THE FINNISH SAUNA: A CULTURAL INDEX TO SETTLEMENT
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The complexity of cultural components on the American scene has been acknowledged for generations by both layman and scholar. The recognition of this diversity is accompanied often with more than a modicum of pride as it is asserted that the United States is an example par excellence of a cultural "melting pot." The idea that cultures amalgamate with time in the environment and that this is the product of our magical "melting pot" formula raises a number of interesting questions. One may inquire if the greatest cultural diversity exists, for instance, under the stringent conditions imposed upon a pioneer settlement or rather in a culturally aged environment where there have been societal achievements well above and beyond that required by a mere struggle for subsistence. Also, one may ponder the possibility that the complexity of a more diversified culture may be the product of both "acculturation" and "inculturation," the former representing an infusion from another culture and the latter being an enrichment from within a culture by some internal process such as that of technological innovation. Further cultural modification and diversity may be involved simply in the process of transfer of a cultural trait from one physical environment to another. Small wonder that the American environment appears to be complex and that students of cultural elements in this country too often have taken refuge in the phrase: "Standard American Culture," or have seen a cultural feature only in isolation rather than in the context of its cultural milieu.

The problem in its simplest form is that the cultural landscape of America is indeed complex that identification of significant elements may prove baffling. While man's occupancy may leave many imprints on that fascinating scroll of history, the surface of the earth, we do need keys whereby the door may be opened wider to this archive of terrestrial interplay.

What cultural indices are there to settlement associations? Need they be functional? What is the impact upon the reliability of such an index of a second cultural group placed in juxtaposition to the one in question? These queries can be tested on the American scene. If we can identify indices to the cultural landscape, our powers of observation and insight in the field will be greatly enhanced.

It is our hypothesis that the sauna, or Finnish bath, is an example of a cultural index, and that when one views a sauna in the field that there is indeed a high mathematical probability that one is in a Finnish cultural complex. While the sauna in itself may not appear significant, it may have broad portent in the cultural context, and thereby may lead us more readily into an appreciation of a related group of cultural phenomena.

THE SAUNA STRUCTURE

The Sauna, or steam bathhouse, is "an invariable appendage of the Finnish farm." 1 It was transplanted to the United States where Finns settled, and it now constitutes one element in the cultural complex of America. The building is erected near the living quarters. Originally, it was attached to the dwelling, but in Europe beginning with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was constructed as a separate structure. 2 Until recent decades, the sauna was built with squared logs, carefully hewn and mortised at the ends, and then placed horizontally on top of each other (Fig. 1). 3 Now, board walls, occasionally sheathed with tarpaper, are often used. The building is a simple two-room, one-storyed, gabled structure with the entrance almost always located at the end. A sauna may vary with its function and the size of the family. Most of them now have a dressing room, but

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3 For different types of saunas see U. T. Sirelius, Suomen Kansanomista Kulttuuria, Vol. 2 (Helsinki: 1921), pp. 221-23.
Fig. 1. A Finnish log sauna south of Tapiola, Michigan. Note the squared, carefully fitted logs which are in contrast to the more common round-log, mud-chinked structures so typical of most of the American frontier.

up to a few decades ago they were largely one-room structures. Persons dashed naked from the house to the sauna even in the winter. Today the typical sauna found in Finnish communities of America is approximately fifteen feet long by eight feet wide and has one outside window for each room. The dressing room is equipped with benches, a heating stove, and perhaps a lantern hung from the ceiling in front of a small interior window (Fig. 2) so that some light will be cast into the adjoining room. The latter has a “lavo” or platform raised about four or five feet above the board floor. Two steps below this may be used as steam platforms for bathers in a reclining position, although the occupants may simply sit on the steps while flagellating themselves with whisks of twigs (Fig. 3). The whisks in the Lake Superior region are made mainly of cedar or oak, since they reputedly last longer than those of birch. Birch switches, however, are the rule in Finland while those of eucalyptus prevail in California. In the room equipped

with a lavo are a water tank, a tub, and a stone-covered stove heated usually by wood. Water taken in a dipper is tossed onto the hot stones, and a cloud of steam envelopes the room. The occupant may remain in the sauna for a couple of hours, sweating and switching, washing and rinsing, then more sweating and rinsing. Subsequently comes the cooling off by jumping into a lake or a snowbank or simply dashing one’s self with cold water.

Fig. 2. Floorplan of a sauna.

