My Father Spoke Finglish at Work: Finnish Americans in Northeastern Ohio

Noreen Sippola Fairburn

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You Can’t Be Mexican: You Talk Just Like Me
FRANK S. MENDEZ

My Father Spoke Finglish at Work: Finnish Americans in Northeast Ohio
EDITED BY NOREEN SIPPOLA FAIRBURN
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These oral and written histories began as a project of the Finnish American Heritage Association of Ashtabula County (FAHA). Founded and organized in 1995 by Linda and John Riddell, the association is a group of Finnish Americans that meets monthly (excluding three winter months) to exchange stories of ancestors, celebrate Finnish holidays, and collect artifacts for their newly built Finnish American Cultural Center (FACC). Construction began on the FACC’s log building in 2004, largely through the efforts of John Riddell and a volunteer crew. Assembled on the former site of Sovinto Hall, the center was completed in time for its dedication and open house, July 1, 2006.

The taped interviews were also begun in 1995, but it wasn’t until 2002 that the FAHA concurred that written copies would be a better method of preserving these family stories for generations to come.

In the beginning, Marilyn Aho provided instruction for the FAHA bylaws and furnished other legal data to comply with the State of Ohio. She emphasized the importance of interviewing and recording oral histories of older Finnish Americans as an educational and permanent record of early immigrants. After attending historical seminars, Marilyn also provided a questionnaire that she adapted for this particular ethnic group. Marilyn left Ashtabula County shortly thereafter but turned over pertinent materials to Linda Sippola Riddell, who continued with the interviews.

In 1995, Linda began visiting people in their homes and in nursing residences, taking along a tape recorder and a questionnaire. Requisites were that they should be of Finnish descent and live, or have lived, in Ashtabula
County. The questions weren’t always answered in precise order, and sometimes narrators strayed from the question at hand. With only one hour on each tape, additional interviews were arranged or information was gleaned from other sources such as church records and other family members.

Questionnaire
1. Who were the first persons in your family to come to the United States?
2. Where did they live in Finland, and when did they leave?
3. Do you know any stories about their journey?
4. What date did they arrive in America? Where did they first settle and find employment?
5. Where and when did your parents (or grandparents) marry?
6. When and where were you born? Do you have siblings?
7. Where did you go to school? Did you attend college? Years of graduations:
8. Was your family affiliated with a church?
9. Were Finnish traditions (foods and the sauna) and holidays observed in your home?
10. What did you do for entertainment while growing up? What chores did you have?
11. How was your family affected by the Great Depression?
12. Did you or members of your family serve during World War II?
13. Do you remember anything about the Finnish halls, parks, or stores?
14. Who did you marry and when?
15. Name your children and give birth dates:
16. How did you earn a living? Was your spouse employed?
17. When, and from where, did you or your spouse retire?
18. Have you ever traveled to Finland?
19. Have you received any awards, honors, or special recognition?
20. What changes have you observed in your community and in the world?
21. Tell about anything humorous or tragic, or of general interest during any period in your life.

In response, a few outlined or wrote their own memoirs, and one interview was conducted over the telephone. Rebecca (Niemi) Sloan first began transcribing and typing the oral stories, but her work as a journalist for the (Youngstown) Vindicator, along with her family responsibilities, left no time to continue this additional task. Beginning in January 2005, Linda Riddell
transcribed the remainder, typing them verbatim; she then gave these copies to me. I edited and arranged each interview in chronological order and, after additional research, I compiled the following material.

The first-person accounts were written as the narrator told them with the exception of minor alterations for the sake of clarity; brackets enclose further explanations. Some photos were donated to the Finnish American Heritage Association, some were loaned by family members, and some were loaned by a private collector. Thus, this project has been a collaborative effort from its inception.

The following oral and written histories are a mere sampling of Finnish Americans in Ashtabula County and its environs; nevertheless, they may prompt others, whatever their ethnic background, to record their own family histories for generations to come.

