

## **HISTORY, ACHIEVEMENTS AND REMEMBRANCE OF THE LOUHI BAND OF MONESSEN, PENNSYLVANIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Louhi Band of Monessen, Pennsylvania existed from 1900-1940. During this period, it grew in prominence among the Finnish-American communities across the country and abroad. This paper looks at the historical geography of the Finnish ethnic settlement in this southwest Pennsylvania city, and the varied achievements of the most famous Finnish concert band in the United States.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Finnish people were among the earliest charter members of the newly settled North American continent. While many are aware of the arrival of the English, French and Spanish, some even know about the Dutch and Swedes, few know that with the arrival of the Swedes in 1634, there were up to some 500 Finns who settled in the New Sweden Colony at the mouth of the Delaware River (Koivukangas, 1988). These early Finns were part of the Swedish Kingdom at the time, but they brought with them the culture and language, which still exists in Finland. Some of these aspects, such as the log cabin construction, has been well documented (Jordan and Kaups, 1989). Yet, over the centuries, the immigration of Finns to the United States has remained quite low. Compared to other ethnic groups, there have been peak periods of Finnish immigration, for example the early 1900s, and most importantly the 1920s when the largest wave of Finnish immigration occurred. Traditionally, the majority of the Finns settled in the mining areas of Midwestern States, such as Minnesota, Michigan and Wisconsin, but many are found in other states as well. Characteristic of immigrant Finnish culture was the establishment of numerous organizations, which included theatre groups, choirs, and bands. The first band was formed in Calumet, Michigan in 1889, and by the turn of the century there were many bands in Finnish settlements across the country (Ilmonen, 1919). The band movement was furthered by the sponsorship of contests and musical festivals and also by the

immigration to the US of many of the Finnish Battalion Band members when Russification policies became prominent in Finland. Rather than be forced to fight for the Czar's Army, many single men chose to emigrate to North America, and thus brought with them musical skills already learned in Finland. Thus, the aim of this paper is to present a comprehensive and pictorial documentation of the famed Louhi Band of Monessen, Pennsylvania, which existed for four decades prior to the Second World War. Following a brief review of pertinent literature on Finnish ethnic band music, and an introduction to the Finns of Monessen, the paper will focus on the formation and expansion of the Louhi Band, its major achievements and eventual decline and the reasons thereof, and the present state of research and recognition.

### **PREVIOUS LITERATURE**

Previous studies on musical groups, bands and performers of Finnish ethnic heritage have occurred amongst historians and researchers interested in this form of culture retention. Most studies have occurred by Finns themselves in Finland (Ilmonen, 1930; Kero, 1997; J.Niemelä, 2001; Sjöblom, 1937), while a limited amount of work on the topic has been done by Finnish-Americans (Riippa, 1981; Palo-Stoller, 1996). Local histories of Monessen have also included the Louhi Band in its publications, exhibited by the 1998 Centennial Booklet published by the City of Monessen (Valley Independent, 1999).

