FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
(Funded in part by the National Endowment For The Humanities)

(Funded in part by the Keweenaw National Historic Park Advisory Commission / U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service)

CONDITIONS FOR USE OF .PDF TRANSCRIPT:
Finlandia University, formerly Suomi College, holds the exclusive copyright to the entirety of its Finnish Folklore and Social Change in the Great Lakes Mining Region Oral History Collection, including this .pdf transcript which is being presented online for research and academic purposes. Any utilization that does not fall under the United States standard of Fair Use (see U.S. Copyright Office or Library of Congress), including unauthorized re-publication, is a violation of Federal Law. For any other use, express written consent must be obtained from the Finnish American Historical Archive: archives@finlandia.edu.

PREFERRED FORMAT FOR CITATION / CREDIT:
“Maki, John”, Finnish Folklore and Social Change in the Great Lakes Mining Region Oral History Collection, Finlandia University, Finnish American Historical Archive and Museum.

Note: Should the Finnish American Archive be a resource for publication, please send a copy of the publication to the Archive:

Finnish American Historical Archive and Museum
Finlandia University
601 Quincy St.
Hancock, Michigan 49930 USA
906-487-7347 - fax: 906-487-7557
Nancy Lack
interviewing
Esther Ojala
December 3, 1974
NANCY LACK INTERVIEWING ESTHER OJALA
COPPER COUNTRY SCHOOLING

Nancy: This is Nancy Lack interviewing Esther Ojala in her home on Water Street in Hancock. Today's date is December 3, 1974. And Esther Ojala is a native of the Copper Country. She was born here in Hancock. She's a first generation Finn. Her parents immigrated here. And she's been a school teacher all her life. I'd like to ask you to give a brief list of all the school's you've taught in.

Esther: If I remember them all. Well I began with the little rural school in Liminga. It's about nine miles out from Houghton. In Stanton township. And there was another little school at Oskar where I taught for a year. They belong in the same township under the same superintendent. From there I went to Franklin township in a little location near what is now Boston. I taught there a year. And then I taught in another Franklin township in Pewabic. That school has been raised. It's near where the big hoist is down beyond that. I taught there for several years and then from there I went to the Hancock Senior-Junior High School. I taught in the social studies for the 7th, 8th, and 12th graders. And from there I went to Newberry Ml. I was the elementary principal for 32 years. And from there I went to Saint Joseph's Saint Patrick's school. I was there for 32 years making a total of 50 years.

N: 50 years. What were you teaching? You said Social Sciences.

E: Yes, Social Sciences in Hancock but like in the rural schools we taught everything including such studies as orthography and agriculture.

N: Oh, you had everything to know. Were your classes large?

E: No, we had 63 children in that school, but I had another teacher with me. She taught the first four grades and I had the upper grades. And I was principal with the two of us there. And we had about 63 children. The classes varied maybe three in one class and two in another so on. Making a total of 63. That was an interesting school in the fact that they were all Finnish.

N: All of them.

E: All of them. And some of them started school without
E: knowing how to speak English.

N: So did you teach them English?

E: Everything had to be taught in English. So we had to make a rule that they were not to talk anything but Finnish in the school or on the playground.

N: You mean English.

E: Ya, English. They were to speak English only not any Finnish so that the little ones would learn to speak English.

N: Made them learn.

E: And they learned.

N: They had to learn.

E: And they seemed to understand what we were trying to teach them. Before the year was over they were speaking with the rest of them.

N: Ya, they can learn so fast

E: With a Finnish accent.

N: Well I've even gotten a Finnish accent since I moved here. I think. Did you have any problems with discipline?

E: Not in that particular school. They were very much interested in school. And we had no discipline problems whatsoever. I never had to raise my voice.

N: Not ever.

E: Not ever. And we had a very good time there. It was a one room school and there was a great big fat stove in the middle of the floor. And in the morning when we came, in the winter, the frost would be up the walls. And everybody would sit around the big old stove and it would get so warm that we'd have to move gradually back. But we kept our overshoes on otherwise our feet would be cold. So and we had kerosine lights and a few library books but not many. And we had no music in the school. So this teacher and I decided that we would earn a victrola for our school so the children would have music, especially during the noon hour. So we had what they called a box social. Everybody. The girls came with boxes of lunch. And the boys would bid for their these pretty baskets of food. And
E: then you'd eat your lunch and then we had games.

