

FINNISH TEMPERANCE SOCIETIES IN MINNESOTA

ONE OF THE earliest manifestations of institutional life among the Finnish immigrants in Minnesota was the temperance society. The first of these was the Pohjan Leimu (Northern Light) Society of Tower, organized on May 30, 1886, by a group of forty-eight young men and women; it was followed on November 15, 1887, by the Toivon Tähti (Star of Hope) Society of Duluth.¹ In the following years similar institutions, bearing equally appropriate names—Strength of Light, Water, Life's Hope, Home of Peace, Seeker of Truth—appeared in cities, hamlets, and cross-roads settlements, wherever Finnish folk dwelt.

Between 1886 and 1940 more than fifty temperance societies were launched.² Many of them proved to be short-lived; the history of a number of others was marked by alternate periods of vigor and inactivity. The Duluth society, for example, slept from 1917 to 1929, the Chisholm Virkistys (Regeneration) Society from 1919 to 1930; both are again inactive at present. Indeed, only a few institutions were destined to witness the enactment of the eighteenth and twenty-first amendments. In January, 1941,

¹ Standard works on the Finnish immigrant temperance movement include J. W. Lilius, ed., *Rauhan Kokous ja Pääpiirteitä Amerikan Suomalaisen Rahtiustyön Historiasta* (Hancock, Michigan, 1908), and S. Ilmonen, *Juhla Julkaisu Suomalaisen Kansallisen Rahtiustyön 25 Vuotisen Toiminnan Muistoksi* (Hancock, Michigan, 1912). The annual publication of the Finnish National Temperance Brotherhood, *Rahtiuskalenteri*, is also useful. Articles on the Minnesota movement appear in the volumes for 1900, p. 99–101; 1906, p. 158–160; 1909, p. 146–148; 1910, p. 134–167; 1912, p. 141–144; 1913, p. 171–174; 1915, p. 156–162; 1926, p. 57–61; and 1927, p. 126–131. The unpublished archives of the various societies, such as proceedings, membership files, financial records, and the like, are, of course, invaluable, and have been used extensively by the present writer.

² Minnesota communities in which one or more Finnish temperance societies have been organized are Alavus, Angora, Aurora, Biwabik, Bovey,

there remained but sixteen active temperance societies among the Minnesota Finns.⁸

The vicissitudes of the temperance crusade are reflected in the membership rolls of the movement. In 1907, the year of the organization of a state-wide Finnish Temperance League, there were more than 1,200 active workers; the number was estimated at 460 in 1920, and at 1,000 in 1933. The present total membership is not over 650 and the trend is in the direction of further diminution. A similar downward spiral has, of course, shown itself in the local societies. The Cloquet society, which had 69 members in 1911, at present has only 15; the Mountain Iron Rauhan Koti (Home of Peace) Society's roll had 72 names in 1911, and 15 in 1941; late in 1940 the Virginia Valon Tuote (Reward of Light) Society's membership had dwindled to 44 from a high of 372. Important causal factors in this striking declivity have been the passing away of the pioneer generation, the changed character of immigrant life, and the failure of the native-born youth to rally to the temperance cause. The oft-heard patriarchal supplication to the youth, "Continue in our footsteps so that this hall will not be left empty, that the bright light and warmth of the temperance society's friendly spirit will forever beckon us around a common hearth," seems to have been unanswered.

This widespread manifestation of institutional life in the form of temperance societies raises a number of interesting questions. Was the pioneer institution a carry-over from

Brainerd, Chisholm, Cloquet, Cook, Cromwell, Duluth, East Lake, Ely, Embarrass, Eveleth, Finlayson, Floodwood, French Lake, Hibbing, Holmes City, Hutter, Iron, Kettle River, Lawler, Markham, McKinley, Menahga, Mesaba, Moose Lake, Mountain Iron, New York Mills, Orr, Palo, Peyla, Pike River, Sandstone, Sparta, Stevenson, Suomi, Toimi, Toivola, Tower-Soudan, Virginia, and Winton.

⁸The active societies, according to Mr. Henry Moilanen, secretary of the Minnesota Finnish Temperance League, are at Angora, Cloquet, Cook, Ely, Eveleth, Floodwood, Hibbing, Iron, Kettle River, Mountain Iron, Palo, Peyla, Pike River, Toimi, Tower, and Virginia. The combined membership of these organizations is about 650.

the old country? If not, what conditions caused its emergence? What was the true nature of the organization?