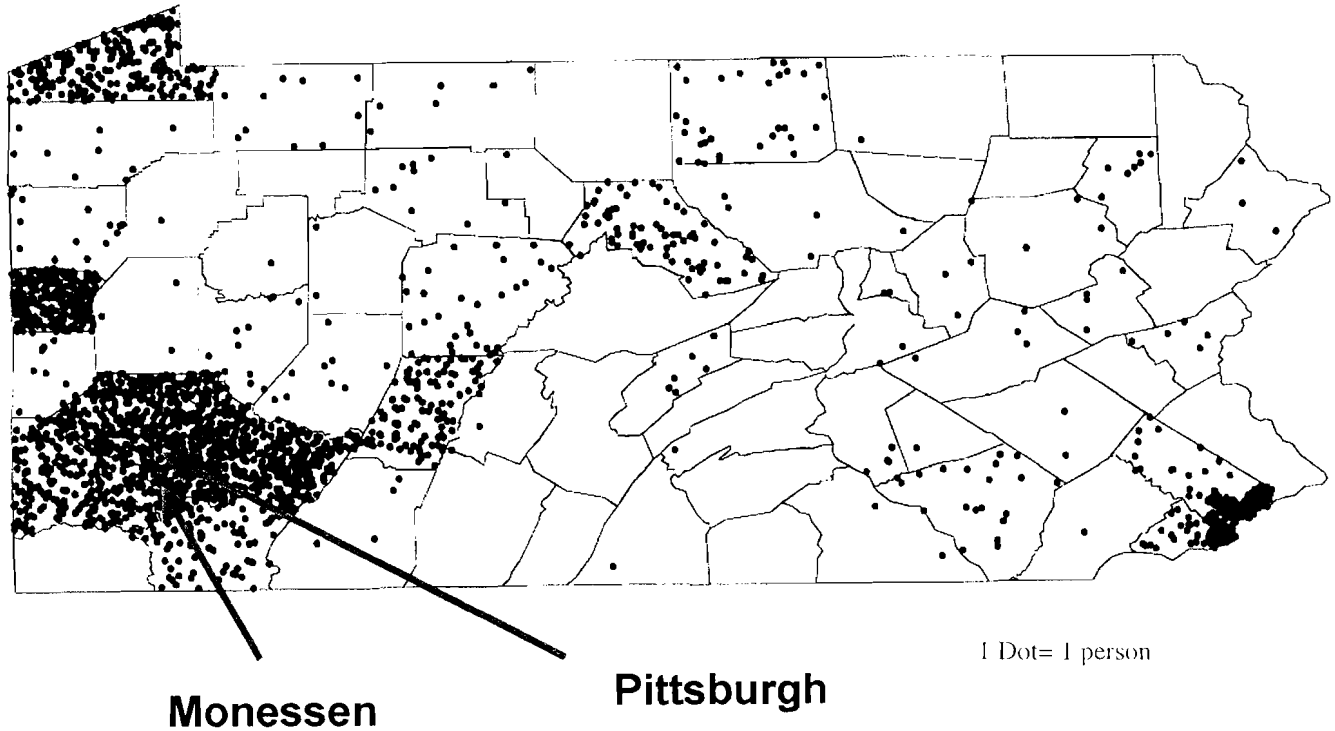


Figure 1. Pennsylvania Finns, 1910

Source: 1910 U.S. Census

While a number of studies have been done on the general music history of the Finnish-Americans, the importance of the musical heritage in unifying the ethnicity, and promoting traditions and appreciation of community spirit, there is a lack of detailed coverage of individual bands – especially the achievements and life of bands such as the Louhi. One of the more detailed accounts of the Finnish ethnic group involves a tri-state examination of the Finns in Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. In this work by Kolehmainen (1977), there is good coverage of the well-known Humina Band of Ashtabula, Ohio as well as the Louhi Band of Monessen. Still, the overall coverage of this text leaves many areas open within the theme of band music. Sociologists and historians agree that ethnic identity and unity is fostered by expressions of culture, whether they are in the form of language, religion, foods, clothing, festivals and celebrations, as well as the fine arts. Music is a part of the fine arts, and it is band music and its importance within the Finnish-American community that helped make Louhi into a formidable cultural institution. In order to exemplify this importance to the

reader, this paper will examine the history and achievements of the best-known Finnish-American concert band. This in turn may become part of a revival in appreciation, which many have forgotten.

## **MONESSEN FINNS**

Monessen, is found along the Monongahela River in Westmoreland County, and was incorporated in 1899. Found in southwestern Pennsylvania, this area has traditionally been a very strong centre for Finnish people. Indeed, the four leading Pennsylvania counties in terms of Finns in 1910 were all in this area (Figure 1 and Table 1). The name of the city comes from the Monongahela River and Essen, Germany, which was the home for hundreds of residents of this once important steel and tin-plate mill town. This was also where hundreds of Finns found work. The majority of Finns were employed in the local tin-plate mill, while others also worked in local steel mills. The heavy

manufacturing positions attracted most Finns. Similar work was found in the steel mills along the Monongahela River in surrounding counties, and it is not surprising that Allegheny County (Glassport, McKeesport, Pittsburgh) and Washington County (Monongahela, Donora, Charleroi) had many Finns. Mining operations in Lawrence County (Bessemer, New Castle), and dockworkers in Erie (Erie County) had many Finns (Kolehmainen, 1977).

The Finnish community of Monessen began its development in 1897 when the first Finnish men began to work at the local tin plate mill. This population grew into a large homogenous community known as the "Finn Town" which was home to over 900 Finns in 1906 (Figure 2). In 1910 Monessen had a population of 11,755, and if the Finns numbered close to 500 as reported in the 1910 census, their percentage would have been about 4.2% (US Census, 1913). Other scholars note that during the height of the Finnish settlement, some 1,200 - 1,500 Finns may have been found in the city of some 20,000 population, which was the population level for both 1920-1940 census counts (Foltz, 1964:17). This represents a proportion of some 6% - 7.5% of the city population.

Monessen thus was a major center for Finnish people, as can be seen from the counties with Finns, which are centered in SW Pennsylvania. With this large concentration, a distinct clustering of Finns in an ethnic neighbourhood developed along the Motheral, Chestnut and Clarendon Avenues near 4th and 6th Streets (Figure 2). While the heavy industries of Monessen attracted many, there were also a few who established shops and provided services to the ethnic community as well. In time, the Monessen Finns established bakeries, grocery stores, insurance companies, public sauna facilities, while others worked as tailors, cobblers, and entrepreneurs. As a result of this settlement, the early Finns developed a number of organizations and activities which became renown

across the United States (Roinila, 1999).

