

## A Quaker Remembrance

by Charlotte Basham

for the Memorial for Niilo Koponen Jan. 5, 2014

As a child I played a game with my friends that went something like this:

*Quaker meeting has begun.  
No more laughing, no more fun.  
If you show your teeth or tongue,  
you must pay a forfeit.*

At that point we would freeze, and the first person to smile, laugh, giggle or snort would become "it."

I knew very little of Quakers (except this game and the name on the oatmeal box) until I came to Alaska as an adult. When I first met Quakers here, I realized how wrong the idea was that Quakers didn't have any fun. Now I'd like to ask each of you to close your eyes and open the ears of your memory and think of a time when you heard Niilo laugh.

As I remember it, his laughter came from deep within, a rich resonance of joy billowing up and out into the world.

You have heard others speak today of the many contributions Niilo made to Fairbanks, Alaska, and the world. What I'd like to focus on is how his Quaker faith informed all of these actions.

On your program is a reproduction of a woodcut Niilo made ---two hands around a flame. The words that we associate with this image are a quote from the Bible, also cited by George Fox, the founder of Quakerism: "The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it."

These words are at the core of Quaker faith: the belief that all of us have a spark of the Divine within us, and that the Light shines on no matter how bad the external situation becomes. This belief underlies all of our actions in the world. For example, Quakers have long advocated for prison reform (and this was one of Niilo's many projects).

Niilo's Quakerism was not a matter of words, although he loved words and used them well, often voluminously. For him Quakerism was not a religion but a way of life. He lived the principles that we call Quaker testimonies. There is not a set list of these testimonies, but the mnemonic SPICE is often used: Simplicity, Peace, Integrity, Community, and Equality. These do not constitute a creed but are available as guidelines for our actions.

The most well-known is the Peace Testimony. Niilo certainly exemplified this one. According to an interview he did with young people in our meeting, he had decided when he graduated from high school in 1945 that he would register as conscientious objector. In 1948 he joined a work camp to help rebuild houses in Karelia (a Finnish province ceded to Russia at the end of the war). This was sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), which was awarded the

Nobel Peace Prize in 1947. More recently, Niilo supported the formation of the Alaska Peace Center here in Fairbanks.

Another Quaker testimony is Simplicity. Niilo certainly upheld this principle in his life, from the work on the homestead to the laws allowing simple burial.

You have heard words that exemplify how Niilo lived the testimony of integrity, truth-telling, especially during his time in the legislature.

You have also heard words about Niilo and community, another of the Quaker testimonies. From the formation of the Northern Schools Credit Union to the Chena Ridge Volunteer Fire Department, Niilo was active in bringing people together for the collective good.

From his life story you can see that Niilo acted from a belief in equality, not just in equal rights for all but that there is that Divine spark in everyone. He was active in the Civil Rights Movement, joining the Congress on Racial Equality.

The members of Chena Ridge Friends Meeting are grateful to Niilo and others for starting the meeting here in the 1950's. An early meeting place was the Browns' cabin on the Koponen homestead. The group included Ted and Mary Ann Kegler and others.

They moved to the home economics lounge in the Eielson building on the UAF campus and in 1984 moved to our present location on Gold Hill Road.

Beyond the Fairbanks group, Niilo also joined with other like-minded Quakers around the state, including fellow homesteaders Mahala Dickerson in Wasilla and Sam Lightwood in Kenny Lake. These Friends met periodically and eventually formed Central Alaska Friends Conference (now Alaska Friends Conference, a yearly meeting affiliated with Friends General Conference). In 1975 Arthur O. Roberts interviewed Niilo for a history of Quakers in Alaska and wrote:

*Throughout change, Niilo Koponen maintains a steady spiritual center...Finnish, quiet Quaker, Alaskan, he epitomizes a quest for authenticity that draws others to his quest, but only obliquely.*