



*Otto (Kulmala) Walta at left  
with his brothers Edward and Antti,  
in a picture believed to have been  
taken in Finland about 1900*

## OTTO WALTA

### Finnish Folk Hero of the Iron Range

MICHAEL G. KARNI

AMERICA'S folk heroes range from clever journalistic inventions like Paul Bunyan to actual frontiersmen, like Davy Crockett. Some, such as the Maine coast's Barney Beal, have been products of isolated areas where their legends still thrive, while others have had a national reputation like that of Jesse James. Good or bad, they all embody

in one way or another the nation's ideals. We celebrate them because they are independent, because they are more brawny than intelligent, and because they "rise from the ranks of the common man and exhibit the . . . manners of unwashed democracy, spitting, bragging, brawling, talking slangily," confident of their own success on the perilous frontier.<sup>1</sup>

Folklorists and historians have paid less

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*Mr. Karni, a native of St. Louis County, is at present on the English faculty of Buffalo State University College, Buffalo, New York.*

<sup>1</sup>Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore*, 201 (Chicago, 1959).

attention, however, to the immigrant folk hero who turns his back on America's ideals and remains to small groups of his own people a symbol of lasting alienation from American culture. Such a figure is Otto Walta, one of the adventurous men who left Finland at the turn of the century and settled in northern St. Louis County, Minnesota. Around him has grown a colorful body of legend. In the taverns, country stores, and hunting shacks north of the iron range town of Virginia, one can still hear old Finns tell tales of his strength, eccentricity, and alienation. They may begin something like this:<sup>2</sup>

"DID YOU ever hear about that giant old Finn who lived out there east of Idington near that big spruce swamp between Rice Lake and the Duluth, Winnipeg, and Pacific tracks? He was a regular Paul Bunyan. Strongest man and hardest worker who ever settled around here. He stood six-four and weighed at least two-forty. Hard as nails and tough as a bull moose. They say he could rip good-sized trees right out of the ground and carry boulders. I never saw him do that, but I know a guy who saw him bend a three-inch steel pry-bar into the shape of a fishhook just trying to pry up a Norway pine stump. It happened on a WPA job on the Pfeiffer Lake road back in the thirties when he was already an old man. He finally had to chop down a thirty-foot tamarack tree and use it as a lever to get that stump out. But he got it out, and all by himself, too. The other guys just stood and watched with their eyes bulging out. But that ain't all he did.

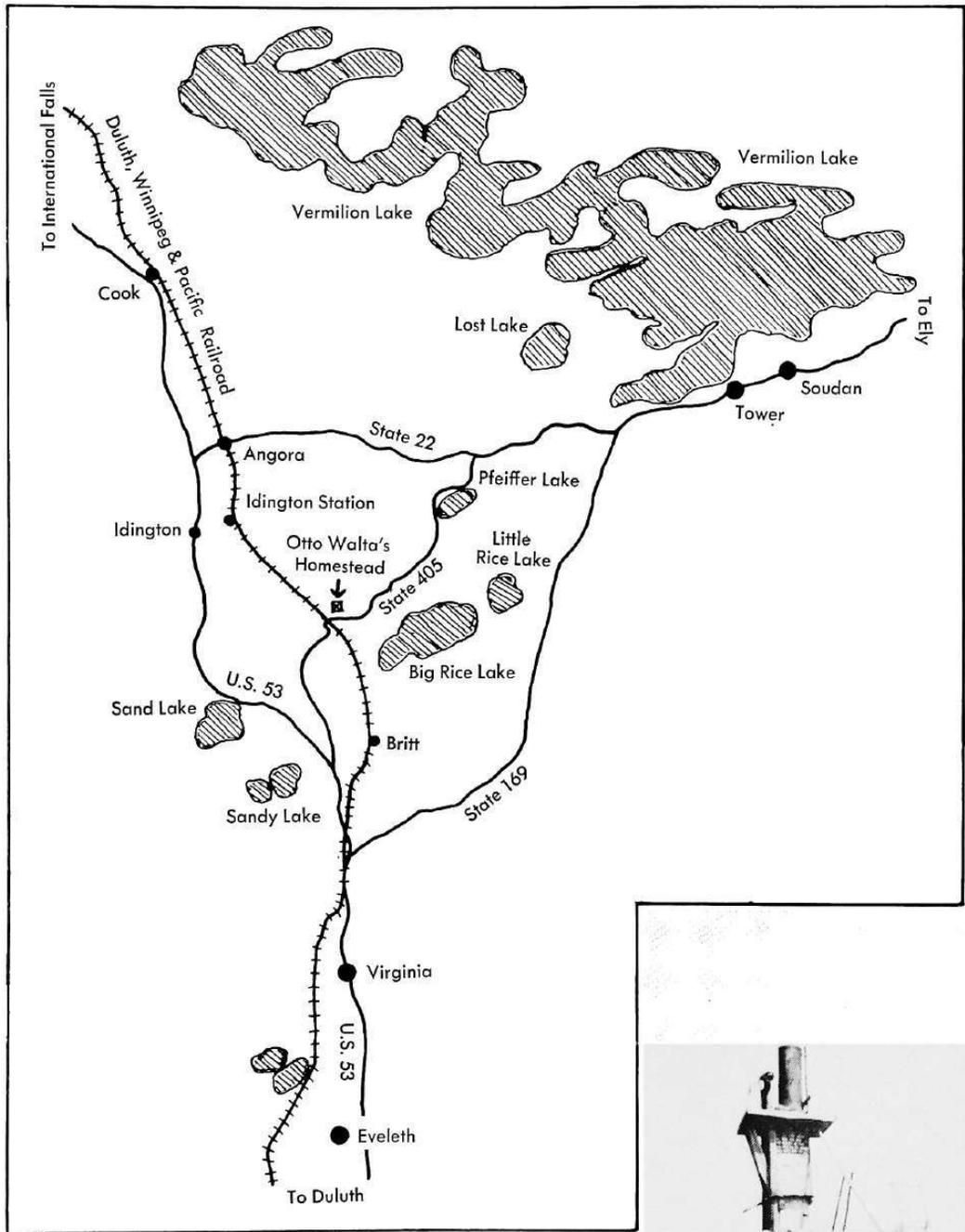
"Way back before the first war he homesteaded a forty back there by Rice Lake. They say when he was clearing his land right after he homesteaded, he didn't have a horse to pull the stumps out with—he didn't believe in working animals because he always claimed that a horse couldn't work as hard as he could anyway—and he couldn't afford to buy dynamite. But he needed something to pry up the biggest

