



## **Libraries and Reading in a Finnish Canadian Utopia: Sointula 1900-1950**

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### **Abstract:**

*Remote Malcolm Island on the west coast of Canada was the site of a Finnish utopian community in the early 1900s. Despite extreme hardships, emigrant Katri Riksmann established a library soon after the first colonists landed in 1902, with the collection based on books donated by a Finnish Australian socialist organization. Although the official structure of the utopian organization dissolved in 1905, the cooperative, communal and distinctly Finnish nature of the Island survived for many decades, with the Library playing a crucial role within the community.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The theme slogan of our conference is “Libraries Now! – Inspiring, Surprising, Empowering,” but since this is a history session, I will be focusing on a library “then,” not “now”. It was a library in the early 1900s that had these three qualities of being inspiring, surprising, and empowering. First, the library was a source of pride that inspired a small group of Finnish settlers to carry on with their dream of creating a peaceful utopia, despite intense economic and physical hardship, exemplifying the Finnish concept of “sisu” – perseverance. Second, the library’s very existence was itself surprising as it was created in a remote corner of Canada on an isolated island off an island. And finally, the collection – the majority of which was in Finnish - empowered the early pioneers to maintain their Finnish language in Canada for many decades and to foster their close knit community – a utopia built on cooperation and sharing.

The story of Sointula is anchored in the belief that cooperation, sharing of resources, and the equal worth of every individual are key to the creation of a just society and the happiness of

individuals. Sointula was established in 1901 by a small group of approximately 20 settlers led by the charismatic Finnish visionary Matti Kurikka, whose theosophist beliefs and strong convictions about the rights of women much influenced the colony's history. His beliefs in the importance of education for both boys and girls, and the need to share all sources of knowledge (such as in books) throughout the community were manifest in one of the settlers' first actions – the establishment of a library. This socialist philosophy survives today on the island over a century after the original formal structure of the utopian colony was disbanded. The friendliness and genuine concern shown equally for one's neighbours and for strangers still characterizes the island – I certainly experienced it when I have visited in the island, my last visit being in March, 2012.

### **WHERE IS SOINTULA?**

The settlement of Sointula is located on Malcolm Island, a small island off the north coast of Vancouver Island on Canada's west coast. It is a remote retreat from the bustle of the city of Vancouver, two ferry rides plus a six hour car journey away. The word "Sointula" means "harmony" in Finnish, and it is indeed the pursuit of peace and harmony that has drawn residents to this settlement over the past 110 years. The Finnish pioneers of the early 1900s came first, but they were joined much later by the "back to the land" hippies of the 1960s who were also enthralled by the Island's raw beauty and quiet solitude.

Sointula is surrounded by beauty – the snow capped mountains, the vistas of the Pacific Ocean, the ancient forests – it is certainly a perfect location to establish a utopian-style community away from the political upheavals and economic hardships of the outside world. The Finns who first established Sointula in 1901 felt very much that they had come to paradise.

### **FINNISH IMMIGRATION 1880-1905**

Emigration was a topic on minds of many Finns during the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as Russia tightened its control over Finland which in the late 1800s was a Grand Duchy of Russia. Under Russian rule, Finland had experienced considerable independence, particularly in the areas of language and culture. The ancient myths of The Kalevala – the epic runes of the Finnish people first published in 1835 - were being read by the Finns who were celebrating their identity distinct from the Swedes and the Russians, both of whom had fought for centuries over the territory sandwiched between them. Reading books in Finnish became even more important after 1866, when Finnish became, along with Swedish and Russian, an official language of this Russian territory. The optimism of the Finnish people regarding the growing strength of their language was crushed, however, with the russification policies imposed in 1899 by Czar Nicholas II, the most hated of which was compulsory service in the Russian army for Finnish men. A strong passive resistance to Russian rule flourished, and through newspapers and pamphlets, ideas about socialist and democratic ideals leading to a better life through cooperation and communal sharing were disseminated throughout the country, in many cases through small underground presses. Many young men decided that life in North America was preferable to service in the Russian army, and that their dreams for a better life, free of repressive government regimes and great economic divides between the rich and the poor could be realized in Canada. (Kolehmainen 1941; Lindstrom 2000; Wilson 2006)

The first wave of Finnish immigrants came to Canada in the 1880s to labour on the cross-Canada railroad (Halminen 1936). The west coast of British Columbia was the destination of many of the second wave of immigrants who arrived in the 1890s, fleeing from the oppressive February Declaration of the Czar. With their very limited English or French language skills, the immigrants found work in the logging and mining industries where the Finnish penchant for hard work without complaint made them highly valued workers (Saikku 2007). Many of these men had first tried their luck in the U.S., but the economic depression of 1893 meant work was scarce for all, and often non-existent for those not speaking English.

