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### Wilderness and Landscape: Finnish immigrant expressions in the American midwest

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During recent years in the United States the field of landscape studies has developed and grown appreciably. Geographers, of course, have displayed a long interest in the study of landscapes, although paradigm shifts in the discipline have given reduced importance to landscape geography at various points in time. More recently, however, landscape studies have merged as a truly multi-disciplinary endeavor. Individuals with backgrounds in geography, history, landscape architecture, anthropology, folklore, literature, American studies, and other disciplines have made important contributions to the body of work that is broadly defined as landscape studies (e.g., Meinig 1979, Stilgoe 1982, Jackson 1984).

These investigators are concerned almost entirely with understanding and assessing the cultural landscape; as such, most give attention to the vernacular or ordinary landscapes that people have created over time. This concern with »typical» or »ordinary» people and environments parallels developments in American historiography since the late 1960s, a time when academics interested in social history began giving much greater attention to non-elite groups and individuals. Included in this »new history» have been important studies of groups traditionally ignored in previous eras such as women, laborers, farmers, immigrants, ethnic and racial minorities, children, and so forth. Landscape studies have developed in a similar manner. Indeed, as geographer D.W. Meinig (1979) has noted: »landscape study is a companion of that form of social history which seeks to understand the routine lives of ordinary people».

While a skilled researcher can employ a variety of sources and methods to investigate the landscapes that people have developed in different times and places, historical assessments do pose rather unique problems. Most accounts written decades or centuries ago that might contain landscape descriptions were prepared by rather well educated people; on the other hand, sources that could provide direct insights to the perceptions

and attitudes of the typical residents living in a place or area generally remain much more inaccessible to the investigator. The issue becomes even cloudier when considering immigrants who moved to areas where the language, culture, and environment were quite different from their homeland. Most of these people were too busy to record their landscape impressions and perceptions, and others could not read or write; in addition, those who were literate probably had little interest in describing the landscapes they viewed each day.

Nevertheless, one is still left with the suspicion that some insights to the landscape images of these people are available — if one could only seek out more sources and surmount some of the linguistic problems that are posed. Nineteenth and early twentieth-century immigrants who arrived in America from the Nordic countries, for example, were almost universally literate. It should not be assumed, of course, that these immigrants were well educated; few were, in fact, but almost every Scandinavian and Finnish immigrant was at least familiar with the basics of reading and writing.

The more than 300 000 Finns who settled in North America from the mid-1860s and onward developed some 350 newspapers, journals, and periodicals in their new homeland. These publications often served as the key factors in linking America's Finnish communities together. Job opportunities and possibilities often were portrayed, as were politics, love, births, death, and the weather. Of greatest interest for this discussion, however, are the comments of Finns who described the features and landscapes of the new settlements and communities they had recently developed or were in the process of forming in America.

The ensuing discussion is intended to give no more than some brief insights to the landscape impressions of immigrants who, in this case, happen to be Finns. The entire study has been based upon a review of some 4000 pages of Finnish American newspapers published between the



Figure 1. The cutover forest of the Upper Midwest posed many problems before it could be transformed by Finnish immigrants into a landscape of clearings, fields, and farms. Source: Palmquist family collection, Brantwood, Wisconsin.

1870s and 1930s; and also has used other sources such as oral histories, journals, and miscellaneous accounts which provide glimpses of the landscapes that Finnish immigrants perceived and created in one of their major settlement areas — the Upper Midwest region of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.<sup>1</sup>

