

The Finns

JUSSI (JOHN) PUSKA first came to a Finnish settlement called Sointula during the summer of 1903 to join a group of several Finnish immigrants with a desire to start a self-sustaining place of their own. The name Sointula meant “Place of Harmony.” The Finns negotiated with the British Columbia government and managed to secure some 28,000 acres on Malcolm Island opposite Port McNeill, Vancouver Island. Under the leadership of Matti Kurikka, a political philosopher and newspaperman, the communal group founded the Kalevan Kansa Colonization Company. Puska bought shares in this new venture. The harmony aspect of the commune began to go awry when the large communal hall burned on 29 January 1903, killing 11 people and destroying most of the commune’s supplies and records. Always a problem, the financial debt mounted. A final blow came when Kurikka made a ridiculously low bid on a bridge project in Vancouver that was accepted. It was during this period that Puska spearheaded a group of men who left Malcolm Island destined for Webster’s Corners.

On New Year’s Day, 1905, an advance party of two, Jussi Puska and Emil Parras, arrived at Webster’s Corners to prepare the way for the

Two men sit on a giant log sawhorse jousting at a Finnish Picnic at Albion. Mrs. Toikka is holding son Olavi in left foreground.



rest of the group, hoping to establish a Finnish commune. The two men learned that Chinese workmen had forfeited a shingle bolt contract because of inadequate wages and had left the campsite in a dreadful state. Obviously desperate, Matti Kurikka had taken this shingle bolt contract at Webster’s Corners.

Arvo Skytte related that in 1904 several men left Sointula in a wreck of a scow. They travelled all the way along the coastline of the mainland, making frequent stops to take on firewood, water, and food supplies.

The first Finnish settlers arrived in Webster’s Corners with a team of horses, a wagon, and a few supplies. They formed a co-operative association and became known as “Sammon Takojat,” which means something like “Finnish colony.” Some of the first arrivals were Sanfried Salo, Karl Hendrikson, and Armas and Arvo Skytte. Within the first month about 40 to 50 others followed, among them couples

A Finnish picnic at Albion, circa 1914.

- 1 Arvo Skytte
- 2 Rose Nikander
- 3 Niilo Nikander
- 4 Nestor Toikka
- 5 Minda Leponiemi (later Mrs. Vilho Katainen)
- 6 Jenny’s Mother (Webster’s Corners Aho)
- 7 Vilho Katainen
- 8 Raymond Aho?
- 9 Ragnar Lundell
- 10 Jenny Aho



The original Sampola farm (the Finnish Commune) left to right: the house, the swing with two adults and two children, a combination mess hall and sauna (behind a slope of land), and a cottage. Notice the Sunday attire: white shirts and ties for the men and light clothing for the women.

John and Minna Skytte, Urho and Mini Teppo, Charles and Henni Bell, Axel and Ruussa Nikander, and bachelors Matti Karttu, Victor Karst, Gust Pederson, and Emil Anderson. Armas and Arvo Skytte later found their wives Jenny and Armi among these newcomers. The settlers had little money and few personal belongings. The two shacks, originally built by the Chinese, were fixed up and other sleeping quarters built.

Now the real work began. The men began falling trees and cutting them into five-foot-length logs before splitting them into shingle bolts. The men intended to float the bolts down Kanaka Creek, but the water was often so low that that the bolts got caught up in the huge boulders. The men had no choice but to wade into the frigid water and manually get the bolts moving again. For the first few months the bone-weary, water-soaked and hungry men did not get home until after dark. The bolts were tied into booms and hauled to

a shingle mill in New Westminster. The men were paid only \$3.50 a cord after making delivery to New Westminster. The challenge of getting the bolts to market eased somewhat during the spring freshet.

That summer ten men with five boats went salmon fishing at the mouth of the Fraser River. A cannery rented out the boats at a fee of one third of the catch. Although the salmon run was one of the largest in recent times and the river was literally teeming with fish, the cannery limited their daily catch to 200 sockeye per boat. The men worked for six weeks and managed to earn \$500, which they turned over to the co-operative association.