The Finnish men who in the 1890s obtained work in the coal mines of north Vancouver Island in the small towns of Nanaimo, Ladysmith, and Extension found that life was only marginally better than what they had fled in Finland. Gas explosions in the mine were frequent, and with their low wages and frequent forced relocation from coal seam to coal seam by the mine owner James Dunsmuir, the miners had little chance to fulfill their dreams of purchasing farmland. Many turned to alcohol for consolation: in Matti Halminen's first-hand account of the period, he says that "gang fights and drunkenness were everyday fare during holidays as well as during the working week" (Halminen 1936, p. 241). This situation resulted in the formation of two Finnish temperance organizations near Nanaimo, and one of these organizations, Allotar ("Water Nymph" in Finnish), established a Finnish language library. The previously discouraged and inebriated men rediscovered their pride in Finnish culture and the importance of sustaining the Finnish language through reading (Wilson 2000, p. 17), important convictions that were evident in the strong support for a library when many of these Allotar members moved to Sointula several years later.

## **THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SOINTULA COLONY**

The miners of north Vancouver Island were desperate to escape the dreadful mining conditions of their employment and eager to live within a co-operative and communal community, but they lacked a spokesperson with English language skills who could provide both the visionary leadership and the passion to establish such a community in Canada. Most of the miners, and indeed most literate Finns had heard of charismatic Matti Kurikka who had been the "mercurial editor of the Helsinki working class newspaper Tyomies in the 1880s" (Wilson 2006, p. 19). When miner Matti Halminen heard that Kurikka's Australian utopian community endeavors had failed and that Kurikka was interested in establishing a utopian community in Canada, he rallied his fellow Finnish miners to raise the \$125 Australia to Canada ship passage money for Kurikka. Kurikka arrived in Nanaimo in the fall of 1900, bringing with him nearly 20 years of promoting socialism (Wild 1995, p. 35) and began immediately to form a company to be called the Kalevan Kansa (people of the Kaleva) Colonization Company. He also initiated negotiations with the British Columbia government to secure land on which to establish a utopian colony (Saikku 2007). When Kurikka and Halminen discovered that Malcolm Island might be available for settlement they decided that the island (site unseen) – removed from other settlements, blanketed with timber, designated as good agricultural land, and close to shipping lanes – would be the perfect location to realize their utopian socialist dream.

On November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1901, the Kalevan Kansa Company led by Kurikka signed a legal agreement with the British Columbia Chief Commissioner of Lands and Works W.C. Wells, acting on behalf of His Majesty King Edward VII of England, giving them possession of Malcolm Island: full ownership would be granted to the Company in seven years if a minimum of 350 settlers had

built homes on the island and improved the land by a minimum of \$2.50 per acre. Kurrikka wrote in the newspaper Aika:

“... We have an area the size of a small county in the midst of the richest possible nature, by the most advantageous sea routes and in the most beautiful place and good climate, and we are able to control it independently with our company rules.... Fishing, hunting, farming, cattle breeding, mining, all branches of industry and international trade, limitless rights to carry out socialist principles protected by the mighty English flag – all this belongs to the field of activities of our company. We can begin producing everything we need, so that finally we won't have to buy anything from the outside. We can also make the amount of human labour used in making a product become the only factor determining its price. The consequences of unemployment, sickness and death, which are now embittering our lives, will become a thing of the past. Strikes and recessions will become unknown amongst us. Simply said, it is now up to us to decide, if we want to break free from the capitalistic social order into safe, organized conditions, where national characteristics will flourish freely, although our children will be equal among others after they learn English. We are already aware of the fact, that in these conditions we will be able to freely develop our intellectual gifts and grow above animal vices. “  
(Kurikka, 1901b, p. 1)

Despite his outward confidence, obvious charm, good looks, and charisma, Kurikka realized that he would need assistance from a steady ally and confidante if the Sointula dream was to be realized. He called on an old friend and fellow intellectual from the labour movement in Finland, Austin Mäkelä, to join him. Mäkelä arrived in Sointula from Finland in January 1902, and immediately began to organize work on the island. He wrote enthusiastically in Aika:

“It will require a great deal of hard work to convert Malcolm Island to farm land ... In the beginning settlers must be earnest, zealous, and prepared to do without luxuries. But later, when we have our own shipping and mail service, a school, store, meeting halls, and homes for everyone complete with gardens and livestock, what else could we need? Capability, enthusiasm, and endurance is all!”

