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# Finger Lakes Finns

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NEWSLETTER

November / Marraskuu 2009

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## Minnesota Christmas Tree

By Sharon Kahkonen

My father told us many stories of his early life in Minnesota. One story that I particularly loved was the story of the Minnesota Christmas tree. This story embodies the spirit of a Finnish immigrant family and the hardships they endured on the Minnesota (pronounced MEEN- a-SOOO-ta) prairie.

To begin at the beginning, my grandparents, August and Kaisa, emigrated from the forests of Karelia to the small frontier town of Plummer, located in the Red River Valley in northwestern Minnesota. Why did they leave their forest homeland to come to the American prairie? Apparently August's family was quite wealthy, so it could not have been to escape from poverty. The best explanation we heard was that August was about to be conscripted into the Russian Czar's army. He decided to leave Finland to avoid being drafted. He wanted to take our grandmother with him, and she agreed to go, on one condition – he had to pay passage for her four sisters as well. The bargain struck, Kaisa and August boarded a ship in Helsinki and headed to Ellis Island. Lured by the promise of rich farmland, they then made their way by train to Minnesota.

Would our grandparents from the coniferous forests of Karelia have felt at home on the Minnesota prairie? The flat, endless sea of grasses must have seemed very strange and very far away from their homeland. They tried to make the best of it -- what else could they do? They bought a piece of land, put up a small dwelling, and tried to grow crops. They were not very successful, however, because they could never drain the land properly. My father told us their land became a sea of mud in the spring, making it difficult, if not impossible, to prepare the soil and plant their crops.

A unique relationship between climate and geography makes the area where they settled particularly suscepti-

ble to flooding. The Red River flows slowly northward within a broad, gently sloping flood plain. The spring thaw progresses from south to north. The snow and river ice melts in the south in spring while the downstream river channel to the north remains frozen. These conditions favor massive spring flooding of the Red River.



The continental climate in Minnesota can be harsh. A continental climate means it is blasted hot in summer and bone-chilling cold in winter. The wind is a constant presence on the level, empty prairie. Temperatures as low as -30 degrees Fahrenheit to -40 degrees Fahrenheit are common. I remember my father telling stories about how he slid on the ice in his bare feet, and how he could throw a glass of water into the air and watch it instantly freeze in the air on the way to the ground.

Plummer was still a frontier town in the early 1900s. My father said there were still Native Americans, the Ojibwa,

who lived in the area. They often came to their house to sell them fresh fish. They were the last of the tribes who had once made their living on the prairies, hunting buffalo and other animals for food and clothing.

Despite their harsh subsistence life in a strange land, August and Kaisa had five children. But one tragedy after another struck the family. The youngest son died after a hernia operation. My father also developed a hernia, but luckily he healed without having an operation. August, perhaps partly because of the hardships they had to endure, became an alcoholic. Kaisa, weakened by the hard life on the prairie, contracted tuberculosis and died. The four children were shipped to the Keckman farm in Erin, New York. August left the prairie too, and soon remarried. His children then joined him and their stepmother in Baltimore, Maryland, where they set up a bootlegging business, but that's a whole other story!

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Although my father and his siblings never went back to Plummer, Minnesota, the memories of their formative years stayed with them. They told us stories of how they celebrated Christmas on the prairie. Despite their meager living conditions, they always found a way to celebrate the holidays. Every year they put up a "Minnesota Christmas Tree" -- twigs in a vase decorated with sugar cookies. My Aunt Helen (my father's older sister) explained to us that there were no conifer trees on the prairie in Minnesota. The bare branches substituted for an evergreen tree. They had no money for "store-bought" decorations, so they decorated their "Christmas tree" with sugar cookies, which were also their Christmas treats!

