

Allen Seager

# MIGRATION AND PROLETARIANIZATION: ASPECTS OF THE FINNISH IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN WESTERN CANADIAN COAL MINING, 1880-1940



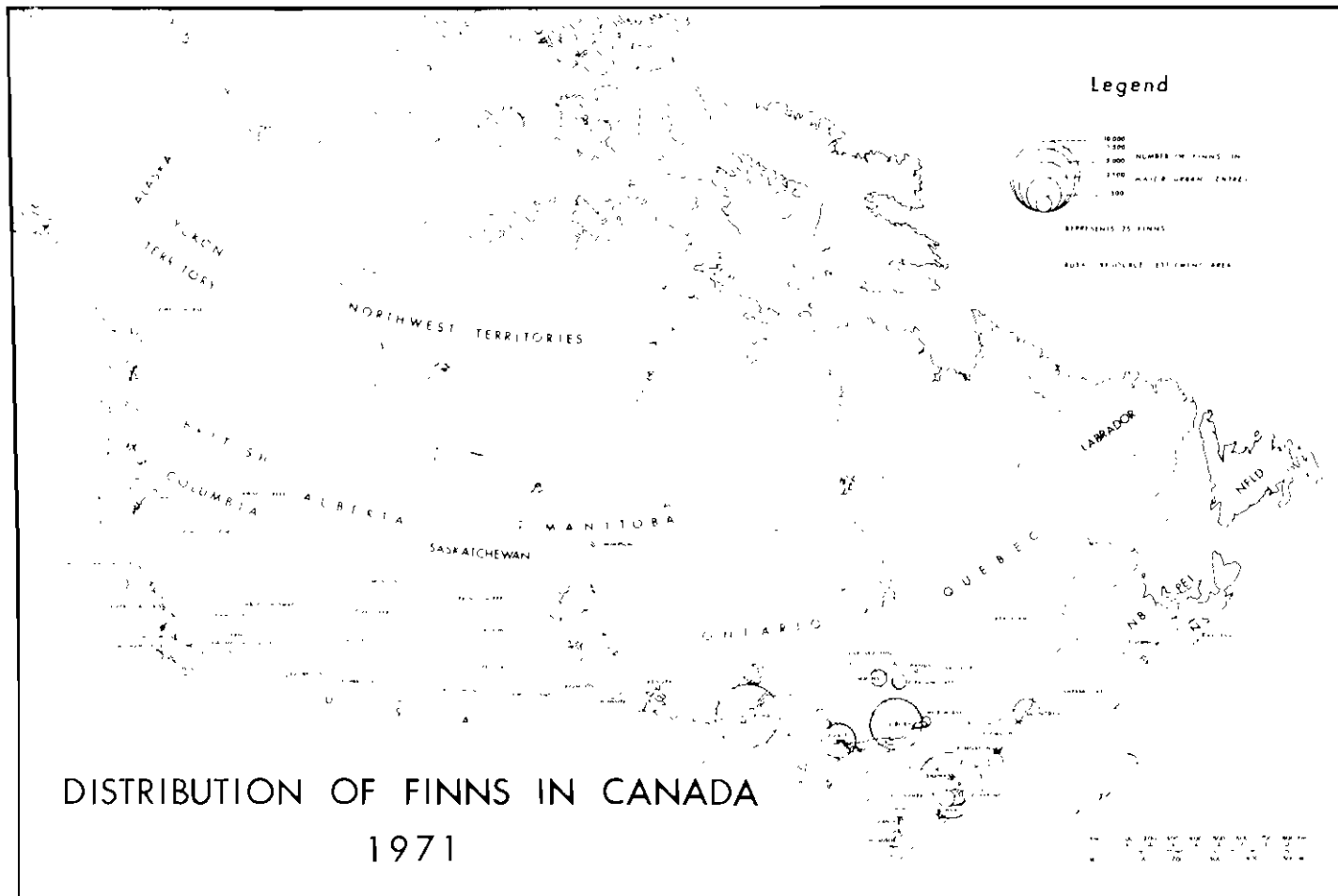
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The immigrant experience in industrializing America in the 19th and 20th centuries remains a topic of deep and abiding interest for historians on both sides of the Atlantic, and both sides of the 49th parallel. What and who were the human materials in this process? How did their experience in the New World transform their lives and culture? And what impact did the immigrants themselves have on the transformation of North American society?

