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# **The Changing Finnish Americana**

**This is a slightly modified version of the article written  
for the Program Book of FinnFest 2004, Lake Worth, FL**

**Siirtolaisuusinstituutti – Migrationsinstitutet**

**Turku - Åbo 2004**

<http://www.migrationinstitute.fi>

## The Changing Finnish Americana

In the 1640's, when 500 Finns arrived as half of the settlers of "New Sweden", they truly were pioneers. The total population of the American colonies at the time was only 25,000. About two hundred years later, in the 1840's, Finns held prominent positions in Russian Alaska, where the first Lutheran church on the West Coast was established in Sitka. Finnish sea captains and sailors pioneered and developed navigation in the northern regions of the Pacific Ocean. We can be proud of these early achievements.

Larger numbers of Finnish emigrants did not start arriving in North America until the 1880's. But, when America Fever was peaking about 100 years ago, some years over 20,000 Finns boarded ships heading here. It is estimated that between 1860 and 1930 over 350,000 traveled to North America, and that of these about 220,000 settled permanently in the USA and 50,000 in Canada. During the same period over 2 million immigrants from the other Scandinavian countries had settled in the United States.

When the big exodus from Finland started around 1900, the US population was already 75 million, and the Finns actually considered latecomers. They arrived on the average over a generation later than the other Scandinavians. There was no longer free land handed out, and many Finns had to take on the toughest jobs in the forests and the mines. Many died young. Early on the ratio of women/men among the Finnish immigrants was low, adding to the factors resulting in fewer second generation Finns. These were the years when Finn Halls were built, to house temperance, sick benefit, religious and socialist organizations.

Between the two world wars it was a time to be American first, often abandoning the mother tongue of ones ancestors. The US Census counts and characterizes the population once every ten years. In 1920 it counted 150,000 persons born in Finland (1st generation) and the same number of US born persons with at least one parent born in Finland (2nd generation). Combined, these two generations totaled 300,000 and were called "Finnish Stock". People of Scandinavian Stock counted 3 million at that time.

In 1980 the US Census introduced a new question "What is your ancestry or ethnic origin?". At that time Finnish Americans were already considered part of the older immigrant groups, compared to the new influx of immigrants of oriental and hispanic origin. The numbers claiming Finnish ancestry were 616,000 in year 1980, increased 7% to 659,000 in 1990, and now in year 2000 decreased by 5 % to 624,000.

Of those now claiming Finnish ancestry 20,000 were born in Finland (including about 8,000 that had arrived since 1990, many staying here on a temporary basis). It is estimated that about 80,000 are second generation immigrants, that is the number of Finnish Stock today would be about 100,000. This means that over half a million third, fourth, fifth and even sixth generation Finnish-Americans recognize their Finnish roots at the census polls (as either the first or second ethnicity). In comparison, about ten million claimed Scandinavian ancestry, of which about 800,000 are still first and second generation, that is of Scandinavian Stock.

Forty percent of the respondents claimed a single ancestry (Finnish only). Of the sixty percent that claimed multiple (or dual) ancestry, half claim Finnish first, and half Finnish second. For 100,000 the other ethnicity was Scandinavian.

The Census also asks "What language other than English is spoken at home?". In the year 2000 "Finnish" was the language given by 40,000 (over 6 percent of those claiming Finnish ancestry). 150,000 claimed Danish, Swedish or Norwegian language (only 1.5 percent of those claiming Scandinavian ancestry). Not surprisingly we Finns feel stronger about preserving our language, but our numbers are also shrinking each year (70,000 in 1980, and 55,000 in 1990).

The ranking of the US states with most Finns remains the same as in 1990. The numbers of residents with Finnish ancestry in year 2000 (with percentage change since 1990) are as follows: Michigan 101,400 (- 7%), Minnesota 99,400 (- 4%), California 56,000 (-12%), Washington 40,300 (-9%), Wisconsin 36,000 (+3%), Massachusetts 27,000 (-12%), Florida 25,700 (+3%), Oregon 21,400 (-7%), Illinois 19,100 (-7%), Ohio 18,000 (-11%), and New York 16,800 (-21%).

Runner ups are three popular Finn states: Texas 12,800 (+1%), Arizona 11,800 (+13%), and Colorado 9,800 (+14%). The highest percentage increases occurred in South Carolina 45% to 2,690 and North Carolina 30% to 4990.

How about newcomers? Currently about 500 persons a year from Finland are given permanent residence status (Green Card), mostly by being married to a US citizen. At the same time, there are close to 10,000 non-immigrant visitors from Finland admitted each year. As an example, in year 1994, there were 3,500 admitted on employment visas, 4,000 for studies, and 1,500 for government related purposes.

## New challenges

Finnish American organizations and their activities during the last century were created and maintained by the big wave of immigrants that visited or settled the United States before and shortly after the year 1900. There were about 200,000 permanent settlers before 1920. They founded temperance and sick benefit societies, workers organizations, and built churches and Finn Halls. In every Finn Town there were brass bands, choruses, theater guilds, gymnastics groups, and most of them had its own Finnish language newspaper. They established the Finnish American culture and traditions. Much of it may soon be lost.

Finnish Americana is right now undergoing a major and rapid change. The number of Americans of Finnish Stock has decreased from its peak of 320,000 in year 1930 to about 100,000 today. The drop of about 35,000 in the number of persons claiming Finnish ancestry between 1990 and 2000 is about the same as the estimated number of second generation Finns that have died during this ten-year period. The next ten years may claim an even bigger loss.

Consider that the last immigrants in the big wave arrived in the late 1920's (before the Depression and WWII) soon eighty years ago, and that anyone still alive would be about 100 years old. Their children, the second generation, are also approaching old age. After the 1930's there has been very limited emigration to the US from Finland. The total for

these seventy years is about 25,000, not much more than the number of arrivals in just one year during a peak period before WWI.

I believe that FinnFest USA has played an important role in keeping Finnish and Finnish-American culture and traditions alive in America. First and second generation Finnish-Americans have traditionally been in majority among participants in the local festivals, with third generation Finns getting increasingly involved. The future will clearly be in the hands of the third and fourth generation Finnish Americans. Project 34 started ten years ago and was on the right track.

FinnFest participants have traditionally been first and second generation Finnish Americans, with third generation participants rapidly increasing. Will the third, fourth and fifth generation Finnish Americans carry forward their culture and traditions? Will the small number of highly educated newcomers and temporary residents integrate with them and find meaningful activities of common interest?

I suggest that we revisit the ideas developed by Project 34 during five yearly brainstorming sessions 1994-98 (initiated by John Laine). We could also learn by studying what has happened in our Finn communities during the past 10-20 years. There are areas with predominantly "older generation Finns" (like Upper Michigan), areas with mostly "newcomers" (Texas, Silicon Valley), and areas where both groups are present and seem to get along with each other (Seattle, Lake Worth).

Perhaps the big "Finn Powers" could join forces in mapping the past and present, and creating a vision and goals for the future. I am thinking of Finlandia Foundation National, FinnFest USA, the Salolampi Foundation, and the Embassy of Finland in the USA, and Suomi-Seura, the Finnish Expatriate Parliament, and the Finnish Migration Institute in Finland. Obviously, modern Finland should and will play a bigger part in the life of future Finnish Americans.

There are challenges and opportunities ahead for all of us in this era of rapid changes.

More detailed statistics on Finnish Americans can be found at:

- <http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/>