

Recognizing the Finnish Pioneer Monument, Towner County, North Dakota

During the summer of 1992, as my family and I were moving across the country to our new destination of Brandon, we stopped at a way-side rest stop along North Dakota Highway No. 5. To my amazement, this rest-stop exhibited a monument that simply read the following inscription in English and Finnish:

FOUNDERS

We dedicate this monument to the memory of the Finnish Pioneers who came here in 1896 and after. They tilled this soil with oxen and horses and lived in houses of earth sod. Through their early efforts we have achieved our present living standard.

North Dakota Finnish Historical Society

PERUSTAJAT

Me pyhitämme tämän patsaan suomalaisten esiraivaajien muistolle jotka tulivat tänne 1896 ja sen jälkeen. He rakensivat tänne turve asuntonsa. Härillä ja hevosilla he ralsasivat nämä maat. Heidän työnsä on laskenut perustuksen tämänpäivän hyvinvoinnille.

Pohjois-Dakotan Suomalainen Historia Seura

After some research into the Finns of the area, the origin of this monument was also discovered. The N. D. Finnish Historical Society had its beginnings in 1954, when Dr. K. Koski of Iron River, Michigan, resettled to the town of Rolla. Dr. Koski was interested in establishing a historical society among the Finnish settlers of the area, and gained support from local residents. Numerous Finns joined the society, which aimed to collect historical data and information on the early pioneers of the area, who arrived in 1896 and thereafter.

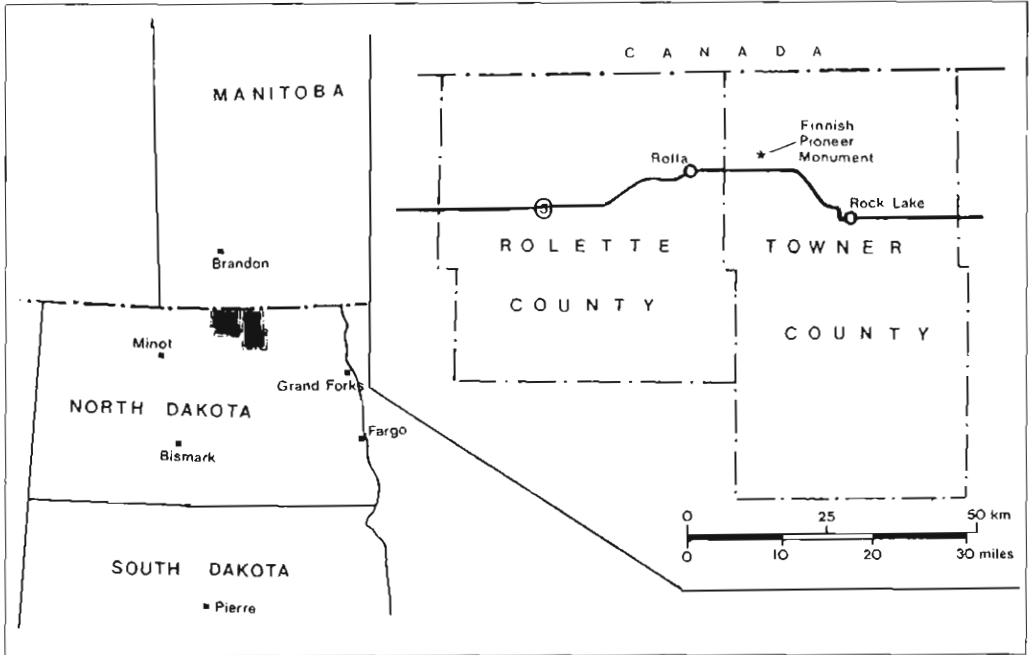
A memorial was to be erected as part of the 50th anniversary of the Finnish settlement in the area. The granite statue, ordered

by the society, was delivered on June 28th, 1956 to the site chosen by the members. This site was along Highway 5, some 7.5 miles east of Rolla, on a farm lot donated by the Johnson family, a Finnish farm family (Kontio, 30). The unveiling of the pioneer monument took place on Sunday, July 8th, 1956. During this day, which also incorporated the celebration of Finnish Independence, the people of the area arrived en masse to commemorate the pioneers who founded and helped establish a better life for themselves and their descendants.

While the pioneer monument was thus established in 1956, the colour and flare of the monument had weathered and faded over the years. The N. D. Finnish Historical Society reached its peak in membership during these years as well, with some 80 members. Since then, the society membership declined, and the society ceased to exist in the 1960-70's. In an effort to bring some interest and pride back to the Finns who still live in the area, a Mid-Summer celebration was organized for July 26th, 1993, which included the re-painting of the Finnish and American flags on the pioneer monument. Numerous residents took turns painting the granite monument, followed by a barbecue picnic, along with music and entertainment aimed to challenge the area residents to recognize the upcoming 100th anniversary of the founding of the Finnish farmsteads in the area.

While my finding of a Finnish monument along the highway led to interesting research dealing with Finnish ethnic churches and the Finns of the area – which are to be published elsewhere – the monument and the events that took place over the summer of 1993 are to be recognized as well.

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Roinila brothers (author middle) at the monument of Finnish pioneers, Mid-Summer 1993