FINNISH FOLKLORE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE GREAT LAKES MINING REGION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT 1972-1978
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Finnish American Historical Archive and Museum
Finlandia University
601 Quincy St.
Hancock, Michigan 49930 USA
906-487-7347 - fax: 906-487-7557
This is an interview with Mr. Onni E. Tainio of 4023 Cook Street, Duluth, Minnesota conducted by Adrian Niemi on February 10th, 1975.

Mr. Tainio would you begin by telling us where and when you were born?

I was born in Gunnos, Finland, April 30th, 1905

Were your parents from that area?

Yes, they were also from Gunnos.

When did you come to this country?

In February of 1906.

Did you all come together as a family?

No, I came with my mother but my father arrived here several months ahead of us.

Do you know why your father came earlier?

I don't know but I imagine to look for work.

Okay...the period that your parents were in Finland, do you recall if they ever talked about why they came to America?

No, I don't

Did they ever comment on the living standard in Finland or their situation? For instance, was it hard to get work? Was there economic problems of any kind?

I imagine they were economic...they didn't really say anything.

Do you recall that your parents ever regretted leaving Finland?

No, I don't think they did.

Do you think that if they had stayed in Finland, do you think they would have stayed on the land?
R: Gee, I couldn't say.

I: Okay then, when you came to this country, your father came over first. Where did he go in this country first, do you know?

R: He went to Upper Michigan in the Copper Country for a little while and then from there he went to Brocket, North Dakota.

I: And was he in Brocket when you came over with your mother?

R: Yes, we went straight from New York to Brocket

I: Do you remember any unusual events about your coming to this country that your mother has told you?

R: Well, she said that it took about a month, I think, on the boat and I was terribly seasick...see, I was ten months old then when we arrived here.

I: Do you know how your mother got along in this country without knowing the language? Did she have any problems finding Brocket, North Dakota?

R: No, she said that the train men guided her all the way. They'd even carry me between trains, you know, when we changed trains.

I: When you got to Brocket, North Dakota, do you know what the situation was there? Did you have a place to live in as soon as you got there?

R: Well, my father was working for some rancher and mother and I moved in there and mother did the housework and father worked out with the owner.

I: How long were you in Brocket?

R: I think it was about a year

I: Do you remember hearing anything about that time in your parents' lives? How they reacted to Brocket?

R: Well, I don't know how my father felt; but my mother was real lonesome out there. She couldn't get used to living on the prairie.

I: Were there any unusual hardships that you ever heard of?

R: I don't remember anything...well, Maw used to talk about the terrible blizzards out there and things like that.

I: Okay, after you were in Brocket for about a year and then where did you move?

R: We moved to Eveleth, Minnesota.

I: About what year was that?

R: Well, let's see...I think it must have been around 1907. I think we were in Brocket for a year.
I: Do you remember why you moved to Eveleth?
R: Well, I imagine to look for better work.
I: And what kind of work was there in Eveleth?
R: I think my father went to the mines right away...iron mines.
I: In what kind of a building did you live in in Eveleth?
R: Well, we lived in several buildings. First building we went to was a sort of a little apartment house. I think there were two or three other families living in the same building. And then we moved to several other places...I don't remember them all; and we lived on Eighth Street for awhile and then we moved on Garfield Street and while we were living on Garfield Street our father built the house across the street from where we lived and we lived there for a year or two. Then they sold that and we moved to another house owned by some Sloumie...well before that we had lived already in Sparta sort of for a little while and Olo, Wisconsin, I forgot about them.

I: Do you remember why you were moving so much in Eveleth?
R: I don't know at all
I: You were pretty young then.
R: Yeah
I: Okay...and your father worked in the mines. Do you remember which mine it was?
R: I think it was the Spruce Mine, underground then
I: Do you remember anything about the labor movements of those times?
R: When I was a kid I saw some strikers, miners striking, parading up and down the streets one year...I must have been about seven or eight years old then.
I: Did your father sympathise with them?
R: I don't know. I couldn't say
I: And about how long did you live in Eveleth?
R: Well, from 1907 except for that short stay in Sparta, I don't remember how long and about a year in Olo, Wisconsin, we moved out of Eveleth in 1914.
I: And then where did you go?
R: Out on a farm in Payne, Minnesota
I: Do you know why your family made that move?
Well I guess father didn't like to work for the mines, he didn't want somebody to be bossing him, he wanted to be his own boss I think.

I Do you know why he chose Payne?

R I wouldn't know but there was a land agent living in Eveleth at the time and he must have talked him into it...moving to Payne. He bought forty acres of land there...wild land, timber land.

I: As there any particular attraction? Was the soil any good?