Although the temperance movement in Finland stems back to the 1830's, it was not until the founding of the Friends of Temperance in 1884 that the modern crusade against alcoholism really began.⁴ The growth of the organization was rapid; membership increased from 5,700 in 1888 to 10,277 in 1900. Five years later there were over 34,000 members on the roll of the Friends. Yet, while the expansion of the temperance movement in Finland was remarkable, it was highly localized, leaving certain areas virtually untouched, particularly in Oulu and Vaasa in northern Finland, regions from which a majority of the Minnesota Finns had emigrated. As late as 1909, for example, there were only fourteen societies with 601 members in the Etelä-Pohjanmaa district in northern Finland. The district of Oulu, with twenty-four societies, had a combined membership of only 838.

The absence of an organized temperance movement in the regions where emigration centered did not imply unfamiliarity with the doctrines of sobriety. The unhappy lot of the drunkard was the subject of an oft-repeated sermon by the old-country mother, parish priest, and schoolteacher; through such agencies many Finns came to possess a warm regard for the principles of abstinence and a hearty dislike of intemperance. Nonetheless, the institution which emerged in Minnesota was of indigenous rather than transplanted growth, and the conditions determining its rise and development were peculiarly American.⁵

The first cause for the rise of the temperance society was, of course, drunkenness. But this vice was not as prevalent

⁴ The best guide to the subject in English is John H. Wuorinen, *The Prohibition Experiment in Finland* (New York, 1931). The volume has an excellent bibliography.

⁵ For an interesting discussion of the relation of the old-country temperance movement to the immigrant crusade, see the manuscript "Proceedings" of the Totuuden Etsijä Society of Hibbing for January 25,

in the early Minnesota settlements as has been generally indicated by temperance literature. Most of the Finns were temperate and orderly; in no sense was intemperance an immigrant commodity carried from the homeland to America. Local conditions, not a racial weakness for drink, determined the appearance and degree of intemperance. Among the forces operating against the continuance of normal, sober behavior were the male preponderance in the early migration stream, the absence of the steadying influence of family life, and the presence of saloons operated by Finns, which were frequented by unattached individuals who sought compensation in drink for their nostalgia or the singular monotony of their New World existence. The immediate but not the only cause for the emergence of the temperance institution was, then, the existence of intemperance. The portrayal, however, of mass dissipation is pure fiction. Is it not too much to expect that, in the face of stern reality, the general run of temperate emigrants would show a complete reversal of behavior upon reaching the shores of a strange land and become the mad children of Bacchus?

The maneuvers along the temperance front were, for the most part, identical in all the societies. The first concern of each group was to augment the number of immigrants who had taken the temperance pledge and to enforce the oath of initiation. Special membership drives were held at regular intervals, and it became a time-honored custom to accept new members without the usual pledge fees at anniversary celebrations and at frequent open meetings. At a meeting of the Totuuden Etsijä (Seeker of Truth) Society of Hibbing on May 10, 1903, for example, thirty-two persons joined the organization, stimulated, no doubt, by the

1910. It was generally admitted that the immigrants knew little about the organized temperance movement and procedure until after they came into contact in America with the older Scandinavian and American organizations, particularly the Good Templars. See also, Ilmonen, *Juhla Julkaisu*, 18-21.

promise of exemption from pledge fees. The heart and soul of the enforcement program was the committee of inquiry, which, in the pursuit of its duties, acted as espionage agent, informer, and prosecutor. The question once arose whether the saloon fell within the proper jurisdiction of the committee; the dilemma was solved by giving it plenary powers to enter the very lair of the enemy "in the prosecution of its delegated duties." The committee of inquiry did not confine its activities to following the scent of alcohol, for the inclusive character of the temperance oath made it veritably the guardian of public morality. The following actions were, at one time or another, considered sufficiently grave offenses to warrant dismissal from the organization: participating in or watching a dance in a saloon, playing cards or billiards, putting nickels in a slot machine, playing dominoes, drinking hard cider or "near beer," and using patent medicines which contained alcohol. It was not surprising that the number of ousters from the societies should have reached a fairly high figure. Fifteen violations were reported at a single meeting of the Virginia Valon Tuote Society on March 18, 1903, and there were 75 ejections from the same society during 1900 and 110 in 1902.

