FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Relations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907 Strike</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Needs of Hibbing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Affiliations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political Rivalry Between Catholics &amp; Prot.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finn - Slovanian Relations</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>&quot;Busu&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Marriages</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finns &amp; Alcohol</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Collula Organization</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Events</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changes in Community Life</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Problems &amp; Community Stability</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical Care</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Remedy</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwives</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Life</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitude Toward Labor Movement</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggle for Church Independence</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalevans</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I Would you give me your name please, your maiden name?
R Impi Saari
I And now it's Salo.
R I was Impi Rantavirti inbetween Saari and Salo
I You were born in this country?
R Yes.
I And your occupation was you worked at Montgomery Wards here in Hibbing for a good many years.
R Nineteen years.
I Your husband is a logger?
R Yes and my first husband worked in the underground mine
I He worked in the mines. Your parents came from where?
R From Finland.
I When did your family arrive in this country?
R My mother arrived in 1897 and my father arrived in 1893.
I They came here to join their parents is that right?
R Not my father, my mother did
I I see
R My mother came with her parents. My father was here before. He was here during that real bad depression already.
I That's right. They didn't leave the old country for any special financial reasons.
R No my father had what was considered a good occupation or proffession, he was a ___________________'
I Oh yes, that certainly was. Okay you went to school through the eighth grade and you went to school in Purley and Hibbing.
R I just started school in Purley. Then I went in Hibbing and in Lowler.
I Your parents were homesteading in Lowler at the time?
When my parents went to Lowler the Soo Line had just been built through there and my father and my mother's two brothers had a store there by the name of Soi Brothers and Saari.

How did the different nationalities get along in the schools? Did the Finns get along with the Swedes.

There weren't many other nationalities over there.

How about here in Hibbing do you recall anything about groups getting along?

We got along real good.

Where did you learn to speak English?

In Hibbing.

In Hibbing, did you learn in the school?

You spoke Finnish then at home then of course?

Always.

What was the attitude of your parents toward formal education?

My parents were people who would have liked to have given their children an education and most of the people always favored having short terms like five months of school, but my parents always favored having longer terms like nine months of school. Because they felt that five months was too little.

That's right I recall your father was very involved on the school board at Suomi and very interested in education.

Yes, and also at Lowler.

How about your upbringing, would you consider your upbringing very strict?

In a way, but my father wasn't the kind of person who was strict but the way that he taught us we respected their wishes but they were never what they would call realstrict people.

They didn't have to beat you over the head or anything?

No, my father didn't believe in that.

There was I take it a lot of love and warmth shown in your family?
There always has been and still is.

You're a very close family yet today then

We still are

What sort of newspaper or books did you read in your earlier years?

Do you mean Finnish?

Well whatever. Did you read a lot of Finnish newspapers when you were younger? Or mostly English newspapers and books?

I read both

You read both so you kept with both sides then?

Yes.

What sort of materials do you read today?

Well I read the Finnish paper and then we get our own local newspaper. Then I read the Reader's Digest and another magazine. Also McCall's magazine.

You do a lot of general reading then too?

Yes.

You try to keep up with reading as much as you can?

I read a few other Finnish magazines

Now this has to do with the jobs that you've held besides working at Montgomery Wards what other jobs have you held?

Does that mean organizations too?

No just work. Where you earned money. You said you were nineteen years at Montgomery Wards?

Yes. During the war I worked in a gas station.

Is that right? Pumping gas hey, is that right.

Yes.

In the earlier years when you were working were wages pretty poor?

When I started to work when I was 17 years old I got $30 a month and I worked at the Saratoga Hotel in Superior, Wisconsin.
That was during the First World War.

Do you recall any incidents from the strike years, let see the 1916 strike? Do you remember anything from that here on the Minnesota Range?

I can remember some of the 1907.

You remember some of the 1907 strike?

In Hibbing because we were here then and a lot of our boarders were on strike. I remember when they were picked up on the street because they had gotten into groups and then they were taken to jail and then my father would have to go and bail them out.

Is that right?

Yes

Was your father sympathetic to the strikers in 1907?

At first until he found out who was running it

He found out that the AWFM was running it?

It wasn't so much that, he found out that these two people were running it and a lot of the Finnish people were disappointed after they found out. These people were more for themselves then the others.

Rather than for the worker?

Yes.

How about the 1916 strike, do you have any special memories of that?

No because we were living in a place where the strike didn't affect that community.

Now after 1950 here mining had a tendency to slow down on the Iron Range here, what sort of things happened, was this community going down hill or what was going on here when the pits weren't as big?

