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**FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT
LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978**

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Interview with Mrs. Mabel Mustonen

October 14, 1976

Interviewed by Helen Armstrong

I:I'm here today interviewing Mrs. Mabel Mustonen in Lake Linden on Second and Schoolcraft. Mrs. Mustonen, can you tell me, are both of your parents of Finnish descent?

M:Yes, they're of Finnish descent. Within ten miles of each other in Finland. In Oulun Länni.

I:Do you know when they came over here?

M:Well my father may have come a little earlier, because that's when the Russia-Japanese War occurred and they were going to take the young boys from Finland to fight in the war. Many of the families, because of lack of sympathy with Russia, didn't want their sons to go so many of them came to this country. My mother came in 1900.

I:Do you know how old she was?

M:Thirteen

I:So was your father older?

M:No, I think he may have been a little younger

I:Do you know what your grandparents did? Were they farmers or?

M:I guess my grandmother's people were on the sea, but they had a lot of farm country. He came to this country, because as happened to so many, he co-signed property and these other people didn't pay. He was a very good-hearted person and considerable property disappeared that way. Grandmother was alone then for quite a few years. I don't remember if it was five years or nine years she was taking care of the children and then she finally got up and came. But my father's people had been large land owners in Finland. Farming, but not small farming.

I:Did they farm when they came over here?

M:No, my father was interested in law and he became a land agent. Of course, my grandfather didn't live very long. I guess they were building the YMCA in Calumet and some log came off of the roof and it just missed him, just barely. He was supposed to have had a heart condition since that happened.

I:Did your mother work ever or did she.

M:Oh yes, my mother was a wonderful sewer and very creative. She would make her own patterns and she could tailor. My father died when he was quite young and my mother brought us up. She supported us with her sewing. She was exceptional, very gifted.

I: Is this where you get your.

M: Well she was talented in art, but of course she did it in sewing. And my father used to write poetry and he was one of the early photographers. He was interested in business, etc.

I: Did he ever publish any of his poetry?

M: I don't know if he has or not. His photography was beautiful. In the old days photographing the Ontonogon River and the property they were selling and stuff like that. But he had polio when he was thirty, so his life was relatively short.

I: What was his name?

M: Vetalia. (?) Actually it's an Italian name. The family came to Finland in the 1300's. They were privateers employed by the Swedish government, to keep other members of the Royal Family from getting at Finland. See, Finland was the only Scandanavian country that wasn't all spoken for. The others were all deeded, from many generations back. They were hired for 50 years until _____ when Denamrk and Norway and Sweden sort of got together and they were getting this large land grant in Finland, but through the centuries of course, the land kept getting smaller and smaller. But that's because of the name. But they always married Swedish or Finnish women, so they were really Finnish.

I: Well, after that many years, I think you are.

M: Yes, 600 years. But there are graves there where the church was in Finland and they go back to 1601, and earlier you know. But then of course, there are a lot of mixed in Finland. A lot of people have been refugees there. His mother was a descendant of a German business man. It's sort of a combination.

I: When you were growing up did you speak Finnish at home?

M: Yes, I still speak Finnish

I: You learned Finnish as my first language

M: Finnish was my first language. We were supposed to go back to Finland. Father didn't want us speaking with an accent. I couldn't speak English when I went to school. I was very young. I was four years old. They couldn't shut me off when I was in kindergarten, because I couldn't understand them and I didn't have a Finnish teacher. I did so much painting and so many pieces of sculpture. I remember they had a show of all of my work on the first floor in the old high school--they've built a new one since then. They couldn't shut me off. But when I went to Hancock there was a Finnish-American teacher and I think she helped me. And by that time I think I associated with little children, so the language had improved some.

I: Did you have other brothers and sister?

M: Yes, I had two sisters younger than I am.

I: Did you ever speak English at home, or was it always Finnish?

M: Oh, later on. We had a grandmother living with us for many, many years until I was about 18 and she always preferred that we spoke Finnish. That helped.

I: Do you speak Finnish with your husband?

M: Not any more. We used to when we were young. He speaks Finnish very well. You people should be interviewing him. He's directed coral groups for over fifty years. He knows much more about the folkways than I do. He directed Finnish and Swedish coral groups.

I: So... you were quite artistic when you were four years old.

M: Ever since I was three. I had the whooping cough and there was a young girl, a neighbor girl, who was showing me how to paint and I think I've been doing it ever since.

I: Did your mother weave?

M: She had a loom before she came to this country. She has probably always done sewing and everything because she used to do weaving and sew all the materials and sew all her sisters clothes. (Takes a picture out). That's my mother, my older sister, my grandmother, grandfather. I don't know if you noticed it when they had the Finn thing this summer, I had this embroidered hanging of my mother and her sister of when she came from Finland with her sister.

