

Finnish Proverbs in Minnesota

Marjorie Edgar

IN COLLECTING Finnish folk music, magic incantations, and other folklore among the Finns of Minnesota, I often used to hear traditional proverbs and sayings, but made no attempt to collect them. In 1941, at the request of the Writer's Project of the WPA, I collected some proverbs from Finnish friends in Cokato, Ely, Duluth, and Minneapolis; from these four communities alone I received over a hundred and fifty of the most commonly used *sananlaskuja* (proverbs or sayings), a few, of course, being duplicates. All of these proverbs were in actual use among Finnish-born citizens, and some were used even by Minnesotans of Finnish parentage, as in Cokato, an older settlement than those of the north.

Although the Finnish language, as it is spoken in Minnesota, usually shows many traces of "Finglish," as the Finnish-English dialect is sometimes called, the proverbs are in true Finnish, just as they have been passed down from earlier generations. Some proverbs, however, show modifications in their use, and there are some variants in phrasing also. For an example of variations in use, there is the common and amusing proverb, "Frost brings the pigs home." Mothers use it when children come in hungry from play, but it is also applied, with slightly acid humor, to relatives who come to visit in hard times, or to grown children coming home to dinner on Mother's Day. Another popular proverb, "Who should hoist the cat's tail but the cat itself?" has been variously used, but always to show pride and polite boasting on the part of the cat (the person using the proverb). A proverb with an obvious meaning is "Nature calls the young woodpecker to the tree," but I have heard it quoted in connection with the return of humans to their original pursuits—even, in one instance, in the sense of "*On revient toujours à ses premiers amours*," which is a long way from the young woodpecker and his aptitude for his natural occupation.

Many Finnish proverbs have similes taken from the farm and the woods. Some of these sayings are:

"If the fish won't bite, you've saved the worms anyhow."

"A bear has bear's cubs."

"The wolf does not weep for the dog's death."

"Big fish eat little fish."

"The old horse keeps to the furrows."

"The crow is charmed by the sound of his own voice."

"Mice won't run down the mouth of a sleeping cat."

"You can't judge a dog by its hair."

"Sharp is the knife of the able man, dull the knife of the dullard."

"Don't make hay in the snow, or go courting in the afternoon."

"Is the egg wiser than the hen?"

"To the thrush her children are always the most beautiful."

"He who is honest in his fields will never lack clean bread" (bread without birchbark in it).

There is a good deal of homely peasant wisdom in sayings used for advice, such as:

"A man is known by his deeds, not by big words."

"In the evening drowsy, in the morning alert, this builds the house."

"There are always wise men on land when there's an accident at sea."

"He who sleeps in a calm must row during a gale."

"What one learns in his youth he practises in his old age."

"To the lazy man, winter always has too many cold days, summer too many sweating days."

"Better to sell the farm than to eat the seed."

"Much talking in the world, little knowledge." Along the same lines is "Much growling, little wool."

"Better to turn out of the road a mile than to go straight ahead into danger."

"Surely the spinning wheel will produce food, the spindle make something to cook."

Some Finnish proverbs resemble those used by English and Scotch settlers, and one recognizes a likeness to old American saws

in "Desperate need creates a way," "Better beware than repent," "Where there is a smell of smoke there is fire," and "A partridge in the palm of the hand is better than two on the branch." The last is an interesting variant of "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush."

The Finnish love of independence is illustrated by a proverb often heard in Minnesota — "*Oma tupa, oma lupa*," meaning "One's own cabin, one's own freedom." This is one of many sayings which rhyme in the original; another of this type is the common proverb, "A man is known by his word, an ox by its horns." Love of country and of one's home countryside are shown in proverbs like "Your own land a strawberry, another's land but a blueberry." Blueberries apparently were too common to be prized in Finland. And there is an old and beautiful saying, "Hearken to the spruce in whose root is thy home."

There are some grim northern sayings among these *sananlaskuja* — such as "There is no watchman at the gate of disaster," "Misfortune does not travel with a bell," and "A good bell is heard from afar, a bad bell from much farther." Often heard is the saying, "Three things trouble a man and eat at his heart — a leaking boat, a kicking horse, and a mean wife." More cheerful, and just as common, is the saying, "Good it is to see smiling mouths." A favorite one during dark days among Finnish immigrants — and even today — is, "It is good to live in hope."

There is often great beauty of sound and wording in these proverbs, and a poetic feeling that shows that they come from the same ancient folk sources as the "Kalevala," although they have not the same rhythm. All this is lost, of course, in translation, although some of the sayings are poetic even in the English translation. For example, there is the religious saying, "Man sows the grain, the earth makes it grow, but it is God who blesses the harvest." Lovely in Finnish, and pleasant in English, too, is the saying, heard in Minnesota after long hard winters, "Some have good luck, but everyone has summer."



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