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A Finnish Runaway Sailor In New Brunswick: The Experiences Of George (Yrjö) Laakso

INTRODUCTION

LITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT FINNISH IMMIGRANTS to the Maritimes. While many travelled through the port of Halifax and continued westward, the following life story, transcribed from a 1986 cassette recording, describes the arrival of some Finnish sailors in northern New Brunswick, and the experience of one Finn in particular. George Laakso (1899-1994) of Charlo, New Brunswick, tells a colourful story, while at the same time providing insight into the immigrant experience in rural New Brunswick, the life of a sailor in the early years of this century, the experience of crossing of the Atlantic in a sailing ship and the particular circumstances which lured George Laakso and other young men to “jump ship” and settle in Canada.¹

MIKA ROINILA

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My name is George Laakso.... I was born in Bommarsund, Åland, Finland, in 1899.... Yes, I'm a Finlander. We left Finland in 1915, my brother and myself. There was a first mate and a second mate and another fellow with us, five of us. We left Åland...travelled from Finland right up to the upper end, north end of Finland on the top end of the Baltic Sea. We crossed over there into Sweden. We travelled down Sweden, about half way of Sweden. Then we crossed from there over to Norway. We got over to Norway, went down there until we reached the city of Oslo. There we stopped overnight. Next morning we started from there by a boat. We went over from boat over the North Sea into England. And then we took a train on the east coast of England to the west coast of England. Our ship was anchored in Liverpool....

....The ship was already loaded with salt for ballast and we were crossing the Atlantic Ocean. While we were laying in dock there yet, there were a lot of ships that left...to cross over to the States.... [One] only went about a week away from England until the Germans caught up to it and blew up the ship, and the crew came back by lifeboats. Well that didn't look too good for us. But anyhow none wasn't too scared about that. So we started out of there, lifted our anchor, set our sail, away we went....

1. I am greatly indebted to the late Mrs. Grace Miller of Campbellton and her father, the late George (Yrjö) Laakso, whom I first met in Dalhousie, New Brunswick in March, 1991. After hearing the April 1986 tape recording George Laakso provided for his children, I obtained a copy of the cassette from granddaughter Mrs. Linda Crowe of Truro, Nova Scotia in 1995. Without the brief contact with Mrs. Miller and Mr. Laakso and the ensuing correspondence with family members, this story would not be possible. My sincere thanks to the entire Laakso family and the three generations of Finnish immigrants they represent for allowing this story to be told.

Mika Roinila, “A Finnish Runaway Sailor in New Brunswick: The Experiences of George (Yrjö) Laakso”, *Acadiensis*, XXVII, 1 (Autumn 1997), pp. 105-108.

Yeah, the ocean was just like a looking glass. You wouldn't believe such a big sea would be such calm. So we sail there, I was at the steering wheel at that time, and like a young fellow not doing too much, and I held...the ship too far up until the wind came on the other side...and the ship started to go backwards. When the mate seen that he was quite upset, done a little jumping around and bouncing, whooping and holler and finally got the ship going the right way again. After that I learned my lesson and it never happened again. So there was about ten of our men in our crew and it was divided in four hour shifts each about, night and day.... Yes, we had one hour at the steering wheel and one hour on the...deck on watch, and we had a big box with a crank on there. When there is fog you use that as a fog horn.... [O]ne day as we were...sailing...about 200 yards behind us was a great big whale. Oh huge, I thought it was a submarine at first, but he come up and he blow...first and he dived down underneath again, and blow again, and...disappeared. Yes it was a very pleasant trip. We washed decks and done little "*sklöppen*" and...then we landed...just outside of Newfoundland....

So continue...there until we...headed into Bay Chaleur. We stopped over at Paspébiac and unloaded some salt there for the fishermen.... The rest of the cargo went up to Campbellton. We had a tugboat to take us up to Campbellton. And you can imagine how glad we were when we landed among civilization, green trees and the green fields and see the people travelling around again after being in a lonely time overseas. It took us about 21 days from the time we left England until we reached Campbellton.... We had to help unload the rest of the salt there, our crew, but after the salt was finished they started to load with long lumber. But we didn't have to help them, there was a stevedore crew that came and loaded the ship....

[O]ne day there I was all by myself there, after 5 o'clock hour coming there and I was sitting there playing the accordion... But you know what happened while I was playing this tune. There was two fellows looking at me there at the dock and they looked at me, and [one] looked again and he said -- "That's quite a tune you played". He was speaking to me in the Finnish language. I said to him, "You're a Finlander".... So we started on Finnish language. That was kind of strange to see a Finlander in among all those so far away from homeland. So we sort of took together one another, and I invited him over: "Come on over tonight there after supper and spend the evening with us".... So he come over after supper.... we talked and talked and talked and the more we talked the better I liked him...

