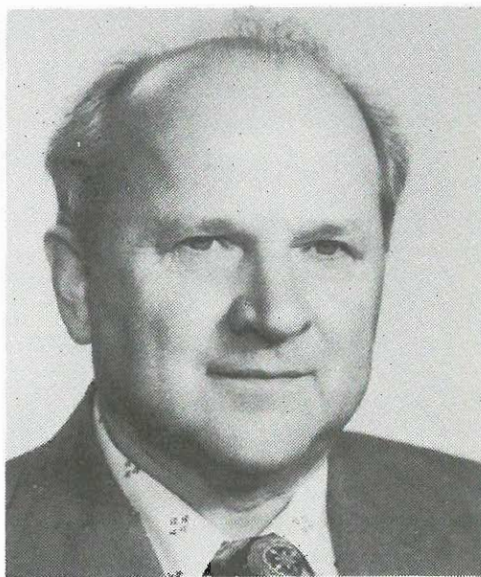


Communities as Factors of Social Geography: The Finnish Rural Settlements in The Vicinity of Thunder Bay, Ontario

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General

Immigration from Finland to the Thunder Bay area began only in the 1880's when many Finns also moved there from the United States on account of the economic recession, attracted by the prospect of railway construction work. Even so, many could find employment only periodically, and consequently set about acquiring land around Thunder Bay and took up farming (Tuominen & Valila 1971-72: 5-7). Thus many villages grew up in the Thunder Bay region whose Finnish names alone suffice to indicate that they were purely Finnish in origin (Fig.1) e.g. Intola, Alppila, Poh-



On a grant-in-aid from the Academy of Finland, Professor Uno Varjo, head of the Department of Geography in Oulu University, did research in 1982 at the universities of Western Ontario and Thunder Bay and collected data from the Finnish colonies in the Thunder Bay region through questionnaires and first-hand interviews. He complemented his data on a second visit to Ontario in 1985. The following article is based on the material collected.

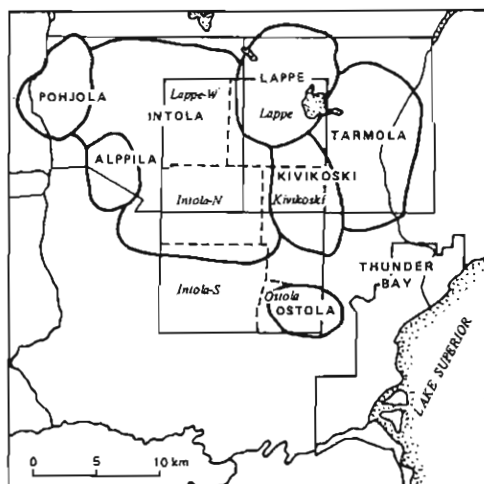


Fig. 1. Finnish settlements in the vicinity of Thunder Bay (Rasmussen 1978, Map 16), study area and its sub-areas.

jola, Tarmola, Ostola, Toimela, Kivikoski and Lappe:

The densest Finnish settlement in the area of Thunder Bay in the 1920's was in Gorham, Ware and Lybster, in all of which over four fifths of the population was Finnish (Fig. 2).

Thunder Bay as an environment for Finnish settlement

Finnish immigration into the Thunder Bay

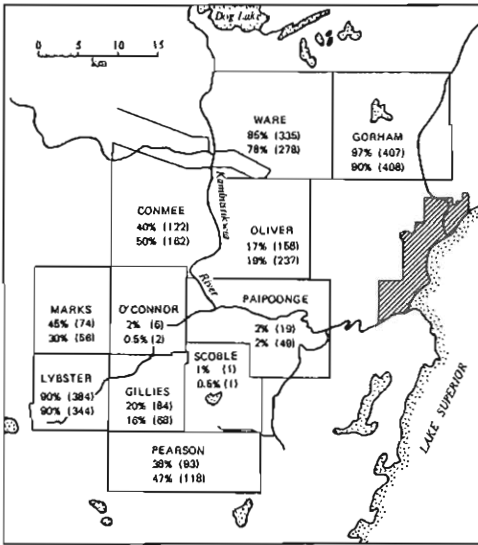


Fig. 2. Finnish populations of the Thunder Bay townships and their proportions of the total population in 1921 (above) and 1961 (below). (after Rasmussen 1978, Table 8)