Well, it wasn't too bad a soil...it wasn't too rocky; but like I say, it was all timber and then he started logging and of course there were a lot of stumps to clear up and then we started farming and expanding a little at a time there. And then he also logged every winter. After he logged his own forty, he bought stumpage from the railroad company. They owned all the lands there. Every winter we lived there he bought stumpage from there and he hired lumberjacks to cut timber and he worked there himself, and he cut timber and he hauled the timber to the railroad spur in Payne.

I Can you think of anything that was...one of your most memorable experiences of being on the farm in Payne?

R: Well, we had a lot of fun there...all the kids there and we all enjoyed the school. We had a one-room school house there from first through eighth grade. All the kids loved school those days.

I How many kids were there in the school?

Oh, I imagine the average was between maybe sixteen and eighteen kids at one time.

I: Did you have any problems learning English when you were growing up?

R: Well, of course when I entered kindergarten I didn't know a word of English; but I guess I gradually picked it up 'cause my first and second grade I seemed to be getting along all right.

I Was Payne pretty much of a Finnish community...Finnish area

R: Yeah, mostly. I think the Section Boss was a Swede and I don't know, there was one farmer there before we went there and his name was Overton. don't know what he could have been.

I During the period that you lived in Eveleth and Payne, do you recall anything about antagonisms between different nationalities?

I The Irish and the Finns never got in fights, 'or instance

R: No, my two best friends in Eveleth were Irish kids...second grade I was real chummy with them.
I: Do you remember any attitudes of your parents towards other nationalities?
R: No, I don't remember any.

I: How about church life? Has your family belonged to a church?
R: Well, while we were living in Eveleth, my mother taught Sunday School and I don't know if we were paying members of the church, I don't remember that. Of course, when we moved to Payne there was no church. So Mother taught us to read Finnish and she used to tell us about God. Payne is a pretty isolated place, isn't it.

R: Well, it was on the railroad tracks about halfway between Virginia and Duluth.

I: Is that the usual way you would get to those towns by railroad?
R: Those days...there were no roads.

I: Was there a store nearby?
R: Yeah, there was a store right in there and a post office in there...same building. Storekeeper was the Post Master.

I: What would you do if you needed a doctor in case of an emergency?
R: Well, I imagine you'd have to wait for the train. That's when I had the mumps...I was about thirteen years old...I was so sick they couldn't move me, so they called a doctor from Virginia and he came there about a day late and I was already feeling better. That was Doctor Rayhala from Virginia.

I: Do you recall any unusual or interesting characters or personalities from either Payne or Eveleth?
R: No, I don't think so. I think they were all average people.

I: Now, how much farming did he do in Payne...do you remember what you grew, for instance, what cattle you had?
R: Well, as I say, we moved there in 1914, and the first thing he did, he built a barn and got a cow from Meadowlands which is about six miles away. See, we first lived in an old hotel in a saloon building. It was vacant, had been vacant for years. We cleaned that out...was a typical western saloon...we cleaned everything out of there and we lived there about a year and then Father build the house. About that time he had already got the horse also. So, he finished his house in 1915, and then he built a house and built the barn a little bigger and built hay sheds and chicken coops and a sauna. Those were all the buildings there. And he started clearing land in the summers when he wasn't logging and the first year I think he cleared a couple acres of land and we grew potatoes and then because we didn't have any hay fields, we used to cut hay...wild hay along the river banks and things like that. And in the winter he'd haul that hay in with the horse; and then gradually he made his fields bigger and bigger so I think he had about eight or ten acres in field...
during the six years we lived there and we were able to get all our own hay. We had about four or five milking cows and a team of horses and a dozen chickens and every summer we'd raise a pig which we'd butcher in the fall. And then we moved to Virginia in 1920.

I: Do you recall why you moved to Virginia?

R: Well, I guess my mother was getting in ill health. She couldn't work on the farm anymore. And you...already you couldn't make a living on the farm outside of logging.

I: Your Mother hadn't liked living on the prairie in Brocket...how did she like Payne?

R: Well, she never did like that country, I guess. She was brought up on a farm in Finland and she said that she had enough of it.

I: Do you know if she ever mentioned that that's why she came to this country...to get away from that kind of life?

R: No, I guess she really came here because my father came here.

I: You said it was about 1920 when you moved to Virginia.

R:

I: And where did you live in Virginia?

R: We moved to 219 Eighth Street, South.

I: Did you own the entire house?

R: Yes we...my parents bought the house. It was a small house then and the following year my father made it into a two-story house and then we moved upstairs and we rented the downstairs.

I: What did your father do in Virginia?

