

# Chapter I: Introduction *By Laura Nigro*

Since their initial arrival in the late 1890s as permanent settlers, Finnish immigrants have contributed in various ways to the growth and development of Thunder Bay (previously known as the cities of Port Arthur and Fort William) and the surrounding area.<sup>1</sup> In particular, Finns have been instrumental in lending their strength to the labour sectors which included the mines, railway, bush camps, and the dockyards.<sup>2</sup> The immigrants also added to the cultural landscape with cuisine that included Karelian pie *Karjalan piiraka* and *pulla*, theatrical and musical displays that filled the local halls, and, of course, the sauna. But, an area often overlooked is the Finnish contribution to amateur sports and athletics. For over a century, Finnish communities in the area provided organized sporting events and clubs which fostered their innate love of athletics; a love that was an integral part of Finnish lifestyle and culture that made its way to Canada during the numerous waves of immigration and manifested itself through political and social organizations.



*Early pioneer family. TBFCHS MG8,D,1,2,F,128a*

Like many of the immigrants that came to North America over the years, Finns in Canada were faced with countless challenges and obstacles.<sup>3</sup> Even though the working and living conditions were often unbearable, they continually prevailed.<sup>4</sup> The Finns drew upon their culture and traditions not only to survive but thrive in their new surroundings. They achieved the seemingly

impossible task of embracing their new homeland with all of its hardships while still maintaining and preserving their Finnish heritage. When asked how they were able to manage such a feat, their reply is often one word: *sisu*. Though it lacks a sufficient English equivalent, the word *sisu* roughly translates to the Finns' ability to outlast, outperform, and exert themselves beyond ordinary human limitation.<sup>5</sup> Their immigration to Canada was no exception.

Immigration by Finns to Thunder Bay and the surrounding area began during the late nineteenth century. It was spurred by both a national and regional belief that, as an editorial in the *Port Arthur Daily News* argued, "the assets of Canada are stupendous, the country reeks with underdeveloped riches, agricultural soils, minerals, water power, navigable lakes and rivers, a healthy invigorating climate, in fact, everything that makes a country great, waiting only for capital and energy of a man to develop it."<sup>6</sup> Although the first documented Finnish immigrants arrived to Thunder Bay in 1876, it was not until the 1880s that the first substantial wave of Finnish immigration occurred. Shortly thereafter, the Thunder Bay area began to experience its first great wave of Finnish immigration.

Between 1880 and 1914, thousands of single men between the ages of 18 to 35 began to make the voyage overseas.<sup>7</sup> These men were mainly labourers and agricultural workers who possessed some experience in lumbering, mining, and transportation construction.<sup>8</sup> Because the majority of these men were in search of security and financial stability, they were attracted to job opportunities in the physical labour sector that Thunder Bay had to offer. Many were hired by the Canadian Pacific Railway and the Canadian Northern Railway as freight handlers for the construction of the railway while others were employed in the forest industry or at the coal docks, mines and elevators.<sup>9</sup>