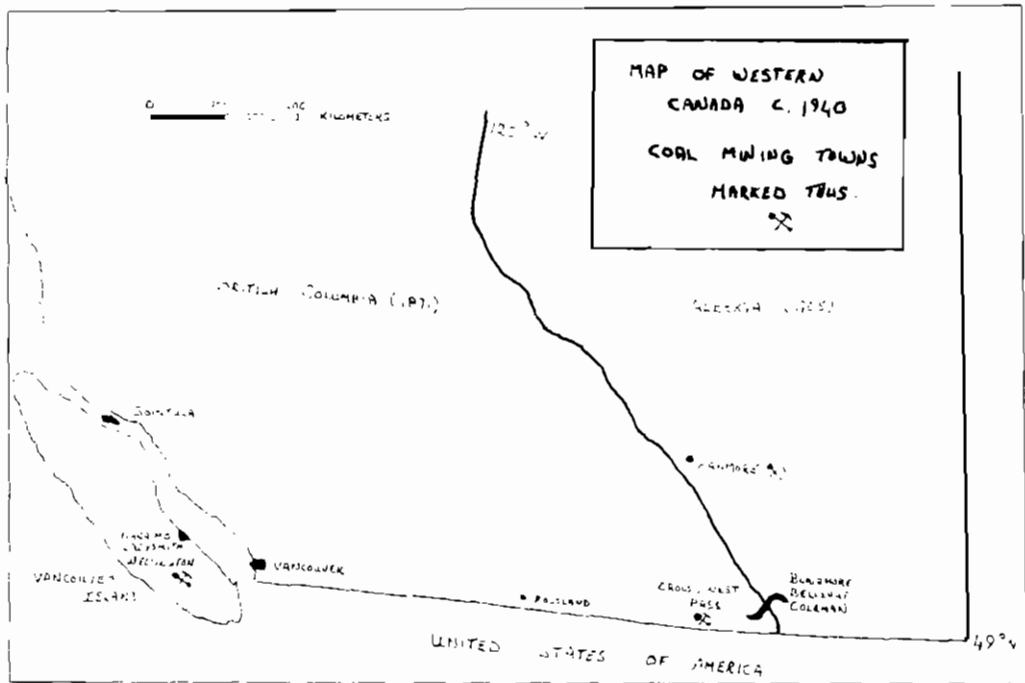
Finnish migration into the mining districts of Canada and the United States was an accident of history, geography, and most of all, of economics. Unlike, say, the Welsh collier or Cornish tin miner little in the background of the Finnish immigrant prepared him for the industrial experience in the Pennsylvania coalfields, the Great Lakes Iron Range, the Ontario gold mines, or the Comestock Lode.<sup>1</sup> Their choices dictated by the harsh realities of the immigrant labour market, the Finnish miners quickly developed the basic techniques of economic

survival; by degrees, pit labour became part of the ethos and culture of the Finnish-American and Finnish-Canadian working class.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile the original settlements, at first mere colonies of single males, exerted a natural attraction for those who followed, and immigrant-industrial communities slowly emerged. Nonetheless, these communities were seldom permanent. Economic conditions uprooted workmen again and again, a situation which at once helped feed the miners' basic sense of grievance, and helped foster feelings of industrial and ethnic solidarity spread across the widest terrain. The miner in Leadville, Colorado, discovered that he faced the same "enemy" and spoke the same language as the miner at Wellington, British Columbia - as the remarkable memoir of Oskari Tokoi, North American trade union militant and later, Social-Democratic Prime Minister of Finland (1917-18), makes clear.<sup>3</sup>

Tokoi once toiled in the collieries of James Dunsmuir, future Premier of British



Source: Statistics Canada, 1971 Census of Canada (Bulletin 13-2), Polyphone, Finns in Ontario Fall 1981, Vol. 3 No. 2.



Columbia (a Conservative), on Vancouver Island, and belonged to the local chapter of the Western Federation of Miners, North America's first important socialist trade union. His remarks on Vancouver Island in the late 1890's - "a desperate blind alley" - ring true with the later comment of William Braes, an English-speaking Socialist who wrote in 1913: "a short period on the Island crushes out the last spark of hope that they (the immigrants) will ever be able to improve their lot by running away from the enemy."<sup>4</sup> These experiences were universal, and eventually provoke a broadly similar response among all mine workers, militant unionism and often "radical" political insurgency.

