what two of their villages (Suomi and Lappe) were like during their zenith in the early 1900s. A similar analysis is then provided of the same settlements as they appear today, and

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contemporary changes in ethnicity are examined.

Research Methods

The boundaries of the villages described in this study are taken to be those loosely defined by the Thunder Bay Finnish-Canadian Historical Society (Kouhi et al. 1976). As merely functional boundaries, they do not correspond with actual, legal limits because the villages were originally delimited on a social basis by the local Finnish population. These boundaries thus often overlap township and even census enumeration district boundaries, making it difficult to determine an accurate population for each village from the Census of Canada. To meet the need for more local, settlement-specific population information to verify the demographic and ethnic changes in the villages, as disclosed by the locals, two approaches were used: *interviews with first- and second-generation* community leaders based on a previously worked out consistent, but not rigidly fixed, set of open-ended questions; and *counting Finnish and non-Finnish surnames* on residences.

As part of a much larger research project (Timothy 1993), personal interviews with some 40 local experts (i.e. clergy, store owners, and lifelong Finnish residents) who are familiar enough with each village to be able to count the number of families in their communities, were carried out in Lappe, Suomi, Nolalu, and Kivikoski, as well as in Thunder Bay with former residents of the hamlets to ascertain population information and ethnic composition at a more local level. Suomi Koti retirement home in Thunder Bay proved to be a valuable resource for this purpose. These interviews were also used to provide a description of the villages as they are today.

In order to count names on households, it was necessary to examine the entire area of each settlement in question. This was accomplished with the aid of topographic maps and by driving along every passable road within the previously mentioned limits of the settlements. This allowed surnames displayed on houses and mailboxes to be counted to derive the proportions of households with Finnish and non-Finnish names as one indicator of ethnic change within the settlements. In this instance, a Finnish name is defined as one that is linguistically Finnish in origin as opposed to Swedish or other Germanic-based names.

Two weaknesses became apparent in the name counting method: a significant number of houses did not display a name at all, making it nearly impossible to determine whether or not the occupants were Finnish, while some houses which displayed non-Finnish names may or may not have contained ethnic Finns since intermarriage and name changing were known to have occurred. Despite these weaknesses, it is believed that the results, taken with other information, would help to indicate ethnic decline. Although four settlements were originally examined, Suomi and Lappe have been chosen for discussion in this report. Unreferenced information in this paper is based upon these field investigations.

The Early Settlements

The Finnish settlements in the vicinity of Thunder Bay, most established in about 1900, grew rapidly until the mid-1930s. The period of most rapid growth extended from 1920 to 1930, during which time the Finnish population increased by more than 100 % (Tolvanen 1987). The early years of the twentieth century saw a dramatic increase in rural settlement as

Port Arthur's Finns were struck with "land fever," and Finns settled in nearly all townships around Port Arthur and Fort William (Figure 1). The largest concentrations, however, were in the townships that were dependent upon the Port Arthur and Duluth Railroad (Gillies, Marks, Lybster, Strange, Pearson, and Devon), in the northern townships (McGregor, Jacques, Gorham, and Ware), and in the townships along the Dawson Road (McIntyre, Dawson Road Lots, Conmee, and Forbes). These settlements came to have names like North Branch, Tarmola, Lappe, Kivikoski, Ostola, Intola, Miller, Alppila, Pohjola, Kaministiquia, Sunshine, Sellars, Leeper, Nolalu,

Suomi, Pearson, Toimela, and Devon (Kouhi et al. 1976) (Figure 1).

The earliest Finnish villages in Ontario were essentially ethnic islands of varying size usually comprised of localities settled almost entirely by Finns who built up a unique vernacular landscape which has clearly been identified as Finnish (Rasmussen 1982; 1985; Varjo 1985). The village limits were generally defined by the rounds of local mail delivery or delineated as the area including all the people who paid taxes for the maintenance of a particular school. Some of these settlements were quite small; however, some were large and often included sections of more than one township.

