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A short visit to the Forest Finn area in Värmland

BY ELISABETH THORSELL

Forest Finns?

Until 1809 Finland was a part of the Swedish realm, just like Småland or Östergötland. Swedish was the official language in Finland, even if a large part of the population in the eastern part spoke Finnish, a language which is very different from Swedish.

During the later 1500s there were many conflicts within Sweden over who should be King of Sweden. In Finland the Russians tried to conquer territory that traditionally belonged to Sweden. The people in that part of the country suffered greatly from the warfare, and wished to move to other more peaceful areas in the country.

Also, the Finns that lived near to the border to Russia had their own form of farming. It was called *svedjebruk* (or slash-and-burn). This means that they cut down a forest area in the spring, let it dry for a year, and then put fire to it, and then afterwards sowed a special kind of rye, which was harvested the next year. This means that they had to have a number of forest areas to use during the various steps to be able to harvest rye every year.

The Swedish crown invited Finns from eastern Finland to come to the huge forest areas in Sweden during the middle 1500s and during the 1600s, as then the forests were not used for anything. But by the middle 1600s the iron industry in Sweden started to grow rapidly, and the forests were now more restricted from the Finn way of farming. The forests were now vital for making charcoal for the iron blast furnaces and iron works, and many of the Finns were used to work those.

However, especially in Värmland province, many Finns were able to continue the traditional way of life until the early 1900s, and some still spoke Finnish until then.

There are many descendants of the Finns still around and they are very interested in their roots. There is a DNA project where they are gathering as much information as possible to verify the family lines.

Read more: SAG 2008/4, page 16, where I wrote about this before.

The *Finnskogscenter* (link on p. 26) has some booklets in English.

A bus trip into history

In late August 2017 I went on a bus tour from Karlstad to the Finn areas in northern Värmland organized by the Värmland Genealogical Society. The trip took us along the Fryken lakes to Sunne and then Torsby and finally Lekvattnet, some 130 kilometers in drizzling rain and thick forests along the road.

Our goal was the fairly recently relocated *Torsby Finnskogscenter* which used to be in Torsby proper. Now they have modern premises in a former school. The institution is part of *Värmlands Museum*. They have interesting displays of the Forest Finn life, they have a rich library on the subject, and a huge archive with material collected from several learned Finn Forest researchers. As we were a busload we were not allowed to do any research at that time.



The Nordic countries in 1595 after the Peace Treaty of Teusina.



This map shows the distribution of Finn settlements in Sweden and Norway. The lower arrow shows that many came by way of Stockholm, the upper one shows that many came to ports in Gävle and further north.



Next we visited the Finn farm of Karmenkynna, also in Lekvattnet.

The old Finns built their houses according to their custom with a huge fire-place in a corner of the room, and let the

smoke come out in the room, to keep the warmth. It stayed just below the ceiling. Old folks could sleep on top of the oven.