N:

E: And folk dances. We could push the seats back in that school. So we earned enough for a victrola but we didn't earn any records.

N: No records but you had the victrola.

E: Well I had to bring some from home. And then we gave another social where we earned some records. But we had one record that the Dover's Music House gave us with the victrola that we bought and that was The Girl I Left Behind. And the county superintendent used to visit the rural schools and he was called Mr. Bath. He came from England to this country and he had left his wife and family in England. And we didn't know it till after we played this song The Girl I Left Behind.

N: Oh it must have torn him apart.

E: Yes, he told us when he left, he stopped, keeping those children towing the mark. Keep them towing the mark. But it was fun. The children even on stormy days would come. They came on skis and snowshoes. We didn't have buses in those days to bring them. But they never missed a day, they were anxious to come.

N: How about the other schools like in Newberry or anywhere?

E: Oh, up in Pewabic up in highway or near Boston Franklin Township school they were little villains. They were wild as they make them. If I'd open a window for fresh air something would land in in the school building or out or if I turned my back I might get an ember in the back. And fights, everyday there was a fight on the school ground.

N: How did you handle it? Were you contact the parents?

E: No, because I used to go on the street car up there and street car home. There was very little time. But I handled it just with the children and myself. There was no superintendent there to fall back on, so one day to I told them I came home and cried everynight cuz oh I just didn't like it after having a nice peaceful school.

N: It was a change.

E: It was a great change. But it was a good experience for
E: me as a young teacher learning.

N: How about then in the Catholic school?

E: That was very easy there. The discipline was no problem at all. And these little kiddies finally I told them there were to be no fights on the school ground. If there was a fight I would be right in the middle of it. punching with you.

N: Oh. That scared them out of it.

E: So we went to our classes and started and we had a recess period. And the children two boys got beyond the door and so they began to fight. So I went in and grabbed them and brought them into the classroom and we had two little, well they were supposed to be toilet rooms but they weren't completed yet so I put one in one room and the other in the other, gave them a text book under the door there so they could stay there until I dismissed them, to cool off. So I went back to the work and of course that, the others didn't know what was going to happen to these children and we wouldn't tell them. Then they were dismissed after school and I stayed there - I was correcting papers and I missed my train, my car back for home. And noon hour I just threw their lunches under the door and they had their lunches there and pretty soon I heard sobbing. So I went to one door and said "What's the matter with you?" He said, "I thought you had gone and left me here for all night."

N: Oh. So they were in there for quite a while.

E: They were there for oh from about 10:30 in the morning till about 4:00.

N: That's a long time.

E: A long time to be alone. And the had. I said, "have you thought about what happened? Yes. Will it happen again? No."

N: How old were they about?

E: Oh, they were about I would judge about ten. Cuz they were fourth graders. So that settled them and the older boys were settled down and do you know that was the first year that school passed their state examinations?

N: And that's what did it.

E: That's what did it. When they settled down and began
E: to work.

N: They just had to have it

E: They had to have, that discipline. But I was real happy when they passed their exams.

N: Oh, I'll bet.

E: You know the state exams were not easy. They had in all subjects penmanship consisted of memorizing all the words to the four verses of Star Spangled Banner and America and writing it from memory with all punctuations, capitols letters, correct lines, and so on.

N: Oh, and what grade was that for? For the eighth grade?

E: Eighth grade, for their high school entrance examination. And so of course we had to drill them on that and we had to study on it and try...

N: Ya, I don't think even I could say all four verses.

E: I could when I was working with them. Now I know the first verse and the last verse but I don't know the two middle verse. I've forgotten those.

N: Could you tell me about any school traditions? Did the school have anything special they did like at Christmas time?

E: Yes, we had our Christmas programs every year.

N: Did the parents all come?

E: Yes, they were invited. And a funny thing happened there up in Liminga. The one mother had her little baby in her lap and the little baby was feeling cross so she just pat it on its little fanny. And it said eventually, why not now? Its little diaper was make out of a flour sack.

N: Oh, eventually, why not now? Oh

E: They were cute.

N: What kind of programs did you put on? Christmas, caroling, singing?