R: Well, he worked for some contractors for awhile and then he was also cut timber for the Bailey Lumber Company...he was cutting timber and he was the head of a big crew there. He took the contract. That went on for one year and then I guess he did odd jobs.

I: Okay, let's go back to Payne period for awhile. You said your father built your house.

R:

I: Do you remember the process of building it very well?

R: Yes, I remember that very well. It was a log house, hewed logs, dovetailed corners...I guess what they called like in Finland...and then when he had that done he put some kind of tar paper or something on the outside and then sided it. So, it really was a warm house and on the inside he put some kind of wall board and wall papered it so I think those walls were a good ten inches thick and it was a real warm house.
I: Is that house still standing?

R: Well, it's...right now, it's ready to fall over. Hasn't been occupied for years and years.

I: Are there any other recollections of the time you lived in Payne that you'd like to talk about?

R: Well, our storekeeper-post master was a musician. He came from Gilbert, Minnesota where he had played in the City band; so he organized a little band there. I think we had a seven-piece band; we had three cornets, alto horn, tenor horn and I played the bass horn. Does that make seven? I think so.

I: Pretty close

R: And we practiced all one winter...we practiced in the school house one night a week; but then for some reason I don't know what happened next spring then I guess everybody was...got discouraged.

I: Did you ever play anyplace?

R: Oh no, we never had the chance...oh yes we did play for the Christmas program. We all seven lined up in front of the audience there and the one-room school house then...we must have played some real easy pieces because I remember my knees were shaking like mad. And another thing I remember from Payne is the last two years we were there, my brother and I were the janitors of the school. The custom was there that the oldest boy was always the janitor of the school. So I was the oldest boy for the last two years...I was the janitor and my brother helped me. We got ten dollars a month which we split and in the winter mornings when it was real cold, we'd get up at six o'clock in the morning and go heat that school...was one of these big stoves with a jacket around it and when it was twenty or thirty below that room never did warm up no matter how we fired it. And the kids used to take turns hugging that big jacket around the stove. And what our chores were, we had to carry the wood in in the evening and wash the blackboards and sweep the room out and then once a month we had to scrub that but Mother used to come and scrub that on Saturdays. She did the scrubbing. Well, that was about all there was to that then and we'd get our check once a month.

I: Where were you confirmed?

R: Well, when I was fifteen in 1920...I took two weeks off from the section gang, I worked in a section gang that summer...I came to Eveleth for two weeks for confirmation. I was confirmed in the Eveleth church.

I: Were your confirmation...the lessons were they in Finnish or English?

R: Finnish...all were Finnish those days and our pastor was (?)

I: Was there any Finnish church closer to Payne?

R: No, I don't think so. I didn't know of any. There couldn't have been They might have had a church up in Toygola, but I think that was still further than Eveleth...and Cherry, I don't know. They must have had a
church there too, but that was out in the country.

I: Okay, then moving on to the period that you were in Virginia, you must have been what age when you moved to Virginia?

R: Fifteen

I: Did you go to Virginia High School?

R: Yes, we...I started in ninth grade and my brother was still in eighth grade. Those days they had a four-year high school.

I: Do you recall if there was ever a tendency of non-Finns looking down on Finns in any respect?

R: I don't remember anything like that. I know all the Finn kids were accepted anywhere just like anybody else.

I: Was there very strong feeling/among the Finns? In other words, would they stick together?

R: Well I imagine, yeah. I imagine, like the Commies and the IWW's had their own doings and the church people had their own doings.

I: Do you recall what kind of primarily Finnish social functions there might have been? For instance, bands, orchestras, choirs, plays...

R: Well, IWW'S, they had their own choruses and plays and band. Of course the church people didn't have much. I know one year we had a big orchestra in church; but the director moved to Eely and that killed the orchestra there...twas a string orchestra.

I: Who was the pastor in Virginia when you went there?

R: Oh, (?)...at that time he had Eveleth and Virginia churches and maybe he had the Modernaire Church also.

I: How long were you in Virginia?

R: Well, we moved there in 1920, I graduated in '24, and I worked two years in the iron mines and one summer for the County Surveyors...then in 1926 I went to Ithica, New York...to Ithica College...it's a music school.

I: What did you do in the mines?

R: Well, I worked in open pit mines because I was on the track gang first then I got on as a pickman, worked around the steam shovel.

I: Do you remember what the pay was like?

R: Well the track gang it was 40 cents an hour, $4.00 a day, six days a week. And went on the pickman gang and got $4.50 a day and worked a ten-hour day. So we really were rolling in dough then.

