

Karjala Koponen on his dad

Jan. 5, 2014 Niilo Koponen Memorial gathering

I have to admit that, even now, it's strange to hear people, even long time friends, talking about Niilo Koponen as if he was some kind of famous person – a great man. He was my Dad.

My first memories are of sitting on top of Dad's dozer facing him with my legs between the clutches while he pulled a plow or pushed some dirt around. I remember a time when he pushed too far into a swampy area and got stuck. Not a happy man, not ballistic, but not happy. Memories include those of hikes with him, perhaps with siblings, to explore some old railroad grade or mining structure and the joy he had when he'd find something tangible and expound or speculate on the associated history. I remember "HELPING" him nail down the floor boards that were at a 45 degree angle to the joists for the 1st floor of the barn when I was, perhaps, 7. Dad remained calm while he explained and showed me how I was nailing in the wrong direction.

I remember some of the incredible social world of Chena Ridge and friends. Young people talking, singing, partying together but also taking care of each other.

When we moved to Massachusetts he would take me to Train Collector Association meets where he'd buy old toy trains. He built a big standard gauge layout in the long unheated attic of our house where we'd run trains. We'd also go to meeting in Boston, twenty miles away, where a group of trolley enthusiasts would have a monthly get together to talk about trolleys and show movies members would take on train excursions.

I remember going with Dad and others to fight a brush fire up the ridge and meeting, after we'd put out the fire, the BLM crew sent to fight the fire and Dad inviting them to tea at our place. This was primary start of a series of discussions and events that ultimately led to the founding of the Chena Goldstream Fire Department.

As an extremely shy child I was always amazed at his social boldness. Where I would think "is it OK to do this/go there?" he would just do whatever it was with all the confidence in the world. He had plenty of Chutzpah. Yeah, as kids we learned a bunch of Yiddish terms or phrases that Dad had picked up when he was a kid.

Dad didn't sit around much except for those necessary stops to read. He was always busy doing something or talking. My, he loved to talk. We'd listen to him talking with others about anything under the sun. Had dreams for a lot of things, started many. Perhaps a greater challenge getting them finished. He seemed to find people, usually pretty good people, to implement his plans. Not always, of course. We heard, more than once, of his frustration that when he was away when the roof of the barn was built. He'd purchased extra long rafters for the roof, paying a premium price for the extra length and was very disappointed when he returned to find that the person working on the roof had, for some reason, cut short each of the boards, resulting in a lower pitch roof. -Or when the floor joists for the kitchen were placed on top of instead of abutting the bearing beam. It makes it easy to reach the pot lids hanging on the joists above but a challenge for any tall person.

We have a photo of Dad sitting in front a small table typing a paper outside in the snow of late March or early April, not looking very happy. I remember asking him a question at that time and getting a pretty unfriendly response. He had, after all, gone outside to get away from everybody so he could finish his work. No, he wasn't the most patient person I've known! Maybe a bit of a short fuse but the explosion was small. We were not afraid of him.

We kids were not given a lot of specific direction on how to do things or how to live life. Neither parent was much on explaining life's rules explicitly. We got pretty good at observing our parents, and other people, so that we could figure out what was correct and what was not. We learned to be self reliant.

I do not remember Dad explaining the world to us except when we made a statement that was clearly in error. He certainly took the time to explain why people who are not a member of the union should pay agency fees even though the explanation was making him late for an appointment. But mostly, neither parent was explicit about the ways of life and the world.

As you know, Dad was involved with a lot of groups outside the home, some explicitly political or others more directly trying to improve the lot of people. As kids, we were not part of that world. Good for the community, the cost was his absence

Where did this impulse to improve the world arise? A good starting place is the fact that he was a Finn and proud of it. His pride when Finns were recognized for their outstanding achievements in education was great.

Finns had some history of formal cooperation but participation in identifiable co-operatives grew very quickly after the structures defined by people (encouraged by Robert Owen and Dr. William King) in Rochdale, England (near Manchester) British experiences with cooperatives were published in Finland in 1866, as well as, perhaps, likely encouraged by the need to respond to the famine of 1866-68 when an estimated 15% of the total population died, and proselytizers spread the word. By 1914 some 2/3 of the Finnish population participated in some way in the cooperative movement. Housing, purchasing (food), production, banking.

