

Historic Detroit Finnish Association still thriving

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By Carol Melancon

On June 21, 1925, a caravan of 20 to 30 cars filled with men, women and children of Finnish descent left Detroit on a 50-mile road trip to a 100-acre farm in Wixom, Michigan, hoping to find their vision of the perfect summer escape. Their search resulted in the founding of the Detroit Finnish Cooperative Summer Camp Association, or simply Finn Camp, which celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2015.

The largest influx of Finnish immigrants to the United States took place between 1870 and the 1920s. Among the many Finnish social clubs formed during this period to help immigrants retain their Finnish identity and ease their entry into their new culture was the Detroit Finnish Educational Association (DFEA), established in 1906. A few years later, the DFEA obtained a hall on 14th Street in Detroit to use for meetings, lectures, theatrical productions and other social activities. For summer activities, swimming, boating, and so on, they rented beaches and campgrounds in the area. Then, in April 1925, founders of the DFEA decided to purchase their own property for summer picnics and recreational activities.

The DFEA search committee first looked at an 80-acre farm near Pleasant Lake that was rejected, for unknown reasons. A second property—a 40-acre farm on Sears Lake, near Milford—had the committee quickly packing their picnic baskets when they discovered that this “lake” was nothing more than a mud hole filled with black snakes. But a third property, a 100-acre farm on Loon Lake, in Wixom, featured not one but two lakes that would become their summer getaway.

By the end of June 1925, the DFEA had purchased the Loon Lake property on a land contract for \$32,000 and had established the Detroit Finnish Cooperative Summer Camp Association as a separate organization. This property included a farmhouse, lakefront property on Loon Lake, a completely private Sun Lake, plus plenty of land for a sauna,

dance hall and other facilities. Members were required to be of Finnish descent, be of good character and be able to speak Finnish (the only requirement no longer in effect). The Finn Camp’s stated goals were “to promote the social, intellectual, cultural and physical welfare of its members, to keep, own and maintain lands for meetings, entertainment, lectures, and athletic purposes and to provide for its members, sites for camps or homes as available.”

Not long after purchasing the Loon Lake property, Finn Camp had its first *talkoo* (workbee) when rows of men and women began swinging their scythes in unison, clearing an area for a future dance hall, *kenttä* (field) and an outdoor *ravintola* (restaurant). Scrubby brush surrounding Sun Lake was removed and willow trees planted in its place. The members dumped truckloads of sand at Sun Lake to create a beach and a picnic area. More sand dumped into the lake gave it a sandy bottom. The most challenging land transformation was the future athletic field. Sand shoveled into this swamp quickly disappeared. But, determined to make a success of this effort, the hard-working Finns had the ingenious idea of first pushing old cars and other junk into the swamp to create a solid base for the sand. It worked—by 1927 they had an athletic field and a regulation-size softball diamond.

In the Finnish tradition, the first building erected was a sauna, built in 1926 on Sun Lake. (A second sauna built near the old farmhouse, for use in winter, burnt down and was never replaced.) That same year, camps with canvas roofs and sides began to appear. There were no rules for where camps should be built, leaving members to choose whatever spots they liked. But when doors and shutters began banging into neighboring camps, a rule was made requiring camps to be placed in rows a reasonable distance apart. Most of today’s cabins (still called camps) were built between 1945 and 1960.

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Before electricity came to Finn Camp in 1945, early campers kept perishables cold by placing a block of ice in a hole in the camp floor covered by a trap door. They used kerosene stoves and lanterns. The lack of indoor plumbing meant using outhouses, and bathing in the lakes when sauna was closed.

Finns love their music and dance; accordingly, in 1927 a dance hall was built. Its sprung hardwood floors with shutters all around to let in the cool breezes off Loon Lake have made it a favorite venue for many entertainers including Finnish American accordionist Viola Turpeinen in the 1950s and the more recent appearance of Finland's Vellamo in 2015. It became the site of weekly dances of polkas, the *raatikko* and schottisches. A cooperative store and dry cleaners that once occupied the area behind the hall are now gone, but a theater stage and clubroom were added in the 1960s.

Sun Lake has always been the gem of Finn Camp with its pristine, artesian spring-fed water and "no motorized boats allowed" rule. It also has the most recognizable structure at Finn Camp: a three-level diving tower built in the 1970s that projects into Sun Lake. A four-level tower, built in 1927, was replaced in the 1950s after it collapsed when too many spectators overloaded it during the annual children's swim meet. The 50-meter distance between the fishing dock and diving tower is the same length as an Olympic-size pool, making it ideal for lap swimming. The current sauna, built in 1982, has both men's and women's saunas and a lounge with a wood-burning fireplace.

During the Depression, the loss of jobs among Finn Camp members threatened the association's existence. Members who needed money began trying to sell their shares back to the association. But the Finn Camp still had a mortgage to pay, and no money to buy back those shares. Not wanting to lose the property, more fortunate members bought back the shares themselves instead.

In the spring of 1934 so much rain fell that Sun Lake's water levels rose to the point of

allowing neighboring landowners access to it. To resolve this potential threat, members began constructing a canal from Sun Lake west to Loon Lake along a natural depression that separated the two lakes. This strategy to lower the Sun Lake water level displeased one neighbor, who filed a lawsuit against Finn Camp. But the Michigan Supreme Court ruled in favor of Finn Camp and the canal remained.

The hard work of the pioneering Finns was recognized when it was designated a Michigan State Historic Site in 1997 and listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2007. The most current recognition came on October 19, 2015, when the Wixom Historical Society celebrated Finn Camp's 90-year anniversary with a special presentation that highlighted its significant contributions made to the community.

Today, over 90 years later, Finn Camp members—many fourth- and fifth-generation—continue to actively promote social, cultural and athletic activities throughout the year. The historic dance hall, summer camps, Sun Lake, ravintola, athletic field and clubroom are still used for traditional and contemporary events such as Juhannus (Midsummer), Children's Weekend, WinterFest, St. Urho's Day, Pikkujoulu (Little Christmas), summer softball tournament and an autumn wine tasting.

Please visit www.FinnCamp.org to read more about Finn Camp's yearly activities and for membership information.