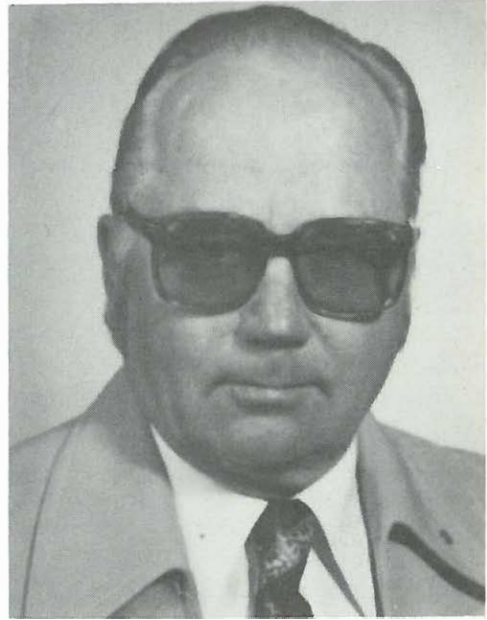


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Collecting information on finns in Florida and Georgia



The peak period of emigration from Finland to North America extended from the end of the last century to the mid-1920s. Inside that period fall the years of Czarist oppression in Finland and the Russo-Japanese War as well as World War I, along with its momentous consequences to this country. Thus reasons for emigrating were for many Finns not hard to find, and according to the fashion of the times the destination was in most cases America.

Many of these emigrants or their children can still be reached in different parts of the United States or Canada. Typically, these Finns have settled down in the same communities -- in the beginning, drawn by employment opportunities. The warm climate and otherwise easy conditions in Florida have more recently attracted many Finns down there after retirement. Frequently, they have settled in established Finnish colonies, though people of Finnish extraction can be found scattered all over the state of Florida.

Finnish students of emigration know well how important it is to collect what written and remembered information still exists about the vicissitudes of Finnish emigrants in the New World. Work along these lines has been done among the Finns in Florida by, among others, the Finnish Historical Society of Florida and Docent William Copeland of the University of Helsinki. Lack of funds and the shortage of help, however, have handicapped their efforts. The present danger is that a large amount of material that could be of value to such research may be lost.

Partly because for quite a few years I have been meeting old Finnish residents of Florida and become acquainted with the conditions in which they live, it occurred to me to undertake the collection of knowledge about them liable to be lost in the near future. I have been supported in my activity by the Migration Institute of Turku. It is not my intention to carry out any analysis of the material gathered but only

to make it available to regular research historians.

I have done the work mainly by interviewing old emigrants. To some extent, I have also managed to collect literary material as well as photographs, some of which I have taken myself, focussing attention on subjects connected with the experiences and fortunes of emigrants.

In the interviews, I have tried as much as possible to apply a certain formula. Accordingly, I start out with questions about each subject's personal history, about the various stages of his Atlantic crossing and about his places of residence and employment in America. The end of the interview changes in the best cases into the subject's own narrative about his life as an emigrant. The stories told have sometimes been quite colorful, sometimes toned down by "self censorship." On the average, the interview itself takes only between 15 minutes and an hour — but the period of persuasion leading up to it is liable to take several hours.

Oral interviews are important because the use of printed questionnaires has not proved to be a successful method of obtaining even basic facts. My guess is that the reason is suspicion on the part of elderly people about the use to which information given might be put. Another reason is failure to understand questions, for one reason or another, and consequent reluctance to answer. Many of these pensioners have discarded as "worthless" material in writing among their possessions when moving down to Florida. In some cases, however, I have succeeded in tracking down family records and documents that show promise of yielding information of interest.

In Florida, there exist four Finnish colonies of some size. The biggest and most important of them is located in the area, known to many, of the small towns of Lantana and Lake Worth. In this area, there live over ten thousand persons of Finnish birth. Their average age is probably

over 70 years. You can hear Finnish spoken all over the place; and in banks, offices and many stores, there are employees who speak Finnish. Another rather large and still active community is New Port Richey, which is situated some 30 miles north of the big city of Tampa. There the number of people who speak Finnish is around 400, averaging in age even more than elsewhere. They share a sense of belonging together to an exceptional degree and their activities are concentrated around their meeting hall, just as in the case of other Finnish-Americans.

In Miami, there used to be a compact, if small, Finnish colony. All that is left of it now is a shadow of its former self, for the influx of colored people caused many of the Finns to move elsewhere, like, for example, the Lantana area, already mentioned.

In Miami, too, there used to be lively social activity, carried on in the local Finnish "hall."

A separate chapter can be written about Astor, which should not be confused with the fishing town named Astoria, located in the Pacific Northwest, in the state of Oregon. It was back in the 1920s that a Finnish agricultural and fishing community was established in high hopes — but the depression that soon overtook the country, leading to difficulties in the marketing of produce, halted progress. Now there are only half a dozen families of Finnish origin living in Astor.

Among the places in the Florida region with a Finnish colony, Jesup also deserves mention. Actually, it is not even situated in Florida but just across the state line, on the Georgia side. The Finns founded an agricultural cooperative there in 1921 with rules and a board of directors of its own. Overcoming many difficulties, it became a thriving enterprise, doing well until the Great Depression and managing to scrape by even afterward. Its membership



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Picture 1:

A former Finnish henery at Jesup.

Picture 2:

A former common sauna of the Finnish cooperative farm, Jesup.

Picture 3:

Matti Kallio standing in front of the former Finnish cooperative store, Jesup.

Picture 4:

The Finnish hall at Jesup, occasionally still in use.

Photos Kalervo Mustonen, February 1978.



3.

dwindled, however, and the younger people moved away. The cooperative sold its fields (some 500 hectares) in 1965, and the remaining Finns live in their own houses in an area set apart for them in the village of McKinnon. The old meeting hall, the former cooperative store and community sauna still exist. Some twenty families live in the neighborhood, but no young people are to be seen. Taken as a whole, conditions in the community are better than in Astor.

Moving around among these old Finns, I have repeatedly observed how much valuable information they possess, both remembered and stored away in their homes. The collection of this information should not be put off the slightest bit longer.



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