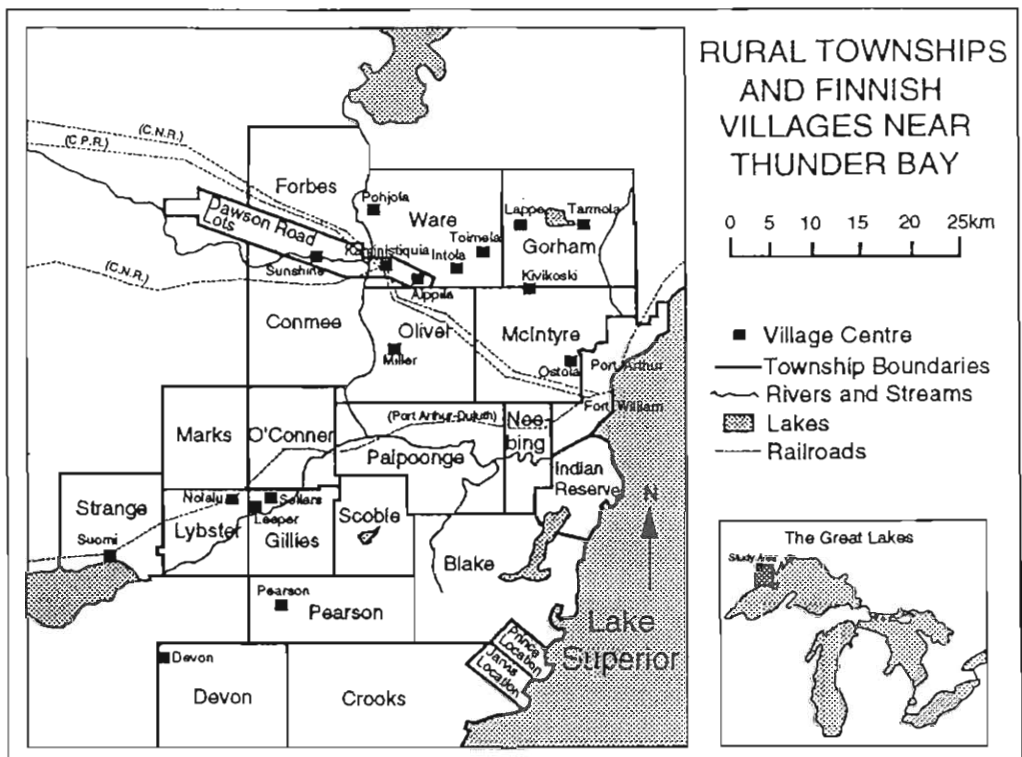


Figure 1. Finnish settlements in rural Thunder Bay

Since residence in the bush made their work much more accessible for Finnish men, many of the settlements were established in areas where forest, road, and mining work were available. Some villages were created specifically as places of agriculture; however, this type of settlement generally occurred later. Land was cheap in Thunder Bay; any male immigrant could apply for a tract of land costing initially a mere total of \$1.50 for 160 acres (65ha). After three years the homesteader could secure a deed if he had cleared and farmed the required 15 acres (6ha) (Huotari 1981).

The social and political life of these villages generally fell into two categories: socialist/communist-oriented activities or church-related functions. This sharp distinction was so apparent that each village was reputed as being composed of either predominantly "Church-Finns" or "Hall-Finns," with a notable animosity between the two groups (Kouhi 1989).

Suomi

The village of Suomi lies approximately 18 km southwest of Nolalu. One of its earliest settlers was Isaac Karila who, in December 1904, took a homestead on the shores of Whitefish Lake in Strange Township, not far from the Port Arthur – Duluth Railroad (Canadian Uutiset 1921; Ilmonen 1926). By 1905, he and his family had built a frame house and soon afterwards were joined by other Finnish settlers.

Along with farming, forestry became the other economic mainstay for Suomi. Between 1905 and 1915, several timber-related businesses were established in the village as a result of the relative ease of shipping on the Port Arthur – Duluth Railroad.

Provincial Pulp and Paper and Great Lakes Paper purchased most of the timber from the Suomi area. A sawmill was owned by local residents, as well as a threshing mill that did custom work for other farms in surrounding townships (Kouhi et al. 1976).

Suomi's first school was built in 1927 but soon burned to the ground. The Finnish socialists were blamed for the fire because of the revolution in Russia which had energized the movement among socialists all over the world, including those of the Finnish ones in Thunder Bay. In Suomi the socialist movement was considered so radical that they would have burned down the schoolhouse rather than allow non-socialist, government-paid teachers to teach classes. Another school was, however, promptly built in place of the first one. All sixty of the students were Finns (Kouhi et al. 1976).

In 1919, Suomi's first post office was set up in Isaac Karila's store. His son was the first postmaster who assigned the name Suomi to the settlement known previously as Wolf Siding (Kouhi et al. 1976). The Nolalu Farmer's Mercantile Co-op opened a branch in Suomi in 1912 which stayed in operation until 1925 (Metsäranta 1989).

As with a number of other rural communities, Suomi was a centre for intense socialist activity. Apparently, because of its relative closeness to the American boundary, Suomi was a popular meeting place for socialists from both sides of the border. A socialist hall, erected in 1921, was well supported by most residents of the community. About 1934, that hall burnt down, but another was soon built where numerous concerts, plays, dances, and many other activities were housed until the structure was torn down in 1950 (Kouhi et al. 1976).

