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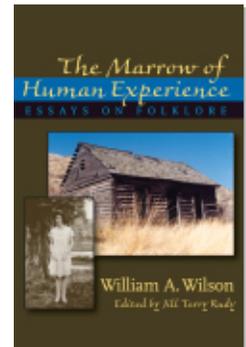
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FINNS IN A NEW WORLD

A Folkloristic Perspective

Rephrased as a question, the title of this address could easily have been announced as “How do Americans form identities?” While Wilson is dealing in this paper particularly with the contemporary situation of Americans of Finnish ancestry, his analysis of the connection of cultural expressions to feelings of ethnic belonging could be applied to other groups. As with his other studies, however, he is careful to ground issues of identity in the distinctive historical and cultural experience of specific groups and recognize that differences often emerge.

The question might be begged as to why ethnicity often takes priority as an important identity. The U.S. Census’s surveys of ethnic ancestry in 1990 and 2000, for example, revealed that more than 90 percent of Americans claimed at least one ethnic ancestry, and many wrote in several. Concerned as a folklorist with the dynamics of tradition, Wilson points out that this ancestry becomes an identity through participation in cultural traditions, and individuals intentionally make decisions about their level of participation. Hence, Wilson uses the concept of Finnishness, as other scholars have used Jewishness or Irishness, to indicate an expression or feeling of belonging. Wilson interprets it colloquially as “a sense of who you are.” This “-ness” fits in with views of modernity in which people have emotional or spiritual ties to an identity, even in the absence of “objective” criteria of living in community with others of the group, speaking the language, having an ethnic name, or being born in the country of origin, and so on.

As an American Studies scholar, Wilson also recognizes that individuals in a diverse society such as the United States may have several cultural identities that they express simultaneously. A wrinkle Wilson adds in his discussion is the

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modern tendency to “consume” identities in the form of purchasing ethnic displays rather than through cultural performance, which we normally associate with “expression.” Therefore he addresses the ways that Americans of Finnish ancestry gain and maintain ethnic identity, especially if they are several generations removed from the country of origin. He reminds his audience that this identity is often a new hybrid born of the American experience and traditions are invented to reinforce the “Finnish American” image. Forces are at work in the formation of identity to claim authenticity for one’s ethnic identity by revitalizing traditions viewed as ancient and authentic, and simultaneously to create traditions anew to keep one’s identity vital and modern.

From his study of Finland, he points out that perceptions of what is ancient and authentic in the home country can often be deceiving, which is a reminder of how perceptual identity as a cultural process can be. Understanding this process leads Wilson to consider the impact of folklore’s symbolism of authenticity. His complaint that many Americans of Finnish ancestry valorize the ancient and miss the opportunities for meaningful cultural experiences in the context of modern society references what Alan Dundes called the “devolutionary premise in folklore theory.” This premise that he criticizes is that folklore decays through time, and therefore the item in contemporary society is inferior to the ancient original. Following the devolutionary premise, a bias is implied against “progress” in theorizing culture. Rather than bemoaning that old folklore, and by extension Finnishness, is dying out, Wilson’s “folkloristic perspective” is that folklore is continuously being created and should be appreciated for how people strategically use it to give a sense of themselves.

For Wilson’s related writing on issues of identity, see “A Sense of Place or a Sense of Self: Personal Narratives and the Construction of Personal and Regional Identity” (2000) and “On Being Human: The Folklore of Mormon Missionaries” (1981). For his views of national identity and romantic nationalism, see *Folklore and Nationalism in Modern Finland* (1976a); “Herder, Folklore, and Romantic Nationalism” (1973b); and “Richard M. Dorson’s Theory for American Folklore: A Finnish Analogue” (1982). For the discourse on “devolution” and “evolution” in folklore theory, see Alan Dundes’s “The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory,” (1969); William A. Wilson’s “The Evolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory and the ‘Finnish Method’” (1976b); and Elliott Oring’s “The Devolutionary Premise: A Definitional Delusion?” (1975).

—Simon J. Bronner

AS I APPROACH THE SUBJECT OF THIS ESSAY, “FINNS IN A NEW WORLD,” OR, perhaps better, “The Making of Finnish America,” I must do so humbly, realizing that not a drop of Finnish blood flows through my veins. This is not to say that I am unaware of Finnish American issues. After all, I have been married to a Finn for thirty-four years and have followed the activities of Finns in my home state of Utah, where scores of Finns arrived before and after 1900 to work

in the mining industry. Still, I readily admit that I am an outsider, denied by lack of Finnish birthright license to speak as one having authority about what it means to be a Finnish American. This gives me considerable pause since I have learned that, while Finns are fully capable of self-criticism, they have not always happily accepted the criticisms of others.

