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The emigration from the Tornio Valley (Tornedalen)

People left Sweden from all parts of the country, even the far north

BY STURE TORIKKA

The emigration to North America from Norrbotten, in northern-most Sweden, started in earnest during the latter half of the 1870s. In the Tornio River Valley (*Tornedalen / Tornionlaakso*) the emigration perhaps did not start in earnest until the 1880s. This article focuses on the first emigrants from the Tornio Valley, who left their homes in the summers of 1865 and 1866.

At times it happened that men from the Tornio Valley found employment as sailors, and it is easy to imagine that some of them arrived at various ports in America and mustered out and stayed behind when their ship set sail again.

From the village of Niemis (present day name: Luppio) in Hieta-niemi parish we find the share-cropper's son *Emanuel Mansten* who went to sea first in 1853. He came home for short periods and found time to get married and father children. He left again but came home regularly. In 1860 he is recorded as "sailor, sailing in foreign waters." In the court records from Nedertorneå District Court in 1883 concerning some unrelated matters, he tells that "he had made several journeys to America." Emanuel Mansten, later known as a photographer in Haparanda under the name of *Andersson*, emigrated in 1875 without his certificate of moving out (*utflyttnings-betyg*), and this was his first actual emigration. His other travels to and from America were when he was a sailor. He came home a year later, but did not stay. Instead he made another journey to and from America.

Stranded sailors

It happened sometimes: some people traveled to and fro and found it difficult to settle in one place. As early as 1858 the sailor *Peter Tumber* arrived in the port of New York, where he mustered out and stayed when his ship continued. His real name is said to have been *Tornberg* and he was born in Nedertorneå. In contrast to Mansten, he stayed in the U.S. Perhaps he was the first person from the Tornio Valley to settle in the U.S.?

Peter Tumber found work on American ships and travelled along the Mississippi river and around the Gulf of Mexico. During the Civil War he served in the Union navy and took part in several sea battles. In 1867 he moved to the harbor city of Erie, Pennsylvania, and spent the rest of his life as a farm owner.

During the Crimean War (1854-1856) a number of Finnish sailors were stranded in some of the larger American ports, and some of them stayed on in the U.S. There are sources that claim that about a hundred Finnish sailors served in the Union navy during the Civil War.

