

## AMERICAN AND CANADIAN FINNS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FOREST SECTOR OF RUSSIAN KARELIA IN THE 1930s

АМЕРИКАНСКИЕ И КАНАДСКИЕ ФИННЫ И РАЗВИТИЕ ЛЕСНОГО  
СЕКТОРА РОССИЙСКОЙ КАРЕЛИИ В 1930-е гг.

### Background

The project *American and Canadian Finns and the Development of the Forest Sector of Russian Karelia in the 1930s* started as a personal quest for information about a missing relative of the principle investigator, Mirja Jääskeläinen. Mirja's great-aunt, Naimi Petronella Koskio, who immigrated to the USA in 1914 travelled to Soviet Russia twice. Her first destination was Kuzbass, Kemerovo, where she worked from 1922 to 1924. In 1931, Naimi again travelled to the USSR, this time to Soviet Karelia. In doing this, Naimi joined the ranks of the so-called "American Finns," that is, Americans and Canadians of the Finnish origin who were lured to settle in Soviet Karelia in order to contribute to the building of communism, a phenomenon called the Karelian fever.



**Fig. 1**

Naimi Petronella Koskio as a young woman, between 20 and 23 years old. The photograph was taken in Finland, before Naimi's first trip to America.

To Mirja's frustration, no additional information about Naimi Petronella Koskio could be discovered in Karelia. Yet the time spent in archives and libraries, both in Finland and in Russia, was not wasted. Through a personal history of her great-aunt Mirja acquired

a sense of a bigger picture. She started to see the impact of the Karelian Fever not only on personal lives of those involved, but also on the development of Russian Karelia, in general, and on the advancement of the Karelian forest sector, in particular. Out of ca. 6,500 of those who immigrated to Karelia from the USA and Canada between 1931 and 1934, approximately 60 % became employed in the forest sector, thus making it the main area of technology transfer. The immigrants, most of whom were skilled forest workers, successfully combined Finnish and North American wood harvesting tools, methods, applied research, training, and education. They became the first to introduce them in Russian Karelia and later across many parts of Soviet Russia by means of forest schools, training courses, and publications. A detailed account of their contribution to the forest sector, including the impact on felling volumes and the state of Karelian forests, is still missing. As a former lecturer in forest marketing, Mirja immediately saw a knowledge gap to be filled in, so that the contribution of the American Finns to the development of Russian Karelia could be fully appreciated.

Fortunately, like-minded people were eager to get involved. The National Archive of the Republic of Karelia possessed a wealth of materials documenting the lives and work of the American Finns in Russian Karelia, and offered to share those with Mirja. Prof. Irina Takala of Petrozavodsk State University, a renowned historian and the author of several publications on the history of Russian Karelia, helped to develop the project idea. As a final seal of approval, in 2018 the project received financial support from Metsämiesten Säätiö, Finland.

### **About the project**

The main objective of the project is to uncover the truth about the influence of Canadian and American lumberjacks and other forest workers on the development of the forest sector of Soviet Karelia from the late 1920s to the mid-1930s, in particular, about their contribution to the technological advancement in wood processing. It is a well-known fact that between the early 1920s and the end of the 1930s, the annual volume of timber harvesting in Karelia increased tenfold.

The project will make use of the abundant material available in the National Archive, the National Museum, and the National Library of the Republic of Karelia, including documents, textbooks, manuals, maps, and statistical reports produced in Petrozavodsk in the 1930s. For some documents, abstracts will be written and translated into Finnish, Russian, and English, if appropriate. The project partners will meet in Petrozavodsk two or three times a year to monitor and evaluate the progress.

The main project output is an online digital resource to be hosted and maintained by the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia. A user-friendly interface of this electronic resource will allow a free access to the digital archive (i. e. a collection of digital copies of documents and photographs from the National Archive), and a database allowing a search of people as well as relevant documents and photographs.

Several other outputs will be produced during the lifetime of the project. A number of articles will be written for the general public and scholarly audience. Some of the documents will be selected for a museum exhibition. The exhibition will go on a public display at the Forest Museum of Finland LUSTO in 2020, and later will be displayed in other parts of Finland.