In the Depression that's when the mines closed down, it wasn't in the fifties it was earlier.

You mean the late forties?

Yes, and even before that I think.

This was the period before taconite and the beneficiating plants came into this area then?

They came later, at that time there were more underground mines.
I: Do you think the future is more dependent on tourism and new industry?
R: Yes.
I: It's desperately needed.
R: Of course they are planning but we don't know if that's coming or not a new taconite plant right around Hibbing here.
I: I've read about that. What do you predict for this area in ten years that's a hard question isn't it? What do you think Hibbing will be like. Apparently this Village has done very well, do you think Hibbing is going to grow?
R: If we get that taconite plant here we should grow according to the bankers and people who know, they say Hibbing is going to have better days.
I: That's very interesting. Now this next section is on politics. When did you first vote for a United States President?
R: I voted for the United States President in 1921 in Hibbing. Now I don't remember if that was the Presidential vote or the first time I voted.
I: Let's see 1920 would be the Presidential year. You probably voted the first time in 1924 for the Presidential.
R: Yes for the Presidential election.
I: Have you ever run for public office?
R: No
I: Do you ever intend to run for a public office?
R: No
I: Did the Depression of the 1930's change your political affiliation?
R: No
I: I'm not going to ask you what your affiliation is.
R: I don't care if you do ask, I'm a Republican.
I: A Republican.
R: Always have been and always will be
I: Who ran the local town?
R: The mayor and that?
I: Yes, who runs the local politics, has it been a well run town? Do they have a clique?
They had cliques here before but after the depression those cliques were dissolved. But at one time there was a strong feeling of Protestants and Catholics.

Rivalry between Catholics voting for Catholics trying to keep them in office?

I

Have Catholics run the town here in Hibing?

R

Not altogether. There's always been a few Protestants and a lot of times it's been all Protestants.

I

So it's been going back and forth then?

R

Yes and a lot of times there's been both so there's Catholics and Protestants.

I

Has the Catholic Protestant tension kept the people kind of riled up in this Community?

R

At one time it did, but not any more.

I

When would that be? Twenty or thirty years ago?

R

In 1924 and 25 around there.

I

Now another problem that's been perennial around the Iron Range has been the problem of local taxes especially real estate taxes. Have taxes been abnormally high here in Hibing? Especially after the mines began to close down?

R

They are now but before the mining company used to pay about 85% of the taxes before. They had a vote to sell north Hibbing to the mining company and after they got that our taxes have been higher.

I

They have. How would you characterize Hibbing as a stable community?

R

Yes a stable community.

I

People are very positive toward law enforcement, police, you don't have any major police problems here?

R

We don't have any police problems.

I

How about game wardens?

R

Not anymore.

I

Thieves don't shoot deer in the woods out of season any more?

R

They probably do.
They just don't catch them. Okay the next section is on social life in the community. Here in Hibbing how do the different nationalities get along? Compare it with today and twenty years ago, how do the different nationalities get along?

Well I don't know, in politics the other nationalities have always been ahead of the Finns but we have had some Finns in too. I think in their friendships they got along.

Pretty well.

Well I don't know, in politics the other nationalities have always been ahead of the Finns but we have had some Finns in too. I think in their friendships they got along.

One of the things that we studied in our study of the Iron Range was that nationality groups had to get along because they had to work together in the mines.

They had to learn how to cooperate and then the other factor was they went to public schools together and all of the Slovenian kids had to get along with the Finn kids because they were in the same school together and were taught the same thing. There was a minimum of conflict and what conflict there was was usually between the Catholics and Protestants as you said before and the other kind of conflict was between the later immigrant kids and the mining company officials and the cousin jacks as they called them. Do you use the work busu?

They do here.

That's kind of a putdown term for Slovenian people.

The Finns kind of thought they had one notch against the Slovenian people because they had less education than the Finns.

Okay do you get along with different nationality groups?

Yes I do.

How about mixed marriages here in Hibbing. Let's say mixed marriages among the sons and daughters at Holy Trinity where your a member?

Well right in our own family we have mixed marriages in our own immediate family.

Catholic Protestant?
R  No. One daughter was married to a Catholic but she's divorced. My
    son is married to a Lutheran. I think Dagmar belongs to the
    Episcopalian Church.

I  There's been quite a bit of mixed marriage in Hibbing?

R  Yes. But of course Dagmar was married in New York, she wasn't married
    in Hibbing.

I  Is there a lot of feeling about mixed marriage today?