region has aroused much discussion in some circles, with frequent reference being made to the opinion that the major geographical factors which attracted the Finns to this region were the similarities in landscape and the physical characteristics between Finland and the whole of the Lake Superior (Van Cleef 1952: 253-256, cf. Orr 1970: 28; Tuominen & Valila 1971-72: 9-11; Rasmussen 1978: 127).

The material from which the soils of the area are formed is of glacial origin, as in Finland. Sand and gravel deposits are associated with the shores of the ancient lake Alonquin. The majority of the northern part of the area features lacustrine deposits. Cut off from this in the south by a broad east-west end moraine zone is an extensive region of cover till with drumlines in places. It is significant, however, that the Thunder Bay region is almost entirely lacking in the lakes which are so typical of areas of glacial morphology and which are so characteristic of Finland.

The agricultural capability classification of the soils of the regions (Fig. 3) shows the best land to exist at Lappe, although

even these fields suffer from an undesirable soil structure and low permeability. The southern part of the region, with its till and peat soils, has still poorer agricultural land.

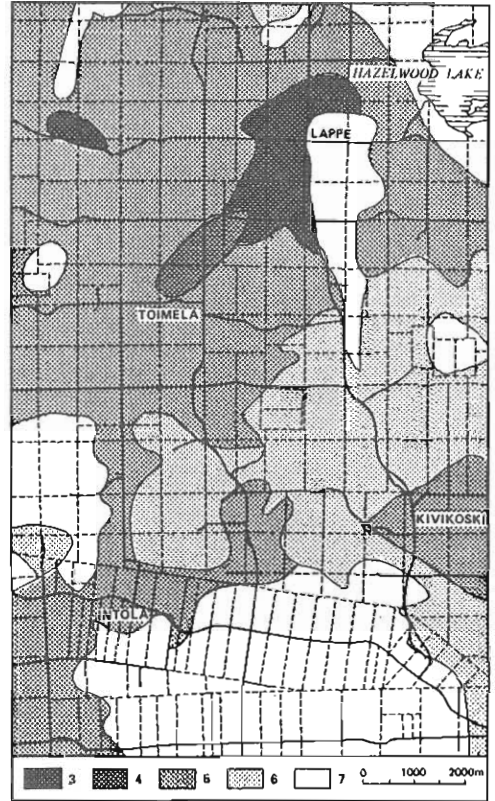


Fig. 3. Mean soil capability for agriculture in the Thunder Bay region. 3 = moderately severe limitations, 4 = severe limitations, crops require special conservation practices, 5 = very severe limitations, perennial forage crops and improvement practices feasible, 6 = soils capable of producing only perennial forage crops, improvement practices not feasible, and 7 = no capacity for agriculture or permanent pasture (organic soils not classified for capability).

Climate has always been a critical factor as far as agriculturally based rural settlement in the Thunder Bay area is concerned since, like the whole of North-western Ontario, this is a marginal region in agricultural terms. The growing season lasts about 170 days on average (see Table 1) and the effective temperature sum is 1200°C,

Table 1.

Climatic data for the Thunder Bay (Chapman & Thomas 1968; Tuhkanen 1984).

Mean annual length of growing season	172 days
Effective temperature sum ($^{\circ}\text{C}$)	1200 $^{\circ}\text{C}$
Mean annual precipitation	740 mm
Annual precipitation June-August	240 "
Mean annual snowfall	1875 "
Mean annual potential evapotranspiration	525 "
Mean annual temperature	2.4
Mean daily temperature in February	-13 $^{\circ}\text{C}$
Mean daily temperature in July	18 $^{\circ}\text{C}$
Mean date last frost	May, 31
Mean date first frost	September, 12
Mean annual frost free period	104 days
Frost sum	1200 $^{\circ}\text{C}$

which corresponds roughly to the figures for Southern Finland, but the annual minimum temperature of -40°C is perhaps somewhat lower than in Finnish Lapland. There are also many vegetational similarities between Finland and the Thunder Bay area, although one particularly striking feature of the forests in the latter area is the much wider variety of species.

