

**SISU AND CREATIVITY—THE ESSENCE OF THE
FINNISH IMMIGRANTS IN EASTERN CONNECTICUT**

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SISU AND CREATIVITY—THE ESSENCE OF THE FINNISH IMMIGRANTS IN EASTERN CONNECTICUT

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The legacy of the Finnish people in eastern Connecticut begins with the early settlers in the 1920's, although immigrants from Finland arrived in New York City as early as the 1890's looking for a better life for themselves and their families. Many of these immigrants were young and came from large families in Finland. Schooling in their homeland for many was not in the picture since they had to work to help support younger siblings. Families were poor and family life was difficult with large families in small farm homes. These immigrants brought with them "sisu" and creativity, which helped them survive difficult times such as the depression years. "Sisu" is a term which has no direct translation but incorporates the aspects of hard work, determination, never give up—"stick-to-it-iveness."

New York City provided initial work for many, with jobs such as maids, housekeepers, and carpenters being the most popular positions. The creativity of the Finnish people helped to make life easier. These enterprising immigrants built boarding houses for Finnish men, and cooperative apartment buildings for families were constructed. Finnish halls provided a place for the young people to socialize and meet members of the opposite sex with Finnish backgrounds. Their language was predominantly Finnish. Many romances of these early immigrants, often leading to marriage, had their start at the Finn halls.

The Great Depression brought a sudden end to any affluence which some of the immigrants were beginning to experience; and many of these Finnish young people yearned for the rural areas, such as they had left in Finland, to get a new start. Their search for land led them

to Canterbury, Connecticut, and adjacent towns, which are typical of the types of communities which were established in the 1920's to 1940's. The first Finnish settlers in Canterbury invited friends from New York to visit on weekends. Yankee farmers had land to sell, and parcel by parcel the Finns began purchasing property. Those without the necessary funds were often able to obtain loans from other Finnish people of more substantial means since the Finns were reputable and seldom shirked responsibility.

As in New York City, these Finns had a strong desire and need to gather together. Their main language was Finnish, they shared similar backgrounds, and socializing on the weekends was important to them after a hard week's work. Initially folks gathered at private homes, sharing conversation along with their coffee and pulla (Finnish coffee bread). Most of the homes of the Finns were built by the husbands, since they had predominantly worked as carpenters in the city, with the wife quite often working side by side sharing in the manual labor. Usually the Finnish sauna, an essential in every Finnish home, was one of the first buildings constructed. There is a Finnish saying, "It is possible to have a sauna without a house but never a house without a sauna."

The Finnish "sisu" was a factor in the success stories of these early settlers, for the land was very rocky and the labor was intensive since modern-day tools were not an option. Cement for foundations was poured by hand, with rocks thrown into the wet cement for filler and strength. Nail by nail, buildings went up, in many cases a crude initial building used for housing until there were funds to build something more substantial. The Finnish people often helped each other when there was a need, such as in construction or farm chores. The term "talkoot" referred to this joint cooperation and enabled many to cut costs and get jobs done faster. (Photo No. 1) This spirit of cooperation carried over into many aspects of Finnish life.

Farming became a way of life for a good portion of these Finnish settlers in eastern Connecticut. Small farms with a few cows, a few chickens, a garden, fruit trees, and berry bushes provided most of the necessary food for the table. Preserving vegetables, fruits, and meats for the winter months was done in most homes. As time went on, poultry farming became the major type of farming for Finns. The area was favorable for raising chickens, and prices for eggs and chickens provided a decent living. Chicken coops sprouted up throughout the area, usually a telltale sign that the farm was owned by Finns. The second telltale sign was the sauna building on the property.

Co-operative effort was a strong trait of the Finnish people, as had already been demonstrated through the construction of co-op apartments in New York City. In eastern Connecticut the Finnish people started organizing farmers' co-operatives through which they could sell their products and buy what they needed at advantageous prices. The co-operative movement blossomed throughout New England, with many of the poultry mashes mixed at the site of the co-op store. Keeping overhead at a minimum and returning profits to the customers based on purchases over the course of a year was a strong incentive to join.

