

## BACK TO THE LAND! RURAL FINNISH SETTLEMENT IN WISCONSIN

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The only language the stumps understand . . .  
is . . . Finnish.<sup>1</sup>

Although the Finns left an indelible imprint upon certain areas of Wisconsin, they never numbered among the state's largest foreign-born groups. Between 1900 and 1920, for example, Wisconsin's Finnish-born population grew from some 2,000 to 6,750 inhabitants, but more than fifteen other non-native contingents had larger representations during both census years.<sup>2</sup> The relatively small number of Finns in Wisconsin is even more evident when the figures are compared to those for Michigan and Minnesota, the two states which provided a bifurcated focus for the largest number of Finnish immigrants to this country. During 1920, Michigan and Minnesota each had a population of about 30,000 Finnish-born persons; and together the two states accounted for approximately forty percent of the United States' total Finnish community.

How, then, did the Finns develop and nurture a distinctive identity within Wisconsin? There were undoubtedly several reasons but a few factors were of paramount importance. One was that the majority of these Finns settled in relatively few areas of the state and thereby maintained a tightly-contained geographic identity and cohesiveness. Secondly, unlike most participants in the major migration waves between 1880 and World War I (the so-called "new immigration"), the Wisconsin Finns settled predominantly in rural rather than urban centers. Hence, it was somewhat easier for them to maintain a distinctive identity and culture. Thirdly, certain Finnish institutions, serving a regional or national audience, have been headquartered in Superior, Wisconsin. Of particular note is the Central Cooperative Exchange,<sup>3</sup> a Finnish-sponsored economic venture which was initiated during 1917. Before it merged with Midland Cooperatives, Inc., of Minneapolis in 1963, the wholesaling facility had an affiliated network of 244 local outlets spread throughout the Upper Midwest and did some \$21 million worth of business during its peak year of operation.<sup>4</sup> Another important institution in Superior has been the Finnish language press. Its best known journalistic efforts have been the *Työväen Osuustoimin-*

*talehti* (*Workers' Cooperative Journal*), which is the primary news organ of the Finnish-American cooperative movement, published between 1930 and 1965; and the *Työmies* (*Workingman*), which moved from Hancock, Michigan to Superior during 1914. Even today, the latter newspaper and its associated activities continue to provide a portion of North America's Finnish-readers with a politically left-of-center news outlet.

To many observers of the Wisconsin landscape, the most evident and interesting Finnish imprint lies in the various vernacular architectural elements built by this immigrant group. Ranging from the *sauna* and *riihi*<sup>5</sup> to log houses and barns, the craftsmanship and functional integrity of these structures have found an appreciative audience among folk architecture aficionados. The Finnish farm complex at Old World Wisconsin, located at Eagle, is an effort to display and preserve a major portion of this ethnic and cultural legacy. In addition, an 1898 Finnish log structure in the Brantwood area (the Matt Johnson or Knox house) recently was nominated for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places.

Although Wisconsin's Finnish communities were relatively small, their activities reflect those of the overall Finnish population in America. The Wisconsin Finns helped to load Great Lakes ore carriers on the docks of Ashland and Superior; entered the treacherous waters of Lake Superior at Herbster and Bark Point to search for lake trout; ventured into deep underground mines at Hurley, Iron Belt and Montreal; felled trees and skidded logs in the forest surrounding Brule and Brantwood; tended assembly lines in factories at Milwaukee, Kenosha and Racine; and most importantly, cleared and farmed the land in various areas of Wisconsin's cutover region.

Since the basic story of Finnish settlement and institutional development in Wisconsin has been related by Kolehmainen (1944) and Kolehmainen and Hill (1951), this article will look more explicitly at the migration of Finns to the state and the agricultural enclaves they formed. A brief overall sketch of Finnish settlement activities will be given, but the major portion of the discussion will focus upon two rural communities in Wisconsin: Oulu (pronounced Oh-loo) and Owen-Withee. Separated by about 175 miles and settled during different periods, the two enclaves illustrate some of the geographic and temporal differences which characterized Wisconsin's Finnish settlement picture. The primary sources for this analysis include church records; the original manuscripts from the

Federal and Wisconsin State Censuses; U.S. Federal Land Office records; Finnish-American newspapers; and personal interviews conducted by the author.

## FINNISH-AMERICANS AND RURAL SETTLEMENT

With the exception of a small number of Swedish-speaking Finns, primary Finnish settlement did not commence until the mid-1880s. As such, the major movement of Finns into the state occurred some twenty years after the initial bridgehead in America had been established in the Copper Country of Northern Michigan during 1864 (Holmio, 1967). These first Finns, recruited to work as miners in Michigan, eventually were followed by thousands of others. For many Finns, Michigan's mining communities served only as temporary way stations in their search for an always elusive American *El Dorado*. Many migrated to the rich iron ore fields of northeastern Minnesota; some sought work in the copper, coal and gold mines of the western United States; and others pursued a variety of activities which ranged from logging and railroad construction to the establishment of private businesses. Some emigrés returned to Finland, or made the trans-Atlantic crossing several times. Of greatest significance, however, were the agricultural activities initiated by Finns in several areas of the Upper Midwest. During the latter half of the 1860s, a few small Finnish agricultural enclaves were established on the prairies of Minnesota (Kaups, 1966); but by the 1880s little prime agricultural land remained for the vast majority of later Finnish immigrants. Because of this, thousands of Finns acquired small acreages in the Lake Superior cutover region<sup>6</sup> and began the massive task of clearing the land of stumps and boulders, draining and planting fields, constructing farmsteads and developing a network of Finnish oriented communities and cultural, social and economic institutions.