As may be appreciated there are really many similarities between Finland and the Thunder Bay area, although few of them would alone be sufficiently compelling to account for the fact that the Finns chose to

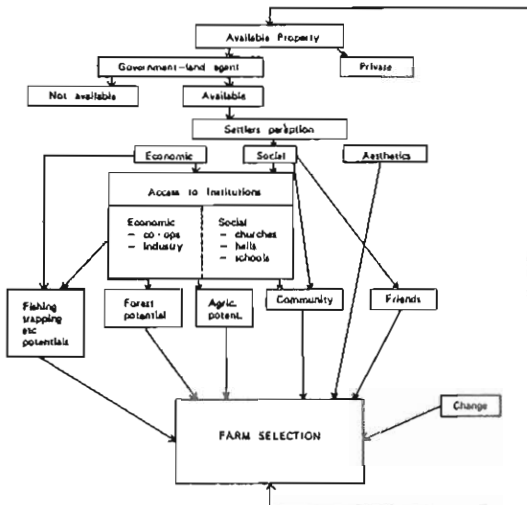


Fig. 4. Farm selection model for early Finnish settlement in the rural areas of Thunder Bay (Rasmussen 1978: 115).

settle in this area to the extent that they did. The valuable work of Rasmussen (1978: 115) sets out to demonstrate just how many factors were involved in the decision of a Finnish immigrant to establish a farm in the Thunder Bay area (Fig. 4).

Land ownership and farming

At least as important a factor as the similarity in physical conditions in predisposing the Finns towards settling in the surroundings of Thunder Bay was the opportunity of farming land of their own. Conditions in Canada were nevertheless entirely different from those prevailing in Finland.

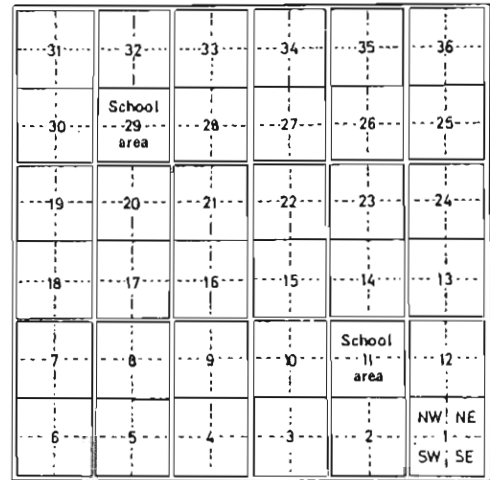


Fig. 5. Scheme for a township in Canada, after Ehlers (1965: 52).

Finland is a country which has had permanent human settlement for almost two thousand years, and where the farms differ vastly in size and shape. The farms also regularly include areas of forest land, mire, meadow and water, all of which are incorporated into the economy of the farm in one way or another. Settlement in Canada, on the contrary, was planned on the principle of establishing townships of a standard size, comprising within them homesteads of 64 ha located side by side (Fig. 5)

Table 2.

Mean areas of agricultural land on homesteads owning such land in the villages studied (A) and distribution of homesteads into size classes by area of agricultural land based on air photographs from 1977 (see Fig. 1).

	A	1-2 ha	3-5 ha	6-8 ha	9-12 ha	13-18 ha	≥18 ha
	ha%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Lappe-W	3.6	50	25	19	6	-	-
Lappe	6.2	9	46	27	4	10	4
Kivikoski	5.7	26	23	16	29	6	-
Intola-N	7.0	19	38	19	8	8	8
Intola-S	5.7	22	20	36	13	6	3
Ostola	8.8	16	24	16	20	16	8
Total area		22	28	25	14	7	4

(Leigh 1894: 20-21). In the study area only 4% of the farms have over 18 ha of arable land, for instance, while more than a half have less than 6 ha. The small area of arable land has thus been a typical feature of the Finnish farms at Thunder Bay (Table 2).

