

Nordic American Voices  
Nordic Heritage Museum

Interview of Wilho Saari  
July 25th, 2014  
Naselle, Washington

Interviewers: Gordon Strand & Brandon Benson

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Q. [00:00:02] Today is July 25th, 2014. We are doing an interview for the Nordic American Voices Oral History Project at the Naselle School in Naselle, Washington. We will be interviewing Wilho Saari, and my name is Gordon Strand. And I'm joined by Brandon Benson. So Wilho, if you would, please start out by giving us your name, year of birth, place of birth, and then just basically tell us your family history -- your story of your family and what you've done with your Finnish heritage.

A. [00:00:44] My name is Wilho Philemon (phonetic) Saari, and my friends call me "Willy." And I was born in Naselle, Washington. I was born at home, and this is where my folks lived in those years. I was born on July 7, 1932.

Q. You just had a birthday.

A. [00:01:15] And I'm from a family of three children. My sister's four years older than I, and my brother's two years older. And I grew up here in Naselle, went through both grade school and high school, finished high school in 1950 here in Naselle. And from my high school class, nobody went to college. Just like most, the guys went to work in the woods. I was tall and skinny, and I wasn't really fit for working in the woods, so I was at home farming, milking 20 milk cows. And for two years, I was at home just doing farm work.

A. [00:02:17] And about 1952, at our church camp in Oregon, I talked to a music group from one Bible school from Santa Cruz. And just chatting with them, I got to thinking I should go one year to school just to see what it's all about, so the fall of 1952, I went to this school in Santa Cruz and spent one year. And it was a plus for me. I was very involved with the music, with the choir, and I played the trumpet, so I was in the brass trio. We got to travel all over California performing.

A. [00:03:10] And from there, at that time, it was Northwest Bible College in Seattle in 1953 and went three years there, where I was one of two people who finished in getting a B.A. in Sacred Music. And from there, I went to Seattle Pacific College, where I went for two years and got my teaching credentials. I majored there in music education. That was in 1958. Did you want some other history?

Q. How about what are the Finnish origins in your family?

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A. [00:04:29] My mother came from Finland when she was 13 in 1891. She was born in 1898. She came to Aberdeen first and lived there for a few years. My dad came from Finland in 1915. He was 17 years old. And I think he would have had to end up being in the Russian Army, Russia, at that time. And there were people who were wanting to leave Finland so they wouldn't end up being in that setting. So he came to this country in 1915, when he was 17 years old. He came to Naselle, where a lot of his relatives lived, especially the Wirkkala family. There were lots of Wirkkals here. They were all cousins to us.

Q. Did your mother also come right to Naselle?

A. [00:05:49] She came to Aberdeen.

Q. Aberdeen.

A. [00:05:51] That's where her dad was, and her mother, and her little brother. The three of them came to Aberdeen, where their dad was.

Q. And what did your dad do? What was his --

A. [00:06:12] He worked in the woods. He was basically logging.

Q. Did you grow up learning Finnish or speaking Finnish?

A. [00:06:21] Yes. Yes. From as a little kid, we spoke Finnish, both Finnish and English. But with my dad, especially, I would almost always speak Finnish to him.

Q. Did he talk about why he came? You mentioned the service in Russia.

A. [00:06:48] No. I never heard it from him.

Q. You didn't hear it from him?

A. [00:06:51] No.

Q. Interesting. Okay. So what was life like in Naselle when you grew up, in those days?

A. [00:07:01] Well, it was a small community. Basically, logging and fishing were the main things, and you stayed pretty much at home. Astoria Bridge wasn't in yet, so if you went to Astoria you'd have to take a ferryboat, so you didn't go to Astoria very often. There were three churches here in Naselle, Congregational Church, the Lutheran Church, and the Assembly of God Church, and all three of them were Finnish churches.

Q. Is that right? Wow.

A. [00:07:44] And when I was young, I grew up in the Assembly of God Church. Well, there was often Finnish services, and we would often have some preachers from Finland come. And gradually, it started changing to English, I would say, was it in the mid-1940s or so. So after the late 1940s most of the services were basically in English. Same with other churches, they were all Finnish in the beginning.