A particularly interesting question posed by the experience of proletarianization of Finnish mine workers in North America is the degree to which this, as opposed to the influence of Old Country ideas, helped shape the contours of Finnish-American and Finnish-Canadian labour movements. Kuitunen writes that "Finnish Canadian socialism

was strongly influenced by radicalized Finnish miners."<sup>5</sup> A majority of the founding locals of the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada (chartered in 1911) appear to have been located in mining districts in Ontario and the West.<sup>6</sup> While some important studies in the American context have recently appeared, the study of Finnish Canadian mining communities has only begun.<sup>7</sup> This paper offers some preliminary comment on the case of Finnish mine workers in the coalfields of two western Canadian provinces, British Columbia and Alberta, during the period 1880-1940.

As of 1921 (the first year for which such data are available), 25 per cent of British Columbia's small community of Finns, numbering 1,837 in all, lived in that province's coal towns: most in the Nanaimo-Ladysmith-Wellington district on Vancouver Island. Fifteen per cent of Alberta's Finns, numbering 1,264, were found in the coal towns, all but a handful in two districts situated along the bituminous coal range of the eastern Rockies: Canmore, and further

south, the Crow's Nest Pass (Blairmore-Coleman-Bellevue).<sup>8</sup> The majority of Alberta Finns were rural settlers (36 per cent of whom were, as of 1921, actually American-born Finns). Most of B.C.'s Finnish population was concentrated in four separate communities: metropolitan Vancouver; the hard-rock mining town of Rossland; the Island coal towns; and the fishing and agricultural community of "Sointula" (Malcolm Island) on the West Coast.

"Sointula"—a community based on the famous Utopian project of Matti Kurikka between 1900 and 1905—might well be considered within the context of the history of the Finnish Canadian coal-mining community, since the bulk of Kurikka's followers were in fact Vancouver Island colliers "seeking to escape the slavery of the mines."<sup>9</sup> In any case, between Sointula, Nanaimo, Rossland, Canmore, and Crow's Nest Pass there existed for several decades an important Finnish immigrant associational network knitted together by family ties, internal migration, trade unionism (Sointula's fishermen carried on the tradition of unionism they inherited from the mining community within the context of their own peculiar situation), and ethnic organization. The Finnish Socialist Organization (later the Finnish Organization of Canada: which was no less socialist!) maintained branches in all major rural and urban Finnish communities in western Canada, including, until the late 1930's, lodges and halls in the coal towns of Ladysmith, B.C., Canmore and Coleman, Alberta.<sup>10</sup>

A small sample of place names of mine workers' next-of-kin drawn from the payroll of the West Canadian Collieries Ltd. in Alberta (Blairmore-Bellevue mines) indicates that Finnish mine workers had emigrated from scattered localities in Finland and the United States. In the 20th century at least there is little evidence of direct migration by large groups of Finns to the coal-mining areas.<sup>11</sup>

The first Finnish settlement in western Canada appeared in the Vancouver Island

coalfield sometime after the opening up of the famous "Wellington seam" by the Scottish coal master Robert Dunsmuir during the winter of 1870-1. The Finnish presence can be traced as far back as the 1880's, but there seems to be no agreement among historians as to its origins. Professor Wilson states that Finns were attracted to British Columbia during the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (1880-1885). Aili Anderson notes that prior to 1880 "a few Finnish sailors on United States ships had stopped for coal at Nanaimo and North Wellington." Joel Poikonen sheds more light on the matter in the recently-published **Chronicles of Ladysmith**. According to the tradition of the Vancouver Island community, the Finnish pioneers actually emigrated from Alaska in the aftermath of the Russian-American Purchase in 1867. They are said to have been the second sons of "prosperous farmers" in the Grand Duchy—presumably recruited for the Czarist colonial service—who brought with them to the B.C. collieries their "love of culture" and Lutheran religion.<sup>12</sup>

