



Finns of Interior B.C., Canada — Okanagan Valley Case Study

This paper will explore the Finnish ethnic community found in the southern interior of British Columbia, namely in the Okanagan Valley region. While Finns did not come to settle the Okanagan Valley after the turn of the century, areas north of the Okanagan were settled. Historically, the Salmon Arm area along the Shuswap Lake has been an area of strong Finnish concentration, due mainly to the railway which many Finns helped to construct in the late 1800's. However, it was not until the 1940's that Finns began to filter south to the Okanagan Valley. The Finns in various centres and other nearby areas along the valley are examined, and some aspects of early settlement history, concentrations and aspects of assimilation are studied through data collected from the area.

Geographic Setting

The Okanagan Valley is situated in the southern interior of British Columbia. To most residents of the valley, the area includes all settlements along the shores of Lake Okanagan, but to the physical geographer, the valley includes the entire Okanagan Lake drainage basin or water-

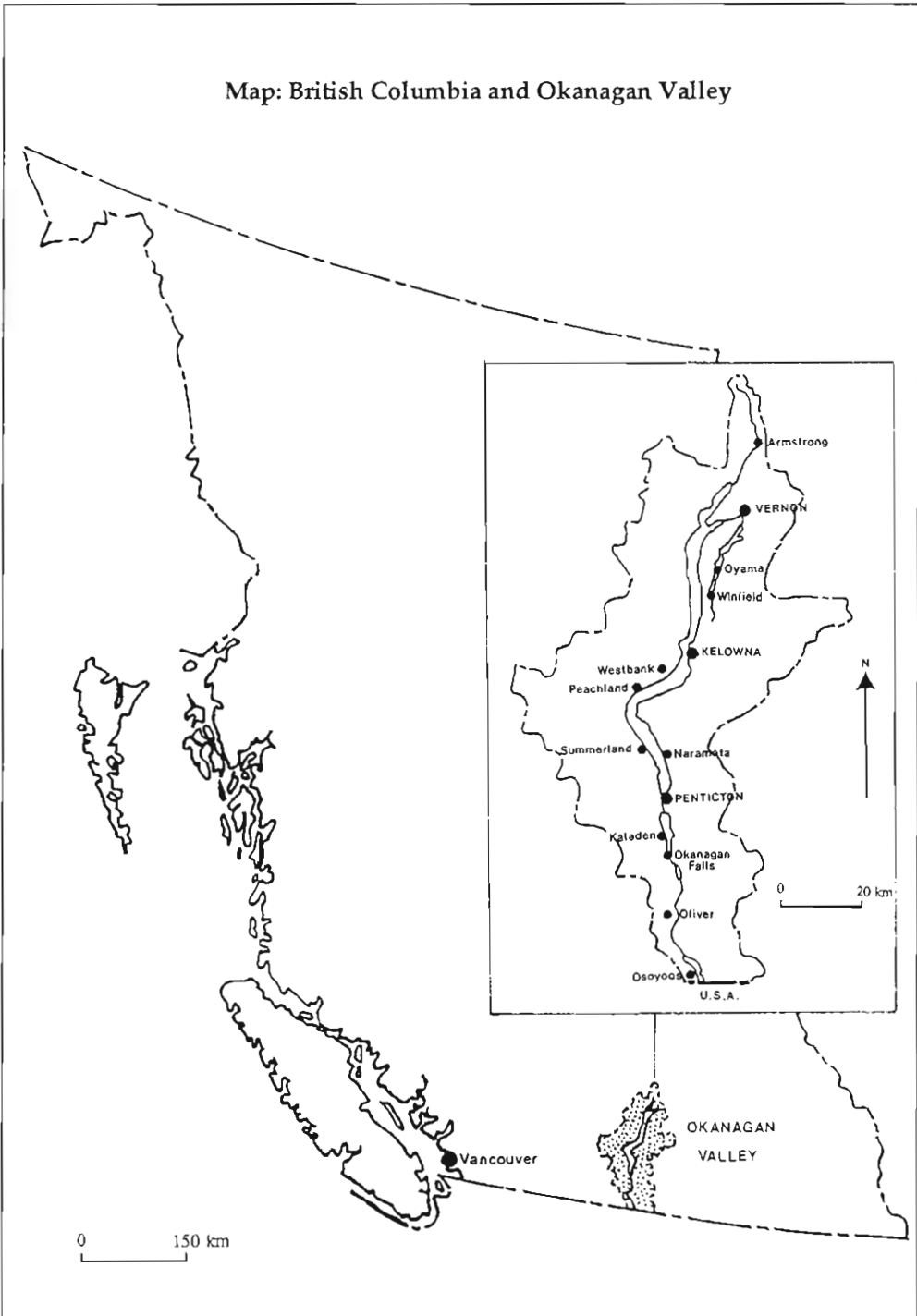
shed (See Map). This watershed spans from Deep Creek in the north, to the Okanagan River passing through Skaha Lake and Osoyoos Lake in the south. Communities that fall inside this drainage basin include Armstrong in the north, Vernon, Kelowna, Peachland, Summerland, Penticton, Oliver and Osoyoos, along with smaller settlements (See Map). North of this defined area and close to centres such as Vernon and Armstrong, are older Finnish settlements of Salmon Arm, Enderby, Sicamous, and others. These, however, belong to the Shuswap Lake drainage basin. Furthermore, these communities also lie outside the North Okanagan Census Division, which also helps define the area under study. Thus, Finnish settlements in these northern areas are not considered in this study.