## **THE ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST SETTLERS AND THE FIRST LIBRARIAN**

After the island was signed over to the Kalevan Kansa Colonization Company, the first settlers wasted no time venturing to Malcolm Island, their new paradise – setting off on December 6, 1901 on a 290 kilometre sea voyage through rough waters in a small boat. After several near sinkings and the loss of a rudder, they reached the island nine days later, and began building cabins from the plentiful cedar on the island. More men arrived over the winter to swell the settlers numbers to 19 men and 1 woman by June 3, 1902, when the island's first librarian Katri (some sources name her as Kaisa) Riksmann arrived with her two small children to join her husband., who had left Finland in 1901, a year before Katri. Her journey from Finland was a long one: The Finnish Institute of Immigration records reveal that she left the port of Hanko on March 19, 1902 on the ship Polaris, travelling to Hull, England (Institute of Migration). The usual route for Finnish immigrants travelling to North America was then to travel across England by train to Liverpool to depart for the U.S. , a route she likely followed. Records show that Katri sailed on a Cunard ship to the U.S., and that her total fare (for herself and two children) was \$105. The name of the trans-Atlantic ship is unknown, but could be speculated to be the Aurania,

a Cunard ship chosen by many Scandinavian passengers. Katri and her husband Matti settled briefly in Oregon, but perhaps after hearing a stirring speech by Matti Kurikka – the reason why most settlers came - they decided to join the commune. On her night of arrival, this 22-year old showed the courage and determination she would need in subsequent years, both as a settler and as the island librarian. Her first impressions:

“We arrived late at night. It was pitch black, of course, and all the bay was covered with these big kelps - these great big snakes in the water with these great big heads on them... The boat tied up so some sort of a slip, and we had to walk along these logs to the shore where the shack was. In this log cabin there were five double bunks for all these families. Hay was piled on these bunks for mattress, and my husband and I and the two children got one of these bunks for our own.” (Riksman 1968)

The summer of 1902 was a very busy and productive one on the island: salmon and halibut were caught in abundance and salted away for the winter in every barrel that could be found. Deer and grouse were plentiful, as were salal berries that had a variety of culinary and medicinal uses (Woodcock 1958, p. 20). A storage shed and a communal kitchen and dining room were erected to replace the dining tent. In the words again of Katri Riksman:

“They were going to share everything. Everyone would be working for the common good. No one owned anything separately and individually. They planned to farm and log, and all the proceeds would be divided equally. I think the main idea was to have a free society. Especially, they emphasized that women should have equal rights with men. At that time, women had no property rights, they had no rights whatsoever in wages, so this was one thing that was applied here. The women had a dollar a day wages, as the men did, and they had a right to speak at meetings, and they had a right to vote. And they had to work. Everyone had to work. “ (Riksman 1968)

Culture and education were crucial components of this utopian community, so Katri Riksman soon established a “library” for the growing numbers of settlers arriving. The library’s first books were a donation from Australia in 1902, from an unnamed group of Finnish people who “had an organization for “Progressive Ideas” (Anderson 1958, p. 16). The organization was very likely the Erakko Society, the only Finnish society in Australia at that time (Koivukangas 1986, 302). This Society had been started by Finns who emigrated to the Nambour area of Queensland with Matti Kurikka in 1899, and who aspired to establish a “utopian society where work, food production, learning, and entertainment would be experienced in common.” (Wilson 1974, p. 54). However, the Queensland government appears to have reneged on promises to fund Kurikka’s new colony, and the Finnish settlers dispersed throughout Queensland, taking the jobs which were plentiful at the time, albeit poorly paid (Wilson 1971, p. 54). The Society eventually disbanded in 1904, resulting in a sale of the Society’s assets. The resulting funds – just three Australian pounds – were sent to support the Sointula colony (Koivukangas 1986, 306).