Possessing an undeniable land hunger, many Finns who retreated to the land during the nineteenth century were inspired by the teaching of Lars Laestadius, a Swedish religious revivalist who found many adherents in rural areas of western and northern Finland—the primary area for early emigrants to America. Espousing a life of piety and simplicity, the Laestadians (Apostolic Lutherans) believed that the maintenance of traditional ethnic values in a new country could be best accomplished by developing rural communitarian enclaves (Kaups, 1975). By the turn of the

century, however, larger numbers of Finns began to emigrate from less conservative areas of their homeland (Kero, 1973, 1974); an appreciable number of these Finns had been politicized by an oppressive Russian czarist government in Finland.<sup>7</sup> Imbued with a strong belief in socialism, many quickly formed political and social organizations in America and began to call for higher wages and better working conditions, most notably in the mining areas of Michigan and Minnesota. By serving as leaders and participants in several strikes, but especially the infamous conflicts on Minnesota's Mesabi Range in 1906 and 1916 and Michigan's Copper Country during 1913, a number of Finns were blacklisted by the mining and steel corporations. Unable to secure work, many of them, as well as other Finns who were affected by the strikes, lockouts and shutdowns, moved to the woods and began to carve out a precarious existence on forty to eighty acre parcels of land (Ollila, 1975).

Whether conservative or radical, none of the Finns could escape the dangerous and often oppressive conditions they faced in the mines and several other employment pursuits. Finnish language newspapers solemnly announced the figures: a total of 63 Finns dead in a mine disaster at Scofield, Utah during 1900; almost 100 killed while mining coal at Hannah, Wyoming in 1903; 146 deaths in the mines of Houghton County, Michigan between 1900 and 1903; *ad infinitum* (Kolehmainen and Hill, 1951; Yli-Jokipii, 1971). Although not quite as dangerous, conditions in logging camps were far from idyllic. One woodsman working in northern Wisconsin reported that at his place of employment the food was poor, the land wet and the camp accessible only after a long trek through the woods (Kolehmainen, 1946). Other lumberjacks died from pneumonia or injuries when they did not receive adequate medical attention in the camps. In a rather widely reported story of 1907, four Finnish lumberjacks were jailed for fifteen days in northeastern Minnesota when a camp operator claimed they had left his place of employment before discharging a debt. The Finns stated that their departure had been hastened because they were given dull and rusty tools (an insult to a Finn!), had not been able to secure adequate food and had been forced to sleep three to a bed. They were jailed when the camp operator claimed they still owed him 77 cents apiece for transportation to the camp.<sup>8</sup> Small wonder then, that thousands of Finns in America heeded the call: "Back to the land!—'mother Earth will provide for all of us' " (Kolehmainen, 1946).

## FINNISH SETTLEMENT IN WISCONSIN

Although major Finnish settlement activities in Wisconsin did not commence until the mid-1880s, some Finnish-born persons entered the state at a considerably earlier date. Most of these earliest pioneers, though born in Finland, either were of direct Swedish stock or spoke Swedish as their mother tongue (i.e., Swede-Finns). Undoubtedly the most important individual in this group was Gustaf Unonius, a minister and author who was born in Helsinki, Finland during 1810. Unonius later emigrated to America and in 1841 founded Wisconsin's first Swedish settlement at Pine Lake (*Nya Upsala*). Located in Waukesha County, the colony never prospered and by 1850 only a few settlers remained of the dozen or so families who had heeded Unonius' original call in 1841 (Nelson, 1943). During the 1870s and 1880s a small group of Swede-Finns settled in the vicinity of Bailey's Harbor; however, this contingent, whose numbers never exceeded fifteen to seventeen members, quickly intermingled and intermarried with Door County's Irish, German and Scandinavian population. Somewhat later in the nineteenth century, a larger group of Swede-Finns established farms in Wood County's Sigel Township; and the nucleus for a fairly large urban settlement was established in Ashland during the same period. Although the Swede-Finns in America identified more closely with Swedes than with Finns, Silfversten (1931; cited by Nelson, 1943) aptly noted the dilemma they faced: "They have their native country in common with the Finns, their language in common with the Swedes and their national history in common with both."

When considering Wisconsin's Finnish-speaking population, Aine (1938) and Kolehmainen and Hill (1951) have noted that the first permanent settlement was established in Douglas County during 1885. According to U.S. Federal Land Office records, a few Finns acquired homesteads during the summer of that year in what are now Amnicon and Lakeside Townships (the Wentworth-Poplar area). Since there were no roads into the area, provisions and livestock were brought from Duluth and Superior in small boats; after landing along the Lake Superior shoreline, the cattle, goods and personal belongings were transported inland by the settlers.<sup>9</sup> Once this initial node had been established, more extensive settlement took place as the land seekers moved steadily eastward through Douglas County and into Bayfield County (Fig. 1). By 1886

