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## **FINNISH EMIGRATION TO THE USA: AN INTRODUCTION**

### **1 Preface**

The Reunion of Sisters project exploring the feminist tradition and experience of Finnish-American women and women in Finland is a good example of the international co-operation in the field of ethnic research and women's studies. The topic of this seminar contains great interest also from the point of view of emigration research which this article is based on. My purpose is to give a general introduction to the Finnish emigration to the U.S.A. and especially about the role of women in these migration flows – first to America and then back to Finland in many cases.

### **2 Finnish emigration to the United States**

To compose a general picture of Finnish immigration to the U.S.A I would like to start by reminding that about 70 million Europeans immigrated to overseas destinations, mainly to America, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During the past one hundred years about one million Finns have emigrated, half a million before the World War II, mainly to the United States, another half a million since the war mainly to Sweden (see Map). Estimating that about thirty per cent of those emigrants have returned back to Finland, the loss by emigration has been some seven hundred thousand persons – and their children.

The history of Finnish settlers in the United States goes as far back as to the year 1638. Of the thousand or so members of the colony Sweden established in the Delaware valley in 1638 – 1656, nearly a half are estimated to have been Finns, some of them settlers from the forests of Värmland, some directly from Finland. Along with the British, the Dutch and the Swedes, the Finns were among the first white settlers in the territory destined to evolve into the United States of America. As the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Delaware-settlement in 1988 is approaching I would like to suggest that some new research should be done about this Delaware settlement. Especially it would be interesting to know more e. g. about the role of women in this pioneer Finnish emigration to the United States. There would also be a great interest to produce an exhibition about the Swedes and Finns in Delaware.

Finnish seamen represent the second migratory phase. During the 1800's, Finns serving on sailing ships now and then decided to stay ashore in New York, Boston, Philadelphia and other American ports. In 1855, during the Crimean War, a number of Finnish ships with their crews, in danger of being captured, sought haven American ports. The California gold rush was still on in those days, luring Finnish sailors and adventures out West.

The tide of immigration to America did not start, however, properly speaking, until around 1864 among the Finnish settlers of the arctic Norwegian province of Finnmark who responded to the gravitational pull of the Michigan copper mines and the promise of free land held out by the Homestead Act signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. From Norway the tide of migration spread to the far North of Finland, the Tornio river valley and on down south. Around the beginning of the decade of the 1870's, the so-called "American fever" then took hold in the region of Etelä-Pohjanmaa (or southern Finnish Bothnia), where the parishes of Isokyrö and Mustasaari were the first to be infected. The migratory movement to the United States began to take on the nature of a mass shift of population in the 1880's, and the crest of the wave of migration was reached in 1902, when more than 23 000 Finnish citizens applied for a passport to move abroad (Figure 1). Emigration from Finland continued on a large scale till the outbreak of the First World War.

The migratory movement of Finns overseas to the United States took place mainly between 1865 and the World War I. During this time, some 308 000 Finns made their homes in the United States, and simultaneously another 20 000 across the border on the Canadian side.

Although it was via northern Norway that the stream of emigration started to run, the main route later became the sea lane from the port of Hanko in southern Finland to England and from there to New York. In New York harbour, the immigrants were thoroughly examined on Ellis Island before being admitted into the country.

When the United States government began to restrict the admission for immigrants into the country in 1921 and 1924, the annual Finnish quota was cut down to about 600 admissions. In the 1920's, the migratory tide shifted in direction toward Canada and, to some extent, Australia. The Finnish immigrant population in the United States reached its peak in the early 1920's, when the number of Finns born in the Old Country was about 150 000 and the number of second-generation Finns amounted to some 200 000, which gives us a total of about 350 000.

Of the over 300 000 emigrants who left Finland before the World War I almost 200 000 or 65 per cent were men and over 100 000 or 36 per cent women. Compared with other Nordic countries the Finnish emigration was most male dominated. Generally men have always formed a majority of the Finnish populations in overseas countries. The balance was perhaps best in the United States. On the other hand there were places such as New York City, where the number of Finnish women was perhaps greater at times than that of Finnish men. A reason for better sex balance was that a greater proportion of men returned to their homeland than women.

According to the Census of 1980 in U.S.A about 616 000 Americans claimed Finnish heritage. Similarly we can estimate some 200 000 persons in Canada of Finnish origin. We have thus nearly one million persons in North America with Finnish blood in their veins.

