

The Finnish Settlement in the Eagle River Area

by Elsa Ahola Bloom

Around the turn of the century, G.F. Sanborn, an attorney and land developer, widely advertised the sale of prime forest and farm land in the Eagle River area. He offered a package deal with 80 acres of land, a log cabin, and a cleared area for farming. Finns from throughout the country were attracted by this offer. After all, the climate and topography of Northern Wisconsin were similar to their beloved homeland and farming was a sure path to self-sufficiency.

One family responding to Sanborn's ad was the Frank and Ida Ahola family. Frank Ahola and Ida Sofia Hyle were married in Finland in 1898. Frank had emigrated to the United States from Finland in 1901. He traveled to Daggett, Michigan, where he was reunited with his parents, John and Ida Ahola, and his brother Oscar. The Ahola's exodus to the United States was precipitated by the tyrannical rule of Finland by Russian Czar Nicholas II. The Czar had ordered a conscription into the Russian army of Finnish men. Many Finns refused to join an army that they believed would be used to suppress their own people.

After Frank was settled in Daggett, his wife, Ida, and their children Ray (formerly Reino), two years old, and Selma (Seimi), nine months old, made the journey from Finland to join him. They lived in Daggett and farmed there until 1909 when they were enticed by the Sanborn ad to strike out on their own in the great northwoods of Wisconsin. They bought a tract of land located near the southern border of Vilas County, about a half mile from Aldridge Lake. True to his word, Sanborn had a log cabin built and some forest land cleared for farming. Until the log cabin was built, the Aholas stayed at the boarding house in Eagle River operated by another Finnish family, Oscar and Hilma Ahlfors.

The farmstead was neighbor to a state-owned virgin forest, known to the family as the "big woods." The "big woods" was a place of serenity and profound silence. The majestic giants shrouded the earth below, discouraging any vegetation growth at their feet. In turn, animals were discouraged from lingering in this hostile climate that offered neither food nor shelter. The majesty and silence combined to create the aura of a grand cathedral.

The Aholas moved to this new neighborhood with a family grown to include another son Albert and three more daughters, Ella, Alma, and Sarah. I was born at the farmstead in 1911 and in the following years we were joined by Freda in 1914, Erma, 1916, and

Walter, 1920. To accommodate this growing family, my parents built a larger log home. The log cabin was converted to a sauna by adding a stone fireplace and a platform where we could sit and throw water on the rocks to create the steam. We also had birch or cedar switches with which we would switch our bodies.

Preceding our family to this area were Anton and Fiina Bloom, sons John T., Andrew, Armas, and Uno, and daughter Ina. They lived several miles east from us. As our family grew, so did theirs. Other children were Rex, Jenny, Gertrude, Martin, Esther, Hugo, and Irene.

Many Finns settled in the Sundstein, Bohemian and Evergreen school districts. The Kivistos lived in Eagle River. Selma and Frank Koskelin were neighbors of the Blooms. The Keskinens lived on Spring Lake. The Stars lived on Loon Lake.

Other early settlers were Frank Inberg, Oscar Maki, Gus Makinen, John Thompson, Otto Myllynen, Alex Hendrickson, A. Ranta, Henry Vilpulla, Herman Lahti, Arvid Kantola, Peter Immonen, and the Pietila and Kalmar families.

Arnold and Bill Pietila became known as the Flying Finns for their ski jumping prowess. They competed regularly at the ski jump located between Eagle River and Conover and at Pine Mountain in the Upper Peninsula.

Finnish was the language spoken in our homes. English was not mastered until the children entered school. Because I had older brothers and sisters, I learned English from them before I entered Bohemian school at age six. Our parents, however, maintained Finnish as our primary language and we, the children, easily adapted to our bilingual existence. I was very proud to be an American and learning English was an integral part of being American.