When we were children growing up in Mecklenburg, New York, we used to go to my Aunt Helen's house to celebrate Finnish Christmas. She always had a Minnesota Christmas tree adorning her kitchen table. Last year my father, age 95, passed away on Thanksgiving Day. I decided it was my turn to carry on the tradition of the Minnesota Christmas tree. I picked some maple twigs and stuck them in a green jug. I cut out sugar cookies in the shape of wise men, angels, stars, reindeer, Christmas trees, and hearts. I sprinkled them with red and green sprinkles and tied them to the maple branches with brightly colored ribbon. The Minnesota Christmas tree was my humble tribute to my father at our gathering of family and friends to celebrate his life.

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## Finn Funn Weekend 2009 Highlights

By Anja Laurila



The Finns of the Northeastern United States celebrated their yearly Finn Funn Weekend in the beginning of October. This time the host organization was the Finger Lakes Finns from upstate New York. This area around Ithaca, New York is the beautiful lake country with huge mountains in the background, where the Finns began to move in 1910 to farm the fertile land.

"This is the 17th yearly Finn Funn Weekend, and we are now aiming for at least 20", said Anita Smiley, who with her husband Jack, started this whole thing. It has grown year by year ever since, and it hosted at least 225 people at this time. Jean Lindblad was the chairperson for the third time, and she and Eeva Krusius, with their help of three people, Susan Pakkala, Nancy Louko Quaif, and Judith Maxwell did a splendid job.

The three-day weekend started with a wine tour on Friday October 2nd. Two busloads of guests toured five

wineries on the picturesque hillsides, tasting many kinds of wines of the region. This area is ideal for grape cultivation. Some filmed close up the heavy bunches of grapes on the vines bursting of juice and flavor.

The activities of the weekend were held at the Clarion University Hotel in Ithaca, New York. This time the Master of Ceremonies for the programs was Osmo Kanerva from Florida's Finnish area of Hypoluxo. We experienced many artists performing each day. Finlandia Foundation Performer of the year Terhi Miikki-Broersma was a delightful lady and a real musician of many variations. An established pianist, Kent Washburn from Virginia entertained us with his superb skills. Richard Koski and his accompanists keep the old Finnish traditions alive with their music. No wonder he was elected as the Performer of the year 2005 by the Finlandia Foundation.

We danced to the music of Vic Aijala and Richard Impola after each banquet and enjoyed the dinners served by the Clarion Hotel staff. The tori Finnish specialty shop was open every day. Coffee and pulla was available at any time. There were many lectures, musical programs and demonstrations available. A roomful of people gathered to see how to make a "voileipäkakku", a sandwich cake. It turned out to be very delicious! The Finnish-American Singers entertained us with their singing in the Finnish language, which is not heard often by that age of singers. Krister Bjorklund from Turku Migration Institute found the roots of many of his "customers". Tuuli Ross from Tapiola, Finland explained to us why the Finnish students are so smart. There are many factors, but a very important one is that they help the kids who learn slowly get to a higher level, instead of boosting just the fast learners. That way they reach a high average. Photojournalist Vesa Oja from Helsingin Sanomat showed his work for his forthcoming book about the Finns In America.

Marita Cauthen, who serves as the Finnish Expatriate Parliament (FEP) Deputy Speaker for the United States and Latin America enlightened us about what is going on in the Finnish Expatriate Parliament. There seem to be many agendas on the table to be discussed, one being the extension of the deadline to apply for the Finnish citizenship. The next session of the FEP will be May 24-25, 2010 in Helsinki.

Riitta Gerlander from the Consulate General of Finland in New York was a guest speaker for the Friday night banquet. She talked about Finland's high tech achievements and urged us to keep the Finnish heritage alive. There were so many other lectures and artists scheduled, that time did not allow attending them all. Jack Smiley chaired a wrap-up session, which was attended by several leaders of Finnish organizations. The feedback included how to advertise future Finn Funn Weekends

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successfully. Jean Lindblad [FLF FFW 2009 Event Coordinator and Committee Chairperson. Ed.] was pleased that there were so many first timers coming to this one. There is a constant wish to get more young people involved. At this time we do not know where and when the next Finn Funn Weekend will be, but the good news is that there certainly IS going to be a next one.

Until then, Anja Laurila.

