

FINNISH COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN ON LAKE SUPERIOR: THE RISE AND FALL OF AN ETHNIC FISHERY

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ABSTRACT: *Fishing on Lake Superior has existed for hundreds of years. With the coming of European immigrants, many Scandinavians found the waters of Lake Superior superb for continuing their Old World trade. This paper focuses on the ongoing research dealing with the development and decline of the Finnish fishermen and their commercial fisheries of Lake Superior. This paper will examine the history, the social context, cultural values and traditions of the Finns encountered in the Canadian Lakehead, Minnesota's North Shore and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Log-roller fishermen and eating lawyers (burbot) are among some of the traditions and practices that existed in these areas. With time, fishing villages gave way to other primary industries, government intervention and the sports fisheries that hurt the fishing operations. For some fishermen, relocation to more southern locations was a solution to the declining and eventual closing of commercial fisheries on Lake Superior. The memories of this once-thriving industry are now retained and revived in the collections of local museums, which have often been influenced by the descendents of former fishermen.*

INTRODUCTION

Growing up within the Finnish-Canadian community of Thunder Bay, Ontario, I always heard stories of the Finns who had worked in mines and lumber camps. I had read about the many domestics who worked for Canadian families. I had also heard and read of the salmon fisheries of the West Coast, and the Finns who lived and worked in Astoria, OR and Sointula, BC (Korkiasaari, 1989). During my dissertation research when I visited Vancouver, BC, for example, I discovered for myself the historic fishing village of Finn Slough, BC (Roinila, 1997). However, I had never heard of the Finns as fishermen on the Great Lakes. Because of this general knowledge gained over the years, it is not surprising to learn that "studies of Finnish workers have... concentrated on few occupations: miners, lumber workers, and maids. Much less is known about fishers, trappers, factory workers, construction workers, railroad workers, farmers and small businesses" (Lindstrom, 1997 pgs. 35-36). Although I personally am not fond of eating fish, many of my relatives are, and in Finland, some of them even

worked in the commercial fisheries industry. From such personal interests, I began my collection of material on the Finnish ethnic fisheries of the Great Lakes. My goal is to document and record as much of the Finnish fishermen as I can, and try to pursue the research until a more comprehensive historical picture could be presented on the topic. While the research is still ongoing, there is much already available on the ethnic fishery of Lake Superior, which is the focus of this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The project in question was begun in 2000, with letters that were sent to active commercial fishing operations around the Great Lakes. I sought information about any Finnish fisherman who may have still worked in these companies, without success. I followed this attempt by contacting members of the ethnic press who helped me in finding some of the local fishermen who still are alive in the region. With the help of grants, I visited

Michigan's Upper Peninsula in the summer of 2002 and the Canadian Lakehead and Minnesota North Shore in the spring of 2003. During these visits to the Finnish-American Historical Archives (Hancock, MI) and the North Shore Commercial Fishing Museum (Tofte, MN) allowed me to search for documents, life histories and photographs which have helped in the compilation of this work. Aside from the archival work, I was able to visit and interview numerous Finnish-American fishermen who actively fished on Lake Superior in the past. The names and addresses were provided by local residents, as well as scholars and other individuals who wanted to help in the gathering of the material. In general, the pre-arranged visits lasted some two hours, and much of the conversation was recorded on tape and later transcribed to paper. Most were very willing to share their experiences with me. Most recently, and with the help of interlibrary loans, I have examined thousands of archival microfiche records available from the Great Lakes Science Center (Ann Arbor, MI) in search of Finnish commercial fishing license holders in the Great Lakes. In general, this paper then examines the presence and distribution of the Finnish ethnic fisheries, which was one of the occupations Finns were found in.

HISTORY OF GREAT LAKES FISHING

The earliest fisheries operations on the Great Lakes were conducted by the Native Bands that lived along the shores of the lakes well before European settlement occurred in North America. These early fisheries involved subsistence fisheries, where most of the fish were consumed by the band members. However, some lakeshore tribes, such as the Ojibwa of Lake Huron, traded dried fish with inland tribes and thus an early commercial interest existed (McCullough, 1989). These early fisheries occurred in shallow inshore areas, in bays and tributaries and along the shoreline. The primary fish harvested was Lake Whitefish, because of their excellent flavor when salted. Other fish that were commonly caught in this early period included lake trout, walleye and lake herring which were abundant.