This publication would never have been initiated if it had not been for the Finnish descendants who consented to share their families’ stories. Many were in their eighties or nineties at the time of their interviews, yet their memories of days gone by were told with frankness and clarity. We give our heartfelt thanks to those still with us and regret that those who have passed on during the many years when the interviewing and publishing were underway will not get to see their contributions in print.

Thanks and gratitude must be expressed to the many people who contributed additional information or photos of a parent or spouse: Janis Bloom Eldridge, Joanne Fitting Carpenter, Susan Luoma Rose, Elizabeth Karbacka, Eleanor Kailhanen Stevenson, Katherine Kaura, Betty Kohta Wormley, Rhoda Korkate, Maxine Koski, Sonja Kotila Corlew, Elaine Raaske Richardson, Glenn Sippola, Rebecca Niemi Sloan, and Will Fitzhugh, founder and editor of the Concord Review.

Many thanks to Rita Hjerpe, program director, Bethany Lutheran Church, who graciously answered questions and provided from files and ledgers the dates and other pertinent information necessary for clarification and accuracy.

Thanks, also, to Dee Riley, photographer, for her expert help and advice; and to Doree Petros for generously lending select photos from her extensive family collection.

And a special thanks to my husband, Robert Fairburn, who is more computer savvy than I am. He solved technical problems that spared me from frustration and anxiety.
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Introduction

Although Finns came with Swedes to Delaware as early as 1638, the first permanent settlement of Finns in Ashtabula Harbor, Ohio, wasn't established until 1874 when a small crew arrived to work as ore shovelers on the Hanna Docks. Immigration accelerated to this area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1891 the number of Finland-born in Ashtabula was 1,300, and by 1938 they numbered more than 4,000. They came to Ashtabula and to other Lake Erie port towns, such as Conneaut and Fairport Harbor, where there was heavy manual labor working on the railroads or loading and unloading ships that plied the Great Lakes. The hours were long and the wages low, but these stalwart immigrants struggled on to send passage to family waiting in Finland and to buy homes once their families arrived. Women or children occasionally traveled alone, in most instances to join family already here. And there were those who yearned for farmland and may have worked on the docks or the railroads only until they had earned enough to buy land and move to rural areas.

They emigrated from Finland for various reasons. The population in Finland had grown considerably by 1900, and there was little employment available, especially for younger siblings when, by tradition, the oldest son inherited the family farm. More often they were crofters, or farm tenants, with no hope of owning land. In 1899, when Finland was still a duchy under the Russian czar, Russia’s grip tightened in many aspects of their lives. For example, the Russian language was to be used in government and education, and men were to be conscripted into Russia’s army. The Finns’ protests were
ignored, so, rather than yielding to Russia’s demands, many left the country around the beginning of the twentieth century.

Of those included in this volume, only one was well-educated and emigrated from Helsinki, Finland’s largest city. One other came from Tampere, and one came from Sortavala, which is now a part of Russia. With the exception of the one from Helsinki, all were of the working class, and most hailed from small villages or farms in the province of Vaasa (now southern Ostrobothnia), which borders the Gulf of Bothnia and stretches inland toward central Finland, and from Oulu province, north of Vaasa.

Thus, they came for economic or political reasons, and when letters arrived from those who emigrated earlier, telling of the comparatively good wages and opportunities in America, this was also persuasive. They settled in areas where they knew other Finns and where the climate was similar to Finland, such as the states surrounding the Great Lakes. They clustered in the same areas, with the hope of retaining their language and customs among fellow countrymen. Although surnames may be the same, the families may not necessarily be related, for individuals and families adopted the surname of the farm owner wherever they last held tenancy. Once here, some surnames were anglicized, and children often changed their first names because of shame or embarrassment with their foreign-sounding, often mispronounced names in schools.