The sauna, mentioned earlier as one of the first structures to appear at the site of a new Finnish home, has always been an important part of Finnish life, not only for the aspect of cleanliness but also for socializing. Entertaining friends on a Saturday evening usually included sauna, as had been the custom in their homes in Finland. The ritual had women and children taking a sauna first, followed by the men. This was not a hurried experience but one to be savored. The taking of steam, a pause for fresh air, more steam with maybe some whisking with whisks made from young birch twigs, washing and rinsing, followed by sitting and relaxing with a cold drink, are all part of the sauna experience. The women returned to the house to allow the

men to have their turn, and during that time the coffee pot was put on and the coffee table set. The conversation flowed during that relaxing time after all had bathed, and the cares of the week were forgotten. This conversational time provided an opportunity to share common concerns and provide moral support where and when needed. Since many of these people did not speak English, or spoke it very poorly, advice on business and legal affairs was shared.

These outdoor saunas were heated with wood, which was cut by the farmer and stacked nearby for easy access. The fire was started in the late afternoon for a good hot sauna when the family was ready to bathe or when guests arrived. The early saunas were often crude but the essentials were there. (Photo No. 2) Ideally there were two rooms, one for bathing and one for changing; but sometimes funds didn't allow that luxury of a second room. The sauna room had benches, usually at two levels (sometimes three). The top level was for hotter steam, and the children often used the bottom bench. In one corner of the room was an oven with stones piled on top. The fire box was under the stones and the wood was fed from the dressing room. These sauna ovens were creatively constructed by individuals with materials at hand, the main concerns being that a good hot fire was essential for a proper sauna and the oven needed to be safe. The article about Matti Kurikka, included with this project, mentions his early sauna, stating that "the doors and other metal parts appear to have been taken from an old kitchen range."

If the sauna did not have plumbing, as was the case with many saunas, water was carried in earlier in the day and stored in a large tub. Many times a water container was attached to the stove so that heated water was available for washing. Those fortunate enough to have water piped in had the luxury of running hot and cold water. A dipper was available for throwing water on the stones for steam, and dippers for washing and rinsing were also available. After a sauna evening, the housewife always returned to the sauna to give it a good cleaning. Sanitary

conditions were essential, and the Finnish housewife was fastidious in keeping both her home and her sauna in tip-top condition. The sauna was usually heated on Wednesday and Saturday evenings, as was the custom also in Finland, whether there were guests or not. Many of the second- and third-generation Finnish people hold this sauna ritual very dear, and it is not unusual to find saunas in many of the newer homes in eastern Connecticut. (Photo No. 3) There are still many wood-heated saunas; but with modern conveniences, many in the younger generations have opted for gas or electric saunas. The importance of the sauna ritual has not faded, and many non-Finnish spouses find themselves immersed in the pleasures of a good sauna.

As the Finnish community grew, the need for a gathering place gained importance. There had been Finnish halls in New York, and similar structures appeared around the country wherever Finns settled. A group called the Finnish American Education Association (FAEA) purchased a piece of land on Bacon Hill in Canterbury in 1924. Prior to that, social gatherings were often held on the banks of the Quinebaug River near the Canterbury Bridge (Photo No. 4), especially for the celebration of Juhannus (Mid-Summer Festival), an important tradition brought over from the old country. Picnics in the summer were well attended. Construction on the hall started in 1924, and the hall was dedicated on Christmas Day in 1925. Later, probably around 1932, the lower level was dug out and this became the kitchen and dining area. A stage was added around 1929, and a backstage area was added around 1936.

This hall was an important part of the lives of the early Finns. (Photo No. 5) Saturday evenings were filled with dancing, often preceded by programs and theatrical performances. Young people were encouraged to share their talent, housewives recited poetry, gymnasts performed, soloists perfected their skills, and roles were filled in many plays performed on the stage. (Photo No. 6) There was much local talent, and there was a need for an outlet from the

labors of the week. In addition, talent was brought in from the Finnish halls in New York City and from other groups established in areas such as Massachusetts.