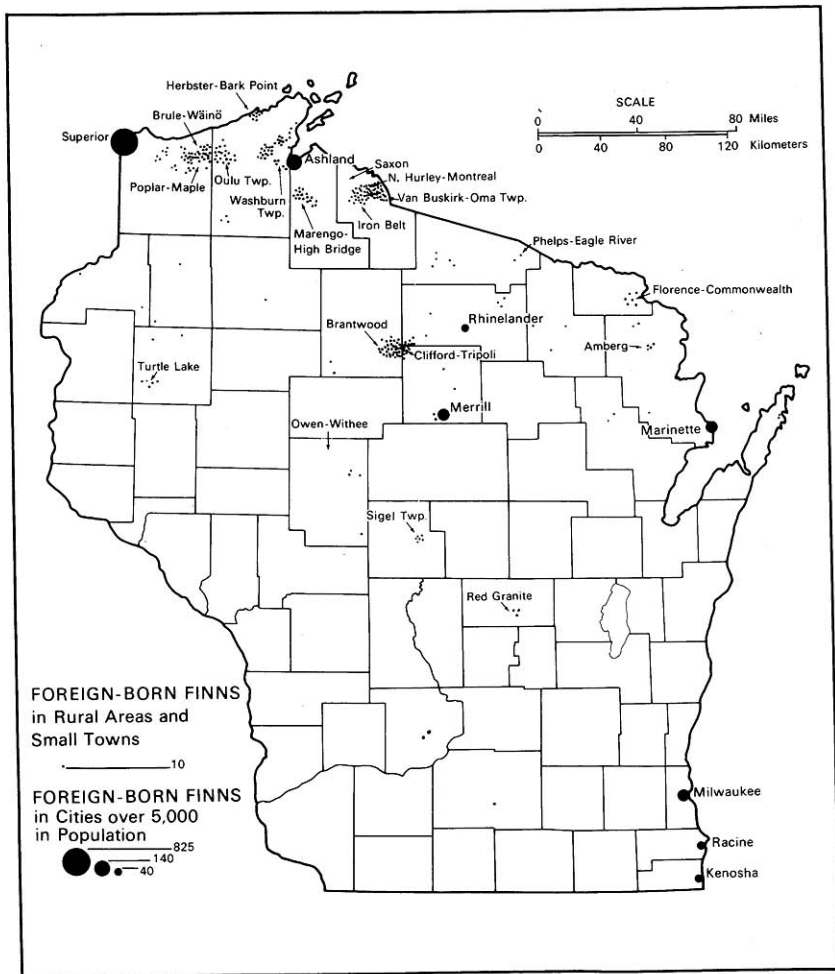


FIGURE 1. Distribution of Foreign-Born Finns during 1905, and Major Finnish Settlements in Wisconsin. With the exception of Saxon and Owen-Withee, the basis for all major Finnish settlements in Wisconsin had been established by 1905. Source: Wisconsin State Census, 1905

Finns had settled in the Maple area, and during the following year another group began to establish farms in the vicinity of Brule-Wäinö. The settlement wave reached Bayfield County in 1888, with the major Finnish concentrations emerging in what eventually would become Oulu Township. During the late 1880s Finns also

established themselves in the City of Superior and in various communities along Iron County's Gogebic Range (Hurley, Montreal and Iron Belt). While a large number of the Iron County Finns worked as miners, they often acquired small acreages of land proximate to the mines and engaged in part-time farming. Eventually, larger farms were established just south of Hurley in a relatively extensive area centering upon Van Buskirk and Oma Township.

In the 1890's, other Finns began to purchase land in some Ashland County townships which had been forfeited by the Wisconsin Central Railroad.<sup>10</sup> Situated between Marengo and High Bridge, a large number of the Finns who moved to this area in subsequent years were attracted from both the Michigan and Wisconsin sections of the Gogebic Range. The latter years of the nineteenth century saw another important Finnish colony established at Brantwood and Clifford-Tripoli. With new settlers and land agents touting the virtues of the area, the settlement quickly became one of the fastest growing communities in Finnish-America (Kolehmainen and Hill, 1951).

With the exception of Saxon and Owen-Withee, by 1905 a nucleus had been established for all major Finnish settlements in Wisconsin. In addition to the communities mentioned above, Finns were situated in rural areas around Turtle Lake (Barron County); Florence and Commonwealth (Florence County); Washburn Township, Herbster and Bark Point (Bayfield County); Phelps-Eagle River (Vilas County); and Amberg (Marinette County). During 1902 some Finns began to work in the granite quarries of Red Granite, and in the 1890s and early 1900s a limited migration was underway to the cities of Ashland, Kenosha, Marinette, Merrill, Milwaukee, Racine and Rhinelander.

Once permanent settlements had been established, various institutions were developed by the Finns. Among the first to emerge were the churches, with three Lutheran variants (Suomi Synod, National Lutheran and Apostolic Lutheran) represented in many communities. A rather unique organization which soon developed in several of the older Finnish communities was the temperance society. Often, though not always aligned with church interests, most societies built halls where members could engage in social activities as well as pledge their opposition to demon rum.

When a greater number of politically active Finns moved to the state during the early twentieth century, socialist halls and locals were established in most of Wisconsin's Finnish-American com-



munities. Many of these locals were rather short-lived, but at least twenty-three were initiated between 1905 and 1914 (Kolehmainen and Hill, 1951). A Finnish-sponsored institution with greater longevity, however, has been the consumers' cooperative. In addition to the cooperative wholesale facility located in Superior, some eighteen local cooperative stores and retail outlets were developed by the Finns in Wisconsin prior to World War II. Two stores organized in the Brantwood-Clifford area at the turn of the century even were among the very first consumers' cooperatives developed by Finns in the United States (Alanen, 1975). Although their numbers have dwindled and the original concepts and ideals have changed, the most evident legacy of Finnish institutional activity is provided by the churches and cooperative stores which still can be found in northern Wisconsin.

## OULU AND OWEN-WITHEE: A COMPARISON OF TWO FINNISH COMMUNITIES

### *Oulu Background*

As mentioned previously, Finnish settlement in the immediate Oulu area commenced during 1888. Some thirty settlers had claimed homesteads by the turn of the century, but the majority had to purchase their small acreages from private agencies or individuals (Kolehmainen and Hill, 1951). By 1915 the rapid development of Oulu Township<sup>11</sup> had been noted by outside, non-Finnish speaking observers; a highly laudatory article published in the *Wisconsin Agriculturist*, for example, observed that Finnish immigrants had cleared the land in a few short years and that Oulu Township already could boast of nine schools, three churches, a socialist hall and a cooperative creamery and store. Stating that the Finnish farmer had a sickening fear of debt and a passion for cleanliness, dairy cows and dynamite (to blast stumps), the writer went on to exclaim:

We must admit their adaptability to pioneer conditions. They are superior in intelligence, physical strength, patience and persistence. They are self contained and somewhat apart from the rest, but they are the makers of history as it will be written of this new empire.<sup>12</sup>

While the Oulu Township portion of the "new empire" supported close to 1,100 residents by 1920, a steady population decline



occurred thereafter (by 1940 there were 910 residents, and by 1970 only 505 persons.) Oulu Township, as such, reflects the agricultural evolution of the entire cutover region. Envisioned as a new frontier for rural settlement at the turn of the century, the cutover was the target for recruitment by private companies and public agencies; special efforts were made to attract European immigrants who, unlike native Americans, "... would devote all their time to farming" (Helgeson, 1962). Although the Finns persisted in their efforts to a greater extent than other groups, and indeed were still seeking land in the 1920s, many of the newly established farms were abandoned during agricultural recessions; other settlers ceased their efforts once it was recognized that at least twelve to thirteen years of steady effort were required to develop anything even approaching a productive farm (Hartman and Black, 1931).<sup>13</sup> Differences between the bounteous potential of the region as envisioned by the promoter, and reality as encountered by the settler often were quite striking. One account written during 1893, for example, claimed that farm life in the north woods of Wisconsin might not be entirely pleasurable, but neither was it all drudgery. The observer went on to state that by cutting down a few trees, dynamiting the stumps and dropping some seed potatoes into the pits, an "enormous return" would be assured.<sup>14</sup> By way of contrast, the actual back-breaking and slow task of carving out an existence in the cutover region was tellingly stated by an early Finnish settler in the vicinity of Oulu:

With the snow still in the ground, in the spring, the whole family worked to clear the brush. We cleared out stones and blasted stumps. With the stones and stumps, we built the fence. The second year, we had three acres of potatoes to show the world. Everyone worked as hard as anyone can work (Doby, 1960).

