

Nordic American Voices  
Nordic Museum

Interview of John Laakso  
March 18, 2017  
Seattle, Washington

Interviewers: Gary London; Paula Corbridge

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**Gary London:** [0:03] This is an interview for the Nordic American Voices oral history project. Today is March 18, 2017, and we'll be interviewing John Laakso. We are at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle, Washington. My name is Gary London, and the co-interviewer today is—

**Paula Corbridge:** [0:23] Paula Corbridge.

**Gary:** [0:25] Thank you very much, John, for agreeing to be not only interviewed, but re-interviewed. We appreciate that very much, and we look forward to the interview. We'd like to have you start by giving us your full name, date of birth, and where you were born.

**John:** [0:45] Yes. My name is John Laakso. My middle name is Heimo, which is typical Finnish. I was born in Gary, Indiana, in March 1938. My birthday is coming up, and it's not quite 100 years yet, but it's getting close. I was born and raised in Gary, Indiana, in a house that my father built.

[1:10] Let's start way back when. My [father], John Toivo Laakso was born in Jyväskylä. He was raised in Toivakka, nearby. My mother came from eastern central Finland, the Kuopio area, specifically a village called Haukivuori, between Kuopio and Mikkeli. They immigrated to the United States separately. It was right after the First World War. It was tough conditions economically in Finland.

[1:55] My father's family preceded him. They made it over just before the war and during the war, and my dad was turned back. He tried to come, and being 16 years old, he decided to take an apprenticeship in the machine shop in Jyväskylä. He came over then about 1918, and joined his father and family in southern Illinois— Zeigler, in a coal-mining district.

[2:30] My mother stayed a little longer in Finland, and then she got a ticket from her uncle, who lived in Hancock, Michigan, where there were hordes of Finnish immigrants, starting from the mid-1800s in the copper-mining districts in Hancock. She joined him, then. She came over by herself. Hardly a word of English under her belt, but she made it, and stayed there a little bit, and then went on to join her brother in Virginia, Minnesota, the iron range in northern Minnesota. Again, a real enclave of the Finnish immigrants. There, she worked at a boardinghouse and went to night school. As soon as she was able, she applied for citizenship, and then moved down to the north side of Chicago, in Lake Forest, Illinois, where she worked as a domestic there.

[3:31] My father quickly decided to leave the coal-mining industry, and went to Chicago, and started masonry— bricklaying. My mother and father met... Anna Roponen, my mother, and Toivo Laakso

met in a Finnish dance hall on the north side of Chicago, called Lincoln Hall, on Lincoln Avenue. That was a real hotbed of young Finnish immigrants. That's where they met. They eventually settled in Gary, Indiana.

[4:14] Dad was a bricklayer in the steel mills there. Wartime was a very prosperous time for all the immigrants. There weren't many Finns. I could count on my fingers, five families that we associated with, and that was it. The rest sort of disseminated— the newly immigrated group. But we did go to Chicago to Lincoln Hall for theater events and dances.

[4:50] Then on the North Side of Chicago, Milwaukee, Waukegan, DeKalb, Illinois— every summer they had a Finnish picnic, summer picnic. That drew people from all over— Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin. Those were all the affairs. All the moms and grandmas would be cooking a storm up, and the guys would be playing horseshoes, and playing pinochle, or whatever, and cribbage. And the kids were running around until we couldn't run anymore. We were waiting for the food.

**Gary:** [5:30] Can I ask you— you said your father came over separately from the rest of the family. So, his parents had come over?

**John:** [5:41] They had already come, and they were in Zeigler, Illinois.

**Paula:** [5:45] Was he the youngest, or the oldest?

**John:** [5:47] He was the oldest son. His oldest sister had already gotten married, and she was in Canada. She went to Winnipeg. So, it was my grandfather, grandmother, younger sister, and younger brother that made it over just before the war really got going. The U-boat activity had stopped all the traffic.

**Gary:** [6:15] Do you know why your dad didn't come over with the rest of the family?

**John:** [6:19] Well, he had started this apprenticeship program at a very prestigious machine shop. Later, I think, it evolved into the Valmet Company, making shotguns, and all kinds of heavy industrial equipment. At 16, he started that, and then he decided to finish that off. I believe he made one attempt to go to the States, and got as far as Liverpool, and stopped. Because of the U-boat activity, they had to go back. The ships were not going.

**Gary:** [7:13] Too dangerous.

**John:** [7:14] Yeah. Too dangerous. So, he decided to finish that off. Then my grandmother and the younger daughter made another attempt, and they made it, during the war. Then my dad just stayed.

**Gary:** [7:34] So, they came over in sequence.

**John:** [7:36] Yes. In sequence. A typical pattern. The man would come first, and make enough money, and send tickets.

**Gary:** [7:46] Did the entire family wind up here?

**John:** [7:48] Yes. They were a lot of Finns working in the mines there. They were Finnish-speaking Finns, with hardly any English capability when they first came. Finns were in high demand, and Swedes, because they were skilled woodworkers. And mining, a good part of that, is woodwork, to keep the holes open for the diggers to come in and remove the ore. So, they were in high demand.

**Gary:** [8:26] What do you remember about your grandparents?

**John:** [8:30] I remember meeting my grandmother basically once. My grandfather died before I could see him. My grandmother died shortly after I saw her. They came up to Chicago. My aunt was living on the north side of Chicago then. They came to visit us.

**Gary:** [9:03] And you never did meet your grandparents on the other side, your mom's side?

**John:** [9:08] No. That's right.

**Gary:** [9:14] What kind of people were your parents? Talk to us a little bit about them, just as people.

**John:** [9:19] Well, in some ways it was odd... They were opposites in a way. My father came from Keski-Suomi, the middle part of Finland. Very quiet people. Focused, hardworking. They don't waste their words. And my mother was from the Savo district of Finland, which are famous for fast talkers and lots of talk. [Laughter] Long, long explanations of the simplest things.