For example, in 1902, on the occasion of Elias Lönnrot's one hundredth birthday, the Swedish scholar K. B. Wiklund published articles on the *Kalevala* in both Sweden and Germany, pointing out what Finnish folklorists had known for some time but what the general Finnish population would not fully grasp for some years to come—namely, that Finland's national epic, while based on Finnish folklore, was the literary creation not of the Finnish folk but of Elias Lönnrot and that it had been composed not in some distant antiquity but in the 1800s at Lönnrot's work table. The Finnish popular press responded to this attack on the integrity of the *Kalevala* with vigor. An editorial writer in *Uusi Suometar*, a leading nationalist newspaper, angrily declared:

That scientist [Wiklund] who serves Uppsala University, [and] who in his two publications has particularly wanted to oppress the Finns, knows well how to serve other than scientific ends. And now the sourness he has sown is spreading in Germany—it has already pretty well poisoned Scandinavia; it will move from Germany to France, to England, and so on; and in a few years no foreigner will any longer believe that the Finnish nation has its own national epic.

But that must not happen! Dr. Wiklund's doctrine offends the national self consciousness of every Finn. It damages those good opinions which the educated in foreign lands hold about our people. Therefore, our scientific and professional men must pick up the pen and prove this "Wiklundism" to be without doubt a fabricated scientific lie. [W:nen 1901: 2]

In what follows, I will do my best not to fabricate any scientific lies. I would like to draw a few parallels between my ongoing study of Finnish Finns in search of their identity and Finnish Americans in search of theirs. I come to my subject as a folklorist who has spent some years studying the Finns' attempts to discover in their folk culture what earlier was called the national spirit, or national soul, and what we would today refer to as the national identity.

On February 28, 1835, Elias Lönnrot sent the manuscript of what was to become the *Kalevala* to Helsinki to be published. From that time Finns have celebrated February 28 as *Kalevala* Day. I am currently studying how these celebrations have been observed in Finland over the last century. The first major celebration was held in 1885, fifty years after the publication of the first edition of the *Kalevala*, the last major commemoration in 1985, one hundred years later. During the century separating these two commemorative events, dramatic changes have occurred in Finland. In 1885, many of the goals of the

Finnish nationalists had been achieved: Finnish had joined Swedish as an official language; Finnish-language schools had been established; and a Finnish-language press was growing stronger. Twenty-five years later, in 1910, these advances were about to disappear under the heavy hand of intensifying Russian oppression. In 1935, twenty-five years after that gloomy period, Finland was now an independent country, boldly claiming its place among the family of nations. Fourteen years later, in 1949, on the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of the second edition of the epic, Finland, after fighting two devastating wars with the Soviet Union, was struggling with all the resources it could muster not to become another Czechoslovakia. In 1985, once again proud, independent, and prosperous, Finland celebrated its national epic with a gusto that echoed throughout the world.

I am attempting to learn how “to read” changing *Kalevala* Day celebrations, to discover in them responses to shifting cultural/political aspirations and thus to view them as keys to understanding what has been going on in the country at any given moment. One could draw obvious parallels between the *Kalevala* Day celebrations and the recent FinnFest USA celebrations held in the United States. I will return to this subject later. First I wish to address more fundamental similarities lying at the heart of my research and at what I perceive to be the core of Finnish American studies.

In 1809, after some six hundred years of Swedish rule, Finland became a grand duchy of Russia. Torn from their cultural ties with mother Sweden, opposed to the possibility of Finland’s absorption into Russia, and inspired by the tenets of romantic nationalism moving into the country from the continent, young Finnish intellectuals took the first steps toward the creation of a Finnish Finland. Their rallying cry became: “We are not Swedes; we can never become Russians; let us therefore be Finns” (see Castrén 1951, 160–61). But what did it mean to be Finns? Separated from each other by regional differences and speaking different dialects, average Finns of the time had no concept at all of “Finnishness.” It remained for the nationalistic intelligentsia, therefore, to create that concept for them. One of these young nationalists, on a visit to Sweden in 1818, wrote home: “No honest Finn can love this thankless, limp, enfeebled, poor Sweden, . . . boasting of the heroic deeds of its forefathers. . . . Lord God, how wonderful it would be . . . to ignite an interest in our history and national language. . . . A Finn should no more praise the Goth’s manhood. We are another nation, and our forefathers were as hairy-chested as the Goths ever were, even though they were not such famous pirates” (Abraham Poppius, in Heikinheimo 1933, 331). Another wrote: “Just as an independent nation cannot exist without a fatherland, no fatherland can exist without poetry. For what is poetry except the crystal in which nationality mirrors itself, the spring from which the nation’s original feelings rise to the surface” (Gottlund 1817, 397–98).