Probably the best known structure built by the Monessen Finns was Temperance Hall (called the White Finn Hall), which was supported by church-going Finns and non-socialists (Figure 3). The socialist Finns, on the other hand, built for themselves a Red Finn Hall, only a few blocks away from the White Finn Hall. Both halls provided much activity to the Finnish community, as did the other organizations such as the Lutheran Church, the Knights of Kaleva, etc., but without a doubt, the most lasting institution of the Monessen Finns was the development and success of the Louhi Band.

### THE LOUHI BAND

The Louhi Band was the pride of Monessen, and especially the joy of the "White" Finns of Monessen (Steen, 1984). It was a musical group organized among the Finnish community on February 14, 1900, only two years after Monessen was founded (Figures 4). That first band consisted of twelve men under the direction of Axel Ruuti (Bell, 1998; Gibalowski, 1998). The name of the band was taken from the Finnish literary epic *Kalevala* (Lönrröt, 1835), which deals with the fight between mythologic characters *Kaleva* and *Pohjola*, over the possession of the "sampo", a miraculous mill, the symbol of wealth and prosperity. In these stories, *Louhi* is the maid of the North (Eskola, 1988).

In 1908 the band had nearly 40 members, \$2000 worth of instruments and equipment, its own uniforms and a sewing circle auxiliary that was, according to the newspapers, still in operation in 1915 for the benefit of the band (Amerikan Suometar, 1915).

**Table 1. Pennsylvania Finns, 1910**

1.	Westmoreland County	508
2.	Allegheny County	373
3.	Lawrence County	274
4.	Washington County	256
5.	Erie County	243
	City of Monessen	493

Source: US Census, 1913

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By 1915, the conductor was George E. Wahlstrom. Mr. Wahlstrom developed the band into a first class orchestra, playing classical music in concerts at the High School, the Sixth Street Park Band Stand, at the City Park, and Gospel Meetings. By this time the band had nearly fifty members and contained a library of 1500 compositions. Weather permitting, they rehearsed outdoors every Sunday morning in front the Finnish Temperance Hall. Rehearsals became social events as members of the community would gather around the band or sit on their porches and listen to the music (Figure 5; Hänninen, 1986).

During the tenure of Mr. Wahlstrom, the Sibelius Club was formed in 1916. Its purpose was the promotion and publication of Finnish music in

America. This club also received national recognition as the printers, publishers, and distributors of sheet music for groups all over the United States. The only known book publication by the Sibelius Club was *Airut*, in which stories of the various bands and choirs across America are documented, including the strong Monessen activities (*Airut*, 1916).

In 1917, the Louhi Band won first prize in a contest between seven regional bands in Belle Vernon, PA. The prize was \$100 and respect and honor worth much more than money to the Finns. In the Finnish-American press, there were complaints about the lack of Finnish people in the audience during Louhi's public concerts! The band made many trips and performed in Ohio, West Virginia