Intensive commercial fisheries development in the Great Lakes, began on Lake Erie about 1820, with operations in Chamont Bay, near the Maumee River (McCullough, 1989). Locations on both sides of the border followed, and commercial fishing spread to Lake Huron, Lake Michigan and Lake Superior over the next 20 years. By 1850, inshore fisheries had declined and deeper waters were being fished. Sailing vessels such as the Huron Boat and Mackinaw Boat were replaced by steam-powered vessels. A change in catching methods led to gill nets, and this method became the gear of choice because they could be easily fished in the deeper waters (Kaups, 1976). Gill nets entangle fish, usually by the gills, as they swim into the thin-threaded nets. Factory-made gill nets and steam-powered gill net lifters appeared around 1850, increasing fishing time by decreasing the amount of time commercial fishermen had to spend mending and lifting fishing nets (Garling et al., 1995).

The Great Lakes commercial food fish catch was dominated by lake whitefish until about 1890, when it was exceeded by the lake herring catch. Michigan food fish landings peaked during the period 1905-1909, when 47.5 million pounds of fish were caught each year. The commercial catch declined in the early 1920s; the average annual harvest for 1920-1924 was less than half the peak catch. During the 1930s, the commercial catch rebounded to an average of 29 million pounds annually. The invasion of the sea lamprey during the 1940s caused another significant decline in the commercial catch and a significant reduction in the number of commercial fishermen (Garling et al., 1995). On the Canadian side, the province of Ontario fish landings do not show major declines or increases. Since 1869-71 when 6.7 million pounds of fish were caught, the three-year average catch for all the Great Lakes increased steadily until in 1979-81 a total of 53.4 million pounds were harvested. Following a catch of 31.9 million pounds in 1919-21, the catch declined, but picked up after the 1950s (McCullough, 1989). The impact of the lamprey is not as evident from the Canadian statistics.

In terms of ethnic fisheries, much has been written in regard to other Scandinavian groups. The Norwegian fishermen have maintained large ethnic communities along the shores of Lake Superior. The Norwegians, in particular, were among the pioneers of the westward moving fisheries frontier. They

began fishing in Lake Michigan in the 1840s and by the 1850s, the earliest Norwegians found their way to the Minnesota North Shore (Kaups, 1976). The earliest fishing village appeared at Knife River (1879), followed by others along the Lake Superior shore (Kaups, 1976). Many Swedes also found their way to the North Shore and found active fishing operations (Cochrane & Tolson, 2002; Hunt, 2002). Similarly, Swedes were found in the Canadian Lakehead region where some were active fishermen (Barr, 1997). It is hoped that the following will build on the diversity of ethnic studies, where new directions in social and immigration history stresses the importance of diversity and interethnic comparative analysis (Barton, 1995). In this vein, it is hoped that this paper will present one part of the picture in the occupational diversity of the Finns. Comparative analysis to the other ethnic fisheries is another project for another time.

While the Norwegians and Swedes are thus well represented, the Finns have also maintained a very strong presence in the ethnic fisheries of the lake. The following material focuses on the Finnish ethnic fishery of the Lake Superior.

EARLY HISTORY OF FINNISH FISHING

It is ironic, that while fishing has occurred along the shores of Lake Superior, sometimes well before the growth and development of other industries – such as mining – very little documentation is to be found in literature, especially when it relates to the Finns. Literature on Great Lakes fishing is not as readily available as first assumed. Perhaps one of the best general works includes the environmental approach of Margaret Bogue (2000), in which the author briefly addresses the prominent Finnish fishing outpost at Portage Entry on the Keweenaw Peninsula (83). Damage and pollution from the developing mining industry in nearby Calumet and the Keweenaw Peninsula in the early 1900s had a negative impact on the fishing industry at this as well as other locations. Hard times fell on the village of Craig, at the mouth of the Portage River, where in 1885 thirty to forty families, including sixty-four fishermen lived. Settled primarily by Finns, it

was the only settlement in the area where any considerable percentage of people were interested in fishing (Bogue, 130).