These statements, and others like them, were the clarion calls that sent Elias Lönnrot and his disciples scurrying through the Finnish hinterlands to

collect the old epic poems, pure and undefiled, that would eventually result in the publication of the *Kalevala*, the work which would serve, at least originally, as the source book for a pure Finnish history, a pure Finnish language, a pure Finnish literature, and, based on these, a pure Finnish national character, or identity (Wilson 1976a, 26–61).

What was this national character like? What did it mean to be a Finn? The answer to that question pretty much depended on the needs of the moment. The image of the Finnish past and of the Finnish national character supposedly reflected in the old folk poetry very often was shaped more by the political predispositions of the scholars holding up the mirror than by the poetry itself. Thus in the years following the publication of the *Kalevala*, as public schools and the popular media exercised more and more control over the thinking of the people, the folk poetry was used to further every cause imaginable; and the protagonists of the epic who emerged from its poetic lines were viewed as everything from peaceful hunters and tillers of the soil to mighty warlike heroes eager with the sword to win honor and glory for the fatherland.

This is a process, by the way, that has not ended. I recently watched a Finnish television program deploring the devastation of the forests in East, or Soviet, Karelia. One of the arguments used against this destruction was that these forests should be preserved because Elias Lönnrot had once trekked through them collecting the core of the ancient Finnish folk poetry. And new causes will continue to develop. As current demands for restoration to Finland of Finnish-Karelian lands annexed by the Soviets during World War II continue to intensify, I will watch eagerly to see if the *Kalevala* will be used to justify such restoration, just as it was used between the world wars and during the first months of the Continuation War to justify the annexation by the Finns of Russo-Karelian lands that had never belonged to them (Wilson 1976a, 137–61, 181–95).

Three issues are central here to my research and, I believe, to those studying Finnish Americans. First, the terms “national identity” or “ethnic identity” do not originally derive from the people but are, rather, scholarly constructs. They are created by the intelligentsia in order to move the people in directions they wish. Second, to move the people in these directions, the intelligentsia must teach them to recognize, value, and shape their lives according to these constructs. Third, the ends which proponents of either national or ethnic identity serve are almost always ideologically motivated.

In his study of Swedish Americans, folklorist Larry Danielson has identified four stages, beginning with unconscious ethnicity and ending with conscious ethnicity, that many immigrants go through (1979). In the first stage, immigrants are unconsciously ethnic—that is, they continue to do things in the old ways simply because they know no other ways; their language, their foodways, and their kinship relationships remain what they were in the Old World. In the second stage, the immigrants continue many of the old traditions but are now aware that these are different from surrounding cultural practices and that they themselves are different because they persist in these traditions.

In the third stage, the children and grandchildren of immigrants consciously put off the old ways—that is, they abandon their parents' and grandparents' language and customs and become as thoroughly American as possible. In the fourth stage, having been awakened by the intelligentsia to the value of their heritage, the descendants of the earlier immigrants consciously try to revive the old ways, though in a manner that does not produce for them the discomfort experienced by their forebears.

It is the conscious ethnicity, of course, that captures my interest and relates most closely to my own research and to the issues I have identified above. By the time Finnish Americans have become consciously ethnic, they have usually become better educated and more prosperous, thereby becoming more susceptible to educational and promotional efforts aimed at them; they have, as a result, learned through the popular media and through the efforts of Finnish American organizations who they really are; motivated in part by what Aili Flint calls the “nostalgia factor” (1985, 5), they have sought the source of their identity in older customs or in practices borrowed from mother Finland; and they have begun to incorporate some of these practices into their own lives, above all as proud symbols of their ethnic heritage. In other words, they have followed just about the same roads as those traveled by their kinsmen in Finland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This revival, or discovery, of ethnic heritage can take many forms. I will concentrate on two. First, there is usually an attempt to take pride in one's past by recovering the immigrant experience through recording the reminiscences of older members of the community. This is the approach Michael Loukinen takes in his two films, *Finnish American Lives* (1984) and *Tradition Bearers* (1987), as he focuses in the first on the patriarch of a three-generation Finnish American family and in the second on traditional Finnish American craftspeople. In both films the emphasis is on *the way it was* rather than on *the way it is*. While the subjects of the films live in the present, they primarily tell stories of the past—of life in the Old Country before immigrating, of the trip to America, and of hardships endured during the first years in this country.

The Finnish Americans presented in these films are treated with great sympathy and quickly win viewers' admiration. Stories like the ones they tell are extremely important. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out, such reminiscing can be “life-sustaining” for older people in general and for immigrants in particular. “Reminiscence,” she says, “which is part of the vital process of self-integration at the end of a very long life, can span almost a century in some cases, and can compensate for the partial and restricted experiences of later generations.” Telling stories of the past can thus become “essential to personal as well as cultural survival” (1983, 41).