Other than a small trunk of personal belongings, they also brought their language, religion, love of music, and traditions. They built their saunas, celebrated Finnish holidays, cooked familiar Finnish foods, and endured disappointments and tragedies with an innate trait the Finns call sisu, a word not easily defined because it has many connotations. It is the indomitable will that makes Finns endure when stamina is needed in work, war, or athletics. It is inner strength that sustains them in the face of adversity. When Finns are challenged in countless ways throughout their lifetimes, they remind themselves to use their sisu by persevering with patience and fortitude and by keeping their faith.

Learning the English language for those immigrating as adults was especially difficult. Finnish bears no resemblance to the languages of neighboring Sweden or Russia. It does, however, have Roman roots, so the alphabet is similar to the English form, except that it has only nineteen letters and relies heavily on vowels rather than consonants. Their language also has no articles or future tense, and the accent is always on the first syllable. The men, out of necessity, had to learn enough English to succeed in their jobs, but their attempts at
speaking the new language resulted in a combination of Finnish and English that became known as “Finglish.” Ashtabula, for example, is a native Indian word loosely translated as “fish river.” In Finglish this word is pronounced US'-te-pulla. Most women continued to speak their native language for the remainder of their lives. The children, however, quickly learned English upon entering American schools, even though Finnish was still the primary language in the homes until the Finland-born generation passed away.

Perhaps it was the second generation who had the more difficult role, keeping one foot in their parents’ generation while stepping with the other into American culture. This generation wanted to learn the new language, become educated, and, in general, have a more prosperous life than their hard-working parents who clung to the old-country ways. This generation coped while growing up during the Depression years, often serving in World War II, either in the military or on the home front. The second generation most often married other Finns who lived in the same neighborhoods and attended the same schools and social events. Moreover, their parents frowned upon marriages to those who were not Finnish and who were not of the same religious persuasion.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Finns were the largest ethnic group in Ashtabula, followed by Italians, Swedes, and then the Irish. As time went on, all groups became less clannish and began to intermingle, and the unwritten family rule was overlooked when they began to marry more frequently outside their own nationality. Today, even the Lutheran churches established by the early Finns are no longer Finnish strongholds.
Late-Nineteenth-Century Arrivals,
1874–1899
A small crew of Finnish men first arrived in Ashtabula Harbor in 1872 to complete construction of the northern leg of the Pittsburgh, Youngstown, and Ashtabula Railroad (PY&A). This railroad was necessary to transport coal north from the Pennsylvania coal mines and to ship iron ore south from the mines in Minnesota and Michigan’s Upper Peninsula to the Pittsburgh and Youngstown steel mills. When the railroad was completed in 1873, this Finnish crew moved on, but in 1874 another group arrived to work as ore shovelers at the Hanna Dock, and a permanent settlement was begun. There were few women among them in those early years, for single men or married men usually arrived first to earn enough passage for siblings or wives.

The first method of loading coal onto boats was by pushing wheelbarrows up a gangplank and dumping them. To unload ore, one-ton buckets were lowered into the boat’s hold while men inside filled the buckets with their shovels. As if these ten-hour days, seven days a week weren’t enough to endure, the living conditions were less than accommodating. Cramped boarding houses were the norm, with outhouses in the backyards. There was no shortage of work, however, and thousands of several ethnic groups were employed.

At the docks, there were no coffee breaks; instead, kegs of beer were hauled in to slacken the workers’ thirst. Gang bosses often paid their crews with silver coins while they congregated in a saloon. These coins were often spent in the saloons, while old-country “Martta’s” promised passage was temporarily forgotten. When the boats took days to load or unload, sailors also frequented the saloons, resulting in fighting and gambling. Houses of ill repute also appeared, adding to the degradation.

During the ensuing years, as more women arrived carrying their Bibles and hymn books, changes were made to ameliorate these conditions. As mechanization was gradually developed at the docks, working hours were reduced or men were laid off. Many were then forced to seek other means of supporting their growing families such as ship-building, maintaining small businesses, or buying that long-yearned-for farm.
Martin J. Hakala

My father is believed to be the first Finnish baby born in Ashtabula Harbor. His name was John Hakala, born in 1876. I don’t know my grandparents’ names, but I had three uncles and one aunt on my father’s side. My mother’s name was Sofie Poltto, and she was born on a farm in Raahe, Finland. They had tough times then, and my mother believed the streets in America were paved with gold. So she traveled to this country in steerage class and settled in Ashtabula Harbor.