#### *Owen-Withee Background*

The movement of Finns into the Owen-Withee area began around 1910, or more than twenty years after the Oulu Township development. Because of this rather late date, these Finns were not able to secure homesteads; however, the sale of land to immigrants in this section of northern Clark County comprises one of the more interesting segments of Wisconsin's Finnish-American settlement history.

After the John S. Owen Lumber Company had harvested most of the marketable timber in the Owen-Withee area, the company's

holdings were put up for sale. National advertising campaigns were initiated, and the Owens sought to promote agricultural endeavors on their cutover land by "... selling on easy terms to those who gave promise of permanence."<sup>15</sup> One person, however, was responsible for bringing the largest number of Finns to Owen-Withee: land agent John A. Peltö. Bilingual agents such as Peltö often were hired by land holding companies, be they railroads, timber operations or speculators, to assist in the disposal of property. Undoubtedly finding it easier and more profitable to sell land to their foreign-born counterparts than to clear and farm the soil themselves, the agents used their powers of persuasion and hyperbole to entice settlers. Peltö, acting as an agent for the Owen Company, placed large advertisements in Finnish-American newspapers and journals which exclaimed: "Become a farmer in a place where there are possibilities—Owen, Wisconsin. . ." (Fig. 2). The ads praised the

# Tulkaa Farmareiksi

sinne missä siihen on

## MAHDOLLISUUKSIA

Owen, Wisconsinissa, on yksi parhaimpia farmiseutuja, jossa maanviljelyksellä on jo käytännössä kyetty näyttämään, että se siellä menestyy. Paitsi suurempaa vieraskielistä asutusta, on jo noin 500 suomalaista ostaneet maita, joista useita satoja jo asuinkin, osa hyvinkin pärjäävinä.

Oweniin pääsee viittä eri rautatietä, joten se ei ole sydänmaassa.

Owenissa on kaikkiaan 18 juustotehdastakin 12:sta mailin alalla; on pickelsien valmistuslaitos, meijereitä, karjan ja lihan välityslaitoksia y. m., farmarien kontrollin alla olevia jalostuslaitoksia.

Hyvät tiet ja koulut. — Tasaiset maat ja helpot puhdistaa ja viljellä.

Hinnat vaihtelevat viidestätoista dollarista ylöspäin, ollen ne verrattain halvat maan laatuun ja aseman edullisuuteen nähden.

Maksuehdot kohtuulliset.

Lähempiä tietoja varten kirjoittakaa osoitteella:

John E. Peltö, Owen,  
Wis.

FIGURE 2. Tulkaa Farmareiksi—"Become a Farmer" Ads such as this, praising the attributes and agricultural potential of the Owen-Withee area in Wisconsin, appeared in many Finnish language newspapers during the second decade of the twentieth century. Source: *Peltö ja Koti* (Superior, Wis.), March 1, 1917

area's level terrain and the ease with which land could be cleared and planted; the five railroad connections which made the community something more than just a "backwoods" location; the eighteen cheese factories located within a distance of twelve miles; the pickle factory, creameries, good roads and schools; and the expanding Finnish community itself. All of this, Pelto pointed out, was available for prices which began at fifteen dollars an acre.

Many Finns could not resist such mellifluous phrases and by 1920 Clark County contained a Finnish-born population of about 280 residents. Situated along the southern rim of the cutover area, the agricultural attributes of the "Clover Belt" did indeed prove to be significantly better than in Finnish settlement areas farther to the north. Despite such agricultural advantages, the arduous task of removing stumps and clearing fields still awaited the first settlers. One articulate second generation Finnish-American, for example, recalled that when her father was clearing land, he sometimes would stop work, wipe his brow, shake his fist in the air and shout: *Tämäkö on Pellon Jussin Amerika!* ("So this is John Pelto's America!"). Nevertheless, once land clearing had been accomplished and full-scale farming established, the Owen-Withee settlement emerged as the most prosperous of Wisconsin's larger Finnish communities. Although curses and vitriolic comments often were directed at land agents, in the Owen-Withee area John Pelto apparently had "... endeared himself in the hearts of his countrymen" (Kolehmainen and Hill, 1951).

### *Finnish Backgrounds of Oulu and Owen-Withee Residents*

Recent studies by other investigators have sought to determine whether certain foreign-born groups (primarily Swedes) that settled in the Midwest formed culturally homogeneous enclaves (Ostegren, 1973; Rice, 1973). The studies have shown that at least in some cases, immigrants from relatively contained areas of Sweden did develop identifiable settlements in America; this, in turn, indicates that such immigrants undoubtedly shared a particular cultural uniqueness and heritage. Large-scale Swedish emigration to America, of course, began at an earlier date than did major Finnish migration; hence, many Swedes (and other early immigrant groups) were able to settle directly in America on inexpensive and often fertile land. Very few Finns could partake of these opportunities. Not only did the later arrival date mean that

Finnish agricultural endeavors were limited primarily to the nation's cutover region, but a large number of Finns from all areas of their homeland first intermixed in mining and other areas of the United States. Thus, the direct transfer of people from individual Finnish communes to specific American areas was very uncommon.