The proletarianization of these and other migrants occurred within the context of an industry—coal mining—noted for relatively high wage rates affording opportunities for family formation and home-ownership among the miners. A shockingly heavy price, however, was paid by miners in terms of life and limb. Five colliery disasters on Vancouver Island between 1879 and 1889 took the lives of 322 miners; four in the Crow's Nest Pass between 1902 and 1914 killed 347 men. At Bellevue, Alberta, for example, in 1910, a mine disaster wiped out one shift comprised of 12 Italians, 8 Finns, 5 Poles, 2 Icelanders, 2 Ukrainians, a Hungarian, a Rumanian, and a Briton—which gives some idea of the multi-national character of the mine labour force at that time. The mass funeral held for the Bellevue men was said in the local press to have been "the saddest drama ever enacted in these parts", and such experiences did a great deal to foster a sense of collective solidarity among the mine workers.<sup>13</sup>



MINE WORKERS AT COLEMAN, CROWS NEST PASS, ALBERTA (home to Local #44, Finnish Organization of Canada, 1911-1939). Such group photographs were made up into postcards, which immigrant miners often sent overseas to friends and relations. Courtesy of the Gushul family, Blairmore, Alberta.

In the years 1901-1920 alone there were not less than 121 strikes in the coal mining industry of British Columbia and Alberta, which employed a grand total of 15,552 workers in 1921. Of the 7,303 coal miners in the two provinces who participated in the referendum held on affiliation with the "One Big Union" in 1919, 95.6 per cent endorsed the idea—which was condemned as Bolshevik by all respectable labour leaders in North America. But the coal miners had their own ideas, which were publicized between 1907 and 1919 in their own newspaper, the **District Ledger**, which spread the gospel of socialism in a variety of languages: French, English, Italian, Slavic, and not least, Finnish. "There is much groping for words to express what we mean . . . especially with foreign-speaking comrades who speak only a little English," wrote Coleman, Alberta Socialist Tom Beattie in 1919, adding that "the old Finnish local . . . has 16 members and expect to have 30 next meeting."<sup>14</sup>

Within the specific context of Finnish-immigrant response to industrial capitalism in the western Canadian coalfields a distinctive pattern of organization and self-activity early emerges. On the one hand, we find the pattern of cultural assertion embodied in the "Finn Halls," which long pre-dated, in fact, the Finnish Socialist Organization in most if not all communities. An all-Finnish temperance society, called **Aallotar** was formed among the miners in the Wellington seam in 1891. Although ostensibly religious in its original incarnation (after 1900, Finnish miners acquired a reputation, which may or may not have been entirely justified, as militant anticlericals), Lindström-Best offers an illuminating insight into the proletarian ideology of the rank-and-file membership of the temperance order through the eyes of one coal miner named Kyösti: "Many cannot understand why an ordinary worker needs knowledge; is it not enough for a miner to know where to drill the hole and how much powder to put into it . . .?"

Kyösti definitely disagreed.<sup>15</sup>

On the other side of the coin, there is the pattern of class assertion by the Finnish-immigrant mine workers within the broader contours of the common labour movement. All the miners had a saying: "It was not love, but a selfish idea that brings us together"--the idea of collective bargaining. Again, to cite an early example from Vancouver Island, we find in 1891 upon the executive of the Miners and Mine Labourers' Protective Association at the Dunsmuir mines "one German, one Belgian, one Italian"--and one "Russian Finn."<sup>16</sup> This union led a particularly bitter and protracted strike in 1890, which James Dunsmuir blamed on "agitators from Rossland"--which might well have included a handful of Finns.<sup>17</sup> When the Western Federation of Miners convened its first meetings on Vancouver Island in 1902, they were called together at the Finn Hall at Ladysmith.<sup>18</sup>

The Finn Hall at Canmore doubled after 1910 as the headquarters for the local Ukrainian Social Democrats. Two men, in turn, controlled the affairs of the United Mine Workers local in Canmore during World War I: N. D. Thachuk, secretary of the Ukrainian Social Democrats, and John Lauttamus, leader of the local Finnish Organization!

The Finnish community halls in the Crow's Nest Pass (first at Lille, later at Coleman) were notorious for parties and boxing matches--invitations extended to all, although a near-riot occurred with members of the Swedish faction following a boxing match at Christmas, 1912, bad calls by the referee allegedly throwing the contest to "Halmar the Swede"--as well as politics and Finnish cultural activities. Again, the supposed "radicalism" of the Finnish miners should be put into perspective. A Socialist candidate for Parliament in Nanaimo lost the elections of 1908 by a mere 190 votes, and the great majority of the voters were Anglo-Canadians. An Irish-Canadian Socialist was elected to the Alberta legislature from the Crow's Nest Pass in 1909: Italians, Slovaks (who

were deeply Catholic), Welshmen and others besides the red Finns put him there.

