

# Finnish Independence Day in the United States

The American Finnish festival calendar is well known for Laskiainen, Vappu, Juhannus, Vortsulai, Finn Fest, and Pikkujoulu. There is yet another traditional event, Finnish Independence Day. It has been celebrated in Finnish communities throughout the United States in a manner and historical framework similar to the homeland.

*The celebration of freedom and independence for this young republic, our forefathers' and the Finnish people's homeland, is celebrated on December 6 and every genuine American Finn also wants to participate with all his heart. Our people living in various communities across this broad America hold public celebrations with patriotic programs, speeches, songs, and music. There are many places where they cannot organize public celebrations but where the Finnish inhabitants celebrate with their families or just in the quiet of their homes. But all are warmed by the same emotion which throbs the same as in a Finnish heart and which offers the same sincere thanks to the Higher Power that He has blessed the fatherland which has been able to free itself of the foreign power and take its chosen place among the world's powers.<sup>1</sup>*

This selection from a December 2, 1922, editorial in the *Amerikan Suometar* (Hancock, Michigan) indicates that in five



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short years the celebration had taken a firm place in both public and private spheres.

Reading through *Amerikan Suometar*, for example, the quick adoption is apparent. Throughout 1917 and 1918 the struggle for independence made front page news. While *itsenäisyyspäivä* was established in Finland already in 1919,<sup>2</sup> there is no mention made yet of American

celebrations during that year perhaps because of the influenza epidemic which was raging and typically led to the banning of public gatherings. But in 1920, the paper had a big ad offering Finnish flags (the *Olympialippu*) as a suitable *juhla-merkki* to be used in celebrations for the price of one dollar. This year marks the beginning of reports of community events under local news columns from throughout the country. As well, there is consistent reporting on the content of the events and speeches in Helsinki.

The format of Independence Day (variously termed *itsenäisyyspäivä*, *itsenäisyysjuhla*, *Suomen itsenäisyydenjuhla*, and *Suomen lippupäivä*) was clearly established from the start as focusing on "a suitable and solemn program."<sup>3</sup> It assumed the homeland model of a serious celebration containing meaningful Finnish music, patriotic speeches and readings followed by refreshments. There was

never any confusion with the boisterous American means of celebrating the Fourth of July. The spirit is more consistent with Veteran's Day which commemorates the end of hostilities in 1918 and 1945 and American war dead. Always the focus is on the concept of a quality program.

At first, the celebrations were held on December 6, but by 1927 they were being held on weekends, often on Sundays. An early (1920) celebration described as the first in Negaunee was already a full-blown event with a choir, a speech (*juhlapuhe*), readings and piano solos as well as the singing of "Maamme" and "America" followed by a coffee table. Speakers usually were prominent American Finns such as newspaper editors, pastors, businessmen, and scholars. In urban areas, such as New York City, they might be Finnish diplomats such as attaché Akseli Rauanheimo-Järnefelt (1922). The programs could be quite elaborate such as

Juhlivat suomalaiset Suomen itsenäisyyttä. Sopivin juhla-merkki on  
**SUOMEN LIPPU (Olympialippu)**  
 Hinta \$1.

Seuroille ja juhlatöimikunnille lähetetään lippuja pyydettyä. Tilaukset lähetettävä os.: Suom. Lut. Kustannusliike, Hancock, Mich.

**Jouluk.  
 6  
 päivää**

**MONES**  
 ehdottein...  
**F. W.**  
 208-02

**Kirjoja**  
 Pyytää...  
 näkin vuonna.  
 lutaan.  
**AUG. ED**  
 20 208 21.

Advertisement for Finnish flags. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 2, 1920).

# SUOMEN TASAVALTA

## 1917 — JOULUKUUN 6 p. — 1927

Tänään on Suomen itsenäisyyden päivä. Täällä Suomen kansa ja Suomen kansalliset miehet maissa vierätyt Suomen vapauden ajattelimen kymmeneksi vuosijuhla.