The expulsion proceedings were, in truth, often more symbolic than real. The transgressor would appear before the society, beg forgiveness, and be reinstated without incurring any damage to his esteem or pocketbook. Four members of the Valon Tuote Society of Virginia, for example, were treated in that fashion after having quenched their thirst with beer during the serious forest fire of 1893, "since neither food nor water," they insisted, had been available. The Totuuden Etsijä Society of Hibbing, on June 25, 1899, decreed that a member would be placed on probation only after he had broken his pledge three times within three months. Banishment was not the punishment of even the chronic repeaters; the weak, decreed one society, were to

be forgiven "not seven times but seventy times seven." Self-confession, which was not only good for the soul but lightened the duties of the committee of inquiry, was frequent; the chairman of the Virginia Valon Tuote Society, to select one illustration, on May 28, 1893, confessed that he had taken liquor for a "stomach ailment." By a ten to two vote the society deemed this a violation of his temperance oath, but it promptly reinstated the anxious chairman to his high office on condition that he would not repeat the cure.

While thus generously forgiving erring members, the societies were active, on the other hand, in fortifying their resistance against further temptation. Finns who were somewhat versed in literature traced the lurid course of alcoholism from Biblical times to the present; debates were conducted which perpetually ended with the overthrow of demented King Alcohol by courageous Prince Temperance. Shy maidens recited self-composed verses that depicted in lachrymose style the anguish of a mother who waited in vain for the return of her fallen husband. Meetings were opened and closed with songs rendered to the accompaniment of a wheezing organ or a well-battered piano.

In their anxiety to save their own generation, the crusaders did not, to be sure, neglect the proper temperance education of their children. Classes in temperance were conducted in many settlements, often with the co-operation of other Finnish institutions. In the earlier days attendance was excellent; over fifty students were enrolled in a class sponsored by the Rauhan Koti Society of Mountain Iron in the early 1900's. As late as 1933 the Valon Tuote Society of Virginia conducted a youth temperance school attended by twenty-one pupils; twelve of them completed the prescribed course of study.

The activity of the Finns took them beyond the confines of the temperance hall. The political crusade found them allied with their American colleagues; aliens were urged to win the right of suffrage through naturalization; voters were

advised as to the "wet" and "dry" qualifications of local, state, and national office seekers; campaign literature of the Anti-saloon League was disseminated throughout the community; and occasionally a letter or a telegram signed with the euphonious name of a Finnish temperance society found its way into the hands of a Minnesota Congressman. There was, of course, rejoicing in the prohibition amendment victory; disappointment and regret, but not surrender, followed in 1933.

But, in truth, the temperance society was more than a company of self-denying Finns. It was an immigrant social, fraternal, and cultural, as well as a crusading, institution. Temperance work, forcefully declared a member of the Hibbing Sovinto (Understanding) Society in 1929, is "more than the banishment of the wine glass . . . it has important cultural and educational objectives." The presence of the other functions was observed by an American student in another state, who suggested that the Finns had "a temperance society not because they are so temperate but to hold the people together."⁶

For a number of years each organization performed the duties of an aid society. An illness committee made regular reports on sick members, to whom financial aid was rendered at a specified rate. The Valon Tuote Society of Virginia, for example, paid out \$413.75 in illness aids in 1900, \$144.50 in 1914, \$163.50 in 1915, and \$165.00 in 1916. Burial aids were also paid by some of the larger institutions; the Valon Tuote Society paid out over nine hundred dollars to the relatives of deceased members in the years between 1893 and 1930. But in recent years, with the decline in membership and the marked increase in deaths among Finns of the pioneer generation, the societies for the most part have been unable to meet either illness or burial obligations.