My folks met and were married in Ashtabula. They had five children: Nelma was the oldest, then Gertrude. Another girl died in infancy. Then there were the three boys: Carl, Paul, and me. I was born on February 22, 1904. At that time they lived on Oak Street [West Eighth Street] in a house that had a bathtub and an inside toilet. [In 1930, most streets in Ashtabula were changed from names to numbers, and the Ashtabula River divided the east and west sides.]

My dad worked at the Hanna Docks as an operator of a machine that unloaded ships; he sometimes worked at night.

Before bedtime, my mother used to tell us stories about Finland. I remember the Bloomquists lived next door. We went to the Finnish Congregational Church at the corner of Oak and Coyne. They used to call it the “little church,” and I think some people looked down on it. We went to Washington [Elementary] School, then to Harbor High.

We had wonderful parents when we were growing up. Christmas was wonderful when we had special things to eat. My mother cooked meat and potatoes, and we liked her reikäleipä [rye bread]. We used to buy some baked goods at Jack Sippola’s bakery. I remember how Mrs. Sippola would always be sweeping the sidewalk off in front of the bakery. Three brothers had a grocery store called Lampela Brothers. On the lower end of Oak Street was a toggery shop owned by Salgen, and John Hummer had a dry-goods store. He was a sort of “Keystone Cop” kind of guy. He had a beer wagon, and he would pull up with his horses, and say, “What’s your name? I’m a Finn—John Hummer.” The grocery stores were mostly east of Joseph Avenue. I remember High Street [Morton Drive] were the bars [saloons] were parallel to the river. Oak Street also had Dublin House—a boarding house—and there was a saloon in there, too. Hank Kinnunen built seven homes in a row on Joseph Avenue that we
called Kinnunen Kaupunki [Kinnunen’s Town]. These were across from the old Bethany Lutheran Church, and they named them after the days of the week: Monday to Sunday, but the Wednesday house burned down.

My first job as a youngster was weeding onions in a greenhouse. I made eighty cents for eight hours. When the schools were closed during the 1918 influenza epidemic, I worked as a rivet- passer in the shipyards and made thirty-seven and a half cents an hour. I worked on the docks as a weigh master in summers, and I once worked at a feed store on Bridge Street; that store later moved to Lake Avenue.

Some Finns kept cows to get milk, and there was a pasture near the overhead bridge on West Nineteenth called Brown’s pasture. There was a water trough on the corners of Lake Avenue and Oak Street. That was fun when you had to step over cow pies or get your feet warmed up! My dad worked once on a farm, west of Haywood Beach, and our family would camp there most of the summer. We cooked outside in their apple orchard.

My father was lucky during the Depression, since he worked as an operator at the docks. I remember the soup kitchens that were formed, and some of the churches served meals. People who couldn’t afford to buy coal went to the coal yards at the docks and picked up lumps of coal during the night. The next day they would say, “We went blackberrying last night.” Then railroad cops would whitewash the tops of coal piles so they could detect stolen coal, but scrapings and fine coal were often given to dock employees, and it could be hauled for a dollar a load.

After I graduated from high school in 1922, I went to Spencerian Business College in Cleveland for two years. I worked first as a manager of deposits at the Harbor Building and Loan. Me and Richard Ranta (Senior) were responsible for starting that company. We did better with real estate [loans] than they did uptown on Main Street. During the Depression, we lost money, but I helped clean up the losses and then got savings insured. Things got better during the Depression when the WPA [Works Progress Administration] was organized. They paved some Ashtabula streets and expanded the city sewers. Peoples Savings and Loan bought out Harbor Building and Loan, but I was able to stay on with them as a manager. I was never out of work.