While detailed scholarly literature on ethnic fisheries may be lacking, there is much available in regional bookstores in the Lake Superior area. Numerous books and articles are a wealth of information that has helped me in my search for more information on the fishing Finns (Monette, 1975, 1976; MacFrimodig, 1990; Oikarinen, 1991; Holmio, 2000; Hunt, 2002; Cochrane and Tolson, 2002). From these sources, only a few bits of information are available, and even these are sometimes sketchy. From gathered sources, it has been found that the earliest Finnish fishermen on the US side of Lake Superior arrived with the great wave of Finnish immigrants in the late 1800s. Some of the known locations on the American side include Larismont, Minnesota, which was named after the town of Larsmo in Finland. Originally settled in 1909 by Finland-Swedish fishermen, some of the fishermen included the Sjoblom and the Hendrickson families, who sold their catch for market in Chicago (Sjoblom, 1998; Strandberg, 1995). There is no longer any active commercial fishing taking place at Larismont. In Wisconsin, ports such as Herbster, Cornucopia and Port Wing were locations where Finns took to the lake, set and pulled their nets by hand, rowing for an entire day in open wooden boats (Knipping, 1977). Other notable fishing ports with Finns were to be found in Grand Rapids, Lutsen, and Two Harbors in Minnesota, in Superior, Wisconsin, and in Calumet, Copper Harbor, Traverse Bay, Dollar Bay and Marquette, Michigan (Myhrman, 1972). According to Carl Silfversten (1931), Finland-Swedish fishermen were also found in areas such as Ontonagon, Michigan, Duluth and French River in Minnesota (Strandberg, 1995). Finns on the Canadian side of Lake Superior arrived after settlement had taken place on the American side. I will begin with the Finnish-Canadians.

FINNISH-CANADIAN FISHERMEN

It is widely believed that the earliest European fishermen began to fish the Ontario side of Lake Superior in the 1890s (C. Westerback, 1996). However, it was not until the 1920s that official

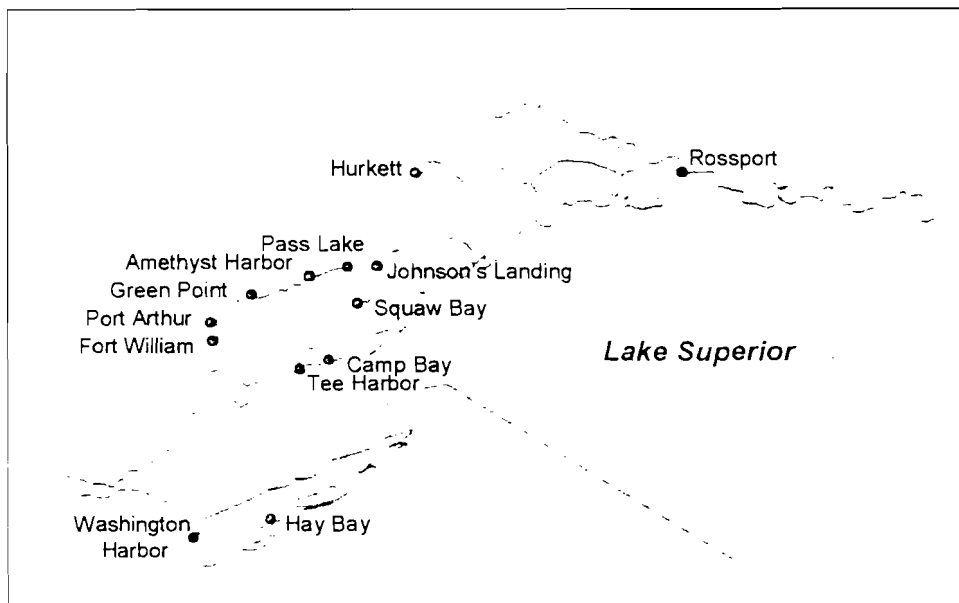


Figure 1. Canadian lakehead fishing ports.

records on commercial fishermen was begun (Giddens, 1992). According to John and Carl Westerback who arrived in RosSPORT, Ontario in 1926-27, many Finland-Swedes were employed in commercial fisheries, using gill nets and pound nets to catch whitefish, herring, trout, pickerel, pike and smelt in Lake Superior. The Finland-Swedes used old row boats, converted lifeboats, as well as tugs for their work. Lifeboats were converted to fishing boats by adding a cabin and a small engine. Seaworthy wooden skiffs were fashioned from local materials and former pleasure crafts were also made into fishing boats.

Some twenty individuals moved from the fishing stations at RosSPORT to the tip of Sibley Peninsula and established their fishing stations at Camp Bay and Tee Harbor. Among these were the Westerbacks, as well as Gunnar Ingves and Roy Hedman. Other fishing stations also developed along the North Shore of Lake Superior at Port Arthur/Fort William, at Squaw Bay, Johnson Landing, Pass Lake, Hurkett and elsewhere. While many Finns and Finland-Swedes worked from these fishing stations during the fishing season, families returned to their

homes in Port Arthur and Fort William for the winter months (Figure 1).