R  A Finn can marry a Roman Catholic and that's not so bad anymore?

I  No especially after the Catholics started recognizing the inter-
    marriages and often both ministers will be performing the ceremonies.

I  This is here in Hibbing then?

R  Yes.

I  Do you approve of that personally?

R  Why were there so many saloons up in the Iron Range?

I  I don't know but I suppose in the early days they didn't have anywhere
to go so they ended up there in the saloons and a lot of them became
such bad drunkards that they forgot their families in the old country.
They ended up as alcoholics and died as an alcoholic.

I  Do you think the Finns had a special problem with liquor?

R  At first when they first came to this country in the early years, but
    not later when their families started coming to this country. Then
    they settled down.

I  What seemed to be the factors that helped them to get rid of the
    drinking problem?

R  Well the first organizations that were organized in Hibbing were the
    Temperance Societies. The Finnish Temperance Societies if you're
talking about the Finnish people. And through there the church was
organized. Of course when they joined the Temperance Society that
meant total abstinence. A lot of them were able to keep it where
others would fall.

I  The Temperance Society helped a lot of people through those early years.

R  Yes.

I  What did you and your friends do for a good time?
I Took saunas and went to your social organizations I suppose, would that be correct?

R Yes, well my social organizations have been more of the conservative type.

I And social organizations were very important and you're very active in the church.

R You were very active in the Temperence Society and of course the family took your time because you had alot of family get togethers.

R Yes. I have belonged to the Collula for over 40 years and right now I'm finishing up as a Grand Lodge officer, I have three more years to go.

I Is this a very active organization here in Hibbing yet?

R We have an organization here but we don't have a big organization. We just have the ladies organization, we don't have the mens. Our men belong to the Virginia Lodge.

I Did they ever have a men's lodge here in Hibbing?

R Yes.

I But it grew too small so they joined the Virginia Lodge.

R For a long time there was no affiliation with the men. When it disbanded here it went to Chism and then to Nashua and it stayed there but it's just a small group now.

I You also belong to Holy Trinity Lutheran Church which is a former Suomi Synod Congregation?

R Yes.

I What has been your role at Holy Trinity? You've been a very active member I know.

R I've been an officer of the Senior Ladies Aid for many many years. I couldn't say how long but way back in the thirties I was Secretary. Of course when I went to work at Montgomery Wards, I couldn't go but then when they started having their meetings in the evening I was Secretary again. Right now I'm a member on the Board.

I How long were you a member of the Temperence Society then?

R I joined the Temperance Society in Superior in 1917 as a youth member because I wasn't old enough to become a full member.
I see you were a youth member then.

Then when we moved to Hibbing I joined this one in 1919.

What sort of recollections do you have about some of the important local events? Some Finnish events or local events.

The first __________________ was held in Hibbing in 1907. I was only seven years old then and they were held at the old Fair grounds which is now part of the pit. They gathered at the Temperance Hall and they took pictures of all the people that came, that included us children that had been going to summer school. The first band was among them and they marched to the fair grounds. Of course being seven years old that was something to be marching with them.

That's a vivid memory for you.

Then each one had a big badge that was pinned on them and that meant something to children of that age.

Sure. Have you always gone to this whenever possible?

Always, whenever I've been able to go.

What does this __________________ mean to you?

Well it's a Finnish tradition and heritage that our parents brought from Finland.

Does it make you think of your Finnish tradition and be proud of your Finnish tradition?

Yes. Of course I've always been proud of it

How about other events? Like Christmas and the 4th of July. Does the 4th of July mean a great deal to you?

When I was little it did because they had parades and things like that. Christmas naturally and Easter and then as a Kaleva member our Kaleva Independence day means alot and Kaleva means alot to me. Kaleva Day. That's on the 28th of February.

The Finnish festivals, the church festivals and then the American style festivals, they're all kind of important to you then?

Now this change in our social life, changes in our social life in our communities and they give examples of the car, television, and the decreases in population and so on. What were the important things that changed life here in Hibbing?
Did you sort of run with the punches when the changes came? Of course you always remember the automobiles don't you?

Well maybe back in 1905 and 1907 there were maybe two or three automobiles in Hibbing and that was really a wonder to see some of them go past. Around 1913 14 and 15 people had cars already.

Do you think this changed the community alot?

Yes, of course in 1915 I wasn't in Hibbing, I was at the country at Lowler and already there they had quite a few cars.

I suppose in places like Lowler they got around a great deal more and kids got to see more of the community. It changed their life in many ways.