In spite of these conditions, it still was possible that some Finns formed relatively homogeneous enclaves in America—even after they had lived in this country for some time. Such occurrences would have been more likely during the nineteenth century when some homesteads still were available and when a number of immigrants from specific Finnish areas could have selected contiguous or proximate areas of land. Since few homesteads with any agricultural potential were available after 1900, it could be hypothesized that Finnish-American settlements formed after this date would represent a much broader geographic cross-section of the Finnish population spectrum.<sup>16</sup>

To explore these hypotheses in a preliminary manner, the Finnish birthfields for a sample of Oulu and Owen-Withee residents were investigated. Samples from both communities have been used, since there is no complete record of all Finns who moved to or resided in the two communities. Most information was derived from church records, especially those of the Suomi Synod, the American transplant of the Finnish State Church. Although the quantity and accuracy of information varied from congregation to congregation, the records of American Suomi Synod churches were relatively analogous to the meticulous church files maintained in Finland. The records used in this study generally included the date and place of birth, baptism, confirmation and marriage; date of arrival in America and the local community; and former place of residence in America. However, rather few of the professionally trained National Lutheran's clergy and certainly very few of the Apostolic Lutheran's lay ministry were thoroughly acquainted with the record keeping systems; hence, much less information could be derived for members of these two church bodies. In addition, it must be pointed out that many Finnish immigrants, especially during the post-1900 era when there was an array of political and other groups from which to choose, did not join any church (Kero, 1975).

Given these limitations, it was necessary to seek information other than ecclesiastical. Some secondary documents (e.g., Ilmonen, 1926) did provide data, but the most useful additional information was supplied by second generation Finnish-Americans living in

Oulu and Owen-Withee. By combining the information from these various sources, it was possible to develop complete or partial background data on 106 adult Finns in Oulu and 113 in Owen-Withee. The years covered by the samples were between 1889-1929 for Oulu and from 1911-1928 for Owen-Withee.

A large proportion of Oulu Township's population left their homeland during relatively early stages of Finnish emigration; hence, the greatest number of the township's Finnish-born residents came from the two provinces which sent the largest number of emigrants to America: Vaasa and Oulu.<sup>17</sup> Two birthfields are indicated: one, a rather widely dispersed area (radius=62 km), centering on Lapua, Kauhava and several adjacent communes in the Province of Vaasa, and the other, a much more concentrated pattern (radius=35 km), focusing on the communes of Lohtaja, Kalajoki and Alavieska in the Province of Oulu (Fig. 3). Thirty-four percent of the immigrants considered in the Oulu Township sample came from the former birthfield, and twenty-eight percent from the latter. It must be noted, however, that the birthfield in Vaasa Province served as the point of departure for twelve percent of all Finnish emigrés to America; whereas that in Oulu Province was under one percent.<sup>18</sup> Although the largest number of residents in the Oulu Township sample came from these two general areas of Finland, undoubtedly those born in the three communes of Oulu Province formed the township's most homogeneous group.

For the place of birth for Finns in the Owen-Withee sample, the geographic dispersion is much greater (Fig. 4). The majority were born in the western area of the country, but this pattern also reflects the overall Finnish emigration picture. Some Owen-Withee residents, however, hailed from other areas of Finland, indicating, of course, that some emigrated at a later date than did their Oulu Township counterparts. As hypothesized before, it seems unlikely that Finnish-American enclaves formed after 1900 had any major linkages with specific communal areas in Finland.

#### *Migration within America to Oulu and Owen-Withee*

Regardless of the rural area they eventually selected in the United States, virtually all Finns had to work at other occupations in the New World before they could secure the means to purchase land.<sup>19</sup> As stated previously, factors such as dangerous employment and labor unrest and conflict in the mining areas contributed to this

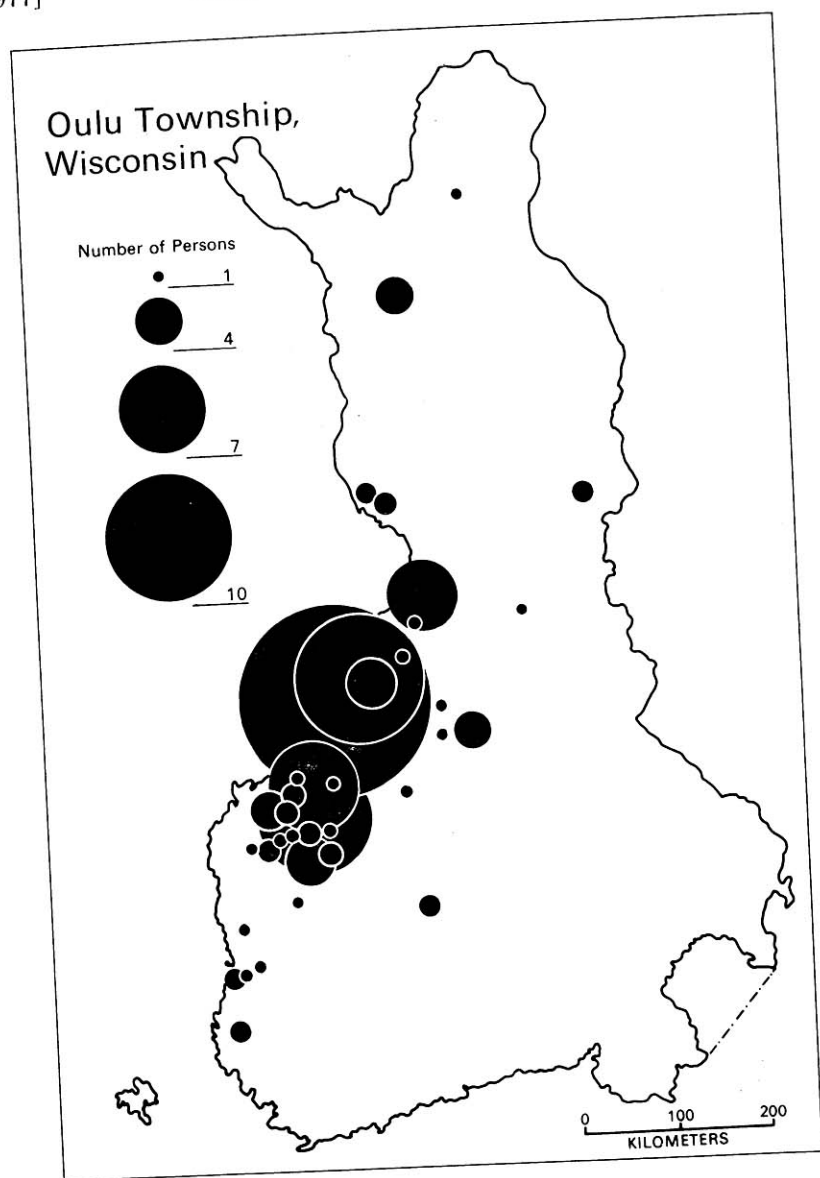


FIGURE 3. Place of Birth in Finland for Oulu Township Immigrants. The largest number of immigrants came from a grouping of communes in the two adjacent Finnish provinces of Oulu and Vaasa. Sources: Church Records, Ilmonen (1926), *Historical Sketches of the Town of Oulu*, and Personal Interviews