Q. So were you musically inclined then at that stage in

church?

A. [00:08:44] My sister was one of the main piano players at the time, and I, myself, taught piano player at first, so I would play the piano sometime. But my main instrument that I've played in the last X number of years, I didn't start playing that until I -- well, first of all, my dad was the main kantele player in Naselle. His name was same as mine, Wilho Saari. And my Uncle Matt (phonetic) also played the kantele, and at Finnish festivals in the Northwest sometimes he'd be the kantele player there. But I grew up, basically, playing band instruments at school and the piano. I didn't hardly touch the kantele because that was Dad's thing. And about 15 years after Dad died, I had to see if an old dog could learn new tricks, and I wish I would have started as a kid, because I've had so much fun with it.

Q. Is that right. It's uniquely Finnish. Isn't it?

A. [00:10:06] It's considered Finland's national instrument.

Q. Okay. Describe it for us.

A. [00:10:14] Okay. The kanteles are different sizes. The small ones are five strings, and there are 10 strings, 18 strings, 28 strings. The one I play is, I think, 36 strings. My daughter has the concert model. Hers is, I think, 39 strings. And this is basically played either on your lap or on a table. I play mine always on a table. I'm a fifth-generation player. My great-great-grandmother, Kantele Kreetta or Kreetta Haapasalo, was probably the best known kantele player in the 1800s in Finland. She had a family of 19 -- what am I saying -- a family of 11 children, just a country woman. She would travel around Finland playing the kantele, and she played even for the czar's children in Russia.

Q. She did? Wow.

A. [00:11:32] And she played in some large theater building in, was it, Stockholm, Sweden. And she being a country peasant, the story goes that, when she played in this large auditorium, she closed her eyes and pictured like she was playing in her own house so she wasn't nervous. But there's a statue of her in Finland, so when I go to Finland I go and stand by her statue and have my picture taken.

Q. Where is that?

A. [00:12:16] Kaustinen, I believe.

Q. Kaustinen, okay.

A. [00:12:19] In Kaustinen. Most of the Naselle Finns' roots go to Kaustinen.

MS. SAARI: But she was buried in Askola.

A. [00:12:29] Yeah, buried in Askola. She lived up to, I don't know, 1875 or somewhere up to there. Did you want to hear

more about the kantele?

Q. Yes, absolutely. I mean that's --

A. [00:12:53] Well, 15 some years after Dad died, I tried to see if I could learn to play the kantele, and it was so much fun. I have been busy with it for 32 years now, and it just blows my mind when I think where that kantele has taken me.

Q. And you didn't learn from your dad then? No.

A. [00:13:17] No. But I knew how he played it. So for me being self-taught, I knew how he did it, and it was very easy for me to pick it up.

Q. It's strictly a solo instrument. Correct? Or is it

A. [00:13:34] Yes and no.

Q. Okay.

A. [00:13:37] The last few months ago, was it, or three or four years ago -- well, first of all, a man in Finland wrote a kantele mass for our kantele group here in the Northwest, and a lady in Finland wrote the words for it in both Finnish and English. And our kantele group, which was players from Seattle, Kelso, Naselle, Portland, Vancouver, and one lady from California, there were about 12, 14 of us that went to Finland to do a kantele mass in about seven, eight churches. This was about five, six years ago. So it is played in a group too.

A. [00:14:33] But anyway, starting to learn to play it in around the year 2000, there was a FinnFest in Seattle. And after this FinnFest, there was a kantele workshop in some town just east of Seattle, where a player from Finland, and I, and one or two other teachers -- there were about four of us teaching the kantele for this group of about 30 some people that wanted to learn how to play the kantele. Some of us taught the small kanteles and others would teach the big kanteles. After that, Setto Micola (phonetic) was a promoter of teaching kantele. She lived, at that time, in the Portland area.