Oh yes, alot of the people that I went to school with they moved away like I have and there aren't very many of my old schoolmates left there anymore.

What do you think the most wide spread social problems were in this community?

Well Hibbing isn't free of drugs either.

How about crime in Hibbing?

Well the crime isn't so bad. There are some speeding and drunken driving and assaults.

But nothing major?

No.

It's a pretty stable community in other words.

Yes.

How about care of the aged? I know Hibbing has always been a community that's been known to take care of it's own back there in the money days of the mining when it was going strong. How about the aged. Is there a problem with the aged? Are they properly being taken care of?

Well the ones that don't get Social Security get Welfare and the people who get Welfare probably get along better than those that get Social Security.

It seems so doesn't

Yes.

Okay let's move over to some questions that have to do with medicine. Now let's go back to your own family, what did your parents do when somebody became sick?
Did you have a doctor?

Yes, here in Hibbing we had a Doctor Blacklaw and over at Lowler we had a Doctor Walters from over at Moose Lake.

So there was fairly good medical care.

Yes, then out there at Suomi they had doctors at Moose Lake that were their family doctors.

So people were pretty well taken care of?

I've been here since I was married in 1923 and I've lived in Hibbing ever since that. Our Doctor is Dr. Ahola.

Kenneth Ahola?

Yes.

Hibbing always was noted for it's good doctors and it's been a good progressive community ever since the mining companies came in. How about home remedies, a lot of the Finns used to have good home remedies, do you remember any of them?

__________ is one

What is that?

I don't know what they called it in English but I always heard them talking about that.

I know some of the older Finns didn't believe in doctors and they did everything at home.

My grandmother was one of them who didn't believe in doctors. She didn't even believe in contagious diseases. It was all god's will.

Ah ha. Do you know if she practiced bleeding or anything like that?

Yes.

She did, is that right?

Yes.

Were any of the families here included in the mining company welfare plans or the logging company welfare plans? This would be sickness benefits and that sort of thing.

They are now and way back then you paid very little which was a dollar a month to the mining company and then you had a free doctor.
A free doctor

You could go to the doctor for an office call. But of course you didn't get any if you needed an operation or something like that.

Do you remember when that practice was begun?

When my first husband was living we had that. He paid the dollar a month and we were able to get the doctor free. I don't know what they do now because he's been dead since 1943 and we haven't been connected with the mining company since that.

Did you ever get strike benefits?

Was the practice of mid-wivery prevalent, like think of Lowler and Suomi?

Yes.

There were midwives?

Yes.

Were you delivered by a midwife?

By a midwife

Where was this?

At Purley Minnesota

You were born at Purley.

Yes.

Are there any midwives in Suomi now that are still living?

Well my mother delivered quite a few babies.

She did. I kind of guessed that

Then there was a Mrs. Heikkinen, but she isn't living anymore. Then a Mrs. Nikander.

Were most of the babies delivered by midwives in Suomi?

In the earlier days

They were. How about health problems, were there any that were bad. I remember tb very prevalent back in the olden days or any other specific diseases that crippled a family that you can think of.
R  Do you mean my family?
I  Yes. Your family seems to have had pretty good health.
R  Well my father died of a stroke and he lived ten years after he had that stroke. That was after the boys were called to the Army and he was 72 years old at that time. I think that had a lot to do with it because it hurt him that two of his boys had to go and then quite a few of his grandchildren went.
I  But basically your family is quite healthy. Of course your mother is still alive and she's 93.
R  Yes
I  Apparently she's in quite good health.
R  My first husband died of tb.
I  He had tuberculosis.
R  Yes. Well first he had pneumonia three times and then it developed into TB.
I  From I suppose the conditions in the mines?
R  From the mines yes
I  That was fairly prevalent back in those days?
R  Yes
I  Okay the last category here has to do with religion. You belong to the local church and you've been active all your life.
R  
I  Now I'd like you to think away back of your early church life. I suppose you remember your early church life in Lowler?
R  Well I went to Sunday School here in Hibbing.
I  I see at Suomi Synod Sunday School?
R  Yes, I started Sunday school here and then of course we went to Sunday School in Lowler.
I  Who had the church in Lowler? Did they have Suomi Synod and __________
R  They had both.
I  I see and you belonged to the Suomi Synod in Lowler then.
R  Yes.
I How about ____________?
R I was confirmed by D A Somonin but I don't remember his initials.
I It was David Somonin.
R 
I Where did he live do you remember?
R Brainard. He had a big area and district that he took care of. Three days of the month he stayed at my home with my folks and three days he was able to stay at Brainard.
I How about other kinds of things, like your marriage, where were you married?
R At Suomi, Minnesota.
I At the church.
R No not the church.
I That's right, they didn't have a church until the thirties
R I was married at home.
I I see.
R That was the second big wedding at Suomi.
I Who was the minister at the time?
R Lepisto.
I That's right, he was at Duluth at the time.
R 
I Who early leaders do you remember in the church. Who were some of the outstanding ministers that you can remember?
R Sominen was one and Pesonen was another one
I Where was Pesonen?
R He was at Lowler after Somonen left. Sarvela of course
I You remember Sarvela?
R Yes. In Hibbing there was ___________ and I liked Otto Maki very much. I admired him very much. I remember alot of those finnish ministers.
I Well your family has always had a good relationship with the minister.
R
I remember reading many of your father's articles in the Finnish newspapers.

