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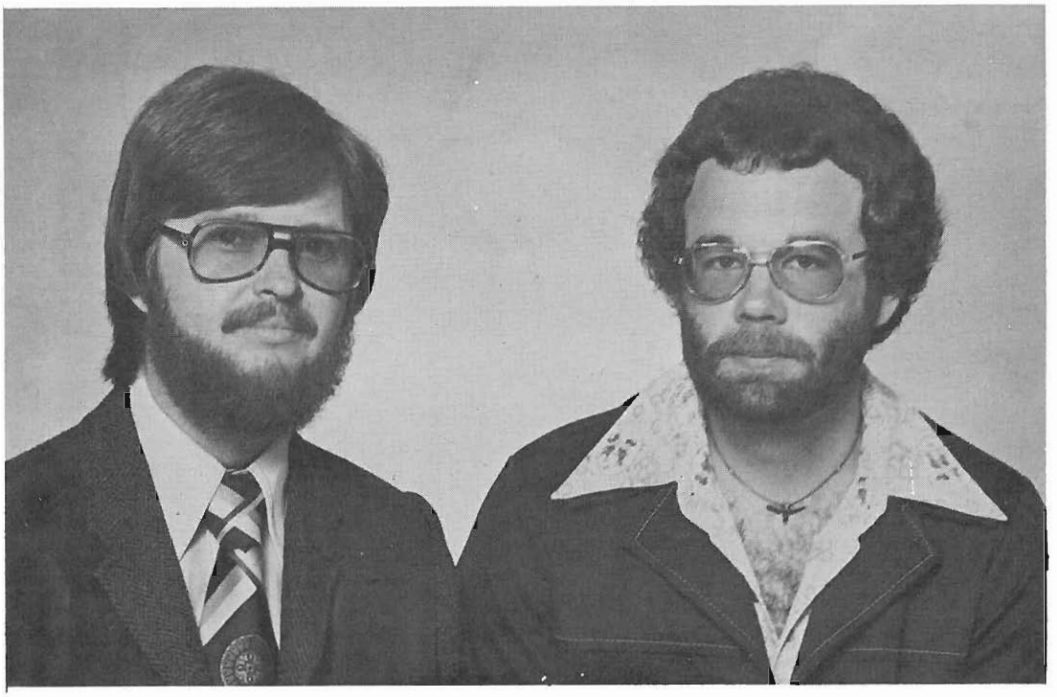
The FINNISH-AMERICAN: an exploration of ethnic identity



The present report describes an exploration of some of the boundary conditions that help to define identifiable ethnic groups. The target population in the present inquiry is a sampling of American citizens of Finnish heritage. Individuals in this sample reside in rural areas of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. The particular influences that certain social structures have on Finnish-Americans' persisting sense of ethnic identity are considered to be strong and ubiquitous. This study concentrates on the special ways by which these persons continue to perceive themselves as being distinctly different from the larger, surrounding population, rather than on demographic variables that might be used merely to describe what it means to be Finnish-American. It is hypothesized that the pace of social-cultural assimilation of Finnish-Americans residing in a rural setting may be considerably slower than is characteristic of similar persons residing in urban areas. In the present study, transcripts of taped interviews with first and second generation Finnish-Americans have provided information that is helpful in identifying a number of boundary-maintenance mechanisms which appear to be useful in preserving feelings and beliefs that define the essence of ethnicity. The most important of these in the present sampling appear to be those related to

religion, language, and education. Subsequent investigations of the Finnish-Americans' strong tendencies to maintain and perpetuate their ethnic identity and cultural traditions have been planned. These studies will be conducted by in-depth interviews and by inventories especially designed for this type of research.