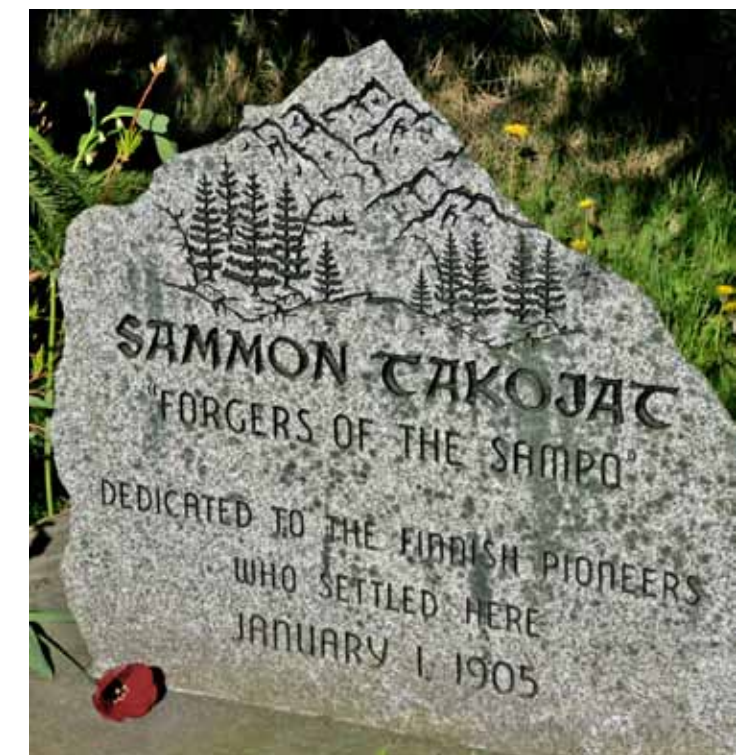
The association members used the \$500 as a down payment on a 160-acre farm on the southeast corner of Dewdney Trunk Road and Webster Road. The farm had been priced at \$2,700. The purchase included a house, a barn, a team of horses, a cow, chickens, and a fine stand of cedars. They managed to make a further \$500 payment through the sale of the shingle bolts.

The cedar forest provided a good source of shingle bolts for the Finnish commune, and the association men cut 1,000 cords during that first year. Axel Nikander initially took shingle bolts by horse and wagon to Port Haney, but after the Selkirk-Pelletier shingle mill became operational, he transported finished packs of shingles to Port Haney instead. It was during this period that Arvo Skytte made a discovery of a lifetime. He was using stumping powder to blow out an old stump and unearthed a prehistoric anthropomorphic bowl, which could be thousands of years old [see page 16].

During the following years, other Finnish families joined the community, some from Sointula and some from Vancouver. In 1910 a number of coal miners and their families arrived after being forced out of Wellington and Cumberland (near Nanaimo) on Vancouver Island because of labour struggles.

In 1911 the men added a stage to the communal dining hall, and plays became a regular feature. Among the young people were many talented actors, dancers, musicians, and a full orchestra

The 40 to 50 Finnish pioneers who settled at Webster's Corners formed a co-operative and the group came to be known as Sammon Takojat—Forgers of the place of the Sampo—from the Finnish folk legend "Kalevala," meaning magic corn, salt, and coin mill.



for concerts and dances. A big dramatic group presented full-length plays, and on the night of a production the hall would be bursting with men, women, and children. Many travelled over muddy roads and trails on foot, by horse, or by horse and wagon.

In 1915 the Finnish community decided to build a new hall as the old one was too small and required repairs. The commune raised the money to buy lumber from Fraser Mills at a cost of \$4 per 1,000 board feet. They hired one man as foreman at \$100, and the volunteers managed to build the hall in just 27 days. With the completion of the new hall, community activities soon expanded and soon the hall boasted of having the best-equipped stage in the Fraser Valley. At this hall the Finns enacted plays, put on amateur program nights, gymnastic displays, weddings, dances, picnics, Christmas concerts, and Halloween masquerades. They were drawn together by their common language, culture, and particularly by their isolation.

All the Finnish settlers were freethinkers, non-religious and open-minded people. However, eventually the commune began to break up. Although all of them wished nothing more than freedom of thought and freedom from political repression, such was not to be

A Finnish folk dance being performed at one of the summer picnics in 1914. Left to right: Hilja Toikka, Ide Ström, Unknown, Minda Leponiemi (instructor), Vilho Katainen, Villi Haanpää, Joel Vepsäläinen, Jenny (Mrs. Armas) Skytte (dressed as a man complete with mustache and goatee).



the case. Although their ideas and opinions were changing on a national and international scale, nearly all of the original settlers were members of the Socialist Party of Canada, and thus, in 1913 they formed the Socialist Party at Webster's Corners. During the First World War the Finnish hall at Webster's Corners was closed because of a ban on Socialist membership imposed by the Canadian government.