Gunnar Westerback was one of the old-time Finland-Swedes who brought their fishing trade and knowledge from Finland to Canada in the 1920s. This knowledge was passed on to the second generation, and in 1947 John Westerback began fishing as well (Figure 2). With the coming of the lamprey in the 1960s, the valuable trout fisheries collapsed, which forced many commercial fisheries out of business. Only a few remained, such as the Aijala and Sameluk families, and the Westerbacks. John Westerback, who quit fishing in 1989, spent almost 40 years as a fisherman. Some of the last remaining fishermen today include Alf and Carl Ronquist of Pass Lake, who are originally from Kristinastad, a fishing community on the western coast of Finland. Also, descendants of other Finns, such as the Tyskä family, work in the fishing industry from Amethyst Harbor (Hautala, 2003).

Green Point

The memory of the Finnish fishermen was recognized with the 1990 dedication of a monument



Figure 2. First trip of the spring, Tee Harbor, 1950s. Photo: Courtesy of Carl Westerback, 1996.

that stands at the shore of Green Point, just north of Thunder Bay on Lake Superior. As part of the 100th Anniversary of the first fishermen to work from Green Point, the monument recalls the impact of the early fishermen of the region. The Green Point area once had a 110-foot dock which was used to tie up some of the ten or more fishing tugs that worked on Lake Superior. The Finns of Green Point would sell their fish to Kemp Fisheries located in Duluth,

Minnesota, and over the years a very trusting and lasting association was formed between the fishermen and the American buyer. In fact, when an unexpected thaw one winter left the fishermen with no way to keep their harvest frozen, Kemp Fisheries rented the Port Arthur Arena to freeze the fish and preserve them for market. Today, marine traffic is limited to small fishing and pleasure crafts used by the owners of the many cottages that line the shore.

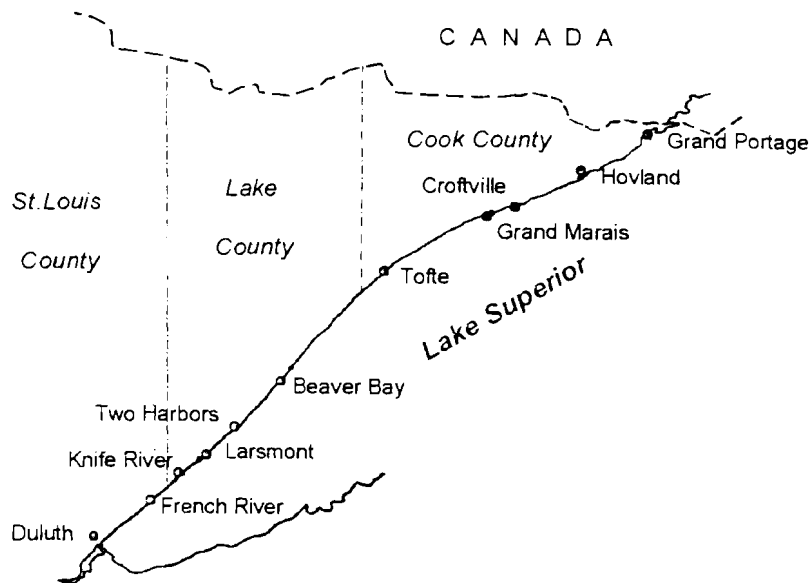


Figure 3. Minnesota north shore fishing ports.



Figure 4. Finn-Swede fishermen of Larsmont, MN ca. 1920s. Photo: Courtesy of North Shore Commercial Fishing Museum, Tofte, MN. 2003.

THE MINNESOTA NORTH SHORE

Although the number of Finns in the northeastern Minnesota counties is lower in comparison to other Scandinavians, the Finns are well represented by the Swedish-speaking Finns who have settled here. These Finland-Swedes (defined as a citizen of Finland who has a Swedish mother tongue) have maintained a significant role in the fishing industry as well as the boat construction industries of the North Shore. The presence of some Finnish fishermen is evident from early fishing license records as well as previous literature, but it is obvious, that the number of Finnish fishermen has always been below 5% of nationalities represented in the trade. Based on all license records for the 1943-1977 period, the homeports of these fishermen could be found from Grand Portage near the Canadian border to Duluth (Figure 3).

The founding of Larsmont, some twenty miles northeast of Duluth was the result of individuals who immigrated from the Larsmo area of

Finland in the early 1900s, and named the settlement after their Old World home. The presence of these Swedish-speaking Finns is still remembered by local residents and historians (Figure 4). Among the names of early Larsmont Finns is the Victor Sjoblom family. After their arrival in Larsmont in 1909, all members of the growing family were to become involved in the fishing industry, as did brother John Sjoblom, whose family arrived in Larsmont in 1910. Other Finns of this area included the John Hendrickson family, as well as fisherman Leander Johansson Bjorn (later Johnson), also of Larsmo, Finland.

