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The Forest Finns of Sweden

Who were they and why were they in Sweden?

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

In the Middle Ages, forests were not regarded as anything valuable, as the technology to make use of the forest was not yet developed.

During the middle and latter half of the 1500s King Gustaf I and later his son Carl (IX) were active in recruiting new settlers to the large forest areas in middle and northern Sweden. At the same time there was unrest along the border between Finland and Russia, and many of the Finnish-speaking inhabitants there were interested in settling in more peaceful areas. Many peasants from the Savolax and Karelian provinces in eastern Finland came and populated the forests. They were offered six years free from taxes if they came and started new homesteads.

Slash-and-burn farming

These Finns had a special method of farming, which required large areas of forest, something they could find in the forested areas of middle Sweden. They surveyed a tract of forest, felled the trees, and let them lie there to dry for a year or two. Then they burned the trees at Midsummer. Next they sowed their special high-yielding kind of rye (*finnråg*). They could use this field for a few years, and then it turned into a grazing field, and at last reverted to forest. During this cycle they had to start new fields in the next tract of land. This method of farming was called “slash and burn” and the people were known as the “slash and burn Finns” or *svedjefinnar* in Swedish. They were also known as Forest Finns or *skogsfinnar*.

How many came?

Exact figures are not available, as this was early in the keeping of specific records, but it is estimated that several thousand families left eastern Finland during the period of 1550 until about 1640.

Were they integrated?

At the start of the period when the new people moved in, it seems that they were accepted, even though nobody could understand their language. At that time there was no competition for forest land, which in many cases still was regarded as being owned by the Crown (government).

Later, in the mid 1600s, the Crown encouraged wealthy people to invest

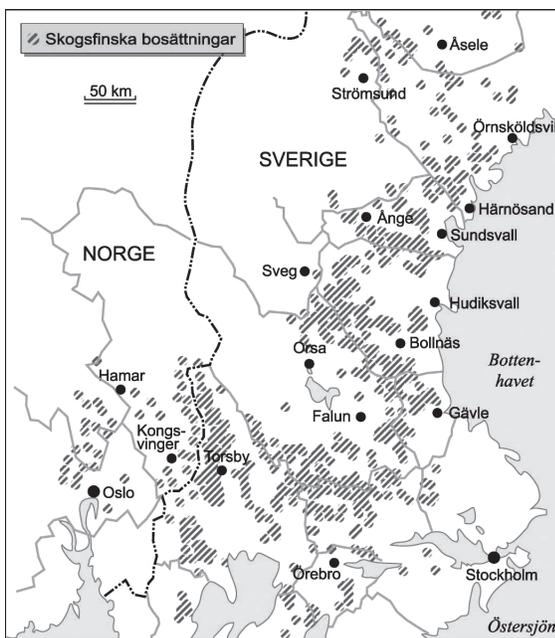
in the iron industry: in mines, blast furnaces and hammer works. This industry needed huge supplies of charcoal, which was made from the forests. The Finns were not so popular anymore, as they just burned the forests, and did not make charcoal. This gave rise to many court cases, in which the rich iron works owners tried to take away the rights of the small Finn farmers to keep their cottage and their land, for which they paid taxes to the crown. If they lost the case, they were turned into iron works laborers and charcoal burners, dependant on the iron works for their support.

Some of them also tried to start iron making and built blast furnaces to produce pig iron, but that usually meant that they needed a lot of capital. This could be borrowed from town merchants, which was a risky business. If they could not pay back as they should, their enterprises ended up by being owned by the merchant.

Life in the forests

The Finns often built their homesteads near a lake where they could fish, as fish was an important part of their diet.

They had a special kind of house, a log cabin with a big stone fireplace in the opposite corner from the door, and no chimney, just a hole in the ceiling, with a wooden slat which could be opened or shut. This meant



Where the Forest Finns settled in Sweden.
Map source: Maud Wedin.

that there was smoke in the house above a certain level, perhaps as tall as a standing man. This kept the house warm in the winter. The type of house is called a “rökstuga” (smoke house). They had a shed for the cows and goats. A *sauna* was most important and they also often had a house for drying grain (*ria*).

