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On the Move, On Their Own: Female Finnish Immigrants in the Red Lodge, Montana

"*I didn't come here because of men but because of my work*", wrote Finnish immigrant Anna Hakola from Seattle, Washington, to her boyfriend Mikko Marttunen in Red Lodge, Montana (correspondence of Mikko Marttunen; Anna Hakola to Mikko Marttunen, October 29, 1923). In her correspondence, Anna clarified her primary purpose in leaving the coal mining village of Red Lodge: not to win the affections of another man, but to seek greater employment opportunities in urban Seattle.

Anna's letters conveyed the desire for economic freedom and independence that implied many Finnish women to leave the security of their families and create new lives for themselves in distant cities. Once they settled in the United States, Finnish women found jobs, practiced their professions, and raised families. They bettered their own lives by forming labor unions and social organizations, and acted to irradicate the injustices they saw in American society and in the world at large.

Anna Hakola left Finland in 1917 to join her family already settled in Red Lodge. Finnish women began emigrating in the 1860s when their husbands or fathers were recruited by a Norwegian mining company to work in Northern Michigan's copper mines. Women and their families accompanied their husbands, or followed them after the family breadwinner had already established a home. This pattern continued until emigration from Finland began tapering off in the 1920s (Wargelin Brown 1986, p. 17–18).

Alone but armed with knowledge of the profession, midwife Aino Hamalainen Puutio left Finland in 1911 and, like Anna, settled in Red Lodge. Increasingly after 1890, single women chose to leave Finland and seek employment on their own in the United States where job opportunities were more plentiful. Feeling the population crunch in rural Finland at the turn of the century, many women moved first to Finnish cities looking for work. Seeking material gain and self-improvement, approximately 100 000 Finnish women between 1865 and 1922 created futures for themselves abroad (Wargelin Brown 1986, p. 18).

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A few of these women had an education

Women received information from Finnish men about employment in communi-

ties where Finns were working. Mikko Marttunen sent message to the girls of Kauhajoki, Finland, in a letter to his mother Emilia Aronen: *"Tell the girls that things are tough for women in Bessemer (Michigan). There are few men here, little work and not many boarding houses and dishwashing jobs"* (Mikko Marttunen to Emilia Aronen, December 11, 1910). Finnish women did find jobs as servants, laundresses, dishwashers, cooks and midwifes. While some women followed men to already established Finnish communities, many others found positions on their own, primarily as domestics in private homes (Ross 1986, p. 45).

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Red Lodge, the community where Anna Hakola and Aino Puutio lived, had reached a population of 4860 by 1910. 828 Finnish-born adults lived and worked in its coal mines, boarding houses and shops that year. 240 adult Finnish-born women lived in Red Lodge, and of these, 57 were unmarried. Twelve single Finnish women worked as servants in private homes. The remaining single women worked in Finnish boarding houses or hotels as waitresses, maids, cooks, and laundresses. One Finnish woman earned her living making dresses, while another was a shop clerk (Carbon county census manuscript, 1910). Anna Hakola worked as a waitress at the *Reintola*, the restaurant in the Finnish boarding house where Mikko Marttunen resided while Aino Puutio made her living as an educated, licensed midwife.

Aino Puutio – an educated midwife

The majority of women who emigrated to the United States were uneducated, having only a *kansakoulu* (elementary school) education (Wargelin Brown 1986, p. 18). Aino Puutio serves as an exception to this rule. She came to the U.S. from Helsinki, where she completed her medical training. Since 1879, Helsinki's maternity and children's hospital offered a course training midwives to attend births. After 10–12 months of schooling and a written examination, midwives were granted a license to practice (Harris 1979, p. 1).