Many reasons for emigration

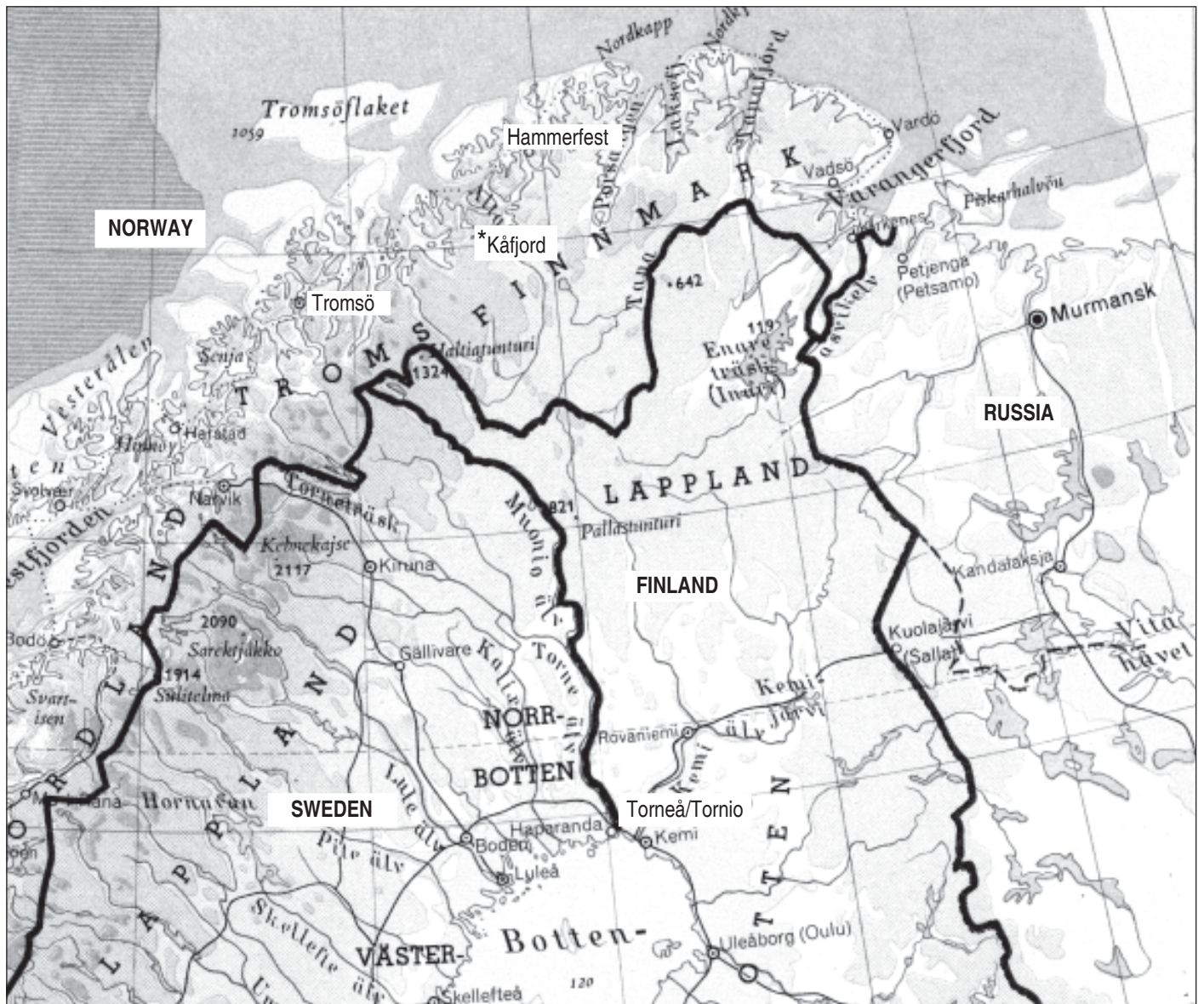
As in Norrbotten, the major wave of emigration to the U.S. did not start in Finland until some decades later. Reasons and backgrounds for migration are numerous, and that is why the phenomenon of migration has existed among our ancestors at all times. The Finnish-speaking people

of Norrbotten have for centuries walked or skied to northern Norway in times of poverty. They had open harbors without ice there, which made life easier than at home. When the copper works started at Kåfjord in Northern Norway in the 1820s this gave work opportunities for a growing population in the river valleys and along the coast. This is true not only for the Tornio Valley but also for large parts of northern Sweden and northern Finland. People even did move there from as far away as Dalarna. One of the first men from Tornio Valley was the fisherman *Mickel Harnesk* and his family from Övertorneå who arrived in Kåfjord as early as 1827.

Miners as emigrants

The copper works in Kåfjord suffered decline in both production and economy from the end of the 1860s. In 1866 the English investors wanted to close down the whole operation. The economic situation for the Kåfjord Copper Works was problematic.

There had not been any emigration from Finnmarken before then, but in 1864 there were 20 emigrants to America from Alta. Most of them travelled by way of Tromsø, where two ships from Bergen were boarded by 200-300 emigrants. Among those who left because of the bad times at Kåfjord were a large number of *kvänner* (Finnish-speaking people). As the Civil War was going on in the U.S. at that time, it was a good time for the American copper works. At the same time many men were joining the



Union army, and there was a lack of skilled miners. The agents that had been sent to northern Norway by the Quincy Mining Company of Michigan promised the *kväner* in the Norwegian mines prepaid tickets. This was a big help and an enticement for the Tornio Valley and the Finnish people there, as they had never before received such a good offer. One might guess that the Tornio Valley people did not hesitate long before they started on their second emigration, this time for North America. During the next two decades between 700 and 1,000 “Finns” arrived in the U.S.

Three early emigrants

Thus the first wave of the Tornio Valley people left from northern Norway during the spring and summer of 1864. Who exactly these emigrants were has not been stated.

