



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF A FINE LINE (Usually 6-lb. test)

By Lemp (a.k.a. Gerry Mantel)

I happened upon Pete Oikarinen's name in the late 70s at a time when I, like so many others, engaged in what might've been called a program of Roots Revitalization or rejuvenation, or admittedly in my own case, roots *revelation*, given that I'd just discovered myself (better late than never) as a half-breed Finlander, a semi-*Suomalainen*.

Wide-eyed (Voi Kauhea!) and striving to finally become an unabridged version of myself, I read up on Finnish-Americans with especial regard to their history, itself amidst an upswing of reawakening & renewal via the efforts of Karni, Kaups, Ollila et. al., with their cool takes on "forbidden fruit" fringe topics like socialist cells, Finn Halls and co-ops, all cozily contrasted by the lighthearted, hilarious adventures of regional author Jingo Viitala-Vachon. I checked the mirror for signs of high cheekbones and with concern proceeded into a crash language course at the Finnish Center near my residence in metro Motown while learnin' dat Finglish on da side, courtesy of Hap Puotinen. On Finland maps I located first Helsinki then mythical Karelia and finally Laivaniemi, the Lapland locale that precipitated my ancestors. Climbing the family tree into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan I found my grandmother, a Koppana from Pequaming, and her sisters clutching Suomi College diplomas. Their father's marriage certificate provided proof of an apparently straight-faced declaration of "Fishing" as his occupation ... a *wonderful* attitude that, genetically unmodified, later propelled my own angling "career" starting on the creeks near Uusi Suomi (New Finland), up the highway towards the Empire Mine from Gwinn, where my mother was raised, close to the Yooper capital of Marquette on the shores of fin-filled Lake Superior, and the magical haunts

of Robert Traver. Winter became “trout off-season” and for me that meant *nordic* skiing and the occasional pathetic stab at pasty making.

I was *into* it, no doubt. My “up north” vacations now had some *real* clout (beyond a guaranteed ride on the “Seney Stretch”) and it was during one of those treks I picked up a copy of Oikarinen’s then-recently released *Island Folk*, still to this day the best-ever tome about the “old timers” of Isle Royale. Turned out Pete wasn’t a party to the aforementioned group of revival scholars but he *was* from Calumet, the fabled mining center of the Keweenaw Copper Country that I’d already understood as the crown jewel of Finnish-Americana once upon a time and, utmost-importantly, the epicenter of my own American roots (as not only did mom’s side first settle there but also my paternal Slovenians, everybody coming during the 1880s). But most impressively Pete was a fisherman who, like the subjects of his marvelous book and quite contrary to my own daring, was willing to tackle the Big Game of Gitchee Gumee.

Naturally, I wanted to hook up with him but for some reason I’d assumed Pete to be a recluse of sorts, another miscalculation confirmed a few years later when I enrolled at nearby “Houghton Tech” (as my elders referred to it), Michigan Technological University, where I had come not simply to crack the occasional textbook but also to explore the possibilities of the past, seek out a few speckie holes in and around the Ottawa National Forest and, ultimately, escape the stagnation of the Motor City; it was upon my arrival at MTU that I’d quickly asked a relative (and Calumet native, to boot) about Pete, wondering where he was hiding. “He’s one of us, we see him all the time” was the puzzled response. Obviously Peter was a Man-about-Town, the thought of which delighted me and the reality of which would greatly simplify my task.

Not long after that I found myself small-talking with him in a Laurium tavern fondly dubbed locally as *Club Smitty’s*, tipping a few with Pete & others and later honored by getting sometimes invited for fishing, sauna, or more *hyvää olutaa*, ideally all in tandem (the ultimate Finn Experience, in my mind). I didn’t question him at any length, prodding only for answers to the more important stuff like “Howdaya tell a laker from a fat, Pete? Is it always ‘last pocket’ on the pool tables here? Do they have a ‘jukebox’ mafia?”

As by this time Pete was going gung-ho up on Oak Street with his own satellite-TV business, these encounters were sadly sporadic but richly rewarding (since he had that special Big Brudder way about him) and continued as such straight thru my graduation in 1986, soon after which I split for Alaska and the Pacific Northwest, attracted not only by the lure of job markets but by the prospects of yet-bigger fish.

Fast-forwarding to the late 90s found me backtracked to the Upper Midwest, now anchored in Wisconsin, having cast engineering aside but with my thoughts (and vehicle) again pointed north. I began my own Calumet historical project (eventually evolving into *Calumet: Copper Country Metropolis*, 2002) and immediately contemplated Oikarinen's whereabouts for his omnipresent, indispensable inspiration was indeed rearing its beautifully creative head. Besides, since Smitty's had closed I *really* needed to know where everyone was now chillin' out (no pun discarded) in the greater Calumet-Laurium metroplex.

Sure enough, I got Pete to bite on my invitation to meet him over at Randy's on the other side of town and caught him there, just returned on the Red Eye from Las Vegas. Yeah, Vegas. So he waltzes in from Sin City and seamlessly joins the roundtable discussion about how they're hittin' – not the slots out West, but the lake trout off Eagle Harbor. That's Pete.

Anyway it was then I learned that, during my prolonged absence, he had married a "trouting" poet (as lakers have always been equal-opportunity) not long after resurrecting his own writing talent, a resurgence proven to me when he produced, presto-like, a sharp-looking hardcover of his written tribute to friend and legendary hermit Armour Sarkela who had survived the unforgiving shores of the Keweenaw, fishing commercially for decades and therefore certainly due consideration as the prototype of the unique, hard-as-nails U.P. character that the damned Trolls, Toots, Flatlanders and scattered scallywags keep hearin' about but often can't comprehend. Pete's well-illustrated insight of the early 90s had come pretty much on the heels of Mr. Sarkela's death.

I in fact enjoyed *Armour: A Lake Superior Fisherman* so much that I soon talked Mr. O into a reprint, allowing me the chance to market it along with my own *Metropolis*, lending some real credibility to my sales efforts and making full-circle and secure that connection with Pete I'd earlier sought –

an aptly symbolic culmination of my 25 years with Finlandia Fever and thus, in those terms, the greatest show since the Fall of the Czar.

Leaving me happier than a fly-caster at a fish farm, that journey provided a religiously rich, respectful understanding of the Northerners' stubbornly long, often-excruciating but *intensely interesting* Finnish-to-American cultural transition (the real crux of this essay) into which my own bloodline managed to get alarmingly snagged, then somewhat untangled and sorted out with the aid of the illuminating perspectives of folks like Pete, his literary subjects, his wife Barb and others, some of whom don't even fish!

Many native Northlanders may wonder what business I had treading their turf but business I had aplenty. However, these days find my roots rightfully retracting to the underground and my ethnic frontier largely closing. After all, I *am* from Detroit, but an "end product" of this waning cultural shift – a kind of "retro-reverse" revelation that takes us back to the very beginning of this discussion and brings me back down to *maailma* (earth) to deal with a much more personal transition as I fish for an inkling of the existing world and, particularly, my niche within.

But this I know: Pete Oikarinen is a good friend and a fabulous writer, and "must reads" for anyone interested in Lake Superior lore (or activities on the Precambrian Shield, in general) would necessarily include his *Armour* and *Island Folk*, both of which nicely complement one another and the latter of which will soon return to bookshelves in a "new & improved," updated format from the University of Minnesota Press.

Cheers, I s'pose!

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