I remember all the halls: Socialist halls, and Sovinto [Harmony] Hall—the biggest wooden hall—with a wonderful dance floor. They had live music with polkas and folk music. They had Finnish plays and I acted in them in the 1930s. They had the Sovinto Male Chorus, and I sang with them, all in Finnish. The athletic groups were wonderful, with baseball and basketball. I
remember every Thursday was the maids’ day off, so there were always dances at Sovinto on Thursdays.

I married Ina Niemi on August 12, 1930. She grew up in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and had come to Ashtabula to visit relatives, and that’s how I met her. We had two daughters: Joan [Lorentzen], born in 1931; and Karen [Haussman], born in 1934. We bought a house on Michigan Avenue in the Harbor. I went to the public saunas, one or the other, three times a week: Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. Next to my wife, I loved a sauna best.

We belonged to Bethany Lutheran Church, and my wife and I both sang in the choir. I sang in the Town Choir, too, as it was first the Sovinto Chorus. And I belonged to the Harbor [Mason’s] Lodge, El Kadir, and the North End Club. I retired from Peoples after working there forty-five years.

We had been married fifty-three years when my wife died in 1985; she was seventy-eight years old. Both our girls live in California, so I later moved into the Country Club Retirement Campus.

*Martin died at the age of ninety-one on June 26, 1995.*

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**Russell Holmstrom**

My grandfather, Oscar Ferdinand Holmstrom, was the first one in my family to come to this country. He was from Summinkylä, and he came to Ashtabula Harbor in 1888, when he was eighteen. He traveled with his two brothers and three Holmstrom cousins. My grandfather married Edla Gran, who came to this country from Ylistaro, in about 1890. They were married in 1892 in the Finnish Congregational Church by Reverend Franz Lehtinen.

My Holmstrom grandfather learned carpentry in Ashtabula. He built his own house on Cherry Street [West Ninth Street] in 1898 and built the parsonage for the first Bethany Lutheran Church, the one on the corner of Joseph Avenue and West Eighth Street.

On my mother’s side, my grandmother’s name was Maija [Mary] Karhu. She came here with her sister. They were the two children of my great-grandfather’s second marriage. His first marriage was to Emma, and they had four children, but three of them died when they were young. My great-grandfather married the third time, this time to a woman fifteen or twenty years younger. Her name was Evelina Skiff, and they had four children. Two lived to be adults: Senia and Liisa. I met those two in Finland on my second trip over there,
and they lived about five years after that—in their middle eighties. Senia was married twice and had no children, and Liisa had five daughters.

My grandmother said it was a very bad trip here, and she couldn’t eat anything but oranges and crackers. My grandfather never told me too much about his background, except that he came from Ylihärmä. His name was Antti Maki. Then he changed it to Hill at the time of taking his citizenship papers. There was just too many Makis, and they got everything confused in the mail. There was Antti Maki, Heikki Maki, and another, and you name it. That’s the reason we have Makis and we have Hills [“Maki” means “hill” in Finnish].

I don’t know why the Holmstroms came here, but it was probably a plan of the six Holmstroms—three brothers and three cousins. The two brothers were Arthur and Edward. Edward lived in Erie, Pennsylvania, and raised a family. He worked in Erie on the railroad, and that’s where he died. Arthur lived here about five years, then he went back to Finland. I met him there in 1952. He lived to be the age of eighty-eight, but he didn’t have children and was married twice. The cousins, Walter and Mikko, they went to Erie. Frank, he stayed in Ashtabula, and he’s the one that played the organ at Bethany Church. That was Esther Karkutt’s father. He was married three times. His first marriage he had Toivo and Tynne, then the second time he married his wife’s sister. Then, when she died, he got a girl from Finland whose was Maria Vahanen. She was Esther’s mother. She was the only child of that marriage.