Still, there are certain cautions those of us who study these stories should exercise. Postmodern criticism has taught us that we do not capture reality in language; we create it—or, in the jargon of the day, construct it. Narrators of the past do not necessarily give us accurate portraits of what really occurred in

their earlier lives but rather stories forged in response to present needs. Their narratives, therefore, are often more akin to fiction, in the best sense of the word, than to history. That is, they are creative interpretations of the past that may in the final analysis tell us a good deal more about the narrators themselves than about the events they describe.

Also, as we present the reminiscences we have recorded, we should resist the temptation to cast them in an overly romantic sheen. Listening to the dulcet tones of “Kotimaani onpi Suomi” or of Kantele music sounding in the background as narrators in Loukinen’s films tell their stories, or looking at pictures of Kantele players taken not in those areas from which most Finns emigrated but in East Karelia, may give the films a romantically artistic flavor but will not do a great deal to enhance their historical veracity.

The second form of conscious revival of ethnicity is closely related to the first. It seeks the source of ethnic identity either in “pure” old artifacts or in “authentic” Finnish art forms borrowed from modern Finland.

Though contemporary Finnish folklorists and ethnographers have happily moved in new directions today, this search for old or authentic cultural forms has, as I have already suggested, deep roots in Finland itself. For example, as early as 1702 Henricus Florinus published a collection of some 1,600 proverbs, hoping to find in them, he said in the introduction to the collection, “many an old, pure Finnish word” (1702, Preface)—that is, words not corrupted by foreign influence. In 1815 the ardent nationalist Adolf Ivar Arwidsson began collecting Finnish folk poetry in the hopes of finding in them “a more natural and more pure tongue” (Heikinheimo 1933, 120–21); a few years later he urged that the old folk poetry be collected vigorously so that “we might be able to create new temples to the art of the fatherland on this native foundation.” “Antiquities,” he said, speaking of the old poetry, “live in the people’s chronicles and in their artistic creations, in which they survive from times immemorial.” Thus every nation that wishes to be true to its own character “must return to the furthest roots of all its native power, strength, and energy—to the pure spring of native poetry. Everything must be built on a native foundation” (1909, 67–68, 138).

In these phrases, three important concepts are clearly evident: that the old is always better than the new; that pure and undefiled language and cultural artifacts are always better than admixtures resulting from the blending of two or more cultures; and that national, or ethnic, identity, must therefore be built on a pure and uncorrupted native foundation.

These ideas did not die easily. As late as 1943, the renowned Finnish folklorist Martti Haavio published *Vuimeiset runonlaulajat* (The Last Poem Singers), whose title clearly reflects Haavio’s distaste for what he called the “gaping emptiness” ([1943] 1985, 363) of his own modern world and his enormous admiration for the last of the great singers who had kept alive the older, purer forms of folk poetry for the blessing and benefit of contemporary Finland. Commenting on the scores of scholars, artists, musicians, and literati who had

been inspired by earlier writings to troop into Karelia at the turn of the century to imbue themselves with the spirit of the *Kalevala* song lands, he wrote:

Undoubtedly, many of them were disappointed because a pilgrim who departs with too high expectations will hardly ever see miracles. And, furthermore, the time of miracles had passed in Karelian lands. Those golden years, spoken of in those books with such unrestrained enthusiasm, belonged to an unreturnable past. As early as 1906, O. A. Haiari wrote the funeral address for the former Border-Karelia when he said: "The backwoods are decreasing in Border-Karelia, and the twilight of fairy tales is disappearing from them. A new generation hears the jingling of cow bells there where the hunter once charmed the forked-antlered cattle of Tapiola. The piercing sound of the factory steam pipes sounds where before the whistle of a bear echoed. At the edge of the wilderness village, where the women once recited incantations at the roots of a holy sacrificial pine, there towers now the ridge beam of a new elementary school." ([1943] 1985, 160)

According to Yvonne Hiipakka Lockwood, a similar predilection for the romantic past has characterized Finnish American studies: "For many decades," she writes, "scholars researched only the folklife of the Old Country and the remnants or survivals of early immigrant life. The alterations and adaptations of immigrant culture to forms that suited the United States context were actually regarded as poor copies of 'pure' Old Country culture" (1990, 5). Such a predilection can be seen in both of Loukinen's films, in which the idea predominates that the old ways are best—from speaking the Finnish language, to playing the accordion, to making twine for spinning, to tying a sauna vihta (sauna whisk). In *Finnish American Lives*, the son of the old Finnish immigrant says: "Anybody can make a vihta, but he [the speaker's father] ties it like the Finlanders do in Finland." When the old man dies, his passing, like the passing of Haavio's last singers, seems to symbolize the disappearance of a culture that will make the world ever poorer for its loss.