At Bohemian School, located on Highway 17, many of the children came to school not having English as their primary language. Our one-room school had students from grades one to eight. We had a wonderful teacher, Miss Esther Carlson, who later married Fred Sailer and became Mrs. Sailer. She made each of us feel welcome and important. By example we learned to respect our differences while we mastered English and the three R's--reading, writing, and arithmetic. I remember trying to help two children who spoke fluent Croatian but didn't know one word of English.

At recess we played hop scotch, kick the can, tag, and anti-I-over. For a prank, the boys would sometimes hunt for garter snakes at recess so they could sneak them into the classroom and

let them slither down the aisles.

Our farm was about two miles from Bohemian School. Although I looked forward to the walk to and from school each day, the weather sometimes presented a challenge because we didn't have school closings for snow, sleet, ice, hail, chill factors, or fog.

At home we organized games and activities with our neighbors. Anton Bloom built a big wooden swing on the Bloom farm, located on what is now Bloom Road. The chair swing had two chairs and we would pile as many of us as possible in the swing to while away our summer days.

When Hugo Bloom was a young child, Anton built a wooden horse with skis so Hugo could join his older brothers and sisters, friends and neighbors on the ski hills. Finnish parents generally gave skis as gifts to their children when they reached the age of four to five years of age. Some fathers, such as Anton and Matt Sallman made skis for their children and others bought skis from Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Wards.

We would ski through the swamps and lowland to reach the nearby big hills. Anton also built sleds for hauling wood in the winter and sleds for the children to use on the hills. Some of us also used cardboard or flat pieces of wood to fashion our own sleds.

Another of our wintertime favorite activities was barnyard hockey. We didn't have skates. We made our own sticks and pucks. We didn't have money for the equipment but we sure had fun. I didn't have skates until I earned enough money to buy them.

From the time I was six or seven, I picked berries during the summer and sold them to the stores in Eagle River. I still remember an argument with one of the Morgans who owned the Morgan store, located at the corner of Main and Division Streets. I had a gallon syrup pail full of raspberries. Mr. Morgan said the pail does not really hold four quarts. I told him that when he sells the syrup he charges for four quarts of syrup, so he should pay me for four quarts of berries. He laughed and he paid me for four quarts of berries. I was not shy about sticking up for what I thought was right and I found that my peers and my elders respected me for doing so.

Finally, I had sold enough berries to buy the precious skates. I learned to skate from the Bloom boys who had skates that could be attached to boots. Uno Bloom let me use his boots and skates. They were too big for me, but I learned to skate. I knew I just

had to have a pair of my own regular skates. I was the first in the group to have a regular pair of skates, paid with my berry money.

Our family was large, ten children in all, and we were very poor in worldly goods, but we were a happy, carefree bunch. Our home was located in the wilderness with our nearest neighbor about one mile to the north, toward Eagle River. To the south stretched a wilderness area with an old logging road that led to an abandoned logging camp which we knew as "Camp Six." Between our house and Camp Six, some five miles away, and leading off from this old road, were numerous other roads and paths, many of them almost overgrown, which led to old fields where years ago settlers had moved in, cleared the land and built homesteads. No buildings were left in these fields, but we had names for them all--such as "Big Camp, Little Camp, Apple Tree Camp."

We had a farm, with not too much land cleared, and a number of cows. Every spring after school was over, and throughout the summer, my parents would let the cows out of the barn after milking and we youngsters would start them off along a path through the woods that eventually met the old road. This was necessary as the small amount of cleared land did not provide sufficient pasture for them. The cows would travel the road and cut off on one or another of the roads or paths, to end up at one of the fields in the woods.

Early every afternoon it was the duty of us younger children to start out looking for the cows and bring them home. We would travel the old road and follow the cow's tracks to whichever field they chose for their pasture for the day. We always loved these long walks and spent many happy hours bringing the cows home. Wild raspberries grew in patches along the road, and strawberries grew wild in the old fields, and we would pick them during the berry season.