Previous Literature

Very little literature is found for the Okanagan area Finns. Mention has been made in various works of Finns living in the Sicamous, Salmon Arm, Revelstoke and Karnloops areas by some authors (Lindstrom-Best 1988:24), but these areas, again, are outside the Okanagan Valley. Regional and local newspapers have on occasion, published articles dealing with

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Map: British Columbia and Okanagan Valley



the Finns of the area, covering topics such as a Finnish Girls Choir performance in Penticton (Penticton Herald 1988), to local Finnish entrepreneur (Kelowna Daily Courier 1991). Apart from these sporadic stories, little has been published on any relevant topic.

Methodology

A mail-in questionnaire was forwarded to a total of 163 respondents, whose names were collected from the 1991 Kelowna and Area Telephone Directory, the 1991 Penticton and Area Telephone Directory and the 1991 Vernon and Area Telephone Directory. A response from 125 Finns was received, representing a 76% response rate. Follow-up contacts were established with numerous respondents over the telephone, and 13 respondents were visited for personal interviews. Further evidence of Finnish settlers was collected from the electoral voting lists found for the Okanagan Valley dating from 1940 onwards. A detailed breakdown of respondent distribution is seen in Table 1.

Settlement History

From respondents who took part in this research, the earliest Finn to settle in the Okanagan Valley includes a Swede-Finn family named Tuovila. Arriving in 1942 from Alberta, Mr. Jim Tuovila was initially involved in building log cabins in the Kariboo area of interior B.C., and later worked on orchards in the Kelowna area (Correspondence with Mr. Jim Tuovila; South Okanagan District Voting List 1942). Mr. Tuovila and his descendants still reside in the Kelowna area.

One of the earliest recorded Finnish settlers to the Okanagan was Mr. Sulo Hiisa. Born in northern Finland in 1902,

he arrived in Canada in 1923. While travelling across Canada a number of times, he passed through the Okanagan in the 1930's, vowing to return and settle at a later date. Initially settling in Wells, B.C., working in the local Wells mine as a blaster, he moved to Peachland in 1946. In the Okanagan, he worked in orchards as well as a saw mill. Mr. Hiisa passed away in 1970 (Peachland Historical Society 1983:393).