stumps with. So he walked over to the DWP tracks, about three miles across that swamp—there were no roads back there then—ripped up a rail from the tracks with his bare hands, hoisted it to his shoulder, and carried it back to his homestead across the swamp. You know the railroad rails they used in those days weighed at least eight hundred pounds. But he didn't have any trouble with it. He'd dig a hole under a stump, ram one end of the rail into it, rest the rail on a rock for a fulcrum, and put all his weight on the other end. Those big stumps came ripping out of the ground like potatoes. It was no effort at all for him to grub stumps.

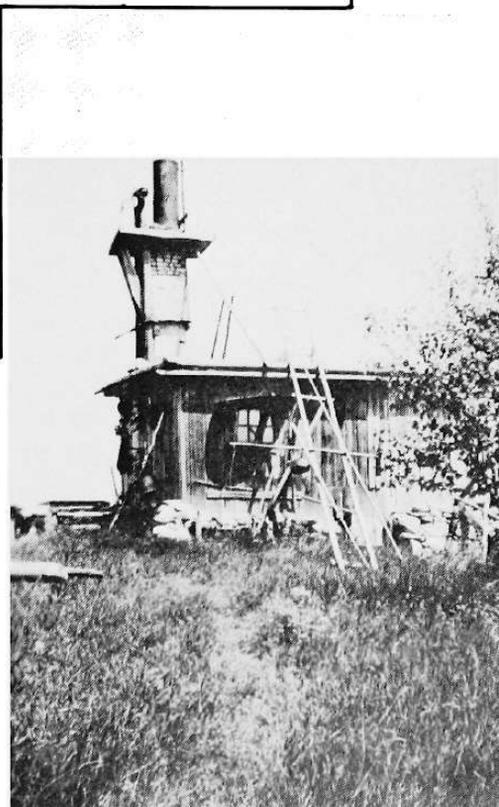
"Well, it wasn't long before the railroad people found out who had their rail. One day about six men from the company came to get it back. Sure enough, there was the rail, leaning up against that crazy-looking shack he lived in—the split-level one, built into a sandy knoll with the lookout platform and rocking chair on the roof. Anyway, the railroad men asked him if he'd taken the rail. He didn't speak English, so he didn't answer, but just kept on eating potatoes from a pot with a big brass spoon. Of course he knew what they were after. When he finished eating, he went outside with them. One of the men who spoke a

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<sup>2</sup>The tales presented in this article represent but a fraction of the total number collected. They have been pieced together from tape-recorded interviews, notes, letters, and conversations of approximately one hundred informants. This form of presentation has been chosen to preserve the flavor of the Otto Walta stories. To reproduce them exactly as they were heard would have been impossible, since many were told in Finnish, and there were as many versions of each tale as there were tellers. Those used in this article are based on the interviews and correspondence of the following informants: Mr. Gary Hokkanen, Mrs. Jack Tario, Mr. Wilfred Alho, Mr. Victor Ojanen, Mr. Matt Aho, Mr. and Mrs. Sever Karni, all of Cook; Mr. William Perkola, Mr. Julius Latikka, Mr. Emil Latikka, Mr. Wayne Hakkila, all of Idington; Mr. Carl Brown, Mrs. Nelmi Koivu, Mr. Rodney Hansen, all of Angora; Mr. Eino W. Koski, Mr. Truman Griffin, Mr. and Mrs. John Matts, Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Osterberg, Mr. Carl Sulin, all of Virginia; and Mr. Carl Lindgren of Britt.