When I was six years old they started to build a road to connect Rhinelander to the nearest city to the south, and Eagle River. This road, now State Highway 17, roughly followed the old wagon trail, and when completed, went right past our house and on to Eagle River. The county line, separating Oneida and Vilas County, was about a mile to the south of our home, and that portion of the road to the south was completed about a year before the road past our house was ready. Our cows would still take the old path through the woods but now they would end up on the completed portion of the road and cut off that to the old fields, or they would continue straight through to Camp Six to pasture there.

One beautiful afternoon, in late summer, when the raspberries were ripe, I had an experience that I believe helped to mold the pattern of my life. My brother who was two years older than I, and I were walking along the completed portion of the road on our way to get the cows which this time seemed to be going straight along the road to Camp Six. We walked slowly along, pausing now and then to throw rocks at the chipmunks that sat on stumps alongside the road eating raspberries.

We had just rounded a turn in the road when about a quarter of a mile ahead of us we saw a large black bear cross the road. Black bear were scarce in those days, and I had never seen one before and had no idea what it was. My brother, who had seen one once when he stayed one summer at our uncle's farm in Michigan, recognized it for what it was. I was a little afraid to go on, but he assured me it would be gone into the woods long before we got to where it crossed. We continued on our way. As we walked along, I recall my brother telling me about how our uncle and some other men had shot and killed a bear in Michigan. We saw no further sign of the bear and took it for granted he was gone. We got to within a short distance of where we figured he had crossed when about a hundred feet away we saw him on the side of the road where he had stopped to eat some of the wild raspberries that grew alongside the road. He evidently saw or scented us at the same time for he came out of the ditch and out into the road. He got to the center of the road and stood up on his hind legs facing us. We stopped dead in our tracks.

"What can we do?" I whispered to my brother. He told me we must not turn and run because the bear might take after us. After several frantic seconds of speculation, my brother said he believed if we acted like we weren't afraid we could probably scare him off.

"When I say 'go' we will both start yelling at the top of our voices," he said, "and run right at him." I will never forget my terror as I waited for that word "go."

As my brother gave the signal, we started straight for that bear as fast as we could run, our hands waving in the air, and both of us yelling as loud as we could. After a moment of hesitation that bear turned, gave one great leap and went crashing off into the woods. We continued on our way, laughing shakily and agreeing that we had done the only thing we could do. In all the years following we never did see a bear again.

The grass of many years has grown over the grave of my brother, and I never did know what effect our adventure had on him. For me, though, whenever the clouds seem too dark, and the burdens of

life too hard to bear, or when I face a seemingly unsurmountable problem, my thoughts travel back through the years and I see once more those two barefooted, terror-stricken children running as fast as they could straight toward what to them was the greatest danger, and I know that I can face whatever comes and win.

The Finns were all subsistence farmers living off the land, raising some cows, horses, and chickens. Our family also raised sheep. In addition to farming, my father ran the logging camp for Sanborn in the winter and my mother helped in the kitchen, cooking all the meals. Some of the Bloom boys worked for my father as well. When my mother worked at the logging camp, she took the younger children with her. Sarah, who was in her teens, was in charge of the older children at home, which included me. Sometimes we would play tricks on Sarah. One day, she thought I was tricking her by knocking on the door. She yelled "Come in you son of a gun, come in or I'll sock you one." When the door opened, to her great chagrin, a traveling salesman greeted her as she sat with a scowl on her face and her feet propped on the table.

At that time Ella was taking care of two children, Urho and Irene Immonen, whose mother had died in the 1917-1918 flu epidemic. The other children, Frances (Fanny) and Vienna, moved in with other families. Frances lived with the Kivistos and Vienna, who was an infant when her mother died, was adopted by the Pelkonens. While Ella was caring for Urho and Irene, she became very ill. The doctor diagnosed appendicitis. The closest hospital where surgery could be performed was in Green Bay. Selma went with her to Green Bay, but by the time they arrived, it was too late for surgery. Ella, at the age of 16, died. Our large family had been diminished by one. After Ella died, Alma took care of Urho and Irene. Later, Urho and Irene joined our household for a short time while Mr. Immonen left to work in the mines in Upper Michigan. The Finnish families opened their hearts and their homes to others.