In 1894 my grandmother’s [Edla Gran] mother was ailing, so she asked her two daughters to come and visit before she died, and they did. And I don’t know how many months it was, and then she died, and they got their inheritance money and came back to the U.S.A. They were married in the U.S.A., and each one had a baby at that time.

My father, Paul Oscar Holmstrom, was born in his parents’ home on Cherry Street in Ashtabula. My mother was born on Day Street in Conneaut. Her name was Aini, but she went by Inez Elizabeth Hill. My grandfather [Hill] worked at the docks in Conneaut, then in later years on the railroad. In 1905 he moved to Cherry Hill, Pennsylvania, and had a fifty-acre farm. That’s where he had his family: eleven children, but only seven lived to adulthood—six boys and one girl [Inez].

My sister, Edith, was the oldest, born in 1922, then I was born on June 21, 1924, in Nystrom’s Maternity Hospital on West Eighth Street. It’s a terrible looking house today, but in those days I guess it was okay. I was born during one of the worst storms from Sandusky to Buffalo. And fifty years after
that it was printed in the *News Herald*, like they reprint the stories, and it said it was the worst storm along the lake—on the first day of summer. My brother, Bill, was three years younger than me, and my brother, Harold, was eight years younger than I was.

Our family lived in Detroit, Akron, and Port Clinton, but most of the time in Ashtabula Harbor. I went to Washington School and to Bethany Lutheran Church. My Holmstrom grandparents were charter members of Bethany.

My grandfather built his second house in 1925, and in 1931 we moved in with them. My grandmother fell on the basement steps and broke her hip, so we moved in to take care of her. She died in 1933.

Most of the time we went to Cherry Hill for Christmas on the farm, and they didn’t have electricity there until 1932. We used to go to the woods to get the Christmas trees, and they didn’t have those great, nice pines. They had those hemlocks, and we’d get three trees and wrap them together to make one nice tree out of it. I can recall when they put lighted candles in the windows. When Mother was a girl, they had lighted candles on the tree, and they had to watch them very closely. They just lit them on Christmas Eve. On New Year’s Eve, we used to take hot lead in a dipper and drop it in cold water to get our fortunes for the next year [a tradition predating Christianity]. My mother told me that, when she was a young girl, her brother Carl’s lead turned out like a little coffin, and he died there that year at the age of five. He had diphtheria and died in my grandmother’s arms. He said, “Mother, I’m going home to the angels.”

We used to have church meetings out in the country because it was too far to go into town. We’d meet at different people’s houses. There was a lot of Finnish families in Clark’s Corners, Brown’s Corners, and Cherry Hill. I have a picture of about fifty people at one of these church meetings. I remember once Grandma got very overheated on a hot summer day and they had to put her to bed.

My mother made liver loaf with raisins, the same way her mother and mother-in-law made it. You never ate more than about a tablespoon because it was so darn rich. And she made rutabaga loaf with cracker crumbs and stuff and salmon loaf and salmon patties. And they made a Finnish salad with beets, carrots, potatoes, and green onions. A lot of Finnish people liked it with fish, but the younger people didn’t like *lipeäkala* [dried cod] because they used to soak it in lye water for many days and it wasn’t very appetizing. So they usually just made roast beef.

The oldest thing I have is a china water pitcher; it was given to my grand-
parents on their wedding day from Reverend Lehtinen and his wife. I also have my grandmother’s 1910 slag-glass shade, and the lamp is bronze. I gave it to my daughter. I had a shelf that my grandfather made to hang cups and saucers on, and I gave that to my brother Harold. Then I had a little cabinet that belonged to my grandfather. It had a hole in the top where you put the bowl and pitcher, and it had a little compartment underneath where you could hide your money. My uncle Ray had it for a while, and that’s where he hid his money. I finally gave it to my daughter Lisa.

I had so many pictures, and I couldn’t identify some of them, so I took them to the County Home, where those elderly people could recognize some of them. I kept those, but the ones I didn’t know, I sold. People do buy old pictures. I think what they want is a family, so they create a family for themselves.

