

President's Report

Saku Pinta

Greetings to all Thunder Bay Finnish Canadian Historical Society (TBFCHS) members. Welcome to the annual general meeting on this most momentous occasion as we commemorate 50 years of serving as the leading voice of Finnish history in Thunder Bay and northwestern Ontario.

It has been an honour to serve as President of the Society over the past two and a half years, navigating many unique challenges, accomplishing some notable achievements, and disheartened by many losses, but nonetheless enthusiastically hopeful moving forward. In this report I would like to provide an overview of the Society's activity during this time.

I accepted the position of President in order to serve out the remainder of Past-President Jorma Halonen's term, who felt the need to step down in October 2021. The Society had, like nearly everyone else, continued to meet regularly but remotely through the use of the Zoom online meeting platform, which also facilitated my distant participation from nearly 800 kilometres away from my home in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

It is no exaggeration to say that this period proved to be extremely challenging for TBFCHS and humanity in general, given the far-reaching and worldwide impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. I had expected a relatively short term as President, however, my term gradually expanded as we decided to postpone a face-to-face annual general meeting due to lingering and completely understandable fears of COVID-19 infection. Some personal and health struggles among members of our Executive – including the unfortunate long illness and passing of Marc Metsäranta in September 2023 – contributed to Society executive and general membership meetings coming to a halt. Another tragedy was the fire that destroyed the Finnish Labour Temple in December 2021, producing a collective trauma that spread well beyond the confines of the Finnish community.

Make no mistake, the TBFCHS is at a critical juncture and transitional period, and the recent downturn in activity should serve as a clarion call for renewal and revitalization. Before I get to that, I would like to outline some of the important achievements of the Society over the last two and a half years.

The most important of these achievements is undoubtedly the recovery of the time capsule from the ruins of the Finnish Labour Temple, an historical artifact of immeasurable worth and cultural-historical significance. Marc Metsäranta was instrumental in this effort. Not only had Marc conducted the original research that kept the living memory of the existence of the time capsule alive in the first place, but he also reached out to me directly and gently reminded me to stay vigilant on the capsule recovery efforts. To these ends I contacted Brad McKinnon (current owner of the 314 Bay Street lot), alerting him about the time capsule. Jorma Halonen maintained an effective “boots on the ground” presence on Bay Street, and together we speculated where the time capsule might be located since the precise location was never revealed in any of the archival records.

Finally, on March 2, 2022 we received word that the time capsule had been found in the front, western, Little Finn Hall-facing corner of the building – the side that had once housed the offices of the Työkansa newspaper. We were informed that the time capsule would be given to

the TBFCHS, but only after it had been unsealed at a private event held in late April 2022 at the Finnish Bookstore/Kitchen Nook. We committed to holding an event where the public would have an opportunity to view the contents of the time capsule, which we are fulfilling at this annual general meeting. In the meantime, Jorma and I jointly translated the speech by Moses Hahl that had lay dormant inside the copper vessel for nearly 113 years.

Two collaborative efforts round out the dizzying highs and crushing lows of the past two and a half years.

First is a collaboration with the Finlandia Co-operative of Thunder Bay, and specifically, the redesign of their Hoito pancake mix packaging (full disclosure: I am a founding and current board member of the Finlandia Co-op). The packaging now features pictures of the Finnish Labour Temple and Hoito from the TBFCHS Collection as well as a blurb on the back written in collaboration with the Society that reads:

All food tells a story. This is ours. In 1918 – a year of great turmoil – fifty-nine union lumber workers pooled their money together to start a restaurant in Thunder Bay. They called it the Hoito, a word that means 'care' in the Finnish language. The famous dinner plate-sized pancakes served at the Hoito for over a century have their origins in the hearty food prepared in the lumber camps of Northern Ontario, as do the co-operative values that we maintain today.

The packaging also includes the website address of the TBFCHS. Hopefully this collaboration will continue with the Finlandia Co-op and Hoito, a part of the living history of Finnish-Canadians in Thunder Bay.

The second collaboration was with the Sleeping Giant Brewing Company, which was eager to produce a seasonal Finnish-themed beer called Sisu. The beer is described as follows:

A nod to our local Finnish community and everyone's favourite breakfast joint, the Hoito. Sisu is a working-class Brown Ale with hints of chocolate, caramel, and toastiness finished with maple and coffee as a reminder of breakfasts' past. Sisu: A Finnish concept described as stoic determination, tenacity of purpose, grit, bravery, and resilience.

Sleeping Giant Brewing Company donated a part of the proceeds of Sisu to the TBFCHS which, beyond the donation, helped to give us some publicity.

In closing, I would like to return to a discussion of the future of the TBFCHS. As mentioned earlier, it is evident that we as an organization are at a crossroads. Along with a downturn in activity recently, as our Treasurer's report shows we are faced with an almost completely depleted treasury, owing to the need to rent a storage locker for materials that needed to be removed from the Finnish Labour Temple after it was sold. Most importantly, we have a great need to recruit more new members! It is my feeling that the Society is too valuable of a community institution to lose. The loss of the Society would be the end of a critically important, democratically member-run structure through which we tell our own history, our own stories, for us, by us. Its loss would be the loss of our collective voice.

Since it was founded in 1974, the Society has served as a uniquely community-led, grassroots organization and medium for independent scholarship with an impressive set of accomplishments. We have told our, shaped our own history often in fruitful collaboration with – but never in deference to – academics (myself included!), through research and publishing activities; the collection and preservation of historical materials; and educational events, among other things.

There may be growing pains associated with a rebuilding phase, but I for one am committed to this task in whatever capacity the membership deems appropriate for me. There is always an ebb and flow to the level of activity in an organization. At an absolute minimum, there is undeniable value in maintaining the name, continuity, and legal status of the TBFCHS so that there is a structure in place, for example, for applying for grant funding or other opportunities when these become available. This, as opposed to starting from scratch or “reinventing the wheel” at some later stage. Re-tooling is always easier than re-establishing, and maintaining the Society is a gift that we can give to the near-future.

But I am confident that we can do better than that. New technologies, like the aforementioned Zoom online platform, have made the world a much smaller place. This provides us with an ability to hold virtual events – presenting results of current or past research – with a potentially global reach, or of equal interest, host presentations by our colleagues and allies around the world who are conducting research on topics related to the history of the Finnish North American diaspora. On this note, one of our big needs at present is a complete overhaul of our website and the maintenance, creation, and expansion of our social media presence. Of course none of this diminishes the need or desirability of holding in-person community events, but virtual events offer a very good opportunity for both reaching and drawing from a much larger pool of people with minimal logistical hassle.

Searching for and applying to funding opportunities as these become available is another necessity. The 2018-2019 “Increasing Access to Finnish Language Archives” project demonstrated to me how much good work can be achieved with relatively little funding. More ambitiously, we should continue our publishing efforts when feasible. There is no shortage of topics. For example, with the definitive end of the Finnish Labour Temple, could our “From the Ashes of the Old” event serve as a catalyst for a book on the later history of the building and its associations, like a Project Bay Street 3?

I leave you with these thoughts as we collectively decide our future.

Terveisin,
Saku Pinta