### Wilderness

Finnish immigrant writers seldom used such a sophisticated word as landscape (*maisema*) when discussing the environments they viewed and formed in the New World. Instead, they employed a number of related Finnish terms that referred to wilderness (*erämaa*), nature (*luonto*), marsh or bog (*suo*), forest (*metsä*), lake (*järvi*), field (*pelto*), pasture (*laidun*), glade (*aukio*), and grove (*metsikkö*). The concept of *erämaa* or wilderness is especially important when considering the Finnish lexicon. In America, many scholarly accounts emphasize the negative properties of wilderness that were expressed by individuals and groups as they encountered areas on and beyond the nation's frontier (e.g., Marx 1964). The Finns of America, however, seldom described their encounters so pejoratively — even when it was the hardscrabble environment of the Lake Superior region that served as the setting. Though this issue needs to be investigated more thoroughly on both sides of the Atlantic, it is quite possible that the wilderness of Finland, which so often

served to sustain local populations by providing vital opportunities for hunting and gathering, also was viewed in a relatively positive light by Finns in America. While the majority of Finnish Americans may not have been necessarily enthusiastic in their praise of wilderness, neither did they regard it with fear. Some of the more romantic accounts occasionally sought to draw connections between the wilderness (and nature) of Finland and that of the Upper Midwest, and rather poetic interpretations even commented that the breezes spreading through the trees reminded one of songs played on a Finnish *kantele* (*Uusi Kotimaa ja Amerikan Suometar* 1890).

### Landscape

Perhaps nothing was more impressive to the Finns of the Upper Midwest than experiencing the transition that occurred as wilderness and cutover forest were transformed into landscapes of fields and farms. This is not unusual, for the »middle landscape,» poised between the wilderness and city, has been idealized in much of western intellectual thought; landscape has served, according to Leo Marx (1964), »as the symbolic repository of value of all kinds — economic, political, aesthetic, religious.»

Various Finnish American commentators wrote about the appealing landscape features of fields and pastures, especially those situations where the setting was framed by trees and lakes. One writer exclaimed that a new log house he had observed was placed in the midst of an »attractive park», while another reporter described dwelling units enveloped in a shimmering aspen

<sup>1</sup> For a map of a three state region that portrays Finnish settlement in 1900, refer to *Terra* 94: 3, 1982, p. 191.

Figure 2. To many Finnish Americans the successful development of a farm, represented by its associated log buildings and other structures, was closely associated with an attractive and productive landscape. Source: Amerikan albumi: kuvia Amerikan suomalaisten asuinpaikoilta. Brooklyn, New York, 1904.



grove. When coupled with certain sounds, the landscape experiences of some writers became almost rapturous. A grove of pine trees, stated one immigrant in 1890, served as the setting for »nature's chorus», while another commentator reported that the singular tone of the cow bell invoked deep feelings and memories of a boyhood spent long ago in Finland. A contented Finn summarized his thoughts and undoubtedly those of many other immigrants when he wrote from an isolated area of Minnesota in 1913: »Far away from the big world, divorced from its large, sweaty, and blood thirsty factories, I slowly built my own wonderful home.» It is no wonder then that the saying, *Oma tupa, oma lupa* (»one's own home, one's own freedom»), was popular both in Finland and America. A home, a farm, and a landscape could be truly attractive only if they were owned by the inhabitants themselves (*Amerikan Suomalainen Lehti* 1880, 1884; *Uusi Kotimaa* 1887; 1890; 1893; *Uusi Kotimaa ja Amerikan Suometar* 1890).

### Summary

The above comments provide but some abbreviated examples of the observations that emerge when immigrants and immigrant culture are added to the list of topics that merit consideration in current landscape studies. In America, millions of immigrants played a major role in creating and shaping the landscapes of an emerging nation. Though the Finns comprised but a small portion of the total immigrant population, their imprint was especially evident in certain areas of America such as the Upper Midwest region. The landscapes that the Finns formed in several areas of this region represent

a unique blending of both Old and New World cultures, attitudes, and ideas. Determining whether the landscape perceptions and impressions of Finns were unique or similar to those of other immigrants certainly will demand much more study and consideration. Quite obviously, however, the landscapes of the past can be probed and assessed from a variety of viewpoints.

Historian Theodore Blegan (1947) noted over four decades ago that immigrants may have been unlettered, but they seldom were inarticulate. It remains for the scholar, whether considering the landscape or any number of other issues, to articulate once again the expressions of these large but often ignored groups of people.

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