Ironically, when Finnish Americans have broken away from the older cultural forms, their doing so has brought sharp criticism from some Finns, who evidently judge the merit of Finnish American expressive forms according to their correspondence with Finnish cultural practices. As Marsha Penti points out, the FinnFest USA festival held in Berkeley in 1986 brought an angry response from a reporter for the *Ilta-Sanomat* [Evening News], who entitled his article covering the event "American Finnishness Dancing into the Grave: Folk Dance Orgies Under the Palm Trees." Deploring the absence of "pure" Finnish cultural forms in the celebration, he wrote: "The festival which has swollen to almost a folk dance orgy is at the same time a rehearsal for a funeral: the number of Finnish-speaking American Finns is decreasing in tempo with the

departure of the elderly: only a folk costume and kantele are left in the closet” (Penti 1990, 18). Here again is the old longing for the pure forms of the past. In some ways, the reporter’s statement is not much different from Haavio’s lamenting the departure of the last singers of the old epic songs.

These FinnFest USA festivals move us to a slightly different but still related concern—an emphasis now, not so much on pure survivals from the past as on “authentic” Finnish, as opposed to Finnish American, cultural forms. As Marianne Wargelin points out in her article “Ethnic Identity for Sale,”

Finnish American ethnic festivals today consider the sale of Finnish import items *de rigueur*. The Finnish gift shop owners fill tables and rooms to overflowing with merchandise to sell. The national Finnish ethnic festival, FinnFest USA, vigorously promotes its tori [market place], where festival attendees can browse among Finnish goods in “the heart of FinnFest.” Interestingly, when FinnFest USA first started in 1983, its tori was a space for Finnish American crafts: rag rugs, straw items, and sauna vihtas (bath whisks). In 1984, the tori mixed gift shop sales with crafts. In 1985, the gift shops began to dominate the tori, and they have ever since. . . . After eight FinnFests, Finnish American crafts are difficult to find in the tori. (1990, 34)

It is probably true, as Penti argues, that, in spite of its Finnish-based component, the FinnFest celebration

is a particularly useful vehicle for identity assertion and formulation. FinnFest attendance in itself can be a way of heightening identity awareness. The typical festival goers are enthusiastically excited by the possibilities of meeting old and making new friends with whom they are united by bonds of ethnicity. (1990, 18)

It is probably also true, as Wargelin points out, that “Finnish American consumers confirm that they see purchases of these Finland-made products as acts of ethnic identity” (1990, 34). As one whose own home is full of Finnish design objects purchased in Finland by my Finnish American wife, it would be something less than admirable for me to deplore the purchase of such objects by other Finnish Americans.

Still I find troubling Penti’s statement that FinnFest “is an artificially created event which appeals to Finnish Americans of diverse backgrounds and is promoted by twentieth century marketing tactics” (1990, 16). However valuable for its participants and however conducive to the development of ethnic pride, FinnFest still strikes me as an imposed popular-culture event, highly orchestrated, that must of necessity ignore regional and cultural differences, even if it is celebrated in a different geographic area each year.

This attempt to homogenize all Finnish Americans into a unified whole with a common ethnic background is akin to efforts of nineteenth-century Finnish romantic nationalists to create from multiple regional and cultural groups a unified Finnish nation. Such efforts certainly can produce, and have produced, laudable results. But without proper restraints, they can also pretty badly distort reality.

Finnish Americans, after all, are not all alike. It seems crucially important, therefore, to discover how in different communities with different historical backgrounds they have chosen to live their lives and how they choose to celebrate themselves—how they wish to present themselves to each other and to the general public and, in the process, say, “This is who we are.” I have no quarrel with what the FinnFest organizers do in their festivals or with what Michael Loukinen does in his films. I am troubled more by what they do not do.

I would like to see in the festivals and in films about Finnish Americans examples of *Finnish American* practices and customs representing a merger of different ethnic cultures and resulting from varying geographical and historical circumstances. According to Lockwood, because culture is always changing in response to present circumstances, one should give up the old notions of the pure and the authentic and realize that “Finnish American culture is not the same as culture in Finland, that it is not simply ‘a diluted version’ of what existed, or exists, in the homeland, and that it is a creature of its own making” (1990, 4–5).

This strikes me as excellent advice. What pursuits of the older, purer forms of Finnish cultural practices or of contemporary Finnish artistic expressions like litala glass or Marimekko design share in common is the notion that whatever originated in Finland in the past or has been created in Finland in recent years is somehow superior to cultural artifacts created and shaped by the historical experiences of Finnish Americans. Anything “made in Finland” is therefore qualitatively better than anything produced here—a notion that the romantic nationalists of yesteryear would have understood perfectly well.