THE FINNISH–AMERICAN: AN EXPLORATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY * **

Introduction

Over the past two decades, and especially with the advent of the American Bicentennial celebration, there has been a growth of interest in studying the cultural roots of the various ethnic groups that comprise the American population. In this article, some of the key issues that have been raised in recent years are explored. The focus is on one extremely interesting ethnic group: the Finnish-Americans who live in the Upper Peninsula of the State of Michigan. Our comments on the social networks developed by the Finnish-Americans in this region dramatically illustrate a number of factors that play important roles in maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity (i.e. these persons typically consider themselves as being Finnish-Americans rather than merely Americans). It is hypothesized that the residents of Michigan's Upper Peninsula with Finnish heritage probably exemplify the feelings, beliefs, and enduring values of members of ethnic groups who live in rural areas and who manage to resist easy or early assimilation into the broader culture of their surrounding environment.

Perspectives on Ethnic Identity

While much of the work to date on the subject of etnicity has focused on the demographic realities of foreign birth and immigration, it is important to remember that the people involved have chosen to remain ethnically oriented. They have managed to maintain ways of life that are different in both obvious and subtle ways from those of the general population of their host country. In this regard, Andrew Greeley has commented:

> The ethnic groups did not come into being in the Old World: they are American creations. In the old country, the immigrants were citizens of towns, not nations. They became ethnics in the United States partly because the larger society defined them as ethnic and partly because it was in their own interest to become ethnics, both because of the political power that might accrue to them in ethnic cohesiveness and because of the social support the ethnic collectivity provided for its members.[1]

As the preceding comment indicates, immigrant groups have typically retained their sense of being people who share more in common with each other than they do with the larger population of their adopted country. By clustering together, they have been able to create communities where they feel more comfortable and "at home." They have shared common food interests, a common language, common religious beliefs, distinct cultural practices, and so forth. Almost all members of a first generation of immigrants have preferred to be identified as members who traditionally follow family and religious ceremonial practices of the Old World.

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The present report describes some of the special ways that substantial numbers of Finnish-Americans view themselves as being distinct from other Americans and the ways that members of the majority of their non-Finnish-American neighbors view them as being different from "typical" Americans.

Fredrik Barth, a prominent social anthropologist, specifies two distinct ways by which an ethnic group may be identified. The first represents a rather traditional view in anthropology, one which places a primary emphasis upon a shared cultural orientation of a group and its organization into a field of communication and interaction. [2] The second conceives ethnicity as being based on personal preferences resulting in a choice made by an ethnic group. The latter perspective represents a view of ethnic groups that defines a boundary that an individual group maintains rather than cultural phenomena that it encloses. [3] It is this second approach to ethnic identity that is emphasized in the present report.

The concept of boundary is regarded as singularly central to the study of ethnicity. This position becomes especially central and important when it is understood that the boundary, as it is represented by a cluster of social-cultural maintenance mechanisms, leads to a distinct channeling of social behaviors and ceremonial practices for the ethnic group involved. Within any strongly bonded ethnic group, members share many common criteria for day-to-day evaluations and personal judgments. It is generally understood that members of any "out-group" are limited in their shared understandings with the ethnic "in-group," in criteria for time-honored values and in evaluating individuals' noteworthy performances. As Barth has observed:

> ...the persistence of ethnic groups in contact implies not only criteria and signals for identification, but also a structuring of interaction which allows the persistence of cultural differences. The organizational feature which...must be general for all inter-ethnic relations is a systematic set of rules governing the inter-ethnic social encounters.[4]

In accordance with Barth's conception, a set of boundary properties may be viewed as a normative mechanism used both by an ethnic group and its related host population. It is the sociological properties of boundary that provide distinctly different perspectives between the two groups.