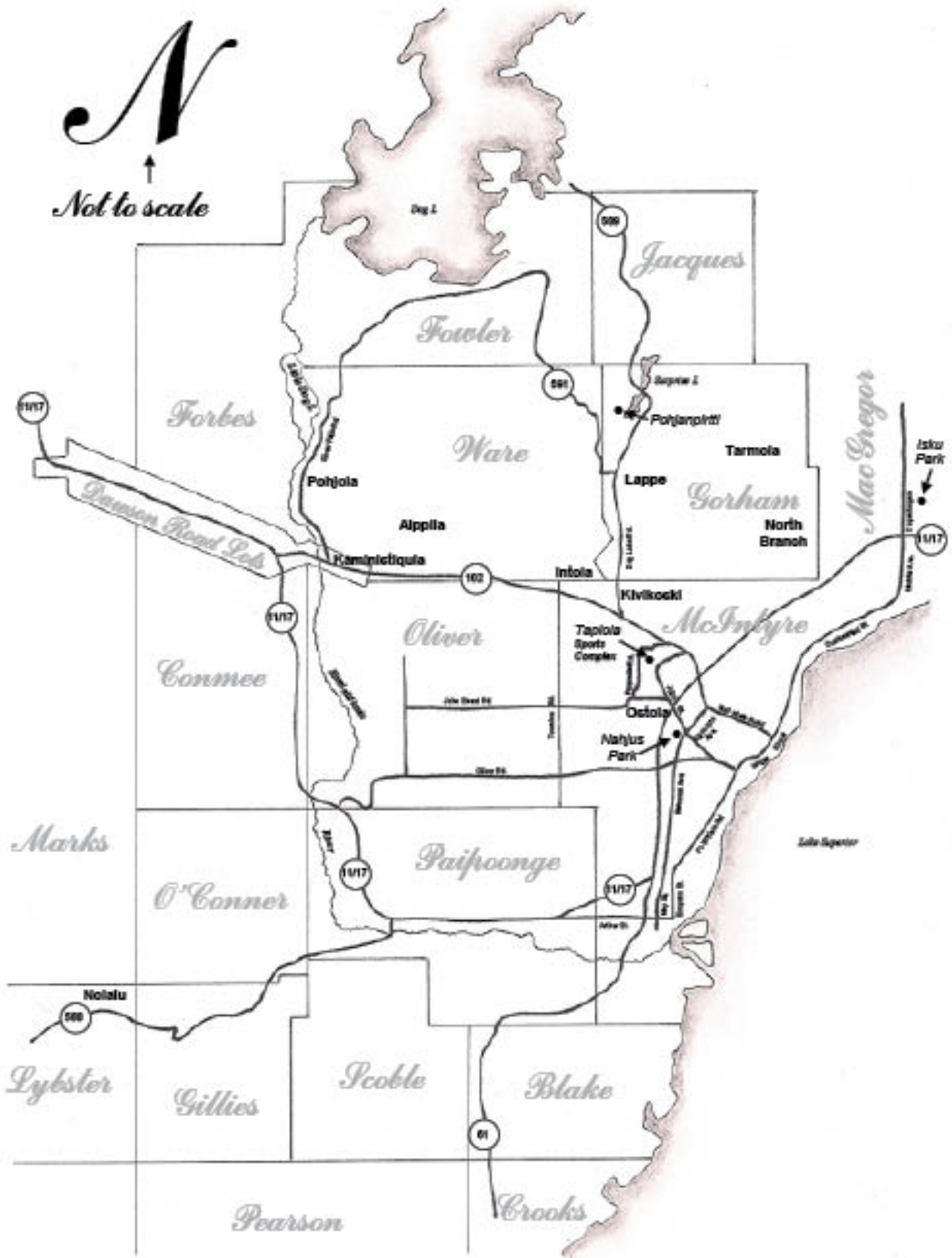


*Early railway workers. TBFCHS MG8,D,1,11,H,I102*

Finnish immigrants always applied themselves to the best of their ability. Their hard work did not go unnoticed. During the early years of immigration, employers, especially those from the railway companies, were quick to recognize and experience what Finnish *sisu* was all about. The Finns were often described as “sturdy, honest, hard-working, God-fearing folk, used to hardship and toil, obliged to battle in order to live.”<sup>10</sup> No matter what task they had to perform, they consistently met and superseded the expectations of those around them.

Before long, they had earned themselves a reputation for being skillful workers who worked well as a team to help one another.<sup>11</sup> Their level of commitment and dedication to their work made the Finns one of the most desirable immigrants, and, as a result, were often given preference when it came to distributing work assignments.<sup>12</sup>

The flow of immigrants to Thunder Bay was steady until the First World War. The Finns continued to accept various jobs consisting of manual labour that required little skill or experience. However, when work could not be found within the city, they turned their attention to the rural areas of Thunder Bay and took up farming.



© 2013 Kathy Toivonen

At this time, the province of Ontario was giving away “free” agricultural land in what is presently known as the District of Thunder Bay in an attempt to build up the area.<sup>13</sup> In just a short amount of time, the popularity of Finns to this region resulted in a build up of the areas and eventually developed into distinctly Finnish communities such as Kivikoski, Tarmola, Alppila, Lappe, Intola, Ostola and Pohjola.

During this time, much of the framework was established for both the rural and urban settlements.<sup>14</sup> The Finns during this period developed a cooperative system where houses, farms, saunas, and, most importantly, halls were being built. Halls were the lifeblood of Finnish activity. The construction of halls allowed for the emergence of social and political groups. Those most common in the Thunder Bay area were political organizations, temperance societies, and unions. All were popular among the Finnish immigrants in the area as they served a vital function; they were a continuation of the cultural experience and society they had left behind.<sup>15</sup>

Although Finnish immigrants were often described as desirable immigrants, they were still viewed by many within Canada as merely another of the “dangerous foreigners” that were flooding the country.<sup>16</sup> It did not take long, however, for them to grow disenchanted and seek change. Some organizations remained permanent fixtures and expanded while others were absorbed into other organizations or quietly disappeared over the years. However, no matter what the state of play among rival parties and groups within the Finnish community, this “hall socialism” remained a powerful force.<sup>17</sup>

While those Finns who immigrated to Canada in the two subsequent waves of immigration after the First World War may have differed in political and ideological orientation, what failed to change were their spirit, determination, and pride in their culture.<sup>18</sup> The first wave of migration had established the infrastructure in the Thunder Bay area for political meetings, theatrical productions, music concerts, and sporting events. Athletic clubs in particular benefited from these recreational halls in that they were no longer limited to outdoor sports or the confines of practicing in one’s homes. Halls allowed athletic groups to expand their interests and grow in popularity.