E: Yes, caroling and little plays and we always had a Santa Clause and a Christmas tree. And the children made the trimmings for the tree themselves. Trimmed it themselves. And trimmings on the window you paste on the windows as you see still today. And we also had
E: A closing of school exercises when the school year is over. And that was a program too.

N: Now this is in June or?

E: Yes, in May usually.

N: In May.

E: And they had some of their work on exhibit and of course memory verses that they had learned and so on.

N: Did you do anything for Thanksgiving or Easter?

E: Just the ordinary school work and talking about Thanksgiving and making turkeys.

N:

E: Trimming of the room for it. And let's see what else did we do? The boys took care of the stove and they helped a little with the janitor work, but not much. We had a regular janitor.

N: Come in regularly.

E: Yes, sweeping scrubbing so on.

N: Did you in the school did you teach any special crafts? like cooking or weaving or sewing or was this all taught at home or?

E: During the war the girls, I taught them knitting so they could make these little washcloths for the American Red Cross.

N: Oh, and then, that's nice.

E: And they were sent to the soldiers. The boys didn't do much. Course I had no handicraft training myself so except I knew how to knit and crochet.

N: Because you knew everything else.

E: But I didn't know much to teach the boys.

N: They all got there, that kind of education at home, cooking

E: Yes, they did.

N: Was art encouraged? You said you made these turkeys and Christmas...
E: Well that was about the extent of our art. You didn't have time. We had five minutes for arithmetic, ten minutes for reading and so on and so forth. The day went by so fast that you really didn't have much time. You had to spend it on the academic subjects.

N: And this would go for music too. Was music encouraged?

E: Yes, music usually we had, we called opening exercises.

N: Opening. What's that?

E: And that was to start the day. We'd sing a patriotic song, salute the flag, and then we maybe had some little verse that we had learned, a little memory verse character training you know. Obedience and so on was taught through little sayings. Count thy day lost Oh descending Son use from thy hand no worthy action done. Something like that.

N: And now this was every morning.

E: Every morning about 15 minutes we had. And the older students took charge in selecting the little verses and saying it and writing it on the board for the week and so on.

N: Oh. Was there any type of organized sports at all for the boys?

E: They organized their own usually. And we had a baseball bat and a ball. They played that on the school grounds.

N: Just on their lunch-time?

E: On their own

N: There was no

E: It was free play.

N: Ya Can you you named the record can you think of any books or magazines or records you encouraged your children to read?

E: Well Robinson Crusoe was one I remember that. And there's we didn't have Bambi yet then. We had Robinson Crusoe and the Bobsey Twins.

N: Bobsey Twins. I've read those.

E: They had those. And the Hardy Boys.
N: Oh, ya.

E: And some of those books. And of course their were the other classics, the fairy tales, Aesop's Fairy Tales, Aesop's Fables and the Grimm's Fairy Tales.

N: Grimm's Fairy Tales. Were they encouraged to read the local newspaper or anything?

E: Oh yes, current events

N: Current events? What was the name of the.

E: That was their name of the little paper that they got, called Current Events.

N: Who put this out?

E: I've forgotten what company put it out.

N: Oh, but you ordered it for the school?

E: Yes, we ordered it for the school. And that was read on Fridays usually.

N: Oh, we had Weekly Readers like the same thing. Sousa's marches you had,

E: Yes, and then of course some of our own jazz music that we brought from home.

N: Oh, did you encourage the boys, the girls to do as well as the boys as far as grades? Were they... Did they have the same push the guys did?

E: Yes, I think so. We had our spell downs for competition.

N: Between the boys and the girls?

E: Yes,

N: Did you have those often?

E: Oh, we usually it was on like a Thursday afternoon after we had completed a certain list of words, and then we'd have that. And having the four grades, of course we took turns. One week we'd maybe the fourth grade, the next the fifth grade the next sixth, the next seventh grade.

N: Who usually won?
E: Well I I can't recall. It seemed to be about even.

N: About even.

E:

N: Did the girls have ambitions to be go into a career of any kind.

E: Well they all wanted to go to high school I know. But they hadn't decided what they wanted to study. Course there weren't many openings for girls except nursing and teaching and office work, business work, stenographers, and typists. There weren't many openings for them.

N: But they wanted to go to high school as much as the guys?

E: They wanted to go to high school at least, yes

N: You said they brought these baskets of food at lunch time. Is that did they always just bring their own food?

