

Finn Forest Smoke Cabins

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Introduction

Who were the Forest Finns, and what built heritage have they left behind? How can we discover something about them?

The so-called "Forest Finns" came from Savolax, in the eastern part of Finland, to settle as slash-and-burn farmers in the vast forest areas of Sweden. They migrated to Sweden over a relatively short period of time – from the end of the 16th century to the middle of the 17th century. But they made a huge impact where they settled.

The Forest Finns' existence in the county of Värmland has been recorded by the authorities since the colonial era in the early 17th century. The civil, military, ecclesiastical and legal powers have followed them and recorded their lives through agreements, in church registers, court records, and the records of forest companies.

We therefore have a series of written archives about the Forest Finns. However, there is no witness from the Forest Finns themselves until the early 19th century. So all we know of them is seen through other people's lenses.

Thus, while the secular and ecclesiastical powers followed, mapped and recorded the presence of the Forest Finns, amongst the descendants themselves their history was almost entirely repressed. Sweden was a poor country, and Värmland a poor province, and the poorest of the poor were the Forest Finns. At least that was the general opinion. If one had Finnish origins, one kept quiet about it. The Finnish language - "Värmland Finnish" - also disappeared rapidly during the 19th century, though it survived on a very small scale until the middle the 20th century.

Research area

The existing official archives thus give glimpses of the lives of the Forest Finns throughout the time that they can be identified as a distinct ethnic group with their own language and traditions for a period of about 300 years.

But it is far from a complete picture. Most aspects of everyday life were not documented and women's lives were not noticed nearly as much as men's, partly because women appeared so rarely in court records.

Documentation of the built heritage of the Forest Finns is almost completely absent from the 16th and 17th centuries, and is very limited from the 18th century. From the 19th century more sources appear: some actual buildings, written documents and, towards the end of the century, photographs. The widespread perception that Forest Finn culture was both archaic and primitive easily leads to the belief that their smoke cabins have such archaic traits that they probably looked the same in the 19th century as they had during the 17th century and earlier.

Finnish researchers became interested in the Forest Finns during the 1920s and 1930s. Finland had then had newly acquired its national independence. The principal work on the Forest Finns' building traditions and housing conditions was carried out by Albert Hämäläinen. Hämäläinen, who was professor of Finno-Ugric folklore at the University of Helsinki, made a field trip to Värmland in 1931 to study the farmsteads of the Forest Finns. His work was completed in 1941, but was not published in Swedish until 1945. This is still the main study for learning about the built heritage of the Forest Finns: how their farmsteads were organized, constructed and types of housing plans.

According to popular belief, the Forest Finns moved from Savolax to escape distress, war and oppres-

sive bailiffs. To Albert Hämäläinen it was obvious that the Forest Finns who migrated were poor and underprivileged peasants. And for Hämäläinen it followed that once settled on Swedish territory they built simple, almost hastily erected structures. Hämäläinen could see in the 1930s, the poor conditions of those who still lived in smoke cabins. But his assumption is problematic. Many of the slash-and-burn farmers had in fact moved from a well-off life (the profitable cultivation of rye) in order to maintain their standard of living – Sweden had the wooded areas that had disappeared in Finland which were necessary for their slash-and-burn type of agriculture.

A story constructed with both facts and the tall tale Each era makes its selections and cannot escape representing certain perspectives. Sometimes choices are obvious, sometimes more hidden. Most descriptions of the Forest Finns emphasize that they moved to virgin lands, to a desolate landscape. However, this is probably one of the biggest mistakes one can make when trying to gain a mental picture of the landscape the Forest Finns migrated to in the 17th century. In the 21st century Värmland is indeed a thinly populated area, with no industry, barely any agriculture and a lack of infrastructure. The population has decreased since the 1880s through emigration and moving to other parts of Sweden. But in the 17th century Sweden was a military power on the rise. Its territory was expanding continuously, and its borders were important.

Värmland, where the Forest Finns were encouraged to settle, was an important border region with Norway – then united with Denmark, and the competing regional power. As part of the Swedish king's defense strategy, it was important that the population in this area increased.

To improve government revenue through greater opportunities to tax land, the King and Crown encouraged land reclamation. The Forest Finns who, through their knowledge of advanced slash-and-burn technique could convert forests to farmland, were encouraged to move to Sweden's forested areas. The cultivation of rye was especially encouraged – it was a sought-after commodity in continental Europe. The Crown demanded tax in kind, which meant rye, which was then sold by the Crown at a good profit on the continent.

Stories of the Forest Finns also contain elements of heroism, of an ennobling hard life. Comparisons with others are made to the Forest Finns advantage. The Forest Finns were physically remarkable, their harvests magnificent and they are able to keep more animals than ordinary farmers. To this is added magical attributes, the ability to have a deep interaction with nature (meaning much deeper than everyone else).

Log building tradition

The Forest Finns' buildings are dovetailed timber constructions, with the timber frame resting on foundation stones. The beams, and sometimes even the floor, may rest directly on the ground. A characteristic roof is covered with birch bark, kept in place with split poles.