Another early fisherman and boatbuilder on the North Shore was Kalle Johan Backlund (1873-1950) of Pelat, Finland, who arrived in the United States in the early 1890s as a young man (Zankman, 2003). Backlund changed his name to Charles John Hill, who first worked for a number of years in the mines of northern Michigan. From there, he moved to the Iron Range of Minnesota, and eventually Duluth where he was married to Mary Mattson Hendrickson in 1898, and went to work for the Patterson Boat Works some time before 1900. In 1902-1903 he built

a 45-foot freight boat, the *Thor*, and went into business for himself. He became one of the independent operators in the famous "Mosquito Fleet" rivaling the near-monopolistic fish and freight giant A. Booth and Company of Duluth. He used the boat to travel up and down the coast, picking up fish at Isle Royale and all the little fishing villages along the North Shore. At some point, Charles Hill lived and fished on Isle Royale for a few years, fishing from an area now known as Hill Point, most likely named after him. Ultimately, he sold his boat and moved to Larsmont in 1910, where he began his own boat building business. While Charles J. Hill was a well known boatbuilder, his son Reuben Hill surpassed his fathers reputation in the field, which lasted into the mid-1980s. The Hill Boat Works is well known among the Scandinavian fishermen of the North Shore, as father and two sons Reuben and Helmer built numerous fishing boats for all. A highlight in the career of the Hill Boat Works came with the dedication of one of Reuben Hill's boats – the 35-foot fishing boat *Crusader II*. Originally built for a Norwegian fisherman Carl Erickson, the boat was christened in 1939 by the visiting Crown Prince Olaf of Norway on location at Knife River! Since 1990, the vessel stands in Lakeview Park of Two Harbors (Cochrane and Tolson, 2002).

The best known Finnish fishermen of the North Shore were to be found in Tofte, located between Grand Marais and Two Harbors. Waino and Victor Stenroos moved to the region in 1939 and built a fish house, home, shed and sauna on the edge of a cliff overlooking Lake Superior. The Stenroos brothers maintained an active fishing operation for decades. The men hauled in their catch of fish, gutted and filleted them, and after preparation for shipment, transferred the boxes of fish along a hand-made railway track from the shore to the main road, some 50 feet above. This totally handcrafted railway went from a power house next to the fish house up to the driveway at the top of the cliff. The 57-step climb up and down the stairs next to the railway tracks is an effort in itself, and attests to the *sisu* of the Finns. According to the present-day owner of the house, Mr. Kenneth Zacher of New Mexico, who bought the home for a summer home in the 1960s, the railway was the pride and joy of Waino Stenroos. A nearby sauna was heated and used by the brothers, and was often made available to neighbors and guests. As sometimes happens in the fishing industry, Victor

Stenroos lost his life while fishing on the lake, leaving behind wife Alina, who looked out one day to see his boat going around in circles, without the fisherman. Following his decision to retire in the 1960s, Waino sold the house and moved to Florida.

FINNISH-AMERICAN FISHERMEN IN MICHIGAN

Of all locations examined over the past three years, Michigan stands out as the most populous in terms of Finnish fishermen. This should be no surprise, as the Upper Peninsula is home to the largest concentration of Finns in the country. In 1990, a total of 37% of the population in Houghton County claimed Finnish ancestry, while a total of 50% of the population in Keweenaw County claimed Finnish ancestry. This strong Finnish presence also is found among the fishermen, as data from the Great Lakes Science Center show the overwhelming majority of fishermen who fished Lake Superior as being of Finnish ancestry (Table 1). Within this state-wide distribution of fishermen are only a handful of names that are found on Lakes Michigan and Huron. In 1959, for example, some 51% of all Michigan fishermen fishing the waters of Lake Superior involved Finns (GLSC, 2003).

Portage Entry

Perhaps the best known Finnish fishing village on Lake Superior was the once thriving Portage Entry (Figure 5). Located on the southern shore of the Keweenaw Peninsula, the location was originally a low lying, swampy area that was part of the delta region of Portage River that opened into Keweenaw Bay. The nearby Jacobsville employed many men in the sandstone quarries, and with time, a commercial fishing industry developed along the sandbars just south of Jacobsville. The low-lying sandbars at the mouth of the river blocked any commercially profitable navigation route to supply the developing mining industry that was growing further inland in Hancock and Houghton. The first dredging of the Portage Canal or Keweenaw Waterway occurred in 1860 between the inhabited sandbar peninsula on the Jacobsville side and the

Table 1. Finnish Fishermen by license in Minnesota and Michigan, 1929-1989

Year	Minnesota		Michigan		TOTAL
	North Shore ¹	Lake Superior	Lake Michigan	Lake Huron	
1929	no data	86	6	2	94 ⁽²⁾
1939	no data	104	4	4	112
1949	8	140	0	3	151
1959	4	93	0	1	98
1969	1	19	0	0	20
1979	0	14	0	0	14
1989	0	2	0	0	2

(1) State of Minnesota Department of Conservation Licensed Lake Superior Commercial Fishermen, 1943-1977.