### **3 Areas of origin and reasons for emigration**

The emigrants to America have been mainly natives of western Finland. (Map II.) Nearly one-half of them were born in the province of Vaasa and the next largest numbers in Turku – and - Pori province and Oulu province. The emigration to America was thus felt most heavily in the territory bordering on the Gulf of Bothnia.

The most important factors underlying the migratory process were economic and social. The point departure was a surplus rural population relative to the opportunities for a livelihood. Tar distilling had been the mainstay of the economy in the Bothnian regions, in addition to the cultivation of grain crops, from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When the era of sailing ships began to draw to a close after the mid - 1800's, the demand for tar declined. Ships turned from wood to iron and steel. New sources of livelihood began to open up in other parts of Finland with the growth of industrial centres, but new industries were slower to take root in Bothnian soil.

Another factor contributing to intensification of the migratory process was rapid increase in population that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Falling into economic decline, the Bothnian provinces, especially the rural sections, were no longer able to provide an adequate livelihood to all the inhabitants; the farms were small, timber was scarce and nearly every household was bursting at the seams with children, One of the chief motivating forces for migration to America was desire to earn enough money to redeem the family farm or buy a house and a piece of land. Many an emigrant was bent on paying off his debts. And one clergyman has written that a certain member of his congregation up in Pohjanmaa took a boat to America to escape his nagging wife.

Toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became the thing to do cross the Atlantic. People in the parish of Härmä used to say, in fact, that if you had not been to America you really did not measure up as a man.

The tide of migration to America was connected with the great transitional developments of the times in nearly all fields of human endeavour. The attraction above all was the high wage level in America, which in certain occupations was much as five times higher than in Finland. For another thing, it should be born in mind that, although people speak of a "mass migration", the phenomenon was one of individuals moving from one continent from another and there were as many reasons for migrating as there were emigrants.

The emigrants were people in their prime, around 20 years old, and the majority unmarried. Most of the emigrants were farming people – the children of farmers, tenant farmers, cottagers and so on. For these people, the prospects at home were anything but bright. One – third of the emigrants travelled on borrowed money, many on a ticket sent from America, this was especially case with women.

#### **4 Settlements in America**

After their arrival in the New World, the first task facing the immigrants was finding a job. Work was available to the men in the great mines of America, the lumber camps, the factories and railroad construction projects. The homes of wealthy Americans offered employment to women, and Finnish servant girls were in considerable demand because of their good reputation.

The Finnish settlements became concentrated mainly in three states with names starting with the letter "M": Michigan, Massachusetts and Minnesota (Map III) the distribution of Finnish-born immigrants by states in 1920 was as follows:

Michigan	30 100	California	7 050
Minnesota	29 100	Wisconsin	6 760
Massachusetts	14 570	Ohio	6 410
New York	12 500	Oregon	6 000
Washington	11 900		

In southern states there have been only very few Finns. In his well known book “We Who Built America”, Carl Wittke noted that, although at first the Finnish immigrants were forced to look for work in copper and iron mines, in stone quarries and factories, or as lumberjacks – a line of work which they were prepared by experience back in the Old Country – the ultimate goal of almost every Finn was to own a farm and become an independent producer. It was thus that the Finnish farming communities were created, especially in the Middle West.

Finns have worked mostly in the hardest occupations in factories, mines, the building trade and agriculture and forestry. Over the years, the economic status of the immigrants improved. Many of them became independent enterprisers, especially after learning the language of the land. Employers in the United States, as in other countries, learned to regard the Finns in general as good and reliable workers. One immigrant has related that back in the good old days – or, more correctly stated, in lean times of economic slumps – employers were in the habit of picking out of the lines of job applicants men wearing trousers of coarse woollen cloth, leather boots curled upward at the tips and fur hat. Greenhorns from Finland fresh off the boat had the reputation of being hard workers – after all, they were in a hurry to get a nestegg started.

## **5 Finnish –American social and cultural activities**

The immigrants’ first years often found them on the move, seeking ever better economic opportunities. As they settled down gradually, Finnish communities came into existence and this laid the foundation for organized cultural activity.

At the very early stage of immigration, religious activity gained momentum. It was in Hancock, in 1867, that the Finns first entered the fold of an organized congregation, in which they joined ranks with Swedes and Norwegians. Congregations were gradually formed in different parts of the country, and in 1890 the Lutheran congregations pooled their resources to found the Suomi-Synod, or the American-Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church. Other church organizations were also established, including the “Kansalliskirkko” or “National Church”.