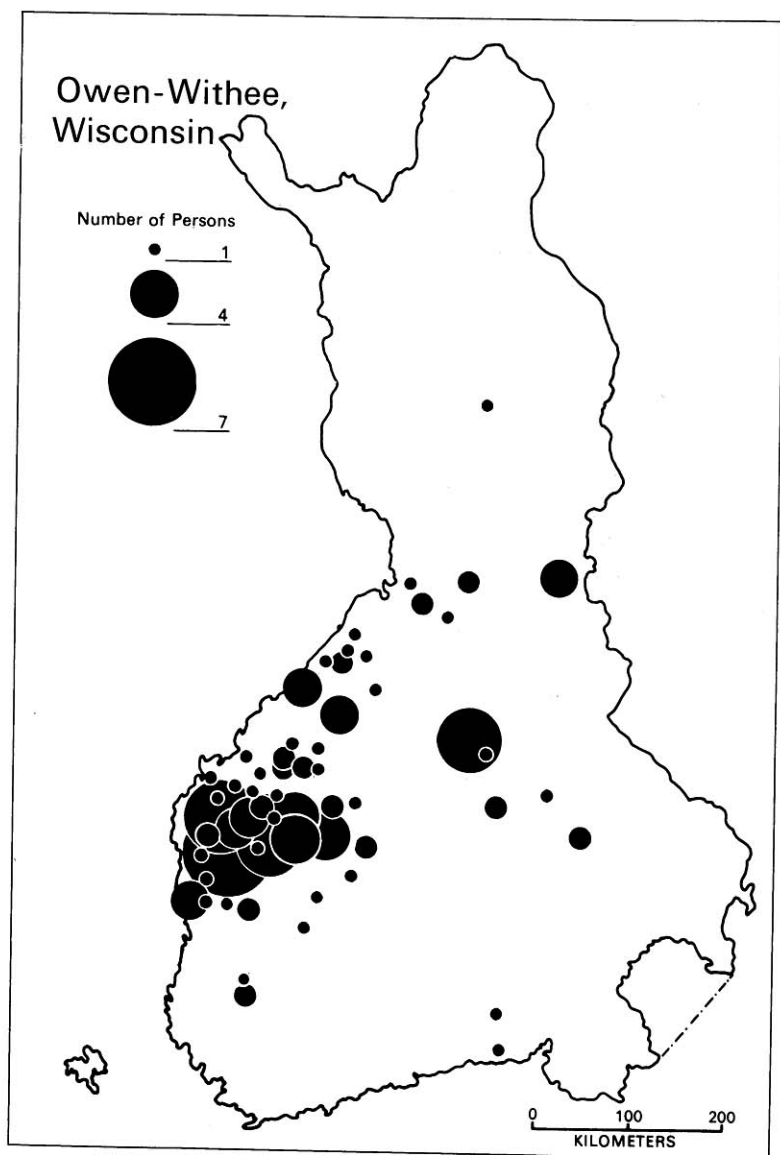


FIGURE 4. Place of Birth in Finland for Owen-Withee Immigrants. Settled at a later date than Oulu Township, the immigrants who established themselves in the Owen-Withee area came from a relatively wide area of Finland. Sources: Church Records, Ilmonen (1926), and Personal Interviews



back-to-the-land phenomenon. Although the movements considered in this study are based upon population samples only, the migration of Finns to Oulu and Owen-Withee does depict two representative threads in a much larger Finnish-American settlement fabric (Figs. 5, 6, 7).

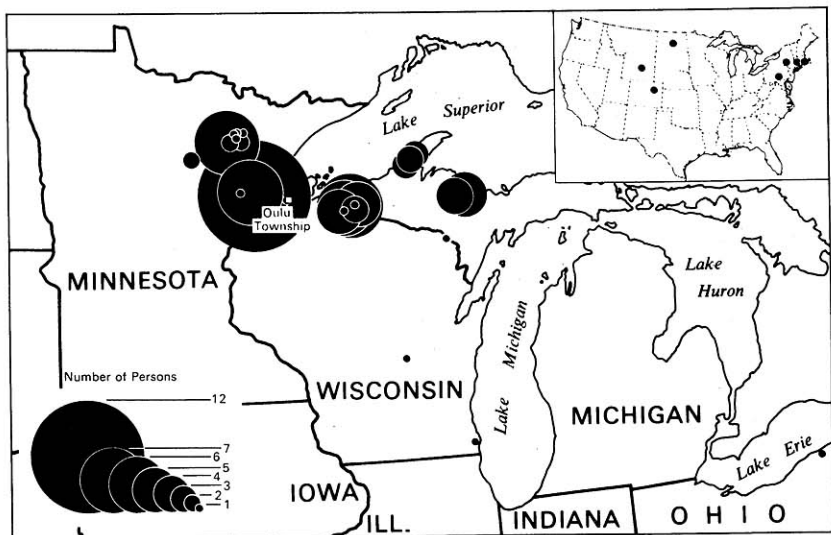


FIGURE 5. Prior American Residence of Finnish-Born Residents in Oulu Township, 1889-1929. The largest number of Finns who moved to Oulu Township came from the Gogebic Iron Range of Wisconsin and Michigan and from Northeastern Minnesota. Sources: See Fig. 3.