I: What would you say was the most memorable event of the time you were in Virginia...before you went to Ithica?
R: Playing in the band, the high school band and orchestra and then after I graduated from High School I got into the City band. That gave me a good start for when I went to Ithica, New York. I was familiar with most of those band pieces they play there.

I: Why did you go to Ithica particularly?

R: Because they...is a strong major in band work

I: Is this what you wanted?

R: That's what I was always interested in.

I: Was there ever any question about whether you could afford to go to college?

R: No, because I had always saved my money. Even in high school one year the mining company hired about two dozen high school boys to work Saturdays in the iron pits there. We got that four dollars a day and we worked all winter on Saturdays and saved all that money. And when I was a junior in high school, I worked one summer for the Bailey Lumber Mills...I was piling green lumber in the yards there. All this money I saved and naturally all the money I made in the mines I saved and also what I earned with the County Surveyors. When I went to Ithica I had about two thousand dollars saved which was big money those days.

I: What kind of an attitude did your parents have towards education?

R: Well, they believed in it. They were glad to see me go to school. Of course they helped me in that I got free board and room while I was at home while I was working out...they helped me that much.

I: Okay then, on to Ithica. Is there any unusual or memorable experiences that you think might relate to the Finnish experience in America? I mean being of Finnish descent and born in Finland, did that influence you in any way in Ithica?

R: Well, in one way it did. The Dean of the Band School was an Irishman, Pat Conway. He was one of the greatest band directors...he was like Suusa. He had his professional band in the summer and years ago he used to tour the country all year around; but now he was at Ithica, New York and he was the head of the Band Department, he directed the college band, and the first lesson I had from him...I took private lessons from him...he wanted to know what nationality I was. I said that I was Finnish and he said, "Oh, I know, I remember Paavo Nurmi." He was a great fan of Paavo Nurmi and the first lesson I took from him he told me, "I can use you in my professional band next summer." Boy, was I happy...coming from a little town up on the iron range here, I was very fortunate to get into one of the best bands in the United States. And that following summer he got whole years contract or whole service contract in Wildwood, New Jersey, and we went there. We spent eleven weeks there...he hired about eleven of us from college and the rest of the players were from his professional band, so that way maybe my Finnish helped me. And then when that job was over we came back to Ithica and then during the first year I was at Ithica I met a lot of Finnish people. There was a big Finnish farming community about twenty miles out of Ithica. I got to know a lot of them. They had a Finnish church there and I enjoyed their Luther League whenever I had a chance to go there for meetings because I didn't
have a car. Well, then I went to Wildwood, New Jersey, with Conway's band. Spent a whole summer there and we had the best time of our lives out there; and we'd swim in the ocean every morning...Atlantic Ocean...and then afternoon we'd play a concert, an hour and a half concert...I think it was from 1:30 to 3:00 every day of the week, seven days a week. From eight to ten in the evening we'd play another concert...that's three and a half hours every day for the whole summer and boy that was really something. By the time the summer was over, I think everybody was just pooped out...nervous and everything. And we made good money those days. I was making...as first bass player...I was making sixty dollars a week which was considered real good back in 1927 and '28. Well then a third summer, Conway couldn't get any job then anymore. All these, you know, jazz bands were out their bidding to count professional concert bands, so Conway didn't get any jobs for that summer of 1929. Well then he told me to see Susa about getting in John Phillip Susa's band. Well Susa couldn't get any work either. These jazz bands were taking everything, so I heard of an opening in Mission City, Iowa...they wanted a bass player in their municipal band, so I wrote there and I got that job. I spent another nice summer in Mission City, Iowa. All I did was play two concerts a week, two rehearsals a week and I got forty-five dollars a week for that. Rest of the time was for myself. I joined the Y and I'd go swimming every day...things like that. And that was in the summer of '29 and then that fall I changed schools. I went to Bush Conservatory in Chicago to get my Bachelors. See, I got a three-year diploma from Ithica. Reason I didn't go to Ithica because Conway died in the summer of '29, so I didn't care to go there to Ithica, New York, anymore. So, I went to Bush Conservatory in Chicago.

I: Did you get your degree from Bush?