Table 1. Distribution of respondents

| City | Responses | Total sent |
|----------------------|------------|------------|
| Kelowna | 59 | 70 |
| Vernon | 18 | 27 |
| Penticton | 12 | 14 |
| Summerland | 9 | 11 |
| Westbank | 5 | 9 |
| Armstrong | 7 | 8 |
| Winfield | 4 | 6 |
| Peachland | 3 | 5 |
| Naramata | 2 | 4 |
| Osoyoos | 2 | 3 |
| Kaleden | 2 | 2 |
| Oliver | 1 | 2 |
| Okanagan Falls | 1 | 1 |
| Oyama | 0 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 125 | 163 |
| Response rate = 76 % | | |

Another early settler was Mrs. Hilja Ketola, who arrived in Peachland in 1947. Born in Finland in 1895, she arrived in Canada in 1926, and settled in Shauvanon, Saskatchewan. In 1948, after visiting the Okanagan a year earlier, she along with her two daughters moved to the Trepanier District area, close to Peachland. She made a living by being employed as a picker in local orchards, and passed away in 1984. (Interview with Mrs. Mary Domi). Her two daughters still reside in the Okanagan Valley (Okanagan South District Voting Lists, 1947; Peachland Historical Society 1983:412).

According to the North Okanagan District Voting List and the Okanagan Telephone Directories for 1947 and 1948, a few Finnish residents were also found in the Vernon area. These early settlers included Mr. John E. Koski (b. 1912), Mrs. Thelma Koski, Mr. Ray Koski, Mr. Oscar Niemi (1894–1972), and Mr. Gerald Niemi (b. 1927). Oscar Niemi was a co-owner and operator of the Lumby Timber Company from 1947–51 (Interview with Mr. Gerald Niemi). Thus it is noted that the earliest settlers arrived in the Valley during the 1940's. From the data collected, it is important to note that very few Finns have settled in this region in these early days. The results clearly show that the largest proportion (81%) of all respondents have moved to the Okanagan Valley since 1971 (Table 2). However, as mentioned previously, Finns settled in areas north of the Okanagan prior to this

period. In nearby Enderby, the arrival of the Lundquist family in 1929 has been recorded by other historians and researchers (Bowtree 1975, 74).

The reasons for settlement in the Okanagan is most often related to the climatic factors of the area. A dry, hot summer and warm, dry winter has brought many elderly people from across B.C. and Canada to this area. Thus, 45% of all respondents indicated that the biggest reasons for settlement included climate, weather, health reasons, and the lifestyle of the area. Climate was the single most important reason for 27% of respondents (Table 3).

It has been argued by some that Kelowna is overtaking the city of Victoria as the retirement capital of Canada, as many seniors from different ethnic backgrounds — the Finns included — have moved to the Okanagan. Because of this

Table 2. Year of arrival in the Okanagan Valley vs. origin of respondent

| Origin | Pre-1950 | 1951–60 | 1961–70 | 1971–80 | 1981–90 | 1991+ | Total |
|-----------|----------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-------|-------|
| B.C. | 2 | 5 | 5 | 23 | 26 | 4 | 65 |
| Ontario | - | 1 | 3 | 9 | 10 | - | 23 |
| Alta. | 1 | - | 1 | 7 | 9 | - | 18 |
| Saskatch. | - | 1 | 4 | - | 1 | - | 6 |
| N.B. | - | - | - | - | - | 1 | 1 |
| Yukon | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| N.W.T. | - | - | - | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| Michigan | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| Montana | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| Oregon | - | - | - | 1 | - | - | 1 |
| TOTAL | 3 | 7 | 13 | 43 | 47 | 5 | 118 |

- a) 40% of all respondents arrived in the Okanagan Valley between 1981–90.
36% of all respondents arrived in the Okanagan between 1971–80.
b) 7 respondents were born in the Okanagan Valley, and are not listed in the above table.
c) 55% of respondents have their origin in British Columbia, with large numbers coming from areas such as Vancouver, the Fraser Valley, northern B.C. and the Revelstoke, Salmon Arm, Sicamous areas

19% of respondents have their origin in Ontario.
15% of respondents have their origin in Alberta.

trend, the average age of the respondent was relatively high at 54 years of age. This essentially indicates the presence of an older generation respondent, and this conclusion is further supported by the fact that almost one half of the 125 Finns (45%) responding to the question are retired (Table 4).