The temperance society's concern for the cultural and

⁶ Charlotte Parker, "Finnish Immigration in Cleveland," in *Western Reserve Bulletin*, 19:34 (1916).

spiritual improvement of its members, as well as of the community, was attested in the early establishment of "absolutely necessary" libraries. Wherever a temperance society was organized a collection of books in the Finnish language of every variety, open to the general public, appeared also. Less than two years after its founding, for example, the Rauhan Koti Society of Mountain Iron opened its library. As early as 1911 the Ely society had 535 volumes in its library and the Cloquet society, 300; in 1940 the Valon Tuote Society of Virginia had over 800 volumes, and the Rauhan Koti Society of Mountain Iron owned over 300 volumes. The societies urged the public to "borrow and read books in a real competitive spirit" in order that a "national consciousness and higher culture might appear in this strange land." In earlier years the turnover was fairly good, but in more recent times the circulation has been negligible. Statistics of the Virginia Valon Tuote Society's library reflect this trend—there were 309 loans in 1913, 174 in 1922, 685 in 1927, 170 in 1935, and 24 in 1940. Similarly, the Rauhan Koti library at Mountain Iron had 137 loans in 1906, and only 8 in 1924. A substantial proportion of the books circulated among persons who were not affiliated with the temperance movement; nearly fifty per cent of the loans made by the Valon Tuote library at Virginia in 1927, and about twenty-two per cent in 1935, were to nonmembers.⁷

The interest manifested in the temperance society's newspaper room was perhaps greater than that in its library. It was customary in the early days for each organization to subscribe to a number of Finnish and Finnish-American newspapers and periodicals. In 1913 the Valon Tuote So-

⁷The circulation figures here presented were compiled from the manuscript library records of the societies mentioned. Information was derived also from the "Proceedings" of the Valon Tuote Society, November 19, 1913, April 6, 1922, and March 20, 1927; the Rauhan Koti Society, January 20, 1895, and August 6, 1906; and the Sovinto Society of Hibbing, October 20, 1922; and from Ilmonen, *Juhla Julkaisu*.

ciety of Virginia, for example, ordered eighteen dollars' worth of newspapers from Finland, and in 1922 the Sovinto Society of Hibbing received from the homeland the *Uusi Suomi* ("New Finland"), *Helsingin Sanomat* ("Helsinki Times"), *Maaailma* ("World"), *Suomen Urheilun Lehti* ("Finland's Athletic Paper"), *Suomen Kuvalehti* ("Finland's Illustrated Paper"), and a number of other popular publications. Interest in the Finnish press naturally ran high; members had to be reminded time and time again that "newspapers from Finland were not to be taken home from the reading room." The more familiar American newspapers to which the societies subscribed included the *Amerikan Suometar* ("Finnish American"), *Amerikan Uutiset* ("American News"), *Kansan Kuvalehti* ("Peoples' Illustrated Paper"), *Päivälehti* ("Daily Paper"), *Siirtolainen* ("Emigrant"), *Uusi Kotimaa* ("New Homeland"), and *Työmies* ("Worker").

The temperance societies served further as important agencies of social intercourse. Usually to its disadvantage, the disparagement of "King Alcohol" had to share the allotted time of each meeting with more engaging, nonpropagandistic diversions, such as poetry, recitations, songs, readings, debates, and the like. Great care was taken to appoint an effective program committee; the Virginia Valon Tuote Society's program committee consisted of thirty persons in 1903, and the Totuuden Etsijä Society of Hibbing had a committee of thirty-five in 1905. At a single meeting of the former society on March 10, 1901, the agenda included four songs, three poems, and a recitation. In 1914 the same society held, in addition to thirty-nine business meetings, thirteen social meetings and six bazaars, and it put on ten theatrical productions and two choral concerts. Even the business meetings tended to become more and more social in character; the secretary of the Valon Tuote Society at Virginia complained in 1912 that it was becoming increasingly difficult to get enough program material for the

business meetings. Debating, while originally intended to stimulate discussion of temperance and intemperance, tended to become a means for arguing academic or far-removed questions, such as "Which is more indispensable, a nail or a needle?", "Where does one learn more, at home or out in the world?", "Is fiction worthwhile or detrimental?", "Is falsehood ever justified?", "Is a cow or a horse more useful?", and "Which is of greater value to mankind, light or water?"

