

# *Ethnicity and Community: Laskiainen in Palo, Minnesota By Carol Babiracki*

In early February each year, in the small rural community of Palo in northern Minnesota's Iron Range region, hundreds of people gather for traditional *Laskiainen* festivities. The word *Laskiainen* literally means "sliding downhill." For the Finns in northern Minnesota, it is more than simply a winter sliding festival; it is a time to share traditions and memories and take pride in their Finnish heritage.

*Laskiainen* was brought to the Iron Range by Finnish immigrants in the late 1800s. It was originally a pre-Lenten or Shrovetide celebration. In Finland and in northern Minnesota, Finns have also considered it a celebration of the lengthening of the short dark winter days. Until the mid-1930s, *Laskiainen* was observed in northern Minnesota by small family or neighborhood groups with sledding and sliding, Finnish foods, music, and dancing. In the mid-1930s, community-wide *Laskiainen* festivals were organized in the rural schools to stimulate interest in the community's folk traditions. Through the years, the festival at the Palo School overlooking Loon Lake has become the region's only *Laskiainen* and has grown in both size and popularity.

The two-day festival is usually held during the first weekend in February, when the weather is right for the festival's outdoor activities. The cold, snowy white setting outside contrasts with the warmth and color inside. For those hardy enough to brave the often bitter cold there are log-sawing contests, skating races, hockey and broomball games, skiing, sledding, and sliding down the steep hill that begins at the school and ends down at the lake. Indoors there is plenty of traditional Finnish food, music, and fellowship.

*Carol Babiracki is the granddaughter of Finnish immigrants to Minnesota's Iron Range. She has done field research on Finnish folk traditions on the Range and coordinated the Iron Range Folklife Project of the Minnesota Folklife Center and the Iron Range Historical Society during the summer of 1978. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in ethnomusicology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.*



Photo courtesy of Iron Range Historical Society, Gilbert, Minnesota



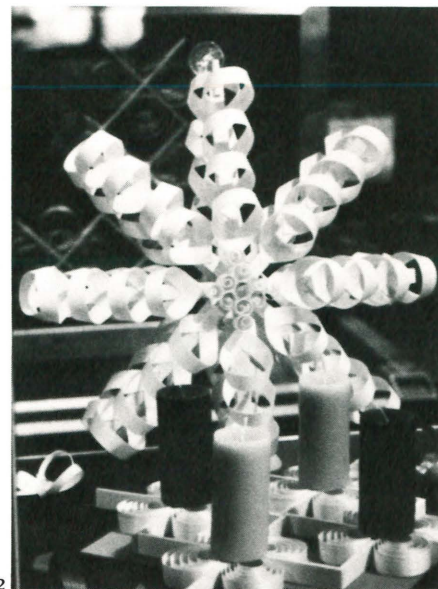
Though many aspects of *Laskiainen* have changed, there are some necessary Finnish ingredients that can be expected every year. For the area's Finns these aspects reinforce a sense of the continuity and endurance of their heritage and their community. They look forward to the *Laskiainen voi-leipä-pöytä* (buffet, literally "bread and butter table") with traditional foods such as *rieska* (flatbread or "skinny bread"), *nisua* (sweet cardamom loaf), *korppuaa* (hard cinnamon toast), and *berne keittö* (pea soup). The festival's program has always featured humorous recitations in Finnish and folksongs sung and played on the button-box accordion or fiddle by local musicians. In their songs they express the Finns' sentiments about the Old Country, the land and nature, love, heroes, bad luck, and, on the Iron Range, about mining and lumbering. Today, the musical items also include performances by Finnish-American folkdance groups. At the traditional evening *Laskiainen* dance, the local band mixes Finnish polkas, waltzes, and schottisches with fox-trots, two-steps, jitterbugs, and butterflies.

Outdoor sporting activities have always been part of *Laskiainens* as well. The slide-builder, with 24 years' experience behind him, spends about a week building up the smooth sides and four-inch base of ice on the toboggan and "bump-the-bump" slides, using special forms that are saved from year to year. The log-sawing contests reflect the important part logging and lumbering have played in the history of Finns on the Iron Range.