Most respondents have moved to the area from within British Columbia (55%), followed by Ontario (19%), Alberta (15%), and Saskatchewan Finns (5%). Other areas of origin include the Yukon, Northwest Territories, New Brunswick, Montana, Oregon and Michigan. No direct migration from Finland to the Okanagan Valley was found through the research (Table 2).

Cultural Activities

A highlight of cultural activity occurred in the summer of 1988, when the Serena Girls Choir of Esbolebygdens Musikskola of Espoo, Finland, gave the official opening concert for the Okanagan Summer School of the Arts. A choir of 33 member with conductor Kjerstin Sikstrom presented many "Swedish selections of a wide variety and context, which were performed almost entirely a cappella" (Penticton Herald, July 19, 1988). Local papers such as the Herald gave raving reviews for their performance, and helped promote the choir's 24-week Canadian tour. Local people, including some Finnish residents helped billet choir members during their stay in Penticton (Interview with Mrs. Mary Domi).

Apart from this rare visit by a famous Finnish choir, seldom has there been other such noted activities. Rather, some local efforts have been organized to have picnics, get-togethers and even sewing bees amongst the residents in the Kelowna area. One such period was from

1974-1984, when picnics were held at Carr's Landing, near Okanagan Centre. At the home of a Finnish respondent, numerous Finns attended get-togethers, enjoying games, music, dancing, and the ever-present sauna along Okanagan Lake (Interview with Mrs. Ilmi Gasman). These events were organized by Mr. & Mrs. Rautiainen, Mrs. Hilja Honkala and Mrs. Sally Maunu, who were energetic in keeping contact amongst the Finnish people of the area. Along with organized activities, Mrs. Honkala often planned and celebrated important birthdays, such as the 50th birthdates, and 25th wedding anniversaries, by inviting local Finns to take part in the parties (Correspondence with Mrs. Hilja Honkala; interview with Mr. Eric Jakku).

Table 3. Reasons for moving to the Okanagan Valley

| | |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| For health reasons | 6 |
| Business/employment | 17 |
| Personal (family, relatives) | 32 |
| Retirement | 11 |
| Climate | 34 |
| Lifestyle, nice place to live | 16 |
| Born here | 7 |
| No response | 2 |
| TOTAL | 125 |

- a) 9/125 respondents (7%) were either born in the Okanagan Valley or did not respond to this question.
- b) The biggest reason for settlement was climatic factors (27%), which also interplays with reasons involving health (5%), and general lifestyle of the area (13%).

Personal reasons, such as family ties, relatives, educational opportunities, and housing conditions drew 25% of the respondents to the Valley.

Business and job opportunities drew 14% of all respondents, while retirement drew 9% of the respondents.

Table 4. Demographics

| Age | 20-30 | 31-40 | 41-50 | 51-60 | 61+ | Total |
|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| Number | 12 | 20 | 19 | 21 | 53 | 125 |

Average age = 54 years. Standard deviation = 16.7

a) Youngest respondent = 20, oldest respondent = 83

b) 42 % of all respondents were over the age of 61 years

Table 5. Number of respondents that make Finnish food

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes | 78 |
| No | 44 |
| No reply | 3 |
| TOTAL | 125 |

62 % of all respondents make Finnish food
38 % do not make Finnish food

Table 6. Number of respondents who own or use a sauna

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes | 67 |
| No | 57 |
| No reply | 1 |
| TOTAL | 125 |

54 % of all respondents presently use a sauna
46 % of all respondents do not use a sauna

Table 7. Readership of Finnish literature in the past or present

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes | 52 |
| No | 70 |
| No reply | 3 |
| TOTAL | 125 |

43 % of all respondents do read/have read Finnish literature, Finnish magazines, Finnish-Canadian newspapers, etc.
57 % do not/have read Finnish literature

Table 8. Respondents speaking Finnish at home

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Yes | 40 |
| No | 84 |
| No reply | 1 |
| TOTAL | 125 |

32 % of all respondents speak Finnish at home
68 % of all respondents do not speak Finnish at home

A sewing bee was conducted and organized by Mrs. Sirkka Tukkimaki for a few year, between 1985-87, in which up to 17 Finnish women participated. Meetings were held at regular two-week to one month intervals, and some events such as a Christmas party in 1986, which drew over 50 people, was organized for the member families. Proceeds from this party, including "coffee money", was sent to a Vancouver Children's Hospital (Interviews with Mrs. Leppanen, Mrs.