Regardless of ideological orientation, Finns in the region believed that athletics and exercise could lead



*Nahjus girls' group 1920s. TBFCHS MG8,D,3,35,H,I311*

a person to “nature’s bosom” all while strengthening one’s character, fraternalism, decisiveness, and idealism.<sup>19</sup> The popularity of athletic clubs and sport among Finnish communities in the Thunder Bay area largely stems from their upbringing in Finland. From a young age, the importance of athletics was stressed so that they could achieve the ideal state of being: “a healthy

body, a healthy mind.” In order to do so, the Finns were encouraged at home, school, and in working groups to purge the body of any unnatural impurities through physical activity.<sup>20</sup>

Popularity within these organizations can be attributed to several factors; however, one of the more common explanations is that athletics is in their blood. The Finns have been exposed to sport and athletic activity for hundreds of years. For example, the Finns have been skiing since the 1100s as it was one of the more popular (and convenient) ways of transportation.<sup>21</sup> The emphasis that the Finns placed on the physical and mental state can be traced back as early as 1834 with the founding of the Institute of Physical Education at the University of Helsinki. Less than a decade later, physical education and training appeared in the school systems, being offered to students as a voluntary subject in the curricula.<sup>22</sup>

Outside of the schools, liberal educators and the labour movement of the late 1800s targeted the workers and the general public. In order to educate the masses on the plight of the workers and to broaden their outlook, activities of a social nature were developed, namely sports.<sup>23</sup> Spurred by the active social reforms brought on by the labour movement, numerous gymnastic and athletic unions were established for the general public.<sup>24</sup> The number of athletic unions grew so rapidly that there was a need to create a central governing organization. So, in 1896 the Finnish Women's Physical Education Association (previously known as the Finnish Women's Gymnastics Union) was formed along with the Finnish Central Sports Federation in 1900.<sup>25</sup> By 1940, there were 320,000 members registered with athletic unions, and by 1950, membership more than doubled with 757, 000.<sup>26</sup>

Another reason for the strength of their physical fibre is often attributed to the constant fighting and combating with foreign nations. Especially during the years of Swedish and Russian rule, the Finns were engaged in battles and military training which gave them physical staying power. By the time organized sport and clubs came about, the Finns were more than able to excel in athletics for sports were "merely a new expression of an old necessity."<sup>27</sup> The conditions experienced within Finland undoubtedly created their passion and natural aptitude for athletics. And, with such a conditioned mentality for healthy and active living, it was only natural for the Finns to continue to practice this philosophy when they immigrated to Canada.

However, as the first wave of immigrants began to adapt to their new homeland and became accustomed to the Canadian way of life, the need for Finnish groups as a coping mechanism diminished. Many of the Finnish cultural groups in the area experienced a decline in participation, membership and interest, with some even coming to an abrupt end.<sup>28</sup> With the arrival of the second and third waves of immigration came a revitalization of Finnish culture. Their need for the familiar created a much needed resurgence of Finnish involvement in the area. The athletic clubs in the area were no exception. Even though there were some clubs that were unable to reform and regroup, a large portion of them were granted an extension.

Although Finnish immigrants in the post-Second World War era were quick to establish, and in some cases re-establish, athletic clubs in their respective geographical locations, it is important to note that the majority of them were affiliated with larger parent organizations; those most common in the area being unions and political organizations. Among these groups existed a great divide between those which occupied the "Big Finn Hall" and those in the "Little Finn Hall". The main headquarters for the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and its Finnish auxiliary, the Canadian Industrial Union Support Circle *Canada Työväen Kannatus Litto* (CTKL) was the Finnish Labour Temple at 314 Bay Street, while the Finnish Organization of Canada (FOC), previously known as the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada, owned the hall at 316 Bay Street. Such groups used athletics as a means of

helping to awaken class-consciousness while others used physical culture to develop moral discipline.<sup>29</sup> Whatever their reasons, these organizations were largely responsible for the creation and longevity of most athletic clubs in the area.

Well into the 1980s, they were able to provide resources such as monetary aid, equipment, facilities, and membership that were necessary to sustain athletic clubs. As long as these organizations were in existence, so too were the clubs with which they were affiliated. However, when the need for these organizations dissipated over the years, the majority of the athletic clubs disappeared with them. There were independent clubs which were free from labour and political ties, but their existence was very brief, and only one of them, the *Reipas* Sports Club, remained active up until just recently.



*The Finnish Labour Temple in 1923. TBFCHS MG8,D,1,1,A,I2.3*

While the need and popularity for these organizations may have waned over the years, the Finns' love and passion for athletics remained. Regardless of their political or social orientation, the Finns continued to strive towards the common goal of "a healthy body, a healthy mind." This ideal, coupled with their fierce determination, unwavering optimism, and competitive spirit no doubt created a lasting impression and legacy within the history of these clubs and the city of Thunder Bay.