A. [00:15:36] She asked me if I would come to Portland to teach a group there. That was around the year 2000. So we met in the Finnish Lutheran Church in St. John's District in Portland, and we had a 6, 8, 10, I don't remember how many people that came to that workshop. Starting from 2000 till 2007, I ended up driving to Portland once a month for seven years to teach this group. I don't think we missed a single month for seven years. And, well, I never play the instrument for money unless somebody gives something. So they provided enough for gas money for me to get to Portland, and that was it. And that, to me, was great to go over there and teach this group. And since then, our group has played at different FinnFests. We played in Florida, we played in San Diego. There's just different parts of the country as a group we've

played.

Q. The group that you've taught in Portland. Correct?

A. [00:17:15] Yeah.

Q. Okay.

A. And I've ended up teaching at other workshops at other FinnFests. Now one was a couple times in Michigan and once in Maine area. So I ended up in, of course, Portland and Seattle several times and Vancouver, B.C. So I've been quite involved in teaching the kantele.

Q. Yeah. Did your father bring his kantele from Finland?

A. [00:18:04] One of the kanteles that he had came from Finland. It was made by the man who invented to change the keys instantly, levers. That came from Finland, but he made his own kanteles, I think, before that.

Q. He did?

A. [00:18:23] Yeah.

Q. And how about you? Where do you get yours done then?

A. [00:18:31] Well, I use the one that he got from Finland, and my son has that kantele now. But, anyway, that's the one that I've used mainly, and then since then I've bought from Finland one kantele. And I liked it so well from the man who made it. I'm not that good at talking Finn, but I called him up over the phone once a few years ago and asked if he would make two kanteles for me. About three months later, here came a package of two kanteles. And this man wasn't very old. He was in his late 50s or early 60s, and he died at that age. But I was very pleased with the kanteles I got from him.

Q. Can you describe how or what they're made of?

A. [00:19:29] I don't know the wood. I'm not up on that. But it's sort of a triangle shape.

Q. What is it comparable to? Is there any other instrument that's similar?

A. [00:19:47] So I should have had it here. You could have seen a picture of it. It's in the other room. Anyway, it's not the upright type harp. Well, like a guitar, it has a bottom and sides, wooden. And you tune it on one side. And my dad played with the short strings close to him and the long strings further away. I play it with the long strings close to me and the little strings are further away, the opposite of how my dad played because, with my left hand playing the chords I can do more chord work by having the kantele the way I have it. So the kantele is being played both ways, even in this country.

Q. Do you sing with it?

A. [00:20:58] We usually sing my great-great-grandmother's song for our final number.

Q. That's later. Yeah.

A. [00:21:07] Yeah. And my wife and I usually sing that for a finale, and anybody who knows the words will join in on it.

Q. What do the words say?

A. [00:21:21] [FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESPONSE] My heart most beautiful, someday we'll --

MS. SAARI: Sing in heaven.

A. [00:21:33] -- sing in heaven. And with a new voice, I will sing up there until --

MS. SAARI: I can't remember.

A. [00:21:49] I can't get the words right now.

Q. Yeah. So that's been around for a long time, then.

A. [00:21:55] Yes, from the 1800s. And most everybody in Finland knows that song.

Q. Is that right? So it's still very popular in Finland, too, then.

A. [00:22:07] I'm sure. Yeah.

Q. Have you been -- well, she said you have been to Finland.

A. [00:22:14] Yeah. I've been at least five times.

Q. What was your first trip? Do you remember?

A. [00:22:18] The first trip was -- was that when you graduated from Seattle Pacific?

MS. SAARI: I don't remember.

A. [00:22:45] Karen (phonetic) was about a year and a half. About 1962 or 1964. 1964, I think. It's when she graduated from college. And our children were one and a half and four, five years old. That was my first time, and I got to meet her family and my dad's and mother's relatives from both sides. And then, well, she went out to the University of Washington and got her master's in 1966, two years later.

A. [00:23:39] So that Christmas before that, I got a letter from Duluth, Minnesota from a Finnish pastor that I knew. He was asking if we would consider going to Liberia for two or three years to relieve the missionaries that needed furloughs. My first reaction was why not. She graduated in June. In July, we with our two children, three and seven, we went off to the Midwest to meet some of these churches that sponsor this mission, and two or three weeks later, we took off for Liberia where we spent three years, three good years, teaching in a mission school. And from there, we came back to Naselle, where I taught here in Naselle at the boys' school. It's a prison for teenagers we have.