(2) Data from 1929-1989 is based on detailed microfiche records of all fishing licenses maintained by the Great Lakes Science Center, Ann Arbor, MI.

land that is today the village of Portage Entry. This dredging of the canal created an island, where up to 13 families once lived. Sea captains complained that the lights of the home were confusing with the

channel markers, thus, occupants of the houses on the "island" were given government land parcels on the Portage Entry shore in the late 1800s. Homes on the island were moved in the winter, with horses

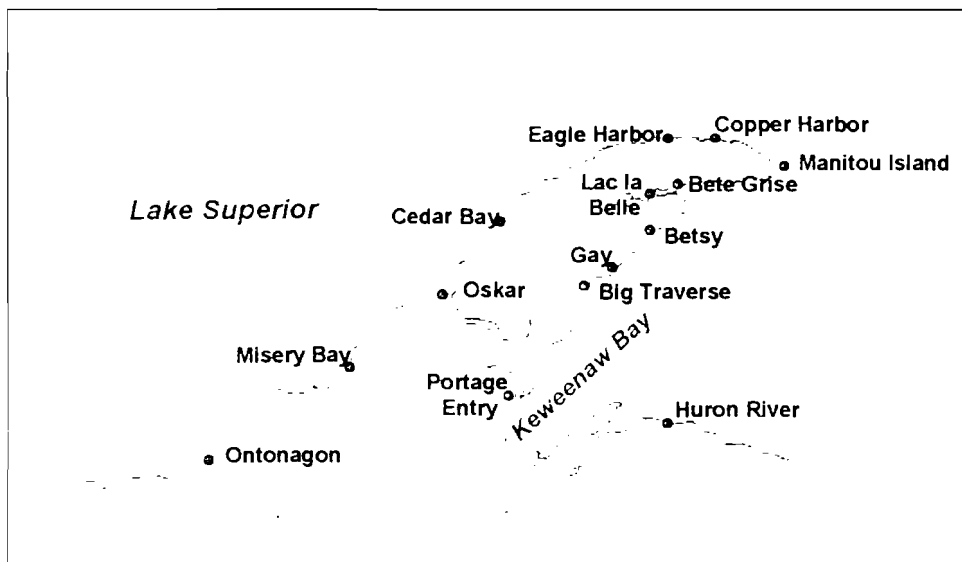


Figure 5. Keweenaw fishing ports and outposts.

skidding houses across the ice to their mainland locations. Today, the wave eroded small island is a graveyard for the remains of three fishing tugs.

In early maps of the region, the presence of a "Finnish Fishing Village" is noted as early as 1905 rather than the name "Portage Entry" which later became the accepted place name. The first fishing boats were open boats powered by oar and sail. Fishermen would pull the gill nets onto the boat, clear the nets of fish, pack the fish in ice and put them in burlap bags. The catch was sent by rail to destinations in Wisconsin and Illinois. In the 1930s, there were more than 15 fishing tugs operating out of Portage Entry. Among persons owning boats then and later were Finns such as the Komula, Huru, Lindgren, Peterson, Karinen, Lepistö, Wiinikka, Törmälä, Kalliainen, Mikkola, Koski, Rautiola and Kolehmainen families. The big square wooden reels on which nets were coiled to dry have all disappeared, as have most of the smaller ice houses, smoke houses and net shanties. Only one of the dockside fish houses remains, along with the skeleton hulls of three fishing boats that can still be seen on an island in the canal.

Keweenaw Fishermen

Among the many locations along the Keweenaw where Finnish fishermen maintained fishing outposts, the settlements of Big Traverse, Betsy, Gay, and Copper Harbor stand above others (Figure 3). All three locations were home to Finnish fishermen who fished along the shores of the Keweenaw, sometimes heading out into Lake Superior as far as Huron Island in the southeast, Manitou Island at the tip of the Keweenaw, "Kaukapakki" - located northeast of the Keweenaw in the middle of Lake Superior somewhere near to the Canadian border, and Isle Royale. Some of the best known Finnish fishermen in the Keweenaw include the Jarve family of Betsy, the Kauppi and Jamsen families of Copper Harbor, and the Erkkila and Lasanen families of Big Traverse (Figure 6).