As could be expected, the greatest number of Finns who moved to Oulu and Owen-Withee came from the mining districts of the Lake Superior area. The magnitude and timing of the moves, however, varied significantly. During the early years of settlement in Oulu Township the largest number migrated from the Gogebic Iron Range, with lesser numbers coming from Michigan's Copper County and Marquette Iron Range. At the turn of the century, migration from the iron mining districts of Michigan continues, but was supplemented by an approximately equivalent number of arrivals from Minnesota. Many of the Minnesotans came from the Mesabi Iron Range, although several individuals migrated from the large Finnish colony centered in Duluth. During this entire period, a small but steady stream of land seekers also emanated from Superior; and a few from New England, Pennsylvania, Ohio, some

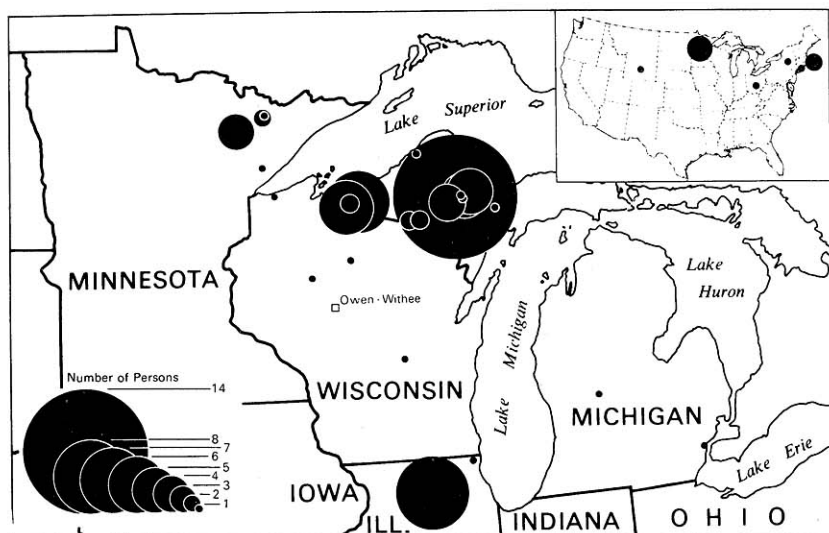


FIGURE 6. Prior American Residence of Finnish-Born Residents in the Owen-Withee Area, 1911-1928. Before moving to the Owen-Withee area, many Finns lived in Northern Michigan and DeKalb, Illinois. Sources: See Fig. 4

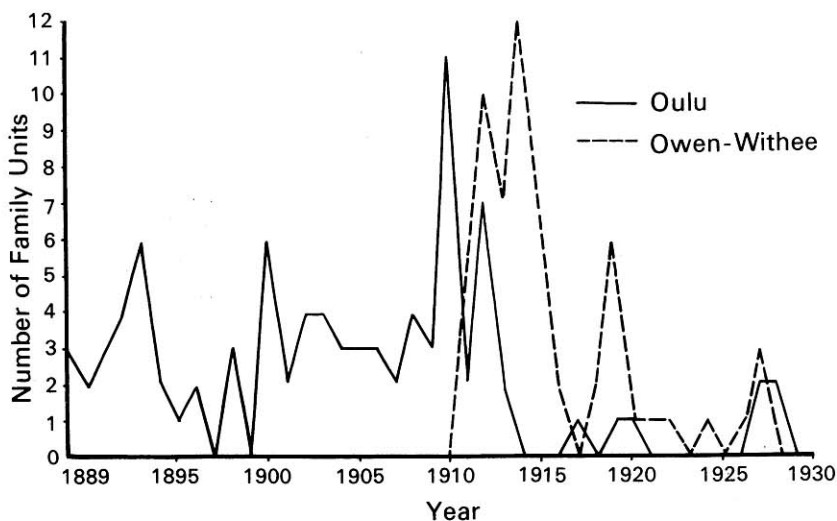


FIGURE 7. Number of Finnish Family Units Migrating Annually to Oulu Township and the Owen-Withee area, 1889-1929. Sources: See Figs. 3 and 4.

of the western states and a few Wisconsin communities. Overall there was a rather constant stream of Finns moving from Michigan to Oulu Township between 1889 and 1914. Migration from Minnesota, however, peaked during the years following the 1906 Mesabi Strike; of the twenty Minnesota Finns counted in the sample, more than one half arrived during the 1906-1910 interim.

When considering the previous American residence of Finns who moved to Owen-Withee, it is clear that the vast majority came from northern Michigan. Most of these individuals settled in the area during the 1911-1919 interim, the period of greatest sales promotion by the Owen Lumber Company and land agent John Peltó. As with Oulu Township, a significant amount of migration originated in the Gogebic Range with the greatest number coming from Wakefield, and from the Marquette Range city of Ishpeming. When compared to Oulu Township, the number of Finns arriving from Minnesota was much smaller. Although some migrated from Sparta, Ely and a few other Minnesota settlements, the availability of cutover lands in their home state undoubtedly lessened land hunger for Wisconsin property. One community outside the normal purview of Finnish-America, however, did contribute substantially to the Owen-Withee total: DeKalb, Illinois. Unlike urban Finns in Milwaukee, Kenosha and Racine who never were enticed to leave their relatively high paying industrial jobs for rural areas, a rather large proportion of DeKalb's Finnish-American community heeded John Peltó's clarion call: "Become a farmer. . ."

The timing of migration to Owen-Withee requires final mention. Migration activities peaked during 1914, the year of Peltó's most extensive promotional efforts; however, this also was the year following the Michigan Copper Country Strike. While it might have been expected that many jobless Finns in the Copper Country would migrate to Owen-Withee, relatively few individuals considered in this study chose this course of action.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it was Finns from the Marquette Range who most vigorously sought land in the Owen-Withee area. It is still possible, nevertheless, that the migration decisions of several Marquette Range inhabitants were influenced by the conflict and carnage which occurred throughout the Copper Country during 1913 and 1914.