*The section of St. Louis County in which the tales about Otto Walta flourish. At right is a view of Walta's homestead shack as it looked in the 1930s.*





*The only remaining building on Otto Walta's homestead, as it appeared in the summer of 1967*

little Finn asked him who helped him get the rail to the homestead. He calmly said nobody helped him. The railroad men just laughed. Nobody could carry that rail alone. Well, the big Finn spits on his hands a little, hunches over, grabs the rail in the middle, and swings her up to his shoulder. Then he ambles around the clearing a few times to demonstrate. The railroad men just shook their heads. They couldn't believe it at first. Then, after a quick confab, they left. There was no sense in trying to get the rail back because they'd need a whole crew of men just to brush out a rough road through that swamp, and probably even more men to haul the rail back to the tracks. They usually have at least eight men handling one of those rails on a regular job. The men probably figured the old Finn needed the rail more than the company did anyway."

IT IS apparent that Otto Walta's real feats of strength and colorful eccentricities have been magnified into legend by admiring tellers; he has become a true hero of the folk. The stories about him are valuable because they reflect conditions in northeastern Minnesota during its frontier period. That region only recently achieved what sociologists call "civilization," and the tales attest to the continuing influence of the frontier on the lives of the people, immigrants as well as native Americans.<sup>3</sup> To the old Finns, Otto Walta is the symbol of an unpleasant

struggle recently completed. To second-generation American-born Finns, the tales, while amusing, also suggest what the immigrant's struggle with pioneer conditions and an alien culture was like.

Who was the real Otto Walta? Little is recorded about him. It is known that he was born the fifth child and third son of Laurie and Sofia Kulmala on December 12, 1875, in Pomarkku, Finland.<sup>4</sup> His father was a farmer. In all, there were nine children in the family: five boys and four girls. Otto left home in 1893 to work in the neighboring village of Ahlläisiin and returned to Pomarkku in 1894. Between 1894 and 1898, when he left for America, he was convicted and sentenced for a minor crime, the details of which are not known. At least one informant has stated that Otto left Finland to escape the law. One story goes that he killed someone with his "bare hands." The rumor, of course, has only enhanced the prevailing mystery about him; it has added the image of a lonely exile, leading a life of penitence in the wilderness, having vowed never again to hurt another being.

It could be partially true, for the Kulmala brothers had the reputation of being strong, strapping rowdies before they left Finland. Otto's nephew, seventy-year-old Mr. Emil Lehtenen of Pomarkku, said recently that

<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of the sociological development of the Mesabi Range and surrounding area, see Paul H. Landis, *Three Iron Mining Towns* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1938). Mr. Landis maintains that northeastern Minnesota still had many of the characteristics of a frontier society in the 1930s.

<sup>4</sup>Unless otherwise noted, all data about Otto Walta's life in Finland is from *Virkatodistus, Kirkonkirja, 1891-1900, sivu 510, Pomarkku, Suomi*. The official copy of the document was made by *Kirkkoherra P. V. Tervakangas*.

Otto was so strong even as a youngster that he could toss huge logs as easily as if they were matchsticks. Mr. Lehtenen also maintains that the brothers, especially Otto, are vividly remembered to this day and are still the subjects of many tales.<sup>5</sup> That their reputation followed them to America is supported by the fact that several informants in northern Minnesota have related stories about Otto's deeds while a young man in Finland. Most of these deal with Otto's participation in contests of strength and violent fights, often with knives. So perhaps Otto did leave Finland to escape the law. More probably, however, he left to seek economic opportunity. At any rate, he changed his name from Kulmala to Walta when he left Finland, and three of his brothers who emigrated shortly after Otto also changed their names.<sup>6</sup>

It is believed that upon his arrival in America Otto went directly to Hanna, Wyoming, to work as a miner. This seems plausible, as there was a community of Finns in Hanna shortly before and after the turn of the century, and Finnish immigrants often sought out other Finns upon arrival in the United States. Since Otto had only his labor to sell, he may have gone where he could get help in finding manual work.

<sup>5</sup> Mr. Emil Lehtenen, Pomarkku, Suomi, to the author, May 10, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> It was a common practice for Finnish emigrants to change their names upon leaving Finland. The author recalls hearing as a boy a humorous folk song supposedly sung by emigrants as they left the port of Hanko in Finland. The song described how each emigrant spun a pointer on a wheel of chance which had short names printed on it instead of numbers. The emigrant took as his the name where the pointer stopped. But every other name on the wheel was "Maki," which explains why there are so many Finns with that name in northern Minnesota.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Mr. Carl Lindgren, Britt, October 15, 1966.