The Erkkila brothers of Big Traverse have remained in the area - with Reino (b.1911) living in Big Traverse and Edwin (b.1914) in nearby Gay, MI. The Erkkila brothers found their way into fishing as their father changed his occupation from a miner to that of a fisherman. Big Traverse had as many as a dozen fishing boats docked in its sheltered harbor, and the Erkkila brothers fished with the boat "Twin Disc". A short story shared by Edwin Erkkila notes how the brothers were once out fishing and upon

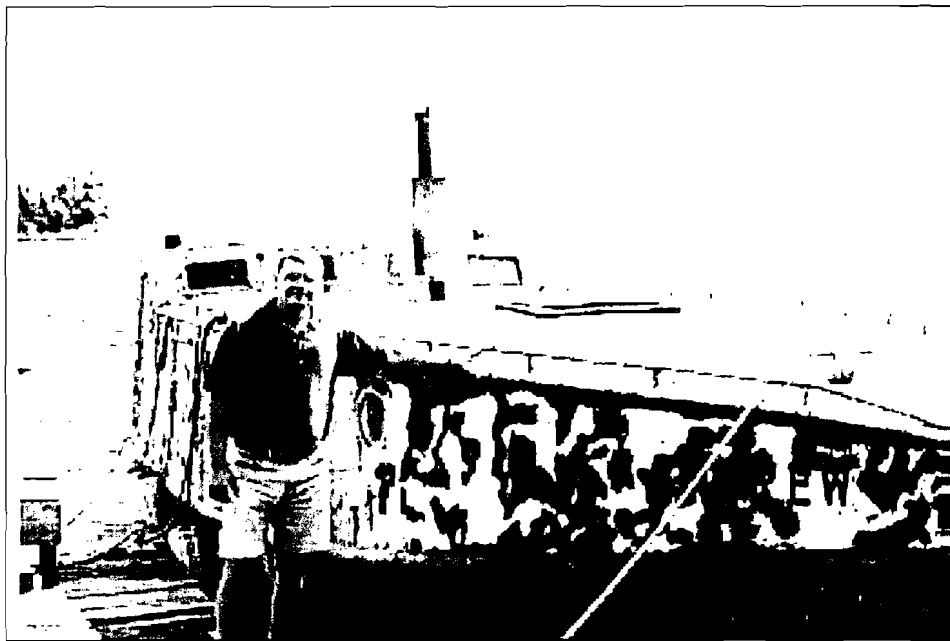


Figure 6. The author with the "Andrew", previously owned by Paul Jarve of Calumet. Today, the boat is docked at Lac la Belle. Photo: Mika Roinila, 2002.

returning back, “about 20 miles from the harbor, a row boat became loose in the heavy weather. I would never go up to he said it was pretty scary up there, with 8-10 foot waves, as he tried to tie down the boat”. During my visits, I heard other stories of adventure and accidents, involving fishing “tugs” getting caught in the lake ice and being moved by the iceflows. In fact, boats were sometimes demolished as the tugs were driven ashore against large and jagged pieces of ice. On the western side of the Keweenaw, fishermen such as Armas Sarkela of Cedar Bay were known as “log-roller fishermen”. Due to the lack of sheltered harbors and sandy beaches, fishermen here pulled their fishing boats out of the water by rolling the boat on logs with the aid of pulleys and ropes.

While the fishermen worked their trade, the spouses and children encountered their own concerns. Wives worried about their husbands who were late coming home, standing with lanterns or blowing horns in the fog to tell the fishermen where the homeport or canal were located. Children were often called “herring chokers” and were put down by classmates. In Betsy, the local children were all taught in a one-room school house beside the Jarve homestead. Daughters rarely were taken on board to go fishing or experience Lake Superior, while boys were expected to continue the tradition. Indeed, while the fisheries industry declined, and it appeared that there was no future in the profession, some fathers still hoped that their sons would choose to fish. When the decision took their careers elsewhere, there was always some disappointment.

THE FISHERIES DECLINE

The fish of Lake Superior that have traditionally been in high demand have included the whitefish, herring, lake trout and chub. A significant period of prosperity occurred during the 1940s, as the US Government encouraged commercial fishing operations throughout the Great Lakes. As a result of WWII, and the war-time dangers which occurred for all the fisheries operations on the Atlantic – local fishermen told me that the Atlantic fisheries were closed for the duration of the war - made fishing a lucrative business in the inland waters due to their

security. Indeed, fishermen were not allowed to go overseas to fight in the War, since they were more important in the homefront as providing an essential service to the public. Thus, the inland fisheries provided virtually all the fish – herring, whitefish, lake trout, chub, etc. to the general public during this period.