Q. Yeah. Could you tell me something about that? Something else was on that site before, was it?

A. [00:25:01] The Air Force had some equipment way up on

the hill.

Q. Radar. Yeah.

A. [00:25:07] Radar. And they had housing here for about 20, 30 apartments, at least. Anyway, from that that was an Air Force system. And after they left it was changed to a teenage prison around, what year was it, mid 1960s or somewhere around there. So there was an opening there to teach, so in 1969, when we came back, I went there and taught for 23 years, and I taught whatever the principal gave me, plus I taught them to play the guitar, and some of the kids even made their own five string kanteles in the woodshop.

Q. So were they actually sent there by the courts then?

A. [00:26:25] Yeah.

Q. So they were -- okay.

A. [00:26:27] Yeah. They're all sent by the government. I don't know who does the sending. So my son teaches in Chehalis in the same kind of a prison there. But the one that we had here, it would have, like, 150 boys from all over the state of Washington. And I enjoyed it there. It seemed like, after the kids knew limits, they would be as good as gold.

Q. Really. Yeah.

A. It was just a good place to teach.

Q. So what age group were we talking about, high school?

A. Fifteen, 18, 19, more or less.

Q. So that's been around for quite a few decades then.

A. [00:27:22] Yes. So my kantele playing then -- when I turned 50, what year was that?

Q. 1982, isn't that 1932 you were born?

MS. SAARI: 1932 to 50, yeah, 1982.

A. 1982. Yeah, it would be 1982. That's when I started playing the kantele. And right now, well, I end up playing at festivals at different places, and I write a lot of music for the kantele.

Q. Okay.

A. [00:28:13] Somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 pieces I've written already. This past year I did a little over -- about 360, 380 pieces just last year. And so I have a kantele close to my computer, and some little idea comes to my mind so I'll have to put it into the computer right away. And a lady in Finland, one who was the first to get her doctorate in kantele playing, has been in in this country two, three times playing. She offered to put my music into a book. Well, I didn't know the first thing about publishing a book, so I started sending music to her. She took 365 pieces that I had written and put them into a book. The title of the book is, "Tune a Day," 365. And there's a favorite picture of myself on the front cover. I

like it. There's the picture of my gnarled hands, but you don't see my face.

Q. I think I've seen that. Yeah.

A. [00:29:40] They're playing the kantele, and they look gnarled. So she put this book out.

MR. BENSON: Is that the only book you've had? Do you have other books?

A. No, that's the only -- yeah, that's the only book I've had. Since then, that was about three or four years ago, so I've written a lot of music since then. There would be enough pieces again to put another book out, but since there aren't so many kantele players, there isn't a big demand for this kind of a book.

Q. Really?

A. Yeah.

Q. All the people that you've taught?

A. Well, yeah. But they're here and there, scattered around. If it were a book for piano playing, you bet there'd be a big demand.

Q. How many were in that group you described that you taught that you've traveled with?

A. [00:30:47] Well, to Finland, we went. There was about 12, 14, about that many in that group.

Q. So there's a sixth generation in your family, then, that's continuing on the tradition.

A. Yeah.

MS. SAARI: If you start with Kreetta Haapasalo.

A. Yeah, and May is the same generation as I. So there's our daughter, who is a good player, so she'd be a sixth generation. And some of the grandkids know how to play the five- and 10-stringers. But give them time. They'll eventually pick it up, I believe.

Q. That's wonderful, really. So what other Finnish things do you do, or is that --

A. [00:31:54] Good question.

MS. SAARI: You married a Finn.

A. I married a Finn. Right.

Q. Yeah.

MR. BENSON: How about cooking?

A. She'd give the answer for that. Yeah. I enjoy cooking, but both of us, we enjoy going out to eat. Astoria is only a 25-minute drive away, so we frequent Astoria.