I: Do you still have it?

M: Yes, I'll show you. My aunt was very fond of flowers, but she didn't like sewing.

I: Well, your mother did more sewing than she did..

M: Oh yes, she didn't weave after she came to this country. My grandmother wove, but after all, all they wove was these raanus for a rocking chair. Eventually carpets. They could do intricate weaving, but when they came to this country they had all this beautiful handwoven material and handmade clothes, but I think people then thought what was valuable was the commercial materials, the bought materials, even though they were not as good. Oh that's my mother there (points to picture on wall) with my father when they were courting.

I: And you painted that?

M: yes.

I: So you think that's the reason people stopped weaving, because...

M: Some people didn't stop. I have some old looms here that were made by Finnish men, but mostly they made carpets. I think part of the reason is that they thought they were not as valuable. But we know now that they are. Weaving has never stopped in Finland. The material is so much better and the colors are so much more beautiful. They're always made out of vegetable dyes. In the Southern Highlands (Smokey Mts.) here in our own country they never stopped weaving, because if they didn't weave they couldn't have these things. Even in colonial times there were weavers who would go from house to house.

I: Someone told me that you went to Cranbrook. Now, did you study there or teach there?

M: Yes, I had a Ford Foundation Scholarship. Three in the country in 1955 received it and I told you my background was in Fine Arts. Of course I was teaching general arts and I took courses from most of the people available--and Detroit was an unusually fertile place. I studied book binding under Jean _____ from Switzerland, silver work with Arthur Newell Kirk from England and, I'm trying to think what else. Oh...and making huge ceramic sculpture with _____ Gregory, he's an American, he used to be a dancer. A lot of these teachers had been associated with Cranbrook and I had studied at Cranbrook before. I was teaching, in fact I was in charge of the Arts and Crafts in the Cas..? High school and then they had the Ford Foundation for secondary teachers...it was a competitive thing. It paid, matched your salary for a full year. I did a survey of crafts in the Northeastern States and the Midwest. Then I went to Cranbrook and I was teaching jewelry and weaving at Cass (?) I had to take it in my teaching field, although I was more interested in sculpture. So I had a masters in silversmithing and metal and I had a minor in weaving and _____ and I already had a Bachelor's and a Masters from Wayne State; they gave a Master of Fine Arts. (Cranbrook) So they told me why don't I get it. It was quite strenuous; I was in my fifties and all of these other people were young and I had full responsibility. Then I also had to travel and they only allowed three days off, but I had to travel to all of these different centers: to New York, Rochester, Michigan, Gatlenburg in the Southern Highlands. But I did get my masters,

I: What do you like to do the best?

M: I think sculpture. Well, when you get old it's much easier to embroider and weave

I: So you embroider, weave, make jewelry, and you work with silver.

M: Yes, I have a chalice here, but it's not polished. (Shows chalice.)

I: I was wondering, did you learn to embroider from your mother?

M: I have always embroidered.

I: Did she originally teach you?

M: No. We used to sit around this round table at my aunt's--we used to stay with her quite a bit, during the first world war. We would

sit around knitting and embroidering. My aunt taught us if anyone because my mother was too busy working. A lot of things I don't think anyone ever taught me, you know you just know what to do. Actually, anytime you do a craft is use your common sense. The material and the tools hasn't changed so much. I don't believe in using mechanical tools, electrical tools, unless sometime when you're in a hurry. I think you can work on it just as fast, as in stone carving, if you just keep the tools sharp. One thing they taught at Cranbrook was that you have to compete and they thought that anything you had to do to shorten your time on your work was justifiable. For instance they use a machine that lathed when shaping; I used a machine for this because it's very hard, but all the banging out I did by hand. I used a machine to help with the polishing.

I: It's interesting, a lot of people would say oh crafts or any kind of art you have to learn and have someone teach you.

M: Well, I think some things are a little different. I have studied painting many years at school and they set up a model and you just work by yourself and sometimes the teacher will come by and say something,

Tape II. (There was excessive noise on the other tape and it had to be changed)

M: I think you learn more from the other students and experimenting and reading. There is something that's a little difficult to explain; you absorb. Art schools that are situated where they have fine art museums and art collections and the students have the experience to go to them rather than an isolated place where they don't have those privileges. These schools near art museums are richer experiences. I taught Saturday morning classes for gifted senior high school students for years at the Institute of Arts and I know just going there every Saturday and spending practically a day wondering around in addition to concentrated work in the field that you were taking; this was a very valuable experience. You absorb the art and I think very often the student can only go in a way as far as the teacher; the teacher either has to be very high in either talent or have the prime background in order to develop the student. to his or her highest potential.