Suomalaiset ovat sielkaita ja edustamattomia ihmisiä, vaikka he ovat nuorempia sivistyskansojen joukossa. Ainoastaan sitä vuotta sitten oli se pieni kansa, jolla ei ollut kukaan eikä omia kansallista kirjallisuutta. Tästä päivästä on Suomen kansa korkeasti valittunut, joka ei olekaan nimeltäänkään ihonvaidon, vaan on sillä vireällä koulutusmiehen, joka on ollut harvasta valitusta ja kirjallisuudesta, sen muuttanut varta varteen maahan parhaammalle "Kalevala", jota suuremman suomalaisen seppänen runoilija on uusi ja ainoita ainoita "Ilmari" rinnalla.

Todennäköisesti valta on luovutettu Suomessa presidentille, joka on valittu kuusi vuotta. Tällä lailla kansan suostunut edustantia, jonka 200 jäsentä valitaan kolmeksi vuodeksi kerralla. Suomessa on kumpikin sukupolvi sivistyskelpoinen. Kaikki kansalliset, jotka ovat kumpikin ja kumpikin, saavat kunnioitusta. Hallintomiesten joukossa on kyykkäitä, edustamattomia ja järkevää mieltä. Virkkauden valmistajien, hallintomiesten ja toimittajien välinä on ollut ja tulee olemaan, Suomi on vielä niin harvasta maista, joka on jo vuonna 1927 luovutettu sen vuoden kukaan meidän.

Suomi on kansallista sivistyneen vuosikymmenen kerralla, maahanvalitusta ja kyykkäistä. Se on rohkeasti astunut pimeydestä valoon ottaneen ansaitun ja kunnioitettua polkan Suomen tasavalta kansojen maahan perheessä, josta jokainen, joka vapautta rakastaa, tekee kunniaan astulle — **21:MI** — tulla vapauden vuosipäivänä.

### Houghton National Bank

Houghton MICHIGAN

Standard Oil se  
Standard Oil se  
ta ja jaksen  
garage

**Standard O**  
Hancock

AMERIKAN SUOME

ISROCCERIA ja LIHAA  
Isaac Lehto & Sons

Ad honorem Finnish independence. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 6, 1927)

the one held in the South Range, Michigan, Kaleva Hall in 1922 which included a play and melodrama as well as the other typical program elements. In important anniversary years, such as 1927 and 1937, programs were particularly extensive. In 1927, the Hancock High School auditorium was the setting of a program which included the Suomi College orchestra, a men's choir, a two act dramatization utilizing the poetry of Eino Leino and the *Kanteletar*, as well as speeches, readings, solos, and the closing of the program with "Maamme" and "America." This grand occasion was sponsored by a coalition of local groups - - the Kalevans, Suomi College, the Copper Country Lauluveikot, the temperance society, and the Hancock Evangelical Lutheran Church choir. A newspaper ad placed by a local bank saluted Finns ("Finns are intelligent and progressive people although they belong to the group of newer civilized nati-

ons"4) and Finland ("Everyone who loves freedom salutes you, Suomi, on this your anniversary of freedom"5).

A duality of identity and a recognition of the American context was visible from the beginning. "America" and "The Star Spangled Banner" were included on programs. If there was a flag ceremony, the American was represented. In later years, the primary language became English; but still today an Independence Day program remains a time when Finnish is heard. Now the celebrations are occasions to familiarize Finnish Americans, who are well beyond the immigrant generation, with a nation and often a heritage which are not familiar. Independence Day has become a time not only to strengthen identity but also to learn facts.

The original essence of Independence Day was one of duty. Excerpts from several years' descriptions of various descriptions of various celebrations show

the patriotic sensitivity connecting Finns in America with the *isänmaa*.