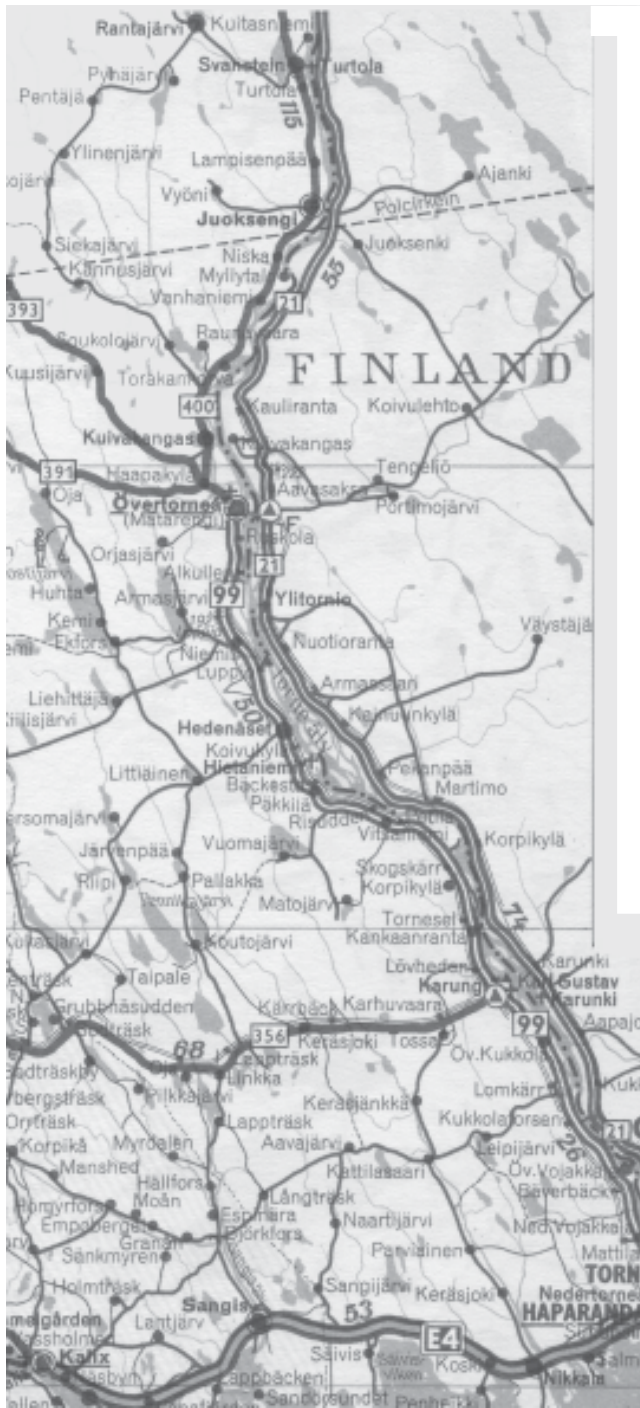
The emigrants were born on both shores of the Tornio river with individuals from the Swedish parishes of Nedertorneå, Karl Gustaf, Hieta-niemi, and Övertorneå, as well as from Karunki and Alkkula (Ylitornio) on the Finnish side of the river.

On the first emigrant vessels in 1864 were found, among others, *Anders Rovainen*, who was born in Övertorneå, *Petter Lahti*, born in Nedertorneå, and *Mickel Heikka* from Finnish Övertorneå.

Lahti was a farmer’s son who

emigrated to Norway in 1853 and in 1864 to North America. He settled in Franklin, Minnesota. Rovainen was a farmer’s son from Haapakylä, who came to Norway in 1858 and went on to the U.S. later. He is said to have started a new settlement in Franklin, Minnesota, already in 1865. In that area a little colony of Finns was established. Anders was the father of Johan Abraham Rovainen, born in 1865, whose tombstone states that he was the first Finnish baby born in Minnesota. Finally, Mickel Heikka





The Tornio Valley.

also emigrated in 1864 from Vadsö in Norway and settled in Franklin, Minnesota.

Petter Lahti was an unusually interesting man in at least two ways. First, it is known that he emigrated with his family in April 1864 on a Norwegian sailing ship from Hammerfest to Montreal in Canada. Anders Rovainen is said to have been on the same voyage, which lasted for seven weeks. From Montreal the

group of travellers went on to Quebec and from there to Chicago and finally reached St. Peter in Minnesota after many weeks on the road. Lahti also functioned as a link for the later Finnish-speaking immigrants to the U.S. He was also recruited as a soldier for the Union army, an event which happened during the fall of 1864. He was a soldier for about ten months until the peace was concluded the following year.

According to other sources, it says that Anders Rovainen did not arrive until 1865.