Q. Yeah. I agree with you. I'm with you there.

A. [00:32:26] Yeah. But I can use a lot of my time at home writing a new tune, and she's in the next room knitting.

Q. Did your dad try to get you interested in the kantele?

A. No.

Q. No? Not interested.

A. No, it was dad's thing.

Q. Did he perform, or was it just a --

A. Yes. Yes. He performed at FinnFest, basically.

Q. Okay.

A. And I've ended up doing it at festivals and at weddings, funerals. Last Saturday, there was a tour of gardens at the Long Beach area, about 15 different gardens in each. Most of the places had a music group at each place, so I was at one of the places for about four or five hours playing as the people came touring through.

Q. Oh, yeah. Perfect, yeah. I remember you performing at the museum, and there's somebody else that plays up there too. Yeah. I can't think of their name now. Yeah.

A. [00:33:55] Setto Micola.

MS. SAARI: Setto Micola.

A. It must be. She's kind of the promoter up there.

Q. Is she. What's her name?

A. Setto Micola.

MS SAARI: Setto Micola.

Q. Yeah, that's probably it. I don't

A. Yeah. She used to live in Portland, and that's where she was promoting it there. Now she's up there.

Q. Okay. What are the origins of this festival here? Do you know?

A. About 30 or 32 years ago, must be 32 years ago, Sue Packenen Holway, she's here. She was the first, what --

MS. SAARI: Yeah, she started it.

A. It was kind of her idea, I think. She used to live in Naselle, and it was her idea of having a festival here.

MS. SAARI: A Finnish festival, as she's not Finnish.

A. [00:34:56] Yeah, she's not Finnish.

MS. SAARI: And she was married to a Finn.

A. At that time.

MS. SAARI: At the time, yeah. --

A. So she's here this year, but she resigned from being the head of it. There's two men that are in charge now.

Q. And the concept was lectures? Or how did they --

A. Music groups and lectures, and usually they would have somebody or a group from Finland would come over to perform.

Q. And it seems you draw from a wide area then that comes here, I guess?

A. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. SAARI: But there's no Finnish group this year, is there?

A. No, except there's that one lady who was here in the spring. She'll be here.

MS. SAARI: Okay.

A. [00:35:57] Can't think of her name, violin player.

Q. Anything else that you --

MR. BENSON: I was wondering. You talked about your first trip back to Finland or to Finland. Have you made other trips?

A. I've been there about five times. We went about in 1962. That was about five years after we got married. And coming back from Africa, we --

MS. SAARI: Spent several weeks there.

A. What's that?

MS. SAARI: We spent several weeks there.

A. Yeah. We went to Finland from there. And then 1977 or somewhere around there, we made it. It was a time when she wanted to -- well, this was actually after she retired. She wanted me to get Finland out of my system, because I always wanted to go there and she would like to see other parts of the world. So she wanted to take me to see Finland at its worst. After the snow, before the --

MS. SAARI: After the rains.

A. [00:37:23] After the nice weather.

MS. SAARI: When it rains, November.

A. November, when the weather started to get wet and just not nice that time of the year.

MS. SAARI: And no snow yet.

A. And when we were there in November, the people there told us this is the nicest fall they've had in a long time. She failed.

Q. That's great. That's a great story.

A. So then we made a trip to Israel in 2000. And there were about over 100 people in this group, and on our way back we stopped in Switzerland. And the group came back to the States, but we went on to Finland in the year 2000. And when was our next trip?

MS. SAARI: I can't remember.

A. [00:38:18] Anyway, we went with a kantele group also. So I've been there at least five, and she's been to her folks' funerals. So she's been seven, eight times back.

Q. So tell us what's on your shirt again?

A. My shirt. [FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESPONSE] Bad boy.

MS. SAARI: And I have a shirt that says [FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESPONSE].

A. My wife has a t shirt that says [FOREIGN LANGUAGE RESPONSE], good girl. We got this at a festival last year in

Michigan.

Q. That's great.

A. I couldn't resist.

Q. So it sounds like you never quite did get Finland out of your system then?

A. No. I'd be ready to go back again, but, well, there's another story I'll tell about. Anyway, we're going to the national festival again in two weeks from now in Minneapolis. What was I going to say?

MS. SAARI: I don't know.