Lesniewksi, Mrs. Tukkimaki and Mrs. Wasenius).

While the extent of cultural activity is not vast, there are other means of maintaining the Finnish culture. The interest in Finnish foods, bakings, etc. receives the most support amongst the local Finns, and 62% of the respondents enjoy Finnish cuisine (Table 5). The presence and use of the sauna is another indicator of Finnish culture, and 54% of the respondents indicate either owning or using a sauna reg-

Table 9. Intermarriage vs. retired/working respondents

| Ethnicity of spouse | Retired | Employed | Total |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| English/Scottish | 9 | 18 | 27 |
| Finnish | 17 | 9 | 26 |
| Canadian | 3 | 10 | 13 |
| German | 3 | 3 | 6 |
| Irish | 1 | 3 | 4 |
| Norwegian | 3 | 1 | 4 |
| Dutch | - | 3 | 3 |
| French | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Polish | - | 2 | 2 |
| Swedish | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Danish | - | 1 | 1 |
| Ukrainian | - | 1 | 1 |
| Austrian | 1 | - | 1 |
| Estonian | 1 | - | 1 |
| American | - | 1 | 1 |
| Widowed | 12 | - | 12 |
| Single | 3 | 12 | 15 |
| Divorced/Separated | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| No response | - | 1 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 57 | 68 | 125 |

- a) 17/41 or 41% of married, retired respondents have a Finnish spouse
9/41 or 23% have an English/Scottish spouse
- b) 18/54 or 33% of married, employed respondents have an English/Scottish spouse
10/54 or 19% of married, employed respondents have a Finnish spouse

From this table, it is clearly seen, that the retired older generation respondents have married to Finnish spouses more so than the younger, working respondent. Thus, English/Scottish and Canadian spouses dominate the marriages of the younger generation category.

ularly (Table 6). Readership of Finnish literature follows, as 43% of the respondents have read or do read some, i.e. newspapers or books (Table 7). It is interesting to note that the Okanagan Regional Library has a good collection of Finnish books in Vernon, Kelowna and Penticton, which can be borrowed by the public.

Finally, the Finnish language ranks last, as only 32% of the respondents speak Finnish at home (Table 8). These findings correspond to the order of cultural upkeep among the Finns of Atlantic Canada, although the Finnish language appears better maintained among

the Okanagan Finns (Roinila 1992:19-20).

Out of all married respondents, 27% have a Finnish spouse, while the majority of the respondents have an English/Canadian spouse (42%). Less common spousal origins include mostly Europeans such as German, French, Dutch, Irish and other Scandinavians, along with American spouses. Further, it is noted that 41% of all married, retired respondents have a Finnish spouse, while only 19% of married, and presently employed respondents have a Finnish spouse (Table 9).

Religious Activities

The Finns of the Okanagan Valley seem to have a strong desire to upkeep some religious activity. There are numerous church supported functions that occur in the area. First, and the longest continuing organized activity is a once a month bible-study/church service in Kelowna. Originally started by Mr. & Mrs. Rauno Rätty in 1980, as a bi-weekly bible-study, the group has grown and today meets once a month at the home of Esther Rissanen. The monthly meetings are supported by the Finnish Missionary Church of Vancouver and Pastor John Sievanen. These meetings attract at times from a dozen to more than two dozen Finns, from various denominational back-

grounds (Interview with Miss Esther Rissanen).

A second group involves a home bible-study/church meeting that has been started in Summerland. Here, some 16 people attended a January meeting that was led by Pastor Herman Blumerous from the Finnish Pentecostal Church of Vancouver. Since this initial meeting, other meetings have been held, and a desire among the Finns in the area suggests that get-togethers such as this will continue in the future (Interview with Mr. Hannu Kivi).