Katri’s collection of Finnish language books from Australia was likely supplemented by books brought to the island by men who had belonged to the aforementioned Finnish Temperance society library near Nanaimo. She created an improvised library in one corner of the newly constructed dining room, but lack of space meant that most of the books were loaned not from shelves but from their shipping cartons. The library operated only for a few hours on Sundays, but its operation was seen as key to the advancement of the colony (Wild 1995, p. 59). In

keeping with the community ideology, no formal church services were held, but discussions and debates regarding spiritual matters were often held amidst the library books. On the weekends, the hardworking Finns also enjoyed a weekly sauna (the sauna building being one of the first buildings erected) to soothe muscles aching from cleaning the land, logging, and hauling fish. The settlers held plays and dances on Saturday nights, sometimes outdoors, but often inside the crowded dining room/library.

## **THE AIKA NEWSPAPER AND LITERACY**

The Sointula colonists' enthusiasm for the written word is also evident in the publication of their newspaper *Aika* ("Time"), Canada's first Finnish newspaper, which in the early 1900s had the largest circulation of any Finnish-language newspaper outside Finland. Having a colony newspaper was one of the conditions that Matti Kurikka insisted upon if he was to remain as the leader of the group: as editor, he took full advantage of this "platform" to publicize the utopian life he envisioned for Sointula (Wilson 1974, p. 56). The bi-weekly newspaper, whose motto was "Freedom with Responsibility," began publication on May 17, 1901, and was mailed throughout the world. It contained articles on socialism, politics, theosophy, temperance activities, plus news from Finland. It served as the primary medium for distribution of news amongst the colonists, whose literacy rate was exceptionally high for the time and whose interest in political news from the outside world was intense. Matti Kurikka's regular columns in *Aika* on women's rights and the evils of organized religion as well as Austin Mäkelä's political commentary were the catalyst for many spirited debates in the dining room/library. Except for some interruptions in publication, the newspaper was published regularly until December 1904.

Although the Sointula immigrants sought to escape the strictures of organized religion (there was no church building on the Island until 1961), the early settlers had been much influenced by the church, and had benefitted from some church policies regarding values and literacy. Ninety percent of the settlers had belonged to the Lutheran State Church in Finland whose teachings promoted the principles of sacrifice, thriftiness, and industriousness, qualities the early settlers would need in abundance in this remote corner of Canada. The Church was also primarily responsible for the hundred percent literacy rate amongst both men and women in the early settler group: no one could be confirmed as a Church member unless one could read the Lutheran catechism, and without a confirmation certificate, one was denied the exit visa required for immigration. So anyone with a thought that they or their children might want to leave the country, made certain that reading was part of their lives (Lindstrom 2000, p. 5; Rihtamo and Pakkalen 2012)

## **DISASTER STRIKES**

By November of 1902, over 200 Finnish settlers were living in tents on the island. With the winter rains approaching, a large communal three-story dormitory building was quickly constructed. It consisted of 28 sleeping rooms plus a meeting room and tailor shop on the top floor (Wild 1995, p. 62). Disaster struck on January 29th 1903, however, when fire struck, burning this structure to the ground with the loss of eleven lives and many of the food stores. None of the library books were reported as lost, as the makeshift library had been established in the dining hall, not the large residence. The librarian Katri Riksmann barely managed to escape after she heard someone sound the alarm and was confronted by smoke in the dormitory hallway:

“I jumped out of bed to see what I could save, then realized that I could only take the children. I took one under each arm and started for the lower level. ...many [women] jumped out of windows rather than pass the kerosene barrel stored by the front door, but I just kept going.” (Wild 1995, p. 68)

The fire left over 100 of the colonists homeless and many of them injured and badly burned. The Kalevan Kansa Company was deeply in debt and food was now in very short supply. These conditions were made worse by disagreements between some of the settlers, and a growing apprehension with Matti Kurikka's leadership, in particular regarding his financial ventures and his beliefs in sexual freedom, for all women. As Kurikka was unmarried, his intentions regarding some of the married women in the colony were considered suspect, particularly by the married men. Discouraged by the harsh living conditions and constant shortage of Company funds, some settlers left the island in early 1903, but other Finns who had heard about this utopian community through the internationally distributed Aika newspaper continued to arrive and swell the island population. These newcomers and those who stayed somehow retained the incredible optimism that a utopia could still be realized. According to Mäkelä's end of year 1903 annual report for the Kalevan Kansa Company:

... “Since the disastrous fire a score of dwellings have risen on the new town site. A new pier has been built so that we no longer have to go to Alert Bay for mail and freight. Into the old saw mill we have installed a lath machine, a planer and a lathe. New barns and warehouses have been built as well as a new foundry and a blacksmith shop.