I: I'm curious, you being more artistic or having more background in art, do you know why Scandinavian colors seem to be very pure and the design very simple in comparison to other countries?

M: Finnish colors aren't pure, but they're beautiful. They're moody. Swedish colors are very clean and clear, but I find the Finnish colors much more fascinating. It's a very subtle; the colors are somewhat gray. It's like the colors of the winter sunset. Very mysterious. But this in a way is no longer true, because there's an influence now, the anthropomorphic influence, where you deliberately try to work crude, because they think you have more power.

M: Before this movement became the dominant one in European art and American art too, the most seemingly, they were not simple--deceptively simple--simple and exquisite art was the Finnish art, and the other Scandanavian. Of course in art as in everything else, the pendulum goes back and forth and for awhile this crude almost pre-human influence and probably the other extreme will come. What I did like always about the Scandanavian art was the simplicity and the pure design. Mr. Dick Thomas, who is head of the metal smithing at Cranbrook, had everybody design a product and then had you eliminate everything you could eliminate. You'll go down to the basic shape first and if you add one thing and it's satisfactory you stop there. You eliminate and eliminate until you have the pure design. And that of course depends... things change. I often thought the reason for the development of this crude technique in painting and sculpture was because all these young men were in the war and they didn't have time for an apprenticeship and had all this pent up energy to produce artistically and they produced emotionally. Anthropomorphic art is emotional. I'm old enough so I prefer dicipline control, technique.

I: You say you're old enough, do you...

M: Know that, yes. Well I'm almost seventy, I'm 67. That's old enough. And I've been teaching since I was 18.

you still teach now?

M: No.

you have any private lessons at all?

M: NO, I've spent so many years of my life, sometimes seven days a week teaching. The seventh day was Sunday School. I don't have much time and I have all these skills that I should find time to work in those areas.

I: You still do a lot of work, don't you?

M: Yes, although we bought this old house and much of our time is spent trying to restore it. I don't mean restore it to its original condition, I mean to restore it to a more liveable state.

I: How long have you lived here?

M: This is four years. We have a summer home too, that's really a home that has all the rooms, a parlor, living room, dining room, etc. There's a lot of work there too. And we've been active with the Copper Country Artists and the Buell Weavers.

I: Is weaving becoming more and more popular up here? In the U.P

M: Mrs. Buell had a group here and there a lot of women who came from other areas, who have had weaving experience. When there is a very active group in one craft you have a source of people to work with. They are exceptionally hard workers and they are very interesting. Many of them work quite differently--rich resources. And they're very nice people. There are many ceramic artists coming here: Allens and Gordon Buswald (?) and there are some new people, some women I haven't met. I would think ceramics would be good here; there's so much red clay that you could experiment with it. Another group is starting--wood carvers. There seem to be quite a few of them.

I: Yes Wilmer Savela was telling me that. I think there is quite an upsurge all over the country in doing crafts.

M: You know what it is: the first generation is busy making a living and getting themselves situated; the second generation goes into the professions and teaching and the third generation has time to be the artists.

I: You say you like the Finnish design; would you that particularly in your weaving and embroidery ..do you think that influences you?

M: No. I don't think anybody influences me. The only thing that influences me is my inheritance of my own people. Somebody else's work doesn't influence me. I studied sculpture with a very fine, gifted artist, in fact he was the first teacher and American sculpture, who worked in stone and wood. He's probably been the most influential person. His wife did stitchery too. She was also a fine painter.

In crafts, one thing I did on my foundation fellowship was to find out sources of livelihood--you can teach and you can sell your crafts, but it's really a rat race because you have to produce in quantity and learn to compete with the machine. You have to be able to produce if they want to order so many hundred of this or that. And you have to learn to handle the mechanics of the business side of it. Another area is to be sort of a foreman in a factory that produces, like that silversmithing.. produce these things, because you would have the background to see the art from the angle of the artist and you could see if the product suffered in its translation to a power produced product. And uh..for instance, you could work in weaving you could work in shops;? is dead now, but she employed many girls and when they were producing a major design they would have maybe five to ten girls, or boys, weaving for them. They would take on commissions for maybe General Motors doing huge wall carpets or wall hangings. And then another area of work is you work on a small loom and you design fabric for automobile upholstery. Many materials and draperies that look like they have been hand woven, have been done on a power loom

Mustonen

but they were designed first on a hand loom. So there are areas you can go into if you like doing crafts. Many people combine doing teaching with entering shows and doing a few things like that. It probably takes too long and you probably won't ever get your money's worth out of it, but you have to do it to increase your reputation, the creative portion, and then... there's our cat looking in. Can you think of anything else? I'm kind of sleepy today. We've been trying to paint the outside of the house, trying to get roofing done.