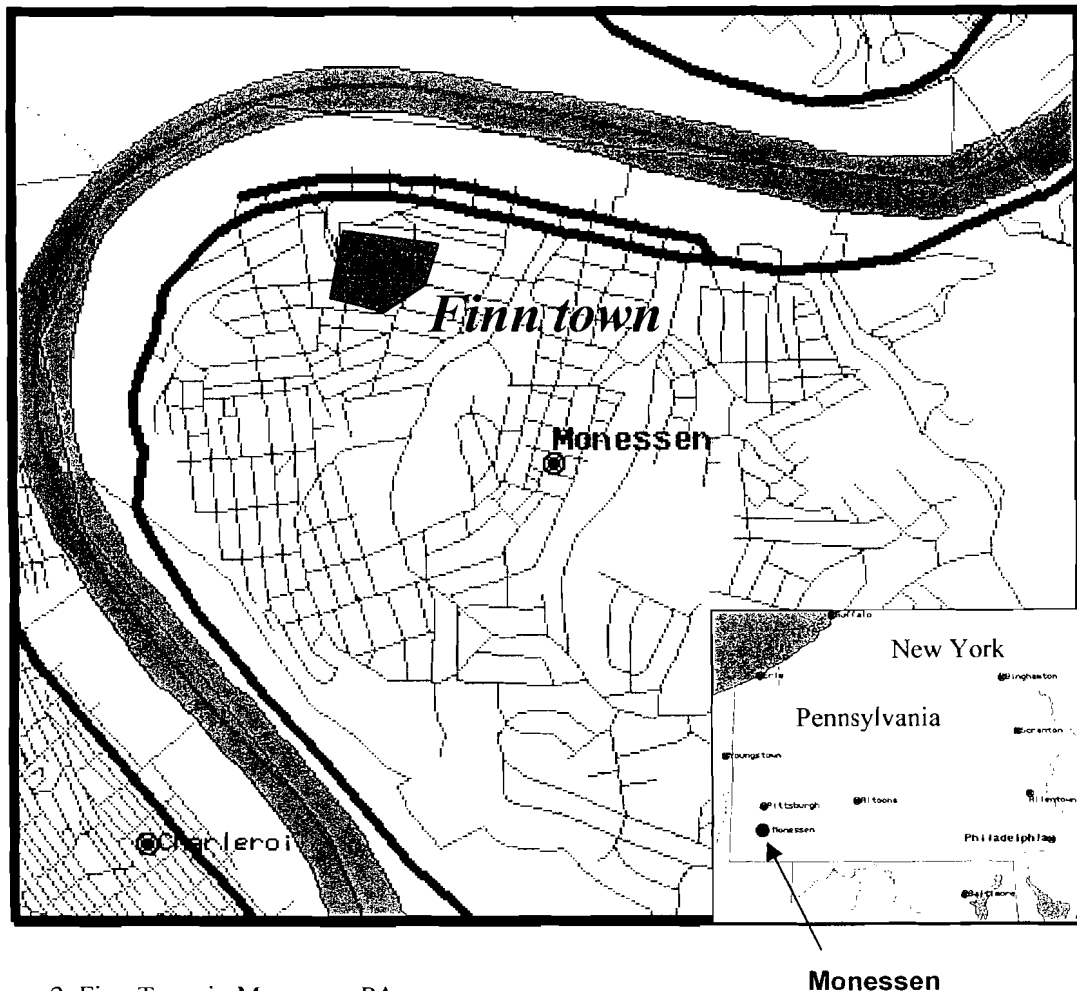


Figure 2. Finn Town in Monessen, PA

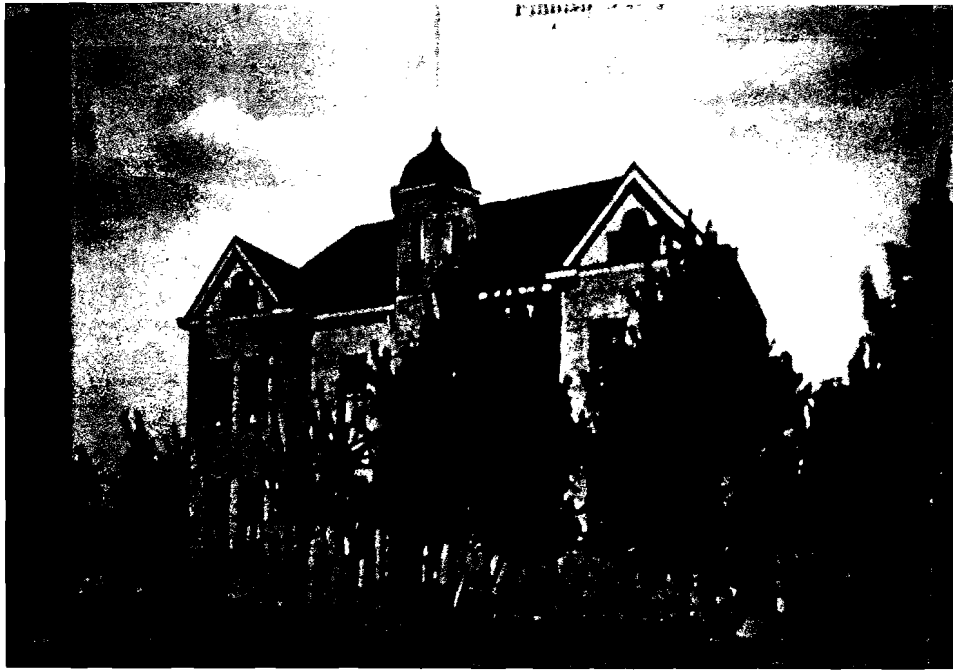


Figure 3. Finnish Temperance Hall, 1920's. Photo courtesy of Janet White.