R: Yes, I got it in the spring of 1930, and times were getting real hard. Couldn't get any work anywheres. That was the beginning of the big Depression. So, I stayed in Ithica and that summer I got a job selling tickets at one of those dance marathons in 1930 that dance marathon craze was on in Chicago, so I had charge of the balcony where people used to come to see those dancers and I worked there all summer selling tickets and a lot of people after they got through sitting there for an hour and a half watching those dancers...they'd dance night and day, you know...people'd get tired and they'd throw their stub, their ticket stub on the floor and somebody else would pick it up and sit. It was my job to try to catch them cause then if they got real tough, then I'd call a couple of big bouncers. These big bouncers would throw them out. Well, that was the summer of 1930 I was in Chicago doing that. Well then in the fall there was no work to be had, so I came back to Virginia...came back home...and then, let's see, I didn't get any work at all and oh yeah that winter then I got a job digging ditches for a golf course in Virginia. They were building a municipal golf course. I was digging ditches there, pick and shovel. And then in the fall of '31 I went to University of Minnesota in Minneapolis to get more education courses because I don't think I had enough to qualify for a teacher's certificate. So I enrolled there in September of 1931 and New Year's Day, 1932, I got married. So my wife moved to Minneapolis with me and we rented a one-room housekeeping apartment there. I got my credits in education and we came to Virginia in the spring of '32 and then I think sometime the next fall I got a job with the county schools teaching music up in Cook and Orq, Minnesota, and then a few years after that I got a job in
Duluth at the public schools here teaching band, band director. I was here for twenty-eight years and then after that when I was sixty-three, I retired. I'm on my seventh year of retirement now.

I: Okay...where did you meet your wife?

R: Well, we had known each other since we were little kids. When we lived in Eveleth we lived in her home for a little while on Garfield Street, we rented the upstairs apartment from them. I can faintly remember her then a little bit...and our parents were real good friends. So, when we lived in Payne, I remember my wife and her mother visited us a couple of times there and then when we moved to Virginia we used to go visit them a few times then. I didn't see her again until when I went to Chicago.

I: Is your wife from a Finnish family too?

R: 

I: Did that have any influence in your choice of a wife?

R: No, not so much. I don't think so. Although in Ithaca I used to go around with three Finnish girls even

I: Okay, in Duluth you were teaching music.

R: Yes, band work...and I also played in the Duluth Symphony for twenty-five years on a string piece.

I: And you've composed some music for bands, haven't you?

R: Yes, and for Piano, violin, vocal...

I: Are there any memorable events from the time you lived in Cook or Duluth that you'd like to talk about?

R: Well, not so much in Cook...nothing really. But of course we had a lot of fun in Duluth. We've got a lot of good friends and we joined a church here almost immediately. We made a lot of good friends in our church and I was usher there for thirty-two years until this New Years, I finally gave it up. And I was on the church council years ago and several times I organized little musical groups here in our church for certain events.

I: Have you been involved in any Finnish cultural organizations?

R: Yes, we belong to the Finlandia Foundation.

I: Are you very active in it?

R: Well, just as active as anyone can be. We have six meetings a year...we take our turn entertaining. During the winter months we don't meet because of the hard winters. We start our meetings in September and our last meeting is in November and the Chapter usually holds a big Christmas party in December and then our meetings start again in April and we end in June...and then there's usually a big outdoor picnic in
July or somewheres like that.

I: Do you still have very regular contacts with people in Finland?

R: Yes, we correspond regularly with lot of our relatives, Aunts, Uncles, cousins and other friends. We send exchange Christmas cards, we send all our friends and relatives there a little Christmas money...just a little gift from here...some get more and others get less.

I: Have you been to Finland?

R: We've made two trips there. '52 we were there the first time, took in the Olympics and '59 we were there the second time.

I: Well, do you have anything else that has come to mind you'd like to mention...that you know of as descendants of Finns living in this country?

R: Well, I don't know. I think it's helped me a lot to be a Finn and a lot of places where I have traveled, some of them claim that they never knew or have seen a Finn before and, of course, they wouldn't know. And I remember when I was selling tickets even in Chicago at that dance marathon, I was talking to some customer there and he said, "Are you a Scotch?" And I told him, "I'm not Scotch." He said "I'd swear you're a Scotsman the way you talk." I told her, "I can't very well be Scotch because I'm a hundred percent Finn."

I: Do you think it's very important for people to try to maintain their cultural heritage and background?

R: Yes, I certainly do.

I: They still have Finnish-language services in Duluth don't they?

R: Yeah, we have it early in the morning at nine o'clock; but I don't know how many years they'll go. But we prefer the English service because the future of our church is in English. Otherwise, we probably would enjoy the Finnish language yet.

I: Are there mostly older people that go to the Finnish-language services?

R: Well, there are a few American born...I don't know why; but in our English services which start at ten-thirty, I think that maybe a good half are still Finnish. We have all kinds of different nationalities there. I think the second largest group there are Swedes. Then we have...I know we have one Irish one and some Norweigians and a couple Italians and I think one is a German and by gosh I don't even know what some of those young people are. There are a lot of young people who are half Finn and half another nationality.

I: What church is that?

R: Mesiah Lutheran

I: Okay, thank you very much.