There was also a need to share political philosophies, and the Canterbury Finnish Hall was known as a socialist hall. Other Finnish Halls were constructed in eastern Connecticut. The Finnish Hall in Brooklyn (Photo No. 7) was constructed and owned by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), the Aura Hall in Voluntown (Photo No. 8) was a farmers' association, and a Finnish Hall in Waterford was a temperance hall. Each hall had its following; and political differences entered into many aspects of Finnish life, such as personal friendships and the co-op movement. Widely differing political philosophies produced outspoken members of society such as Matti Kurikka, who set out to establish a Utopian commune (Addendum No. 1) based on his interpretation of the Kalevala (the Finnish folk epic). Young people coming from Finland were often allied with either the Whites or the Reds, spurring them on to political activism in their new surroundings. The publication in 1999 of a book entitled "Immigrant Radicalism in Rural New England: A History of the Finns of Eastern Connecticut, 1915-1945" by Finnish American Heritage Society member Richard Lenzi traces the socialist movement of Finns in eastern Connecticut during this important period of political involvement. (Addendum No. 2)

Finnish groups in eastern Connecticut, and for that matter all over the United States, were called into action in 1939 when Russia invaded the peace-loving nation of Finland; and the Finnish halls became a hub of activity. A large mass meeting was held at the Canterbury Finnish Hall in mid December, 1939, for the purpose of organizing a relief committee to raise funds and secure clothing for the Finnish people. Close family members of many of the immigrants were involved in the struggle to maintain Finland's independence, and they felt an urgent need to supply help. The relief committee organized numerous fund-raising events; donated clothing

and other supplies were packaged by volunteer effort at the hall and at private homes for delivery to a central location for shipment overseas. (Addendum No. 3) This was a trying time for most Finnish families since they were aware that practically all of the male and female population of working age in Finland (their own mothers, fathers, and siblings) was engaged in defending their small country against a monstrous aggressor.

As time went on, there were some differences in what should be happening at the Finnish Hall in Canterbury; and in 1963 a local group of Finns gained title to the hall from the remaining FAEA members. This new group, named the Sampo Club (“Sampo” is the name of the “magical mill” in the Finnish national epic, The Kalevala), set to work to make improvements to the hall. (Addendum No. 4) Indoor plumbing (including bathrooms to replace the outhouses) and central heating were added. Activity at the hall gradually dwindled during this period of ownership, and membership decreased over the years. In order to pay property taxes, several parcels of land belonging to the Club were sold; and the idea of selling the hall was proposed because the group was delinquent with their tax payment.

When news of this impending sale first became known in 1978, a group of concerned Finnish Americans met to discuss the future of the hall. The Finnish Hall and all that it stood for was an important part of their heritage since dances and programs at the hall were fresh memories and many had celebrated their wedding receptions there. It was too important a place to see it sold to outsiders, and their opposition managed to thwart the sale of the property at this time. Newer members kept the hall activity going until 1987, when talk of selling the property again emerged. Again a gathering of concerned Finnish Americans was hastily called to take action. This group formed the Finnish American Heritage Society (FAHS), planned a fund-

raising event to pay the taxes, and purchased the property from the Sampo Club for \$1. The hall was saved and a new era began.

The first items on the agenda for this new group were to publicize its beginning, gain increased membership, and apply for tax-exempt status as a non-profit organization. Charter membership during the first year reached about 100, with dues being set at \$10 per person. The hall was in need of much work, which the new organization took on with much gusto. The basement of the hall had not had any improvements since it was built. This area was completely gutted through a cooperative effort by members (the Finnish “talkoot” practiced by parents and grandparents was not forgotten). (Photo No. 9) A new kitchen with a convenient serving counter was built, a new tile floor was laid, and sheet rock and wood paneling was placed on the walls. The area became a bright meeting room and coffee area and has served as the cooking area for many meals served at the hall in subsequent years. This work was completed in 1990.

By now the membership of FAHS was growing rapidly and the hall was again becoming a hub of activity. The objective was to restore the hall to some of its original purposes, reviving the types of activity for which it had been noted. Also important, and one of the prime objectives, was to promote and preserve the Finnish culture and heritage by collecting anything dealing with the history and culture of the Finnish people. With the increasing number of donated artifacts, books, records, photographs, and other memorabilia, it soon became apparent that there was no place to safely store the collection. This concept was the seed which set the wheels in motion to build a heritage center addition including an archives area to the existing hall.