It is not necessary, or probably reasonable, to hypothesize that boundaries created by ethnic groups are in any way total or completely homogeneous in their effects. Barth has noted that even in a society where assimilation is common, boundaries still constitute important conditions:

> First, it is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility, contact, and information, but do entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories. Secondly, one finds that stable, persisting, and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and are frequently based on the dichotomized ethnic statuses. In other words, ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a social system does not lead to its

liquidation through change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence.[5]

In an effort to extend knowledge about the functioning of boundary mechanisms, the present research was conducted on a group of individuals with a generally acknowledged strong sense of ethnic identity: a sample of Finnish-Americans residing in the Upper Peninsula of the State of Michigan. The data involved in this study are at this point of inquiry somewhat impressionistic. The data were obtained from an analysis of transcripts from an oral history project being conducted in the Upper Peninsula by Dr. Arthur Puotinen. Most of the observations included in the present report are derived from analysis of over 300 transcripts of interviews conducted by Dr. Puotinen with first and second generation Finnish-Americans. Dr. Puotinen's interviews, conducted as a basis for historical records, were relatively unstructured. Quantification of the type that sociologists find most persuasive was therefore not possible.

The Finnish-Americans of Michigan's Upper Peninsula

Ethnicity in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan is one of this geographical area's most striking features. Folklorist Richard M. Dorson made the following observations on a tour of the area:

> The psychology of the Peninsula people in particular, and of American society is bedded deep in this ethnic mix. America has grown from Europeans, and the Upper Peninsula spectacularly illustrates the fact. All Europe comingles in her neighborly towns; besides the dominant Finns, French-Canadians and Cornishmen, you can find Belgians at St. Nicholas, Poles and Bohemians at Iron Mountain, Austrians and Armenians in Escanaba, Greeks in Marquette, Italians in Stab-Greeks in Marquette, Italians in Stambaugh, Danes in Norway, Swedes in Manistique, Czechs in Crystal Falls, Croats and Lithuanians in Ironwood, and even such tiny peoples as Luxemburgers at Escanaba, Slovenians at Shingleton, and Montenegrins at Wakefield. These colonies splotch the countryside with a cultural rainbow, and each contributes its own distinctive folk coloring.[6]

The Upper Peninsula of Michigan can be appropriately termed rural by almost any acceptable criterion. In its 16,500 square miles of territory there are 304,347 residents; furthermore, the largest community in the region is the town of Marquette which has a population of about 23,000. For the present report it is important to know that the Upper Peninsula has the largest single concentration of persons with Finnish heritage in the United States. The 1970 census indicated that the region contained 17,721 foreign-born Finns concentrated in eight of the Peninsula's fifteen counties. Since the bulk of Finnish immigration took place near the turn of the century, the Upper Peninsula also contains large numbers of second and third generation Finnish-Americans.

The principal attraction for Finnish-Americans and certain other ethnic groups now residing in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan was the opening of extensive mining operations in the late 1800's. As the mining industry expanded, the copper and iron companies engaged in major labor recruitment drives all over Europe. These efforts proved unusually successful in attracting persons with Finnish heritage.

Since the Upper Peninsula contained such a diversity of ethnic groups during the extreme latter part of the 19th century,

ethnic identity became a prime setting for unusual "boundary" conditions. As noted earlier, Greeley observed that ethnic identity typically provides social support for the members of a group with a common cultural background. For members of ethnic groups in the Upper Peninsula, total disorganization was avoided by fierce attempts to hold on to the customs and ceremonial practices of their respective cultures. The key to ethnic boundaries were, therefore, culturally defensive postures that were maintained by the diverse ethnic groups for purposes of surviving, and hopefully bettering their social and economic status in a new and sometimes threatening environment.

As one might anticipate, many forms of conflict arose between the various ethnic groups of this area. One that was most easily observed was the high level of sheer physical violence that prevailed among the different members of ethnic groups within the region. Such conflicts were particularly frequent between the Finnish-Americans and the Irish-Americans. The comments of one of the older Finnish-Americans living in the Upper Peninsula illustrate this conflict:

> Them tavern brawls, youknow amongst the Irish and the Finns. It was like the Blacks and Whites years back -- they had those special places where they meet. Well, it was the same thing in the saloon, what they called them in those days. But this place was designated for Irish and the other place was designated more for Finns. Well, if the Irish would walk into the Finnish tavern, or vice versa, so then there would be a fight. I don't know what it was, but they just couldn't get along drinking together.
>
> The fights were rugged -- they were cut up, you know, the olden days -- the Finnish especially -- they used to carry them "puukkos." There was a lot of them "puukko junkkaris" -- you know, they would really get into quite a few blood spilling brawls.[7]