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## Finn Funn Weekend Observations October 2, 3, and 4, 2009

By *Jeanne Pakkala Frandsen*



This was the 17th annual Finn Funn Weekend. It was hosted by the Finger Lakes Finns at the Clarion University Hotel in Ithaca, New York.

The festivities began on Friday, October 2, when some of the attendees participated in a Finger Lakes wine tour along Cayuga Lake. The tour visited

Hosmer, Thirsty Owl, Americana Wineries, Goose Watch and Buttonwood Grove, where the group also enjoyed a box lunch. It rained part of the day but everyone seemed to have a good time.

There was a banquet on Friday evening, with Kent Washburn playing beautiful selections of Finnish music on the piano during the dinner. After dinner entertainment was provided by Rich Koski, Jason Koski, and Thomas Connor playing old-time Finnish tunes on button accordion, mandolin, and fiddle. They were followed by the 2009 Finlandia Foundation Performer of the Year, Terhi Miiikki-Broersma who played accordion, piano, and sang. The evening concluded with dancing to accordion music by Vic Aijala and the songs of Richard Impola.

My Saturday at Finn Funn 2009 began with breakfast and then working at the registration. We also sold raffle tickets for the woven blanket from Finland, and the many beautiful baskets donated by several different local organizations. All of these items were very popular with the people buying the tickets.

Later that morning I was able to enjoy Carl Rahkonen's lecture on "Viola Turpeinen at 100". He spoke about several accordionists who toured and played with her during that time. Several people have spoken about hearing Viola at the Spencer School or the Finn Hall in Van Etten. Sadly, she died in 1958 but her music lives on.

Marilyn Loos presented an entertaining program on "Musical Memories". She has obtained many old Finnish recordings and a friend put them on CDs for her. For copies of these CDs, contact Marilyn at 318 Signal

Hill Road, King of Prussia, PA 19406-1817. I have a list of the songs she played at the program and I will make you a copy if you desire.

The tori (marketplace) was very good this time, with many lovely things to spend your money on. The tori included items brought here by the Malkamakis of Ohio [Finnish Treasures Gift Shop, 316 Fairport Harbor, OH 44077]. It was very popular.

Twice on Saturday there was a coffee hour, with all kinds of wonderful Finnish coffee "goodies". We have Nancy Quaif to thank for making all the calls to round up the food items.

Our own Lisa Koski lectured on the "Occupations of the Finnish Immigrants". She talked about the miners, farmers, carpenters, laborers, and household workers who worked hard to make a living for their families. It was especially hard in the mines, where the miners were not treated very well and there were many deaths. They weren't even allowed to come up to have their lunch in the open air. When they tried to unionize, they were fired, or worse. She talked about some miners who were called to Arizona and when they arrived, they were all shot. They were union organizers. She also told us about two of her uncles who went, against the advice of their relatives, to Karelia to experience "the Utopian life" there. One brother died of malnutrition and the other brother was imprisoned but escaped. The Russians caught him and said if he ever tried that again they would shoot him. He did escape, and walked, at night, for two years to return to Finland. When his wife saw him, she fainted – he looked so old and tattered and dirty and was starving. So much for Utopia!

In her lecture, later that afternoon, Sharon Franklin-Rahkonen described the Civil War between the Reds and Whites in 1917-18 in Finland. Thousands of Red Finns escaped into the Soviet Union. Thirty thousand Finns died, less than 1% of Finland's population at the time, but less than 25% of those died on the battlefield, and the rest died in detention camps or were executed. General Mannerheim and his forces entered Helsinki on May 16, 1918 and liberated the city, marking the end of the Civil War. The victors called this the "War of Independence" and the historians call it the "Civil War."

Of course there were many other programs and lectures to attend, like Donna Palomaki's "Magic and Mystery in Mythic Finland" and Krister Bjorklund's "Searching and Tracing your Roots". Some schedules overlapped and it was impossible to attend all of them.