The coal miners collectively suffered a series of major defeats between 1914 and 1924 which brought to a close the great epoch of militancy and radicalism in the coal towns. The industry itself declined steadily in the 1920's and 1930's. Many workers left in search of other jobs, and the western Canadian communities received virtually no increment of population from the post-1920 emigration of Finnish citizens and refugees to Canada (including the redoubtable Tokoi, former Prime Minister.)

The unions were either destroyed or passive throughout most of the inter-war period, though one exception was the town of Blairmore, Alberta (where lived, in 1931, 37 Finns, 10 of whom worked at the local colliery). The Blairmore miners fought and won a violent strike in 1932 and went on, in 1933 to elect a "Miners' Town Council" said to be dominated by the Communists. (The mayor, an Englishspeaking Communist, received a mandate of 76 per cent in 1944.) Behind the union at Blairmore stood the Women's Labour League, organized in 1928 under the leadership of Anna Apponen, whose husband was a disabled miner. It seems that Anna Apponen, featured speaker at the 1930 May Day demonstration (where she made a plea for women's rights and unemployment relief), participated in the Karelian emigration in 1931. Her colleague Mary North, despite her English surname, Finnish-born, carried on the work of the women's organization, which may be seen as part of the legacy of the long tradition of proletarian feminism of the Finnish-Canadian communities.<sup>19</sup>

By this time, the Finnish Organization in the coalfields was in a state of advanced decline, and no longer commanded much enthusiasm from a dwindling and largely "assimilated" Finnish working class community. "We take part in the (strike) struggle . . . but we ten cannot do anything special," wrote the Finnish union members at Blairmore to the Toronto headquarters in 1932



Mine workers at Copper Cliff, 1893. The Canadian Copper Company's mine at Copper Cliff was the first mine in Canada from which nickel-copper ore shipments were made (in 1886) and also the first to employ Finnish Canadian workers. Source: Polyphone, Finns in Ontario Fall 1981, Vol. 3 No 2

With few financial resources available to them, the Canmore and Coleman locals surrendered their halls in the 1930's.<sup>20</sup> The Crow's Nest activists met in private homes for a few more years, then concluded that the Finnish Organization had simply outlived its usefulness.<sup>21</sup> It is undoubtedly true that the younger generation, to the extent to which they were even retained by the industrial community, would have considered themselves "Canadians" rather than "Finns" -- a problem of cultural identity not entirely solved by the self-professed proletarian internationalism of the Finnish Organization's leadership.

Mary North wrote an eloquent memoir of Local 44 (Crow's Nest Pass) sometime prior to the outbreak of World War II. She recalled her own initiation into the rites of the Finnish worker-community:

The meeting opened with the singing of the 'Internationale.' I had never heard it before (this, circa, 1910) and it was very moving. Each time afterwards I heard them sing it I thought of that moment, and wondered what impact it had on others who had come, like me, to the Golden West. . .

