

## 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

