

THE MINNESOTA FINNISH-AMERICAN FAMILY HISTORY PROJECT



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Finnish American history, culture and world view can be investigated from two different but mutually related perspectives. Viewed from Finland the subject becomes defined as emigration from Finland. It focuses on examining the original roots of Finnish American culture, its subsequent modifications in the New World, and the prospects for its continuing survival in America as a sort of extension of the homeland culture. Viewed from America the subject is defined as immigration to America. It focuses on examining the historic role of the original culture in confronting American realities, on its subsequent modification and relation to the dominant American culture as a continuing aspect of the total multi-cultural society of America.

The two perspectives supplement each other, illuminate the same reality, and perhaps define the relationships between scholars in Finland and America who are concerned with the same subject matter.

One subject of mutual interest will be the Minnesota Finnish American Family History Project conducted from November 1979 to June 1981.¹ This project was unorthodox in several respects. It sought the historical origins and a definition of the cultural characteristics of Finnish Americans in sources other than manuscript collections



Carl Ross, Project Advisor for the family history project, author of *THE FINN FACTOR* of which the second edition, with a new Foreword by Juha Pentikainen, has just become available.

and institutional records. It organized the volunteer participation of ordinary Finnish Americans of many generations in gathering and recording their personal histories. While assuming the existence of a national Finnish American culture it focused on one region, seeking to define its particular characteristics and identity.

Uniformity of approach was encouraged by defining a completed family history as consisting of several parts: 1) a "Family Tree", or genealogical table, of several generations with the emphasis on the immigrant generation and subsequent generations in America; 2) a written narrative history by the family historian; 3) a collection of family documents verifying the historical record, individual reminiscences and biographies, and photographs or descriptions of objects of material culture relating to the family experience; 4) oral history interviews with family members conducted by an interviewer from outside the family (following a predetermined "Interview Guide").

An illustrated 100 page HANDBOOK FOR DOING FINNISH AMERICAN FAMILY HISTORY² was published. It reached hundreds of Finnish American families who were already caught up in the current enthusiasm for seeking family "roots". At public meetings of local residents, members of church congregations, "Kalevalaisia", Minnesota Finnish American Historical Society chapters, and at special local "Workshops" for family historians, it was emphasized that the purpose was not a search for remote ancestors in Finland but an exploration of Finnish American experience over several generations.

Originally suggested in April 1979 by Carl Ross in the SEURANLEHTI of Minnesota Finnish American Historical Society, the project was sponsored by the MFAHS and funded by a generous grant from the Minnesota Historical Society. The project was carried out by project director and oral historian Velma M. Doby with the volunteer assistance of local coordinators and family historians. Over 300 registrations for participation were received. At the time of its

official conclusion the collected family histories and taped interviews were donated to the Immigration History Research center of the University of Minnesota as the nucleus for a permanent Finnish American Family History Collection. At the present time the collection includes 81 completed histories (11 of them still requiring interviews), a total of some 200 hours of interviews on cassettes, and the Summary Report and records of the project. Of the interviews 44 were with first generation immigrants, many of whom arrived early in the century, 59 with second generation American born persons, 8 with third and fourth generation individuals. Probably a majority of participants were women. A large number of family histories begun during the project are still in various stages of completion and the collection remains open to donors of family history materials of all kinds.

Altogether these generation-linked stories encompass the entire period and the major areas of Minnesota Finnish settlement. Although participants were volunteers, not a selected cross section sampling, it is our opinion that these life stories and expressions of Finnish American views are typical for this region and ought to be considered as reliable evidence. We have not attempted to evaluate fully or to summarize the project findings, nor can this be done in isolation from manuscript sources and other evidence that is available. Family history, like oral history, is subject to problems related to individual recall or memory, and needs to be weighed with other evidence: but it is also a form of evidence that penetrates into areas of the conscious, of beliefs, memories and personal experiences that go unrecorded in documents, but circulate freely as folklore, family legend, recalled experience and popular myth. Therefore, the scope of this report is limited to describing the project and impressions from it and venturing some hypotheses for further investigation.

Our first, and most basic, impression is that a sense of Finnish American identity is alive and well and living in Minnesota. Persons of Finnish descent in large numbers,



Ceremonies dedicating carved wooden statue of Saint Urho in Menahga, Minnesota in July

and of all generations, acknowledge this common cultural background. They do this in various ways. Hundreds of family histories are being investigated with a conscious search for Finnish origins (it does not really matter in this respect that many will never be finished or never circulate outside the family circle). Membership in contemporary Finnish American societies such as the Minnesota Finnish American Historical Society is comparatively large and has increased in recent years. A patron saint of Finnish Americans (St. Urho) has been enshrined this summer with a statue at Menahga, Minnesota (an American invention, he is almost unknown in Finland but his legend has spread to all fifty states of the U.S.).³ Participation in trips to Finland and visits by Finnish relatives

to America is increasing annually. Other evidence could be cited. That this should be so confounds the predictions of earlier decades that ethnic identity and culture would disappear in the great American "melting pot".

