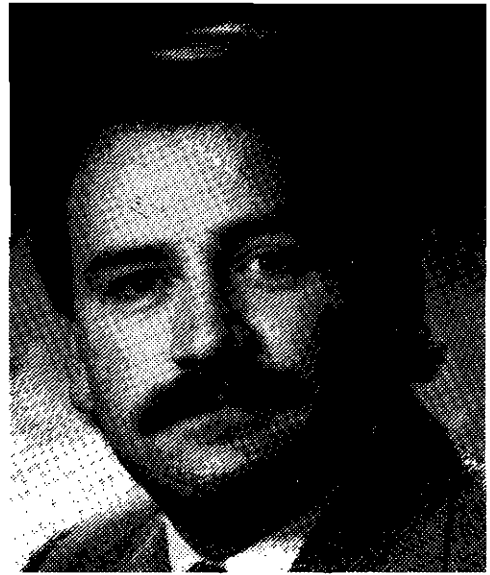


FINNISH SETTLEMENT IN RURAL THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO, CANADA



Mark Rasmussen is a Canadian Geographer specializing in settlement and historic cultural landscape studies, as well as heritage resource management. He received his B.A. at Algoma College in Northern Ontario and an M.A. at the University of Alberta. Formerly a heritage resource planner with the Alberta provincial government, Mr. Rasmussen is presently the Supervisor of Historic Conservation for the Province of Saskatchewan.

Introduction

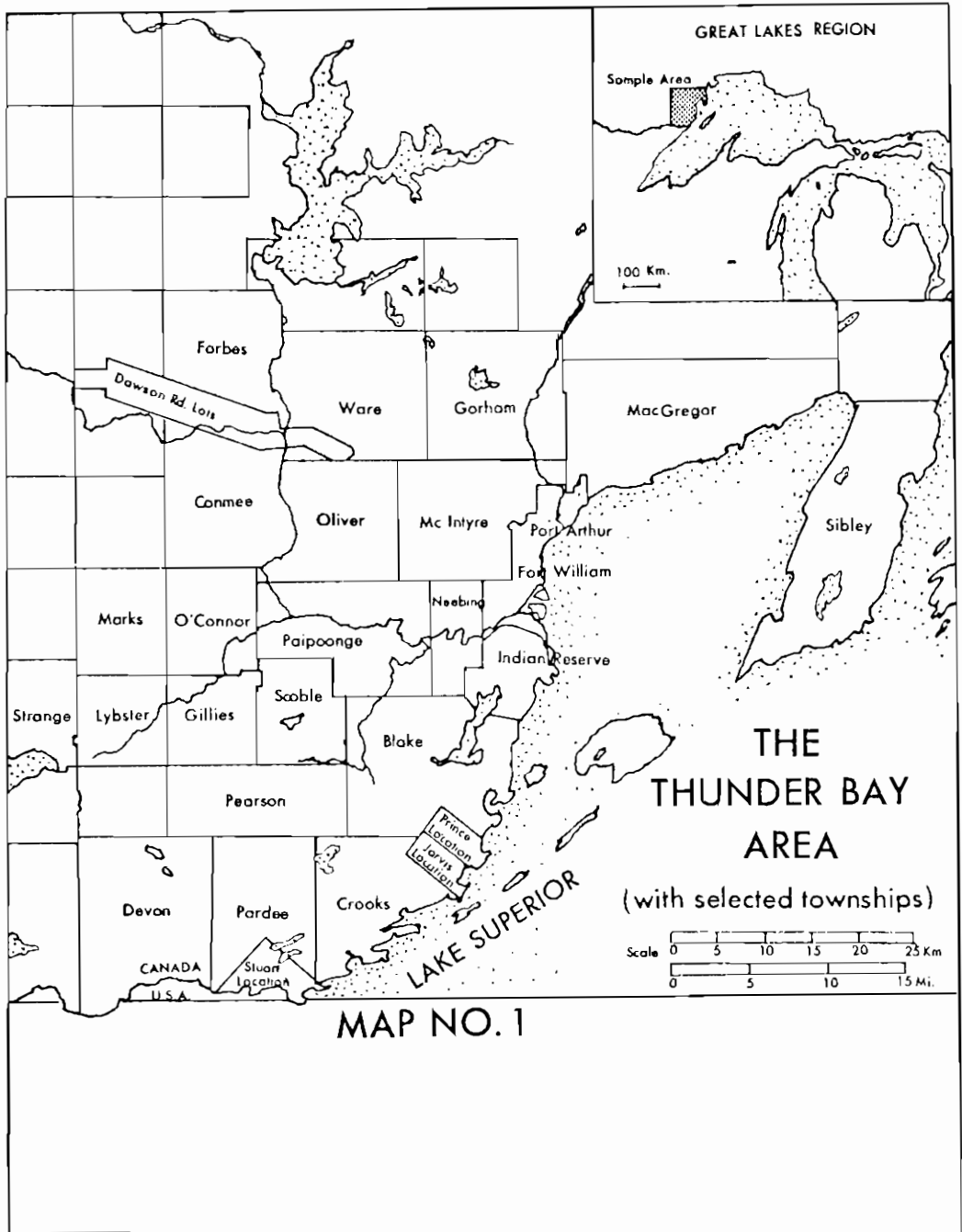
Among the most interesting of nodal settlements on the Canadian Shield occurred with Finnish in the Thunder Bay area of Northern Ontario early in the century. Here, Canada's largest concentration of Finns settled on a landscape physically much like the one they had left. Climate, geology, hydrology, soils and vegetation in portions of Finland and Northern Ontario bear striking similarities, even to the point of strong subregional parallels.² In migrating then, the early Finnish settlers were not forced into the dramatic change presented by a new physical environment. On the contrary, their mastery of the boreal forest gave these people certain advantages over settlers from the more temperate areas of Europe. The main difference for the Finns in their new geographic