THE SAUNA IN FINNISH CULTURE

“Var man än rör sig i Finland och stöter på en människoboning, upptäcker man på något avstånd från bostaden, i skogsbyn eller vid sjöstranden, en liten timmerbyggnad, bastun” ("Wherever in Finland one stumbles upon a human dwelling, one discovers some distance from the house, by a river or by a lake, a small log structure, the sauna"). And so it

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4 While the term “lavo” is often employed, “lauto” and “lautteet” are not uncommon.
5 The Finnish term for the bundle of birch branches in western Finland is “vihta.” In eastern Finland it is called “vasta.”

Now the bath is fully ready:
Water brought, and likewise bath-whisks,
All the boards are cleanly scoured.
Go and bathe thee at thy pleasure,
Wash thou there as it shall please thee,
I myself will mind the steaming,
Standing underneath the boarding.”  

The use of the sauna among the Finns has continued from time immemorial down to the present. 10 Joseph Acerbi describes the sauna as he witnessed it in the late eighteenth century, and reveals simultaneously his scientific interest and his diabolical curiosity:

Almost all the Finnish peasants have a small house built on purpose for a bath. . . . Men and women use the bath promiscuously, without any concealment of dress, or being in the least influenced by any emotions of attachment. If, however, a stranger open the door, and come on the bathers by surprise, the women are not a little startled at his appearance; for besides his person, he introduces along with him, by opening the door, a great quantity of light, which discovers at once to the view their situation, as well as their forms. . . . I often amused myself with surprising the bathers in this manner, and once or twice tried to go in and join the assembly; but the heat was so excessive that I could not breathe, and in the space of a minute at most, I verily believe must have suffocated. I sometimes stepped in for a moment, just to leave my thermometer in some proper place, and immediately went out again, where I would remain for a quarter of an hour, or ten minutes, and then enter again and fetch the instrument to ascertain the degree of heat. My astonishment was so great that I could scarcely believe my senses, when I found that those people remain together, and amuse themselves for a space of half an hour, and sometimes a whole hour, in the same chamber, heated to the 70th or 75th degree of Celsius. The thermometer, in contact with these vapours, became sometimes so hot that I could scarcely hold it in my hands. 11

German troops encountered the sauna in 1941 when they advanced into Estonia and the Soviet Union, and the sauna was recommended to German troops and settlers, especially after a battle or heavy work, as

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7 The Kalevala was put together in the early part of the nineteenth century. It records the dramatic struggle of the Finnish people and is studied today in the schools of Finland.


10 The sauna is believed to have been invented by the ancestors of Finns on the present territory of Finland. For a map showing world distribution of water vapor bath (sauna type) in the sixteenth century, see Ivan A. Lopatin, “Origin of the Native American Steam Bath,” American Anthropologist, Vol. 62 (1960), p. 986.

being good both spiritually and physically. The German-Finnish “weapon-comradeship” requires that the term sauna be adopted into the German language.\textsuperscript{12} Military regulations in Finland in the 1930’s and 1940’s made it mandatory for Finnish soldiers to take at least one sauna per week. Some writers credit the brave, calm, determined “sisu” of Finnish character to the sauna.\textsuperscript{13} One writer maintained that the sauna is the “most beloved refreshment of the Finn, his dearest evening delight, and his most important remedy in sickness.”\textsuperscript{14} Another opinion on the Finnish bath is that “a sauna offers peace and quiet away from the trouble of the farm.”\textsuperscript{15} Be that as it may, it is significant to note that in 1937, about 80 per cent of the farms in Finland had their own sauna. For Finland as a whole there are 6.5 persons per sauna, but in Swedish-speaking southwestern Finland the figure is 20.8 persons per sauna.\textsuperscript{16} In Europe the sauna is indeed distinctively Finnish. But what happened to the sauna or Finnish bath when it was brought across the Atlantic, when it was placed in the cultural cauldron or “melting pot” of America? Many old cultures have had elements manifested on the landscape which it is asserted have either disappeared on the American scene or have become so modified by the impact of other cultural forces that they are no longer discernible as distinct entities. Some students of cultural groups in America have asserted that certain elements have persisted to an extraordinary degree. Van Cleef, for example, noted that “the bathhouse is the sign of the Finn.”\textsuperscript{17} And Mead has remarked that in Minnesota “by night, sauna and Suometar are in competition

\textsuperscript{12} Werner Hangarter, \textit{Bedeutung und Anwendung der Sauna Für Abhärting und Gesunderhaltung der Truppe} (Berlin: 1943), p. 4. The sauna had disappeared from Germany during the late Middle Ages.