There are no simple answers as to why this is so. In fact, it has not even been clearly established what constitutes for Finnish Americans a definition of their identity. The Finnish language is neither spoken or read by a majority. Only remnants of once powerful institutions built by Finnish immigrants remain with a core of faithful but aging supporters. Therefore, explanations for the continuing Finnish American presence cannot be sought in either a persistence of language as a cultural vehicle or in institutional life

which once seemed to be the force that gave life and vitality to a Finnish community in America. Yet, if after more than a century of residence in Minnesota, Finnish immigrants and their descendents acknowledge and cultivate a Finnish American identity, compelling reasons, some mechanism or means, must exist for this persistence of ethnic identity. Family histories provide valuable clues for defining this identity and for understanding how an ethnic identity and subculture is maintained, modified and disseminated.

The Finnish American population of Minnesota appears far more homogeneous and interconnected when viewed from the perspective of family histories. Although at the beginning we were inclined to attach only secondary importance to genealogical tables, it became apparent that these tables conveyed vital information; they indicated a point of common origin among a surprisingly large group of earlier Minnesota Finns. Their old country origin was a small area of Northern Finland and their American origin in the Michigan "Copper Country". This is corroborated in the work of Salomon Ilmonen who investigated the point of origin in Finland of early immigrants and through oral history interviews between 1911 and 1922 collected hundreds of biographical sketches of Finns in America (including the date and place of birth, date of immigration, places of residence and occupations in America).⁴

These biographies, for instance, show that nearly half the Finnish residents of the Cokato area in Minnesota, prior to 1880, came there after prior residence in the Copper Country (75 from Michigan and 87 directly from Finland). Ilmonen's almost complete listing of immigrants in the New York Mills-Sebeka area up to the 1880's showed that of 131 heads of families 80 had lived in Upper Michigan for varying lengths of time, another 15 came from other industrial centers, only 36 had arrived from Finland or rural areas of the U.S. Sixty had lived and worked in the Michigan mines from 6 to 19 years. Much the same, accor-

ding to Ilmonen, was true in the other early Minnesota settlements including Northern Minnesota mining towns, the Duluth and Minneapolis areas. We were able to confirm Ilmonen's observations in many family histories and we found that merely to inject the subject of personal origins in Michigan set off a chain reaction of responses in almost any gathering of Minnesota Finns.

The Copper Country origin of so many of the early immigrants contributed to the comparatively early development of a homogeneous and well knit Minnesota Finnish community and sub-culture well before the mass immigration of the twentieth century. The Finnish immigrants to the Copper Country came from a small number of villages in extreme Northern Finland near its borders with Norway. As they moved to Minnesota, common village origins and culture, as well as predominance of Laestadian religion convictions among them, provided a mutual support structure and links between the various settlements they built. Laestadian Lutheran teachings emphasized the virtues of simple rural life, lay preaching, and local church autonomy, goals they sought to realize in Minnesota rural (and urban) communities.⁵ Copper Country origins of Minnesota settlers were also significant since it was from this first "hub" of settlement that the seeds of Finnish American cultural and institutional life were carried into Minnesota (not directly from Finland). The most significant of these, apart from the church, was the temperance movement.⁶ A visitor to Cokato will still find a nineteenth century temperance hall which despite its urban origins continues to serve this rural area as a community center.

Finally, family histories and kinship charts indicate how people actually lived and how family connections introduced a coherent and unifying element into Minnesota Finnish American life. Even in farming areas these were not isolated or purely rural communities. Men often worked in sawmills, on the railroads, or even returned to the mines for periods. Women worked the farms when the men were absent but also worked as

domestic servants in nearby towns or in boarding houses, restaurants and homes in the larger cities. Family migrations from place to place and their dispersal into new areas, intermarriage with other families, Finnish and non-Finnish, constant migration between farm and city, all indicate an evolving and homogeneous community. From this perspective we see a network of closely linked communities through which traditional culture and new experience were constantly dispersed. This remains true of contemporary Finnish American life. Descendants of the first settlers in such places as the Cokato area still live there, but family ties connect them to the other areas of Finnish settlement in Minnesota (and, of course, outside the state as well). We also find that with the passing years and intermarriage of families the distinction between earlier and later immigrants and their descendants has become blurred or has disappeared (with the possible exception of those who have arrived since World War II). ⁷ It becomes a tenable hypothesis that family ties and common experiences were a significant factor in shaping, disseminating and preserving a distinct regional Finnish American culture while institutions played the secondary role. This would explain why even with the disappearance of many of these institutions and even of Finnish American communities in the strict sense of geographic settlement there is a continuing presence of Finnish Americans as an identifiable group.