<sup>8</sup> Mr. W. S. Engman, of the Consolidated Abstract Company, Duluth, to the author, October 20, 1966. Otto Walta's homestead site was legally described as: NE $\frac{1}{4}$  of NW $\frac{1}{4}$ , Section 7, Township 60 North, Range 17 West, St. Louis County.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mrs. Jack Tario, Cook, December 23, 1966; Moose Lake State Hospital records, Moose Lake.

The same informant believes that Otto went to northern Minnesota about 1911.<sup>7</sup> He was there at least as early as 1913 because a picture of him was taken at the funeral of his sister, Hilma M. Kulmala, who died in Minnesota on July 8, 1913.

The next reliable record of Otto Walta is a patent for a homestead near Rice Lake in Sandy township, about twelve miles north of Virginia, taken on August 11, 1917. He owned this homestead until May 8, 1946, when the probate court ordered Otto's legal guardian, attorney J. W. Huhtala of Virginia, to sell the premises.<sup>8</sup> One building, an outhouse, and the foundations of his bizarre house could still be seen on the homestead site in the summer of 1967.

On November 21, 1942, Otto was admitted to Moose Lake State Hospital. A neighbor who was present when Otto was taken away states that he was suffering from "fever and hallucinations." Hospital records show that he lived until November 4, 1959.<sup>9</sup>

While these few facts tell little about Otto Walta, the memories and imaginations of people who knew him, as well as those who have only heard of him, tell much more. The following tales are among those most often repeated:

"BOY, could old Otto eat; he could eat as much as any four men put together. Of course it would take a lot of fuel just to keep a machine like him going. They say one time he stopped to visit some Finn friends who had a farm. He got there just at milking time, and his friend offered him a drink of fresh milk from a ten-pound lard pail. Otto put the pail to his lips and drained it in one gulp, filled it up and drained it again. Now, a ten-pound lard pail will hold a lot of milk. Some people say it was a regular twelve-quart galvanized pail, and that he drained that twice. But it makes no difference; it was a lot of milk any way you look at it—and warm, fresh, cow's milk at that.

"Another time Otto was going to Virginia on foot, like he always did, to get some

supplies—when he had money, that is. That wasn't very often either, because he didn't like to work out for people, so he didn't often have money. He didn't hunt either. That's probably why he was so hungry all the time—he hated to hire out and wouldn't hunt. He ate only what he raised and what people gave him. So naturally he ate all he could when he got the chance. Anyway, on his way to Virginia, he stopped off to visit some people he knew. And, being good Finns, they offered him something to eat. And of course he accepted. So they gave him a big bowl of *kala mojakka* (fish stew, Finnish style). He ate it right off, and asked for more. They gave him another bowl, and he ate that right down, too. Then he asked for still more. Well, he kept eating until he'd finished the whole pot. He visited for a few minutes and took off for Virginia again. About five miles down the road he stopped to visit some other Finns he knew. And they asked him if he was hungry. He said he was very hungry because all he'd had to eat was a little snack earlier in the day. Well, the missus set the table and invited him to eat. She put a loaf of bread and a big bowl of potatoes in front of him—wanting to serve company first. So Otto dumped the whole bowl of potatoes on his plate, ripped the loaf of bread in half, and started chewing away. In about two minutes he looked up and noticed that the rest of the family wasn't eating—because he had all the food, of course. So he asked why not. Well, the missus kind of explained that the family had already eaten or was going to eat later or something. So old Otto just went right back to feeding himself. When he'd finished, he made the last leg of the trip into Virginia.

“When he had money Otto usually bought middlings by the hundred-pound sack. That's what he made bread from. He said flour was too fine, and there wasn't any body to the bread it made. They say you could find him in his shack eating middling bread in loaves the size of wash tubs and Rice Lake pickerel by the dozen. In the winter

when ice fishing was good, he'd have those pickerel stacked up outside his door like cordwood. But getting back to the middlings—he'd tote them from Virginia on his back, the whole twelve miles, and anything else he'd scavenged. One time they say he had a packsack full of grub on his back and a hundred-pound sack of middlings under his arm when he headed up over the hill out of Virginia. About two miles on he spotted an old wagon wheel he figured he could use around the homestead. So he threw it up on top of his packsack. Well, a couple more miles down the road he found a stray calf. He thought he knew who it belonged to, so he just tucked it up under his free arm and started walking toward his shack again. No trouble at all.

“Otto and his brother Antti—the one who lived out by Vermilion Lake and who built that religious altar out in the woods—were good at toting all kinds of junk. They liked to collect scraps of iron, steel rods, car wheels, and the like. No telling when stuff like that might come in handy. In fact, Antti used to tote wagon wheels and plate iron all the way up to Vermilion from Virginia. That's a good thirty miles. A lot of that junk is still up there stuck in the muskeg near where his shack used to be. Anyway, one time a hardware dealer in Virginia told the two of them they could have this great big, monstrous old cook stove—like they used to have in lumber camps, the great big ones—if they would just get it out of his warehouse. They didn't have a horse or a wagon, so they just took a long Norway pine pole and chained the stove to it. Then each one hoisted an end of the pole to his shoulder and off they went, headed for Otto's shack, the stove just a-swinging back and forth on the pole. Now they had something to cook with when and if they had something to cook.