Three phases of emigration

To sum up: we first have sailors from the Tornio Valley who jumped ship or stayed behind and settled in the U.S. Then we have the miners from the Tornio Valley who left from northern Norway. In the third wave we have the emigrants who arrived directly from their homes in the Valley.

In most cases the emigrants during the 1860s and 1870s travelled by way of northern Norway. In Norway they boarded a ship at Vadsö or Hammerfest and travelled to Trondheim or Bergen. From there they either went on a direct ship to Quebec in Canada, or in some cases, New York, but most often they went to Hull in England, and then on the railroad to Liverpool, where they boarded ocean liners. They probably had to wait a few days in England.

According to information from *Isak Rova*, who was probably the first

direct emigrant from the Tornio Valley, arriving in New York in September 1865, the total travelling time from the moment they left their home until landing in New York was one month and two days. Rova and his family travelled on a steamship. It is more difficult to say how long a voyage by sailing ship took, as it depended on the weather. A typical time for the crossing was between twelve and eighteen days, if you went on the older type of ship that combined sail and steam. Those ships were more susceptible to bad weather than the next generation of pure steamships, which normally took eight days for the crossing. But in the total travelling time one must also count the time used for land travel. So Rova's 32 days can function as a median time for the Tornio Valley emigrants during the latter half of the 1860s, at least for the ones travelling by steamships.

The pioneers from the Tornio Valley

Rumors about the possibilities in "the promised land" of America reached people back home amazingly quickly. The first man from the Valley who asked for a moving certificate [*flyttningsbetyg*] to go to America did so in the beginning of April 1865. Something had happened in Lapträsk village of Karl Gustaf parish – "America Fever" had hit.

Stories spread very quickly and already in April 1865 four families from Lapträsk with a total of 24 individuals went to the parish minister in Karunki and explained that they wanted to leave their country and move to the other side of the Atlantic. They needed a written permit that listed their family members and their conduct. These four families all had Swedish names and had their origins mostly in the parish of Nederkalix. Their mother tongue was evidently Swedish.

The first family was the former farmer *Erik Magnus Jakobsson* and his wife *Florentina Sandberg* and their four children. They asked for a moving certificate for "Norrge. Amer-

ika,” and then went to northern Norway. But further than that they never went; there was no voyage on the Atlantic. Instead they returned to Lappträsk from Norway during late fall of 1865. This was the first planned direct emigration from the Tornio Valley. What happened to them in northern Norway that made them change their plans is not known. When they returned they also brought a fifth child, Johan Fredrik, born in Hammerfest in September 1865.

Next were three other Lappträsk families: farmer *Lars Olof Bergström* and his wife *Lisa Greta* and their four children; farmer *Henrik Wilhelm Lithner* and his wife *Greta Lena* and their three children; and farmer *Johan Bäckström* and his wife *Johanna* and their five children.

From the same village came the lodger *Anders August Sundkvist* who wanted to leave during the month of June. He changed his mind and returned his permit in early July. It has been said that a moving certificate was valid only for one month from the date of issue, otherwise it was cancelled. Sundkvist returned his permit well within the month.

Johan Välimaa

Now the Finnish-speaking neighbors were waking up. Naturally it was another man from Lappträsk who had been caught by the talk about *Amerika* in the village. Farmer *Johan Välimaa* and his wife *Eva* and their three children at Kauppila farm in Lappträsk asked for their moving certificate for *Norra Amerika* in July 1865. Johan Välimaa was born in Hietaniemi and had come to Lappträsk through his marriage. This seems to be the first Finnish-speaking family from Swedish Tornio Valley who aimed to go to America, but it is not certain that they were the first to cross the Atlantic. According to a local tradition in their new home in Minnesota, they had travelled on a clipper ship (and these needed several weeks for the voyage).

In Deer Creek Township, Otter Tail County, Minnesota, where the



Finnish log cabin from 1865, Cokato, Minnesota. Photo by Joan Dwyer.

Välimaa finally settled, it is still told that *John Walimaa* had a commission to find good places for future immigrants from the Tornio Valley to settle. Part of his mission was to regularly report back home on the possibilities to earning good wages in the U.S. During the first five years he travelled from the East Coast to Minnesota and had had time to live in both Pennsylvania and Michigan. After about eight years in Minnesota he and his family travelled by train to Pendleton in Eastern Oregon. They travelled twice there and lived for a while in Astoria on the coast of Oregon. Later they returned to the area of New York Mills in Minnesota, where John Walimaa purchased a larger farm of 120 acres. The place was named Heinola.