**Gary:** [9:57] And your parents were true to those stereotypes.

**John:** [9:59] Yeah. They were that way at home. Dad would say, "Mm, yes." "Mm, ei." Mom would fill in between. They went as far as grade school in Finland, and came. That was it. But like a lot of the immigrants, they were driven to learn as much as life would give them.

**Paula:** [10:25] You said your mother went to school when she arrived?

**John:** [10:28] Well, she went to night school to learn English in Virginia. American things, and enough to pass a test to get a passport. There was a fast track for passports, it seems like, in those days, for these immigrants.

**Gary:** [10:47] Did they speak Finnish at home?

**John:** [10:49] Only Finnish. Thank you for asking that question, because it's interesting. It was wartime. I remember the air raid sirens going on, and all the lights out. Curtains on the windows, everything drawn dark. So, they tried to Americanize as fast as they could. So, they spoke English to me, which was the poorest English. My Finnish became very passive as a result. I'll get into this language thing a little bit later, here.

**Gary:** [11:31] But it was deliberate on their part to have you speak English so you could be an American boy.

**John:** [11:36] Yeah. Every once in a while, in quiet times, my mother would teach me a few things.

She sang Finnish songs constantly. My mother was the one that taught me to dance. Our kitchen was smaller than this office we're sitting in, and I was able to do the polka, and raatikko in very small confines there. So, yeah, I picked up words. I could understand what they were talking about, totally. My first language was Finnish.

[12:17] They removed my tonsils. I can't remember that. But my mother said those were the first English words I spoke: "ice cream." Because when you have your tonsils removed, they give you all the ice cream you could eat. [Laughter] To calm the swelling down and pacify the child. After that, I just picked up English on the street, playing. But everybody was... it was totally Mr. Rogers' neighborhood. Every nationality was in Gary. It was a major industrial city. All the immigrants came. We had every nationality you could believe in our school. Every time I watch *Happy Days* reruns, and the Fonz—that was my school. I was the only blond-headed kid in that school, and the rest were all dark. It was a wonderful place to grow up. Wonderful, because of the diversity.

**Gary:** [13:33] Were your parents active in any organizations? Was your father, or example, in a union? There were a lot of Finns, for example, who were in the socialist movement, and the trade union movement. Your father?

**John:** [13:53] Well, yes. You know... let's try to break this down. In mining areas in Upper Michigan, and Illinois, and Minneapolis, there was a socialist component of the Finnish immigrants.

**Gary:** [14:17] Absolutely.

**John:** [14:18] As well as non-socialist. There were some communists, too, in those days.

**Gary:** [14:26] Yeah.

**John:** [14:27] In Chicago, there were two dance halls—Lincoln Hall, which was the right side, or white side, and then there was the worker's hall on Halstead Avenue. Fortunately, they were five miles apart. Yeah. There was a component, and activists. I think that just came about because Europe was in turmoil in those days when they were growing up. From 1900 on, they had that. I saw some families that had a newspaper called *Työmies*, that came from Superior, Wisconsin. My parents subscribed religiously to *Raivaaja*, from Fitchburg, Massachusetts. I would see that paper, and I would see the Finns in different places like Astoria, or Waukegan. They had contributors that would send in news from those places, or Hanna, Wyoming, or Red Lodge, Montana.

**Gary:** [15:44] So, your father was not a socialist himself.

**John:** [15:47] He was on the right side. But he sure got into discussions, sometimes. That's when he would talk.

**Gary:** [15:56] He liked to talk about politics.

**John:** [15:58] Yeah. Just ramble on about the latest things. I can recall him ranting and raving during the Cold War, and those Russians. And he idolized Scoop Jackson. [Laughter] And Everett Dirksen—Illinois.

**Gary:** [16:31] What about church? Were they churchgoers?

**John:** [16:33] Yes. There was a Finnish church in Waukegan, Illinois, just like we have here in Ballard, in Seattle. That was a membership congregation there. Their pastor would visit Whiting, Indiana about once a month for the Sunday evening service there. That was the opportunity so we would go to that service with the coffee hour, and pulla afterwards. So, yeah, we did go to that. That brought in Finns from the local areas around there.

**Gary:** [17:19] Since your wife suggested it, I need to ask you about confirmation, and whether you went through confirmation school?

**John:** [17:27] Well, it wasn't possible to have any confirmation through a Finnish church (in Gary), because there was no Finnish church there. So, that was delayed. Finally I was about 16 years old, and past the normal confirmation school. There was a small Missouri Synod Lutheran church there, close to us, and one of my buddies in high school— his parents went there. And he invited me once, and I started going there. Then I went through an adult confirmation class. I was the youngest person there, but I went through that. That's when I became a member. You asked... we talked about the politics thing. What else...

**Gary:** [18:20] I think that pretty much answered my question— their activity in organizational life. Were there other organizations that they were active in, or involved in?

**John:** [18:31] Well, no, because... It was true for many of the immigrants. They were not very active in PTA, for example, at school. I think my mother went there a few times. But they didn't have much to offer, because they were not brought up that way.

**Gary:** [18:54] I'd like to hear more about the social life at Lincoln Hall. That sounds very interesting.

**John:** [19:03] Yeah.

**Gary:** [19:05] You said you'd go there, and there were various activities— theater, and dances. Can you tell us more about that?

**John:** [19:11] Yes. There were businessmen that originally came from Finland. They did well— contractors and teachers. Then there were some very talented musicians and actors. And that's the same thing in Toronto. There was really a robust group of actors there in theater. They would put on plays in Finnish. And they would invite musicians and people from Finland to put on programs. So, a couple times a year, we'd go to Lincoln Hall, drive the 25 miles along the lakefront to hear Tapio Rautavaara, or and some of these. After the play or concert, there was always a buffet and dancing. I danced. There weren't many kids my age, but I did it. [Laughter] So, that was that.