“Getting back to Otto's eating habits—one time his closest neighbor, who lived six miles away, came over and told Otto he'd just shot a bear way back in the brush, but he needed someone to help him drag it out

to the road. Otto was glad to help. The two of them tramped into the brush, about three miles off an old logging road, to the bear. And it was a big one. The neighbor figured her to go about 450 pounds dressed. Well, when Otto saw that bear, he let out a yell, dove right into it, ripped out about four pounds of raw meat, and started chewing away at it, saying he hadn't had anything to eat in a week. After he got down a healthy mouthful, he looked up at his neighbor and shot off a Finnish proverb to the effect that 'When need is the greatest, help is closest at hand.' Then he went right back to gorging himself with raw bear meat. When he was full, he stood up and said it was time to get that carcass out of there. So he grabbed that bear by the forepaws and slung it over his shoulder as easy as if it was an empty sack. Then he started stomping off through the brush back to the logging road. But that's not all. It was pretty rough walking back there, and Otto's neighbor was having one helluva time. He couldn't keep up. So Otto said to him, 'Why don't you crawl up on top of the bear? A few pounds more won't make any difference.' But the neighbor was kinda proud and said no. You know how some Finns are about things like that."

WAS OTTO capable of any of the feats of strength ascribed to him? The question, of course, is impossible to answer because fact has become folklore in the minds of the people who knew him. To them, he could do anything they say he could. There is no doubt that he was an unusually strong man. The tales about him did not begin to grow because of his eccentricity alone, and many of the feats ascribed to him are humanly possible. But, quite interestingly, the existing pictures of Otto show him to be only a little over six feet tall, although they also suggest that he was a powerful man. Moose Lake State Hospital records report that Otto was only five feet, nine inches tall when admitted in 1942. Perhaps it was the combination of his rugged good looks, innocent nonconformity, charming eccen-

tricity, and great strength that caught the imagination of the Finns who knew him and who have made him the hero of their tales. At any rate, his case demonstrates how one man's deeds can become enlarged into legend.

Whatever the reasons for Otto's status as a folk hero, he appeals to a very limited circle. It consists primarily of Finnish-born Americans and their immediate descendants. In only two instances has it been found that third-generation Americans (people whose grandparents were immigrants) actively participate in transmitting the tales. And very few non-Finns know the Walta tales. For example, of twenty-seven people who volunteered information during the week of March 24, 1967, only three were non-Finns. The reasons for this appeal to his own ethnic group are perhaps suggested by the following five tales, which, together with the railroad tale, are the ones repeated most frequently and with the deepest relish:

"OLD OTTO was such a nice guy you just wouldn't believe it. He wouldn't hurt a soul. Why, they say he wouldn't even squash the bedbugs in his mattress. When they got too bad upstairs—he usually slept in the kitchen of his shack on the floor—he would just move down to his cellar and sleep there. When the bugs got too bad down there, he'd move back upstairs, hoping they'd gone away or starved.

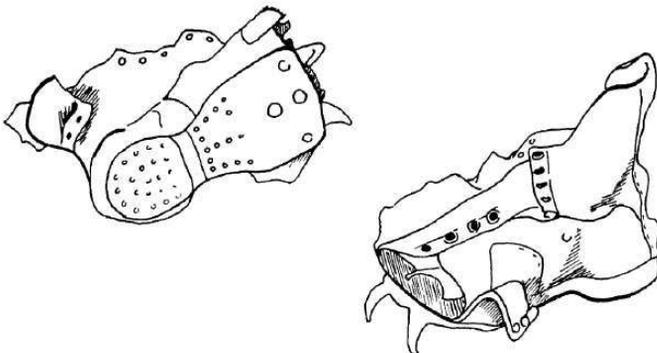
"He was the same way with animals. The most he ever made a horse do was pull a light wagon with a light load—like the time he was making hay in that natural meadow to the east of Rice Lake. He was going to sell the hay in Virginia, to the mines. They still had horses and mules then. Well, to get the hay to his place, he had to build a big raft of pine logs. It was forty feet by twenty. Then he poled the horse, the wagon, and himself across the lake to the hay. It seems he always did things the hard way, but he liked to work. The harder the work, the better. Anyway, he made the hay all right. But on the way back across the lake,

he got the raft stuck in the mud near the west shore—you know how shallow and mucky Rice Lake is. Well, while he was thrashing around in the muck up to his waist, trying to pull the whole mess the last few feet to shore, the horse ate most of the hay. Was Otto mad! He said he'd never use a horse again for anything. Besides, he could work harder than a horse any time, and he didn't need as much food to keep alive.

