

What Official History Forgets Lives on in Song: On a Finnish-American Parody of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”

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Abstract

In 1938, Fulton, Michigan resident Gusti Similä performed a parody of the World War I era song, “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary” for folklorist Alan Lomax to record and archive at the Library of Congress in its Archive of Folk Song. While perhaps a generally interesting piece to Lomax, the rich and intimate details of the song, as well as the wider musical cultures to which it belong, reveal a perhaps forgotten history of economic struggle in a remote community in Minnesota’s Iron Range either at the end of World War I or just following it. In this paper, the song’s story will be examined in relation to documentation of the local history as well as its place in Finnish-American parody and protest songlore.

To state the obvious, the narrative of history depends heavily upon its author who in turn depends heavily on an ability to record the narrative and further to share it with a wider audience. Narrative influences others, be it in stories told, songs performed, or formal, scholarly volumes published. A narrator has a given point of view regarding particular events, individuals, and emotional situations and with the passage of time, the maintenance of this narrative is dependent on the durability of the message, and the ability of the bearer to pass it forward. Often survival of the message- and its viability versus competing ideas- depends on the social prestige and access to methods of sharing such ideas of the bearer. Other times, however, surprising and seemingly improbable circumstances retain the messages of those whose messages appear doomed to disappear with the passage of time.

During his 1938 field recording trip in Michigan and Wisconsin for the Library of Congress, folklorist Alan Lomax made the acquaintance of Gusti Similä¹, an immigrant from Muhos, Finland, in Fulton, Michigan. Born in 1880 and having come to the United States after time spent working in Helsinki on salt ships, Similä settled with his family in this small Upper Peninsula community following years on the Iron Range of Minnesota. Lomax’s field journal provides colorful imagery of Similä, in a section entitled, “Here are the tales and the people I must remember”:

¹ Similä’s name is also spelled in the following variants: Kusti Similä, Kusti Simola (both found in Lomax-related materials), Gust Similä (Siirtolaisuusinstituutti Passenger Records), and Kustaa Similä (Ilmonen, 1998/1926, p. 178). Here I will refer to him as Gusti Similä, based on his family’s spelling of his first name and the standard Finnish form of his surname.

The tale of Kusti Simola’s [sic] job hunt- the burly handsome blond fellow shambling across 12 mountain ranges and up to climax 14,000 feet 3000 feet above tree level, criss-crossing Montana, Dakota, Oregon and Washington looking for harvest job- down to Calif. to pick grapes [...] Of him- shivering in shoes, blue overalls and shirt on the Canadian border: “You can’t buy a job.” (Lomax, 1938, pp. 36a-38a)

Similä’s personal repertoire, as captured by Lomax, included, among others, a well-known lullabye, “Pium, Paum, the Cradle Sways,” a ballad, “Unto, Laiska Renki-Juntti,” and an unusual song listed with the title, “Yli kymmenen vuotta Korpiinissa oli jo asuttu” [Over Ten Years We Have Lived in Corbin]. A more appropriate title, as drawn from the chorus, would have been “It’s a Long, Long Way to Evelettiin,” which would have further given the context clue that this was a parody of the World War I era popular song, “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary.”

This song, perhaps at first obscure in tune and subject matter to the casual listener, proves to be the surviving documentation of a confluence of social and cultural streams in which Similä found himself at some point during his life in Corbin, Minnesota. We do not know whether or not Similä composed this song, participated in or witnessed the actions it described, or learned it secondhand. For whatever reasons, however, in late September of 1938, Similä chose to share this song with Lomax, recording it for posterity and leaving a rich and fascinating record of one teller’s frustrations with an unbearable situation:

Kymmenen vuotta Korpiinissa oli jo asuttu
eikä täällä kauppapuotia viel’ oo’ näkenyt,

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vain Kovaniemi se elelee siellä se kello-peslevi
hän tuumaili että tuostahan se oli reformi

Vaik' on long way to Evelettiin, mistä jauhosäkin
saa
It's a long way to Evelettiin
kun ei ole kauppapuotia
Goodbye jo kirkollikkii velverron rakentais
Kotmannin kolikin roppia kauppapuotis' myydän
kai.

Ja liikkeen hoitelijaksi ne laittoi rookerin
joka nimeltään oli Mäkinen ja aika täkyri.
Ne tavaraa nyt ostelivat tuolta juutalaiselta.
Ja se arveli että hintaa niille korotta vain saa.