She waxed philosophical about the demise of the order, proud of the collective and individual accomplishments of its pioneers and militants. "We are after all," she concluded, "only actors in a larger drama."<sup>22</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 recent work on Finnish mining communities in North America includes M. E. Kaups, "Finns in the Copper and Iron Ore Mines of the Great Lakes Region, 1864-1905: Some Preliminary Observations," in M. G. Karni et al (eds.), *The Finnish Experience in the Western Great Lakes Region: New Perspectives* (Turku, 1975); M. G. Karni, "The Finnish Socialist Tradition and the Minnesota Strike of 1907," in D.J. Ollila (ed.), *For the Common Good: Finnish Immigrants and the Radical Response to Industrial America* (Superior, Wis., 1977); and Arnold Alanen, "Finns and the Corporate Mining Environment of the Lake Superior Region," in M. G. Karni (ed.), *Finnish Diaspora II: The United States* (Toronto, 1981).
- 2 for a miners' eye view see Vienna C. Maki, "Memoirs from the Minnesota Iron Ore Mines, 1908, by Matti Pelto," *Finnish Americana* =5 (1982:3); also the unpublished *Journal of the Ontario gold miner, Victor Koski*, Archives of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario, Siirala Papers (original and English-language typescript), n.d.
- 3 *Idid.*; see also Oskari Tokoi, *Sisu: The Autobiography of the First Premier of Finland* (New York, 1957)
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 47-50; Wm. Braes, "Heads I Win, Tails You Lose," *Western Clarion* (Vancouver), August, 1913.
- 5 Al Kuitunen, "The Finnish-Canadian Socialist Movement, 1900-1918," unpublished research paper, Dept. of History, University of Calgary (1979), p. 24. The radical phenomenon in Canada is explored with some sensitivity in two articles in the collections, *Ethnicity, Power, and Politics in Canada* (Toronto, 1981), edited by Jorgen Dahlie and T. Fernando: Varpu Lindstron-Best, "The Socialist Party of Canada and the Finnish Connection," and E. W. Laine, "Finnish-Canadian Radicalism, the First Forty Years."
- 6 *Canadian Suomalainen Järjestö 25 vuotta* (Sudbury, Ont., 1936), p. 37.
- 7 Kuitunen, *op. cit.*; Allen Seager, "Finnish Canadians and the Ontario Miners' Movement," *Polyphony* vol. 3, -2 (Fall, 1981: Toronto).
- 8 *Dominion Census Report 1921*
- 9 Aili Anderson, *History of Sointula* (Vancouver, 1970: based on Matti Halminen's 1936 Finnish-language edition); J. Donald Wilson, "Matti Kurikka: Finnish Canadian Intellectual," *B.C. Studies* 20 (Winter, 1973-74), *Dreams of Utopia* British Columbia Sound Archives Publication (Victoria, 1980)
- 10 partial records of the coal-town lodges of the Finnish Organization of Canada are found in the PAC, FOC Papers, vol. 3, f. 4 (Canmore Local =45, 1917-1919), f. 5 (Crow's Nest Local =44, 1915-1919); vol. 12, f. 48 (Local 45, 1931-1933); f. 50 (Local 44, 1931-1939).
- 11 the process of migration and settlement in the coal regions is discussed in Douglas Cass, "Aspects of Ethnicity in Southern Alberta Coal Mining Camps 1880-1920" (unpublished research paper, University of Calgary, Dept. of History, 1979) and Allen Seager, "A Proletariat in Wild Rose Country: The Alberta Coal Miners, 1905-1945" (Ph D dissertation, York University, Toronto, 1982) ch 2.
- 12 J. Donald Wilson, "Finns in British Columbia Before the First World War," *Polyphony* Vol. 3 -2 (Fall, 1981), p. 55; Anderson, *History of Sointula*, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2; Joel Poikonen, *The Finnish Community, Chronicles of Ladysmith and District* (Victoria, B.C., 1981) pp. 309-313.
- 13 for the Bellevue mine disaster see the *Blairmore Enterprise*, various issues, December,