“And he could work harder than a horse, too. He plowed his potato patch by harnessing himself to the plow, horse collar and all, and having his brother or somebody press the point of the plow while he pulled. He did all his plowing that way, but he said he was never satisfied with the furrows because he could never find anyone to help him who could press the point hard enough. He even made himself a special pair of plowing boots so he could get better footing while pulling. He took a pair of size fourteen work boots and cut the toe off each one so he could get at the inner sole with a wrench. Then he took two pieces of plate iron about three inches by five and a quarter inch thick that had two big spike-like things sticking down from each one—like the spikes on baseball shoes, only much bigger. Finally, he bolted one plate to the bottom of each boot and put them on. Now he could really dig in and get traction when he was pulling the plow. He was quite a sight when he plowed, pulling and heaving and grunting, with his toes stick-

ing out the ends of those fancy plowing shoes. All this because a horse couldn't work hard enough to suit him.

“Even though he was so strong like that, he was never known to hurt anyone. And he had plenty of chances for fights and such in those days because lots of people used to make fun of the Finns. But people say he had his fill of fighting in the old country when he was young. He thought it was foolish to fight. But when trouble came his way, he wasn't afraid of anybody. One night he was riding home in a boxcar from Virginia. It was around Christmas time and he'd been celebrating a little in the bars. He had a couple bottles of whiskey with him and he was just enjoying the ride and taking a sip every now and then. At the first stop out of Virginia, ten French-Canadian lumberjacks climbed into his boxcar. They were going to International Falls. Well, it didn't take them long to see that old Otto was alone and that he had booze. So they hatched a plan. About four of them started to fight, but they were only faking. In the fight one of them got pushed into Otto's lap. Naturally, the Frenchman who got pushed accused Otto of tripping him and challenged him to a fight. Otto didn't understand what the guy was saying, but he knew he had trouble on his hands. So, like a streak, he grabs that Frenchman, lifts him up above his head, twirls him around a few times like a stick, and tosses him over to his chums and knocks them all over. Boy, did that shut them up in a hurry. They sat in their corner



*Otto Walta's plowing boots, sketched from a photograph taken by the author*

of the boxcar cussing in French under their breath. And Otto sat in his, just enjoying his whiskey and the ride.

"Another time Otto and his brother Antti, who was just about as big and strong, were in Superior, Wisconsin, whooping it up a little. Superior was a wild town in those days, full of gambling joints, bars, prostitutes, and the like. Well, at two in the morning, after the bars had closed, the boys were ambling down the street looking for a *poika talo* (Finnish men's boarding house) to sleep in. Antti was a little drunk, and he started to sing the Vagabond Waltz, or some old Finnish song. Antti was the loud one of the two. They say he was always gumming about something. Usually he was showing and explaining the blueprints for a perpetual motion ditch-digging machine he was inventing and trying to get patented. But anyway, there he was, singing at the top of his lungs, when a mean cop — an Englishman who hated Finns — yells at Antti to stop singing or get put in jail for disturbing the peace. So Antti shuts up. But in a block or two, he forgets, and starts singing again. This cop has been following them, and runs up to Antti, really mad this time, and yells at him to stop singing. This was the last warning. So Antti stops; and they keep walking. Well, Antti somehow forgot again. And this time the cop was raving mad. He starts screaming at Antti and calling him stupid Finlander. Then he lifts up his club to hit him. But before he could, Otto grabbed that cop by the coat collar and hung him up on a spike that was sticking out from a light pole — about eight feet above the ground. The boys just amble on, and there's that cop, hanging by his coat, just swearing and yelling and thrashing. In a block or so, the boys found their *poika talo* and got a room. Next morning there were about six cops waiting for them when they got up, including the one who got hung on the spike. The cops rush the boys off to the judge, and an interpreter shows up about five minutes later. The judge asks Otto if he hung so-and-so

cop on a light pole last night. Otto, he just thinks for a while, like he was trying hard to remember something. Then he answers 'No.' Then he thinks for a while more and says: 'Come to think of it, I did hang a coat up on a light pole last night. But I didn't know there was a man in it.' Well, that broke the judge up. He told Otto to get back up in the brush, and not to hang any more coats up on the way out of town. 'Case dismissed.'"

A PARTIAL answer to the question of why Otto has become a hero to only two generations of Finns lies in the history of Finnish assimilation into American culture. Most immigrant groups face ridicule and discrimination during their first years in America. These groups, in return, seem to resist Americanization and thereby delay their complete assimilation. The Finns were no exception. But adding to their natural resistance was the fact that Finnish church and government officials exerted pressure upon emigrants to keep ties with the old country strong.