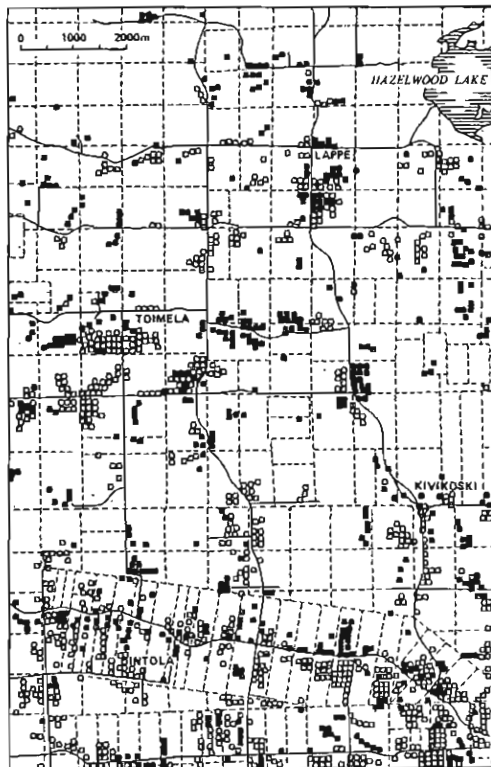


Fig. 6. Areas of land cleared for cultivation in certain townships close to Thunder Bay, based on air photographs from 1977. Each square corresponds to 1 ha. The black square indicate fields turned over to forest.

A considerable proportion of the farmland in the Thunder Bay area consists, however, of formerly cultivated fields which are shown by the 1977 air photographs to be gradually returning to forest, these accounting for as much as two fifths of the total cultivated land (Fig. 6). Agriculture in the Thunder Bay area was hit by a depression in the 1950's, whereupon the younger generation began to give up farming and drifted to the towns in search of work. On the other hand, very few Finnish settlers in this area could really have been regarded as farmers in the Canadian sense in the first place, since they have always gained a considerable proportion of their income from other sources. This form of farming is still common in many of the more remote districts of Finland.

Finnish organizations in the Thunder Bay area

The Finnish immigrant communities of Thunder Bay have always been characterized by a lively social intercourse amongst their members, but they were already divided into two ideological factions on coming to Thunder Bay. In order to understand this feature it is necessary to look at the general background to their emigration to Canada. There were many reasons for leaving Finland. Apart from the threat of unemployment and poverty, Finns were lured to Canada by a sense of adventure, or else were moved to emigrate for political

reasons. By the late 19th century Russia had taken steps to deprive Finland of many of its rights. This aroused expressions of dissatisfaction from many quarters and because of political reprisals from the authorities many left-wing supporters moved to Canada. Later, the gaining of independence from Russia was followed by a civil war in which the left-wing radicals the 'Red Guard' were defeated. This also caused many of these people to leave Finland and escape to Canada (Lindström-Best 1981: 3).

Even the left wing, however, was unable to remain united. The Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada, which had represented the whole of the Finnish-speaking left, split into two separate ideological groups in the 1920's, the evolutionary social democrats under the banner of the Industrial Workers of the World, the 'IWW Finns', and the revolutionary communists as the Finnish Organization of Canada, the 'FOC Finns' (Raivio 1975: 369; Kivistö 1983: 18; Wilson 1985: 20). Both of these organizations based their activities on the village workers' meeting hall (Fig. 7), so that frequently each organization had its own hall in the same village, e.g. at Intola. The political education and training given in these places was different, but

both groups included in their programme a large number of open cultural interests, very often with a specifically Finnish flavour, and the halls developed into a major uniting factor for the left-wing Finnish immigrant population.