A. [00:39:29] Three years ago I was chosen Finlandia Foundation's performer of the year.

Q. Right.

A. [00:39:39] What did that involve? We had nine -- that year we had nine flights to different parts of the country. Every place we went, there was somebody there to meet us at the airport, so we didn't have to rent a car. And they would take us to whatever lodging they had prepared for us. So being the Finlandia Foundation Performer of the Year, we were able to make all these flights. And it didn't really cost us anything, because the foundation provided us, at least for me, airfare.

A. [00:40:29] And for her we would sell CDs, and we'd get her travel covered with that. And each place we went they provided, I think, \$300 for the performance. Well, we had about 10 performances in all, and so that helped for our travel expenses. So this was an interesting year three years ago. We covered everything from Florida, Washington, D.C., up into Maine, Michigan, California. Then she was always packing my kantele and the kantele table. We had special coverings for all of that, and she was tired of putting these things away. So she hasn't really wanted to go flying anymore. I'm ready to go.

Q. Good for you. Yeah. You were the ambassador then for the kanteles is what it sounds like. Yeah. You also got some reward from the National Endowment, didn't you?

A. [00:41:47] Yeah. There's several awards I've gotten. It's just unreal. Is that listing --

MS. SAARI: I don't know.

A. Do you have it there?

MS. SAARI: No. I have this one?

A. No. Maybe we can -- yeah.

Q. Oh, the one that you gave me? Yeah, I have that. Here it is.

A. Okay. Well, in 2005, the Niskanen (phonetic) Award was given to both of us. And then that same year, the Governor's Heritage Award, I received. What's her name that was the governor?

Q. Gregoire.

A. Yeah.

Q. Gregoire.

MS. SAARI: Gregoire, yeah.

A. [00:42:33] There were about three, four of us that received this award that year in 2005. Well, there were some people that were at our festival once, and I don't know how they were, but I kind of heard about it. Some ladies from Olympia that were down and they thought they should apply for the national award. And they decided it was such a little chance of getting that, let's go for the State Heritage Award, so they did. Well, the Heritage Award came, the state award came through. Next year, 2006, the National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship Award came through. That just blew my mind. How did they? There were about 9, 10 of us that received this award.

Q. Wonderful.

A. [00:43:48] And how they ever got this Finn from out here in the bushes blows my mind.

Q. Somebody's good at writing. And maybe you deserve it, too.

A. [00:44:01] Anyway, we ended up going to Washington, D.C., and one of the people was from Hawaii. Another was about a 94-year-old lady from Southern California or New Mexico, some place down there, a 94-year-old lady in a wheelchair. She did a lot of translating of English into her native language, and she was one of them that received that award. She left that Saturday back home and was in a pickup accident on her home, and she passed away there. And there were other people from other parts of the country. The award I like, the name of it, is one of my favorites, the Sauna Bucket Award. This, I got about three years ago from the Finn American Historical Society of the West and, of course, the Finlandia Foundation National Performer of the Year Award. So these are awards that are just unreal for me that have come through.

Q. Well, you've obviously done a lot for your heritage, for sure. Anything else?

MR. BENSON: I don't have any. Anything you'd like to tell us yet that you haven't?

A. [00:45:57] Did I miss anything?

MS. SAARI: I think you covered everything.

A. [00:46:08] Yeah. I just hope this kantele playing will continue.

Q. I was going to say, what words of encouragement could you give or what inducement is there to a young person to maybe try that instrument?

A. [00:46:23] Well, if there's anybody close in the area, I'm always glad to teach them how to play. I'd be very happy to.

Q. Yeah.

MS. SAARI: Well, your daughter and granddaughter both play.

A. [00:46:35] Well, yeah, daughter and granddaughters. They're playing. But it kind of takes time for them, too.

Q. But it goes back a long way in Finland then? I mean is it this centuries old?

A. According to some of the records, it goes a couple thousand years back.

Q. Really?

A. There's been some write-ups about it. Yeah.

Q. Wow. Okay, very good. Thank you so much for participating.

MR. BENSON: Thank you.

A. Thank you for coming.

Q. Yeah.

(Proceedings concluded.)