The Apostolic Lutheran Church is a third congregation that has members from the Okanagan Valley. Respondents from Armstrong attend regular weekly meetings near Sorrento, some 75 km

Table 10. Identity breakdown — respondent self-identity vs. respondent generation

| Generation | Finnish | Finnish-Canadian | Canadian of Finnish origin | Canadian | Other | Total |
|--------------|-----------|------------------|----------------------------|-----------|----------|------------|
| First | 7 | 30 | 16 | 2 | 1 | 56 |
| Second | 2 | 10 | 20 | 12 | 1 | 45 |
| Third | 1 | 4 | 10 | 4 | 1 | 20 |
| Fourth | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 4 |
| TOTAL | 10 | 46 | 47 | 19 | 3 | 125 |

- a) 38% of respondents identify themselves as Finnish-Canadians
38% of respondents identify themselves as Canadians of Finnish origin
16% of respondents identify themselves as Canadian
8% of respondents identify themselves as Finnish
- b) 55% of 1st generation respondents are Finnish-Canadians
29% of 1st generation respondents are Canadians of Finnish origin
13% of 1st generation respondents are Finnish
3% of 1st generation respondents are Canadian
- c) 44% of respondents were 1st generation
36% of respondents were 2nd generation
17% of respondents were 3rd generation
3% of respondents were 4th generation
- d) 45% of 2nd generation respondents = Canadian of Finnish origin
- e) 52% of 3rd generation respondents = Canadian of Finnish origin

Table 11. Present occupations of employed vs. education of respondent

| Activity | Elementary | High School | College | University | No response | Total |
|--------------|------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-------------|-----------|
| Primary | 3 | - | 2 | - | - | 5 |
| Secondary | - | 1 | 3 | - | - | 4 |
| Tertiary | 1 | 9 | 13 | 2 | - | 25 |
| Quaternary | - | 5 | 2 | 1 | - | 8 |
| Quinary | - | 3 | - | 11 | - | 14 |
| Housewife | 1 | 3 | - | 1 | - | 5 |
| Student | - | 2 | 1 | 1 | - | 4 |
| No response | - | 1 | - | - | 2 | 3 |
| TOTAL | 5 | 24 | 21 | 16 | 2 | 68 |

- a) 26% of working respondents have a university education
 31% of working respondents have a college education
 35% of working respondents have a high school education
 8% of working respondents have an elementary education
- b) 8% of respondents are involved in primary activities, such as agriculture, logging or mining
 69% of all working respondents are involved in some service sector activity, tertiary/quaternary or quinary industries

Some of the occupations include positions such as managers, teachers, welders, contractors, notary publics, realtors, doctors, dentists, secretaries, machinists, accountants, bricklayers and government employees. Very few are involved in primary industries, with only the forestry industry employing some Finns.

Table 12. Past occupations vs. educational level of the respondent

| Activity | Elementary | High School | College | University | Total |
|--------------|------------|-------------|-----------|------------|-----------|
| Primary | 10 | 7 | 3 | - | 20 |
| Secondary | 3 | 3 | 1 | - | 7 |
| Tertiary | 5 | 4 | 3 | - | 12 |
| Quaternary | 2 | 1 | 5 | - | 8 |
| Quinary | - | - | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Housewife | 4 | 1 | - | - | 5 |
| No response | 2 | 1 | - | - | 3 |
| TOTAL | 26 | 17 | 13 | 1 | 57 |

- a) 44% of the retired respondents have only elementary education
 only 1/57 went through university education
 35% of the retired respondents were involved in primary activities, such as forestry, mining, agriculture, as well as fishing
 39% of retired respondents were involved in tertiary and above activities

In comparing the two tables, it is noted that the largest proportion of respondents with the elementary education level and involved in the primary activities is found among the retired population of the area. The younger generation, with higher educational backgrounds, have reached past the high school level, into colleges and universities. This is to be expected, since the older generation had little opportunity to continue in education, and the need for employment was predominant with the earlier immigrants. A clear distinction then can be made between the retired and the working respondents and their responses to the questionnaire.