Political Activity

One very traditional manner in which members of different ethnic groups have dealt with inter-group conflicts has been to become involved in the political activities of their communities. Political machines have traditionally courted ethnic groups in the hopes of block support. It is interesting to note how visible the attempt to court the ethnic vote became in the 1976 Presidential election in the United States. When one examines the Finnish-Americans of the Upper Peninsula, however, one finds that this pattern has never been pronounced. The following comments by Edgar Litt may help to explain the absence of this process.

> ...accommodation politics was exceedingly limited in scale. It was essentially urban politics, bound by perimeters and the dominant political institutions of the central city. Our understanding of ethnic accommodation politics rests on an analysis of urban politics as something essentially separate from the national political horizon. When one considers the range of party patronage and other rewards dispersed to accommodate competing ethnic groups, it can be seen that these benefits are meaningful only within the urban area and the sphere of operations of the local politicians. Accommodation politics presented a picture of discrete urban solutions, whose impact was meaningful only in the aggregate.[8]

Attempts to get the "Finn vote" were made on occasion, but the urban style of political accommodation appears to have been largely absent. The one period when

Finnish political activity was visible occurred in the early part of the twentieth century, however it seemed even then to be diffuse rather than concerned solely with the interests of Finnish-Americans. This occurred during a period of major strikes against the owners of the mines in the Upper Peninsula. A large portion of Finnish-Americans were at that time of the radical socialist persuasion (members of the Finnish Socialist Federation). They supported the strike and began to make a bid for power on the part of the workers. Private security forces and the National Guard were called in, however, and the strike was broken in a wave of violence. Since that time, Finnish-Americans seem to have withdrawn, as a group, from this type of political participation.

In the Finnish value system, the principle of self-sufficiency is extremely important. Rather than turn to various governmental agencies for aid, the members of Finnish communities have tried to establish a variety of self-help programs. One of the more successful attempts has been the development of cooperatives. In order to provide food, farm supplies, and other necessities, the Finnish-Americans of the Upper Peninsula have banded together in cooperatives in an effort to reduce the cost of goods and to help one another. Most of the early cooperatives were established by the Finnish socialists during the Depression, but a number of these organizations still function today. The cooperatives, in addition to serving as a source of material products, have served as meeting places for the Finns; a place where they have been able to gather and to discuss the issues of the day.

Education

For many ethnic groups, the educational system has been a vehicle for assimilation. Publicly supported education has long been recognized as a potent force for homogeneous socialization. The educational programs encountered by Finnish immigrants were very American indeed. There was little attempt to deal in any special ways with the cultures of immigrant groups. This was, however, an outcome of economic opportunism rather than any conscious designs or prearranged plans to Americanize the immigrant. The number of cultures represented in the schools of the Upper Peninsula was very large, and little attention was given to the specific concerns of the Finns or any of the other ethnic groups. The students would often gather in the school yards and try to teach each other parts of their languages. Some who experienced this process have stated that they grew up having some familiarity with the words from over a dozen languages in their vocabularies. In the classroom, only English was spoken, and few attempts were made to teach it in any special programs to the students. The students were expected to pick it up themselves, and through necessity, many of them did. In attempts to counter what they considered the leveling effect of the public school system, the Finns established privately financed summer school programs. These programs were designed to teach the children the Finnish language, and many of the cultural values ot the Finnish people. These schools were undoubtedly very important in passing on and reinforcing a sense of ethnic identity among Finnish children.

