

Finnish treasures displayed at West Paris library

By Leslie H. Dixon, Staff Writer

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Dale Piirainen, president of the Finnish American Heritage Society in West Paris, stands by some of the many Finnish items on exhibit at the West Paris Public Library on Main Street. The items include a brightly-colored knit hat, a musical instrument, wooden skis, a tapestry and much more.

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WEST PARIS — The Finnish American Heritage Society of Maine is exhibiting Finnish treasures at the West Paris Public Library on Main Street through February, society President Dale Piirainen said.

Tea pot warmers with reindeer fur trim, a wooden rooster, a birch bark star ornament, a colorful knit hat and scarf, wooden skies and a musical instrument not unlike a harp, are a few of the items on display at the library at 226 Main St.

Many of the pieces were donated from the original Finnish immigrant families to this area as the elders in the family died. The younger members sometimes wondered what they would do with all the memorabilia, Piirainen said.

“A lot of people are unaware of the Finnish heritage. That's why we wanted to do an exhibit about it,” he said.

Piirainen said some 400 Finnish families came largely from one parish in Finland to this area between 1900 and 1914 to take over abandoned farms and get away from the famine in Finland.

“These were sons and daughters of people who didn't have that opportunity in their own land,” Piirainen said. “This was an opportunity to make a life.”

The Finnish were considered “honest, industrious and frugal,” according to comments from a 1908 State of Maine economic report describing the “Finnish Colony at West Paris.”

A century later, many of their descendants remain in the area, Piirainen said. And many have been left with treasures from their Finnish heritage that have become the basis of the society's extensive holdings at its headquarters at 8 Maple St. The building also has rooms dedicated to research and immigrant history, displays and artifacts, and archival storage. The building is closed in the winter months.

The society was formed in 1982 as a nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving Finnish heritage, celebrating Finnish culture and educating the community about Finnish customs.

The organization holds regular meetings, does fundraising events such as public

performances of dance and song, and programs on Finnish history.

More information about the Finnish–American Heritage Society of Maine is available at or <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Finnish–American–Heritage–Society–of–Maine> or at <http://www.mainefinns.org>.

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