setting was a lessening of cultural restrictions. In Canada, with limited supervision, they were relatively free to make their own choices and create their own lifestyles. As with most immigrants, this was a process of tradeoffs seeking the best from their cultural past, yet fulfilling some former dreams through innovation, and adapting to the features of a new nation. While perhaps the most adaptable of the newcomers chose the economic advantages of the city, others preferred to resume the rural lifestyle - to a large extent duplicating a piece of Finland in Canada with only minor modifications. It is these rural Finns that are the primary focus of this study.

To understand the reasons for the migration, the "push" and "pull" factors must be analyzed. The late 1800's to early 1900's were difficult times in Finland, with many

adversely affected by a series of famines, an economy changing from an agrarian to industrial base, a rapidly rising population, and unstable political conditions. Pulling these immigrants were North America's prospects of high wages, free land, political

freedom and sheer adventure. According to the national Census, Canada received three basic waves of Finnish immigrants: 1900 to 1913 (with 15,000 to 20,000 immigrants), 1920 to 1930 (with slightly over 20,000 additional people), and 1950 to 1960 (with



another 15,000). In the first two waves, which are of concern to this study, most Finns came to Canada from the rural areas of Vaasa, Turku and Pori.³

Over one-third of all the Finns that settled in Canada chose to reside in the rugged uplands of Northern Ontario drawn by work on the railway, mines, mills and forest, as well as some of the only free land left to this relatively late settlement group. The Thunder Bay area, on the north shore of Lake Superior, attracted the largest concentration of both urban and rural Finns. In blocks in the rural townships, strong Finnish communities developed. In the boom period, which began after 1910 and peaked around 1930, small rural hamlets such as Intola, Kivikoski, Lappe, Toimela and Sistonen's Corners developed as well as larger Finnish communities such as Tarmola, Pohjola, Alppila and Ostola. Three townships in particular, Gorham, Ware and Lybster had populations that were 93 % (420 Finns), 85 % (394) and 92 % (427) respectively

comprised of people of Finnish ethnicity according to the 1921 Census of Canada. These areas had colourful histories with a distinctive Finnish-Canadian lifestyle bolstered with great institutional solidarity. Finnish farms were mainly subsistence operations agriculturally, but were aided by supplemental incomes from natural resource industries and construction. Though these rural communities and way of life continued until the second World War, deterioration began thereafter. Soliders returning from the war and the youth on the farms were enticed by the financial rewards and easier life the city offered. The days of subsistence operations were clearly numbered.