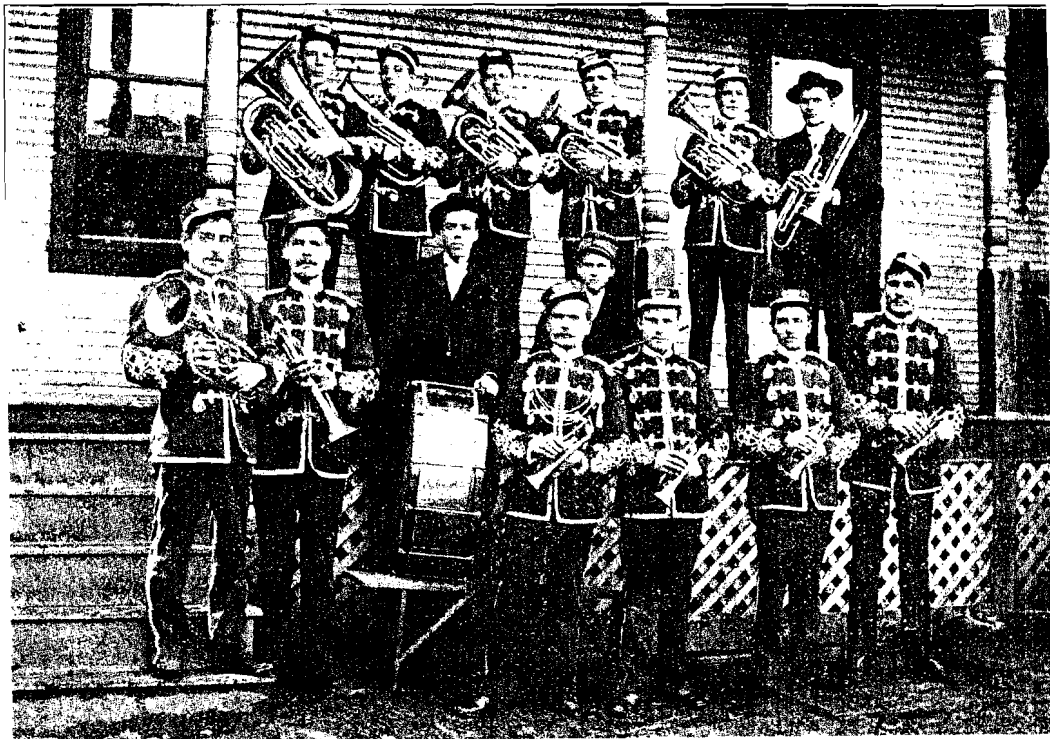


Figure 4. Luohi Band ca. 1900 with early uniforms. Photo from Airut, 1916.



Figure 5. Louhi Band practice in front of Temperance Hall, ca. 1920's. Photo courtesy of Elna Bell.

and Pennsylvania (Amerikan Suometar, 1920).

In 1918, the Louhi Band performed at the All-Nations Liberty Bond Parade in New York City. While in New York City, the band cut their first record of Finnish compositions. On the Victor label, the first side was *Maamme Laula* and the flip was *Pois Rannoilta Suomen*.<sup>1</sup> The success and fame of Louhi was maintained over the years, and in 1920, they toured Finland giving concerts throughout the country. The record of that trip is preserved in the 1921 *Kirkollinen Kalenteri*, pp.115-119, and in the *Siirtokansan Kalenteri*, pp.81-101. The Louhi Band

and some 400 others sailed from New York City on May 22. After a series of concerts in Helsinki, Sibelius himself was in the audience, the band played throughout the country. The band published a large 110-page program booklet entitled *Tervehdys Suomelle* (Greetings to Finland), for the trip. In the book, American Finnish people, their cultural pursuits, achievements, associational activities and way of life were presented. Conductor George Wahlstrom's tenure with the Louhi Band ended in 1921.

Lauri (Louis) Koski, an accomplished

**Table 2. Pennsylvania, 1940**

1.	Philadelphia County	304
2.	Erie County	206
3.	Lawrence County	191
4.	Westmoreland County	172
5.	Allegheny County	172

City of Monessen

151

Source: US Census, 1940

composer, was the conductor of the Louhi Band in the early 30s. During the tenure of Lauri (Louis) Koski, the Louhi Band made a second recording, this time for the New York Phonograph Recording Company in 1931. The first side featured *E Pluribus Unum*, an original composition by Koski. The flip side was *Kesäpäivä Kangsalla*, which Koski had arranged. I have not been able to obtain this record or the music since the Library of Congress does not have this in their archives.<sup>2</sup> Paul Passoja was the last conductor of the Louhi Band. Passoja was a native Monessenite, whose immigrant parents Charles and Wilhemina immigrated from Finland. All the Passoja boys played in the Louhi Band, and were taught music by George Wahlstrom. Paul played the tuba. Upon graduating from Monessen High School, he went to the Ernest Williams Conservatory of Music in New York City. After New York, Passoja studied music at West Virginia Wesleyan University in Buchanan. He then taught music at Mannington, West Virginia and West Virginia Wesleyan before he came back to Monessen as conductor of the Monessen High School Band and the Louhi Band.