Although Finns had helped found the colony of New Sweden at the mouth of the Delaware River before the American Revolution, they did not begin to emigrate in large numbers until after 1860, when Finland was in the throes of an intellectual enlightenment and industrial revolution. The heaviest exodus occurred between 1883 and 1920 when 310,136 passports were issued to emigrants bound primarily for America. These people left for various reasons, but the most commonly expressed one was the wish to earn a better living than Finland could provide. Economic conditions were difficult for many rural Finns at the time, and the industrial cities in southern Finland, although rapidly burgeoning, could not absorb all the young people from the northern agricultural provinces who wished to leave the drudgery of farm life. Thus the bulk of Finnish arrivals in America consisted of unskilled farm laborers. Most of these immigrants went directly to



*Otto Walta (second from right) and four fellow lumberjacks, probably taken about 1920, on one of the rare occasions when he hired himself out*

centers of heavy industry where laborers were needed. But working in mills, factories, and mines was regarded as only a temporary expedient. Whereas many immigrant groups went to America—or so the popular belief goes—to begin a new life in a free land, most Finns went with but one thought: to make enough money to return to Finland and live in ease.<sup>10</sup>

This attitude was largely fostered by the national Finnish church and by the Finnish government, both of which frowned upon emigration. In the words of one authority, “Departing emigrants received little sympathy in Finland. Churchmen, writers, and public officials were generally critical and hostile. The critics had little understanding of the emigrants, who came primarily from the lowest ranks of society. . . . As long as they failed to understand that it was the desire for better working opportunities which impelled departure, critics were apt to regard emigrants as unthinking adven-

turers, and even as traitors and moral laggards.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus a sense of guilt was engendered in all who left. But economic necessity forced emigration nevertheless. Having failed to convince the peasants from Oulu, Vaasa, and Turu-Pori provinces that America was a sinkhole of vice and depravity, church and state authorities made the best of a bad situation.<sup>12</sup> They sent cultural groups, writers, clergymen, and entertainers to the Finnish settlements in America to keep the ties with the old country strong and to encourage the new Americans to educate their children in Finland’s language, history, religion, geography, and folklore.

<sup>10</sup> A. William Høglund, *Finnish Immigrants in America, 1880–1920*, 7, 15 (Madison, Wisconsin, 1960).

<sup>11</sup> Høglund, *Finnish Immigrants*, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Oulu, Turu-Pori, and Vaasa provinces sent the greatest number of emigrants to America: Oulu, 39,352; Turu-Pori, 41,775; Vaasa, 134,490. See Høglund, *Finnish Immigrants*, 22.

The sense of guilt coupled with the sense of alienation experienced by any new immigrant group caused an intensified withdrawal from American culture and reinforced the desire to stay as "Finnish" as possible. By the turn of the century the northern states were dotted with tightly knit and exclusive communities of Finns.

Evidence of the effectiveness of Finland's continuing domination over her emigrants lies in the fact that a large number of Finnish-born Americans do not to this day speak English. Further evidence is the number of second-generation American-born Finns who are bilingual.<sup>13</sup> And often the language these people speak best is Finnish. But the most conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of Finland's propaganda is that steamship company records for the pe-

<sup>13</sup> Of the twenty-two informants listed in footnote 2, for example, five do not speak English and thirteen are bilingual.

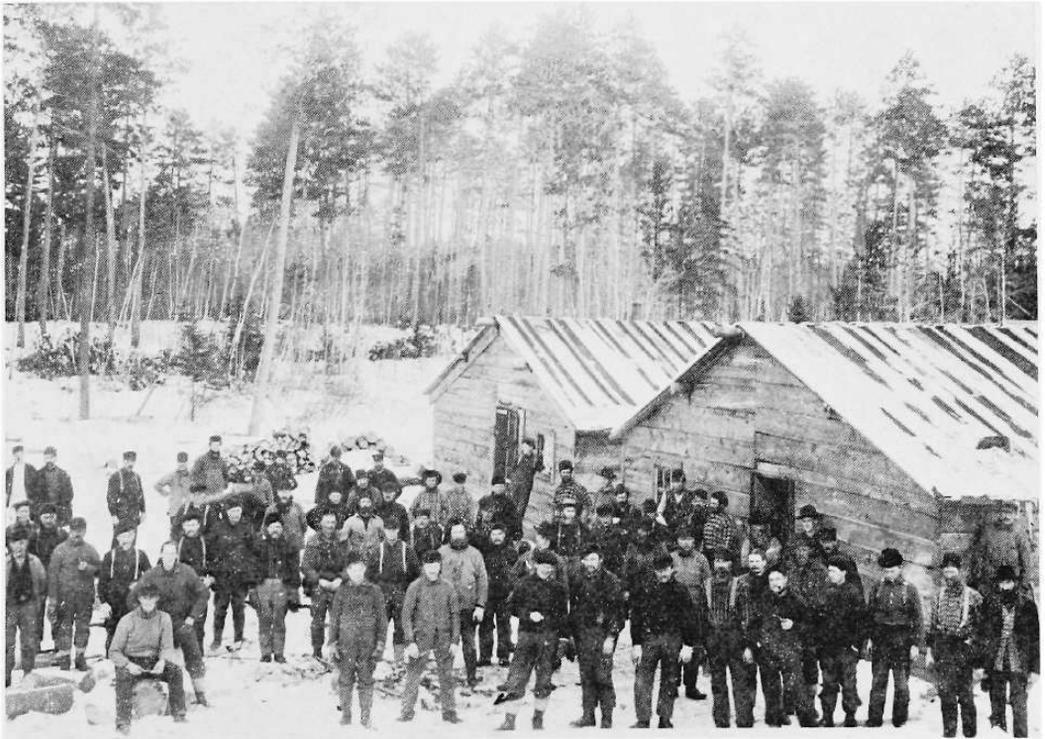
<sup>14</sup> Hoglund, *Finnish Immigrants*, 8.