Let me return for a moment to Martti Haavio’s *The Last Poem Singers* and to his statement about the disappearance of an earlier Finnish culture. Quoting Haiari, Haavio sorrowed over the loss of elk hunters, of a bear’s whistle, and of a sacrificial tree and over their replacement by cowherds, factory whistles, and a schoolhouse. I have no quarrel with Haavio’s desire to preserve a record of the last singers of songs and of the culture that produced them; indeed, we owe him a great debt of gratitude for having done so. But what about those cowherds, those factory workers, those school children? Weren’t they also important? Didn’t they also have a culture? Shouldn’t that culture also have been studied? Wouldn’t such study have taught us just as much about life in Karelia in particular and about the human condition in general as the exploration of the lives of the old singers?

I hope my comparison is obvious. Don’t Finnish Americans also have independent cultural traditions separate from those of their ancestors? Aren’t those cultural traditions equally important? Shouldn’t they be studied and

valued? And, most important, shouldn't they be seen as the principal sources of contemporary Finnish American identity? In the creation of this culture, says Lockwood, Finnish Americans have "both adopted new ways and adapted old ways of life to fit their new cultural and social context" (1990, 5). What that means is that scholars must learn to look for and at Finnish American life in ways they have may not have looked before.

A good example of a cultural expression born on American soil and having precious little to do with anything in Finland is St. Urho's Day, a day celebrated with gusto by some Finnish Americans and deplored with a matching vehemence by others. I would certainly like to know what there is in the character of certain Finnish Americans that causes tales of a fictitious saint who once saved the Finnish grape crop from destruction and thus preserved the country's wine production to excite them far more than do events sponsored, let us say, by the Knights and Ladies of Kaleva, seeking in the *Kalevala* a common Finnish heritage. I will never learn the answer to that question, however, if I become too preoccupied with the survival of earlier Finnish practices.

Cultural *adaptation* is probably a more common process than the adoption of completely new forms like St. Urho's Day. In the Scofield coal-mining community in Utah, once occupied by scores of Finns, one will find numerous Finnish saunas invisible to the observer accustomed to the frame and log saunas brought to Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota from the Old Country. Utah Finnish miners, cramped into small houses often not their own, had to put their saunas wherever they could find a place for them—in coal sheds, in tool houses, and on back porches. During a day I spent photographing these saunas, I was amazed to open the door of a nondescript, un-sauna-like shed and then to walk into a room that was in almost all ways similar to saunas I had known in Finland. According to Carolyn Torma, "Finnish-American architecture which most closely resembles Old World models is regarded as the most 'ethnic'" (1990, 28). Again, anyone operating from this perspective, anyone looking for "pure" old forms, would have missed these Utah saunas, which played as important a role in the lives of the Scofield miners as have the more traditional saunas in the lives of immigrants in the Upper Great Lakes areas.

Much of this cultural adaptation is what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls cultural "recycling"—that is, practices originating in the Old World assume new functions in their new environs (1983, 42). An excellent example of this recycling would be the celebration of Laskiainen at Palo, Minnesota, as documented in the film entitled *At Laskiainen at Palo, Everyone is a Finn* by Elli Kõngäs Maranda, Marsha Penti, and Thomas Vennum (1983). At first glance, the film is what the Finns would probably call a *sekamelska*, a confusing mixed-bag of just about everything. The annual celebration, which was begun in 1935, does retain some elements of the original Finnish practices, such as sledding down hills and eating pea soup; but it also contains just about everything else—from a royal festival queen with an honor guard carrying hockey sticks to women dressed in Finnish national costumes and displaying Finnish

crafts; from cheese making to the construction of a Lapp village; and from traditional bleeding practices to cure illness to clog dancing to the tune of “Oh, Them Golden Slippers.” The newspaper reporter from the *Ilta-Sanomats* who was so confused by the Berkeley FinnFest USA festival might well lose his mind were he to attend Laskiainen at Palo.

Laskiainen, or Shrovetide, which has been celebrated broadly across Finland, goes back to medieval Catholic practices that have merged with pagan calendar customs. The name of the celebration comes from the verb *laskea*—“to descend” or “to go down”—and did not mean, as Y. H. Toivonen has demonstrated, to descend hills, as on a sled; rather, it meant to descend into the forty-day fast period beginning Lent. The word for Easter, *Pääsiäinen*, came from the verb *päästää*—“to let loose” or “to release”—indicating a release from the fast at the end of Lent (Vilkuna [1950] 1968, 54).

In Finnish peasant society, the hundreds of different customs surrounding Laskiainen, or attached to the day, have been far more important than the religious observances. These customs, as Kustaa Vilkuna has noted, have focused primarily on the world of women—especially on the division of labor falling to them. Why, for example, did the women cook pea soup, and make it as greasy as possible? Because, says Vilkuna, after the soup was eaten, “the more grease glistened on fingers and in the corners of mouths the better the pigs would fatten in the summer [and] the cows would give milk, and the more butter the housewives would be able to churn and the more ham they would be able to cure” ([1950] 1968, 55).