**Gary:** [20:30] Sounds like something you enjoyed.

**John:** [20:31] —A nice experience. Yes. I could understand enough Finnish to get along socially.

**Paula:** [20:43] Was that the main Finnish social outlet for your family, then?

**John:** [20:48] Well, I mentioned the annual regional Finnish picnic. But then the Finns that lived in Hammond, Whiting, and Gary, Indiana— that region, locally, also went to this church (Finnish Church in Whiting). They had a get-together, too, at somebody's home. It was nice. So, every year, I saw these people. We maintained contact.

**Paula:** [21:24] Did your family have much contact with the family they left behind— aunts, and uncles in Finland?

**John:** [21:35] Thank you for asking that. My father had a pen-pal cousin in Jyväskylä that he wrote to, back and forth. My mother's brother lived in Helsinki, and she had a sister in Kuopio, and a sister in Helsinki. My uncle had a son pretty close to my age, a little younger. During the war, we sent care packages over. Many, many care packages. We put in coffee, and all these good things. My old clothes. And it was carefully sewn in canvas sacks to survive the journey. They did that very often. I can remember. And finally it got to the point, shortly after the war, my uncle wrote back and said, "You know, Anna, you don't have to send those anymore. We pretty much have everything we need now." So, that was that.

**Gary:** [22:48] How many siblings did you have?

**John:** [22:51] I was the only child. My mother and father were married late in life.

**Gary:** [22:59] Yeah. When you say late in life, how late?

**John:** [23:07] Well, let's see. My mother was 37, and my dad was 34. My mother was approaching 40 when she had me. Real close.

**Gary:** [23:38] First marriages for both?

**John:** [23:39] Yeah. My mother had intentions of coming here and working for a while, and going back to Finland. Well, she was in the Chicago area, working, saving her money. Very frugal. And many people did go back to Scandinavia after working here for a while. Well, the crash came, and President Roosevelt, one of the first acts he did, he closed the banks to straighten out the financial mess in the country. And it took almost a year before she got her money back. She got everything back. At that point, she said, "Okay, I think I'll stay." You get to the point where there's not much to go back for. She had no connections.

**Gary:** [24:36] Had her parents died by then?

**John:** [24:39] Yeah.

**Gary:** [24:41] Did she seem homesick to you, ever? Do you have any sense of her being homesick?

**John:** [24:45] No. I think both parents came here, and they said that was that. When I was growing up, there was no hint of that kind of feeling. My grandmother on my mother's side died when my mother was young. And my grandfather remarried. But there was no real contact there.

**Gary:** [25:13] Yeah. What did you like doing as a boy? What kinds of activities did you enjoy?

**John:** [25:22] Well, when I was real small, we had all these kids, and we had an alley between the houses in the old workmen's neighborhood. We had an alley, and after school, everybody would pile out in the alley. We'd play Cricket, and Kick the Can, and Annie-Annie Over. You could smell the pork chops frying in the summertime. Pretty soon, all the doors would open, and moms would holler, "John! Chester!" Up and down the alley. Everybody would go in. And then after dinner, everybody was back to the alley again. That was a fun thing.

[26:15] We lived a block away from the school, so in the summertime, we played Peewee baseball and Little League baseball. The coaches had good programs for the kids. Downtown there was a YMCA, and that was really good. And the CYO. These organizations were really good for kids. We were busy swimming and playing. I rode my bike two miles to get to the YMCA. Then I could ride my bicycle about a mile and a half to the Lake Michigan shore. In our area, there were the steel mills, but we knew how to get through the fence. We were on the beach all the time. Nobody was around us, but every once in a while we saw a truck pull up, and we snuck out of there.

[27:13] The south end of Lake Michigan— all three or four major trans-continental railroads went right by our house— between our house and Lake Michigan. The Pennsylvania, New York Central, and Erie. They all went through there. So, we had to cross nine tracks on our bikes to get to the beach. I think our parents worried about that a lot. So, often we didn't tell them where we were going. And then fishing— we fished for perch on the steel mill dock. Mother liked it when she got fish.

**Gary:** [27:57] White fish?

**John:** [27:58] No, perch, and then a fish called Cisco, which people call herring. It was a silvery fish. Perch was abundant. That was fun. Back to the coaches— they would take a couple busloads of kids. A couple times a summer, we would go up to either Comiskey Park to watch the White Sox play, or go up to the Cubs' field there on the north side of Chicago—Wrigley Field. For a lot of kids, that was like going to a foreign country, to get out of Gary. Gary is quite famous for its production of famous football players like Alex Karras, and Coach Evashevski of Iowa. And Michael Jackson. I played Little League baseball on the same field that Jackson played on.

**Gary:** [29:13] Sounds like a pleasant childhood. You have good memories.

**John:** [29:16] It was a very urban kind of thing. So, what I lacked was the nature, except for what I did, fishing, as a little kid on Lake Michigan. But my mother inherited a cabin on Lake Linden, which was on a canal by Hancock, Michigan. We would go up there in the summertime. So, I would spend three weeks up there. Totally Finnish kids everywhere, all blond-headed. Turovaara's farm, and Niskanen's farm. All these Finnish families. Earlier, when the men had earned enough money in the copper mines, they bought land, and became land owners. So, I remember that very fondly. A couple times, my father would put me on a Great Northern train. We went all the way north to Winnipeg to visit my aunt, who lived there. I really remember that. My parents didn't really travel, so it was more or less going to visit...

**Paula:** [30:38] You said Gary was very diverse, or your neighborhood was. Was there any discrimination you felt, ever?