Chorus: Vaik on long way to Evelettiin
mistä ryysyareetun saa.
It's a long way to Evelettiin,
kun ei ole kauppapuotia
Goodbye jo kirkollikkii, velverron rakentais'
Kotmannin kolikin roppia kauppapuotis' myydän
kai.

Evelettissä sulkatalkona
Kyllä niistä Korpiinissa taalan aina saan.
Uusia siellä lasilla ompi näytteillä
vaikka puolet hintoja kohotta ei joudat tyvitä.

Chorus: Vaik' on long way to Evelettiin,
mistä ryysyareetun sais'
Vaik' on long way to Evelettiin
kun ei ole kauppapuotia

Over ten years we've lived in Corbin,
But not a store we've seen
Just Kovaniemi's living there, that timecard
tracking thief.
He thinks he'll be able to reform us that way?

But it's a long way to Eveleth,
Where you can buy a sack of flour
It's a long way to Eveleth, since there isn't any
store.
Goodbye to the church league, we're going to build
a chapel (a store).
Gottman's Colic Syrup will maybe be sold at that
store.

And as a manager they chose a crook.
His name is Mäkinen, and he's a schnook.
They were buying all their stuff from that shyster
And he felt he could hike the price just as much as
he pleased.

Chorus: But it's a long way to Eveleth,

Where you can get a rag crate.
It's a long way to Eveleth,
'cause there isn't any store.
Goodbye to the church league, maybe we'll build a
place.
Gottman's Colic Syrup may be sold there.

In Eveleth we're at a feather bee [to raise money
for the store]
Sure you can always get a dollar for one of those in
Corbin.
New eyeglasses are on display there,
Though even at half the price they wouldn't be a
deal.

[Chorus]

While we're slaving over lumber work,
That cock-eyed Mäkinen is fixing the prices.
A dollar-and-a-half shirt he wants to sell for two
and a quarter.
And still he assures us it's no cheapskate goods.

[Chorus]
(Similä, 1938)



Figure 1. Esther and Gusti Similä, Fulton, Michigan, ca. 1950s. Similä family photograph.

Reading the Clues: Corbin as a Place

While Corbin was once the place name of
a community in northern Minnesota, the last traces
of its existence can be found in Corbin Road,

which is a part of the Makinen², Minnesota postal area. By using Google Earth, one can see where this short road veers off to the left in its last remaining stretch and dead-ends at a home, likely once a farmstead boasting several buildings. One can also see where, at the point where the official road forks toward the residence, the older, dying road keeps going, leaving a possibly impassable rut for several miles into the bush before it ends abruptly after a 90 degree left into a stand of deciduous trees, not too far from the main county highway which leads quickly back to Makinen proper.

Located southeast of Makinen and northwest of Markham, nearly equidistant between the two on the backroads along Long Lake, Corbin may now seem like a shadow of a ghost town, but at one time, this was an organized community with its own institutions. In a communication between folklorist James P. Leary and cultural geographer Arnold Alanen regarding Similä's recording and the village of Corbin, Alanen writes:

[Corbin] wasn't a mining company location, but was platted as a small, speculative venture by the Corbin Improvement Company in 1907. Many of the houses were moved in the late 1960s or 1970s when open pit mining operations consumed the site. [...] According to an interview with a person who lived there during its latter years, the town had a gas station and possibly a store. She said that its early history was quite notorious because of many saloons (personal correspondence, June 29, 2005).

History of the Finns in Minnesota (Wasastjerna, 1957) sheds additional light on the background of the community in describing the spread of Finnish agricultural communities in the region beginning in the 1890s. While Finns had originally become attracted to mining and logging jobs in the Iron Range, labor conflicts and the personal quest to achieve "*oma tupa, oma lupu*" [one's own home, one's own master] led many Finns—indeed often forced them—into the cutover hinterlands to homestead on truly difficult land. Wasastjerna contextualizes Corbin's development

² Because the English language does not use umlauts, the use of "Makinen" will refer solely to the placename as accepted for the U.S. postal location while "Mäkinen" will refer solely to John Mäkinen, founder, storekeeper, and first postmaster at Makinen, Minnesota.

as a part of the original move to fill logging jobs and then as a result of the strikes of 1907 and 1916, (pp. 538-539), describing its development along with other nearby communities of Cherry (originally Alavus), Forbes, Makinen, and St. Louis River (p. 574).