The most distinctive characteristic of these traditional buildings is the use of a smoke oven. Hence the name "smoke cabin". In residential buildings the oven is constructed from natural stone and mortar. The oven has no chimney and the smoke is led into the room, collects under the ceiling and in time discharged through a channel placed on the side. The smoke heats the whole room. In the sauna and barn the oven vault is laid as a dry-stone construction, without mortar. The smoke leaves the room through openings in the walls or the door.

The Forest Finns' building stock does not represent excellence in terms of log construction. There are several explanations for this. They were not nomadic – on the contrary they aspired to become resident cultivators – but still they pursued a migratory existence that differed from established farmers. They did not follow each other generation after generation on a particular farm. Each new generation moved to a new place and established a new farm – at least for a period of time.

When the Forest Finns migrated to Sweden from eastern Finland, they came from a timber building tradition. In the landscape they moved to they met a quite similar timber building tradition. But what they had lost was the greater community; the settlers were at the mercy of themselves.

After a brief period of prosperity, perhaps as short as two generations, the initially good economic conditions for the Forest Finns were strangled. The King and Crown demanded that forest lands should be

exploited for more profitable uses: the mining and iron industries. The government put restrictions on all other uses. Opportunities for slash-and-burn agriculture were sharply curtailed. The Forest Finns had to struggle for access to forest lands, a fight that ended up to the disadvantage of the Forest Finns. They continued to work in the forest, but they did not own it.

The surviving Forest Finn buildings we can study today were erected over a 100 year period from the late 18th to the late 19th century. No buildings remain from the pioneer era of relative prosperity in the early 17th century. Most extant buildings are buildings constructed by people who lived on the margins. Only a few of the buildings that survive belonged to farmers with a good income, who had access to their own forests and the ability to hire good craftsmen.

In Värmland the farms are located high on ridges. On the top of hills there was plenty of space, with no competition between land for building and land for cultivation. Cultivated surfaces were spread between rocky areas. The farm buildings were strategically placed according to function and the risk of fire. At least four of the buildings contained one or two fireplaces: the dwelling house, the sauna, a drying barn and (sometimes) a separate cook-house. The residential building - the smoke cabin - had a central place, the farm's epicenter. For protection from fire buildings were placed at a certain distance from each other. There was one building for each function: dwelling house, cook-house, cowshed, stable, smithy, sauna, drying barn, storehouses. The buildings were placed in relation to which part of the farm's production they would serve, and how easy access was from the fields.

Why did the smoke cabins disappear?

A conservative estimate is that there must have been at least 400 Forest Finn farms in use at the same time over a reasonable period of time. This means there were potentially at least 400 smoke cabins in the landscape. Only around 30 remain today in Värmland. A total of 62 remain in the wider area including Norway and the provinces bordering Värmland. Why did the smoke cabins disappear? The main reason was social in nature. The farmers abandoned the smoke cabin tradition voluntarily, and constructed residential build-

ings with stove and chimney instead. This was already happening in the 18th century. During the 19th century the abandoning of the smoke cabin went on even faster. It had become socially unacceptable to live in a smoke cabin. On the other hand, smoke cabins were still being built at the end of the 19th century. Some smoke cabins were torn down or perhaps burnt down by forestry companies who bought peasant forests in the late 19th century. A few of the smoke cabins that came under the ownership of forestry companies were donated to Homestead Associations or open-air museums.

Threats to surviving smoke cabins

Inventories made in 1999 and 2011 show a clear and urgent need for the care and maintenance of the surviving buildings of the Forest Finns. A large number of the remaining structures are being abandoned due to the declining numbers of inhabitants and users. Homestead Associations who took care of a large part of the historically valuable buildings have a growing problem with a decreasing number of committed members, particularly those with the practical knowledge needed for the everyday care and maintenance of the buildings.

When people and animals no longer move across courtyards, vegetation is not worn away nor mechanically removed. Shrubs take root, and roots invade the buildings. It is inevitable that the ground shifts, under the influence of frost, rain and drought. Cornerstones drop, or move laterally so that the entire building is threatened with collapse.

A mull bench protects the house from drafts and small animals. The mull bench is often reinforced by a wall of stones. The stones may have fallen out of the wall, and must be replaced and wedged with stone chips.

In addition to the beams damaged by moisture from the ground, and the roof structures seriously battered by the harsh weather conditions, the collapsed ovens are the most difficult challenge when preserving the buildings to their authentic appearance. The huge and heavy oven can cover as much as 20% of the floor space. Besides being difficult to restore in themselves, when the ovens collapse, it causes damage to floors, walls and roofs.

Among the measures suggested to protect the structures of the Forest Finns and maintain the few survivals of their distinctive built heritage could be:

- lifting the timber frame and replacing the first log
- stabilizing cornerstones
- straightening the façade
- replacement of decayed and damaged timber
- replacement of damaged parts of the roof
- replacement of floors (moisture damage)
- stabilization of the great smoke oven