In November, we established the printing press into its new quarters so that our publication, Aika, has again begun to appear in magazine form this time, after an absence of a year and a half. By the end of the year (1903), 1,500 copies were printed fortnightly. By the end of the year, a new meeting house has been built and also the foundation for a new saw mill has been laid. ....

Cultural pursuits have also been followed as far as our economic conditions have permitted. On Sunday evenings, discussions have been held, plays have been presented and a band and a choir have been inaugurated. Our library is still small, and we sorely need a larger reading room. Classes in the English language, mechanics, and other subjects are also under way. “ (Mäkelä, 1904)

Austin Mäkelä K.K.C.Co., Sec'y, Feb. 15, 1904

This was amazing progress for a settlement of only 237 souls (100 men, 50 women, 88 children), and demonstrated the abundance of “sisu” within those early settlers. As explained by Loretta Rihtamo and Catherine Pakkalen, whose ancestors first settled Sointula, the Finnish term “sisu” is a difficult concept to translate (Rihtamo, 2012; Pakkalen 2012). The term is loosely translated as the quality of long term determination, ferocity and tenacity in the face of overwhelming adversity, the ability to carry on with bravery after many others would have quit. In tracing the history of the Sointula library, “sisu” was certainly a factor in its remaining a vital source of inspiration and empowerment during the past 110 years.

## THE “OFFICIAL” UTOPIA DISSOLVES

Despite the enthusiasm of the colonists, financial troubles continued to plague the community. Kurikka was a very intelligent and charismatic leader, but these qualities were overshadowed by the fact that he was “obstinate and headstrong, impatient and restless ... inept and clumsy as an organizer and administrator” (Kolehmainen 1941, p. 121). His views on marriage also proved divisive: he urged all Sointula men to seek only the “rights of love,” not the “chains of marriage” (Kurikka 1904). In his column in *Aika* he wrote:

“Marriage and morality are two different things just as law and justice are two different things. Marriage and love are two different things just as the church and truth are two different things. Similarly just as capitalism appears as a protector the social organization, and the church as the protector of truth, so also marriage appears as the protector of morality” (Kurikka 1902).

After the Colony lost thousands of dollars in a bridge construction contract brokered by Kurikka, the colonists grew weary of Kurikka’s continuing incompetence and blind idealism. Kurikka resigned as president of the Kalevan Kansa Society on October 10, 1904, and left the Colony, resulting in the exodus of approximately half the settlers in the next six months. Without Kurikka’s vision to inspire the struggling settlers, and without Kurikka regularly attracting new settlers with his fiery speeches and his persuasive columns in *Aika*, the colony faltered, and the Kalevan Kansa Company was dissolved in May, 1905. The assets were sold to pay the Company’s debts, and land sold for \$1 per acre to those who wished to remain on the island (Wilson 2006, p. 37).

Approximately 100 settlers chose to remain as “independents”, but even without a structured utopia provided by the Kalevan Kansa Company, the blueprint established in those four years continued to guide Sointula during the subsequent decades: “a standard for the community had been set, a pattern for a communitarian ideal centred on Finnish language, culture and identity, on temperance, on socialist philosophy, on co-operative living, and on suspicion of authority” (Wilson 2006, p. 37). The colonists continued to emphasize education, the benefits of reading, and the importance of having books available to all through a co-operatively managed library. This educational fervor had first simmered in their Finnish homeland when in 1867 the Finnish government removed education from the authority of the Lutheran church, and appeared to encourage growth of Finnish language schools. These gains were lost in the 1880s, however, when government officials brought in measures to repress all post-primary schooling in the Finnish language (instead of Russian or Swedish). The Finns were determined, however, to keep children reading Finnish language books for both pleasure and education, and managed with “a great deal of volunteer work and self-sacrifice” to keep the schools open. “The growth of interest in learning amongst the peasantry was striking.” (Puntila 1975, p. 46) According to Kevin Wilson (2006), “This growth of educational fervor in the face of official obstruction helps explain two factors that were to make themselves felt in Sointula: a stress on the importance of education, especially in the Finnish language, ... and a distrust of authority.”

This conviction that education was important and that one could not entrust the responsibility for informal education through reading to outside government bodies spurred the Malcolm Islanders to keep the public library a vital part of the community, even after the Kalevan Kansa Company dissolved. Small libraries with a preponderance of Finnish language books existed in most of the



Finnish communities in Canada, but Sointula's library appeared to be especially vital – perhaps because the nearest large library was several days' journey away in Nanaimo. In the early 1900s, Sointula had the largest Finnish language library in Canada (Wilson 2006, p. 12).

