Historical Sketch

Individual Finnish immigrants worked on early canal and railroad projects in Canada, but it was not until the 1890s that organized communities developed. Some of the earliest Finnish immigrants seeped into northern British Columbia from the Russian Alaska territory of Alaska, which had been under the rule of a Finnish Governor General, after it was sold to the United States in 1867.

Well adjusted to the cold climate and unfriendly terrain, throughout the history of Finnish settlement in Canada, most of the Finnish immigrants chose the mine or lumber towns of northern Ontario as their final destination. In most cases they preferred to live in the rural communities surrounding these towns, in places such as Beaver Lake, Waters Township, and Long Lake (in proximity to Sudbury, Ont.), South Porcupine, and Cochrane (close to Timmins, Ont.), where they could easily supplement their income by fishing and hunting. A small number of Finns operated large commercial farms, mostly dairy farms, around Sudbury (Ont.) and Thunder Bay (Ont.).

A prewar peak in Finnish immigration in Canada was attained in 1913, when 3,508 Finns reached Canada. From the last decade of the nineteenth century the Finnish Canadians started forming their own societies and clubs: in 1893 the first temperance society was established in Sault Ste. Marie (Ont.), and in 1896 the first Finnish congregation in Thunder Bay (Ont.). In 1903 Thunder Bay obtained its first Socialist organization and community center. The only large community to attract any Finnish immigrants was Toronto (Ont.), which counted a Finnish Canadian population of approximately 1,000 before the First World War, the vast majority of whom were skilled workers. In 1902 the Finnish Society of Toronto was founded, which, in 1906, joined the Socialist Party of Canada, and in 1911 - after links had been established with other Finnish Canadian communities throughout the country - formed the Finnish Socialist Organization of Canada, later (1923) renamed the Finnish Organization of Canada.

Until the 1920s, most Finnish immigrants in Canada were ideologically committed to Socialist ideas, partly in response to the poor and often unjust working conditions they were subjected to, and partly because of events in Finland, where a Civil War in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution had caused an exodus of many prominent left-wing leaders, some of whom ended up in Canada where they played an important role in the growing trade union movement.
With the restrictive immigration legislation in place in the United States, in the 1920s many new Finnish immigrants chose Canada as their final destination in North America, although approximately 20 to 30% of them returned to Finland, and many others left their new home for the United States. Nevertheless, between 1921 and 1931 the Finnish Canadian population doubled in size from 21,494 to 43,885. While the sex ratio was unbalanced in the previous period of Finnish settlement, by 1931 it had balanced out as approximately 44% of Finnish Canadians were women. More than 60% of Finnish Canadians in the 1920s lived in Ontario, and many small communities saw a boom in cultural and social events. Particularly theater performances, weekly dances and sporting competitions reached large audiences.

From the late 1920s a large number of nationalist conservative Finns immigrated to Canada, leading to the formation of a number of right-wing organizations, which joined together in 1931 under the name of the Loyal Finns in Canada. These organizations exerted an important influence on the Finnish Canadian communities, since they were for the most part supported by the Finnish consuls and the Lutheran Church in Canada.

In the 1920s the Finnish Lutheran congregations joined the United Lutheran Church in America. In 1933 there were 12 Finnish Lutheran Churches and 29 preaching stations nationwide. Finns also founded Presbyterian, United Church of Canada, and Pentecostal congregations, which played an important role in providing shelter and employment to the new immigrants from Finland.

The depression of the 1930s hit the Finnish Canadian workers very hard, since many of them were employed in particularly vulnerable industries in the north. Approximately 2,000 Finns returned to Europe, where they hoped to found a Socialist community in Soviet Karelia. The deportation of unemployed Finns (about 100 annually) by the Canadian government was another factor that contributed to the decline of the Finnish Canadian population in this decade. By 1941 there were only 41,683 Finns left in Canada.

Although the struggle of Finland against Soviet Russia (1939-1940) initially could count on the sympathy of many Canadians, by 1941 - as Russia became Canada's ally - the Finns were considered enemy aliens, causing a stop to all immigration from Finland until after the war, and the internment of a few Finnish Canadians. All Finns had to register with the police for fingerprinting. During these years thousands of Finns in Canada joined the efforts of Finland-Aid organizations in sending food and clothing to the war-torn homeland.

In 1947 Canada once more opened its doors for new Finnish immigrants. In the next 12 years 17,384 Finns arrived for
settlement in Canada. As the Finnish economy and living standards improved, however, fewer Finns became inclined to leave their homes for Canada. Since the early 1960s the number of Finnish immigrants arriving in Canada, has decreased to about 200 per year.

The Finnish Canadians have never been a very numerous group, but have relatively attracted a lot of attention by concentrating their settlement in certain professions and geographical areas. Today, most are still living in the resource towns of northern Ontario, particularly in the Thunder Bay region. In 1981 33,400 Finnish Canadians lived in Ontario. This figure amounts to 64% of Finnish Canadians nationwide. With the arrival of proportionately more skilled workers and professionals since the 1950s (41% in 1952, and 74% in 1978), many have chosen Toronto as their home. A large number of cultural, social and sports organizations still remain in operation, as well as a number of historical societies. A number of new projects have reinforced the unity in the Finnish Canadian community - that began in the form of relief societies during and after the Second World War - such as, for instance, the construction of old age homes in Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury and Toronto, and the initiation of Finnish language lessons for the second and third generation of Finnish Canadians, who have become an indistinguishable part of broader Canadian society.