In the summer my father did yard work for resorts, and worked in the Shattuck sawmill, which was located where Mud Creek enters Watersmeet Lake. He logged many of the pine forests, as well as the birch, maple and other hardwoods. I can remember when he would have the logs piled on the Deerskin during the winter and in the spring they would float them down the river to the Chain of Lakes. The logs would be gathered and surrounded with what was called a boom--a chain of logs fastened together. They would then fasten the boom to a launch and bring the logs down the Chain to Eagle River where they were put in a mill pond for the Wisconsin-Michigan Lumber Company sawmill. The sawmill was located almost directly behind where Cranberry Products now

stands off Highway 70. It was quite a sight to see the launch with the large raft of logs trailing behind.

The Finns brought to the United States a strong tradition of working together to achieve goals that could not be attained individually. The Eagle River area Finns who were farming early recognized the need to combine forces to have the money for veterinary and threshing services. They formed a Finnish Cow Insurance Association. The first recorded meeting was March 20, 1920 at the Oscar Star home. Children were always welcome on these excursions because social contacts were otherwise limited to births and deaths. The meetings were scheduled on holidays whenever possible due to the difficulties of traveling long distances by wagon, buggy or sleigh. The first Christmas Day meeting was held at our home. Following the meetings, there would often be dancing with the music provided by Anton Bloom and his hand made violin. The men would remove their hobnailed boots and dance in their stocking feet on the bare pine floors.

Association members were charged a small premium per cow. Insurance funds were increased by passing a plate during meetings and having card parties and picnics. There wasn't an official company that issued policies. The family cow's name was recorded in a book. If a cow needed a veterinarian's attention or died, another member verified the incident and the insurance was paid at the next meeting. The veterinarians employed over the years included O.E. Espeseth, Percy Morgan, Warner Norlander, Dr. C.M. Hornung of Rhineland and Arthur Stenback.

When I was 13, our family moved from the farmstead to Eagle River. We rented a home on Pine Street from Sanborn at a monthly cost of about \$16. Ina Bloom, who was two years older than I, joined our family at that time. A childhood injury to Ina's hip had resulted in her having one leg shorter than the other. To assist her rehabilitation, she was sent to a facility in Sparta. After being fitted with a platform shoe, she was able to walk for short periods of time. Walking from the Bloom farmstead to school and back, however, would have been very difficult for Ina, if not impossible. Our new home was just a few blocks from the high school so by joining our family she was able to attend high school. She became one of my best friends. Although she did not finish high school, she enrolled in a sewing course that was offered through the mail. She outfitted many Finns through the years. Her beautiful handiwork included the wedding gown for her son Harry's bride, lovingly sewn many years after she had completed her correspondence course.

Our move to Eagle River meant a new school for me--Eagle River Grade School. That summer I entered the spelling bee at the

Vilas County fair and walked away with the championship. This victory absolved somewhat my sense of loss at leaving the beloved farmstead. My sisters Alma and Sara and I would often return to our roots and stay overnight in the granary. One night I provided nourishment for us by milking one of the cows belonging to our old neighbors, the Cerney's. The Cerneys moved here from Texas and while they were working to clear their land we opened our pastures for their cows.

Right after high school graduation, I began working as a secretary for Sanborn Insurance and Land Company. To get back and forth from work I decided I needed a car. My brother Albert taught me to drive, using the families old Model-T. I bought a used 1928 Chevrolet Coupe for \$250 from Jack Pride. The Coupe didn't have a heater, but by lifting up the floorboard we would get the heat from the engine to warm the car. The Coupe did have a rumble seat, an unroofed seat, in place of a trunk. This space greatly expanded the passenger capacity and was a popular riding spot.