- 1910, and the uniquely well-documented account by David J. Bercuson, "Tragedy at Bellevue," *Labour/le travailleur* 3 (1978). Official records of coal-mine fatalities were kept in British Columbia after 1877 and in Alberta after 1905.
- 14 Public Archives of Manitoba, R.B. Russell Papers, Winnipeg Strike Trail Records Exhibit "I", corres Socialist Party of Canada Local # 93, Tom Beattie to Chris Stephenson, 6-27 February, 1919. During World War I, both the Socialist Party and the Finnish Organization locals in the coal-mining communities were more-or-less dormant and/or suppressed. I have discussed this period in miners' history at length elsewhere. cf. A. Seager, "Socialists and Workmen: The Western Canadian Coal, Miners' Movement, 1900-1920," paper read at the American Historical Association Annual Meetings, Washington, D.C., 1982.
- 15 Wilson, "Finns in British Columbia," op. cit.; Varpu Lindstrom-Best, "Fist Press: A Study in Finnish Canadian Handwritten Newspapers," *Polyphony* Vol. 3 -2 (Fall, 1981), p. 65.
- 16 British Columbia, Sessional Papers, 1891, "Evidence, Select Committee on Wellington Strike," p. ccxxxiii, Testimony of John Sugett (document courtesy of Dr. R. A. J. MacDonald of the University of British Columbia)
- 17 "Strike at Wellington," *Victoria Colonist* 21 May 1890, and other numbers
- 18 Dominion of Canada, Sessional Papers, 1904, "Evidence, Royal Commission on Industrial Disputes in the Province of British Columbia," pp 40-41, Testimony of James Pritchard.
- 19 for the Women's Labour League and its leadership see, among other documents: FOC Papers, vol 12, f. 50, Local 44, Minutes 24 April, 1928; Public Archives of Canada, Communist Party of Canada Records, Box 1, f. 11, corres., Alberta district, 1930-31, Mary North to Tom Ewen, 8 October, 1930, and other items; "May Day Celebrated by Workers . . . Mrs Apponen Spoke for Women," *Coleman Journal*, 8 May, 1930, Dept. of Labour Library, Hull, Canada, Proceedings of the Annual Convention, Mine Workers' Union of Canada, 1934--a convention Attended by a dozen women delegates, including "Mrs. Matti Paavola" from Canmore and other notables.
- 20 FOC Papers, vol. 12, f. 50, Local 44 Minutes, 3 April, 1932, Vaino Ross to Central Committee, 7 April, 1933. See also documents listed in n. 10.
- 21 "We have gathered with the intention of closing this local . . . (political) disagreements were not the reason why we have lost members . . . Those who left just thought it should be stopped." *Ibid.*, Local 44 Minutes, las entry, 5 December, 1939
- 22 *Ibid.* vol 13, f. - "Mary North, History of Branch #44, Crow's Nest Pass," Finnish-language manuscript, n.p., ca. 1936. I wish to thank Mrs. Helen Tarvainen of the FOC, Dr. Edward Laine of the Public Archives of Canada, and Varpu Lindstrom-Best, York University, Toronto, Canada, for their co-operation and help in researching these documents

## Suomalaiset Länsi-Kanadan hiilikaivoksissa

Kun suomalaiset siirtolaiset alkoivat asettua Kanadan Länsirannikolle 1880-luvulla, joutuivat he hankkimaan elantonsa hiilikaivoksista. Dunsmuirin kaivokset Brittiläisessä Kolumbiassa tulivat heille tutuiksi samoin Nanaimo, Ladysmith ja Wellington Vancouverin saarella sekä Albertan provinssissa Canmore, Kalliovuorten rautuonella ja siitä etelään Crow's Nest Passin alueella Blairmore, Coleman ja Bellevue.

Hiilikaivosten ankeat työolosuhteet ja etenkin lukemattomat onnettomuudet kehittivät työntekijän soidaarisuutta ja radikaalisuutta. Yksin omaan 5 kaivosonnettomuutta Vancouverin saarella vuosina 1879-1889 tappio 322 kaivostyöntekijää ja Crow's Nest Passin alueella oli vuosina 1902-1914 neljä onnettomuutta, joissa kuoli 347 työmiestä. Bellevuen kaivosonnettomuudessa vuonna 1910 kuoli mm. 12 italialaista, 8 suomalaista,

5 puolalaista, 2 islantilasta, 2 ukrainalaista, unkarilainen, romanialainen ja englantilainen.

Järjestäytyminen ei ollut helppoa monien eri kansallisuuksien keskeillä. Suomalaiset olivat kuitenkin aktiivisesti mukana alusta alkaen. Heita tukivat omat monikayttotalot (haalit) ja myöhemmin Suomalaisen Sosialisti järjestön läpi Kanadan kulkeva verkosto. Varsinkin Albertassa suomalaiset olivat usein yhteistyössä ukrainalaisten kanssa.

Myös naiset radikalisoituivat naissa-olosuhteissa. Blairmoren Women's Labour Leaguen puheenjohtajana toimi 2 suomalaista naista ensin Anna Apponen ja hänen Karjalaa muuttonsa jälkeen Mary North.

Kolmekymmentä vuotta suomalaisten toiminta hiilikaivosalueilla hiljeni. Kaivoksia suljettiin ja suomalaisia muutti muille alueille. Pula-aikana myöskin ammattiliitot heikkenivät. Eikä uusi sukupolvi enää tarvinut suomenkielistä organisaatiota.