**John:** [30:46] Not amongst the kids. But I think many of the heads of households were Archie Bunker types. It was just that style of living. I think it was friendly diversity, too. Italians do this, and Swedes do that, and the Polish. We didn't have any problems at all. From a religious point of view, a place like that... It was a predominately Catholic area, with most of the immigrants coming from the continent— Italy, and Poland. So, a big social evening for me was to walk a mile to the Holy Rosary Church. I'd go out dancing. The nuns would watch it pretty closely. Every other kid went there. I know my buddy was Baptist. They were all there. It was a place to go have fun. It was a great opportunity.

**Gary:** [32:17] Was there any kind of pecking order, like one nationality sort of above the other? Were you aware of any of that sort of thing, when you were growing up? Any hierarchy?

**John:** [32:35] Well, I can't pinpoint anything.

**Gary:** [32:41] Yeah. You weren't aware of that, of any one group sort of being above or below another, in terms...

**John:** [32:51] Well, that was a time when we had discrimination— racial discrimination. I'm sure in the mills, there was some... Not discrimination, but there was a resistance to commingle, socially. Gary started, shall we say, to decay, and families moved out to the suburbs. It became an opportunity to people to move up from the south— black people. And also in our neighborhood, we had a number of Hispanics who came up from Mexico. In our high school, when I was a junior, we admitted the first black students— a boy and his sister, without incident. Then times changed, and the city changed, as many rust belt cities.

**Gary:** [34:10] Yeah. So, you were there to sort of experience that transformation of Gary?

**John:** [34:16] I saw it, and then I could especially see it from a distance when I went to Purdue University, 90 miles south of Gary. I would come home on weekends, and go visit places I used to go when I was in high school. It was changing.

**Gary:** [34:37] Talk to us a bit about your school experience, from elementary through high school, and then, of course, on to the university.

**John:** [34:48] Well, I went through a K-12 school. Gary was noted as creator of the school system, because before Gary was formed, Judge Gary was on the board of directors of the Andrew Carnegie steel corporation. They were centered in Pittsburgh. Then Andrew Carnegie decided we need another steel mill. We need more production. They went to California; they went to all the states, and they picked Gary as the place to build a steel mill. There was nothing in Gary but sand dunes.

[35:35] They plotted out an entire city, and Andrew Carnegie, as you know, was a philanthropist, and believed in education. So, he created the school system where you have a central staff, a school district, a superintendent, and all the schools are satellites off the central school. And the central high school was named Horace Mann. That goes back in history.

[36:12] So, we had the benefit of a well-funded school system, because the industrial firms paid



taxes. It was a very wealthy city at that time, compared to other cities in the state. We had the best teachers. And boy, it was a good place to grow up. It was a good education, although I have a hard time recalling if I ever had to write an English term paper in high school. That would have been a discriminatory thing, because some of the kids could barely speak English, the latecomers. But we had good science, good math.

**Gary:** [37:00] I take it from your future career that your interest in school was primarily in the direction of science and math.

**John:** [37:09] Yes. Right. Not languages. There was a Latin Club. They had Latin class. I don't think there was a Spanish class. There might have been. I remember the guys in my senior class would come to school pretty tired, because they were working third shift in a steel mill so they could pay for their '55 Chevy that they just bought. So, they were working nights in a steel mill, and coming to school during the day.

**Gary:** [37:46] But that wasn't part of your experience.

**John:** [37:49] No. My father was self-educated in terms of math and electricity. He was a lifetime card member of the International Bricklayer's Union. A very skilled craftsman. But along with that, he bought engineering books, and reference books. I still have a few of these, about electrical engineering, and all that. So, I'd look at these when I was in high school. That was interesting. Plus, he was practical. He taught me a lot of skills, to fix things. That took me over to technical education in engineering.

[38:31] My first job out of high school was as an apprentice bricklayer. If your father is a bricklayer, you're going to be a bricklayer. If your father is a shoemaker, you're going to... That was the old guild approach from Europe. Well, laying bricks and concrete blocks in the Indiana sun in 100 degrees in August— then I spotted a university extension. I went in after work one day. So, I signed up for civil engineering as a natural transition from construction.

**Gary:** [39:11] And that is the course you pursued at the university?

**John:** [39:14] Yes.

[TAPE BREAK]

**John:** [39:25] After I got my engineering degree from Purdue, I worked a year in heavy steel construction in Detroit, Michigan. Having grown up in that kind of environment, heavy industry, and all that, I was sort of longing for green things. One thing led to another. Boeing made me an offer, and I moved to Seattle, and joined Boeing in 1962, in May.

[39:56] I remember driving here, and crossing the floating bridge on Lake Washington. Beautiful day, the first of May. I thought, "Oh, did I die and go to heaven?" I got to my desk at the Boeing Developmental Center. It was a window desk by the river. I was sitting there, and looked out the window, and here comes some salmon jumping by the window, up the river. Oh, boy. [Laughter]

[40:29] So, I lived the first four months with my aunt Lydia, who was my mother's sister-in-law. Her

parents had emigrated from Finland to Virginia, Minnesota, and homesteaded up by the Canadian border. Just like really old Finnish farmers, every picture you see— a red house with white trim on the windows. So, Aunt Lydia took me in until I could find a place to live in Seattle.

[41:03] Lydia and my uncle John Walti were very active in the Finnish Brotherhood. They had a hall on Western Avenue, the Magnolia area here— the Finnish hall. I would go over there to get some good food. They had programs, and theater, plays. Then I could see the Pacific Northwest Finnish subculture here.

[41:41] Uncle John was from the prairies in Alberta, from Finnish parents. You would think he was from Finland. Perfect Finnish. And he was a miner here. Between going to Bristol Bay fishing for black cod in the sailboat, he was mining in the wintertime down here. I got to know all these immigrants, all these Finns up by Buckley and Wilkinson at the coal mine. Near Kangley. They would come over on Sunday, and my aunt would have a nice dinner for everybody. They played pinochle. I got to know them very well.

**Gary:** [42:36] Did you notice any particularly significant differences between the Finnish community in and around Gary, and the Finnish community here in Seattle when you came?