At the turn of the century, there were some 100 Finnish church congregations in the U.S.A as well as a few in Canada. Suomi-Opisto, or Suomi College, was founded in 1896 in Hancock to train ministers for the church. It was in response to an obviously felt need that temperance societies began to be formed in Finnish – American communities in the 1880’s. The last decade of the century found these societies at their peak. In 1908 there were 200 Finnish – American temperance societies with a total membership of 11 200. Women were especially active in the temperance societies.

The working-class movement began to spread among the Finnish immigrant population in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first socialistic labour organizations sprang into existence in the

final years of the last century and in 1906 banded together to form the Finnish Socialist Organization, and join the American Socialist Party. By 1913 the organization could boast 260 locals and a total membership of 12 651. Besides activities in the political and social sphere, the workers' associations staged plays, promoted literary pursuits, sponsored sports and so on. The Finnish-American labour movements was torn apart in 1914, when the supporters of the Industrial Workers of the World, or IWW, parted company with the Socialists. Another split took place at the beginning of the decade of the 1920s, when a large number of Socialists joined the Communist Party.

A typical form of organization among the Finns in America was cooperation. Especially during World War I and the 1920s, the cooperative movement spread rapidly. Its ideas were eagerly accepted by farmers in particular. The cooperative movement was one field of activity in which Finns have been trail blazers on a broad front in the United States.

I should also like to call attention to the organizations known as Kalevan Ritarit (the Knights of Kaleva) and Kalevan naiset (the Ladies of Kaleva), which, tracing their inception back to 1898, have aspired to preserve the Finnish heritage and promote Finnish culture.

About the Finnish-American culture I should pay tribute to the great and very valuable contribution the Finnish American press has made to the immigrant community. It is said that by the end of the century there were more Finnish newspapers being published in America than in Finland itself. Many of these were, it is true, short-lived, and at present there are only a very few Finnish-American newspapers still struggling to stay alive.

During the course of the past several decades, the Finnish-American immigrant culture has undergone changes. The first-generation immigrants in general spoke their mother tongue for the most part, their children were bilingual, and the third generation speaks mostly English. Along with this development, the English language began to take the place of Finnish in organizational activity, as in, for example, the spheres of the church and the cooperative movement. The old immigrant culture has been preserved best in such traditional Finnish strongholds as Hancock, Fitchburg and, more recently, especially the twin towns of Lake Worth and Lantana, down in Florida. The second and third generations of Finnish Americans deserve credit for in many cases upholding the institutions set up by their elders born in Finland.

It is an indisputable fact that the era of Finnish-American immigrant culture is beginning to be over – at least in the form it exhibited at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This raises the question: how can the history of the immigrants be preserved for the future generations? We might work together to promote research into the phenomenon of immigration and the Finnish-American culture.

## **6 The relations between the Finnish-Americans and Finland**

When toward the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the migratory movement to the United States began to take on the character of mass migration, the Finnish authorities took notice of the population drain and tried to take measures to restrain and prevent the exodus. This was done by having the provincial governors' issue warning circulars, preachers deliver admonishing sermons and

newspapers articles and editorials containing appropriate messages, etc. Only after the favourable effects of emigration, especially in the economic sphere, began to be perceived - did the negative attitude take a more understanding turn. Following the achievement of Finnish independence, efforts were placed on a systematic basis in the 1920s. Founded 1927, the Suomi-Seura (Suomi Society), did much to strengthen the ties between the emigrant Finns and their former homeland. In particular, visits back to the Old Country became popular among the emigrants. The celebrating in 1938 attending the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Delaware colony in 1638 served to reinforce Finnish-American ties with Finland, thanks to the participation of a high -level delegation from the Old Country. The emotional distress suffered on both sides of the ocean during World War II, especially during the Finnish Winter War, resulted in the building across the Atlantic of a bridge of affinity. Finland also began to hold the Finnish-Americans in higher esteem than ever. What made a particularly deep impression was the flood of gift parcels sent to war-torn Finland. From the post war period I just would like to mention the extensive ASLA-Fulbright program and cultural co-operation between America and Finnish universities and institutions e.g. in migration research. The starting point of the co-operation has been that Finnish-Americans also represent Finnish culture and traditions which should systematically studied and preserved for posterity. This should not happen in an emotional and sentimental spirit and not too much from the Finnish point of view. The Finnish-Americans and their contribution to the growth of the U.S.A. and their culture and descendants ought to be viewed expressly as part of American Society and its developmental process. In an immigrant-community women had an important role and consequently this project of "the Reunion of Sisters" will have a wide and international interest also from the point of view of ethnic and immigration history.

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