While the present numbers of Finns in these rural townships have remained near their 1921 levels, the urban Finnish population has increased twenty-five times since that date. According to the 1971 Census, the Thunder Bay division reports about three thousand rural Finns as opposed to over eight thousand urban. While most of



Early Finnish home in Thunder Bay



Farm building in Finland, taken 1948^x

^x Taken from Talve, I., "Den Nordost-Europeiska Rian", *Folklivsstudier*, Vol 6 (Helsinki: Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, 1961) p. 17

the original Finnish farmsteads still stand, few of their first communities are still intact.

The Survey

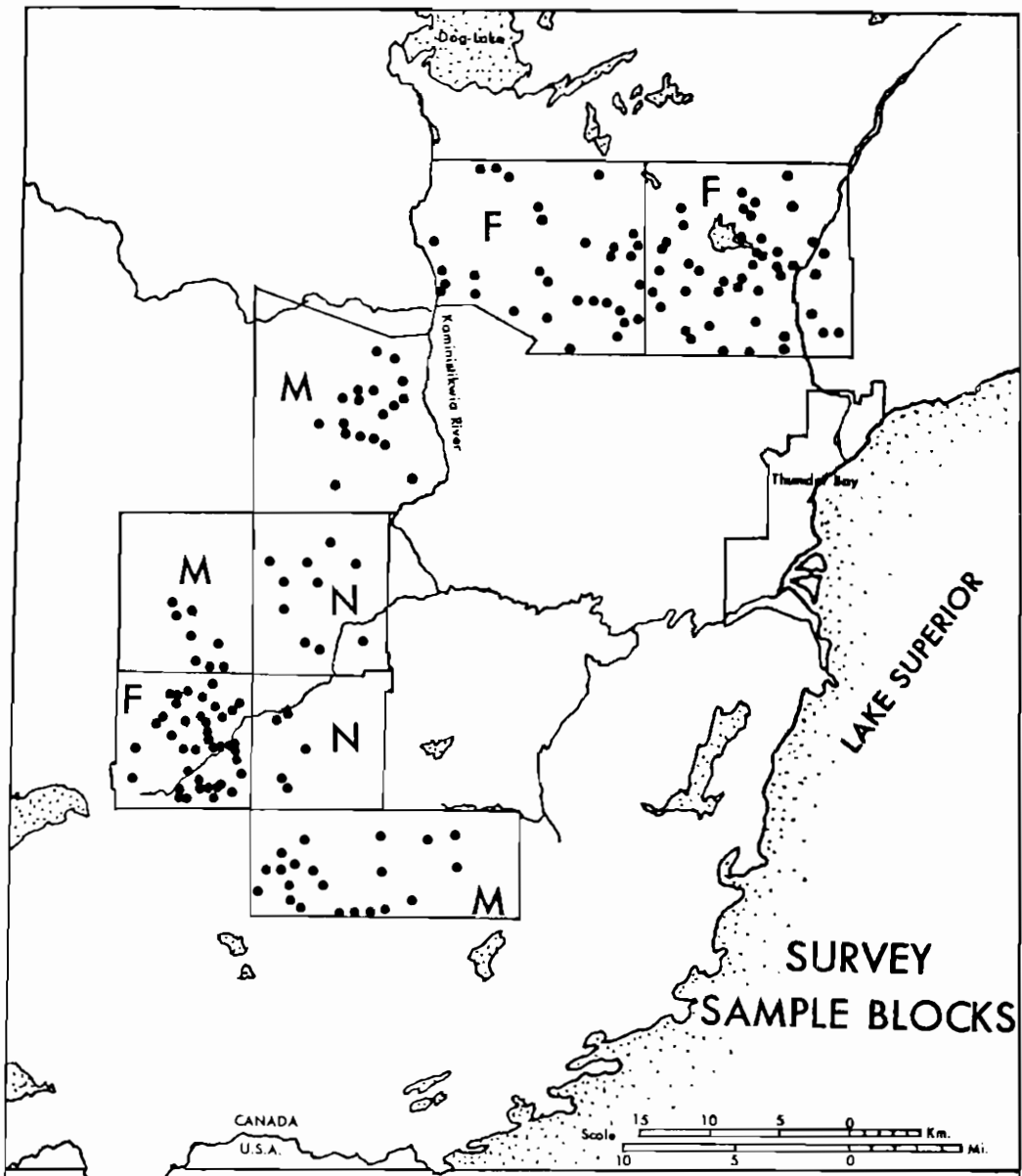
In surveying the settlement characteristics of the early Finns and contrasting ethnic groups, eight rural townships were selected. According to Census of Canada data and land title records, three of the townships were predominantly Finn, two were non-Finn⁴ and three mixed (Finn and non-Finn) blocks. Through preliminary investigations, it was discovered that nearly all the initial buildings of the sample area still remaining were built from logs. Although a few frame buildings on which dates were established were included in the survey, the criterion of log construction became a pre-requisite to site inspection. The survey, which ultimately consisted of 362 buildings over 190 sites, possessed a Finnish content of more than 85 % of all buildings over at least 83 % of the sites. Non-Finnish content was predominantly British, however Dutch, Swedish

