FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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This is an interview with Mr. Adolph Rajanen of 814 Ninth Avenue East, Duluth Minnesota conducted by Adrian Niemi on December 4, 1974.

Okay Mr. Rajanen will you tell us where you were born and when please?

I was born in __________ in Finland on November 27, 1900.

When did you come to this country?

I was an infant, just about two years old.

Did you come with both of your parents?

Yes. The whole family.

Do you know why your parents came here? For economic reasons?

Yes.

To get better money?

Where did you first come to this country?

Northern Minnesota, it's quite common among the Finnish people in this country.

Then you've been around here all your life in this part of the country?

How much education do you have?

Well it's kind of hard to say because I went to grade school at Wolf Lake and then I went to Duluth and I studied night school for many many years. So I don't know exactly how I would say that.

It's hard to say

Did you speak Finnish at home?

Where did you learn English?

In school some and then naturally as I grew up.

Do you recall if your parents talked about any special hardships or experiences they had coming over?
R Not in coming over no
I What did they do in this country then?
R They had a farm, they homesteaded a farm here.
I Do you recall if they mentioned any unusual experiences from that period?
R Not so much but there must have been many of them but I can't remember them off hand.
I I know it's difficult. Do you know if they got along with the neighbors all right, do you ever hear them talk about that.
R Oh yes. No problems at all. In fact they were all Finnish except for one man as far back as I can remember. One man was Irish and he had married a Finnish girl.
I So that made him all right because he married a Finnish girl?
R So only one language was needed there.
I long did you stay at home with your parents?
R I was about twenty-four.
I Were they still on the farm then?
R Yes.
I Did you leave to go someplace else?
R Well I was occasionally working out and then I went to take up barbering in Minneapolis which became my life then.
I How long were you in school?
R Just while I was in school.
I Less than a year?
R Yes.
I Do you still have relatives in Finland that you communicate with?
R No, there would probably be some distant relatives but we don't communicate.
I Do you remember anything about Finnish organizations such as Kaleva Club or Temperance Societies?
I know about all of those, Temperence Societies back then until just recently maybe the last ten fifteen years, there aren't many of them around any more. And Kaleva is quite active in Duluth even now although I don't happen to be a member.

How about Finnish choirs and bands?

There used to be a lot of them in years gone by but not much in the last 30 or 40 years.

Were you involved in anything like that at Wolf Lake?

Do you remember anything from the period around the First World War during the Depression. What was the situation then, were they different from other times?

Well for the 1st World War I was too young to register for it and for the Second World War I had to register but I was too old to go. I had a family then too. My brother was in service in Europe during that war.

But you were still on the farm during the First World War?

Oh yes.

Did the war change your life style at all?

Oh yes, for instance there was a shortage of flour, you had to buy a few substitutes before you could get the real flour. Sugar prices skyrocketed too, not as bad as they are now but high.

How about the Depression?

I had to try and make my living from the soil because I had all my investment in that and I couldn't just pick up and go someplace else but there was hardly no income from it at all. So it was hard to raise a family with those conditions.

How large a family did you have?

We had 7 children.

When did you move to Duluth?

1925.

You've been here ever since then right?

Yes

When did you retire from barbering?
4.

R Well actually I didn't fully retire because one of the members of our union died and I was next in line for the job. I tried to do both and found out I couldn't so I closed the barber shop and had that business agent's job for five years.

I Was your clientel mainly Finnish or mixed?

R Mixed.

I Have you noticed that the Finnish would want to stick together and goto the Finnish businessmen?

R To a certain extent yes. When I went to night school I also studied income tax and when I got out right away they levied tax on the small businesses mostly so I got busy right away and started figuring taxes. Then the following year they levied taxes on the common people so I took that on. It would have been more than a full time job but I kept on barbering too and I still do incometax work yet.

I Being in that kind of work you must have heard unusual stories about unusual people.

R Oh yes.

I What stories did you hear?

R Well one case I was filling out his income tax and I thought he doesn't have to file at all and he was worth several hundred thousand dollars.

I A surprise to you.

R Yes, and some Finnish people if you were to see them on the street you would think they were just paupers and they still have maybe a hundred thousand or more. They seem to hang onto their money.

I Do you remember hearing any stories about Finnish people who worked in the lumber camps or mines?

R Oh yes, lots of them.

I Can you think of any of them right now?

R My brother, next to the oldest, worked in the mines in Bute Montana until he got sick from it and died. I never did work in the mines myself but I knew quite a few miners.

I Did you ever hear of ________________?

R I don't think so.