The church also played its part in supporting the social life of the Thunder Bay Community, although its influence among the Finnish immigrants was not as far-reaching or as diverse as that of the halls, due largely to the aftermath of the Finnish civil war, which even penetrated church affairs (Raivio 1975: 285-335). Religious activity among the Finns of the Thunder Bay area began in the village of Lappe in 1908 and it was in 1920, that the village gained its own church (Fig. 7). The church at Lappe has since then provided an important bond for those people in the area who regard themselves as Church Finns, and it has had a profound influence on their adaptation to their new surroundings.

It was quite a natural thing for the families moving to Thunder Bay at the beginning of this century to send their children to school. Thus the Finnish villages of Thunder Bay had nearly 30 schools (Rasmussen 1978. Map 15). Most of the teachers stayed only for short periods, and only in a few exceptional cases did they speak any Finnish. Thus all the teaching normally took place in English, which the pupils could not understand properly. These language difficulties were gradually overcome, however, and the school system may without doubt be said to have been one of the most efficient institutions in the area for intergrating the young people of the community into Canadian society (Kouhi et al. 1976).

The cooperative organizations have been at the centre of the economic activity of the Finns at Thunder Bay. The cooperative movement as such was a familiar concept for the immigrants from Finland where it had existed since the end of the 19th century. By 1910 it had begun to assume political aspirations with the left wing

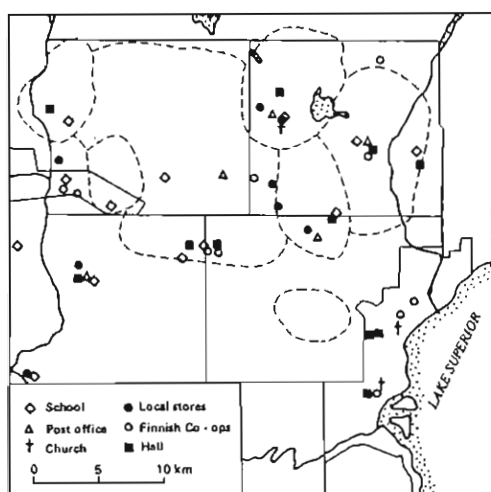


Fig. 7. Schools, post offices, halls and churches in the Finnish communities at Thunder Bay.

forming its own central body (Simonen 1949).

At Thunder Bay the cooperative naturally operated on the same general principles as in Fjmland. One feature was that the existence of this cooperative movement severely restricted the establishment of small shops in the villages; although some private shops were to be found. The most significant of the other forms of cooperative undertaking was the Thunder Bay Co-operative Dairy, however, which came into being in 1930 and had a membership which covered a very large number of the farmers in the area. Although the cooperative movement in Thunder Bay as a whole was divided into a non-political organization and a left-wing organization, this division did not concern the Co-operative Dairy, which was looked on as belonging to all, and membership of which was not a matter of controversy. Elsewhere in the cooperative movement passions could be aroused very easily, especially with the social democrats and communists competing for ascendancy in left-wing circles.

As soon as the Finns began buying and cultivating farms at Thunder Bay the question of obtaining forestry work became an important one. Working conditions in the forests were anything but good in those days in Ontario, and the lumbermen would be obliged to make various kinds of constructive protest. The conflicts waged were not merely ones between the workers and their employers, however, but also provided an opportunity for the Finnish immigrants to resolve their own ideological differences.

Communities as factors in the social geography of Thunder Bay

The community and communal activities are concepts which are often given prominence in the description of rural settlement, but seldom is any attempt made to define them. Effrat (1974) maintains two questions:

- a. Must a community be grounded in a particular geographical area?
- b. Does a community involve a few or a wide range of social linkages?

He also provides four main conceptualizations of the notion of a community:

1. The complete territorial community characterized by many shared social linkages. This community is viewed as a mini-social system with a high degree of autonomy.
2. The community of limited liability, where the precise linkages involved vary with social status, ethnicity and stage in the life-cycle.
3. The community as a society, where a territorial grounding is not essential but people share many linkages.
4. The personal community, where an areal grounding is not necessary, neither is the sharing of many linkages.