Katri Riksmann remained on the island and continued to be the volunteer librarian for many years. Soon after the fire, the settlers erected a new Finnish Organization Hall in which to hold meetings and debates, stage plays, and enjoy musical concerts, and the library was moved from the dining hall into the back of this Hall where it remained for 25 years. The library received a strong boost when the islanders formed the Co-op Store in December 1909: it was a general store that sold whatever supplies the islanders needed – fresh fruit and vegetables, meat, canned goods, fabric. Dave Siider (grandson of an original settler) remembers that the Store was the “heart and the community” and that “it did everything” (Wilson 2006, p. 39). The Sointula Co-op became the “economic and emotional focal point” of the community, even supplying large amounts of hay to help out the farmers during poor growing seasons (Wilson 2006, p. 41). Between 1901 and 1905, the local groups and organizations (both economic and cultural) had relied on the Kalevan Kassa to provide the funds and management needed for local services, including library services. Now the Co-op Store filled that need for library funding, and continued to do so for 81 years until the islanders joined the Vancouver Island Regional Library system in 1990.

Every year, the library committee, along with the other volunteer groups that essentially managed all community services in a socialist communal manner, would petition the Co-op for funds, to be supplied from any store profits realized in the past year. The Library was a “source of pride” in the community (Sointula Co-op 1909, 1978), and always received a portion of the monetary surpluses accrued. But the percentage allotted varied considerably year to year, depending on other pressing community needs and the island's overall prosperity that year. According to Loretta Rihtamo, daughter of longtime Co-op store manager Hannes Myntti: “The Co-op Store always thought the Library was very important. Sometimes it received 1% of the profits, other years it received as much as 10%, but every year there was some money to buy new books.” (Rihtamo, 2012).

## **THE LIBRARY MOVES LOCATIONS AND CHANGES ITS NAME**

By frequently adding to and renovating the all-purpose Finnish Organization Hall, the building fulfilled the “gathering place” needs of the community for two decades for a library, meeting room, live theatre and music venue, and a gymnasium. But by 1930, the Hall was frequently overbooked, particularly for physical activities during times when the weather was inclement (although the temperature rarely falls below freezing at any time of the year in Sointula, the annual rainfall averages 180 cm). The local industries of farming, fishing, and logging all required fit workers, but the islanders aimed even higher regarding physical fitness so attended exercise classes throughout the week. The Young Pioneers group of young people campaigned for a separate athletic building, a request that the Co-op agreed to finance as long as the Library could occupy space in the new building. A new Athletic Hall opened in 1931, with a gymnasium on the first floor and the Library occupying expanded new space on the second floor. The library remained there for approximately twenty years, until it moved to a building beside the Co-op Store. The Library was moved again in the early 1950s to a small building very near the ferry terminal, and moved to its present location in the vacated school building in 1990 after the Library joined the Vancouver Island Regional Library system (Pakkalen, 2012; Rihtamo 2012).

Katri Riksmann had relinquished her position as volunteer librarian by 1914, when the Library Committee Minute Book (1914) reveals that J. Laitinen had assumed the position (the population of the island was 250 people in 1914). The Minute book indicates that the Library was running smoothly, with just routine matters discussed such as delinquent customers, titles recommended for purchase, and the amount of money to be requested from the Co-op for library support the following year. However, in 1915, a motion to change the name of the Library caused much controversy at the February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1915 Library Committee meeting (1915). Since the Library's 1902 creation in a communal dining room with books in shipping cartons, the Library had been known by its original name - the Kalevan Kansa Library, reflecting the name of the long disbanded company that had formed and guided the utopian colony. The motion to change the Library's name to "Sointula Socialist Organization Library" was hotly debated by the Committee and caused concern to library users, many of whom wanted to retain the original name, but the motion eventually passed. The new name was duly recorded by Amanda Tanner, then secretary of the Committee. The inclusion of the word "socialist" within the Library's new name clearly shows that the intense convictions of the Sointula citizens regarding the sharing of resources and the rights of all to access the profits and benefits of society remained strong, and that they wanted their Library to reflect that philosophy.

One of the hotly debated issues revealed in the Library Minute book of 1918 was that of opening hours (1918). The Library had only been open on Sundays right from its inception in 1902, because everyone was working hard on all the other days (Rihtamo 2012), and this single opening day remained the schedule until the 1980s. But in 1918, a request was made of the Committee that the volunteer librarian not close the Library over the Sunday lunch hour from 12 to 1 to allow greater access to the collection. After a lengthy debate, the request was denied, and the volunteer continued to enjoy a leisurely midday meal.