riod 1894–1914 show that 244,584 emigrants departed Finland, and that 100,897 — about 40 per cent — returned. Granting that many of those who returned to Finland eventually went again to America, it is still probable that about one-third did not make permanent homes in the new country.<sup>14</sup>

Otto Walta fits this pattern. He did not learn to speak English; he did not conform to the accepted methods of earning a living; he frequently expressed a desire to return to Finland; and he remained alienated all his life. Moreover, his experience embodies the disillusionment the Finns suffered upon realizing that one did not become wealthy overnight in America. They were affected by this more deeply than other immigrant groups because it was attended by a sense of guilt for having left Finland in the first place. All that was left for those who could not afford to return was resignation.

Things were not easy in northern Minnesota. Life for the homesteader, for example,

*A St. Louis County lumber crew with which Walta worked about 1920*



was a continual battle against the forest. When all farm work was completed, the whole family turned to clearing land and grubbing the ubiquitous stumps. Without cleared land, one could not farm profitably; and without profit, one could barely live in America, let alone return to Finland. Pulling stumps was extremely difficult. They were chopped out by hand, pulled out by horses, and blasted out with dynamite. At times, the roots of live trees were cut and the trees were left to die in hopes that the wind would some day blow them over, taking the stumps with them when they toppled. All methods except the use of dynamite were slow and painful, and the cost of dynamiting was prohibitive. Worse yet, the forest was quick to reclaim its lost territory. If the cleared land was not cultivated quickly and regularly, the result was a pasture of tenacious brush and hardwood saplings. The timber obtained from clearing was often burned in huge piles for lack of a market, and land from which the stumps had not been removed was often burned over in the spring and cultivated despite the presence of stumps.<sup>15</sup>

Those Finns who had forsaken the mines and lumber camps for a homestead and independence found only hard work, loneliness, and isolation. In an attempt to alleviate their loneliness, they banded together into dozens of different clubs, guilds, and societies. But after the church supper, the co-operative meeting, or the temperance rally, it was back to the isolation of the farmstead. Otto Walta became a hero to these people because he did with ease what for them was a perpetual struggle. He could uproot trees with his bare hands; he could pry out stumps quickly and easily; he could do his own plowing; he did not worry about making payments on farm implements; he was not self-conscious because he could not speak English; he was obligated to no man. But, most importantly, he lived alone in nearly total isolation without complaint. He bore the hardships of daily life in a strange land with what the Finns

call *sisu*, a term that best translates into English as "guts."

In the end, however, the wilderness defeated him. He spent the last seventeen years of his life in a hospital, dependent upon the state. It is in this defeat that Otto Walta fails as an American folk hero. True, he had the physical capabilities of a Paul Bunyan. But Otto did not have the American dream. He proved de Crèvecoeur and Frederick Jackson Turner wrong. He emigrated to the New World, and he fought with its wilderness, but the vaunted process of Americanization did not work its magic on him; he resisted it to the end, as did many of his countrymen.

His resistance, if he was even conscious of it, was in vain. With the coming of excellent public schools to the iron range — one American institution the Finns were in full accord with — the grandchildren of Otto's contemporaries became Americans and belatedly helped their parents to do the same.<sup>16</sup> Ironically, however, while Otto Walta resisted becoming an American, the tenacity of that very resistance has contributed to the image of the rugged, resourceful, self-reliant frontiersman who has come to stand for all that is best in the American character.

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<sup>15</sup> Some homesteaders circumvented the task of clearing by settling on land already cleared by timber companies. Mr. Matt Aho of Cook stated that he homesteaded such a tract, and that he took as his new name the word which describes a parcel of land that has been cleared and that is still full of stumps and waste — *aho*. Interview, March 25, 1967.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the importance of public education on the Mesabi Range in facilitating immigrant assimilation, see Timothy L. Smith, "New Approaches to the History of Immigration in Twentieth-Century America," in *American Historical Review*, 71:1265-1278 (July, 1966).

THE PICTURES used in this article were collected by the author from friends and neighbors of Otto Walta in the vicinity of Cook. The one on page 400 was among the possessions left in Walta's shack when he was moved to Moose Lake State Hospital in 1942. The plowing boots and the remaining building on the homestead were photographed by the author in 1967. The sketches were made by Patricia C. Harpole.



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