Dad's grandparents were part of the 350,000 Finns who, encouraged by a very unpopular Russification program in the early years of the twentieth century, immigrated to the United States through 1929 - about an eighth of the 1900 population. They brought their experiences with them

Dad grew up in an cooperative apartment building which now has 64 apartments built in 1927 that was among the later of many built in NYC starting in 1916, including at least 28 in the 25 block area around Sunset Park in Brooklyn.

A typical Finnish cooperative apartment building was financed with loans, shares purchased by the future apartment owners where each person, regardless of apartment size or value had one vote. The purchase price might have been partly raised by using 'comrade loans', private loans from other Finns.

A typical Finnish Cooperative apartment building would be built with better layouts, more light than conventional landlord profit maximizing apartments and construction costs and quality would be tightly controlled. In some cases the construction superintendent would be a Finn working for a wage, without the overhead of the typical construction firm. The contract with the association for the apartment would state that the apartment had to be sold back to the association for the original price, perhaps with interest. No extra profiteering. In 1925 a Finnish cooperative apartment rent in Brooklyn was \$32 when the typical rent in the area was 70 to 80 dollars.

With the market crash of 1929 and the onset of the Depression most of the families had only one child.

Dad's mother was the bookkeeper for the cooperative association for many years. Parents were also part of "Finn Hall" - that included a theater group, with mother and aunt active in plays and Grandpa handling lights, as well as community dances, speakers, and a cooperative travel agency in addition to other social functions.

With the depression continuing, grandpa was laid off from Bell Labs, at that time in NYC, when payroll was cut 35% by cutting work hours but also laying off everyone who did not have a college degree. We can see Dad's personal emphasis on education with his studies in engineering at Cooper Union, a tuition free school, degree in sociology and social administration at Wilberforce/Central State, degree in education from the U of A, a year studying anthropology at LSE, and then an Ed.D. from Harvard.

Dad's experience was that the latter part of the depression were the harder times when grandma worked cleaning rich people's apartments or houses and grandpa worked intermittently until boom times with the start of the Second World War, including work on the SS Normandie. (The S.S. Normandie, was interned in September 1939, taken over by the government December 1941, caught fire and capsized February 1942, then righted August 1943)

While Dad did have to repeat kindergarten because his knowledge of English was too weak, he did learn to read at an early age. His mother would read him the comics, including Flash Gordon, which led to a passion for science fiction through to the sixties.

One present Dad received and cherished was a Toy train. He and his friends would take their train sets to one another's places and put them together to make larger railroads.

Grandpa had purchased a lot in Putnam Lake, straight north from NYC where they'd go in the summer time. A sauna was built from the lumber used to ship granite used for tombstones.

Physically active, Dad roamed all over New York and to the palisades. Of course there was no elevator in their five story apartment building.

While Finns are generally Lutherans, Dad's religious explorations started at 11 or 12 with a friend's desire to win a watch in a Presbyterian Church competition by bringing the most new people into the Sunday school. His friend won the watch and Dad and his friends attended Sunday school for about six months. After that he and his friends started attending each of the local churches and asking lots of questions. He was confirmed in the Lutheran church. But he kept reading the bible and taking it seriously. He questioned that the pastor was appointed by god and thus had absolute authority and he came to believe that "Thou shalt not kill" meant what it said. He saw the desire of most of the allied powers, especially Britain and the Soviet Union, to maintain or extend their empires in political terms, as imperialist desires by the rich and powerful. He became an anti war pacifist and at eighteen registered as a conscientious objector. It was during the process of his application being rejected and appealed multiple times that he met more anti war people, including Quakers.

He and friends formed a discussion group at school which invited people, including leading socialists of the day, to speak. They got the standard response from the school administration and had to move across the street. This group ultimately became a 'circle' of the Young Peoples' Socialist League. Only after becoming politically active did he learn that his parents had been active socialists in their youths.

Dad's time at the American Friends Service Committee work camp helping resettle refugees from Karelia (Karjala in Finnish) certainly strengthened his attachment to being a Quaker as well as making the idea of living in the north attractive.

The romance of the "last Frontier" was real for Dad. The attraction of 'free' land was powerful. He and Mom had a challenging time, living in an alien land, learning skills that neither had, and learning to live with each other, both strong characters.

Dad was not a natural mechanic or carpenter and not a perfectionist but learned enough to succeed at homesteading.

Beyond the homestead he succeeded in helping build community on Chena Ridge, in Fairbanks, and across the State of Alaska.