Since the making of linen was a crucially important task carried out by women, it was important for them to do all they could to assure a good flax crop during the summer. A large number of homeopathic practices to produce such crops were, therefore, attached to the observance of Laskiainen. The following examples from Jouko Hautala’s *Vanhat merkkipäivät* (The Old Red-Letter Days) are typical: “On Laskiainen you were to comb your hair nine times so that beautiful flax would grow in the summer. Every time you combed your hair you were to stand on a chair so that the flax would grow tall.” “If you sweep the floor nine times on Laskiainen, the flax will grow well; and if you carry the sweepings far away, the flax will grow tall.” “On Laskiainen, the women wore white clothing in order to get white flax.” “On Laskiainen, if the women folk let their hair down, then the flax will grow tall.” “On Laskiainen Eve when you went to bed, if you threw yourself onto the bed from a standing position, then [in the summer] the flax would remain standing and would not lie flat.” “In the evening the younger people went sledding and the further the sled coasted, the taller grew the flax the following summer. Sliding down the hill, they shouted, “Tall flax, Tall flax”” (Hautala [1948] 1974, 74–75, 83, 80, 75, 81, 96).

This last example brings us at last to the one of the few “authentic” features of Laskiainen, besides eating pea soup, that have persisted in Palo, Minnesota—sledding or sliding down hills. But even that practice has changed rather dramatically. While it is true that in Finland the younger people enjoyed coasting

down hills, adults also, and especially women, participated in the sledding very seriously. Often they used as sleds the platforms of spinning wheels, the connection between the spinning wheels and flax and linen being obvious. And occasionally they followed a practice which, if revived at Palo, would certainly enliven the occasion even more. I quote from Hautala: "If tall flax was desired, then on the morning of Laskiainen the woman of the house had very early to slide down a certain hill on her bare bottom" (Hautala [1948] 1974, 97).

In Finland itself, many of the old customs have died out. Some families will still eat pea soup and Laskiais-pulla, and the children, often in outings organized by their schools, still enjoy sledding. But that's about it. Very few people participating in these practices will be aware of the once prevalent homeopathic magic connecting them to success in women's work. In Palo, the wide array of Laskiainen customs has all disappeared. But, as opposed to the celebration in Finland, a dazzling display of new practices with no connection to Laskiainen has been added.

Some will say, "Why, these things are not Finnish at all!" And they will, of course, be right. The practices are not Finnish; they are Finnish American—or at least Palo, Minnesota, Finnish American. Community based, community organized, and community run, Laskiainen at Palo reveals the spirit and the ethnic identity of Finnish Americans living there many times better than any attempt to revive or keep alive the old ways ever will. As Marsha Pentti states, "*Laskiainen* [at Palo] is an example of folk festival creativity at its best. American Finns have not only had to, but have wanted to, adapt their celebratory life" (1990, 16). Or, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett might say, they have "recycled" Old World culture to reveal what they consider most important about their lives in their new homeland.

One more issue needs brief discussion. I earlier suggested that those who seek to identify, teach, and advocate either national or ethnic identity are always ideologically motivated. I see nothing wrong with that so long as we acknowledge the motivations that move us to action. Too often we do not.

Archeologist Mark Leone, speaking of living history exhibits, states:

As a visitor you take all this folklore and this symbol mongering and imagine yourself to be the native of Williamsburg or Mesa Verde. . . . And because the data are relatively mute . . . , they are then more easily made to give the message of those doing the reconstructing. . . . The tourist [at Williamsburg] does not really become immersed in the eighteenth century at all; he is spared the shock of the filth, degradation, and misery common to that era, and is led into a fake eighteenth century, a creation of the twentieth. While in this altered frame of mind he is faced with messages—the reinforcement of standard modern American values like those surrounding the myths of our own origin as a nation—that come out of today, not two centuries ago. (1973, 130–31)

Archeology in the service of national goals is not particularly offensive, says Leone, but what is offensive “is the archeologists’ unawareness of this . . . function” (1973, 133). Leone is speaking of living history presentations, but what he says can apply equally well to the search for ethnic identity and to attempts to promulgate that identity through publications, films, and festivals.

So I ask again: how aware of, or how forthright about, their motivations are those engaged in these activities? When in 1978 I did fieldwork for the American Folklife Center in Paradise Valley, Nevada, documenting ranching customs of the area, I soon discovered a number of cracks in paradise. I was told by my supervisor that if I included negative statements in my report, he would edit them out. We cannot, he said, give negative impressions in a study funded by the public and made available to the public, including the people of Paradise Valley. In ethnic studies, it may also be common practice to focus on the smiling aspects of traditional culture and to “edit out” the rest.