Because the U.S. government did not license midwives, it is not known how many Finnish women worked as midwives in the United States, or how many were trained as Aino had been. European countries accepted the presence of midwives at births well into the 20th century, whereas in the United States, particularly in the eastern states among middle-class families, doctors had already taken over and "pro-

fessionalized" obstetrical care. Midwives who did practice were mostly immigrant of black women (Wertz and Wertz 1977, p. 45). Midwives charged less than doctors, and many immigrant women, used to the presence of a woman at deliveries, preferred midwives over doctors. Others chose midwives because doctors in sparsely populated western states were scarce. In rural Montana, a study conducted in 1919 found most mothers giving birth without a trained attendant of any kind (Wertz and Wertz 1977, p. 205). Thus Aino Puutio, as a trained midwife, served an important purpose in Montana.

Aino practiced first in Finnish American communities in the east and mid-west before friends beckoned her to Red Lodge. Though most of the mothers she served were Finns, occasionally Anglo-American doctors called upon her to attend difficult births of non-Finns. Aino provided the prospective mother with prenatal care, including information on proper diet, exercise and rest. As the date drew near, Aino supervised preparations for a delivery bed, a bassinet for the infant, and meanwhile gathered a stethoscope, catheter, thermometer, scalpel, forceps and scissors into her instrument bag. After the birth, confinement or "lying-in" lasted 10 days, during which time Aino visited each day, sometimes cooking or cleaning for the family as needed. She received $14 for her services.

Aino believed emigrating to the U.S. would bring material wealth not available in Finland, and she used her profession to work toward that goal. She discovered that gains could only be made through hard work, but the education she underwent and the years she spent practicing suggest she respected and enjoyed her work. Like other Finnish women, she imagined emigrating would bring greater happiness, and she worked to make her dreams a reality.

Anna Hakola strives after an independent life

While Aino came to the United States without relatives, Anna Hakola came as the final link of a family "chain" of emigration (Daniels 1990, p. 19). Hoping to return to Finland with money earned in Red Lodge's mines, Esa Hakola's plans changed with the coming of World War I. In 1916 his wife Marja sold their farm, and encouraged their son Oliver to avoid conscription into the Russian army by joining his father in the U.S. Marja and Anna's three sisters followed shortly after Oliver's departure. Anna came last in 1918. (Zupan and Owens 1979, p. 320).

Though she came to live with her family, Anna wanted to secure the resources necessary to live apart from parental influence. She had always made this her primary concern, as she wrote to Mikko: *" I have to be able to make my own living and besides I would not want to live at home"* (Anna to Mikko, December 18, 1922). Anna found temporary employment at the *Reintola* boarding house, but soon after, a strike occurred at the coal mines. Esa Hakola, along with many Finnish miners, gave up mining in favor of farming in nearby Roberts, Montana. The boarding houses lost residents, and employees were let go. Anna found herself again living with her parents on the farm in Roberts.

In October 1922, Anna left Red Lodge and relocated further west in Seattle, Washington. Her departure resulted primarily from her inability to find work in Red Lodge, but also from her dissatisfaction with her and Mikko's relationship, and her distaste for the isolated Finnish community in Red Lodge.

Anna's relationship with Mikko was an unhappy one. Uncertain as to where she wanted her relationship with him to go, her equivocation stemmed from his domineer-

ing personality and his drinking habits. As she told him in her letter: *"I don't demand your punctuality and that you have to do as I say, but you, Mikko, demand things from me. If someone gives me orders my life is crushed"* (Anna to Mikko, December 28, 1922). Desiring to live her life as she wanted, Anna struggled to free herself from his authoritative personality.

Mikko had asked her to marry him, but she had always refused, though apparently not adamantly enough to stop him from asking again. Anna hesitated because of Mikko's frequent drinking binges, as reflected in this letter: *"Let me know if you want to get married because I think we should not hurry. And Mikko, in God's name stop drinking. Donït give into those devil innkeepers ... you always reach out for the bottle when you feel bad"* (Anna to Mikko, December 28, 1922). Even as Anna rebuffed Mikko's offers of marriage, her only other option in Red Lodge seemed to be to live with her parents. In Seattle, Anna found she had many more choices. Here, she could make her own way in life, with or without a husband.