Subsequently, it is revealed that "the village called Makinen got its name from John Mäkinen who, together with John Kovaniemi, kept a store and post office there from 1905 on" (p. 575). And so we see that the person criticized in Similä's performance as a "schyster" and a "schnook"³ had such an influence over the area that his name is now a part of the landscape. Although presented quite simply in this brief statement, Mäkinen and Kovaniemi are entered into the record as founding members of the local community, and their influence and importance are evident by this fact alone.

Mäkinen's role as the first postmaster contributed to the official disappearance of Corbin from the map as a place name. Citing Corbin as an example, Matti Kaups says, "In a few instances, the expansion of Finnish rural settlement led to displacement of previously accepted place names" (1979, p. 38). With the name Makinen taking on the official designation of the place, Corbin remains in use among locals as a designation for an area that, to the uninitiated eye, may appear to only be a bend in the road or a clump of trees, but to the local signifies a place where some people still live and where, according to Wasastjerna, residents once had their own Finnish National Evangelical Lutheran Church congregation and a workers' society (pp. 575-576). Like many similar uses of officially discontinued place names in the Upper Midwest, Corbin exists because it still connects with locals when describing things ranging from history and life stories to useful navigational information, being as it is six miles by road from Makinen proper.

Seeking the Heart of the Story

The two key concerns addressed in Similä's song address the high costs of commodities accessible to Corbin residents, an issue well-documented in local history, as well as

³ In the original song, the words translated as "shyster" and "schnook" are literally "täkyri" [possibly "tykerys," "schnook"] and "juutalainen" [Jew]. Jews in Upper Midwestern communities were [and still are] often associated with the merchant classes and as such, merchants as a group were often maligned with Jewish ethnic slurs when the results of a trade were unsatisfactory.

possible labor issues between local residents and the villainous Kovaniemi and Mäkinen, which remain unclear because of a lack of currently available documentation as well as contradictory evidence from the historical record.

Founded as a speculative venture that never took off, Corbin was endowed with at least one attribute that would have aided in its settlement by Finns for agricultural purposes: it had at least rudimentary roads, as well as, if Wasastjerna's dates are accurate, the post office and store established in nearby Makinen proper by Kovaniemi and Mäkinen. Consistent with many Finnish agricultural communities established in the Upper Midwest, the local timber supply would have provided families with a winter source of income, which Similä highlights in the song when he mentions "slaving over lumber work." The song implies that Kovaniemi somehow controls this labor as a "timecard tracking thief," although this connection is not explained by Wasastjerna in describing the local economy. If the implication is that Kovaniemi runs a company store, this is also not in line with general practices of the time in Upper Midwestern industrial communities as explained by Alanen:

Unlike other American mining regions, the Lake Superior area landscape was dotted with only a few company stores. Nevertheless, some independent merchants charged excessive prices in communities where they held a commercial monopoly, and others denied credit to unemployed workers during periods of labour strife. To counteract these practices, the Finns formed consumers' cooperatives in many mining towns and rural communities of the Lake Superior area (Alanen, 1981, p. 52).

Regardless of whether locals worked directly under Kovaniemi or bartered with him through trading timber, the price inflation found at his store was a common issue in the early history of the region. Alanen offers yet another clue when he writes that

. . . most of the early, rural-oriented cooperators already possessed a common bond: exploitation by local merchants. Virtually every account concerning the early history of these stores contains stories of local merchants and entrepreneurs who would contract for timber products, eggs, milk, butter, etc. from the local farmers, only to offer less

money (or scrip in some cases) than originally agreed upon. In other cases, the private storekeepers, who often held a virtual monopoly in isolated centers, would charge excessive prices for their wares. (1975, p. 111)

Throughout the Iron Range, high food and commodity prices were endemic. Due to the industrial nature of the local communities, as well as the poor farming conditions offered by the land and climate, local farming was not very extensive and so much of the food had to be brought in from elsewhere, driving up the costs significantly, unscrupulous practices of individual grocers notwithstanding. According to Neil Betten (1970), a 1916 survey found Iron Range food prices much higher when compared with those in southern Minnesota, with staples including eggs, fruits, meats, and even potatoes (at up to 40% higher prices) being a significant expense for the working class (p. 52).

Response by Finns, through the burgeoning cooperative movement, has been described by some as a natural response to these conditions. In an oral history interview, Duluth-area lifelong IWW member Vaino Konga describes the move toward cooperativism under such circumstances:

"The Finns brought the cooperative movement with them from Europe. Cooperatives had been very popular in Scandinavia and Finland for decades. When the Finns went up to northern Minnesota and northern Michigan, a store would open up and try to take advantage of their isolation. The Finns said to heck with that noise. They'd band together and open a cooperative store, which resulted in refunds, lower prices, and better quality" (Konga, 1985, p. 93).