In the early 1900 John's wife Eva died and John decided to return home to die and be buried in the soil of his ancestors. His five children stayed in the U.S. In the late summer of 1907 he came back to his ancestral village of Koivukylä (*Hedenäset*), but had already caught pneumonia. He died only a few weeks later, in early October, and was buried in the cemetery of his home parish Hietaniemi, in the same soil as his fathers.

During the 42 years John Walimaa

lived in the U.S. he continued to send reports back to Tornio Valley from the various places he visited. Within a year after his immigration other immigrants from the Valley started to arrive. Just a few days after Välimaa's decision to emigrate, his neighbor *Johan Henrik Perttu* and his wife *Elisabet* also started to think about emigration but changed their minds and stayed home.

The Rova story

Other parts of Karl Gustaf parish also started to move. In Korpikylä, just by the river shore, the farmer *Isak Rova*, born in Haapakylä in Övertorneå, and his wife *Greta Toljus (Torikka)* and their four children asked for their moving certificate in the middle of July 1865. This is the second totally Finnish-speaking family from the Swedish side of the Tornio Valley who emigrated directly to the U.S., but may well have been the first ones to land on American soil. In a letter sent home three months later Isak tells that they had arrived in New York just "1 month and 2 days" after leaving their home in Korpikylä. The Rova family arrived at Castle Garden, New York, on the 7th of September 1865.

Isak also tells that the family had

been forced to stay in New York for three weeks as their travelling money, which they had in gold coins, had been stolen. Later in September they all went to Chicago, where they stayed, even though their first intention had been to go to fertile Minnesota, where the Federal government distributed farmland for free.

This immigrant family ended up in the big city of Chicago with more than 200,000 inhabitants. Like John Walimaa, Isak Rova also wrote back about the possibilities of a good income that were offered. After only seven weeks in the U.S., Isak knew almost everything about his new fantastic homeland. He tells about the fertile soil, lots of game in the forests, and fabulous earning opportunities. This is one of the exaggeratedly positive rumors concerning America that went the rounds in the home parishes of the emigrants.

However, Isak Rova did not get to reap the benefits of these fine earning opportunities, as he died of consumption after only about four years in Chicago.

More immigrants

In Lappträsk village the interest in America grew and farmer *Johan Henrik Ekman*, his wife, and five children got their moving certificates only a few days after the Rovas. But they also changed their minds and stayed in their home village.

As said above, Karl Gustaf has more than their share of emigrants in 1865, but from nearby Hietaniemi we find the settler [*nybyggare*] *Johan Sundbäck*, his wife, and eight children from Saarijärvi who left their home. The Sundbäcks arrived in New York on the bark *McRathbone* on 4th November 1865, and later became farmers at Manistee in Michigan.

The settler *Karl Petter Nilsson* and his family from Kiilisjärvi received their moving certificates just two days later. Another settler from Kiilisjärvi was *Elias Eliasson* and his family who left another ten days later. He is probably identical to "Olof Olofsson," who arrived on the *Mc-*

Rathbone in early November 1865.

All of them were Swedish-speaking emigrants.

From northern Norway the emigration kept growing among the miners from the Swedish Tornio Valley and Finland.

In 1866 the parishes that did nothing in 1865 started to move. In Övertorneå the dug-out dweller *Isak Parpa*, wife, and one son from Haapakylä decided to start on this long journey, and got their moving certificates in June 1866. Parpa, who was Americanized to *Barberg*, became a farmer in Cokato, Minnesota. They were followed by the dug-out dweller *Isak Brännström* and his family from Kuivakangas. They are supposed to have lived for some time in Cokato, but arrived back in Övertorneå already in July 1867. Their only child, son Karl, died in America only two months after arrival, which might have been a contributing cause for their return. Isak Brännström later became a Laestadian preacher and drowned in 1873.

And more

Hietaniemi had three emigrating families in 1866: farmer *Johan Paloniemi* and his family from Vitsaniemi; former farmer *Per Välimaa* and his wife *Maria Magdalena*, and one child from Vuomajärvi; and former farmer *Johan Mäki*, his wife, and children from Koivukylä.

Johan Paloniemi was called *John Palm* in America, and settled in Dasel, Minnesota.

