



Jim Klobuchar

## Finnish version of hunt for roots

They invited Lydia and Marian Eliason of Minneapolis, mother and daughter, for some family camaraderie in the town of Laukaa, Finland, a few months ago.

The ladies were prepared for the usual housewarming, reindeer meatballs and sentimental invocations.

They were not quite prepared for 1,800 relatives.

That is correct. Imagine ringing the dinner bell and having the whole town of Jordan show up.

It may have been the planet's biggest roots-excitation of the year and it watered the eyes and stretched the minds of the notoriously unexcitable Finnish historians who were among the witnesses. Everybody was astounded at the size of the global pilgrimage to Laukaa. Everyone, that is, except a Finnish schoolteacher, who spent four years organizing it, and me.

I didn't get within 4,000 miles of Laukaa this summer. But I did crash the gates of a few Finnish picnics on the Iron Range—a brown-haired Slavic chestnut in a monochromatic bower of blond hair and blue eyes—and I can tell you these people are tireless and unstoppable reunionists.

All they usually need for a reunion is a vat of fish soup, a woodchopping contest and a Sunday afternoon. But the thing got so huge in Laukaa, Finland on July 14 that it became the first family gathering in history that required a domed stadium to house all the relatives. The church hall wasn't big enough so they had to move the clans five miles out of town to a futuristic copper-lidded arena used as a physical rehabilitation center in the lake country, 70 miles north of Helsinki.

If Calvin Griffith had known about it in advance, he almost certainly would have negotiated for the smoked fish concession and the sauna party at night. I mentioned that very fact to Lydia Eliason the other day.

"The way Calvin's been going at Metropolitan Stadium," the lady speculated, "he would have run out of fish about 4 o'clock."

There was no such delinquency at Laukaa. In Finland, organization stands next to waxed ski bottoms and the Lutheran Church. Four years ago, a school principal named Jaakko Hirvonen began exploring all available archives to track the 350-year-old history of the six lines of a family named Riikonen, which is derived

from the house Riikola, which the family patriarch founded not far from Laukaa.

Hirvonen determined that more than 13,000 living people, from Malaysia to Wadena, Minn., could trace their ancestry to the house of Riikola, and it should surprise no students of the Finnish mind and glands that he tried to invite all 13,000 of them.

It further should surprise no students of the Swedish mind and glands that the entire house of Riikola, with 13,000 Finnish descendants, was founded by a Swede.

"His name," Marian Eliason disclosed, "was Simon Storckovius, who migrated from Sweden to Finland in 1630 to study at the University of Turku. He evidently married one of the local women and they had six children, who became the ancestors of the 13,000 people Mr. Hirvonen's research has uncovered. Can you imagine walking into a town thousands of miles from home, and running into 1,800 cousins?"

The thought is almost too immense to absorb, especially if you are the cook. But Jaakko Hirvonen, naturally, had planned methodically. The groaning boards were stacked with platters of smoked fish, salads, potatoes, breads, greens.

"I could have handled all of it," I told Marian Eliason, "except that soup they called *mojakka*, with the little fish eyes in it."

Marian Eliason smiled benevolently. "I don't think they even serve much of the stuff in Finland nowadays," she said. "I didn't go for the fish eyes myself."

Her mother made a sound which might have been interpreted as a grunt.

"They were very tiny fish eyes," she said. "Nothing wrong with that soup at all."

If they didn't serve *mojakka*, they didn't short-change any of the 1,800 tribesmen in scrolls and family rosters or the unveilings of Hall of Famers from the house of Riikola. The names are impossible to resist. They come tumbling off the tongue in a cascade of impatient ees and tees and ens.

For example, it may have escaped your attention that one of the house of Riikola was the internationally recognized downhill skier Pentti Kokkonen; or that one was the distinguished pastor Pekka Turunen, or that another was the renowned sculptor Pauli Koskinen.

"Give me more," I urged Marian Eliason hungrily. "Every couple of years I need a fix on Finnish names."

"Well, he's not in the Riikola Hall of Fame, but I suppose I should note that in mailing his invitations, Jaakko Hirvonen misaddressed the one to my mother, and sent it by mistake to her brother in Detroit."

"And his name is . . . ?" I asked eagerly.

"Eino Jutila."

What else? And although Eino couldn't make it, and apparently no other members of the family from Minnesota, the ones who did each got to turn one of six symbolic screws with which a copper plaque commemorating the six family lines was fastened to the wall in the ancestral home near Laukaa.

And, afterwards, Marian and Lydia Eliason joined some of their relatives for an honest-to-God Finnish sauna in a hundred-year bathroom near a lake.

"Did you jump in the water afterwards?" I asked.

"No," one of them said with just the barest disapproval, "only in the middle of January."