I Do you remember anything about the cooperative movements, or the socialist movements?

R Oh yes
I remember we had a co-op store here.

Was that store here before you came?

No, I don't think so, maybe it was here before I came.

Do you remember anything about how it was organized or who got it going?

I don't recall it now.

How about socialist or labor movements?

Well, labor movements, there quite a few of them many years ago which was quite sad as far as the Finnish people go. In the first when they first started them they had all kinds of radical labor movements. The IWW took over and told the men you cannot work unless you join and if you didn't you go home. Then later on they made it so a man with a Finnish name couldn't get a job and they boycotted him so they were radicals.

So you would say that the IWW did more harm?

Oh yes, definitely. More harm than good because they kind of blacklisted the Finnish nationality altogether with that. Many of them joined because they had to not because they wanted to. And then in turn some of them became kind of radical themselves too.

Do you remember of hearing of any open fights between labor and management between the socialist groups and nonsocialist groups?

I have heard of some of them.

Sometimes they had quite violent feeling about each other.

Oh yes. And outwest they had quite a time.

Have you lived in this part of Duluth for the last fifty years then?

Just about yes.

Are there any particular events in the past of Duluth that stand out in your mind? Unusual things that you might have taken part in or observed?

I don't know.

Do you remember for instance any particular bad winters?

They had one or two but we were not here yet when they had those heavy snows, that was the winters before we came. People couldn't get out for three days. Even doctors had to go on skis or snowshoes or something. Cars couldn't move and horses couldn't go no place because the snow was to deep. The streetcars couldn't run for I guess four or five days because of the snow.
I That was before you came here right?
R Yes
I Were you still at Wolf Lake at that time?
R Yes
Do you remember what the weather was like there then?
R We had quite a bit of snow but not as much as they had.
I When you were on the farm did you have a car or truck?
R Ya, we had a car
I Okay now about church, have you been active in a church?
R Oh yes, practically all my life. We moved here shortly after we got married and got associated with a church right over here.
I Were there Finnish language services at Wolf Lake with a Finnish Pastor?
R Yes. Nothing but Finnish then and now nothing but English. If they would have had English services 50 or 60 years ago I don't think they would have had more than a half a dozen people there. Now if they would have Finnish services in that same church they wouldn't have more than 4 or 5 people.
I Do you remember the name of the Pastor at Wolf Lake?
R Houskinen was the first one
I Houskinen?
R Yes, John Houskinen was the first one. He's dead now, he died in Ohio. There were many and they mostly have died now. Then when we came here we went to Suomi Synod Church.
I Did those ministers at Wolf Lake live there or go from one town to another?
R Most of them were living in other places. I've serviced on the church council all the time I've been living here. It's the longest anyone has ever served, over 40 years.
I It's a record then hey?
R Yes. Now you can't do that, you can only serve two three year terms.
I When and where did you meet Mrs. Rainanen?
R Wolf Lake.
I Wold Lake?
Yes. Our families only lived about 7 or 8 miles apart.

How do you think your parents would have reacted if you had married an Italian girl instead? Would they have liked it or not?

I don't think they would have liked it

Would they have tried to stop you?

I don't know if they would have tried to stop me but it was exceptional in those days to go to another nationality. Now it's very common.

Some people say that many of the Finnish people who came here and their descendents have a tendency to drink alot, have you observed that?

To drink?

Would you say that's true or not?

Unfortunately it is true.

It is true.

It wasn't so much years ago but now adays

Do you think there is any reason for that?

I can't see any reason for it because there's no need for it

Have you belonged to any Temperence Organizations?

No. We belonged to the Minnesota Finnish Historical Society for many years and I'm still the State Wide Secretary for that organization. The Finlandia Foundation also. I used to belong to the Barber's Association and also the Journeyman's Union also.

Do you recall hearing from your parents Finnish folklore, sayings or expressions or nursery rhymes maybe?

Can you think of any right now?

No not all of a sudden

Okay. How about the names of the fingers?

I don't think I've ever heard that

No. Can you remember any of those little sayings?

No, not that I can remember.
Do you remember hearing any stories about a person who could heal magically?

I have heard some of them but I never paid much attention to them.

Have you heard there are people who can stop blood from flowing by saying certain words.

Yes I've heard that. I don't remember how it was done if it was done.

Do you remember any charms?

I don't remember them but I do remember hearing them.

How about any fishing charms?

No.

It seems like some people spoke about these things in the families and they remember them more.

Yes They were not very common in my home.

Well going back to the time when you were living at Wolf Lake, do you remember any outstanding periods of time in that time?