E: Yes, they brought their own lunches.

N: And you ate them inside or outside?

E: Inside first, we had sat down seats and ate them there.

N: Did you ever go outside to eat or?

E: No, we didn't go outside to eat. We ate in the school building. It was the only way to be sure that the little ones ate. They wouldn't begin playing before they had their dinners.

N: And then could they go outside after they were done?

E:

N: And do you remember how long lunch time was?

E: It was an hour.

N: An hour.

E: An hour. They had a chance to play for an hour.

N: Did any of them go home?

E: Very few because the farms were so scattered. They stay-
E: And right there.

N: That must have been fun?

E: It was fun. It was like one big family. The older children took care of the younger children, even in classes, the little ones learned an awful lot from listening to the older ones. So when it came their turn they "I know that". Especially the little ones.

N: Ya, they wanted the... You said they never missed a day of school. Not even in the winter. They always...

E: They always came.

N: They how far did some of them...

E: Oh no, in the springtime the boys in the eighth grade didn't come steadily. They'd miss a day or two and would... The first time I questioned them about his absence one of the boys said, "I had to pick rocks".

N: Oh.

E: And I couldn't imagine what that meant until I saw the farm. They had plowed and he had to pick these great big boulders. They had kind of a flat like sled that he would have to load them and then the horse would pull them out in the middle of the field, and you'd see these great big piles of rock that were picked off the farms. The soil there was very rocky. The glacier passed over.

N: That was the only time they missed school. Was there much problem with an illness?

E: Just when the flu epidemic came. That was the last year that I taught up there. We had the flu epidemic and we closed all the schools.

N: And how long did that last?

E: It last about two weeks.

N: Do you remember about what year this was?

E: Oh, I don't remember how many were absent because the school closed and there was no one absent when they closed our school cuz all the schools were closed. But in Redridge, that was where the superintendent lived, he had us come there, the two teachers, and teach there because
E: he didn't close his school.

N: Why not?

E: There was no illness there. There wasn't any in ours either but he wanted us teaching there.

N: I see.

E: for some reason or another, whether he thought we needed a little extra help in our methods or what. We were there.

N: Do you remember the name of the person who was teaching with you?

E: Yes, it was Mr. E. B. Holman. The school is named for him up there now.

N: He taught with you? He was your... 

E: He was the superintendent.

N: Oh, who was your teacher then?

E: It was Nan Ahola. She was from Ripely. She and I were at Northern together.

N: 

E: So she taught with me-up there. We had lots of fun.

N: I'll bet. Can you remember any of your students that you had? That are. Are there any living around here that you taught now or?

E: Oh, there a quite a few of them.

N: Can you remember them?

E: Robert McKindles is a retired school teacher. I taught him.

N: Oh ya, is he living here now?

E: He lives across the street from me and Boyu Waisanen that runs the Waisanen store and Harry Joffee that runs the Joffee store.

N: Oh, Harry Joffee I know him. You taught him?
E:

N: What school was that?

E: In the Senior-Junior school here. And let's see. Oh there were quite a few.

Esther's sister walked in: I don't mean to be eavesdropping but don't forget you taught two of your brothers.

E: Yes, my own brothers and my own sister.

N: Oh.

Esther's Sister: That's right you had Miriam too didn't you?

E: No, I didn't have Miriam. Miriam was a senior in high school. She wasn't in my class.

Esther's sister: I'm sorry. I thought she was with John and Robert.

E: John and Robert both and Betty. It was at one time, I was a senior, I was a teacher, my sister was a senior, there, my brother was in the sophomore, my brother in the junior high school, and my baby sister was in the kindergarten.

N: You had your whole family.

E: My whole family practically.

N: Right down to kindergarten. Teacher to kindergarten.

E: From all yes.

N: Can you remember how much money you were making?

E: Yes, I made 55.00 dollars a month.

N: 55.00 dollars a month.

E: And that was the principals salary. And the other teacher made 50.00 dollars a month.

N: That's nothing is it?

E: No, and then that I went up to 60.00 dollars in Franklin Township, and then when I taught in Hancock Senior-Junior High School I was making 85.00 dollars a month.

N: Well it did go up a little there.
E: In the country school we went only eight months or nine months, eight months. And then in the Senior-Junior School year we went nine months, of school, so then of course I went up to 125.00 when I went to Newberry. Cuz principal 85.00 to 125.00 that was a good jump.