**John:** [42:48] Well, these were very social people here. They were quite Americanized, I would say, too. And there were enough of them to have a critical mass, to get enough people together, which was not the case in Gary. We had to travel to make a connection. My uncle's sister lived up in Vancouver on Lulu Island. They call it now Steveston. We'd go up there. I'd drive my aunt and uncle up for a get-together. I got to know a lot of people that way.

[43:29] Some Finns today are still around here, like the Junttilas. That was one of the first Finnish families I met here. And professor Kyösti Sarkamen at the University of Washington. I was then going to graduate school part-time, and I would go visit him at his office, and I got to know him very well. An understated war hero, and a great professor, and a great engineer. They all accomplished great things in their lives. Satisfying things for them, certainly.

[44:16] That was the Finnish community. I kept perked up in Finnish things. I had a pretty busy non-Finnish life here, too. [Laughter] But then one day, I came home from work on a Friday evening, and what to do now? Everybody else... I had six roommates at the University of Washington. We rented a big house there. Everybody was going to grad school. Everybody had flooded out of the house to some social thing somewhere. One guy left, an architectural student. And Dave said, "Doggone it, I can't go out partying tonight, because I have to go to this Home Show and look at this exhibit and do a term paper on architectural trends."

[45:07] Hmm. During the day, there was a Finnish guy that worked at Boeing. He said, "Johnny, you've got to go down to the Home Show and see this really nice-looking Finnish girl working there." So, I went, "Oh, Dave, okay, I'll drive you." And that's where I met my present wife. She was a Fulbright student at the University of Southern California in graduate school. The Finnish consulate sent her up here to demonstrate the exhibit of Finnish products. Finland had a booth. Somehow Carita Fredriksson in her national costume was in the Finnish sauna mockup caught my eye. Moving right along, from there, we were married in Helsinki in 1966. That's where I did meet my uncle and the family. I went up and met some of my aunts on my mother's side.

**Gary:** [46:18] That was your first trip to Finland?

**John:** [46:20] Yes. My first trip. I always wanted to go there, but I had no compelling reason until...

**Gary:** [46:26] Tell us a bit about the wedding. Was it a church wedding?

**John:** [46:30] Yes. Very much. I talked about the old part of Finnish culture I was exposed to. Now, it's a new Finnish-Swedish culture. My wife is from the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. As you know, in Finland it (Swedish) is an official language, but when I first encountered it, it was totally strange. I had no foreign language training. It was different. Oh, boy. I was at a loss. Her dad spoke Finnish. My mother-in-law had the capability to go shopping, and things like that, but Swedish was her home language.

[47:22] So, I was introduced to that side of Finland. It was very fortunate, because through that exposure and connection, I better understand all aspects of Finnish culture— from the Swedish development of Finland, and possession of the Finnish territory, that brought in the Swedish culture and education and infrastructure. Then the handing of Finland by the Swedes over to the Russians, and Finland being a grand duchy of Russia for those years, until the revolution, and the subsequent rise of Finnish nationalism.

[48:15] So, I see both sides of the culture. Today, it commingles. As far as we're concerned, it makes no difference if you're Finnish-speaking or Swedish-speaking. I personally can manage in a social situation in either language. Often, with modern Finns our age, you could be at a function, and Finnish, Swedish, and English is spoken around the table. It makes no difference. It's transparent.

[48:52] I'd like to talk a little bit about our wedding. Having been to Finland about every year, we go over there in December. We were there, and we were walking down Esplanadi in downtown Helsinki. At the far east end is the harbor, and the west end is the site of our wedding in 1966— June 4<sup>th</sup>. We were married in the old German church there in the harbor area. A quaint parish there. It was very nice.

**Gary:** [49:51] Beautiful church.

**John:** [49:52] Yeah. The year before, when I went to Finland and got together with Carita, I met a lot of her friends, wonderful folks, college friends, and family friends— old and young. I had a good reunion with them just before the wedding that summer. It was a full dress wedding, and we had a reception at the Swedish Theater. Eva Tauro played the piano. A famous Finnish musical artist. Yes. It was a grand event. My mother came over for that. That's when I hooked up with her side— her brothers and sisters.

**Gary:** [51:01] Was that her first trip back to Finland?

**John:** [51:03] Yes. Since she had left Finland, yeah.

**Gary:** [51:05] First and only?

**John:** [51:06] First and only. Yeah. My dad did go back, himself in about 1933-1934, and then he came back. Anyway, back to our wedding, fortunately one of Carita's friends was Virpi. I was informed I had to do the waltz at a traditional Finnish wedding. Uh-oh. That was not like our high school sock hop dance. I couldn't waltz with Carita a bit. But our friend who we still talk to every week via Skype— she's left-handed, and I'm left-handed. I could dance with her fine. She gave me the first steps. From there, I made it.

[52:07] She and her husband and Carita and I took a little quick trip. We honeymooned: Carita and I went to Spain. We drove down to Spain. I picked up a new Volvo in Sweden before the wedding, and got that over to Helsinki. Then we took that down to Spain, having to drive through Sweden when it was left side driving. Anyway, we made it.

**Gary:** [52:45] What was it like for you to go to Finland for the first time? Can you remember your feelings?

**John:** [52:53] Oh, it was so different. You have inklings, but these are stories my parents told, and a few magazines we saw, and books. I had no idea what to expect. The first feeling, it was quite stark. It was late May, and gosh, it was stark. By the time I left, I got accustomed to it. I stayed in a room at the Domus Academica, part of the University of Helsinki. I got a cheap room there. There were two roommates. [Laughter] And they were cramming for their entrance exams for the university, day and night. They didn't speak much. They were cramming. That was my base operation. Good location in downtown Helsinki. I walked and walked and walked.