\textsuperscript{13} Viherjuuri, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 144 and 158.

\textsuperscript{14} J. C. Brown, \textit{People of Finland in Archaic Times} (London: 1892), p. 284.

\textsuperscript{15} Eduard and Claudia Neuenschwander, \textit{Atelier Aalto} (Zurich: 1954), p. 11.

\textsuperscript{16} Viherjuuri, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 37–38.

with television.” While the proverb states that “if the sauna and brandy cannot help a man, death is near at hand,” and an entire volume deals with the physiological benefits associated with the sauna and the use of the sauna in therapy, it remains to be seen to what degree the sauna has actually persisted in its transplantation to the New World.

LOCATION OF THE FIELD TRAVERSE

Finnish migration to the United States in substantial numbers commenced about three decades after the first great wave of settlers entered from Scandinavia. Although some Finns had participated in the colonization of Delaware in the seventeenth century and over 200 Finns had been attracted to California by the Gold Rush, Finnish immigration prior to 1884 was very limited. Subsequently, the number of immigrants swelled, and by 1892 an estimated 38,400 Finns had migrated into this country. Most of them had found employment in the mines of northern Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. The Finns came in greater numbers during the first decade of the present century; 58,640 arrived during that period. In the following decade 28,360 Finns entered the United States, and in the 1920’s immigration from Finland declined to 16,691. In the 1930’s only 2,146 arrived, and in the 1940’s the total was 2,503. The foreign-born Finnish population in the United States had attained a peak in 1920 when the number totaled 149,824 (Fig. 4). Forty-four per cent of these foreign-born Finns were concentrated in Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Hoglund stresses a societally influenced or socially organized migration while others, such

21 U.S. Census Bureau, Population, Vol. 2 (1830), p. 501. The first census reports which included Finns as a separate ethnic group were for 1900. Prior to that time, Finnish immigration figures must be based upon secondary sources.
as Van Cleef, have maintained the thesis that the impelling force was the similarity of environment.\textsuperscript{23} Fully 50 per cent of the total migration of Finns to America had its source in the lääni of Vaasa, with the majority of the Vaasa emigrées coming from South Ostrobothnia—an amazing localization of emigration.\textsuperscript{24} This localization of emigration, however, is matched by the concentration of the Finnish immigrants in America. Nearly one-third of all foreign-born Finns in the United States today live in the states of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Minnesota; most of them are settled in two nodes (one in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and the other in the Arrowhead section of northeastern Minnesota) near the southern and western edge of Lake Superior (Fig. 5).\textsuperscript{25} It was partially because of this distributional pattern that two field traverses were laid out. The Michigan traverse was along an 18-mile route in Houghton County between Tapiola and Nisula, via Elo (Fig. 6). It included 74 residences. The Minnesota traverse extended 32 miles from Floodwood to Kettle River, via Cromwell (Fig. 7). It included 88 residences.

The Michigan traverse was in an area of virtually solid Finnish settlement where the

\textsuperscript{23} Van Cleef, op. cit., pp. 203–07.

\textsuperscript{24} Henry Samuel Heimonen, "Finnish Rural Culture in South Ostrobothnia (Finland) and the Lake Superior Region (U.S.)" (Madison: 1941), unpublished Doctoral Thesis, p. 5.

\textsuperscript{25} The 1930 U.S. Census indicated that almost one-half of the 350,000 U.S. Finns were in the Lake Superior region. Canada's 50,000 Finns were concentrated in and near the Lake Superior settlements of Port Arthur and Fort William. At that time, the only other noteworthy overseas Finnish settlements were in South America, Australia, and New Zealand; Finns in these areas totaled less than 6,000.
process of acculturation might be minimized. The traverse in Minnesota was mixed. South of Cromwell, in Carlton County, the residences were mostly Finnish; north of Cromwell, in northern Carlton County and in St. Louis County, the Finnish residences were interspersed with those of Swedes, Germans, and East Europeans. In the Minnesota traverse, therefore, as opposed to the one in Michigan, one might test the process of acculturation more effectively particularly as it might pertain to the presence of saunas as a cultural index.