Family histories also reveal characteristics with which Finnish Americans identify this group. One participant suggested that the primary characteristic of Finnish Americans could be summed up in the three "S" words "Sauna, Sisu and Sana" (the Samuelson family of Ottertail County, family history narrative). This definition accurately notes a continuing belief in the virtues of the Sauna, the existence of Sisu, and the value of the "word" whether read or spoken, in scripture or as the embodiment of educational values. ⁸ These might be considered "old world" cultural attributes still held by Ame-

rican Finns in new and modified forms (for instance, "Sana" is decidedly not to be understood literally as use of the Finnish language; but we can note evidence that Finnish Americans have attached great value to literacy and education). Family histories confirm the existence of various self-definitions of Finnishness whether or not they are true, and, of course, different generations will tend to have their own definitions of Finnishness. What Finnish Americans unquestionably have is a feeling of common origins and experiences that, in fact, constitute a body of Finnish American folklore that is distinct from old world culture.⁹

The existence of a distinct ethnic group or subculture ought to be evident in shared experiences, common values, and something which for lack of a better term we might call a "group memory". This collection of family histories, interviews and autobiographical accounts demonstrates such shared experiences, commonly held values and memories of past events that are passed on from generation to generation and largely define Minnesota Finnish American identity. We can illustrate the existence of "group memory" by the following:

— The retention of a family story about the original migration to America even several generations back and the recurring reference to an earlier sojourn in Upper Michigan among many families. This indirectly often appears to be connected to the very considerable identification of Minnesota Finns with the Apostolic Lutheran churches (Laestadians), a fact which has perhaps not received the attention it merits.

— The widespread recollection that Minnesota Finnish American immigrants began their American experience as mine and lumber workers or domestic servants. Stories of work experience are often detailed and contain remarkable similarities. (During the past year we have, for instance, encountered three accounts from different mining areas of a miner's first traumatic experience going down in the "cage" used to lower them into the mine.) The origin of many rural families and communities in the movement to

escape from mine labor, or in being black-listed for labor militancy, is a facet of many interviews and histories (not limited to radicals). Among women the mention of domestic service elicits stories of how their mothers worked as domestic servants while numerous second generation women relate their experiences as teachers.

– The inclusion in family stories, usually with a strong sense of nostalgia, of participation in the temperance movement, accounts of “Finn Hall” activities, adherence to local Finnish congregations, etc. all point to a general involvement historically in Finnish American institutions.

– Among the striking and dramatic events recurring in the recollections of family experience none are more vivid than stories of great fires. Ilma Wehka Widstrom tells of how her family fled in panic and stopped in exhaustion to find shelter and survival in a culvert while they watched a group of fifteen refugees immediately ahead of them burn to death during the great Cloquet fire of 1918. Syrjälä tells of a dramatic escape from burning Cloquet. Aino Mäki recounts her personal memories of the fire that burned down Chisholm in 1908.

– A remarkably similar kind of experience with language is related by a very large group of second generation persons. Lina Laitala from Ely writes that among Italian, Slavic and Finnish children “all children spoke the mother tongue on entering school” and had to learn English. Don Wirtanen, in Markham, spoke no English on entering school and the same was true of Aino Mäki in Chisholm, while Maria Starkka of Brainerd says Swedish or Finnish was the spoken language of the children beginning school. Memories of leaving Finnish speaking homes for English language schools is a typical and almost universal second generation experience. Substantial continuing ability among second generation Finns to use Finnish seems to be indicated; on the other hand there seems little evidence to support the quite common supposition that the second generation tried to lose or conceal its Finnish identity.

– Apart from the Sauna, as an almost uni-

versal social practice, these histories indicate recollections of other customs including the celebration of various holidays of distinctly Finnish origin including “name days”, “Pikku Joulu”, “Juhannus”, etc., testifying to participation in the ethnic culture and retaining often nostalgic memories of these.