Away from an insular ethnic community

Anna also left Red Lodge to escape the isolated Finnish community that had developed there. Like nearly half of Red Lodge's Finns, Anna could not speak English, and could not easily mingle with other ethnic groups or Anglo-Americans in the community. Red Lodge's Finns, as in other Finnish American communities, lived in neighborhoods separate from the rest of the community. They shopped at Finnish owned businesses, drank at Finnish bars, and socialized with and married their fellow-countrymen (Kuhlman 1990, p. 6). As Anna complained to Mikko in a letter dated November 22, 1922: *"I've been quite sad in this big city* [Seattle] *but this is not as bad as in Red Lodge. People come and go here, so they don't have so much interest in other people like the people in Red Lodge. In Red Lodge people can really oppress you and make you feel bad"* (Anna to Mikko, November 22, 1922). By moving, Anna escaped the gossip that circulated in an insular ethnic community.

Once she arrived in Seattle, Anna found a job at a hospital where she earned 40 dollars a month plus room and board. Never very hale, Anna's health worsened after a few months on the job. Apparently she contracted pneumonia, but by the fall she had recovered and found a new job at Seattle's Swedish Hospital. In a letter Anna told Mikko about her work: *"I worked in the other* [hospital] *for awhile but the doctors told me not to do such hard work. I could have become head waitress there, since I knew the job so well. Men liked my work. In fact, I've gotten a lot of compliments about my work wherever I work. I want to show with my work how good I am"* (Anna to Mikko, September 3, 1923). Anna worked not simply to earn money to live on, but to gain pride and self-worth.

Anna left Seattle shortly after she wrote to Mikko for the last time. She developed an allergy to the disinfectants used at the hospital, and returned to the family farm in Roberts. She moved again to Butte, Montana, where she continued to work in boarding houses and at hospitals after her marriage in 1928. She earned the self-pride and financial independence her work gave her.

Among Finnish women there were various activities

If Anna Hakola complained of the insularity of the community, some Finnish women thrived on the varied activities living in the ethnic enclave provided. In Red Lodge, some women joined the secret society "La-

dies of Kaleva" formed in 1904 to promote Finnish culture. Beginning in 1909, fourteen women performed in the Finnish Ladies' Band. Others, perhaps more athletically inclined, performed gymnastic feats in the Women's Gymnastic Club. Red Lodge boasted a Finnish theater group, where women and men acted in the plays they performed (Harris 1979, p. 179–187).

Other Finnish immigrant women, in addition to activities within the community, found ways to connect with the world outside of Red Lodge's Finnish enclave. World war I became the event that forced Finns and other immigrants to query themselves about their place in American society. Some Finns declared themselves loyal Americans in support of American intervention in the war, while some joined Americans and other foreigners in organized anti-war activity. The Industrial Workers of the World, a labor union of unskilled workers, mobilized radical Finns to voice their anti-war sentiments. So taken by IWW philosophy was one Red Lodge Finn that she decided to form a branch of the union herself (Kuhlman 1987, p. 93).

Female Finns as working-class union members

The IWW, formed in 1905, called for the unification of all unskilled workers, including women and foreigners, in one union embracing all industries. Finnish men and women were drawn to the IWW, and to unionism in general, because they saw union activity as the only means of achieving the economic gains they had hoped for when they emigrated to the U.S. Female Finnish domestic workers began unionizing as soon as they arrived in the U.S. in the 1890s. Because their primary occupation was domestic work, women did not have to deal with powerful industrial employers as their male counterparts did. But women did seek to better their economic positions, and they felt a comraderie with their fellow working-class union members (Karvonen 1977, p. 197).