Cooperative associations did indeed spread gradually before World War I and more rapidly thereafter, with communities near Corbin establishing their own stores and associated services in the years listed: Eveleth (1917), Virginia (1909), Zim (1926), Sax (1936), Cherry (1919), Palo and Markham (1931). A cooperative store was established in Makinen itself as a branch of the Markham Cooperative Association; Wasastjerna does not cite a date other than the foundation of Markham's Cooperative Association in 1931 (1957, pp. 443-444, 474, 573-574, 576, 581, 583). Elis Sulkanen, however, cites the

foundation of Makinen's cooperative store as having taken place in 1926, in the same year in which it joined the Central Cooperative Wholesale (1951, p. 306).

Further research can certainly inform us more clearly of the particular situation referenced in the song as well as its resolution for Corbin residents. The interplay between historical factors at work on the Finnish singer (and writer should this prove to be another person) resulted in an expression of anger, contempt, and a resolve to rectify matters that surprisingly survives to the present day and now, our attention will turn to aspects of the musical culture in which this song is situated.

Music as Protest in Finnish America

As numerous field and commercial recordings, published songbooks and ephemera, scholarly publications and even existent performance repertoires attest, Finns came to America already boasting their own songlore about oppression and injustice experienced back in Finland, and assumedly, from which they had hoped to escape. In Similä's own repertoire as captured by Lomax, we hear two song fragments illustrative of the uneasy relationship between farm owners (particularly the farm wife, who is commonly depicted as cruel) and their landless workers⁴. An entire genre of songs brought on immigrant voices from the old country depicted rebellious men who horrified the gentry by crashing weddings, picking fights with the guests, and even sometimes carrying off the bride, most notable of which is "Isontalon Antti ja Rannanjärvi," a song based on true events in Finland and still performed by traditional musicians today.

The songs are personal, describing individuals—possibly real—who face relatable problems and angers. These angers are directed at a class of individuals—chiefly landowners and sheriffs—who, although described in formulaic terms making them into a uniform generic entity, come to the mind, if not the lips of the singer, as a person with a name, with a land stake, and with power. As Greene (2004) says of the Finns who came to America, "the most distinctive feature of the group [...] was the more heightened sense of oppression felt by the masses, particularly the youth, toward those in power, resulting in a hostility toward all authority" (p. 54).

At the same time that Finns began to move to America, Finland itself was moving toward a more capitalistic economy such as that found in America. The structure of a capitalist authority, with often faceless masters, was also something the Finns were gaining familiarity with, and this, too, is reflected in the songlore. As Finns became more active in left-wing political life, songs developed either based on their own native tunes, parodies or imitations of foreign songs, or direct translations of songs that were increasingly becoming part of the international workers' repertoire, including "The Marseillaise," and "The Red Flag," ("Marseljeesi" and "Punalippu," respectively, in Finnish).

This tradition only grew in the American context, where Finns, and many other immigrants, needed to create points of connection with the wider interethnic community if they wanted to participate in struggles of labor, politics, and other public spheres that crossed ethnic lines. Encountering a life filled with new sets of cruelties, "poets found the wandering immigrant falling victim to economic injustice. Although there were homes and food aplenty, a poet described how the wanderers were enslaved to work day and night while others reaped the fruits of their toil" (Hoglund, 1960/1979, p. 34). The new and the terrible of America resonated with an established tradition of songs in the face of oppression, and in this context, it is no surprise that soon, Finns were borrowing outside of their already-established bodies of Finnish native songs and those used internationally in workers' movements, taking up English-language popular tunes as the basis for new, and ever-rebellious, songs (See Hand, Cutts, Wylder & Wylder, 1950, p. 8; Hoglund, 1960/1979, p. 33; Johnson, 1947, p. 336; Saunio & Tuovinen, 1978, p. 95).

Parodies of "It's a Long Way to Tipperary" had already entered English-language editions of the Industrial Workers of the World's periodical *Little Red Songbook* since at least March 1916, with Pat Brennan's "Harvest War Song," the earliest, featuring in the Joe Hill Memorial Edition. Other editions included Lone Wolf's "The Road to Emancipation," Joe Hill's posthumously published "It's a Long Way Down to the Soupline," and a previously-unpublished variant of Hill's version by Charles Ashleigh, "It's a Long Way Down to the Breadline" (Green, Roediger, Rosemont & Salerno, 2007, pp. 163-164, 168, 256-257, 347-348).