– Finally, there is expressed no yearning for “good old days” in the old country but some of these narratives suggest a desire to return to virtues associated with memories of earlier experiences. The Laitalas have maintained their old homestead, Alice Niemi Murphy and her non-Finn husband have returned to live on the old farm which she says was built on the style of the old country farmstead.

Finnish Americans continue to congregate together, to display some of their old “clannishness”. Wherever they gather the conversation can readily turn to subjects arising from their origins and their experiences. In the past year the authors of this article have experienced this on various occasions. During these conversations whether they concern one-time work as domestics, mine work, Finnish halls and theatres, or visits to the Copper Country, it is evident that we are sharing in a Finnish American culture, heritage and folklore. And it must be marked that we no longer discern significant differences due to earlier family affiliations with factions based on religion or politics, in fact, it begins to appear that these schisms were never as significant to the daily life of American Finns as the historians have believed them to be, our cultural heritage seems now to be broader than the schisms of the past.

References

1. The Minnesota Finnish American Family History project and this report of its findings is one aspect of ongoing research by American scholars in Finnish American culture and folklore. Among these is the independent research of Marianne Wargelin-Brown over several years and her recent unpublished paper defining Finnish American folklore. the recent study by Marsha Pentti of a Massachusetts Finnish Cranberry Growing Commu-

nity, as well as continuing studies of Finnish immigrant architecture by Arnold Alanen. In October 1982 Wargelin-Brown, Carl Ross, Rachel Ewaldson and Yvonne Lockwood will participate in a panel discussion of Finnish American folklore at the Annual Meeting of the American Folklore Society in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

2. Carl Ross and Velma M. Doby, *HANDBOOK FOR DOING FINNISH AMERICAN HISTORY* (Parta Printers: New York Mills, 1981), available from publisher or Immigration History Research Center at \$ 4.50 per copy.

3. Although the Saint Urho legend can be traced back for some 25 years, began to circulate widely in recent years, and to be celebrated in many localities as a St. Urho's Day in March, the Menahga celebrations this year began as a local Chamber of Commerce promotion for the town. Nevertheless the acceptance of St. Urho as a sort of Finnish American equivalent of the Irish St. Patrick is widespread and assumes the proportions of a folk legend. The Menahga celebration was a genuine Finnish American festival of considerable significance.

4. Salomon Ilmonen, *AMERIKAN SUOMALAISTEN HISTORIA JA ELÄMÄN KERTOMUKSIA*, Vol. 2 (Jyväskylä, 1923); also, *AMERIKAN SUOMALAISTEN HISTORIA*, Vol. 3 (Hancock, Suom.—Lut. Kustannusliike, 1926).

5. Marvin Lamppa, "Embers of Revival: Laes-

tadian Schisms in Northeastern Minnesota, 1900-1940" in *FINNISH DIASPORA II: UNITED STATES* edited by Michael G. Karni (Toronto: The Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1981).

6. Michael G. Karni, "Finnish Temperance and its Clash With Emerging Socialism in Minnesota" in *FINNISH DIASPORA II*

7. Marianne Wargelin-Brown, "Finnish American Folklore: a Survey of Research and a Definition of the Subject" written for Scand. 5670-1 Prof. Juha Y. Pentikäinen, Visiting Professor, University of Minnesota, July 1981, outlines six different immigrant groups, all defined on the basis of the original immigrant's time of arrival.

8. Yvonne Lockwood wrote about the vitality of sauna culture among later generations of Finnish Americans in her "The Sauna: An expression of Finnish American Identity". *Western Folklore*, Vol. XXXVI, Num. 1, January 1977, pp. 71-84.

9. Wargelin-Brown has introduced a broad definition of Finnish American folklore in the study she did under Juha Pentikäinen. This as yet unpublished manuscript defines a body of folklore distinct from its counterpart in Old World folklore. The Minnesota Finnish American Family History Project validates many of the distinctions she proposes in her study, and the stories which follow illustrate the type of folklore she outlined.

Amerikansuomalainen Perhehistoria-projekti

Amerikansuomalaisten historiaa, kulttuuria ja maailmankuvaa voidaan tarkastella kahdesta eri lähtökohdasta, Amerikasta ja Suomesta, käsin. Nämä täydentävät toisiaan, valaisevat samojen asioiden eri puolia ja samalla määrittelevät suhteita kahden maan tutkijoiden välillä.