In 1938, Passoja led the Louhi Band to the tercentenary celebrations of the New Sweden Colony (Swedish-Finnish Delaware Colony) of 1638. In June, 1940, the band performed in the Finland Day program at the Finnish Pavilion of the New York World's Fair. They had two performances, the first an afternoon Finland Day program at the Court of Peace under guest conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra Tauno Hännikäinen. The second performance was a Bonfire Program in the evening, also at the Court of Peace. The last known concert given by Louhi was performed on December 1, 1940 at the Schenley Hotel where the ceremonies celebrated Finnish independence as well as the 75<sup>th</sup> birthday of Jean Sibelius. Honorary guests included the Finnish Ambassador Hjalmar Procope who was

the guest speaker (E.Niemelä, 2001). Another world tour to Finland was planned, but World War II brought those dreams to an end (E.Niemelä, 1998). According to informants, the Louhi Band stopped performing and practicing after 1940. Two reasons exist for the decline of the Louhi Band. First, the closure of Pittsburgh Steel Mills (included rod mills, wire-drawing mills, galvanizing plants, etc.) in 1930 forced many workers – including the Finns – to move away and look for new work. Thus, hundreds emigrated away from Monessen. This out-migration, which had begun earlier after the 1919 strikes and work stoppages, and eventually affected the entire region is seen in the census counts and maps. The Finns who moved to destinations such as New York, Cleveland and Chicago, were replaced in the Louhi Band by many non-Finns who eventually began replacing many of the former Finnish bandsmen. Towards the end of the 1930s, there were bandsmen from backgrounds involving the Italians, English, and others (Altobelli, 2001). Secondly, the abrupt end came as a result of the War effort, as many Finnish men volunteered to serve Finland during its war against the Soviets, while others joined the US military and served overseas (Niemelä, 2001; Karanen, 1998; Kokkila, 1998). Thus, the push factors of unemployment and the oncoming war were the chief reasons for the demise of the Louhi Band.

Conductor Paul Passoja remained in Monessen, playing for the Shriners Band in Pittsburgh. He died on June 5, 1963. In 1940, with a much smaller Finnish ethnic population in Monessen and the region, Philadelphia County had the highest concentration, while Allegheny and Westmoreland counties still had sizeable populations (Figure 6 and Table 2; US Census, 1940). With the coming of many Italians in the 1950s and African-Americans in the 1970s, the ethnic composition of the neighbourhood changed. The once homogenous

**Table 3. Pennsylvania Finns, 1940**

1.	Allegheny County	827
2.	Erie County	773
3.	Philadelphia County	580
4.	Bucks County	505
5.	Chester County	504
	City of Monessen	137