and French Canadian sites were also recorded, as well as a 7-8 % sample which were not identifiable as to original ethnicity. Each site and building was photographically recorded, mapped, details sketched, and three page checklist-questionnaire filled out.

To provide clear indications on the amount of cultural carry-over, Finnish sites surveyed were compared to those in similar ethnographic studies done in southwest Finland during the initial settlement period.

Folk Architecture

In looking at the settlement features that comprise the cultural landscape, folk architecture is perhaps the most visible and telling of all elements. In the case of the Finns in rural Thunder Bay, the initial traditional log architecture is particularly revealing because of its unusual purity. This purity applies in two senses. First, there is so little discrepancy between form and function. The buildings display an uncanny beauty because of their pure functionalism and harmony with their

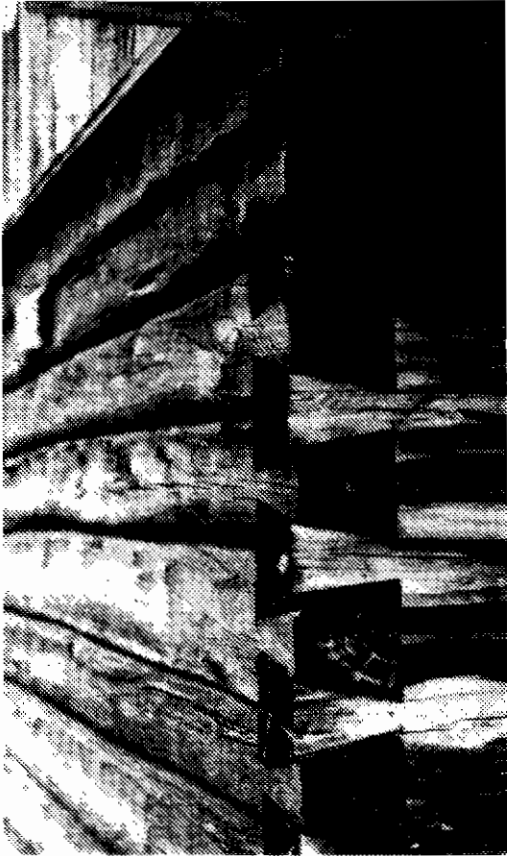


MAP NO. 2

- Sites Sampled
- F** Finnish Townships
- N** Non-Finnish Townships
- M** Mixed Finn/Non-Finn Townships

natural surroundings. Second, there was little mixing of Finnish styles and techniques

with the non-Finnish styles and techniques with the non-Finnish population majority.



Full-dovetail cornering



Saddle hewn beams



Lock joint cornering

Beyond this, the vernacular architecture of these Finnish pioneers displays a familiarity of dealing with the materials and environment in a way not seen in any other ethnic group in the region. The design is distinctively clean and unpretentious, employing the maximum use of local materials. The large numbers and good condition of these early log structures still standing is a testament of this functionalism and soundness.