As may be seen from the above, the Finnish villages at Thunder Bay do not, as such, fit in with any of these conceptualizations, even though their inhabitants appear to be linked together into social groups by bonds of very many kinds (cf. Hoggart 1981: 20-21).

- a) Affective ties: people feel they belong to a certain locality and will not leave it,
- b) social ties: people belong to local organizations and engage in neighbourly activities,
- c) intimate ties: people's best friends and kin live in their locality,
- d) institutional ties: people are formally involved in the locality through churches, schools, work, etc.
- e) attitudinal ties: people hold similar attitudes towards the local area and local activities.

This scheme enables the social structure of the Finnish villages at Thunder Bay before its break-up from the late 1930's onwards to be described in the manner shown in Fig. 8 (Varjo 1985).

The village itself constituted a complete territorial community (1), with its post office, school, church and halls. Its inhabi-

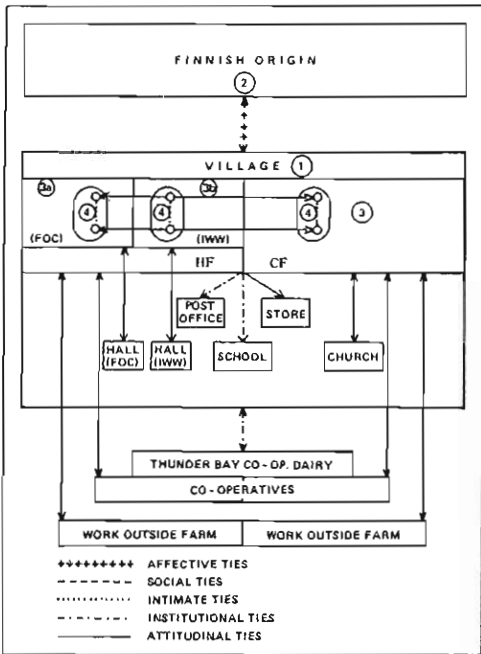


Fig. 8. Socio-geographical structure of the Finnish villages in the vicinity of Thunder Bay. 1 = territorial community, 2 = community based on Finnish origin, 3 = community as Finnish society, 4 = personal community.

tants were then divided along ideological lines into two communities of the society type, the Church Finns (3) and the Hall Finns, the latter being further divided into two groups, the communist FOC Finns (3a) and the social democrat IWW Finns (3b). The village also contained very many personal communities (4) based on 'intimate ties' between its residents. The responsibility felt by the people of the village for all their fellow-inhabitants regardless of the boundaries imposed by ideological views did not reach the level of a set of intimate ties, but rather was based largely on attitudinal ties.

The village post office, shop and school were essential for everyone, the people being linked to the school and post office by institutional ties, whereas some attitudinal effect came into play wherever there was more than one shop to choose from. The people also had obvious attitudinal ties to the halls and the church.

Only the young people would sometimes forget which camp they belonged to when they went dancing at the halls.

One uniting factor which lay outside the villages but had considerable influence upon them was the Thunder Bay Co-operative Dairy, to which the farmers usually possessed institutional ties irrespective of their ideological views. Attachment to the other co-operatives, however, was likely to operate along ideological lines if this was possible, in which case the ties were largely attitudinal, although the difference between the groups was not particularly great in this case. On the other hand, political views appeared to play a decisive role at least up to the 1930's whenever the inhabitants sought ancillary work away from their farms, and forestry work could be positively dangerous for those who did not happen to be of the desired persuasion.

In contrast to the above, the Finnish immigrants were to a very great extent a united people on matters of fundamental importance, and particularly where their Finnish national background (2), their relations with those who 'spoke the language' and their attitudes towards their home country were concerned, and this pride in their national identity and devotion to preserving their Finnish way of thinking remained with them, and has done so up to the present day. In this respect they were bound to the new homes, to the other Finns around them and to their country of origin by a strong set of affective ties, in spite of the fact that the underlying aim of their organizations at the outset was to assimilate the Finnish-speaking people of Canada with the remainder of the population by convincing them of the advantages of Canadian citizenship.

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