While these Finnish elements of the festival have been continued through the years, other Finnish aspects have disappeared. Girls no longer race to be the first one down the sliding hill to win a spray of flax. People no longer talk about *Laskiainen* legends or "superstitions." And many Finnish foods have disappeared from the menu.

Yet in recent years, other Finnish elements have been reintroduced into the festival. Visitors can sample *leipä juustoa* (or "squeaky cheese," a white cheese made from rich milk and rennet) and *kropsua* (rich, oven-baked pancake) at the buffet. Outdoors, on the lake, they can once again enjoy a ride on the *vipu-kelkka* (whipsled), a sled on iron runners attached to a 26-foot spruce pole that rotates on a post frozen into the lake. When the pole is pushed around the post, the sled is sent flying around the icy circular track.

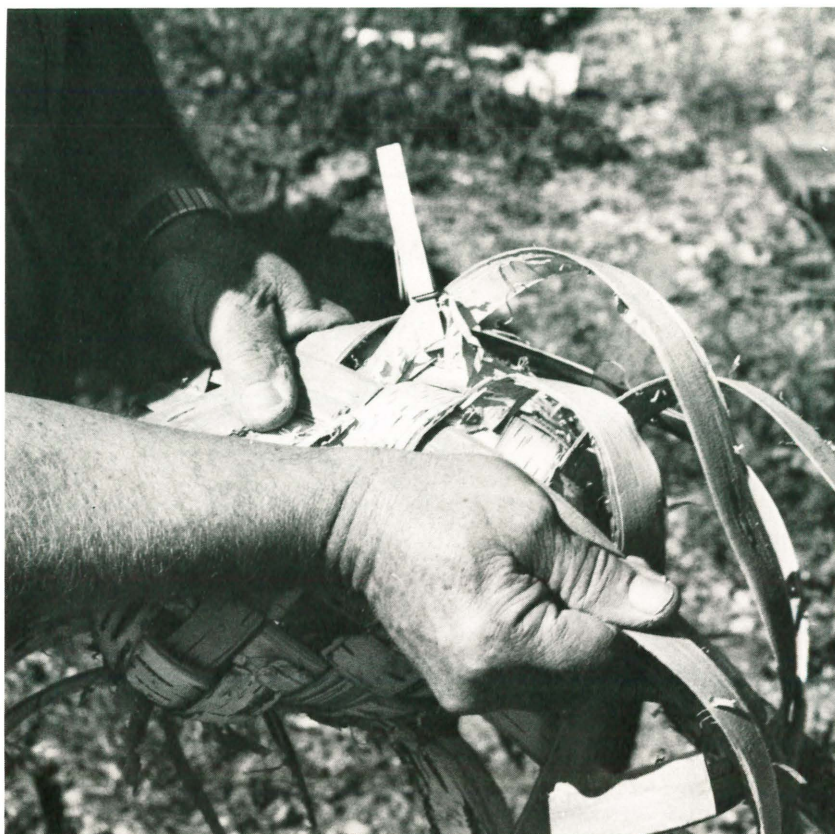
Displays and demonstrations of traditional Finnish crafts, common in the early *Laskiainens*, have also reappeared in the festival recently. There are examples of fine handwork such as crocheting, tatting, weaving, and *lastu* craft (bending thin strips of unfinished wood into decorative designs). Many of the display items, however, were once made for household use, out of necessity, from materials found in the Minnesota surroundings: birch-bark baskets, packsacks (*konttis*), and shoes (*tuobri wirsu*), warm felt boot liners (*tossus*), farm tools, carved wooden kitchen utensils, skis and ski poles, snowshoes, and sleds. Discarded clothing was transformed into woven rag rugs and quilts. Wool and flax were carded, spun, and knit into socks and sweaters. Many of these old crafts are not widely practiced anymore, but on display at the *Laskiainen* these artifacts take on new significance. They give older visitors a renewed sense of pride in their traditions and their ability to survive by their wits. The displays are also a gathering place for those who want to reminisce about the old days and ways. Both the displays and the live demonstrations of carding, spinning, and quilting at the festival have encouraged younger generations to learn and continue these traditional crafts.



