



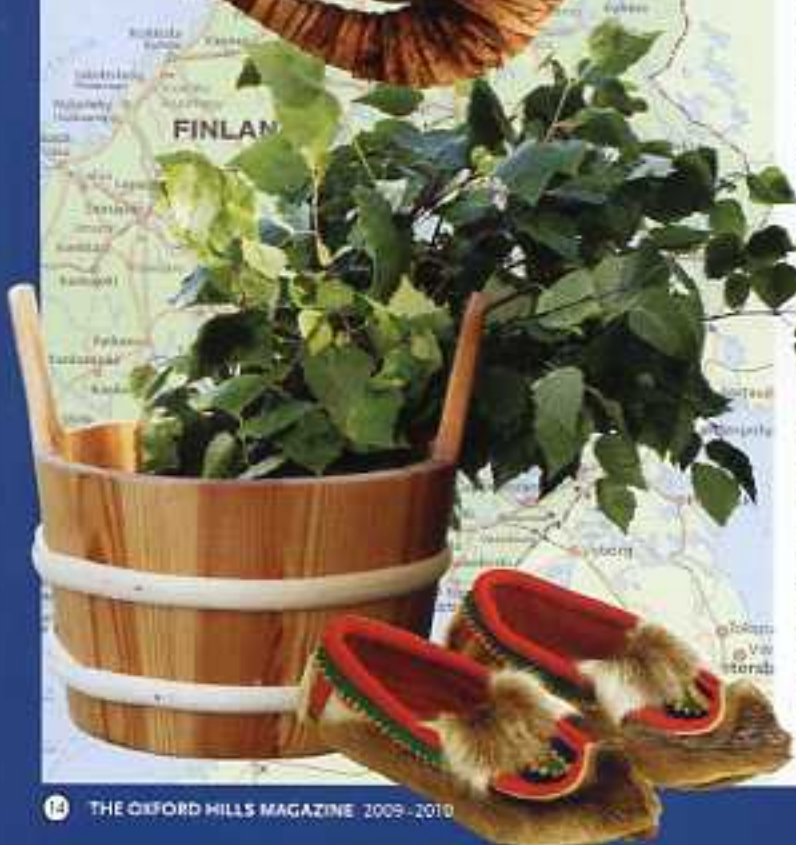
finnish heritage

TRACING SCANDINAVIAN ROOTS

BY JEN OTTERSON



FINLAND



Over 400 Finnish immigrants came to the Oxford Hills area between 1900 and 1910. They crossed the ocean looking for work and a chance to own land. Leaving behind harsh conditions and often extreme poverty, many had only a few dollars in their pockets and no more of their former lives than would fit in a suitcase. They survived, and even thrived, due to their spirit of hard work, determination, and a unique stubbornness that lives on in their descendants and helps to shape the character of our community.

Early in the twentieth century, Finland was part of the Russian Empire. As land was passed from father to oldest son, there were few opportunities for land ownership. At the same time, industrialization in America left many farms available, creating rare opportunities for sharecroppers and day laborers who dreamed of a better life.

Third-generation Finnish-American Dale Piirainen's grandfather immigrated in 1906, at the age of eighteen. A cottager's son, he had no hope of land ownership in Finland, as his father owned only the house he lived in, and not the land he worked. Like most Finnish immigrants, he had a sponsor in America who paid his fare and found work for him when he arrived.

Many of those who immigrated were able to save enough money, after repaying their sponsors the cost of their passage, to sponsor another immigrant. Because of this network of sponsorships, most of the Finns in this area came from the same part of Finland, Kuhmo Province. The

names that are common here—Heikkinen, Kahkonen, Pulkkinen—appear there as well.

Second-generation Finn Barbara Payne says that although it's romantic to think that the early Finnish immigrants came to this area because it reminded them of home, the fact is that they went where the work was, Finnish language newspapers throughout New England told of work, encouraging migration among Finns who had already arrived in America. Many came to Maine to work in the slate mines, logging operations, and on small farms.

Payne's mother came to America as a seventeen-year-old girl, speaking no English. She worked six days a week as a maid, crying herself to sleep each night from loneliness. Payne was the youngest of thirteen children and spoke Finnish until she went to school. She was the only child in her family with an English first name, chosen for her by her siblings, so that she wouldn't stand out at school as much as they did.



Dale Piirainen discusses his Finnish heritage while standing between gravestones of his grandparents and his parents at the Finnish cemetery in West Paris.



The Maine Kanteles pose with their instruments outside the Cummings family sauna on Kings Hill in South Paris, reputed to be one of the oldest in the area.

"The second generation tries very hard to blend in," Payne mused. "In later years, they want to go back to their roots."

That desire to return to their roots brought many of the second-generation Finns in the area together to form the Finnish-American Heritage Society in West Paris. With over 200 members, the group works to preserve their heritage by sharing their stories and presenting them to the community.

The society maintains a library of both Finnish- and English-language books, a gift shop, and a museum. Upon entering the museum, visitors are met with the somber faces of dozens of immigrants featured in black-and-white portraits along one wall. Their expressions illustrate the hardships they endured, while around them their many accomplishments are showcased.

Finnish immigrants founded two area churches, the Mission Congregational Church in West Paris, and Trinity Lutheran Church in South Paris. The Lutheran Church still holds an annual service in Finnish, given by second-generation Finnish-American Reverend Henry Leino. They also formed a co-op that is now a general store in West Paris. The Finnish-American Center itself was once a boarding house for Finnish bachelors.

The society hosts a musical or folk dancing performance each year to bring Finnish culture to life in the community. They have hosted groups from Finland, but also enjoy presenting local talent such as the Maine Kanteles.

Sarah Cummings-Ridge, a music teacher and second-generation Finn, traveled to Finland in order to learn to play and teach the kantele, a traditional Finnish lap harp. Her students became the Maine Kanteles and now perform all around New England.

Cummings-Ridge views the traditional music the group plays as a gateway to discussing Finnish culture and history. "It's so important to hold on to this piece of the culture and to share it," she said.

Whether we can trace our ancestors back to Finland, or are simply curious about the background of the area, there are many opportunities to learn about our heritage. Try rice pie at a Finnish-American Society public supper, or listen to folk music played on a kantele. If you're lucky, you may have a chance to enjoy a piece of Finnish nissu after bathing in a neighbor's sauna. All are part of the culture that makes our community unique. ✦



Barbara Payne's parents immigrated from Finland 96 years ago. She appears here at the Finnish-American Heritage Society's museum in West Paris, where an array of cultural items have been collected.

Nissu, or pulla, is a slightly sweet Finnish dessert bread, flavored with cardamom and raisins or sliced almonds.