Per Välimaa was called *Peter Peterson* and lived with his family in Holmes City, Minnesota. His wife was a sister of John Walimaa's.

From Karl Gustaf parish came the former farmer *Johan Jakob Haara* and his family from Keräsjoki, and they seem to have settled in Holmes City, Minnesota. From the same parish came the farmer's daughter *Eva Pipping* from Korpikylä, who seems to have travelled alone. She later married a man named *Viinikka* from Kukkola. They married in Cokato, Minnesota.

Nedertorneå also sent their first

emigrants in 1866: former farmer *Nils Alrik Koski (Holk)* and his wife *Maria Gustafva* (they settled in Bandon Township, Franklin, Minnesota, where he died 1906); farmer *Anders Sepponen* with his wife *Eva Lisa* and two children, who settled in Cokato; farmer *Per Selvelä* and his son *Johan Oskar*; farmer *Nils Selvälä* from Karsikkojärvi travelled alone. He built himself a cabin in the woods of Cokato in 1867, after having lived for some time in Red Wing, Minnesota. The servant girl *Brita Johanna Törn-gren* travelled alone (after arriving in Minnesota, she married Nils Selvälä); the farmer *Erik Lappiniemi* with his wife *Helena* and six daughters.

From the city of Haparanda the only immigrant was the young man *Karl Gustaf Strömberg*.

In northern Norway the emigration went on as before, as well as from the Finnish side of the Tornio Valley. From there, for example, left *Anders Kauvosaari* from Finnish Övertorneå. He is supposed to have travelled in 1866 and afterwards lived in Holmes City, where he called himself *Anderson*. Also *Gustaf Frisk (Sukki)* left and later lived in Franklin, Minnesota.

A break in the immigration

Almost immediately after the start of the emigration there is a decrease in the number of emigrants. From Övertorneå no emigrants are officially recorded for the period 1867-1870, only emigrants with destinations like Norway and Finland.

Of the ones that went to Norway some will probably show up in the U.S. later on. There are no emigrants from Hietaniemi, Nedertorneå, or Haparanda, and just two from Karl Gustaf; it is a bit strange. In 1871 Övertorneå has one family recorded and two single individuals, but none from Hietaniemi. From Karl Gustaf four single people emigrated in 1871 as well as two families. Nedertorneå had eight emigrants and Haparanda just one. There is no change in the

emigration from northern Norway: emigration continued.

The stream of emigrants from the Tornio Valley is still not constant, for some years no emigrants were recorded. From Hietaniemi the emigration to North America continued in 1873 with six individuals, 1874-1875 no emigrants were recorded, 1876 just one, 1877 five, and in 1878 six. The picture is the same in the other Tornio Valley parishes. But in the 1880s the emigration increases and from now on grew every year, and that is true for all the Tornio Valley parishes. In the upper valley the emigration starts a few years later.

From then on the number of emigrants from Tornio Valley has grown every year, and does not decrease until the economic crisis during the later 1920s. But we find emigrants still during the 1930s, as well as a few during the 1940s, 80 years after their forbears' daring decision to emigrate and after their laborious and demanding travels both on land and at sea.

More information?

This is a compilation about the first pioneers from eastern Norrbotten who emigrated to North America. The information can never be complete, but if any of the SAG readers knows anything about those early immigrants I would appreciate hearing from you.

It is with great joy that I can see that Övertorneå *kommun* has accepted these findings on the earliest emigration from this area. What in 1866 was regarded as the start of a negative development concerning the population has 140 years later changed to a positive view; as a possibility to promote the area both commercially and as a tourist goal. In July 2006 the municipality has realized the unusual project of inviting two of the descendants of the first emigrants from the municipality, *Isak Parpa* and his wife *Eva Maria*. These descendants from Cokato, in fact living in the same buildings and on the same farm as

Isak Parpa had built in 1866, have through their own contacts with their local mayor received an official paper linking Cokato and Övertorneå as sister cities. The descendant *Harvey Barberg* solemnly handed the document to the *kommunalsråd* [councillor] of Övertorneå at the big stage during the Övertorneå summer market.

The circle has been closed.

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The first "savusauna" [smoke sauna] built in 1868 on the Parpa farm near Cokato, Minnesota. Now moved to Cokato Open Air Museum. Photo by Joan Dwyer.