N: Yes. Was that enough to live on?

E: It was in those days but you didn't have much left. Of course out of that I saved enough to keep going to school.

N: You kept going to school all the time you were teaching?

E: All the time, yes. You see when I graduated from high school my father sent me to Northern and I was there till the fall term and I came home for Christmas. Then H. D. Lee for whom Lee Hall is named at Northern, was superintendent in Hancock, he called me to come to see him on Saturday when I was home at Christmas vacation. He said I had to take the Liminga school. I had to take it because he said if I didn't they wouldn't have any school and there were 63 children. If I took that school I'd be doing as much as the boys in the trenches in France. So I said well I'll have to talk it over with my parents and they said I could make my own choice. So I chose to go there. Man came with me. She was my roommate at Northern.

N: Oh.

E: And we thought it'd be fun to go see what teaching is like.

N: How much schooling had you had?

E: That fall term

N: That's all just one term?

E: That's all. But we got a special permit to teach from the county superintendent of schools, and then in order to continue teaching we had to take teacher's examinations.

N: I see.

E: And they granted certificates, first grade, second grade, and third grade certificates. With the first grade certificate you taught one year and then we had to take the
E: examination. With the second grade, you taught two years without taking an exam and in the third grade you taught three years without taking an exam. If you passed that degree of difficulty in the tests. And in the meantime while you were teaching you had to read. I remember one book was called the Vitalized School.

N: The what?

E: Vitalized School. We had to read it. And the other one I remember was Training for Citizenship. And we had to study those and then we were examined on those books along with subjects and all the other subjects.

N: And then you could teach?

E: And then you the county would grant you your certificate.

N: Then when did you go back to school? In the summer?

E: During the summers.

N: Did you go to Northern?

E: I went to Northern until I got my life certificate and then from there I've gone to The University of Wisconsin. I've gone to the University of Minnesota. I went to Columbia National Teachers College. I kept going every summer.

N: I'll say, so you have what degree?

E: I didn't work for a degree.

N: You just have all this.

E: I worked for what I felt I needed for my work. So I had more hours than was necessary for any degree. Degrees kinda scared me. Because I saw those teachers who got their degrees and never went back and had a refresher course or anything.

N: That's not right

E: It isn't right. You have to continue growing, learning when you see the changes in methods of teaching even from the little rural school where I began to now where they have the open classroom. You have to know things and you have to know especially the growth of children. How to handle them if you're going to do the best you can. And you've got to have a wealth of information back in
E: your own brain, so that you can deal with them and guide them into the fields where they're interested. I think teaching is extremely interesting.

N: I was just going to say you obviously enjoyed it.

E: I did. I loved it.

N: What do you think about today? Education?

E: Well I think it's wonderful. There are some things that trouble me. Now for instance the I was just reading in the Chicago Tribune what some students are earning their degrees. The what they call pop culture, you know the popular culture.

N:

E: And one boy, his study for his master's degree is the influence of tee shirts on society.

N: For a masters degree?

E: For a masters degree.

N: Oh, now I hadn't heard that.

E: Another is studying for a barbecuing in the backyard the influence on society. To me that's a waste of effort and I don't think it's contributing very much. I don't think they'll teach if they go into teaching. They haven't much to contribute. It's just that. I can't see it. But I think there's such a wonderful opportunity when you think of how in ten years they reached the moon.

N: They did.

E: They did. And the discoveries that are being made in your field chemistry.

N: It's just so fast.

E: So fast that cancer research and there is a wonderful field for anyone interested. There's no need for anyone to be bored with life.

N: A good attitude to have. Well I want to thank you a lot for talking with me.

E: Well you're entirely welcome. I hope I've given you something to...

N: I appreciate it a lot. Oh you sure have. Thank you.
BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR ORAL HISTORY

Tall Timber Tales by Jingo Viitala Vachon

Education in the Wilderness by Dain Chapter 13 "The Birth of the Michigan School system"

Michigan Pioneer in Education by Martha Bigelow

Calumet Copper and People by Arthur Thurner Chapters 2 "An Ethnic Conglomerate" and 5 "A Vital Community"

4000 Years of Copper Country History by Lauri Leskinen