*Let no American of Finnish descent say Finland's independence is no concern of ours. We have no right thus to evade our responsibility. The duty to help Finland is ours. By helping, we thereby prove our Americanism. America's mission is to democratize the world. In helping Finland to seek recognition of her independence as a nation, we Americans are helping our country to fulfill its noble world mission.*<sup>6</sup>

*The local people are worthy of heartfelt recognition for organizing a successful patriotic celebration.*<sup>7</sup>

*The sixth day of December 1917 means more to the people of Finland than any other day in past or present history. It is its birthday when it was born as an independent nation among the world's peoples. The commemoration of the sixth day of December is to the people of Finland great and sacred and duty bound.*<sup>8</sup>

*Finns have not yet been able to celebrate independence many years. Thus it gives us more pleasure in this foreign country to gather in the knowledge that we are free citizens of a free Finland.*<sup>9</sup>

*In South Range this celebration is honored greatly because the local pastor is a devoted and enthusiastic patriot who understands the duty not only for himself, but also to lead his parishioners in a special event to thank the Lord for all the good He has done for our Finland throughout time and particularly for the independence of Finland which the people of Finland finally received at his hand. The people of Finland gave their sons into the flames of the war of independence and bought the freedom of the fatherland at a high price. . . . Our people in the homeland recognize this celebration of independence throughout the land and the same duties belong also to us Finns here.*<sup>10</sup>

*We believe that the many obligatory teachings which can be gained in the celebration will imprint themselves eter-*

*nally in the mind.*<sup>11</sup>

*The Finnish people are urged to attend this celebration in great numbers because the celebration certainly is great in national significance.*<sup>12</sup>

*We Finns here in our new homeland send our heartfelt congratulations to the free people of Finland and we promise our strength in the work of construction. . . . To us, too, is brought a freedom as former members of the nation. This obligates us to live and act here in America so that we bring honor not just to ourselves and to our people but also to the entire Finnish people [heimo] in the name of a free Finland.*<sup>13</sup>

The symbolic significance of the day in terms of responsible patriotism is obvious. While the sentiment is expressed towards the republic of Finland, the occasion allows the strengthening of feelings of identity, in this case ethnicity, within the American context. It would seem that during early years the celebration might not have been enjoyed by all Finnish Americans. A 1922 report from Ishpeming, Michigan, notes: "The celebration of Finland's independence is not a celebration for any particular faction nor does it inveigle anyone for the good of any faction or group. . . . for it is hoped that everyone will take part in the same way."<sup>14</sup> The division of "Reds" and "Whites" also existed in the United States.<sup>15</sup> While it may not have appealed to all immigrants, Independence Day did have the character of a community event. In the twenties money also often was collected for Finland's orphans either in the form of a collection or by the sale of badges giving practical expression of group support of the homeland.

Typical early sponsors of celebrations were temperance societies, the Knights and Ladies of Kaleva, and Finnish Evangelical churches. Today the sponsorship is broader based as is the membership of extant Finnish organizations. In 1987, a random sampling of groups sponsoring Independence Day celebrations include



## OHJELMA

Suomen Hämäläisjärjestön 18-vuotisjuhlassa Hancockin Korkeakoulun juhlasalissa tiistaina jouluk. 3 p. Suomi-Opioston, Kalevan Nuorten ja Kalevan Ritarien, Kuparisareen Lauluveikkolan, Hämäläisnuorisun sekä Hancockin Ev.-Lut. Seuran kirkkokoron järjestämä.

1. ALKUSÖYTÖ: Præledium ..... säv. Järnefelt  
Suomi-Opioston orkesteri.
2. TERVEHDYSSANAT ..... Tuomitt. E. Eganstamoinen
3. YKSINLAULUA: Tarkassa hiljät hisonohelut, säv. Kilpinen  
Mäenlaulu ..... säv. Hannikainen  
Laulajatar Elin Suokas-Steinback.
4. LAUSUNTAA: Leijonallippu ..... kirj. Koskenlammi  
Mrs. M. Niemen.
5. KEIVAAN HERÄTYSBÄ ..... säv. Bach  
Suomi-Opioston orkesteri.
6. JENLÄPÖHE ..... Paast. A. Künönen
7. YKSINLAULUA: Jääkärinmarssi ..... säv. Sibellus  
Vaottaja ..... säv. Schubert  
Tri Henry Holm.
8. ISÄMAAN VIRSI ..... Kaikki
9. UHRIPÖHE ..... Mr. J. H. Jaaberg  
joka jälkeen kannetaan uhrilukia Suomen sotaväelle. Suomi-Opioston orkesterin soittaessa suomalaisia sävellyksiä.
10. MIESKUOROLAULUA:  
Karijalan Jääkärinmarssi ..... sovit. Niemen  
Tähti-Ola ..... säv. Niemen  
Star Spangled Banner ..... säv. John S. Smith  
Kuparisareen Lauluveikot.
11. SUURIN MÄNÄ: 5-kuvaelmäinen draamallinen legendo.  
Suomal. kansanlaulun draamatisointi ja säv. Martti Niemen.  
Laulutekstinä käytetty Eino Leino'n y. m. runoja  
sekä runoja Kantelettarosta.
12. MAAMME JA AMERICA ..... Kaikki  
Kuoron ja orkesterin johtaa säveltäjä Martti Niemen.  
Alkaa klo 7:30 illalla.