THE FIELD METHOD AND RESULTS

The location of each residence was plotted by number on the field traverse sheet; spacings between residences were obtained from speedometer readings. A three-by-five-inch card, with the residence number on it, was used to record the following data by means of an abbreviated key: (1) farm, part-time farm, or nonfarm residence; (2) presence or absence of sauna; (3) inhabited by Finn or non-Finn; (4) number of buildings in the homestead. Personal interview was employed to obtain complete data.26

Results of the Michigan traverse indicate that 63 of the 72 Finnish residences had saunas; only two non-Finnish residences were present along this route and neither had a sauna. Along the Minnesota traverse, 43 of the 56 Finnish residences had saunas while only two of the 32 non-Finnish residences had them. Significantly, 88 per cent of the Finnish residences in the more ethnically homogeneous Michigan area had saunas, while 77 per cent of them had saunas in the relatively heterogeneous Minnesota area (Table 1). If we correlate saunas with type of Finnish rural residence, that is, whether the home is occupied by a farmer, part-time farmer, or nonfarmer, one notes that saunas are most prevalent among the Finns engaged in full-time farming and are less likely to be encountered at Finnish nonfarm residences (Table 2). These traverses indicate that over nine out of ten Finnish farmsteads in these two areas have saunas! Thus, the presence of saunas is a remarkable index here to the Finns as a cultural group, particularly in locales (1) where the settlement is dominated by a single ethnic element, and (2) where farm residences prevail over those of part-time or nonfarm residences.

FEATURES ASSOCIATED WITH SAUNAS

The most significant aspect of saunas may not be that this feature is a signpost of Finnish population, but that seeing the sauna is like going through a gateway into an ethnic field of inquiry. A very distinctive set of cultural features is seen on the landscape of rural areas in the American Finland. These features include (1) the "lato" or field barn (Fig. 8); (2) the connecting barn constructed in different stages; (3) the multiple roof line of structures (Fig. 9); (4) the log structures with squared timbers; (5) the presence of ladders.

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26 Finns are purported to be aloof and suspicious, but field experience in this area indicated that they were most cordial and cooperative. We encountered a real field hazard, however, in the form of numerous canines. Out of 102 residences, we were greeted by 139 dogs, of which four were downright vicious!
along the sides and on the roofs of buildings; (6) the larger percentage of unpainted structures, often with flower-filled window boxes which offset drabness; (7) the covered stoop; and (8) the rural roadside garage.

It is interesting to note that Wilson, Davis, and Van Cleef each asserted that Finnish farmsteads have an unusually large number of buildings (Fig. 10). "Probably the most striking feature of the Finnish farm is the great number of buildings. These may range from the original small shack which was the first dwelling of the farmer, through several types of hay barns, tool sheds, and cattle barns, to the more modern dwelling and latest type of combined animal and hay barn with all modern appliances. Two structures which are always present are the bathhouse and the hay barn." Davis stated that "there is a multiplicity of sheds and other outbuildings, including the ubiquitous Finnish bathhouse, all widely separated. In the peripheral portions of the Community, where Scandinavian elements of the population predominate, the characteristic buildings of the Finnish farmsteads disappear, to be replaced by frame buildings or log houses of more conventional construction." Van Cleef contended that "one may very safely identify a Finnish farm from a distance by its number of buildings. Among them may be counted the owner's first shack, his later log cabin, his recent modern dwelling, his never-forgotten bathhouse, a cow barn, perhaps the old one and the new one with its glacier-boulder foundation, a horse barn, a root cellar, several hay barns scattered over the fields, a tool house, a woodshed, and miscellaneous special buildings." These statements apparently were never verified from field data. Our 50-mile field survey in Michigan and Minnesota included 81 farm and part-time farm homesteads of which 63 were occupied by Finns. From this limited universe of 559 buildings on 81 farmsteads, we found that the average Finnish farmstead was comprised of 7.1 buildings while that of the non-Finn had 6.2 buildings. This is not a great difference and one may well inquire why Wilson, Davis, and Van Cleef averred it so positively. It is our conclusion that the impression is actually more apparent than real and that it is compounded from two other characteristics: (1) the fact that often Finnish buildings are added in several stages (Fig. 11), and (2) that the


29 Van Cleef, op. cit., p. 192.
pervasive multiple roof line creates a visual impression of more buildings.⁸¹

Special note of the rural roadside garage is needed to highlight its concentration in the Finnish settlement areas of northern Michigan. It is more characteristic of Finnish and non-Finnish settlement areas of Michigan but in Wisconsin and Minnesota it is a rarity. Finns in Michigan explain their placement of the garage next to the public roadside rather than near the other farmstead buildings as a response to the heavy snowfall in that region (Fig. 12). While the snowfall here is indeed heavier than in the Wisconsin and Minnesota areas of Finnish settlement, it is dubious if snowfall in the Michigan area is heavier on Finnish farms than on adjacent non-Finnish ones!