Source: US Census, 1940

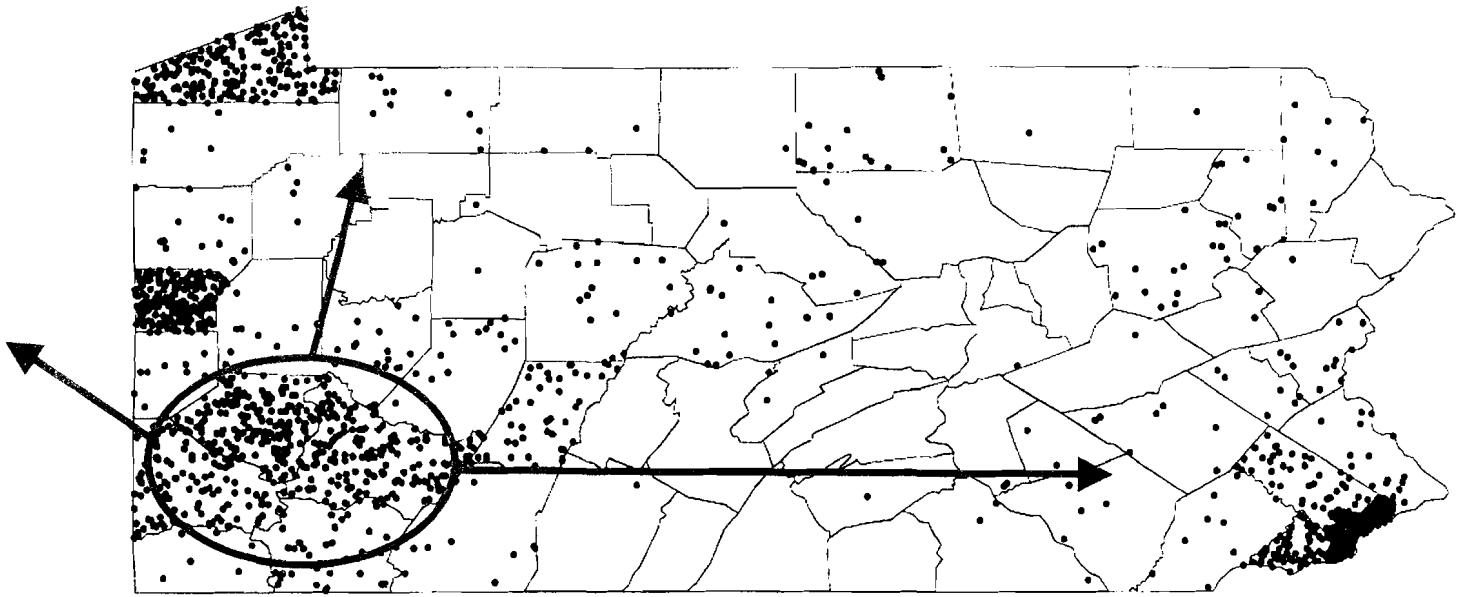


Figure 6. Pennsylvania Finns, 1940

Source: 1940 U.S. Census

1 Dot=1 person

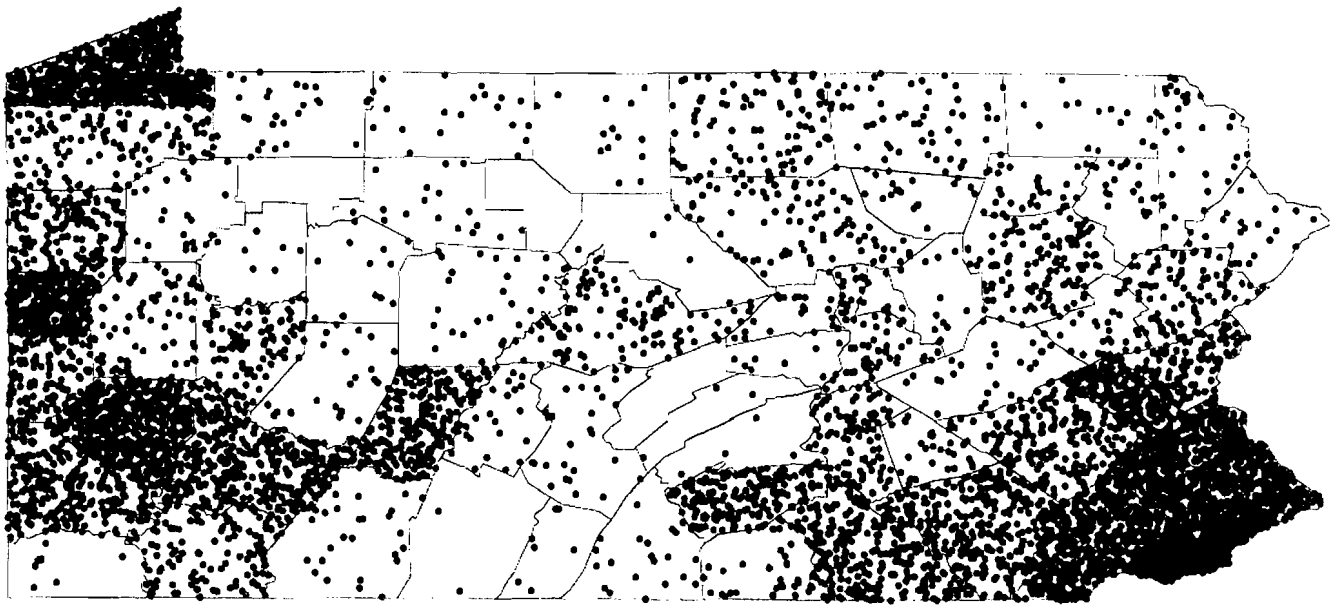


Figure 7. Pennsylvania Finns, 1990

Source: 1990 U.S. Census

1 Dot=1 person



ethnic island of Finns began to disappear. Aside from the lack of work already noted, one additional reason helps explain the declining Finnish presence in Monessen. This involves the quota laws of the 1920s, which curtailed much of the immigration waves from around the world. With no new immigration to the country, and with time, foreign-born Finns inevitably would become a smaller component of the Monessen population. While a large number moved out, a few of the older Finnish residents have remained in the area. Lennart Kokkila, who played in the Louhi Band and also played in the high school band has remained, while Tykō Karanen, a journeyman trumpeter, who at one time played for Big Bands such as the Frank Lombardi Orchestra and Al Nalli Orchestra, has only recently returned to Monessen after an absence of some 50 years. Former members Everet Niemelä – who attended the 1938 tercentenary of New Sweden, and Mr. Altobelli, all recall with great fondness the music the Louhi Band played, the travels they made, and the experiences they have had over the years (Altobelli, 2001; Kalvesmaki, 1998; Karanen, 1998; Kokkila, 1998; Niemelä, 2000).

In 1990, Monessen had a total city population of 9,900, which is well below the 20,300 that was reached in 1930 (Figure 7 and Table 3). While some of the western counties appear to have high numbers – the 1990 census included single and multiple ancestry, which is different from Finnish-born individuals. According to the census, Monessen had a total of 137 individuals with their first or second ancestry as Finnish (US Census, 1990). These third and fourth generation descendants lack the awareness of the local ethnic history. It is also inevitable that old remnants of Finnish ethnicity, begins to disappear. This, indeed, was the case of the White Finn Hall.