Finns, too, used this tune in parody in their own language. In 1918, *Proletaari Lauluja* [Songs of the Proletariat] was published by the Workers Socialist Publication Company in Duluth,

⁴ "Unto, Laiska Renki- Juntta" (AFS 2392 A3) and "Mieleeni Mulla Tahtooi Tulla" (AFS 2392 B1)

Minnesota, a longstanding hotbed of Finnish leftist activity. Song number 39 in the book, “Long Way and Short Way,” is set to the tune of “Tipperary” as well, although the themes and imagery of the song are closely related to those presented in IWW songwriter and martyr Joe Hill’s iconic “Long Haired Preachers (Pie in the Sky),” perhaps making it a variant of that song as well. “Long Way and Short Way” repeats the message, “It’s a long, long way to vapauteen (freedom)” and that the worker can expect his reward in heaven. In the last verse, and final chorus, the message is radically shifted, urging others to join the struggle and change the course of their lives:

It’s a short, short way to vapauteen,
Suora on tää taiston tie,
Joka yhteiskuntaan uuteen,
Pohjajoukot voittoon vie.
Yhteistyössä meidän voitto,
Se on luokkataistelo.
Vapauden kallis aamun koitto,
Suur’ teollisuusunio.

It’s a short, short way to freedom,
Straight is this struggle’s road
All into a new society,
Comes the bottom of the heap to victory
In cooperation is our gain
It is class struggle.
Freedom’s precious morning dawning,
Big industrial union.
(pp. 48-50)

More close, perhaps, to the minds of Iron Rangers such as Similä, an “unsigned song appeared in *Solidarity* (August 5, 1916) during the strike of the iron ore miners on the Mesabi Range in Minnesota” (Kornbluh, 1987, pp. 299-302). In this piece, Minnesota’s then-governor is called out for not supporting the strikers, and the suggestion is made that this will cost him in the next election. The song existed in parody among many in the Industrial Workers of the World, and with an extremely strong Finnish contingency within this group, it is certain that members of this immigrant community heard the “Tipperary” tune in its “proper” context, and in parody among English-speaking IWW members.

Even closer, still, was another parodic use of the “Tipperary” song, as cited by longstanding Makinen area resident, Clifford Nisula (personal correspondence, December 2007). “It’s a Long Way to Virginia When Corbin Goes Dry” also commented on extremely local issues (perhaps the incidence of saloons in Corbin?) using the

language of popular music to convey messages. While no known full text of this song exists, it proves that this particular song was useful to many groups at the time and that it was equally suitable for commenting on issues ranging from the extremely local to the international. It could reach across ethnic and linguistic lines precisely because of the cultural overlaps created by the rise of the recording industry, interethnic political movements, wartime physical movements internationally, and more.

Conclusion

In folklore and social history, American Finns are often recognized for that which differentiates them from others, including their perceived qualities of radicalism, clannishness, and alcoholic tendencies as well as their unique language, folkways, and apparent ability to farm potatoes out of rocks, among other things. In Similä’s song, we see that Finns were not so far removed from the mainstream culture to be unable to use popular songs and broader cultures of protest for their own means, in their own language. We also see, in sharp detail here, that being in the same ethnic community did not necessarily mean that individuals held the same interests. Finally, even in a community removed from direct involvement with the prevailing economic structure and its resultant negative impacts on the working class, certain forces of oppression still acted upon Finns who opted out of the mining communities of the Range, which contributed to the growth of the cooperative movement, especially following World War I.

While perhaps of little to no importance to scholars in other fields, a song such as Similä’s is of great value to the folklorist. While history may emphasize the works of grand and important men, folklore looks to the actions and reactions of everyday people. As art and music scholars may also prefer “high” and “educated” art, folklorists look toward the excellence of the utilitarian, the everyday, and the subversive. By highlighting such detail in what is otherwise an overwhelming cacophony of often silenced voices, the folklorist, and particularly those who look back in historical time, comes to see the faces, hear the shouts and feel the burning anger and miserable aches of our subjects. It is here that the folk burns alive and with one surviving shout into our own day and age, reminds us of the commonalities that bind all humans across time. Both for the facts and the emotion conveyed, such messages are of utmost importance.

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