## **THE LIBRARY COLLECTION**

The Library collection has evolved over the past 110 years from being almost all Finnish language books with just a few books in English, mainly for the purpose of learning the English language, to a collection that is now totally in English and integrated within the system-wide catalogue of the 38-branch Vancouver Island Regional system that serves all of the Island except for the capital city region of Victoria. The presence of a few English books during those early years is not surprising, as Matti Kurikka believed that learning English was very important for the colony's economic future, so he himself taught English language classes on the weekends in 1902-1904. One of the requirements the provincial government of British Columbia stipulated in the agreement to give the settlers Malcolm Island was that the children be educated in English, so over the decades, interest in reading English grew, albeit slowly. The continuing vitality of Finnish into mid 1950s as the conversational language of the community was due to several factors – the passion of the community members to retain their cultural heritage and the isolation of the community. Few of the young people left the Island to seek employment because the fishing and logging industries provided steady work, and few outsiders settled on or travelled to the Island until World War Two, so English was seldom heard on a regular basis (Wild 1995, p. 165) Electrical power was not installed until 1951, replacing the coal oil and gas lamps used by most settlers and the noisy generator used by the Co-op Store (Wild 1995, p. 166; Rihtamo 2012). Telephone service came to the Island in January, 1965, and it was celebrated as the first bilingual exchange in British Columbia: the two operators who managed the switchboard had to

be fluent in both Finnish and English to handle the calls (Wild 1995, p. 167). Shoppers often used to hear “the old-timers” speaking Finnish in the Co-op Store, but during the past two decades, many of the original settlers’ second and third generation descendants - most of whom could speak and read Finnish - have passed away (Pakkalen 2012; Rihtamo 2012). With

The Library held mostly Finnish language books in the early years, but the library records of the 1920s show that the volunteer librarians supplemented the collection with English language books by taking full advantage of the Travelling Library service of the provincial British Columbia government (Sointula Library Committee Minute Book, 1921). The Provincial Legislative Librarian, Mr. R.E. Gosnell, had initiated this service in 1898 to serve the many isolated communities throughout the province. Boxes with “fixed” collections of 100 books were shipped to communities for a three month period, with the possibility of a three-month extension upon request. Applicants paid \$6 for each locked case of books, along with a key, and strict printed instructions that “Books must be handled with care, and leaves must not be turned down.” By 1920, the service had been modified from fixed collections to collections of books more tailored to the needs and specific requests of the community. (Holmes 1959, p. 11) The date of Sointula Library’s first use of this service is unknown, but the 1921 Minute book indicates that the service was already regular, and notes the arrival of a book box containing books by Jack London, Mark Twain, George Bernard Shaw, Robert Louis Stevenson, Anatole France, and Booth Tarkington, all popular writers of the period.

## **BOOKS BY MAIL**

The residents of Sointula also took full advantage of another British Columbia provincial library service, the Open Shelf Library, to satisfy their avid reading interests. This “books by mail” service began in 1919, and operated continually until 1995, except for a two-year period during the Depression. With the Open Shelf Library, readers in remote areas selected books from lists sent from the headquarters of the Library Service Commission in Victoria, and also made special requests for titles not on the lists. The Commission staff then mailed the requested books to readers’ postboxes, with the books travelling by post both ways at a reduced rate (Holmes 1959, p. 20) Books were drawn mainly from the Commission’s own collection, but requests not easily filled were routinely sent to the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Center headquartered in Seattle (Holmes 1959, p. 21). The readers in remote Sointula, reading by oil lamp with neither electrical power nor telephone service, nevertheless had access to the major library collections of Vancouver and Seattle. Long-time Sointula resident Loretta Rihtamo remembers using this service as a child in the 1930s and 1940s, and that her own family members were some of the most regular and appreciative customers (Rihtamo 2012).

## **EVIDENCE OF THE OLD COLLECTION & POLICIES**

Several handwritten catalogue lists of the Library’s books survive in the Sointula Museum, one list from 1915/16 and one from the 1930s. In both lists, books are recorded by author and title, with a classification number from a homegrown system beside each title. These numbers are the same as those on the spines of the old Finnish language books donated by the Library to the Museum and now shelved there. The lists reveal a collection that held a wide variety of books in both Finnish and English, with a strong emphasis on political matters, particularly Marxist/socialist beliefs. Titles in English such as War of the Classes, The Proletarian Revolution, Dictatorship and Democracy, The Bolsheviks and World Peace, and The New

Economic Policy of Soviet Russia were in this small collection, as were fiction books such as *Ivanhoe*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Treasure Island*, *David Copperfield*, *Big Timber*, and *The Whiteoaks of Jalna*.