The romantic nationalists in Finland tended to view the past as a golden age in which only heroic action occurred. Individuals seeking their ethnic roots often yield to the same temptation. I have some trouble believing, for example, that the early Finnish Americans were quite as heroic as they appear in some presentations. In the minutes book of the Vuoriston Tähti [Star of the Mountains], one of the Finnish temperance societies operating in Utah around 1900, it is fascinating to watch human foibles coming constantly to the fore. In one instance, members of the society reveal that a committee was being formed to visit the former financial secretary and to reclaim from him the society’s funds. Further, I have difficulty believing that different groups of immigrants—Church Finns, Red Finns, Temperance Finns—lived together in harmony, bound together by the common ties of blood, language, and national origin. In her *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada* (1988), Varpu Lindström-Best moves beyond the smiling aspects of immigrant life and brings to light such unpleasanties as suicide, bootlegging, and prostitution—circumstances later generations in search of their ethnic identity, and imbued with feelings of ethnic pride, are not always willing to acknowledge. In a similar vein, Carolyn Torma points out that a too heavy emphasis on the brighter side of Finnish immigrant life may also have distorted the study of Finnish American material culture. Unwilling to look at the underside of the immigrant experience, scholars have, she argues, focused on safe buildings like saunas and have ignored structures tinged with controversy. She states, speaking of a historical preservation program:

Buildings which might reflect conflict or unpopular views are often overlooked. Not surprisingly, buildings which might represent the historic Finnish-American radical movement are almost completely absent from this list of [historical preservation] sites. This selectivity of political points of view is common throughout the preservation program. (1990, 29)

Of particular importance here is the question of what agendas are being served in Finnish American festivals—from community-based events like the celebration of Laskiainen, to grand events sponsored by Knights and Ladies of Kaleva, to the broader national FinnFest USA festivals. From my study of *Kalevala* Day celebrations, it is clearly evident that as political and national needs change, the celebrations of the *Kalevala* also change to reflect and reinforce current aspirations. And they are also shaped by the cultural/political ambitions of the organizations sponsoring them.

For example, in the grandiose 1935 celebration held in Helsinki, the speaker of Parliament, Kyösti Kallio, proclaimed:

As we think of our nation's past and of its time of wandering in the wilderness, when in unbelievably primitive circumstances it managed to preserve itself, we can come to no other conclusions than that it had been able to endure and to maintain life by the aid of the hope and faith which are characteristic of it and which are contained in our folk poetry. And that same hope in the future prompts and obligates us more purposefully than in the past to perform our duty. An essential part of this duty is the continuing study of our antiquity. (1936, 60)

At the same time, across the border in Soviet Karelia, *Kalevala* celebrations were also held, though the language used there was somewhat less restrained than were the measured words of Kallio. Titles of articles appearing in the popular press give some indication of the tenor of the times: “Folklore and the Imperialistic Aims of the Finnish Bourgeoisie,” “The Attempts of the Finnish Bourgeoisie to Force the *Kalevala* into the Service of Nationalism and Chauvinism,” and “To What End has the Finnish Bourgeoisie Used and Is Now Using the *Kalevala*?” One impassioned editorialist wrote:

Thousands of Fascist students have been sent throughout the land to arrange *Kalevala* celebrations, that is, to whip up anti-Soviet feeling. . . . The Finnish bourgeoisie have come to the egocentric conclusion that they can without hindrance soil and desecrate the best products of the people's creative ability and force them into the service of their plundering and national oppression. (Leppänen 1935)

I could go on, but there is little need. The point is that the cultural symbols on which national and ethnic identity are based can be used for a variety of ends and that it is therefore important to stand aside now and then to take a calm, detached look at the causes being served.

Though I still consider myself an amateur in the study of the Finnish American experience and though that experience is not part of my own Idaho, Mormon, and western heritage, I nonetheless hope that by drawing parallels

between my studies of Finnish nationalism and the studies of those devoted to Finnish American ethnicity, and that by highlighting some of the strengths and pitfalls inherent in both, I will at least have raised issues worth thinking about.

As I have written this paper, my thoughts have kept drifting back to earlier conversations between myself and my Finnish American son-in-law. From the day he first began courting my daughter, I began trying to persuade him to use the Finnish pronunciation of his surname—Jämsä. He steadfastly resisted all my importuning, calling himself instead Ralph Jam-sa. Finally, I realized that I was trying to force him back into what I have been cautioning others to avoid—an adherence to old, pure linguistic or cultural forms. For my son-in-law, his name, as he pronounced it, symbolized both his Finnish ancestry and his American experience; and it was foolish of me to try to change that. He had learned to look to himself and to the experiences of his Finnish American family for the principal sources of his identity and had discovered instinctively what Yvonne Hiipakka Lockwood has stated so nicely: “People in the United States who trace their origins to Finland are neither American nor Finnish; rather, they are Finnish Americans” (1990, 5).