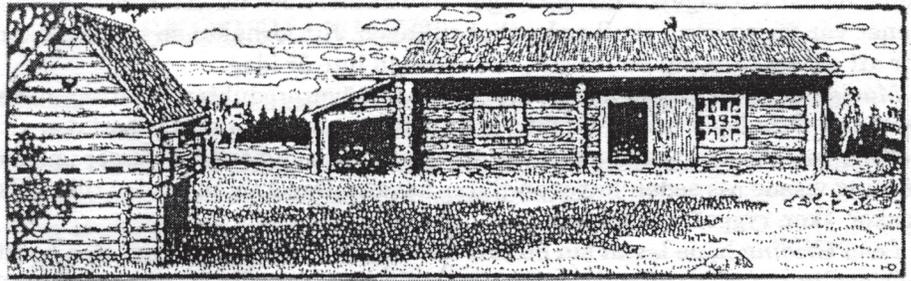
There are many stories about the Finns being good hunters, and not too observant if a certain kind of game was forbidden, like moose, which was considered to belong to the king. They also hunted bear, and there is a tale of a man nailing his bear skulls to a tree near his home, and when he died they counted 40 skulls there. They also fished in the many lakes and made a fairly good living, as long as they were left in peace by officials and wealthy people, who saw them as unused labor force.

The Finns were also supposed to be very good at sorcery and other black arts. They knew how to get milk from the neighbor’s cow, they knew how to stop blood from a wound, they knew how to get people to fall in love by reciting charms. It was always best to be friendly with the Finns, or they could harm you from a distance.

How do I know if my ancestor was a Finn?

It is not always very easy to know if an ancestor belonged to one of these Finn families. They usually came in the 1500s or early 1600s before church records were kept. The Swedish clergymen had difficulty in understanding their names, and quickly gave them Swedish patronymics, even though they usually came from areas where they used proper surnames. Sometimes the Finnish surnames have survived, or they are noted in the tax records (*mantalslängder*).

Typical Finnish surnames can be *Suhoinen*, *Likainen*, *Honkainen*, *Havuinen*, *Sikainen*, and *Ronkainen*. Many modern researchers are working with these types of surnames and trying to identify the members of these families.



A typical Finn homestead.

First names might give better indications of Finnish ethnicity. If you find ancestors with names like *Henrik*, *Sigfrid*, *Christoffer*, and *Thomas*, then there is a possibility of Finnish descent, especially if it is way back in time and in one of the “Finnish” areas.

Forest Finns in New Sweden

As the Forest Finns were used to life in the forest, it is not surprising that many of the settlers of New Sweden in Delaware were Finns. Some of them had probably found out that their traditional way of life might be threatened in Sweden around 1638, and that it was better to move to new lands. One of these families was the *Mullica* family. They can be studied in, for instance, *The 1693 Census of the Swedes on the Delaware*, by Peter S. Craig (1993).

Reading tips

Unfortunately there does not seem to be much written in English on the Forest Finns in Sweden:

Forest Finns in Scandinavia, by Maud Wedin (a booklet, out of print, but it will be reprinted).

“Swidden Finns in Sweden. Migration and assimilation studies,” by Lennart Stenman, in Koter, M (ed): *Inner divisions, region and regionalism* (1994. Łódź, pages 55-65).

On the internet there is a little information at

www.finnsam.org/English.htm and also on Wikipedia.

In Torsby in northern Värmland there is the *Torsby Finn Cultural Center*, with interesting exhibitions and a research room for the genealogists. Their web site is <http://www.finnkulturcentrum.com/english/index.html>



The deserted Finn village of Igelhöjden in the parish of Gåsborn in eastern Värmland.