While the dates of construction of the buildings surveyed ranged from 1877 to 1950, 70 % were built between 1910 and 1939. Construction style among the Finnish log building stayed particularly consistent. The non-Finn log buildings tended to be more or less temporary structures build from logs left in the round, hastily "saddle notched" for cornering and displaying distinctive wide strips of chinking (often cement) between logs. In the non-Finnish townships, few of the initial buildings were still standing. The original Finnish structures were built almost entirely using a characteristic, highly refined log construction style. Beams were normally flattened on two sides and grooved or "saddle hewn" on the bottom. Corner styles were predominantly "full dovetail" or "lock notched" joints. Due to the tight fit of the logs, chinking was usually kept to a minimum but when necessary, employed either sphagnum moss or rags. Beams were normally reinforced with wooden pegs, connecting the tiers at regular intervals. The beams were usually pine, spruce or poplar with dimensions commonly at 5" (12.7 cm) x 8" (20.3 cm) on hewn logs.

Exterior walls on the Finnish buildings were nearly always left bare, although painted trim was common. The craftsmanship of these log buildings could be seen in the fact that from a slight distance many gave the appearance of being frame buildings with dressed lumber.

Interior walls were likewise bare, except in houses, which were usually papered or boarded. Roofs were predominantly gable, with mixed framing styles, 1" x 6" (2.5 cm

x 15.2 cm) rough-cut lumber strapping and covered with wooden shingles. Foundations were at times lacking, but generally consisted of stone and/or vertical wooden posts.

The two most distinctive architectural building forms on these Finnish farmsteads were the **sauna** and the hay barn. The **sauna** was found on virtually every Finnish farm, yet only on the Finnish homesteads, providing a unique cultural indicator.⁵ Their standard design was an 8' x 16' (2.4 m x 4.9 m), two room facility with one external door, and one or two small windows. Of the 50 **saunas** examined, most tended to have a metal stove and chimney, rather than being the traditional *savusauna* (smoke sauna) type. Usually the **sauna** was the first building on the farmstead and served as a temporary house. Later auxiliary uses for the steam bath found in the survey included summer kitchen, maternity room, laundry, grain drying area and even smoke-curing unit for fish and meat. The distinctive Finnish hay barn was the exception to the general construction style, invariably having rounded logs with wide gaps between (for drying), and occasionally slightly cantilevered walls.

The dwelling houses varied in form somewhat, but were normally 16' (4.9 m) x 20' (6.1 m), one to one and one half storey buildings, with gable roof, two to four rooms, and perhaps a small porch. Other common features included a wall-mounted brick chimney, external access to the loft, and a small root cellar dug under the dwelling floor. The main animal barn was the largest construction on the farm, averaging 18' (5.5 m) x 24' (7.3 m), with the lower cow parlor built of logs and the top hay loft area constructed of frame (dressed lumber).

The main feature of interest in the settlement characteristic survey is how directly it paralleled the descriptions and pictures of rural buildings and sites in Finland (particularly the southwest area) early in the century. Early folk architectural studies by Valter Forsblom in Finland in 1916⁶ and 1931⁷ and Albert Hämäläinen in 1930⁸ display features nearly identical to the Finnish farms



Finnish house in Thunder Bay, note pole roof

of Thunder Bay. Noted Finnish Geographer, J.G. Grano's descriptions of traditional "peasant habitation" in *Suomi: A General Handbook on the Geography of Finland*⁹ could also equally apply to the Finnish building forms in Canada. Only slight differences in materials used seemed to take place in the transfer.

Site and Settlement Patterns

While many of the spatial aspects of Finnish settlement in Thunder Bay again paralleled that in rural Finland, some interesting modifications took place. Despite the fact that their North American farms averaged to be four times larger than those they left in Finland, the farmstead and general farm layout remained much the same. The farmstead was characteristically five to eight buildings including the dwelling house, main barn, storage sheds, animal sheds, sauna and

hay barn. The traditional grain threshing or riihi barns common in the old country, were not used very often in Canada because of heavier mechanization. The farmstead buildings were laid out in a notably symmetrical fashion over a two to three acre (0.8 - 1.2 hectare) area at an intermediate elevation on the farm. The buildings cluster was usually road-oriented, often water-oriented and at times aesthetically based (view-oriented). Field patterns could be characterized as scattered, irregularly shaped patches with little of the total farm cleared. Unlike the non-Finn farms of the area, forests covered the majority of the Finnish holdings and were highly utilized by these pioneers.