Sovinto Hall was around the corner from us. They used to have dances, political programs, roller-skating, and boxing. Behind the hall was the band’s hall, where they practiced. That was a stone’s throw from where we lived. There were five Finnish churches at one time in the Harbor. One church met in the people’s house, and I don’t know what they call that, but the building was called Olavanlinna, like the big castle in Finland. They had four apartments there, and they had a charismatic service where they would speak in tongues. I would listen, but I didn’t know what they were saying, and they probably didn’t know because they were speaking in tongues.

The Modern Woodmen of America [a fraternal order] would meet at Woodmen Park on Lake Road where the CEI [Cleveland Electric Illuminating Co.] property is. Some of that property belonged to my father’s cousin, Hilda Gran. She was a nurse in World War I, and they gave her a shot in the spine and it paralyzed her. She was in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. I saw her last time in 1950, in southern California. She lived in a three-room apartment, and she had a woman to drive her around, but she couldn’t go too much. She gave us a ticket to go to Knott’s Berry Farm for a dinner.

We didn’t go to Haywood Beach. That was called “sin swamp.” There were three kinds of Finns in Ashtabula: There was the “whites”; they were the church people. The “yellow” were Socialists, and the “reds” were Communists. My grandparents didn’t like the Communists. And one woman never liked my mother because she was a church person. There was a lot of kids whose folks were Socialists, but I didn’t pay too much attention. They were fence-sitters. They didn’t know whether to jump off the fence and go to church, or jump off the fence and go to the “red” side.
I had an old picture of the *Humina* [Murmur] Band when Williamson was the director. His daughter was a vocalist in it. They were quite high toned. She had a feather boa around her neck and a long dress. They were one of the best musical groups in that area. Conneaut had a lot of musical groups, too, in Kilpi Hall [now Conneaut Community Center]. My grandmother, Edla, had a brother, Konstaa Gran. When he came to this country he settled in Conneaut. He was an architect and drew the plans for Kilpi Hall, and he was the master carpenter. They made a widow’s walk at the top, but that’s before my time. They took it [widow’s walk] down when it weakened. Behind Kilpi Hall was a little confectionery store owned by my great-grandfather. His name was Karhu, the second husband of my great-grandmother, Liisa. Her first husband was Matti Maki, and she was married about five years to him. He was going down the road in Finland and the horse and buggy overturned. He and the horse were killed in the accident. So she had to go out and work in a little town—Verdi—sort of a Swedish settlement, and she put her kids as shepherds among her relatives.

My grandfather was a cabin boy at the age of ten on a Swedish boat. Both of my grandparents spoke Swedish, because you had to in order to get along. My grandmother used to talk a little bit of Swedish, and I didn’t know that she was talking Swede, because when you’re a kid you don’t question. I never made the connection until I became an adult.

Grandfather Holmstrom was a very pious church person. In fact, some of his relatives in Finland are what you would call Amish. My grandmother would say it’s a big deal to go to school. My parents had to pay; it wasn’t free. My grandfather Hill was poor as a church mouse, but he could still read the newspaper. You know why? He went to confirmation school, and you had to learn how to read then.

Sippola Bakery was a Conneaut bakery, and they were also in Ashtabula. Later, Talvola’s was in there, and they used to make that rye bread with a hole in it. John Maki was my father’s friend, and he was a bachelor who painted houses. He also taught citizenship classes. When he died, my father took over his classes. My dad was always telling us kids stories. He worked at Bjerstedt’s Bakery and would be making cream puffs and lady fingers. Once the window was open and he saw the Swedish preacher walking by with a big stovepipe hat, and he threw a cream puff at him, then said to his friend: “I got to go to the restroom; will you take over for me?”

On Halloween we went into a neighbor’s milk house and grabbed his wagon. It was real light—a one-horse wagon. We’d go down the road and he’d have the cops waiting for us. When the cops got close, we’d run into the woods.