[53:55] Then I made a side trip to Russia, St. Petersburg. Still an iron curtain country. I went with a Finnish tour group. Absolutely shocking, as far as being dismal beyond imagination. I came back to Finland, and it was like coming back to paradise. Because I had limited Finnish capability, it was sort of hard to converse with my uncle and aunt. They didn't speak much, and I couldn't speak. I was much more comfortable with Swedish-speaking folks, because the young ones, especially, had a good handle on English. I quickly picked up key words, enough. My mother-in-law— I liked her, and she liked me. [Laughter]

**Paula:** [54:58] That's important.

**John:** [54:59] Yes.

**Gary:** [55:02] In Finland, was your actual experience of being there quite different from what you had imagined?

**John:** [55:11] Yes.

**Gary:** [55:14] What surprised you about it?

**John:** [55:17] When I first went there, it took a while to get some kind of closeness to the people. I had no problem with Carita and her friends at the university. We connected very quickly. But the older folks, with my poor language skills, it was pretty hard the first few trips. Now, I go through there unnoticed.

**Gary:** [55:59] And you said you'd been back quite regularly over the years?

**John:** [56:04] Yes. We were very fortunate. Carita kept her language skills up, both in Finnish and Swedish. So, she was hired from day one when Finnair started nonstop service from Seattle to Helsinki. So, we would use that benefit, and travel frequently to Finland.

[56:32] Now I think it's time to move on and say something very important. We were blessed with two children, Lena, our oldest, our daughter, and Thomas, our son. We decided early on to bring them up in Swedish, because it would be more useful. Her parents didn't speak English, and Swedish was her home language, so it was natural. Mothers are the ones that pass the language on, anyway. It's a useful language, well-connected with German and English. From day one, we spoke Swedish to the children. Today, they are quite fluent.

[57:26] So, they would get a pass from Finnair to fly to see grandma and grandpa back there. We put them on the plane, and they went there themselves. So, that was a blessing for them to continue being exposed to our backgrounds, in a better way, too, because they could see it from others, and learn quickly from others what it's all about. To this day, they carry a lot of traditions they've picked up. They have friends there. Both went to confirmation camps in Finland. Quite unlike here, where they have to go months and months to a Lutheran church, there they had a two-week co-ed camp. Now, how much fun is that?

**Gary:** [58:27] A lot of fun, from what I hear.

**John:** [58:29] Yeah. Lots of fun. Out of that experience... Of course, they went to separate camps at different times. To this day, they have some dear friends as a result of that. Whenever they go to Finland, they connect with their old friends, or they come over here and visit them. That's the best.

[58:57] I'll move along to what's happening to them and us now. the main tradition is Christmas Eve. Scandinavian Christmas Eve. Finnish, but also Swedish, too— traditional foods. We kept that up. Our children still continue that. They are very supported by their spouses. Our son and Ashley have three daughters, three lovely granddaughters.

[59:42] And our daughter Lena and Andrew have a three-year-old daughter, Nina. She's being brought up in Swedish. When we go there, for all the grandchildren, we read stories in Swedish, all traditional things. So, they are keeping some aspects of the tradition as best they can. Our daughter works for a French company, and our son is in the sporting industry. He travels in Europe. They're using their ethnic background, leveraging that. In many situations, it comes to be a real asset. Socially, it's been great.

**Gary:** [1:00:38] Can you tell us a bit more about your Christmas traditions, more specifically how that unfolds— the menu, and the activities?

**John:** [1:00:51] Okay. Well, we went back to Finland for the first time in 40 years for a Finnish Christmas this last December. My sister-in-law Meeri put the ham in the oven early in the morning, and a rutabaga casserole. Those fill the house with smells. We were staying with Carita's niece Nina in town. So, we're not there for the cooking. We went to the National Cemetery, where her parents are buried, and relatives.

[1:01:41] Then we went to church. We didn't have the possibility this time, but 40 years ago, we were in Haukilahti area, and we went to Christmas Eve service at the old Espoo church, a 600-year-old stone church. You sure kept your coat on when you went in there. [Laughter] That's a traditional thing. The ham is already done, and everything. Then you come home and have the starter food—pickled herring, and rye bread. Some people have maybe schnapps or beer with the herring. Then moving on to the ham and rutabaga, and carrot casserole. I can say the words in Finnish and Swedish, because those are the first words you learn in a foreign language - is the food.

[1:02:57] Then you finish off with rice pudding, and an almond in it. Who's going to get the almond? Then Joulupukki knocks on the door—Santa's helper. And he comes in the door, and he's got a big sack, and he asks, "Are there any good kids here?" The kids have been waiting, looking out the windows constantly—"where is he; where is he?" So, we had that experience, and we opened the presents. I was Joulupukki. Just being there, opening presents. Yeah. That's wonderful. If you're in town, you see all these Joulupukkis running around town, one house after another.

**Gary:** [1:04:13] Part of visiting the cemetery, I suppose, is taking a lantern there?

**John:** [1:04:20] Yes. Taking a lantern. There are a thousand lanterns. It's very picturesque and heartwarming.

**Gary:** [1:04:33] It's a beautiful part of the Christmas celebration, isn't it?

**John:** [1:04:35] Yes. That's where people meet. It's a nice tradition.

**Gary:** [1:04:50] So, talk to us a little bit about your professional involvement, John, as a civil engineer.

**John:** [1:04:59] Okay. Civil engineering covers a wide variety of technologies. I specialize in structural engineering. After gravitating to Boeing, they hired me because of that. Most of the Boeing engineers are structural, because we make cantilever bridges. They're called wings, and pressure vessels. The workforce is a lot of structural engineers. That was my baseline role there. Through the years, and with my graduate work at the university, I got exposed to a lot of other things. So, I worked on many different projects at Boeing, from hydrospace, deep under water, to outer space, satellites, solar energy, windmills.