Minnesotan Amerikansuomalaisten Perhehistoria-projekti, joka on toiminut marraskuusta 1979 kesäkuuhun 1981, pyrki selvittämään ja määrittelemään amerikansuomalaisen kulttuurin alkuperää innostamalla amerikansuomalaisia keräämään ja tallentamaan omaa henkilöhistoriaansa. Kirjoitetut perhehistoriat ja haastattelunauhut muodostavat nyt Amerikansuomalaisten Perhehistoria-kokoelman Immigration History Research Centerissä Minnesotan yliopistossa. Käsikirja *A Handbook for doing Finnish American Family History*, jossa on mukana yli 300 osanottajaa, korostaa, ettei tassa ole tarkoitus kertoittaa kaukaisia esi-isiä Suomessa vaan tutkia amerikansuomalaisten elämää ja kokemuksia muutamien sukupolvien aikana. Koska osanottajat olivat vapaaehtoisia eivatka mi-

kään valikoitu poikkileikkausjoukko ovat tulokset tyypillisiä Minnesotan amerikansuomalaisten kertomuksia ja näkemyksiä ja edustavat Minnesotan suomalaisten elämää läpi koko vuosisadan kaikilta alueilta ja eri sukupolvien ajalta.

Projekti paljastaa tämänpaivan Minnesotassa voimakkaan amerikansuomalaisuuden, jota ei voi selittää itsepintaisella kiinnipitamisellä suomen kielestä, koska enemmistö ei enää puhu suomea, eikä suomalaisella järjestötoiminnalla, koska siirtolaisjärjestöt ovat melkein kokonaan lakanneet toimimasta. Perhehistoriat antavat kuitenkin arvokkaita johtolankoja amerikansuomalaisen identiteetin määrittelemiseen ja sen ymmärtämiseen kuinka etninen identiteetti ja vahemmistökulttuuri on säilynyt, mukautunut ja havinnyt.

Tastä näkökulmasta nähtynä Minnesotan amerikansuomalainen väestö näyttää olevan homogeeninen ja yhtenäinen. Yhteiset lähtökohdat sekä Suomessa että Ylä-Peninsulassa näytävät olleen merkityksellisiä jo aikaisemmin tehdyissä Salomon Ilmosen tutkimuksissa. Perhehistoriat ja sukuselvi-tykset siis osoittavat kuinka ihmiset itseasiassa elivät, kuinka he liikkuiivat kaupungeissa ja maaseu-

dulla, kävivät läpi yhteisiä työkokemuksia, menivät keskenään naimisiin ja liikkuvat suomalaisten yhdyskuntien välillä. Suomalaiset siirtokunnat on historiallisesti nähty yhdistävänä tekijänä yhdyskuntien välillä, joiden traditionaalinen kulttuuri ja uudet kokemukset olivat alituisesti hajallaan. Ei ole epäilystä siitä, etteiko perhesiteillä ja yhteisillä kokemuksilla olisi tärkeä merkitys erillään sijaitsevien amerikansuomalaisten kulttuurien muotoutumisessa, leviämässä ja säilymisessä. Tässä yhteydessä järjestöillä oli toissijainen merkitys.

Perhehistoriat paljastavat useita amerikansuomalaisessa identiteetissä itsessään olevia piirteitä, joiden juuret ovat Vanhan Maan traditioissa, kuten usko saunan parantavaan vaikutukseen ja sisun olemassaolo. Se, mikä amerikansuomalaisilla epäilemättä on, on tunne yhteisestä alkuperästä ja käsitys, että itse asiassa amerikansuomalainen kansanperinne eroaa selvästi Vanhan Maan kult-

tuurista. Tämän näyttävät toteen tapahtumien ja kokemusten muistiinpanot. Näihin sisältyy ensimmäisten maahanmuuttaneitten muistoja, jotka ovat siirtyneet sukupolvelta toiselle, muistoja kaivos-työstä, metsätöistä ja kotiapulaisena olosta, muistelmia Finn haaleista, raittiusseuroista ja kirkon toiminnasta ja lopuksi kuvauksia metsäpaloista, kielieroista kouluissa ja suomalaisten juhlapäivien viettotavoista.

Amerikansuomalaiset keraantuvat jatkuvasti yhteen ylläpitaakseen vanhaa "heimohenkisyttään". Missä tahansa he kokoontuvat keskustelu kääntyy heidän alkuperänsä ja kokemuksiinsa. On ilmeistä, että me olemme jatkamassa amerikansuomalaista kulttuuria, perintöä ja kansanrunoutta, joka on riippumaton suomen kielestä, ei ole selvillä Suomen menneisyydestä eikä nykypäivästä, eikä tunne järjestöjä eikä yhteisoja, jotka kerran esittivät niin suurta osaa amerikansuomalaisten keskuudessa.