The Saturday evening banquet was well attended, with over 200 people. The food was good and the service was too. Kent Washburn again played dinner music on the piano. After the meal there was a nice program led by Master of Ceremonies Osmo Kanerva. Again the musical entertainment was great, with Rich Koski and Carl

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Rahkonen playing accordion, violin and piano! Did you know Rich could play the piano? Well, I didn't, but it was very well done and enjoyable. The Finlandia Foundation Performer of the Year, Terhi Miikki-Broersma, also performed again, singing and playing the piano, accordion, and bassoon, and was again excellent. Eeva Krusius, assisted by Terhi Miikki-Broersma led the participants in an interactive bell ringing performance. Jim Loomis was honored with a gift certificate of \$50 by Jean Lindblad on behalf of the Finger Lakes Finns, for the wonderful work he does setting up the sound systems, and maintaining the Website. Krister Bjorklund spoke on the genealogy work he does and he was available at Finn Funn all day Saturday for our edification on the subject. Event Coordinator Jean Lindblad and Committee Chair raffled off the baskets and the blanket from Finland and some pulla that was still available. The day's events concluded with music for dancing by Vic Aijala and Richard Impola sang a few numbers.

All in all, it was a wonderful weekend, full of good entertainment, good food and wonderful friendships, renewed every year at the Finn Funn Weekend.



Jason Koski, Thomas Connor, and Rich Koski  
(Finlandia Foundation Performer of the Year 2005)



Kent Washburn

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**Just a few of David Pakkala's hundreds of photos from Finn Funn Weekend 2009**



On the Winery Tour



Lunch With a View on the Veranda



Terhi Miikki-Broersma  
Finlandia Foundation Performer of the Year 2009



Taughannock Falls



Grapes on the Vine



Anita Smiley, President  
Finlandia Foundation



Eeva Krusius



Riitta Gerlander from  
the Consulate General  
of Finland in New York



Richard Impola with Vic Aijala



Osmo Kanerva



Jean Lindblad, FLF  
Committee Chair  
and Coordinator  
Finn Funn Weekend  
2009



Carl Rahkonen



Vic Aijala

## Donations to the Finger Lakes Finns

If you would like to make a monetary donation to the Finger Lakes Finns, please indicate whether you want it to go to the scholarship fund or the general fund. If you want the donation to be made in memory of someone, please indicate who it should be in memory of and to which fund it should go.

We would like to acknowledge your gift in our next newsletter. We will not print the dollar amounts of the gifts. *If you wish your donation to be anonymous, let us know and we will not print your name.*

Make checks out to Finger Lakes Finns, and send to our Treasurer, Helen Sunderlin, 3065 N. Triphammer Rd., Lansing, NY 14853.

*Thank you.*

*As a non-profit organization, contributions to the Finger Lakes Finns are deductible to the full extent of the tax law.*

## Scholarship Recipients Progress Report

*By Gayle Greuber*

[Gayle (Maatta) Greuber is the mother of Emileigh and Kevin, 2003 and 2007 recipients, respectively. Ed.]

We are very proud of both Emileigh and Kevin. Emileigh is a third year graduate student in Pharmacology and Cancer Biology at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. She expects to receive her doctorate in about three years. She hopes then to teach and do research in a university setting. She and her high school sweetheart were married two summers ago, and have just purchased their first home in Durham.

Kevin is in his senior year at Elmira College. He is a history and adolescent education major. This term he is student teaching high school history and humanities at Watkins Glen High School. He will finish with his bachelor's degree in the spring, and hopes to find a teaching job in the area. He and his high school sweetheart are engaged and plan to be married in 2011.



The Finnish-American Singers



The Saturday evening banquet

**A Word from Our President**  
*Lisa dC-Koski*



At the October meeting, elections were held for our new officers. I am pleased to announce that Shirley Barton will be our new president, and Helen Sunderlin will take over from Barbara Twombly, who very ably served as treasurer for three years. Virpi Loomis and Jeanne Frandsen have agreed to continue their fine work as vice-president and secretary, respectively.

It has been a pleasure to fill the office of president for the past two years. The responsibility was made lighter by the cooperation of many members, and the dedication of our able officers.

I shall continue to serve our group as scholarship chairperson, shall help with programs, and continue to help with newsletter mailings.