What do you mean?

For instance did someone ever get very sick at home and what would you do if they did get very sick? Would you get a doctor or take someone over to a hospital or what?

I remember one time my mother got sick and she couldn't talk at all. It was late Sunday night. We had a telephone and tried to get the doctor and couldn't get any answer at all. So we heard about this man who was about twenty miles from our house so we thought we'd have me try to go and get him. So he came and stayed all that day and when I took him home he said I can't see what's ailing her and he said if she gets beter you bring her to see me. So when she did get better we took her to a medical doctor and she couldn't hardly walk so I went to see the doctor first. I told the doctor about the other one and he was startled and said doesn't he remember about two weeks ago me and another medical man and him were at a sick bed or death bed and she died from the same thing, doesn't he remember that at all. So we didn't go to him anymore because he didn't know what it was at all and he was there a whole day.

What if someone on the farm got a cut and it kept bleeding what would you do for that, just bind it up some way?

Yes and then there was one man you could go to that even took care of fractured bones and that.
I: Do you remember if there were any kind of plants or wild plants that people grew in the yard that they used for medicine?

R: I heard about them but I didn't want to learn about them because it was not common practice and I didn't want to know about them. I don't know if they did any help or not.

I: Do you recall if your mother ever used them?

R: No.

I: When you were a boy did you ever have warts on your fingers?

R: No. I don't think I had them when I was a smaller boy but then when I was growing up I used to get them.

I: Do you remember any unusual ways of getting rid of warts? Superstitious ways of getting rid of them.

R: Well I guess this is superstition but take a bee and cut it in half and lick that and then take it outside and cover it dead where the water comes from the roof. Then as time goes on and that bee is rotted in the summertime you're wart is gone.

I: I never heard of that one before, are there any other ones like that?

R: I don't remember any others, there were probably more but I don't remember any.

I: At Wolf Lake, I suppose you had a sauna?

R: Oh yes, the rumor has it that the Finnish settlers when they came they cleared enough land to build a room about 12 by 16 and then when they could they cleared more land to build a house and then when they moved into the new home they converted the original house into a sauna. But it was not a sauna when they were first living there. They converted it into a sauna later.

I: That was a modern sauna and not a ________sauna?

R: It was a ________sauna

I: Oh that one. Did you have a ________on the farm?

R: No.

I: They still have Finnish language church services here don't they?

R: They still have them although in many places they have terminated them. How long do you think it will last?

R: Well it's kind of hard to say because I remember them saying thirty-five years ago that in the next five years it will be all gone. They have been saying that every five years. I hope it lasts because there's a need for it yet because there are some people that don't speak anything but Finnish.
Do you think it's important to preserve Finnish tradition or language? Such as the Finlandia Foundation or the Kaleva?

Well the Finlandia Foundation operates in Finnish or English, it's optional. So that is turning to English too, the same as the Historical Society is too. Some years ago, it was some English but predominately Finnish.

How long have you been in the Historical Society?

Well this is my fourth three year term as secretary and I was a member before that.

Do you remember how, who or when it was organized?

Well actually credit is given to Alex Kukkonen, he's the founder of the English Finnish Historical Society. There were others too before like Pastor Immonen who did quite a lot of historical work gathering history of the Finnish people in America. Now that history book of Finns in America is in Finnish and English.

Do your children know Finnish?

Not much, very little.

Did you ever try to teach your children Finnish?

No, not exactly because they don't succeed in school if you try to talk Finnish. If you teach a young child Finnish and English then when he or she goes to school they don't know the difference and they are stuck. So then I felt I better not use Finnish to them at all, let them learn English.

Do you think it's good for older people to learn Finnish?

Yes, definitely, this day and age anyway. It's always better to know more than one language. You get a deeper meaning out of a word if you know it in more than one language. Sometimes a dictionary might help some but you get a deeper meaning if you know more than one language. Two or more languages at least. If you could handle two or three languages or even three or four languages that's even better.

Do you remember, and I'm sure you do, stories about Finns being Mongolians?

Oh yes, I remember when I was going to school it was an old story then and we took it for granted but later on we found out different.

How did you feel about that, when you first learned that Finnish people were Mongolians?

I was too young to even distinguish between the Finn and the Mongolian.

Did you ever hear that at one time Finnish people had hard times getting jobs because they were supposed to be Mongolians?

Oh yes, I heard about that.
It also had some bearing on becoming a citizen of the United States. That's why Judge Cant made a ruling on it because he was confronted with that and he was the one who was granting the citizenship papers.