So he began to tell me his hard-luck story. He said that two years ago he had landed over here and he stayed with a farmer over here. Liked it very good but he was getting tired of that. So...he go out to sea again. ...he went and hired on board a steamer that was laying at the dock. But he said "I don't like it"...that is a German boat and this is time of the war. He said he's supposed to go to England with the cargo, but he's liable to go over to Germany...he said "there I will be a prisoner of the war the rest of the time.... I have a notion to run away"....

I said, like a crazy young fellow then: "Have you got a good place for me there?" He says, "I just got the place for you. He's a farmer here. I've been over with him for two year, I know him well, he's a good man. And he told me that if I could find a young sailor, bring him over here and I'll look after him. I'll teach him, whether he knows the language or not...". He says, "By the looks of you, I think you would just

have the stuff'. Well...I made up my mind, right there and then, regardless of brother or nothing....and I packed my bag.² I had 25 cents in my pocket and ready to go.

Well, we started out of Campbellton and we headed somewheres around Richardsville. We took to the woods there and that's where we slept the first night. Then we hit the railroad, walked at night, slept in daytime until we arrived in Charlo. After we landed in Charlo...this fellow went down to see Mr. Willy Craig.... They gave us some grub and blankets and we stayed in the woods there for that night.... [T]he next morning he went down to the house again to see what the news was. We had to wait in the woods...until the ships would leave the harbour. So this time, afternoon, he came running... and he jumped the fence and says, "Run boys, they're after us!" And...when I heard that I took for the woods. And if you could see anything going through the little alders and cedar bushes, all you would only see just a shadow going through there. I went that fast....

I travelled there the rest of the afternoon until I was half way up to Monbrook I guess and I crossed the highway there. I...hid myself in the woods and that's where I slept that night. The next morning I kept an eye on the railroad where we used to cross before in case he would come. So the fellow there had been out inquiring...and he said that...the ships were out in the harbour; we still had to stay hidden away. So we...went to another hiding place until the ships left Bay Chaleur. But after they set sail and went out everything was fine.

Yes, I thank Mr. Willy Craig. He landed me like a father.... [The Craigs] done wonderful for me. Only thing I had different was my speech, because I didn't know a word of English. All I could say was yes and no.... But it wasn't too long, I got friendly with the boys around the neighbourhood, and I wasn't too shy...so I got to be chums with the boys there and in no time I could speak...the language. Took me, I would estimate, about three months and I could put up quite a gabber by then. Some of the names aren't quite right there yet but they'll have to do. I'm too old to change them now.

Well my luck was there... [a] few summers afterwards I met my loving wife and lived happy ever after.... So I am very glad that I landed in Canada.

* * * * *

In an interview conducted on 4 March 1991, at Restigouche Senior Citizens Home, Dalhousie, New Brunswick, Mr. Laakso filled in the remainder of the story. After his marriage, he left the Craigs' farm.

My name was changed from Yrjö to George at Willy Craig's place. I spent four years there. I took up salmon fishing in the Bay of Chaleur around Charlo for about 12 years. During the winters I worked as a lumberjack and cut logs. I also worked on construction at a mill--the Foundation Company mill at Massan, Quebec--for a few years in the mid-1930s. That time there were 40-50 other Finns working on the

2. Mr. Laakso did not, however, permanently abandon his family, for in a 1991 interview he reported that "My brother ran away a day after I did. He took another boat to New York, then to Illinois". Thus, although he would never see his brother again, they did not entirely lose touch. Nor were the two brothers the only members of the Laakso family to migrate to North America: a sister settled in Quincy Massachusetts.

pipeline for the paper mill.³ Later I worked at the paper mill in Dalhousie, and for a couple of years I was at the sawmill in Jacquet River. There I sawed slats and shingles, and did general carpentry work....

My wife and I raised a family with five children, twelve grandchildren and four great grandchildren. My wife learned a bit of Swedish and was able to understand a little bit of my language. The kids had no ambition to learn Finnish or Swedish.

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At the end of our conversation, Mr. Laakso picked up his accordion and played two Finnish songs, which he said he had not played for a very long time. The words were in Swedish as well as in Finnish. He seemed very happy to make conversation with another Finn and to be of help in the collection of material on the Finns of Atlantic Canada.

3. In contrast, Mr. Laakso reported that he had met only three other Finns in New Brunswick. One of the three, a Swedish-Finnish man living in Charlo, had also jumped ship.