I: Sure, I can think of things. You mentioned your ryijy. Do you do ryijy's very often?

M: Well, not very often. I mostly do things I want to keep for myself. It's in the bedroom, I can show you it.

I: I wanted to ask you about knitting and crocheting, did your mother do those too?

M: Hum. But see my aunt did... Janie's got a cover over her bed, my grandmother used to crochet a lot and she made this lovely course carpet wool--white. I have another spread but the kap kept sleeping on it so I put it over the bed, it's a high post four--you know. I've done some crocheting, in fact, oh, I think they're at the cottage. I'd like to some soft sculpture with the crocheting, but then I wonder, well where would I keep it? Unless I just did it and somebody wanted to buy it. You can do almost anything, because you can just crochet the shape of anything you want to do. You just have to use heavy enough thread. I have to find a source though where I can get a lot of the real heavy thread. If I find some manufacturers advertising... a lot of them use up what they could use and then they sell the rest of it much more reasonably. If I got a lot of it... I was thinking of doing a whole wall thing, a great big thing, with real knobby stuff, and a couple of places I'd have real smooth, you know it reflects your studies so it would be like brick or some very heavy kind of material. But I have a lot of things to do before that.

I: It's nice to have a lot of things to do.

M: Yes. We have this big stairway and I want to make a rag carpet out of wools and put it down there. Because I enjoy those, there are such beautiful things you can pick up to use at rumage sales for ten cents. ^{for 8-10 cents} You can get a lot of wool out of that. It's a shame to waste that material.

I: Do you ^{know} in Finland if people wave cloth as much as they did rag carpets?

M: Oh yes, they still do. And you can go, there are places where

you can go ~~for~~ two weeks and three weeks and somebody will dress the loom for you and you can weave most anything. Materials, or the afgan covers, or anything. When I was in Finland, we stopped where my father's people were from and there was a cute little lady and she must have been, oh seventy. And she had a loom way upstairs, I think she called it an ullako. It was a real wide loom and she was real tiny and there was a big bench. She had seven children and she was making each one of them a ryijy carpet--it was for the floor. And that's the only place where I say sheep, because it seems in Finland they use imported wool, but she had her own sheep so I suppose she was doing her own dying. Another thing in Finland that they are good at is the silk screening. You have heard of Marimekko. We were staying with my cousin who I had married a girl who had designed for Marimekko. She wasn't designing then, they had just had a little baby. But umm...at Cranbrook too, Marietta Strom (?), by the way, she's Finnish,...her father was an architect and her mother was an interior designer. from Finland. She was the weaving teacher there, but they have moved out east. Her husband is Hannu Strom (?) and he is one of the architects for the Saarinen associates, they have Finnish designs of the younger Saarinen, the father died when he was quite young, I think when he was 45...uh, had designed the buildings he had already been commissioned for and he was one of the architects. She did a lot of silk screening and her main creative activity besides teaching, of course, was designing ??

In order to produce a design in northern Europe, it is customary to have a designer do it and the people who are skilled technically do the work. You couldn't possibly do all that yourself, I mean physically. In America, we do most of the things ourselves. But if you want to be active and have a very prosperous craft shop, you have to have apprentices and trained help. You couldn't keep up with it otherwise.

I: Do you know of any other crafts that people do up here?

M: There are some jewelers, the Millers have been doing jewelry. I think you'd be interested in interviewing them. They have a very interesting and nice shop in Ameek. Her husband beats out these copper bowls and things. And they're Finnish. I don't know what their name used to be, they changed their name. And then, Nancy McKee(?)...does beautiful jewelry.

I: I was wondering if you recall as you were growing up or even now any home remedies that your mother ever used to use when you got sick?

M: The only thing I remember, I was very active when I was young, a real TomBoy and I got stung badly by a wasp or something,

she made me drink fresh milk, cow's milk and I was quite badly poisoned and it lasted for quite a few days. Evidently it was some kind of antidote. But I can't remember of anything else. I used to have to drink buttermilk when I ate too many peanuts and to this day I don't like buttermilk, but I love peanuts. I can't think of anything.

I: How about, I've heard of people being made to drink tar water when they have colds.

M: There's a Finnish saying that if the sauna doesn't help you, then I guess you're far gone. Then there's this cupping, but I don't know anything about that. I think that was for high blood pressure. We were very well and we were always outside.