In the 1950s and 1960s as the lamprey invasion began to show the results in the declining catches, the Michigan DNR began to limit the commercial fisheries operations. According to some, the DNR is to blame for the end of the fishing industry, since the DNR was trying to ensure enough fish for the sports fisheries. As the government began to establish fishing zones for the fishermen, they were often pushed towards deeper water where less and less fish thrived. Over time, some fishermen saw the inevitable end of fishing on Lake Superior and retired. Others tried to promote fishing by making new and edible fish commercially viable to the public. This was the case with the burbot, a bottom-feeding fish which was often caught in high numbers by the fishermen. Also known as the “lawyer” and sometimes called the “ling-cod”, the same fish in Finland has the name “made” [mah-deh]. In Finland as elsewhere in Scandinavia, the fish is a common, edible fish. While the burbot or lawyer is considered a worthless fish by most other fishermen, the local Finns often ate the liver and roe of the fish which are considered delicacies. The odd practice of “skinning” the fish before preparing it for food is another Finnish practice, and the knowledge of its preparation was brought to America by the initial immigrants. While the fish was plentiful in Lake Superior, attempts at making this fish into a commercially attractive product was met with skepticism. Thus, there have been occasions when thousands of fish were dumped at landfill sites during periods when the fish were spawning in February-March of every winter, and as non-Finns did not find this fish edible.

By the 1970s, the Finnish fishermen had begun to leave the business. Native-Americans were given more control of the commercial operations, and many Finnish fishermen sold their equipment and boats to the government supported Natives, who continue to fish the lake. While many of the initial attempts by naïve and unexperienced Native-American fishermen was met with scorn, a number of dedicated and serious fishermen have established

solid operations that are respected today by the local old-timers (Erkkila, 2002).

One of the most surprising finds from my visits to the Lake Superior area were the comments many made about the Finns who have moved away from the region and have maintained their interest in fishing. For example, during the 1960s when the lamprey and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) began to limit the fisheries operations, numerous fishermen began to look elsewhere for fishing opportunities. Many Finns had moved to the Gulf Coast, and took up shrimp fisheries operations in Florida and Texas. Many of these Finns have remained in the south, and maintain prosperous operations. Accordingly, some of these Finns sell much of their catch to large sea-food restaurant chains – such as Red Lobster. While some have remained in the shrimp fisheries, others returned to the Keweenaw. One such individual is Rich Jansen, a third generation fisherman who now operates and captains the Lighthouse Tourboats of Copper Harbor. The attraction of working on the water has remained in his blood. Others, such as Art Lasanen Jr and Reino Erkkila of Big Traverse, and Paul Jarve of Calumet, co-operated and worked with the Michigan DNR and the many studies dealing with the fish populations after the commercial fishing operations became largely unprofitable.

CONCLUSIONS

The contacts made with many of the Lakehead, North Shore and Keweenaw fishermen has provided a good collection of material that relates to the Finnish fishermen and fisheries operations of the region. There remains, however, many other regions that need to be studied. Locations in Wisconsin such as Superior, Herbster, Cornucopia, Port Wing, and Ashland, and Michigan's Marquette, Munising, Whitefish Point and Sault Ste. Marie need to be covered in this on-going research. Moving further east to Lakes Huron, Michigan, Erie and Ontario should undoubtedly provide additional locations where Finnish fishermen once could be found, and it is hoped that with time, I can uncover some of these locations. The latest data uncovered from microfiche records obtained from the Great Lakes Science

Center in Ann Arbor, MI indicates that a growing population on Drummond Island on Lake Huron was home to Finnish fishermen. Indeed, these fishermen were part of a socialist utopian settlement which developed in the early 1900s under the leadership of Maggie Walz (Toiviainen, 2003). Much credit is given to the Americans who have established museums and many displays that commemorate the work of the former fishermen. Comparisons between the Canadian and American reaction to a dying industry clearly shows that in the United States more interest is shown towards the remembrance of the many fishermen, boat works, and families. Museums with exhibits relating to the fishing industry are found in Tofte, MN, Eagle Harbor and Chassell, MI. In all these locations, the influence of the Finnish fishermen are noted, thanks to descendents of some of the fishermen who want to honor the legacy of their parents and relative. The Finnish-Canadian response appears to be a generation behind in this respect, which is natural, given the fact that immigration and ethnic settlement in Canada lagged behind the United States. Perhaps more interest among the Finnish-Canadians will develop in the future. Without a doubt, while Lake Superior has been the home for many Finnish-American and Finnish-Canadian fishermen, the time remaining in documenting their presence is quickly vanishing and it is the hope of the author that this often neglected part of Finnish immigrant history and work will be recognized and uncovered.

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