The core research task of the project is to examine to what extent Canadian and American Finns developed the forest sector of Soviet Karelia, in particular the methods of timber harvesting and transportation. The evidence can be obtained from textbooks and manuals published at that time, and also in the form of tools that were used during the period under study. The methods and tools used in Russian Karelia will be compared with the ones used in Finland, Canada, and the USA during the same period. Thus an explanation will be found for a tremendous increase in the volume of timber harvesting observed during the 1930s. An analysis of methods and technological solutions will be complemented by personal accounts of the events and anecdotes obtained from letters and other documents.

The database will have links to map resources, such as those showing the locations of forest camps (“lesopunkt”), industrial enterprises, saw mills, joinery factories, and the Kondopoga Pulp and Paper Plant. It will also include digital copies of watercolor paintings created in the early 1930s. Thus, personal data will be combined with data from the forest sector to form a single entity; depending on their interests, the users will be able to query either any of them or both. For example, the following questions could be answered:

1. Where the forest camps were located, who were the people working there, and what do we know about them.
2. How a forest camp functioned, how big it was, and how it changed over time; such information will be available for each individual forest camp.
3. What infrastructure was built in each forest camp or village, including tool and equipment maintenance facilities, stalls, machine and tractor stations, cafeterias, housing (barracks and individual houses), schools, etc.
4. What was the climate, soils, and forest growing conditions in the area.

In the course of the project, the team will analyze some of the data. The Karelian (Russian) forest types and growing conditions in the 1930s will be compared with those in Finland at the same time period and at present. Forest harvesting methods will also be reviewed and compared. For instance, in the 1920s and 1930s, the Russian method was to divide a harvested area into squares. Each square was felled by its own team of workers consisting of 1–2 loggers and 3–4 pruners, with many women among the latter. Canadians introduced a strip method combined with directional felling. A hauling track would then be made in the middle of the strip.

Gathering information about the political and economic landscape that existed in Soviet Karelia in the 1920s and 1930s is another major project objective. Karelian

forests were of enormous importance for Soviet Russia as they were conveniently located for the purpose of timber export to European countries. However, Edvard Gylling who in 1923 became the leader of Soviet Karelia strove to ensure a sustainable development of Karelia. Following negotiations with Lenin, Gylling acquired a measure of budgetary autonomy for Karelia, and made Finnish the second official language in addition to Russian. In the 1920s, an unprecedented share of the budget (12 %) was allocated to the cultural development in Karelia. As a result, in the 1930s, nearly 100 % of all children went to school. With the imposition of Stalin's First Five Year Plan in 1929, a large-scale labour migration from all over Soviet Russia to Karelia dramatically changed its ethnic composition. To counter this trend, Gylling decided to recruit ethnic Finns from North America as qualified labour force. He drafted the petition requesting a permission to invite lumberjacks and others skilled forest workers to come to Karelia and assist in harvesting Karelia's "green gold". A permission to recruit the Finnish North American labour to Karelia was granted by Stalin, and for nearly half a decade immigrants kept on coming. However, the late 1930s saw a dramatic turn in the fortunes of Gylling and the North American Finns whom he had recruited to move to Karelia. In 1935, Gylling was removed from his position in the leadership of Soviet Karelia, followed by his arrest in July 1938, after which he was sentenced to death and executed. About 15% of the North American Finns who settled in Soviet Karelia in the 1930s were repressed, and many suffered the same fate as Edvard Gylling.

The project partners believe that this dramatic story of Finnish-American and Finnish-Canadian forest workers will help to understand the progress achieved by the Soviet forest industry before the WWII in Russian Karelia and in Soviet Russia as a whole. This understanding will hopefully contribute to the development of sustainable forest practices and better appreciation of Karelia's "green gold".

#### **Project Sustainability: development and maintenance of the electronic resource**

After the end of the project, the electronic resource will be maintained by the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia. The project partners hope that it will not only be further developed to include additional materials on the Karelian forest industry and North American Finns among its work force, but also to embrace other sectors of Karelia's pre-WWII economy. The long-term aim is to provide a useful tool for those who are interested in the natural history of Karelia, in general, and family history, in particular. The electronic resource can also establish foundations for the development of tourist activities in Karelia focused on its pre-WWII history.

**Mirja Jääskeläinen**  
**Nadia Bystriakova**