In the Thunder Bay survey approximately three-quarters of the Finnish Farms sampled had less than 30 acres (12.1 hectares) cleared of forest, out of their 160 acre (64.8 hectares) total. A similar survey conducted by H. Smeds in Finland in 1910, showed



Typical Finnish sauna in Thunder Bay area



Similarly constructed sauna in southwest Finland (From Forsblom, V.W., "Allmogebyggnader i Esse", op.cit., p. 25.)

that 68 % of their farms had less than 24.7 acres (10 hectares) cleared. Therefore despite fitting into a new survey system, farm activity, as reflected in cleared area, remained the same.

According to the questionnaires, the initial choice of a farm unit by the Finns in Thunder Bay was based on the direct economic opportunities of the land (such as farm agriculture and forestry) and social ties (friend or kin) that the particular site had to offer. However more general considerations were access to the social and economic institutions of the Finnish communities, and the proximity to supplemental employment (eg. commercial forestry operations, mines and construction projects). Certain elements of chance and aesthetics also entered the selection process.

The Finnish communities in rural Thunder Bay were fairly clearly defined, well organiz-

ed, social units, which were institutionally based and delineated by composite service areas. Of most importance to the community economically was the co-operative, and socially the "meeting hall." However schools, post offices and churches were also involved. The co-ops were something unique to the Finnish communities within the region at this time, however, were common in Finland. Also unlike other ethnic communities in the region, the meeting halls, not the churches, tended to be the social foci for the Finnish settlements. Many of the Finns had faced problems with the home church upon their emigration and were looking for alternatives in the new world. Often Finnish communities which were split on political beliefs, built separate halls. Some cases were found in Thunder Bay where both "white" and "red" halls (the former referring to rightist political leanings, the latter leftist) were constructed



Finnish haybarn in Thunder Bay

nearly side by side, with little social exchange. Again, this was unique to the Finnish communities of the area.

Conclusion

In looking at an overview of this pioneering effort, that they chose these rugged, "marginal" areas at all, is perhaps the most distinctive feature of the rural Finnish settlement. The Finns were responsible for a substantial expansion of the ecumene of the Thunder Bay area, as they were in other parts of North America. Despite a wide

range of alternatives in the New World, many chose to cling to the traditional lifestyle and to a large degree replicate their homeland in a new, but familiar geographic setting.

The significance of the impact of Finnish settlement on rural Thunder Bay is noteworthy in two respects. First, the Finns demonstrated a mastery of the boreal landscape born out of centuries of dealing with it. Secondly, the transplanted Finnish character, showing a strong sense of will and unusual abilities of organization, formed a life and image now a distinctive part of the cultural mosaic of Canada.



Haybarn in southwest Finland, C. 1915 (From Forsblom, V.W., "Sydosterbottniska allmogebyggnader", op.cit., p. 81)



Typical early Finnish farmstead in Thunder Bay, 1905 (From the Collection of the Thunder Bay Finnish-Canadian Historical Society, Donor-Maki)