Since the 1990s, the Finnish language books have gradually been weeded from the regular library collection because of low circulation, with the older pre-1930s books being shelved in the Museum next door to the Library. The collection includes some translations of English literature from English to Finnish, including several books of Walt Whitman's poetry and essays, but the majority of the Museum's Finnish language collection of about 200 items appears to be non-fiction, perhaps revealing the islanders' preference in the early years for reading facts in Finnish and novels in English. The Museum bookshelves hold numerous books about world and European history, technical how-to books, medical advice, learning to speak and write English, World War I battles, astronomy, and cooking. Most have copyright dates in the 1920s. The oldest Finnish language book found on the shelves was an agricultural how-to manual, published in Finland in 1892, possibly one of the titles in Katri Riksmán's original 1902 book carton library.

A special Library Notebook has survived in the Sointula Museum collection. In this handwritten notebook (mostly in Finnish), the various Sointula volunteer librarians recorded from 1936 to 1970 the names of delinquent borrowers and their library fines. Discovering the information in the book with the help of Sointula museum volunteer and translator Loretta Rihtamo was particularly special as her late father's name Hannes Myntti appears very frequently in the early days and her own name appears in the 1950s and 1960s. As she translated the Notebook, Loretta exclaimed "He not only supported the Library by serving on the Library Committee for years, he supported the Library financially with his fines!" (Rihtamo 2012). Library fines were calculated on a per week basis because the library was only open on Sundays, and fines remained low to encourage library use. The first fine recorded in January 1936 was five cents for a book one week late, a rate that remained the same for 34 years. Only in 1970 was the fine rate raised 100% - to ten cents per week (Library Notebook 1936-1970).

The 1936 to 1970 Fines notebook also includes a small section in which the volunteer librarians recorded donations of books to the Library. This section reveals that the community members were generous with their donations of Finnish language books, and perhaps most notably, that one of the most generous donors in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s was the first librarian herself, Katri Riksmán. Riksmán remained a "Sointula activist" (Wilson 2000, p. 107), ardent reader and library supporter, and prolific writer in Finnish all of her life: her work was published in newspapers in Finland, and she was a frequent contributor to the Canadian Finnish socialist newspaper *Vapaus*, published in Ontario (Wallace 1993). Under her pen name "Grandmother", she was a columnist for *Vapaus* for many decades, reporting on the Sointula Co-op's twice yearly meetings, which often included lively debates (Wilson 2000, p.107; Pakkalen 2012). She was 89 when her last article was published, and she remained a Sointula resident from 1902, when she arrived as a young woman, until just before her death in 1969. She was honored by the Canadian Jubilee Committee on International Women's Day March 8, 1970 as "a pioneer in the struggles of women in Canada for their full potential and economic and social rights; and in recognition of her untiring and selfless efforts for the security of her family." (Pakkalen, 2012).

## CONCLUSION

The Sointula Library remained a volunteer-run organization from its establishment in 1902, through its support by the Co-op Store annual allotments from 1909 to its becoming part of the 38-library Vancouver Island Regional Library system in 1990. The Library remained a vital part of the community throughout those 110 years, relying solely on the convictions of the islanders that reading was important and that through sharing resources and labour, the Library could be sustained. “Co-operation and independence were the twin poles of life in Sointula,” according to Kevin Wilson (p. 75), and these “poles” are evident in the history of the Library. Also evident in the history of this inspiring, surprising, and empowering Library is the presence of “sisu” – the determination during the past century of the islanders to provide on Malcolm Island a Finnish-based cultural foundation for its citizens, coupled with intellectual richness and educational opportunities for both the adults (women and men equally) and the children. In the words of the enigmatic yet compelling founder of the Island colony, Matti Kurikka:

“There – where virgin nature, unaltered by human hand, exudes its own, mysterious life – we shall find the sweet feeling that terrifies a corrupt human being, but makes a virtuous one sing with poetic joy. There, amidst nature, we shall find ourselves and feel the craving for love, justice, and harmony.” (Kurikka 1903)

Throughout its 110 year history, the Library undoubtedly contributed to the love, justice, and harmony sought by Kurikka and the colonists on their island of harmony – Sointula.

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