

Bringing a Winter Festival to Washington

By Thomas Vennum Jr.

By including a Finnish-American component in this year's Festival, the Smithsonian Institution Folklife Program reaffirms its commitment to plans specially developed for the 1976 Bicentennial Festival. The program, called "Old Ways in the New World," was intended to dispel much of the "melting pot" notion of American culture by showing that many traditions brought from the Old World have tenaciously survived and developed in their new setting.

When immigrant groups arrived here, the "Old Ways" of cooking, singing, dancing, building, and playing they brought with them were often their only means of maintaining cultural identity. Eventually the descendants of many of these ethnic groups, by retaining these practices, have developed a pride in their heritage. Often they choose a particular day, such as a patron saint's feast day, to celebrate their ethnicity. Such an annual occasion becomes a real "homecoming," when distant family or community members return to their roots, eating traditional foods with foreign names and joining in Old World dances to the accompaniment of music and instruments from outside the mainstream of American popular culture.

While ethnic festivals in the United States are numerous, scholarly focus has centered mostly on urban celebrations sponsored by the larger immigrant groups, such as Italians or Irish. By contrast, *Laskiainen* is a rural winter festival quietly sustained by one of the smallest immigrant groups, the Finns. It was first celebrated as a Shrove Tuesday festival in the early 1500s during the advent of the Reformation in Finland. As with Mardi Gras and other well known Shrovetide celebrations, *Laskiainen* was a day of feasting and other festivities in anticipation of the 40-day Lenten fast. In fact, *Laskiainen* is a derivative of the verb *laskia* meaning "to settle down," and is connotatively translated: "to settle into Lent."

Having been transplanted from Finland to northern Minnesota, the event has continued for more than 50 years, making it one of this country's oldest ethnic festivals. Additionally, the community's own documentation of the event over the years has provided a valuable time-span for studying the historical evolution of *Laskiainen* in this country and comparing it with the practice in Finland today.

Having decided to present a segment of *Laskiainen* at the 1980 Festival of American Folklife, problems in recreating a winter festival during Washington's early October weather arose. Because it was impossible to transport the entire event with all its participants, we selected a fairly representative cross section of foods, crafts, and entertainment, stressing wherever possible the wintertime aspects of the event—*lastu* (Christmas tree ornaments), the colorful Finnish woolen wear, the birchbark winter slippers as used in the lumber camps, and the sauna from which one emerges to plunge into the snow.

A crucial decision was to transport the whipsled (*vipu-kelkka*) from Palo, and to have it operational. Though a fairly modest hand-powered device, it is such a popular "folk ride" in Minnesota and so uniquely Finnish that it might be said to symbolize the celebration. For that reason, it will be the focal point of our presentation. Another challenge was to devise some means to make the ride work, since in its natural context it is set up on a frozen lake and the track is, therefore, ice. After exploring the possibilities of synthetic ice or a teflon-coated runway, we decided to mount the sled in a specially built cradle with roller skate wheels running on a plywood track. While the ride is considerably smoother than on Loon Lake in Minnesota and lacks the familiar

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crunching sound of the runners going over ice, we feel we have simulated the effect and, to complete the experience, we have provided photographs of the sled in use in Minnesota.

Another essential aspect of *Laskiainen* that we have tried to retain is its family character. Among this year's participants you will find two brothers and a sister playing Finnish music, several husband-and-wife teams, and a young man weaving fishnets while his grandmother knits caps and socks nearby. The one element missing is the presence of many local children, as they are essential participants in the event. However, by restricting the whipsled ride for *your* children to enjoy, they will be able to experience the joy of the Finnish-American children for whom *Laskiainen* is planned on the Iron Range each February.

Photo by Paul Williams



Riding the whipsled in Palo, Minnesota, for the 1979 *Laskiainen* Festival. Rumor has it that a small child is sometimes asked to say "Vipu-Kelkka," Finnish for whipsled, for an extra good ride.