## CONCLUSION

Whether analyzed as an individual experience or as a collective phenomenon, the migration process generally involves a complex

web of social, economic, political and/or psychological variables. The migration regimen for many Finns who moved to the Upper Midwest consisted of two major phases. The first involved the journey from Finland to America, followed immediately by a period of employment in one or more communities or areas.<sup>21</sup> The second phase occurred when the Finns left the mines, lumber camps and urban areas to pursue life as farmers, primarily in the cutover region. Whether this move was undertaken voluntarily or under duress, the settlement and institutional activities of these individuals constituted a distinguishing feature of the Finnish experience in America.

Given the amount of information available, it appears that the origins of a significant number of Oulu Township's settlers can be traced to two general areas or birthfields in Finland. Since the birthfield located in the Province of Vaasa was a major area for many Finnish emigrants, other Finnish-American settlements also claim significant numbers of residents coming from this area of the homeland. However, the other birthfield, focusing upon three communes in the Province of Oulu, sent a larger proportion of its emigrés to Oulu Township than might have been anticipated. The source area pattern for the Owen-Withee community, on the other hand, was much more dispersed and reflected the broader geographic base which characterized general Finnish migration during the early twentieth century.

Before too much is made of the seemingly homogeneous group that settled in Oulu Township, further work should be undertaken in other early Finnish-American settlements. It is possible that the transfer of cultural traits (e.g., architecture, cuisine, dialects, etc.) might be studied more effectively if the specific communal or home area of the immigrants is known and considered. Nevertheless, many distinguishing cultural traits and nuances undoubtedly blended together or were modified in some way once Finns came in contact with large numbers of other Finnish natives, other immigrant groups and Americans. As has been pointed out by several observers (e.g., Jaatinen, 1972), most rural Finnish communities in America were distinguished by their overall cultural cohesion and homogeneity. Seeking "...to create permanency amidst an impermanent environment" (Kaups, 1975), many Finns, regardless of their place of origin in Finland or political persuasion in America, participated collectively in the development of rural communities within a new and sometimes hostile land.

## NOTATIONS

1. This quote, describing conditions in Northern Michigan, has been attributed to J. H. Jasberg, an effervescent Finnish land agent who was active throughout the Lake Superior area (Wargelin, 1924).
2. These figures, and those for Michigan and Minnesota, have been derived from the Federal Censuses for 1900 and 1920. Any numerical ranking of the total foreign-born population by country of birth or ethnic background has to be undertaken with a great deal of caution. During 1900, for example, Poles were listed by their place of birth: Austria, Germany, Russia or unknown. Canadians, on the other hand, were divided into French and English speaking groups. Although often thought to be an ethnically homogeneous group, the Finns were distinguished on the basis of their native or mother tongue. In 1920, about 12 percent of the Finnish-born population listed Swedish as their mother tongue, and just under one percent claimed Lappish and other languages; the remainder were Finnish speakers.
3. The name of the Central Cooperative Exchange was changed to the Central Cooperative Wholesale in 1930 and to Central Cooperatives, Inc., during 1956.
4. 1964 *Yearbook, Central Cooperatives, Inc.* (Superior, Wis: Midland Cooperatives, Inc., 1964), p. 37.
5. Whereas the *sauna* has become a popular institution in America, the *riihi*—a building for the drying, threshing and winnowing of grain—is less well known. For lucid descriptions of these two vernacular building types see Kaups (1972; 1976).
6. Although the Finn who acquired a homestead could claim up to 160 acres of land, many did not; the majority bought 40 to 80 acre parcels from land agents, land companies and other parties.
7. Finland was a Grand Duchy of Russia from 1809 to 1917.
8. *Duluth News Tribune*, March 4, 1907, p. 5.
9. One account of early settlement in the area reported the exploits of two Finns who dragged a sled, laden with a heavy stove, from Superior to Lakeside Township during the dead of winter. A severe blizzard slowed them down, whereupon they were forced to spend the entire night making tracks through the snow so the stove would not tip off the sled when they pulled it (Aine, 1938).

10. For a description of the land fever which gripped Ashland during this period, see the account in the "Annual Edition" of the *Ashland Daily Press*, May 1893, p. 88.
11. Oulu Township was organized and named largely through the efforts of Andrew Lauri, a tailor born in Finland's Oulu Province. Since local residents felt that Bayfield County officials did not devote enough time and money to the western area of the county, they petitioned to form their own township. After some procrastination by the County Board, Oulu Township was organized in December 1904, with Andrew Lauri serving as the first chairman. See *Historical Sketches of the Town of Oulu: Bayfield County, Wisconsin, 1880-1956* (Oulu, Wis.: Sunnyside Homemakers' Club, 1956); and *Amerikan Uutiset* (New York Mills, Minn.), Sept. 10, 1976, p.4.
12. "Our Most Thickly Populated Township," *Wisconsin Agriculturist*, Vol. 39 (Feb. 1915), p. 8.
13. For a broader summary of agricultural conditions in the cutover region and Oulu Township, I am indebted to R. Zeitlin's "The Rankinen House," unpublished manuscript prepared for the Old World Wisconsin Research Office (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin), Oct. 26, 1976.
14. "Annual Edition," *Ashland Daily Press*, May 1893, p. 88.
15. *The Book of the Years: The Story of the Men who Made Clark County* (Neillsville, Wis.: Clark County Press, 1953), p. 23.
16. Also, emigration activity was more extensive throughout Finland during the post-1900 period.
17. Between 1870 and 1914, approximately 16 percent of all Finnish immigrants came from the Province of Oulu and 49 percent from the Province of Vaasa (Kero, 1974).
18. The overall figures for the communes have been derived from Appendix A of Kero (1974).
19. Of the individuals considered in the two samples, only three males and three females came directly from Finland to Oulu Township; and one male and one female made the direct crossing to Owen-Withee.
20. During and after the strike, a large number of Finns from the Copper Country moved to Detroit and rural areas of Michigan (Holmio, 1967).
21. A striking facet of Finnish-American settlement was the rather considerable amount of geographic mobility displayed by many immigrants. These moves were not undertaken randomly, however, for a communications system consisting of letters,

newspapers and person-to-person contacts directed Finns to new areas and employment opportunities in America.

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