At many meetings part of the program was devoted to the reading of the society's handwritten newspaper or *nyrkkilehti*. Like the Virginia Valon Tuote Society in 1910, most of the institutions felt that a handwritten organ would be both "useful and educational," and launched such journalistic ventures. Typical were the "Valon Kipinä" ("Spark of Light") of Virginia, "Kehitys" ("Development") and "Taistelu" ("Struggle") of Mountain Iron, and "Totuuden Säde" ("Ray of Truth") and "Wesa" ("Seedling") of Hibbing. No great formalities attended the preparation of the *nyrkkilehti*, although the Mountain Iron Rauhan Koti Society had a set of bylaws governing its journal and the Hibbing Totuuden Etsijä Society had drafted instructions for its editorial staff in 1906. An editorial board, consisting of one or more and sometimes as many as a dozen members, was appointed to procure the necessary material for an issue. A box was made available for the use of the few individuals who wished to submit unsolicited manuscripts for the paper; as it usually turned out, however, the editor was through necessity also the only contributor. When a sufficient quantity of prose or poetry had been received, the editorial board or a select body of censors usually examined the contributions to see that they were "suitable to be read before the public"; the Valon Tuote Society of Virginia, however, decided vigorously in 1913 that there would be "no censorship." After considerable

pruning and not a few emendations, the copyist was set to work to prepare a master copy. With good fortune and assiduous work, the issue was ready before the dead line was reached, and it was then read before the members of the society by the proud editor. In the first flush of enthusiasm, handwritten newspapers were frequent and regular — the Mountain Iron Rauhan Koti Society, for example, “ordered” its paper to appear “at least once monthly with eight pages or more to an issue.” But before long, as the novelty wore off, the *nyrkkilehti* appeared less and less frequently and in many instances soon lapsed into silence. At Virginia a paper was read for the first time on August 14, 1910, but by November 8, 1912, a member was inquiring whether the Valon Tuote Society had ever issued a *nyrkkilehti* and proposed that one be started. Two serious difficulties interfered with the production of handwritten papers, in addition to the labor of preparing the copy — the refusal of the rank and file to contribute articles, and the unwillingness of individuals to assume the toil which an editorship involved. The operation of the latter factor is vividly demonstrated by developments in 1904 in the Rauhan Koti Society at Mountain Iron. On February 7, four editors were selected and a new handwritten paper, “Taistelu,” was launched; on April 10 the *nyrkkilehti* was not read, as “all editors were absent”; on April 17 the society attempted to elect a new editor, but since no one was willing to accept the position, the old editors were reinstated; on June 12 the society decided to drop the paper “until interest again revives.” As a result of the absence of editorial recruits, a member was often forced to dig deep into the society’s archives to find an old and faded issue, which was read in the hope that “it would pass as a new one.”

The social character of the temperance institution was further reflected in the number of auxiliary bodies which operated under its banner. One of the earliest was the

women's sewing circle, which contributed much to the development of conviviality in pioneer immigrant life. A dramatic society was likewise a regular appendage of the temperance institution. Provision was made for a stage in many of the temperance society halls. Before the footlights Thespians drawn from the rank and file of the temperance workers enacted such classics as *Tukkijoella*, *Anna Liisa*, *Savon Jääkärit*, *Hevospaimen*, and *Karjalan Kannaksella*. The Valon Tuote players of Virginia gave a total of eighteen performances in 1913—fourteen of them at home, four elsewhere. The repertoire, as might have been expected, was generally devoid of temperance plays; rarely was the overthrow of Demon Rum regarded as an adequate vehicle to attract the Finnish theater-going public. Choral societies were established under the auspices of the temperance institutions. Although their history has been, with few exceptions, a series of suspensions and revivals, they have enriched immigrant life. Community bands and orchestral groups likewise have, in their time, received the enthusiastic support of the temperance societies. A common and pleasant summer event in many a Finnish settlement was the society's Sunday picnic, with the Finnish band in the pavilion and "potatoes, fish, buttermilk, and coffee" gracing an overloaded table. The temperance lodges, moreover, met the needs of the robust and active members by encouraging the formation of athletic societies; intersociety field meets were frequently held in conjunction with summer festivals and rallies. The needs of those who had intellectual aspirations, on the other hand, were met by numerous public speaking clubs and debating societies.

The temperance societies in Minnesota were thus indigenous rather than transplanted. While emerging in response to an intemperate condition among a small group of Finns, they assumed from the very outset the role of a fraternal, social, and cultural immigrant institution. Not

alone by their number and size, but by their varied activity, the temperance societies have exerted a powerful and beneficial influence upon the character of first-generation life in the state. If, as now seems likely, the future should bring death to the Finnish immigrant temperance society, the pioneer institution deserves a worthy epitaph.

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