An architect was consulted and plans were drawn up which would maintain the integrity of the original structure and add a more modern-looking addition which blended in with the

historic building. (Addendum No. 5) In order to accomplish this, in 1994 a successful fund-raising campaign was undertaken and construction was soon underway. Again, volunteer help from the membership enabled work to proceed with minimal expenditure. The work involved razing the backstage area added around 1936 and extending the basement area by removing the stone and concrete wall and excavating the area behind the hall. This in itself was quite a project, but the Finnish “sisu” came through and members were not deterred from their goal. The addition gradually took shape as the fire-resistant archives storage area was constructed to the rear of the original building. The plans also included dressing rooms behind the stage area and storage for props. Construction codes necessitated the addition of a handicapped ramp and bathroom. A display area with display cabinets and wall space for hanging displays was built adjacent to the archives storage area. By this time, construction funds were running low; and the plan was to close in this portion, with additional work on a library and office area to continue as funds became available. Fortunately, a sizeable grant from the Imatra Foundation in New York City was received in 1997; and construction proceeded on schedule.

Through the perseverance of a dedicated work crew comprised of members, generous donations of labor and funds from members and friends, and a membership dedicated to the purposes of the organization, the addition was completed and a dedication ceremony took place in October, 1998. A full weekend was devoted to this important occasion for there was much to celebrate. Not only was there an archives storage area but stage productions were again a reality.

To celebrate this notable achievement, the first theatrical production of the Finnish American Heritage Society, “While the Juhannus Sauna is Warming,” was staged in 1998. (Photo No. 10) Among the artifacts stored at the hall are many of the backdrops used in stage

productions during the early years of the hall. Some of them are presently in use as highlights on the stage. (Photo No. 11)

The Finnish Hall has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and is located on Route 169, which is a designated Scenic Highway. The original hall area remains as it was when it was constructed in the 1920's. The walls and floor have not been changed, other than a refinishing job on the floor. The original cabinets housing the book collection required of Socialist halls in the 1930's remain intact, and the book collection is believed to be the most complete of any such collection in the United States. (Photo No. 12) The archives area houses what is one of the largest collections of Finnish music in the United States, and the book collection contains many books valuable to those researching Finnish history (Photo No. 13). The collection continues to grow, and the task of archiving and cataloging is an ongoing tedious process. The ultimate goal is to make materials available to Finnish-American scholars and genealogists through a lending library, and cultural displays and genealogical sessions are planned.

In addition to the structure described here, the Finnish American Heritage Society has constructed a national monument dedicated to Finnish-American World War II veterans on a hill behind the hall. The project was written up in Finnish newspapers nationwide, names were collected, and the dedication of the site took place in 1995. Another ceremony was held in 1998 during the dedication of the new addition, when a memorial stone was placed on the site. (Photo No. 14) Names are displayed on plaques mounted permanently on the hillside, and a quiet area is cleared for reflection.

The Finnish American Heritage Society has an active program revolving around the many aspects of the purposes of the organization. Finnish language services are available on an

individual basis. A folk dance group has been performing at various functions (Photo No. 15), and a singing group called the “Laulajat” learns Finnish folk songs for enjoyment. Entertainers from Finland and Finnish-American entertainers are invited to perform at the hall each year with the public invited. Finnish foods are enjoyed at many of the dinners, always open to the public. An annual Tori (open market), similar to the tori held in all Finnish towns, is held each September. Finland’s independence day is celebrated each December with a solemn program (Photo No. 16), and the Finnish national epic Kalevala (Addendum No. 6) is celebrated with kantele music and recitation at the annual Kalevala Day program in March. Midsummer’s Eve, an ancient pagan ceremony celebrating the longest day of the year, is still traditionally celebrated at the Finnish-owned Tamarack Lodge in Voluntown with a bonfire, around which participants dance and sing. (Photo No. 17) Each year the Finnish American Heritage Society places an exhibit depicting some aspect of Finnish life in eastern Connecticut at the Brooklyn Fair Heritage Hall exhibit in August. The archives at the Finnish Hall contain several videotaped interviews of elderly members, including veterans of the Finnish Winter War and Continuation War of 1939-1944. (Photo No. 18) An ongoing program is a day set aside each year for cemetery research, at which time members research a designated cemetery and catalog information about Finnish people buried there. (Photo No. 19) This information is available at the Finnish American Heritage Society website on the worldwide web.