R Yes

I I remember reading several of his articles where he would mention that one of the ministers had stopped over.

R For a long time I was the correspondent in Hibbing and now I'm the correspondent for the ____________

I You are

R So we came in contact with a lot of different Suomi Synod ministers

I Did the early ministers visit the homes a lot? Let's say the Hibbing ministers, were they pretty close to the families?

R Some of them were and some weren't.

I Some of them stayed in their study hey?

R Yes.

I Did any of them get involved in local issues?

R Well naturally they exercised their voting rights but they didn't take part in politics so that they would go out.

I Did any of them try to encourage the workers or take part in the labor movement? Well for example when they organized the union in this area were any of them involved in that?

R I don't think so. Way back when the labor movement started in 1907 that's when the Socialist movement started. The church people and the ____________ were opposite of each other.

I They didn't have anything to do with each other.

R

I Did you personally have much to do with any of the people who belonged to the labor movements?

R No, only I did belong to the union when I was working at Montgomery Wards.

I But as a whole you didn't have much to do with this personally?

R I had lots of friends among them but I never belonged to any of their organizations.

I I see, there were some personal relationships among them.

R Yes, I have some good friends among them. They are very nice people but I've never belonged to any of their organizations.
How did you handle some of the touchy questions as a personal friend, you just didn't discuss them or what or did you just agree to have honest differences.

R  They knew my feelings and I knew there's.

I  It was kind of a mutual respect of each other's position.

R  Yes

I  Well after living here in Hibbing with all these Socialistic movements how do you feel about them now looking away back on them.

R  Well there's been alot of good in the labor movement too that brought us alot of things that we probably wouldn't have had.

I  Well like what the teaching of citizenship.

R  Well the citizenship was taught through our school. It wasn't taught through the different organization. It was each one's personal problem. If they wanted to become a citizen they would have to go to night school to get their diploma. I have alot of good friends that belong to the IWW and some of them are better than some of the other ones I have.

I  Sure. Okay, was there a religious conflict here in Hibbing among the Finns?

R  Not too much

I  In other communities there was alot of conflict especially between the Lustadians and the Synodians. Was there ever a ____________ here?

R  Well when our church joined in with the Suomi Synod here in Hibbing there was trouble.

I  Do you remember what that trouble was?

R  Well it was the idea that they wanted to stay independent and not become affiliated with any church.

I  It was not a religious question at all?

R  No.

I  It was just a matter of being independent like finns want to be independent always.

R  Yes. Saastominen was a minister here and then he took sides.

I  Yes he was here in Hibbing when he became a Lustadian.

R  Yes.
Most of them are dead that were head when we had that trouble of course some of us second generation are still here.

Did the churches get along.

Can't understand?

So Chisolm and Hibbing had a relative amount of religious harmony.

Yes.

As opposed to some of the communities where there was less harmony of the churches.

Yes.

Of course one of the reasons was there just weren't too many other churches. The Suomi Synod which is the strongest church in this area. Of course the Methodists and Congregationalists and Baptists all try to get along with the Lutherans, they never fought with the Suomi Synods.

How about Holy Trinity getting along with non Finnish churches in the City of Hibbing?

Well during Lent, they have services in the Holy Trinity one Sunday and then in the First Luthern and I think they even go to the Norwegian churches.

What would you say about the Kalevans, what has the Kaleva given to you?

Well they try to preserve the Finnish heritages and traditions.

Did it help you do that?

For yourself

Of course I've had that training at home already so that's why it drew me to the Kalevas because that was one of the things that I had been taught at home.

So you could be both a good American and a good Finn at the same time?

There's no conflict at all?

No. My mother was never a Kaleva

But they were Finnish minded.