1 Three Finnish women immigrants posed for this picture outside of their "homestead" around 1912. The house in the background was built using Finnish carpentry techniques and still stands in Brimson, Minnesota. So exact are logs hewn that no chinking is needed for weatherization against the harsh Minnesota winter evident by the snow and icicles.

2 Examples of *lastu*, the traditional Finnish craft of making ornaments from wood shavings.





3 Birchbark weaving is a craft still practiced among Finnish-American immigrants and their descendants similar to the way it was among their ancestors. Marvin Salo of Embarrass, Minnesota, is shown weaving a birchbark basket.

4 A completed backpack.

#### Suggested Reading

Edgar, Marjorie. "Old Finnish Folk Songs in Minnesota." *Music Teachers National Association, Volume of Proceedings*. Series 40 (1946): 137-141.

Hoglund, A. William. *Finnish Immigrants in America 1880-1920*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960.

Johnson, Aili Kolehmainen. "Lore of the Finnish-American Sauna." *Midwest Folklore* 1 No. 1 (Apr 1951): 33-40.

Karni, Michael G. "Otto Walta—Finnish Folk Hero of the Iron Range." *Minnesota History* 40 (1967): 391-402.

Kaups, Matti. "A Finnish Savusauna in Minnesota." *Minnesota History* 45/1 Spring 1976.

Smith, Robert J. "Festivals and Celebrations." *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Richard M. Dorson, ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

#### Suggested Recording

*Finnish Heritage: Music by the Third Generation*. Available from The Third Generation, P.O. Box 659, Virginia, Minnesota 55792.

The reintroduction of Finnish traditions in the *Laskiainen* festival reflects the community's interest in its own ethnicity. Once the Palo area was nearly 100 percent Finnish. Though most are still of Finnish ancestry, the area is becoming a mixture of many different ethnic groups. There is a concern among the older generations that they will lose some of their Finnish traditions, that their children may not know what a *vipu-kelkka* is or how to do a polka or a schottische. Through their *Laskiainen* festival they can pass on their traditions to younger generations and share them with each other.

*Laskiainen* has always been an Iron Range festival, also, by offering popular activities that Finns share with other area ethnic groups. Thus, basketball, hockey, and broomball games have become traditional features of the festival. Since its beginning, the festival has included the coronation of a *Laskiainen* queen, and, since the 1950s, she has walked to her throne under an arch of hockey sticks held by honor guards clad in hockey team uniforms.

Though visitors to the festival come from all over Minnesota and neighboring states, the festival is organized by volunteers from the Palo community. Local church groups, fire departments, boy scouts, and other community groups all participate. Shopkeepers donate food, and local women bring baked goods from home or prepare foods at the festival. In addition, proceeds from the festival are helping to keep the building on Loon Lake, closed as a school many years ago, open year-round as a community center.

The *Laskiainen* festival is a dynamic, growing tradition in Palo. Traditional old Finnish elements in the festival provide continuity with the past. New elements are being added and traditions reintroduced to meet the needs of a contemporary community. It is a family festival, with events for all ages. It is a community festival, with fun and friendship to offer the area's non-Finns. But *Laskiainen* has a special meaning for the Finns. Conversations at the festival often come around to the subject of "being Finn." Non-Finns are dubbed "honorary Finns." People wear Finnish buttons and hats, speak Finnish with each other, tell Finnish jokes. As one *Laskiainen* celebration came to a close, a Palo Finn expressed her deep satisfaction in this way: "This is one day when you can be proud to say you're a Finn. It's a different way of life, being a Finn. But this is one day when even the jokes don't bother you. It's a great day for Finns."