The prevalence of the covered and often enclosed stoop is in itself an interesting architectural feature. However, it also illustrates the significant point that a cultural distinction may not always be attributable simply to a feature's presence or absence, but rather to the frequency of its occurrence in the architectural compages. In northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan one can observe covered stoops on non-Finnish houses but they are most common on the homes of Finns (Fig. 13). One can certainly appreciate the covered and often enclosed stoop from a functional standpoint. However, its numerical superiority on Finnish homes rather than on non-Finnish dwellings of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan poses a question similar to the one raised about the occurrence of the rural roadside garage. In this connection it is significant to heed the similarity of cultural forms in the American Finland with that of the cultural hearth in Vaasa. While Heimonen was not focusing upon this point, his study does represent the only comprehensive comparative investigation that has been made of these two areas.⁸² One is impressed by how many cultural characteristics which he described in Vaasa were transplanted to the American scene. This impression is reinforced when one studies the other published investigations of each of these areas and complements it with field observation.⁸³

⁸¹ Heimonen, op. cit.
⁸² Some writers have theorized that only cultural features with sentimental value have been transferred and preserved. For a discussion of the sauna in this context see Gladys Pierson, "Acculturation of the Finns
example, one notes the ladder against the two-room, tar-papered shack in Figure 5 of Van Cleef’s article, and in the six photographs in Davis’ article which show buildings, three of the structures have ladders. Also, Heimonen describes the long and narrow farm outlines in South Ostrobothnia and one notes from Michigan cadastral maps its partial transplantation on the American scene in areas of Finnish settlement. The writers vividly recall a pleasant repast in a rural Michigan home when they were shown a photograph which they had first concluded was taken in the Upper Peninsula. It was a scene that depicted two Finnish farmsteads and it was disclosed that the photograph was actually taken in southwestern Finland.

IN RETROSPECT

The correlation of saunas with Finnish settlement in rural America is impressive. in Miltown, Montana,” unpublished M.A. Thesis, Montana State University, Missoula, Montana, 1941.

33 Van Cleef, op. cit., p. 193.

34 Davis, op. cit., pp. 382–94.

35 Heimonen, op. cit., p. 27.


37 Heimonen, op. cit., p. 4.

One may conclude that there is indeed a high mathematical probability when one sees a sauna in northern Michigan, Wisconsin, or Minnesota that one is viewing one element of a Finnish cultural complex. This complex was transplanted to America with many of its distinctive elements still intact or only slightly modified. In the move across the Atlantic such names as Mäki may have been altered to Mackey, Niemi to Point, Vaara to Warren, Kasi to Casey, Järvi to Jarvis, and Lassi to Lassey. The old method of drawing water from a Finnish well may have been moved to the New World and now be a relict feature rarely encountered (Fig. 14). But despite the transformations which have occurred, many morphological elements that have existed for centuries remain despite technological and functional change. Over two decades ago, Heimonen asserted that “although a clear-cut Finnish rural culture exists in the Lake Superior region, it is rapidly disappearing with the generation which brought it to America. This is especially true of such tangibles as the forms and functions of farm structures and agricultural practices.” With the benefit of hindsight, we can now question Heimonen’s conclusion and wonder if he, too, has overemphasized the “melting
similar cultures without further investigation. In the nonmarginal areas, especially in the exploding metropolitan centers, cultural identification may be a far different problem. Perhaps the city is a cultural cauldron, although close geographic association cannot assure us that it is necessarily so. In the marginal areas separation may be in terms of geographical distance; in the cities the great separator could be social distance in occupation or some other form of economic or social grouping.

One may consider the diffusion of culture that occurs when an ethnic group such as the Finns migrates into the urban environment. One notes, for example, that President Kennedy, who is not distinguished as having Finnish forbears, has just acquired a sauna purported to be superior to Premier Khrushchev's. New York's beauty shops are installing saunas, and there are over 4,000 of them now in California motels. Hammacher Schlemmer, New York's fancy home appliance store, currently offers a "build-it-yourself" model for $2,395. Is acculturation in the city sweeping across traditional barriers of the rural environment, or is the adoption of cultural traits in the city rather superficial and ephemeral? Be that as it may, there is the distinct possibility that other cultural groups in rural environments similar to the one dealt with in this study might be identified and investigated with the tool of the cultural index.

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