Membership dues for the 2010 calendar year are now due. Send your \$10 to Jeanne Frandsen. See details on the last page. Thank you.

Looking forward to many more successes of our group, I remain faithfully yours.

*Lisa dC-Koski*



**Finger Lakes Finns Officers**

**President:** Shirley Barton

**Vice President:** Virpi Loomis

**Treasurer:** Helen Sunderlin

**Secretary:** Jeanne Frandsen

**Membership and Change of Address Coupon**

Join \_\_\_ Change \_\_\_ Renew \_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

To join/renew Finger Lakes Finns membership, please send \$10 per person, payable to **Finger Lakes Finns**, c/o the Membership Chair:  
**Jeanne Frandsen, 502 Donalds Drive**  
**Ithaca, NY 14850**

Please send address changes to the same address.

**Mission Statement  
of the  
Finger Lakes Finns**

*The Finger Lakes Finns is organized to promote cultural and educational appreciation of Finnish heritage and customs, to provide a social setting for enjoying old and new friendships in the Finnish tradition, and to pursue charitable community activities.*

*Membership shall consist of persons of Finnish descent, those married to persons of Finnish descent, and any other persons interested in the work and activities of the society.*



Pumpkin Art from the Finn Funn Weekend Wine Tour



Finger Lakes Finns

Officers for 2010

(left to right)

Shirley Barton, President

Virpi Loomis, Vice-president

Jeanne Frandsen, Secretary

Helen Sunderlin, Treasurer

[Jean Lindblad photo]

## Calendar of Coming Events

November 15 – Sunday 1 p.m. – Dish to pass luncheon, business meeting, and program (making Christmas decorations for shut-ins – please bring greenery). Newfield Fire Hall.

November 29 – Sunday 6-10 p.m. – Toivo plays Finnish, Cajun, and Tex-Mex music at Maxie's Supper Club, 635 W. State St. Ithaca. Also on Dec. 3, 7-10p.m. at the Pourhouse in Trumansburg, and at Felicia's Atomic Lounge, Ithaca, 5:30-8:30 p.m on Dec. 11.

December 20 – Sun. 1p.m. – Dish to pass luncheon, business meeting, Pikku Joulou Christmas party, presentation on St. Lucia Day. Newfield Fire Hall.

January 15 – Friday – Newsletter deadline for submission of articles, poetry, pictures, or calendar items (see right\*).

January 17 – Sun. 1p.m. – Dish to pass luncheon, business meeting, and program on Seneca Lake Pure Waters Association (non-profit), by Richard Ahola. Newfield Fire Hall.

February 21 – Sun. 1 p.m. – Dish to pass luncheon, business meeting, and program on genealogy: Rosemary Rowland of Newfield. Newfield Fire Hall.

## Membership

For membership please use the form in this issue or at [www.FingerLakesFinns.org](http://www.FingerLakesFinns.org). Mail the form with your check or money order, payable to Finger Lakes Finns, c/o **Jeanne Frandsen, 502 Donald's Drive, Ithaca NY 14850**. Membership in Finger Lakes Finns is open to anyone of Finnish origin or with an interest in Finnish culture. **Dues are \$10 per person per calendar year.** Payment may be made at any time during the year, but only covers membership for the remainder of that calendar year.

**Help us provide information and activities for Finns and Finnish friends to enjoy.** You do not need to be a member to attend our meetings and activities, but your dues entitle you to continue receiving this newsletter and to vote on all FLF business at our meetings.

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\* Published February, May, August, and November. We welcome members to contribute content sent to: FLF Newsletter, c/o Jim Loomis, 19 Upper Clark Ave., Van Etten, NY 14889, [Email [loomis@htva.net](mailto:loomis@htva.net)]. Newsletter Editorial Committee is Jim Loomis, Richard Koski, and Shirley Barton. **Submissions for the newsletter are due on the 15th of the month before publication.**

Finger Lakes Finns Newsletter  
c/o Jim Loomis, Editor  
19 Upper Clark Avenue  
Van Etten, NY 14889