

FINNISH SAUNAS

The one and only claim to fame that the Finnish people that removed themselves to these shores have is the steambath. The word "sauna" is part of our English language, so we descendants of those early Finns hold on to that little bit with iron grip to satisfy our vanity.

The sauna was, and still is, we presume, an institution in Finland. Every household from peasant on up had this little building, separate from any others, on the premises. In it they not only bathed themselves, but gave birth to their offspring - it was warm and water was available in plenty.

The building was small - 8 ft. by 12 ft. or so - split one-third dressing room, two-thirds steam room. The firebox was built from the floor up with an 8 - 12" layer of river-washed small stones on top. This fire box was fired from inside the steam room for some unaccountable reason, causing gases from the flame and smoke to escape into the room, smarting and burning the eyes of the first occupants in great style. One small window after a while allowed these gases to escape. Two barrels of water, which were filled by pail from the well, one cold, one hot, were used which was ladled into pails-the proper mixture for comfortable washing.

Along one wall was a three tiered seating board. The lowest was the coolest, the third, where your head nearly touched the ceiling, was the hottest. After three to four hours of burning wood in the fire box, the hardened river stones were heated to we know not what temperature - suffice to say, when a ladle of water was thrown on them sometimes they would crack, and that's hot.

So now enter the family, man and wife and all the offspring. They seat themselves according to how much heat each one can stand. A ladle of water is thrown on the stones - a sizzling sound is heard but no steam is seen - the water evaporates immediately, a few seconds pass - all of a sudden a blast of air hits the occupants that burns the nostrils and ears, pores open,

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adjustment is made by the body to the heat - another ladle of water thrown causes a higher degree blast that really opens the pores and the water starts rolling off the fried occupants. This goes on for five, ten, fifteen minutes.

Then the birch switches start beating the air. These are short birch branches 12 to 16 inches long, tied together. Each person has a bunch and mercilessly beats himself all over to make the blood circulate. After this the window is opened some and pails are filled for washing. Sometimes in between all this ordeal one will go in the dressing room or outside to cool off, but the heat draws one in like a magnet ultimately. In the winter time a person can roll in the snow or have a snowball fight without feeling the cold for maybe ten minutes. We can vouch for this as we have done it.

After going through this sizzling experience one feels all dragged out for an hour or so, but what exhilaration after that - one feels like a new person; as if one had been to hades and escaped! A sauna heated to this degree is good for four-five hours of use.

This is what my people brought over here. First, those that settled on farms built facsimiles of the old country sauna. Improvements were made - the fire box was built from the dressing room, or outside altogether. The ones that settled in towns prompted some enterprising gentlemen to build town saunas. These were buildings with four to twelve steam rooms with steam radiators in them - each steam room having two dressing rooms. A narrow aisle between the rows of steam rooms and dressing rooms allowed the proprietor to get to and clean up the rooms while customers were dressing and undressing.

The heat from water thrown on a radiator could not reach the intensity of water thrown on stones - actually, the room would fill up with steam and a tough one could not really get hot enough, but it was better than nothing.

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Steam boxes were installed also - a person could sit in it, steam himself, and take a shower (which was an added feature of a town sauna).

In the last twenty years electrically heated saunas have been installed in home cellars with running hot and cold water, but it seems to us the thrill is gone. The struggle with nature in the raw gave a boot to the farm sauna which is missing with these modern new-fangled inventions.

Maynard has had five town saunas. The first one was built by August Lehto on River Street in 1903. This is still in operation in 1968. The second one was on Florida Road built by a Mr. Pietikainen (November 18, 1904). This stopped operating sometime after the second World War and recently was torn down. The third and fourth were built between 1909 and 1912 (we are unsure of the dates). One of them, adjoining the Middlesex Laundry on Powder Mill Road, was bought by that laundry around 1960 and is presently used as a warehouse. Charles Kahilainen and Oscar Grondahl were two men among others, that owned this sauna at different times. The other is the River Bank Road Sauna, just at the bottom of the hill from our Municipal Building. Saku Komu was the original owner; it is not in operation. The fifth was the Elmwood Street Sauna built after the first World War by Vanni Vuori. This is still in operation, for how long we do not know.

We have extolled the virtues of a sauna to heaven, so if you, that have never had the pleasure and the unsurpassed joy of glorying in a farm sauna, and you decide you will, may we add a word of warning. Twenty years ago my brother-in-law and I were invited by a kindly old Finnish gentleman to his farm sauna. He had imbibed a few schnappes so with the steam that we took he got steamed inside and out in glorious order. For twenty years if either of us (my brother-in-law or me) mentioned that episode to each other we were in hysterics. If you can imagine a combination of Charlie Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy with a very serious and sober face and manner, trying to put on a

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union suit, the arms through the legs for five minutes, you have an idea what we see in our mind's eye. Today they say drinking and driving don't mix - we add, drinking and a sauna don't mix.

We are really sorry that we could not mention James B. Farrell in this paper but unhappily he is not Finnish - and I am finished!!

I am indebted to William Salo and John Helander for general information, and the Maynard News for dates.

Read at the January, 1968 meeting of the Maynard Historical Society-B. R. Koski