There are ample opportunities for members to gather socially at such events as the annual family picnic, the pikkujoulu/Christmas party, the coffee hour prior to monthly meetings, clean-up days at the hall, and the annual St. Urho’s Day mystery ride, program, and dinner. Children are especially invited to an annual Halloween party and to the Christmas party, as well as to all

events at the hall. The future of the organization is dependent on maintaining the interest of youth in their heritage.

As a cooperative effort with other cultural and heritage organizations in the area, FAHS is a member of the Association of North East Connecticut Historical Societies (ANECHS) and the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor. FAHS also holds membership in the FinnFest USA and Suomi Seura (Finland Society) in Finland. Joint efforts in preserving and promoting the Finnish heritage are important to a long life for this organization.

The Finnish American Heritage Society welcomes as members all who have an interest in Finland and Finnish-American heritage and culture. The quarterly newsletter, "The FinnConn Connection," reports on activities of the organization, news from Finland, and news from members. (Addendum No. 7) FAHS calendars were printed in 1998 (with historical pictures of the early years of the Finnish Hall) and in 2000 (with pictures of events occurring at the hall since 1987). (Addendum No. 8 and Addendum No. 9) The logo of the Finnish American Heritage Society, designed by a member, depicts the Finnish-American connection. (Photo No. 20) All meetings and events are held at the Finnish Hall, (Photo No. 21) located on Route 169 (76 North Canterbury Road). A yearly program of scheduled events (Addendum No. 10) and a brochure about the organization (Addendum No. 11) are available at the organization's address. Contributions of Finnish and Finnish-American memorabilia, as well as goods, services, and grants are gratefully accepted. Since FAHS is a 501(c)(3) corporation, donations may be tax-deductible.

The Finnish American Heritage Society can be contacted at:

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Location: 76 North Canterbury Road (Route 169), Canterbury, CT

PHOTOS INCLUDED IN PROJECT

1. Chicken Coop “Talkoot,” Brooklyn, CT
2. Sauna at the home of William Grass, Foster, RI
3. Modern sauna at the home of Jack and Anita Smiley, Preston, CT
4. Picnic on the banks of the Quinebaug River
5. Group photo, early members of the FAEA at the Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
6. Play, “Pahassa Pulassa” (A Difficult Situation), Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
7. Finnish Hall, Brooklyn, CT
8. Aura Hall, Voluntown, CT
9. “Talkoot” during renovation of basement, Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
10. Scene from play, “While the Juhannus Sauna is Warming”
11. Backdrop at Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
12. Display case with socialist library, Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
13. Section of archives area in new addition to Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
14. Dedication of Veterans’ Memorial Site, Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
15. FinnConn folk dancers performing
16. Finnish Independence Day program at Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT
17. Juhannus Celebration at Tamarack Lodge, Voluntown, CT
18. Videotaping interview of Finnish Winter War veteran
19. Cemetery research, information being recorded
20. Finnish American Heritage Society banner with logo
21. Finnish Hall, Canterbury, CT

OTHER DOCUMENTATION INCLUDED IN LOCAL LEGACY PROJECT
Finnish American Heritage Society, Canterbury, CT

Addendum No.

1. Article about Matti Kurikka by Burton Jernstrom
2. “Immigrant Radicalism in Rural New England: A History of the Finns of Eastern Connecticut, 1915-1945” by Richard Lenzi
3. Article and photo about “Help Finland” campaign
4. Sampo Seura newsletter, dated July 6, 1978
5. Architectural rendering of Finnish Hall heritage center addition, by Jeffrey Bacon, architect
6. Synopsis of “Kalevala,” national folk epic of Finland, by Richard Impola
7. “FinnConn Connection,” Winter, 2000, edition, newsletter of Finnish American Heritage Society
8. 1998 calendar, published by Finnish American Heritage Society
9. 2000 calendar, published by Finnish American Heritage Society
10. 2000 Program of Events for Finnish American Heritage Society
11. Informational brochure of Finnish American Heritage Society