And yet, the Finns who came to Webster's Corners before the First World War held politically divided loyalties. Some, called "Reds," held on to the socialist (communist) ideals. The "Reds" were more radical than the "Whites," who were more conservative. The short-lived civil war in Finland that had followed the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia thus caused a division of loyalties in Webster's Corners, with the result that individuals who had earlier been the best of friends were not talking to each other for a period of several years. A

Axel Nikander taking a wagonload of shingles by horse and wagon from the Selkirk-Pelletier mill to Port Haney. A "Red" Finn, Nikander returned to Finland, where it was alleged that he was executed by the secret police.



W. Barry Piers, manager of The Bank of Montreal, was the photographer of this scenic landscape of the Golden Ears titled “Summer Clouds.”

small minority favouring the “Red” political system chose to leave Webster’s Corners in 1913.

Another factor that may have led to the demise of the Finnish commune was that the settlers had hoped to be self-sufficient, but that philosophy did not work well with the rest of the developing community of Maple Ridge. Finally the Finnish association decided to divide the 160 acres into family plots. They hired surveyors and divided out parcels of land according to the size of the family and the value of the land.

Although many of the Finns of Webster’s Corners still live in the area, the rest are dispersed throughout the Fraser Valley.

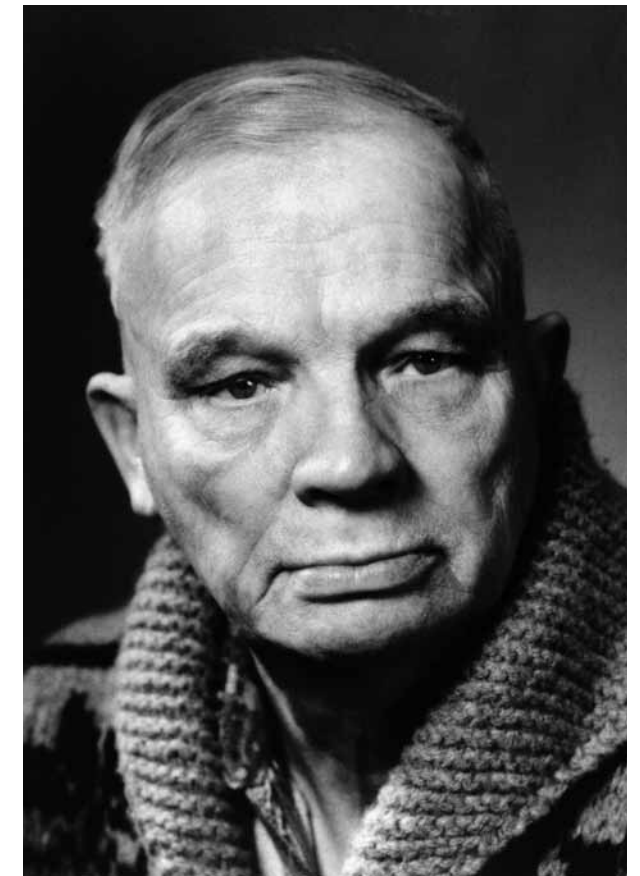
The Webster’s Corners Finns firmly believed that co-operatives paid

the highest dividends to the shareholders, and as a result a Consumers’ Co-operative Association was started in 1926. Unfortunately in the 1930 dissent, rifts, economic troubles, bitterness, personal and political differences caused one group to break away and leave the province. In 1937 the remaining Finns made another attempt and built another co-operative called the “People’s Store.” The name was later changed to the “Co-op Exchange.” At first this Co-op Association Store did extremely well, but soon through mismanagement, personal animosities, and other differences the shareholders were forced to declare bankruptcy.

In 1941, the Canadian federal government declared the War Measures Act, with Finland being one of the so called “enemy alien” countries, as it was aligned with Germany. Even though all the Finns had arrived in Canada before this worldwide political situation, all the Finnish halls across Canada were locked up and people were forbidden to use them. The halls belonged to the Finnish Organization of Canada founded in Toronto in 1901.

The library was transferred to the home of Ada and Walter Rauma. During this period the RCMP executed search warrants looking for communist literature. They raided one home and left with nothing other than a Finnish-written pamphlet on the history of the Finnish Civil War of 1918.

It was ironic that during this time many of the Finns all across Canada had sons and daughters serving in the Canadian Armed Forces. That act was rescinded near the end of the war, but the local hall had deteriorated badly from lack of care and declining membership. It did carry on some activities though and was rented out for various functions for many years.



Arvo Skytte, the pioneer Finlander who settled at Webster’s Corners and discovered an anthropomorphic bowl under the roots of a first-growth Douglas Fir tree (see page 16).