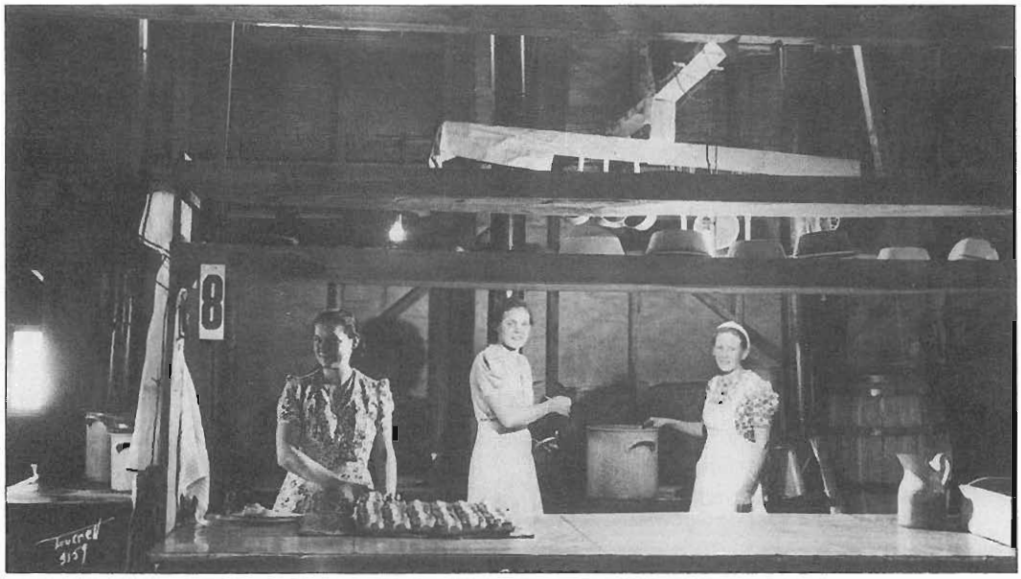

Photo Collections of the Institute of Migration.

The IWW attracted Finnish women who saw themselves as a part of the oppressed working-class, who saw industrial capitalism as an unjust system, and who saw the First World War as a war waged by capitalists to gain control of the world's resources. The IWW waged a vigorous anti-war campaign in cities all across the U.S. (Miles 1986, p. 13–15).

In 1917, as the U.S. joined the war effort, a Finnish parlor maid working at Red Lodge's Southern Hotel became exasperated with the working conditions there. Upon hearing of the IWW and its goals, she determined to change her situation by joining the union. She began taking names, collecting dues, and distributing IWW literature among the female domestics at the Hotel. A couple of days later, she found her position at the Southern terminated. In response to what she felt was unfair treatment by her boss, she wrote an anonymous letter to the *Industrialisti*, a Finnish-American newspaper which had become an organ of the IWW (Hummasti 1977, p. 184). In the letter, the woman revealed her reasons for joining the union: *"Among the lady wage earners* [in Red Lodge] *conditions are so hot and unbearable. Employers demand much more than the weak women can endure, and the wages are too small in comparison with the cost of living. Therefore it has caused our minds to boil in such a pitch that we know we need an IWW"* (Industrialisti, October 23, 1917). A translation and story appeared in the November 23, 1917, issue of the Red Lodge Picket.

The actions the maid took suggest that she felt her union activity would empower her to change the working conditions at her job. Not stopping at personal goals, she perceived the IWW as a way to change another situation she would intolerable; lives lost to the capitalists she believed had started the war. As she explained to her employer, she joined the IWW because she believed distributing IWW literature would stop the war.

Constructive work for a better life

Emigrating to the United States allowed Finnish women greater freedom of opportunity to live and work as they pleased. When they came to the U.S. they brought with them, in the case of midwife Aino and others like her, skills that were greatly needed, especially in rural states such as Montana. Anna Hakola and others changed their individual situations first, and then, as the parlor maid, acted to transform society through their unionizing efforts. Far from the stereotypical female emigrant who was buffeted about on life's stormy seas, these women rode the waves of their own creation.

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