With the beginning of the Depression, the socialist movement in Canada strengthened even more, especially in the village of Suomi. Several active socialists from the community emigrated to the Soviet Union which was then viewed by many as a Utopia for left-wing activists (Kero 1975; Kouhi et al. 1976).

During its later days, Suomi saw an overwhelming number of forest fires, one of which razed the Whitefish Lake area destroying the school and the Whitefish River bridge which had facilitated transport and communications to and from the village. Another fire destroyed much of the timber in Strange Township in 1932 (Kouhi et al. 1976).

Lappe

The boundaries of Lappe are especially difficult to define; however, it is generally accepted that the community included all those lots near the school and those who paid taxes to the Gorham and Ware School No. 1, (Kouhi 1972). Lappe began in 1904 when the first settlers, Kalle and Wilhelmina Ranta, filed their first land claim (Kouhi 1972; Kouhi et al. 1976). The settlement had originally been named Lappi (Lapland), probably owing to its late springs, cold winters, and poor soil. However, an error in spelling by some early postal worker changed the name to Lappe, as it remains today (Huotari 1981).

Lappe, which was wholly Finnish-speaking for many years, was settled as an area of mainly subsistence agriculture supporting the men working in the forest and on road construction. The original settlers moved out to the countryside from Port Arthur and Fort William in response to "land fever" which motivated many people in the region to reside nearer the lumber

camps and road-building sites. They purchased land and worked it whenever they had time.

Families often took care of the animals and crops while the men went to work in the bush. By 1920, much of the suitable land was cleared and cultivated to yield considerable crops of turnips, potatoes, and hay. Chicken farming also became a fairly prosperous industry. Although such agriculture was exceptionally difficult, owing to the rocky, infertile soil in Gorham Township, the Finns usually made good use of their limited resources. At one time, McIntyre River was even used to float local timber to Port Arthur, and a sawmill was built mostly for local use (Kouhi 1972; Kouhi et al. 1976; Huotari 1981).

By 1920, two general stores had been built in Lappe, and a branch of the People's Cooperative was founded in 1935. Mail service, which arrived in the mid-1930s, was originally distributed from the Co-op store. A school was completed in the summer of 1912 across the road from the cemetery (Huotari 1981). When they started school, the children could generally speak only Finnish, but it did not take long for them to learn English. Their parents, however, were not presented with many opportunities to speak English, and, as a result, some never learned it. Although many of the teachers could speak Finnish, classes were always held in English, as required by the Ontario Department of Education. In spite of this, however, Finnish continued to be the language of lunchtime, recess, and social events (Danton 1992).

Unlike Suomi, Lappe was very much a church-oriented community. Antti Kaija, one of the village's earliest settlers, started a Sunday school and choir because of his interest in sustaining the spiritual needs of the Finns. Services were held in various

homes until a Lutheran church was completed in the summer of 1921 in which all services and activities were conducted in Finnish. The earliest pastors travelled by horse and wagon from Port Arthur until Lappe received its own resident preacher in 1932 (Repo and Maunula 1977).

In Lappe, politically speaking, the general rule prevailed that Church Finns were conservative, and non-church Finns (atheists) were Communists. Because of their commitment to communism, several people from Lappe emigrated to the Soviet Union where they were reportedly killed in action against Finland around 1939-40 (Kouhi 1972).

Lappe was well-known for its community activities: both those associated with the church and those connected with the socialists. In the early days of the village, concerts, dances, church services, and plays were held at the school. A socialist hall was soon built in which meetings and dances were also held. However, owing to the village's overwhelming church-oriented population, the hall never became much of a social focus, and the building was eventually torn down in the late 1950s (Huotari 1981).

The Modern-day Villages

At present, relatively few residents of the villages speak Finnish or even claim Finnish ethnicity. The Finnish landscape is on the verge of disappearance as once commonplace features are being replaced by modern structures, while the fields which took so much effort to clear are once again overgrown with scrub timber.

Through the years **Suomi** has developed along different lines from nearby Nolalu which lies only 18 km northeast on highway 588.

Since no one from Suomi is known to drive to Thunder Bay to work on a daily basis, but many from Nolalu do, the commuting zone must end somewhere between the two villages. Farming and bush cutting are no longer economic activities in Suomi; however, the area is rapidly developing into a fairly well-known recreation area along the shores of Whitefish Lake drawing tourists from much of Ontario, as well as from Minnesota and Wisconsin in the United States. A campground/trailer park, a liquor store, and a restaurant make up Suomi's selection of commercial establishments.