My father thought I had paid too much for the car. I paid \$12 per month and I don't think any interest was charged.

We didn't have credit cards but credit could be extended as needed. At one time our family didn't have the money for some materials that we needed for our home. I went to Hall Lumber Company and explained we needed the materials, costing about \$30, but we didn't have the money. I asked the Halls if I could buy it on credit. They agreed and I made the payments as I could, with, again, no interest charged.

The Finns always helped each other with hay making, barn building, and any time a family needed an extra hand. In 1940, their willingness to help others extended overseas when the Cow Insurance Association sent \$50 to Finland for the victims of the Russian invasion.

The Association served a noble purpose, but by 1942 the members recognized that the changing times had diminished its importance. The family cow had lost its status and children had grown and moved from the farmsteads. Members voted to dissolve the Association and convert the funds to government bonds. They also resolved to dedicate the funds to construction of a hospital in Eagle River if and when it was ever seriously proposed. In 1960, the Eagle River hospital trust fund received a \$200 check from the Finnish Cow Insurance Association. Three surviving charter members, Mrs. Anton Bloom, Mrs. Frank Koskelin, and Frank Inberg witnessed this final transaction.

The Finns also formed an Association which built the Finn Hall in the Sundstein District where we held dances. The money to build the hall was raised from parties and picnics.

The Finn Hall served a social purpose and the Finn Cow Insurance Association served an economic purpose. A third endeavor of the Finns was the Finnish library, to serve an intellectual purpose. The Finns raised the funds to purchase over 500 books and a number of magazine subscriptions. These books and magazines, printed in Finnish, were available for check-out and return. The library was somewhat like a bookmobile, because it was moved to different homes to equalize the access and management. Authors represented included Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Jack London, Zane Grey, and Alexandre Dumas. Books could be checked out for two weeks. A fine of \$.10 per week was assessed for overdue books. If the book was not returned, the fine was \$.90.

Taking the lead from our parents, we formed an Athletic Club in 1933. Matt Sallmen of Eagle River spearheaded the effort. At our first meeting in the Finn Hall we elected Willis Keskinen chairman and Velma Hendrickson secretary.

I drafted a constitution and by-laws for the club which were accepted by the membership. The club was officially named the Get Together Athletic Club. It was an "independent, non-political organization" of "young workers and farmers." Its functions were "to advance the interests and forward the education of its members." In addition, it would "uphold all organizations that are working in the interests of the laboring class."

We sponsored dances at the various schools. Music was provided by Viola Turpeinan of Michigan, Louis Shimek, Paul Cook, Sylvia and Allie Makinen, and others. The dances were well-attended by young and old.

One time a group of us drove in my dad's Model-T to the Phelps Finn Hall for a dance. Piling into the car with me were Uno, John T., Rex and Jenny Bloom. Coming back, we got a flat tire. It was raining, so we stayed overnight in the car and changed the tire in the morning after the rain stopped. My parents didn't say anything about our overnight stay but one of the neighbors thought our behaviour was scandalous. At a meeting the next week she stood up and ranted and raved at our conduct--staying out all night. My parents thought her conduct was quite outrageous.

Our athletic club sponsored road races long before the running boom of the 1970's. We didn't do the long distance races. We had races of a half mile or mile. We didn't have stop watches.

Whoever came in first was the winner and this is all we had to know. Prizes were provided by the Athletic Club. One time I won a pair of tennis shoes, besting the other competitors. We didn't have separate prizes for boys and girls. To get a prize you had to be the first across the line.

The parents cheered us on at all our events. We had wrestling matches for the men with a wrestling mat and referees. We played basketball, had long jump competitions, and even had stilt challenges to see who could stay longest on stilts. To keep fit we had weights, an exercise room, and rings.

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