[1:06:11] Boeing is made up of many, many different divisions and projects and programs. It's like going to a separate company. When I started at Boeing, I was fortunate that the culture was sort of like the guild culture and trades in Europe. The lead engineers would take you under their wing, and teach you what to do. When you come out of school, you know you have tools, but you can't define the problem, the right thing to work on. So, we had that mentoring. That was wonderful.

[1:06:55] I worked with a lot of different people. They transferred to me knowledge of science and electronics. I did a couple years in computer services, supporting clients outside Boeing. It was quite a journey. I finished my career at Boeing Commercial Airplane group, working as a manager and engineer in structural engineering.

**Gary:** [1:07:30] So, your work life was essentially at Boeing.

**John:** [1:07:32] Forty years at Boeing. Yeah. Before that, bricklaying. [Laughter]

**Gary:** [1:07:42] And I suppose you belonged to a professional organization, did you?

**John:** [1:07:46] Yes. I've been a member of a number of different organizations. The one that I'm really linked to is the Society for the Advancement of Material Science Engineering. I'm a lifetime honorary member. I did a lot of research projects at Boeing, both as an engineer and manager. Materials— that's the start of the food chain. That was my first love. Then engineering and project development.

[1:08:27] Once you're an engineer like that, it's hard to let go. I retired in 2002. This is 2017. Quite a while. But I still hang onto things. Our daughter lives in Salt Lake City, and our son lives in Park City. So, that's the other dipole of our family structure. So, we make trips there. Down there, a good friend of mine, Dr. Dan Adams at the University of Utah, asked me four years ago if I could help a couple Ph.D. students who were struggling with their computer models. Okay. I looked at it. Sure, I can help you.

[1:09:14] One is a professor now at Thailand's Naval Academy, and the other one is due to graduate now in the spring. So, I've helped them, and I'm helping a student out at Gonzaga. I've found my passion continues in working with the youth. I wish all my retired buddies would do that, because at this age, you know how to say no, but if I see something I can help a person with, a computer model, I can pull it out of my hat right now. It's easy to recall it. I can give them a sample file, and get them going. The rest, they can proceed with, and do the hard work, the learning work.

**Gary:** [1:10:06] You talked about how you were mentored. It sounds like you're doing some mentoring now.

**John:** [1:10:10] That was the culture that I grew up with at Boeing. I hope it's the same there today.

**Gary:** [1:10:24] But it sounds like you're mentoring, yourself, these young graduate students.

**John:** [1:10:28] At the same time, you reach back, you reconnect with things you studied, and knew before. And I'm reminded, when I do this, of T.S. Eliot's poem, where he says "You wander, you wander, you wander, and you finally come back to the place you started from, and you understand it." Completing the circle.

**Gary:** [1:11:01] That's lovely. What Finnish, Swedish activities and organizations are you and your wife involved in now?

**John:** [1:11:15] We're members, first of all... I want to mention the Nordic Heritage Museum.

**Gary:** [1:11:23] Thank you.

**John:** [1:11:24] Thanks for this opportunity. And the Finlandia Foundation, which is really special this year, because this is the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Finnish independence, and we're looking very much

forward to the December celebration. I'll get my tux out one more time. [Laughter] And the Swedish-Finnish Historical Society. We attend a Finn Fest whenever that's held in the Northwest. And we come to Lucia Ball every once in a while. We have both the Finnish-speaking culture [and Swedish]. Our Swedish friendship circle today extends across the borders of Sweden, Norway. It sort of stops when you hit the boundary of Skåne in Sweden.

**Paula:** [1:12:39] Did you use traditional naming conventions when you named your two children?

**John:** [1:12:45] Well, we wanted them to cover both languages, or maybe three languages. Lena Maria, and Thomas Anders. Anders is more Scandinavian, but they link the grandparents. And Thomas is spelled "Thomas" in this country, but he goes by Thomas ["Too-mas"].

**Paula:** [1:13:20] And your daughter's daughter is Nina?

**John:** [1:13:22] Nina. That's a good Finnish-English name. Again, named after... our family links to these names. And our son's daughters have middle names that link to us.

**Paula:** [1:13:44] That's nice.

**Gary:** [1:13:45] What do you most look forward to when you go to Finland? What do you particularly enjoy doing there?

**John:** [1:13:54] Seeing our friends. My brother-in-law, Kurt Fredriksson, is a great guy. I enjoy him and his wife Meeri. Their daughter is Nina; we stay with in her flat in Helsinki. Nina's sister-in-law and their children live in the Borgå (Porvoo) area. We enjoy all the connections with these kids, to see the kids growing up—now the third generation coming up. Going back this time in December at Christmastime, we had our Christmas Eve celebration at my brother-in-law's home. Christmas Day, we went out to land space by Borgå. It was at his daughter-in-law's house. Unfortunately, my brother-in-law's son has passed away.

[1:15:15] We went to see them. Now one nephew is in the Army. The youngest daughter has left the house, and is at school now. There is still one left, about 16. Very interesting to talk to this young man. Before, they were quite quiet. When we got off to the side, he wanted to talk. I got a lot of insight about what he's thinking about, and also some interesting aspects of attitudes towards the Swedish subculture, and the politics. The Finns are very knowledgeable about the United States. Sports has a lot to do with it, followed by music. Star hockey players, you name it. But I look forward to meeting these young people again, very much.

[1:16:20] I enjoy walking to the market— at Christmas time, the Christmas market. The *koirapuisto*, the harbor market there with the coffee, and this food I don't eat here, but there, I have to eat. And Karelia piirikka. Because of my technical background, I connected early on with some professors at the University of Helsinki Technical School. It's now called Aalto University in Otaniemi, or Hagoland. Every time I go there, I pay a visit to these professors. We have coffee. Some grad students come around. We have a good, knock down drag out nerd discussion session.