A total of 12 permanent homes were counted within the boundaries of old Suomi (Table 1). Although 4 of the 12 (33 %) are Finnish residences, a life-long Finnish resident of the community estimated that, with the development of tourism and the ensuing impermanent and seasonal migration, a mere 5 % of Suomi's population remains Finnish. Only 4 Finns, all over 70 years old, can be identified today in a village that was once wholly Finnish.

Moreover, it is likely that with the development of newer, more impermanent tourist sites along the lake, the percentage of Finns in the local population will continue to decrease.

Lappe's first-, second-, and third-generation Finnish population is perhaps more cohesive than that of any of the other rural communities. The Lappe Lutheran Church, the only remaining functional Finnish church in rural Thunder Bay, has played a key role in keeping this ethnic identity alive. The church's various activities (i.e. Sunday services, choirs, barbecues, and recently organized tours to Finland and Russia) have attracted older Finnish-Canadians, many younger-generation Finns, as well as a few non-Finns in the area. Although

Table 1. Surnames of Suomi and Lappe households

Category	Suomi households			Lappe households		
	Number of houses	% of total houses	% of houses with a name	Number of houses	% of total houses	% of houses with a name
Finnish names	4	33	66.5	27	24	46.5
Non-Finnish names	2	17	33.5	31	28	53.5
No name displayed	6	50	N/A	54	48	N/A
Total	12	100	100	112	100	100

(Source: Field investigations 1992)

the Lappe Lutheran Church is attempting to change its reputation from a Finnish ethnic church to a regular church which anyone can attend, its activities are still strongly Finnish in nature, probably owing to its continuing dominant Finnish congregation, some of whom come from Kivikoski and other nearby settlements to participate.

According to the Pastor of the Lappe Lutheran Church, all church records were kept and services held in Finnish until 1970. Sunday services are held at two times: the first service in Finnish and the second in English for those non-Finnish visitors and younger-generation Finns who prefer to hear the sermons in English. Other than the church, no other Finnish activities or organizations exist in Lappe except for Finnish language courses offered to youngsters at the local school, but outside regular school hours.

Nearly all of Lappe's residents, both Finn and non-Finn, commute to work in Thunder Bay. The village's retail sector is comprised of one grocery store. Agriculture, except for a few private hay fields and cows, is non-existent. Although several of the area's residents are engaged in hauling timber by truck to the mills in Thunder Bay, Lappe's main money-

making ventures are gravel pits, approximately 15 of which, privately owned, provide a living for several families in the village. At the northern boundary of the community a small recreation area is developing on the shores of Surprise Lake where numerous city dwellers are beginning to build cottages.

Of approximately 112 households in Lappe, Finnish surnames appeared on 27. Thirty-one exhibited non-Finnish names, and 54 displayed no name at all (Table 2). This means that 24 % of the total houses bore Finnish names, 28 % were non-Finnish, and 48 % displayed no names at all. Of the total names shown, 46.5 % were Finnish and 53.5 % were non-Finnish. According to local leaders, approximately 10 % of the community's population would be likely to claim Finnish ethnicity.

Conclusion

In Canada Finns settled most heavily along the shores of Lake Superior in the vicinity of Thunder Bay. As in other parts of North America, they established small villages which, with their many social activities, became notoriously Finnish in character.

It is clear from the examples of Lappe and Suomi that the rural Finnish settlements near Thunder Bay have greatly declined in their Finnish culture, social characteristics, and ethnicity. All that is left today are commuter settlements from which the majority non-Finns travel daily to work in Thunder Bay. According to the interviewees, ethnic Finns comprise less than 10 % of the population in both communities. A small recreation industry is developing in Suomi and Lappe, owing to their close proximity to attractive lake resorts; however, very little other economic activity exists in the two villages. Although Lappe hosts several church functions, few activities exist in any of the villages that can today be identified as Finnish.

Summary

As Finns settled along the shores of Lake Superior, they established numerous small, rural settlements which developed into vibrant communities where the language, cultural landscape, and social institutions were uniquely Finnish. Today, however, the Finnish character of these villages has nearly disappeared. This paper discusses some of the changes which have occurred in two of these communities in rural Thunder Bay, Ontario by providing descriptions of what the villages were like during their peak of activity in the early 1900s, and what they are like today, in the 1990s. Social, cultural, and economic activities are considered, as well as ethnicity.



Bay Street, a stronghold of Finnish settlement in Thunder Bay, was renamed Finlandia Street during the annual Finnish Canadian Grand Festival, held in Thunder Bay in the summer of 1994. (SI/VA/539/Kanada)

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