I: How about for headaches, or anything...

M: No, we never used to have headaches

I: It's fascinating the things, the home remedies that I've picked up. I mean, I know those things....

M: You see, the thing is, we weren't exposed and particularly during World War I we used to have the superstition of these campher bags, everybody had those, but that wasn't particularly Finnish. But uhh, I never had the German measles and when I was teaching I was exposed to them and it was a bad time because I was pregnant with Janie. But uh, I had whooping cough when I was three. I used to spend a lot of time outdoors skiing and skating and they always managed to get oranges for us and we had good ordinary food.

I: Did you eat a lot of Finnish food?

M: My mother... I don't think anybody made as good nisu as she did. My grandmother was very good. She had been an orphan, but she had inherited quite a good bit of property. She was taught by the peasants, she knew how to do all kinds of stuff, blood sausage. She knew all the peasants crafts. It's too bad she isn't alive, she couldn't answer... she knew all that, and then of course she was left with children and no husband for I don't know how many years. Like I said I don't know if it was 5, 7, or 9, but she wouldn't wait any longer. ? was a cousin, both sides of the family, and his folks had died and I realized what had happened. That was probably that time there was the Great Hunger, in 1867, a lot of people were orphaned. It must be at that time. See, they're from around ?joki, that's where, I don't know if you know much Finnish history, that's where the Russians and the Swedes held the ?? . It's a part of Finland where it's narrow so they could cut through from Russia.

Mr. Mustonen: Would like coffee?

M: Oh, yes, would you put the water on? Would you like tea or coffee?

I: Coffees fine, thank you.

M: No, I don't remember anything about these remedies.

I: One thing I was curious about--I've read that people used to have their babies in saunas.

M: Yes, they did, but of course that would be before my time. I wouldn't know anything about that.

I: I, you know, I knew that happened in Finland, and I

M: Well, in a lot of families, that's where the bodies were prepared too; the sauna is sort of a holy place. I know when we were young, we had --my uncle Blitz, he had--and his sister had a cottage, now it's Kitty's cottage, I don't know if you know where it is, it's up in ? , but very few people in those days, you couldn't get, a private person couldn't get land up there. The Anderson's had the island-- they would rent out cottages; the Aho's on the mainland, they would rent out cottages. But somehow they were able to -- Kitty, Cousin Larson and my uncle Blitz, get this, it was really a swamp land, there where the road forks. But there were a lot of us; Kitty had a huge family, there were three of us girls and the girls would go to the sauna together. The older people would see that we got washed, but uh.. there was no mixing of sexes in bathing. I remember the upstairs was all one huge room, but we'd learned so we could dress under the covers. We were all very modest. Now everyone had got to have their own bedroom.

At this point, her handicapped daughter, Janie, says she wants to show her cape material. She is a bit difficult to understand.

M: Yes, show your cape material. Janie likes to weave. She isn't feeling so good today. I told her to keep away. She had like a flu yesterday and she had to lie down. She wasn't very sick, she just felt badly.

I: How about, when children when were born, were there a lot of.. maybe not for..uh..

M: My mother was born in Finland.

I: But, do you know if they had a lot of midwives up here?

M: Oh yes, she comes next store, the daughter of famous one, ? Iltonen, and her daughter is Marie Haitala (or Haapala?). I think one of her daughter's husband is at Suomi. I forget what the name is. I think he was, not a registrar, something... but she was a remarkable woman. Her bag, her midwife bag, is here in the Historical Museum. And I always remember her, she used to come and visit. Her voice was very strong, you could hear her quite a distance away. I think her daughter is quite a bit like her. She's very active in 4-H groups, I think testing either hearing or sight in the schools and then she caters as far as Milwaukee. She does all kinds of things.

She has recently bought a loom and I have to go over sometime and help her. (Janie comes in with her material) Janie wove many, many yards for her cape.

I: That's beautiful

M: It probably won't need much of a lining, it's so heavy. Janie learned weaving at the Oakland School for the Handicapped. She's had many years of weaving. That's her loom right there. It's a little one from Sweden. She has a Galleger in her bedroom. Then we've got one in the cottage and we have a little one floating around.

(Janie says something here about a piece she is doing.)

Oh, I think that'd be nice to go in a narrow space in the hallway Janie. Weaving is nice because you don't have to worry about bumping your head, or falling, or glass breaking. And the colors rich and ...

Janie shows how much yardage she has)

She has about four yards. The loom I have upstairs is 45 no it's 48" and its one of those old fashioned looms with the high over beam.

I'll go put the coffee on

I: Okay. I'll end it here then. Thank you very much Mrs. Mustonen, it's been very interesting.