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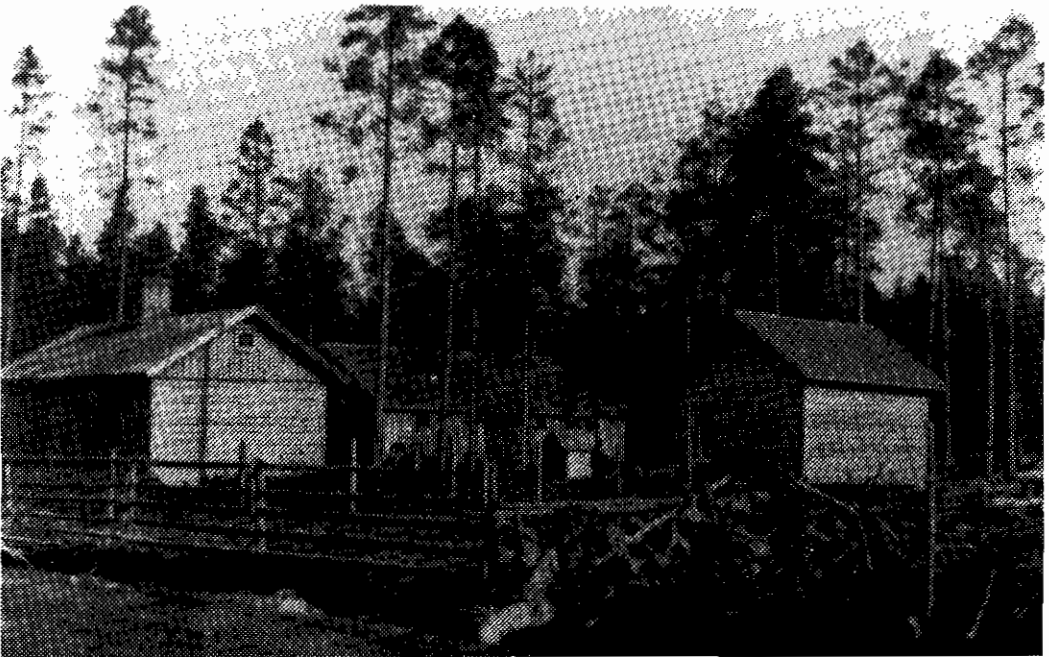
Suomalaisen asutuksen vaikutuksia kanadalaisessa kulttuurimaisemassa

Tämä tutkimus käsittelee Kanadan suurinta ja varhaisinta suomalaissiirtokuntaa ja tutkii sen vaikutusta Thunder Bayn alueen kulttuurimaisemaan. Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan laajasti kansanomaisen arkkitehtuurin muotoja ja asumismalleja sekä tehdään vertailuja (sijainti/asutus) samankaltaisiin etnografisiin tutkimuksiin, jotka käsittelevät samaa aikakautta Suomessa ja seurataan kulttuurin siirtymistä ja vaikutusta Uuteen Maailmaan sopeutumisessa.

Se, mitä suomalaiset saivat aikaan Thunder Bayn alueella, oli heidän perinteellisen kulttuurimaisemansa melkoisen suora siirto uuteen, mutta tuttuun fyysiseen ympäristöön. Taloudellisesti nämä ihmiset säilyttivät rajoitetun maanviljelyskulttuuriperustansa, mitä osittain korvasi ja täydensi muu alkutuotanto ja rakennusteollisuus. Arkkitehtonisesti kulttuurisiirtymä oli melkein täydellinen sekä pitkälle kehittyneessä rakennusty-

lissä että erityisissä rakennustyypeissä. Vieläpä voimakkaasti perinteellisen saunan merkitys säilyi lähes koskemattomana. Maatilojen sijoittuminen, johon väljentävästi vaikutti Kanadan maanmittausjärjestelmä, kehittyi paljolti samanlaiseksi kuin vanhassa kotimaassa vastaavine rakennusasetelmineen, peltoineen ja metsineen. Valitut maatilojen sijaintipaikat olivat samankaltaisia huolimatta eräistä muuteluista, jotka johtuivat käytävissä olevan maa-alueen rajoittuneisuudesta. Instituutiot, kuten osuustoiminta ja luterilainen kirkko siirrettiin myös, vaikka kirkko menetti merkitystään ja jossain määrin sen korvikkeena toimi yhteinen kokoontumis"haali".

Suomalaisen asutuksen merkitys Thunder Bayn maaseutualueelle oli kahdenlainen. Ensiksi suomalaiset osoittivat vuosisataisen kokemuksensa perusteella, että he kykenivät hallitsemaan pohjoista maaperää ja maisemaa. Toiseksi, he siirsivät suomalaisen luonteen, johon kuuluu voimakas tahto ja hyvät organisointikyvyt ja muodostivat oman elämäntyylinsä ja maailmankuvansa, joka nyt on omanleimainen osansa Kanadan kulttuurimosaiikkia.



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