In addition to the establishment of summer schools for Finnish children, educational facilities were created for the Finnish population of young adults. For example, Suomi College in Hancock, Michigan was created in 1896. Suomi is the only institution of higher education that has

ever been founded by Finnish-Americans in the United States. The college was established with three major goals in mind: The study of religion (meaning Finnish Lutheranism), nationalism (which meant Finnish nationalism), and lastly, the passing on of the more subtle but equally important aspects of the Finnish culture. While some watering down of these goals has probably occurred in more recent years, the basic philosophical intent remains intact.

During the earlier years of its operation, the courses at Suomi College were all taught in Finnish, but by the 1920's, English was employed in some of the classes. This practice angered many of the more conservative members of the Finnish community. Nevertheless, by 1958, the requirement that all faculty members be fluent in Finnish was dropped; indeed, by that time all classes were taught in English. While the Finnish language is no longer in formal use at the college today, the curriculum still reflects a strong commitment to passing on the general culture of modern Finland.

At Suomi College, Finnish cultural events continue to be represented in the school calendar. The cultural activities at Suomi often include visits from the Finnish Ambassador to the United States, and by other Finnish persons with national and international reputations, including the President of Finland, who visited the Upper Peninsula in 1976. These officials' public addresses on the contributions of the Finns to the American way of life are well attended and widely heard.

Language

Language has always played a unique role in the maintenance of a sense of ethnic identity. It is a special class of those boundary conditions that separate an ethnic group from the population at large. This is due to the fact that the communications passed on in the language of the ethnic are privy only to those who understand it. Therefore, the media used by the ethnic group is composed of a series of "coded" messages that are directed toward the specific interests of the ethnic group; and consequently, the "out-group" is not able to understand or appreciate this realm of private communication.

Since the arrival of the first Finnish immigrants about 1860, there have been over 350 Finnish language newspapers and periodicals printed in the United States. One of the more prominent publications was the **American Suometar** (American Finn). Its published editorial policy illustrated the role that ethnic periodicals play in the maintenance of ethnic identity. The purposes of the **Amerikan Suometar** were to: 1) further Finnish nationalism and culture; 2) support the temperance movement; 3) preserve Finnish culture and education; 4) provide information about the United States; 5) generate worthy fiction or other literature; 6) provide thorough coverage of news from Finland; 7) offer reliable reporting from Finnish-American communities; 8) print as much world news as space permitted; and 9) underlying all, encourage a Christian outlook and strong support of the institutions and activities of the Suomi Synod and its pastors. The **Amerikan Suometar** published its last edition in 1962, but a number of Finnish-language newspapers remain in circulation throughout the United States.

In addition to the printed word, radio and television stations of Michigan's Upper Peninsula devote significant periods of time each week for Finnish-language programming. The content of these programs usually deals with community issues, news from Finland, Finnish music, travel programs on Finland, and special birthday and anniversary announcements.

Religion

Religion among the Finnish-Americans of the Upper Peninsula was, and still is, an active source of ethnic identity. The Finns are predominantly Lutheran and have developed eight different branches of Lutheranism in the United States. In the early years of the American establishment of the Lutheran Church of Finland and other Lutheran bodies, the congregations were dependent upon the Old Country for their source of ministers. They insisted that services be conducted in Finnish. As a general rule, they would not accept ministers from the American Lutheran organization; however, the supply of ministers from the home country was not very stable or adequate. Between 1890 and 1930, fifty-one pastors came to the United States from Finland, but only seventeen of them remained in the United States.

To attain some degree of independence from their reliance upon Finland for ministers, the Finnish-Americans of the Upper Peninsula founded the Suomi Theological Seminary to train pastors to serve in their churches. The seminary was attached to Suomi College, and this partially explains the strong emphasis on religion in the college curriculum.

While the Lutheran Church has strong support and a large following, it is not, by any means, universally accepted. For many Finnish-Americans the Lutheran Church represents the more conservative forces within their communities. This, of course, runs counter to a widely held socialist political ideology. Current estimates indicate that only one in three of Finnish-Americans is a member of the Lutheran Church. This ratio of membership is undoubtedly influenced by the practice of holding services in Finnish in many of the churches, a language in which many of the young people are not fluent.