## CONCLUSIONS

In 1999, I had an opportunity to travel to Monessen and investigate the attic of the former Finnish White Hall scheduled for demolition in the winter of 2000. After hearing a rumor that there may have been

some Louhi Band uniforms in the attic of the building, I decided to investigate and try to recover any memorabilia that might have remained in the dilapidated building (Figure 8). Climbing up to the top floor of the boarded up building, I found an opening in the ceiling that opened into the attic. Covered in soot and ash, the attic was dark and hot. With a flashlight I looked around the attic and was about to leave when I noticed a small closet in one corner of the attic. Peeking into the space, I found a wicker basket with 6 Louhi hats! Other paraphernalia was nearby, including pages of a 1908 *Sirtolainen* newspapers written in the old Finnish script, possible props for plays and a half-crest of Finland, which was painted on wood. Reclaiming these items makes history come alive, and to preserve these findings, two hats were donated to the Finnish-American Heritage Archives at Finlandia University in Hancock, MI, and two hats, the wicker basket, props and crest to the Greater Monessen Historical Society. One hat was given to the gentleman who informed me of the rumor, while I kept the last hat for myself.

It is gratifying to be able to contribute in some way - whether it is through archival research, interviewing old-time residents, collecting material such as photos or recordings, and exploration of old and often forgotten structures - and share findings such as these with an audience. There appears to be little importance given to the existence of the Louhi Band amongst scholars, the local residents of the City of Monessen, as well as the Finnish-Americans at large. Many have forgotten the achievements and importance of this musical institution in Southwest Pennsylvania. With the eventual demolition of the White Finn Hall, any other possible remnants of Louhi memorabilia were lost (Figure 9). While appreciation for the documentation of the explored and discovered material has been received, much more could have been done years ago (Harhai, 2000). Given the historical geography examined here, it also is a small part of the continued legacy of Finnish-American lives that is part of the ethnic fabric of American society. I thank the people of Monessen who have gone before and the descendants of many Louhi Band members who are interested in preserving this past and assisting me in my research. By doing so, we are all remembering and honouring the achievements made within the Finnish-American community.



Figure 8. The Finnish Temperance Hall, Spring 1999. Photo by author.

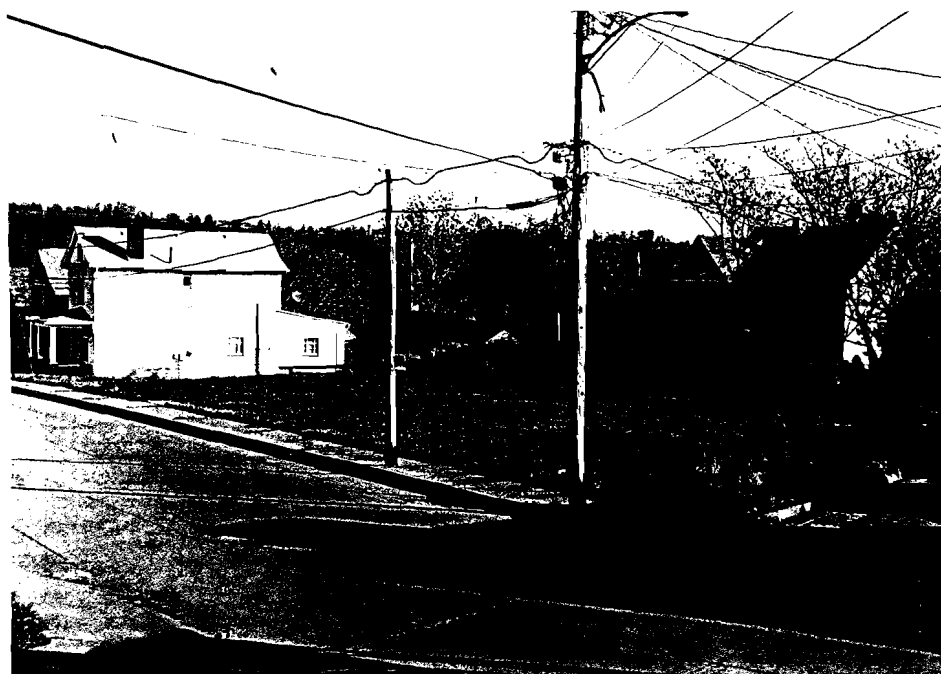


Figure 9. The once-famous site of the Temperance Hall, Fall 2001. Photo by author.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Finlandia Foundation Trust for their generous support in this research, and two anonymous reviewers for their help and comments on this manuscript.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The 1918 Victor label recording was obtained from the Library of Congress Sound Division, and was played for the audience at the paper presentation.

<sup>2</sup> The second record is available amongst some of the Monessen Finns and descendants of Louhi bandsmen. I have not been able to re-record these numbers to date, although I have obtained photos of the record.