Table 13. Income levels vs. retired/working respondents

| | Under \$10 000 | \$10- \$20 000 | \$20- \$30 000 | \$30- \$40 000 | \$40- \$50 000 | Over \$50 000 | No reply | Total |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|----------|-------|
| Retired | 6 | 15 | 6 | 7 | 2 | 4 | 17 | 57 |
| Working | 1 | 3 | 9 | 19 | 5 | 22 | 9 | 68 |
| TOTAL | 7 | 18 | 15 | 26 | 7 | 26 | 26 | 125 |

a) 30 % of the retired respondents did not reply to this question
38 % of the retired respondents (15/40 reporting) earn \$10-\$20 000/year

b) 37 % of the working respondents (22/59 reporting) earn over \$50 000/year
32 % of the working respondents (19/59 reporting) earn \$30-\$40 000/year

from Armstrong attend regular weekly meetings near Sorrento, some 75 km. northwest of Armstrong. About 15-20 adults and 15 children belong to this groups, which meets at the Notch Hill Old School. The congregation has a regular pastor, and also attracts visiting ministers and missionaries from as far as Finland (Interview with Mrs. Rantala).

Finally, the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church is well represented in the Okanagan Valley. This congregation is strong, with over 33 regular attenders, and numerous children found in the Summerland area. Meetings are held in local homes every Sunday, and at special occasions, missionaries are invited to bring communion services to the congregation. A large Lutheran Church facility is used for these special meetings, which draw well over one hundred participants from as far as Washington State. Missionaries have visited from Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana and Washington. A large congregation in Vanderhoof, B.C. also draws many Summerland residents to some of their meetings and vice versa (Interview with Mr. Heikki Kuoppala).

The Apostolic and the Old Apostolic Lutheran Church are part of a movement originally started by Reverend Lars Levi Lestadius in the mid-1800's in northern

Sweden. Both church congregations are members of the Association of American Laestadian Congregations, and as such officially organized.

Further Research Findings

The many tables shown in the appendices show the various data that was collected and tabulated by using cross-tabulations and descriptive statistics. Some of these have been mentioned already, but some others are explained here.

As with other studies dealing with assimilation, the Okanagan Firms show a shift in their ethnic identity over time. First generation respondents more readily identify themselves as being Finnish-Canadians (55%), followed by Canadian of Finnish origin (29%), and Finnish (13%). While the 13% Finnish identity among this generation is quite low, the figure is the highest among the four generations encountered. Among the second and third generations, identity shifts more towards Canadian of Finnish origin (45% and 52% respectively), and follows with the assimilation of further generations to the host society (Table 10).

When the respondents are divided into categories of presently working or

retired respondents, some interesting differences are found to exist among the Finnish population of the Okanagan Valley. While it was earlier noted that retired respondents have married more often to Finnish spouses, according to respondents, the economic activities of these two groups also are quite different. Among the presently working respondent, a much higher educational background has enabled employment in industrial sectors removed from the primary industries. More younger respondents are employed in service oriented positions (Table 11). Conversely, among the retired respondents, the primary industries held the largest proportion of the respondents, and can be attributed partially to their somewhat lower level of education (Table 12). This difference between retired and employed respondents is further noted in their levels of income. A larger proportion of retired respondents earn between \$10-\$20 000 per year, partially as a result of pension plans, etc. while the working respondent earns much more (Table 13).

Conclusions

From this study, it is noted that the Finns of the Okanagan can be broken into two

distinct classes — working respondents and retired respondents. The data shows that these two groups have different tendencies in intermarriage, employment sectors occupied, and educational backgrounds. Due to the popularity of the Okanagan's climate, many have moved to the region for reasons other than employment. This is noted with the recent influx of settlers in the past two decades. Although little cultural or religious activity has occurred, there are small pockets of activity that continue to bring the local Finns together. Most notable of these activities involves religious meetings held in Kelowna and Summerland. While the older generation Finns have tried and wish to continue their heritage in some manner, younger generation respondents are seldom involved in the ongoing activities. As a result, the two groups of people have become polarized, with little interaction between the younger and older respondents.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Canadian Suomi Foundation of Thunder Bay, and the Institute of Migration of Turku, Finland, for their financial help and support in this research. Without their help and interest, this work would not have been possible.

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