Self-Image

From the time that the first Finnish immigrants arrived in Michigan, Finnish-Americans have had to contend with considerable ethnic hostility. It began with the early fighting among the ethnic groups of the area, which, as mentioned earlier, tended to generate a strong degree of solidarity within the Finnish community. Hostility and social pressures from "outsiders" continue to be factors in the sense of ethnic identity that prevails among Finnish-Americans. In many areas of the United States, derogatory jokes are commonly told about Swedish-Americans, Polish-Americans, and members of other identifiable minority groups within the United States. In the Upper Peninsula, jokes about Finnish-Americans are more common than jokes about the frequently ridiculed Polish-Americans within the United States. In the Upper Peninsula Finnish-Americans are often the recipients of slurs and other derogatory remarks (e.g., "He's just a dumb Finn"). Perhaps a part of the toll this takes on self-esteem is illustrated by the following comment:

> R: The young people, when their parents couldn't talk English, they didn't respect them -- they thought they were stupid. The young people were not only ashamed of their parents, but ashamed of their Finnish nationality, even. They tried to hide under some other nationality -- especially here in the Copper Country who have taken different names, and they say they are Swedish.
>
> I: So, that's one of the reasons why the Finnish people changed their names then -- feeling that they were not good enough?
>
> R: Yes, but the third and fourth generation started looking at it differently and began to be proud of the Finnish heritage.[9]

The Finnish-Americans have reacted to the assault on their ethnic heritage in various ways. One, which is quite common in the Upper Peninsula, is the bumper sticker which reads, "SISU - Finn Power" (Sisu is a Finnish term which they apply to themselves which roughly translates into stubbornness, guts, or perserverance). Another reaction is reflected in the Finnish cultural programs that present to the community a view of the Finnish culture as being attractive, rational, and as valid as any other ethnic way of life. Interestingly enough, these cultural events do not attract the rank and file of the Finnish population. This may be due to the fact that they see the purpose of such events as being educational for the communities, and not as an event to be participated in by the local Finns. Such programs seem to be viewed as exercises in consciousness raising.

The hostility faced by the Finnish-American in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan provides a good perspective of one of the many interfaces of ethnic boundaries. Attitudes, feelings, commitments, beliefs and values are mechanisms which generate classic situations of the "in-group" and the "out-group," as developed by William Graham Sumner. Ethnic solidarity and unity are created and maintained within the group as the members not only respond to external threats but do their best to maintain the wisdom of their past as it relates to current aspirations and problems.

Conclusion

Through social networks especially created in this country, the Finnish immigrant has been able to retain and pass on to successive generations selected attitudes, beliefs, values, and ceremonial practices of the Finnish culture. Finnish-Americans have come to realize that they have a special heritage that is not simply a facet of the broader American culture. The various educational and religious institutions created by the Finns in America seem to have been particularly effective in helping to maintain a sense of ethnic identity among Finnish-Americans that has been lost by many of the other ethnic groups that came to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan at the turn of the twentieth century. The Finnis of the Upper Peninsula stand nearly alone in their strong sense of pride and social importance. They truly feel grateful for the cultural heritage of their homeland and the enduring stalwart legacy of their ancestors.[10]

FOOTNOTES

[1] Andrew W. Greeley, *Ethnicity in the United States: A Preliminary Reconnaissance* (1974), p. 2.

[2] Frederik Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), pp. 10-11.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

[6] Richard M. Dorson, *Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers: Folk Traditions of the Upper Peninsula* (1952), p. 10.

[7] Arthur Puotinen, Unpublished interviews from an oral history project.

[8] Edgar Litt, *Beyond Pluralism: Ethnic Politics in America*, (1970), p. 156.

[9] Arthur Puotinen, *op. cit.*

[10] The authors are presently engaged in further research on the subject of ethnic identity among Finnish-Americans. Future reports will contain quantitative data to support hypotheses related to the strength of ethnic identity in this population.

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