[1:17:26] My best contact is head of the Department of Engineering. He just finished his sabbatical in the States. He's been all over, and studied in London. So, I get a good insight from them about



the current educational situation in Finland, and Europe, and what the EU has done to them. It's caused a real need to consolidate the schools to become a more economical operation. The global market situation has a curriculum that is not compartmentalized like engineering, science, business. No. At Aalto University, if you take engineering, you're going to have to take these other [subjects]. It's very integrated.

[1:18:23] At first, with EU membership, you had a flood of non-Finnish students coming. And I asked the professor, "Paavola, has that diluted your program? Has it hurt you?" And these are graduate students. He said, "Actually, it has strengthened it, because they come all over Europe, wanting to come to Finland." They even come from Iran now. They don't really like cold weather, but they come, and they bring with them skills to the graduate school that weren't there already. Conversely, the Finnish students are now free to go to Barcelona University. So, you've got this intellectual mass and motion, back and forth. So, that was a good sign.

[1:19:32] The other person I meet was formerly with the university. He's now the top structural engineer manager, the top guy at Fortum, the energy company in Finland. He's charged with the safety of nuclear reactors. He was educated in Finland, and he got his post-doc in Moscow during the Cold War. He's been all over. He's a member of the International Society for Engineering. So, he and I, every time, we have a gentleman's lunch at Hotel Kämp in downtown Helsinki, the same table, white tablecloth. We meet there at 11:30, and for two hours he gives me a dump on what's really going on. It's nice. And vice-versa. We're on the same page. No bashing. Just what's going on. That's reality.

**Gary:** [1:20:35] Excellent.

**John:** [1:20:37] So, that's what I look forward to.

**Gary:** [1:20:40] What do you bring back from Finland when you go? I always like to know what Finns are bringing back from Finland.

**John:** [1:20:48] Well, Swedish punch rum. *Muikku*. Fish eggs— caviar. And Oulainen rye bread, that flat bread that you split apart like a Finnish tortilla or sopapilla. That's about it. And sometimes *juustoleipä*— the consolidated fried cheese curd, which we can now buy in QFC. It's made in Wisconsin. It's called *Juusto*. [Laughter] Nothing other than that.

**Paula:** [1:21:36] Memories.

**John:** [1:21:37] Yeah, memories. We are so much more in contact with Finland. As I mentioned, we have a Skype conversation every Monday morning with Virpi in Helsinki. The ladies talk, and every once in a while, I get a chance to say a word. Emails.

**Gary:** [1:22:03] Yeah. So, the technology had brought people closer.

**John:** [1:22:05] Yeah. I go on the Internet and look at the *Helsinki Sanomat* or *Hufvudstadsbladet*. I enjoy watching these shows like Anthony Bourdain going to Finland.

**Gary:** [1:22:28] To what extent do you continue to identify yourself as Finnish?

**John:** [1:22:37] Keeping the cultural fire burning inside of me. I am constantly trying to learn my words, and things. Staying friends. That's one of the important things about the Finnish culture. If you have a friend there, it's a friend for life. And you cherish that. I'm a Finnish citizen. I had an opportunity to become one. In about 2005 or 2006 there was a window of opportunity since my mother and father were from there. It was a slam dunk to get that, for sentimental reasons. I use that passport on occasion in Europe.

**Gary:** [1:23:35] What are you most proud of in terms of your Finnish identity?

**John:** [1:23:43] One thing is work ethic. I'm happy that I married a Finn, and I have enough Finnish background to understand her, and relate. After 50 years, I'm still learning some things. [Laughter] But isn't that true of all? Also, I just like history. I like to go back over the origins. I like the Finnish language, and how it's related to the Asian languages— Japanese, Korean. And now I discovered a link to Philippines.

[1:24:34] When I go to Finland, I am happy and proud that I can understand what they're talking about, what's going on. I have a sense of understanding. Some of the Finns are a little reluctant to talk about our side, because either they've been here, but they don't fully understand it, or they're a little reluctant. But I sure enjoy hearing them, and what's going on. Yeah, it's just roots. And every once in a while, you meet a Finn in the strangest places. Amazing. Anywhere you go in the world. Especially being here, this connection with the museum.

**Gary:** [1:25:34] Well, thank you so much John. Paula, did you have other questions?

**Paula:** [1:25:38] I think we're good. Thank you very much. I enjoyed it.

**Gary:** [1:25:41] John, were there other things you wanted to add? Questions you expected that we haven't asked? Or things that you wanted to add that we haven't discussed?

[TAPE BREAK]

**John:** [1:25:58] Truly modern Finns have come here— the Nokia guys, and those people. Those connections come and go, it seems like. We see them at maybe the Finlandia Foundation events. Personally I think the Swedish-Finnish group is nicely integrated. Their genealogical project is huge. That's important for the future. What this young man told, me, what I observed in Finland, post Nokia crash... Are we on now?

**Gary:** [1:26:54] We are.

**John:** [1:26:54] Okay. In December when I was in Finland, I talked to my professor friends there, and engineers. They said, "How are things now with the demise of Nokia?" The empire rose and fell, and 6,000-10,000 people were furloughed, lost their job. "How bad is it?" "Not bad at all. These people regrouped, and you go by the formerly Nokia office buildings in Rauhalahdi on the way out of Helsinki to the west— in the former Nokia building, the lights are still on. Well, people probably have the same desks. They just reformed little small startup companies.

[1:27:48] And guess what? Google, Netflix, Amazon— they're building big data centers and centers of excellence up in northern Finland— Oulu. And they have instant access to well-trained technical workforce, business workforce. Don't worry about the Finns. They're going to do okay. They just have to keep their cool amongst all the turmoil in Europe right now.

**Gary:** [1:28:32] You're positive about [the future of Finland].

**John:** [1:28:34] I'm happy with my background as a Finn. [The Finnish economy] will quiver for a while, but it'll settle down. It'll be fine.

**Gary:** [1:28:49] That's a wonderful, positive note to end on.

END OF RECORDING.

Transcription by Alison DeRiemer.