First Prize  
Second Prize  
Third Prize  
Fourth Prize  
Fifty Prize  
(In case of tie  
prize to)

HA

Houg

Official D

Tenth Anniversary program in Hancock, Michigan. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 3, 1927)

13845 Woodrow Wilson St. Grand  
DETROIT, MICHIGAN

# Suomen itsenäisyyden 20- vuotisjuhlaa

juhlitaan jouluk. 11 p. Highland Parkin korkeakoulun juhla-  
salissa. Ovet avataan klo 7:30 ja ohjelma alkaa klo 8 illalla.  
Oviliiput 40c. Ohjelmassa esiintyy parhaat voimat. Joka nu-  
mero on tarkoitustaan vastaava ja arvokas.

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

Ad for independence celebration. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 7, 1937)

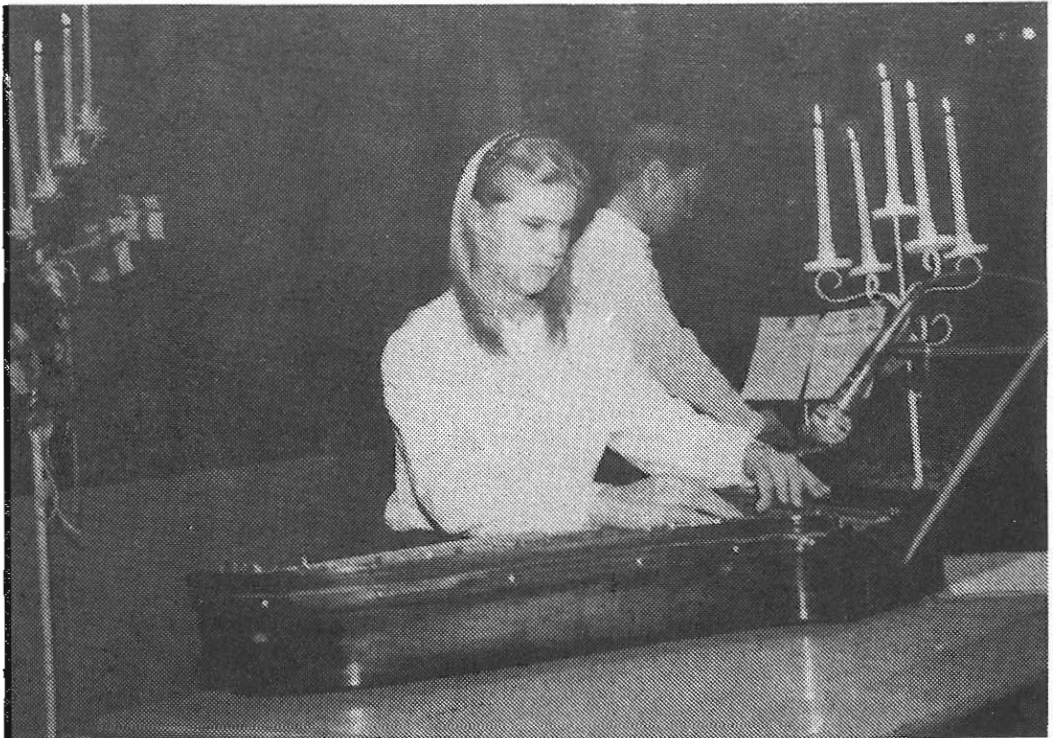
the Bethel Lutheran Church (Ishpeming, Michigan), Finlandia Foundation (Boston, Massachusetts; New York, New York), Finnish American Heritage Society (Canterbury, Connecticut), Finnish Historical Society at the Finnish Cultural Center (Detroit, Michigan), and Suomi College (Hancock, Michigan). For over sixty years the standard model has been followed as is apparent from the Boston publicity:

*The program will open with a flag ceremony and the president's welcoming address. Leonard Kopelman, Honorary Finnish Consul, will give the key-note talk, which will be followed by a brief but beautiful series of performances in celebration of the day. The New England Conservatory Brass Quintet will be on hand for the traditional SOI KUNNIAKSI LUOJAN among other well-known pieces. Other performers will include Aina Cutler reciting some short poems, the REVONTULET FOLK DANCERS, and a sekakuoro organ-*

*ized by our musician in residence extraordinaire, Roy Helander. After the program we plan to have delicious Finnish homemade hor d'oeuvres.*<sup>16</sup>

All performers nor the setting (John Hancock Building) are not Finnish but the format is traditional. The New York celebration features "almost all performers [who] have been imported from Finland."<sup>17</sup> As contemporary events focus on Finland, the symbolic value placed on homeland speakers is high.

A more home-grown program in the heartland of Finnish America is that presented annually by Suomi College. The college perceives the celebration to be vital to its mission. "Suomi is dedicated to preserving and maintaining Finnish-American culture and creating higher educational opportunity for students in a small college setting." The institution has been involved in celebrations for decades; typically they have been sponsored by Kon-



Mari Salmi Coale and Melwin Kangas playing kantele at Suomi College Independence Day Celebration (December 5, 1984)

ventii, the oldest student club which is dedicated to the maintenance of the Finnish language and culture. The college staff and surrounding community includes many knowledgeable about Finnish culture so that a hometown program features individuals who have national reputations.

Independence Day in America is a public presentation of affection for the Old Country made on a local level. Investigations should be made of audiences as to their composition and reasons for attendance. At the Hancock celebration the audience is made up of primarily "older" Finns who typically are of the second generation but who may be third generation in this area of old settlement, "younger" Finns with a strong affection for Finland who might be termed "Finnophiles," some recent immigrants, Finnish exchange students or professors, and non-Finnish community members interested in the dominant local ethnic culture. Extensive fieldwork should be done throughout the country as local Finnish communities vary widely in composition. Especially important would be the determination of the meaning of the event in relationship to other well-known Finnish celebrations in the United States. Yet it is clear from this preliminary paper that when American Finns gather amidst Finnish flags, blue and white color schemes, candlelight, the strains of kanteles or Sibelius's compositions, and tables spread with *lipeäkalaa*, *nisua*, and *joulutorttuja*, that they are reinforcing their Finnish iden-

tity. The celebration also is a time of local gathering, rather than being national, whereby one community can strengthen its identity within multicultural America.

## Footnotes

1. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 2, 1922), p. 4.
2. See Matti Kuusi, "Itsenäisyyspäivä," *JUHLA-KIRJA: Suomalaiset merkkipäivät* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura), p. 184.
3. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 2, 1922), p. 5.
4. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 3, 1927), p. 5.
5. *Ibid.*
6. O.J. Larson, "What of Finland?" *Siirtokansan Kalenteri* (1919), p. 150. *Original in English.*
7. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 7, 1920), p. 7.
8. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 9, 1920), p. 4.
9. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 6, 1921), p. 4.
10. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 9, 1922), p. 5.
11. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 12, 1922), p. 3.
12. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 1, 1927), p. 7.
13. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 4, 1937), p. 4.
14. *Amerikan Suometar* (December 2, 1922), p. 7.
15. I recently heard, for example, a story of how in 1929 in a large Finnish American community a Finnish immigrant who had fought on the side of the Whites was waylaid by a group of "Communists" intending murder. This true experience story indicates the high level of tensions on this side of the Atlantic.
16. "Finlandia Foundation" (November 1987), p. 1.
17. *New Yorkin Uutiset* (November 24, 1987), p. 15.

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