

## Living the good life

Niilo Koponen reflects on a half-century of social activism and politics launched from his Fairbanks homestead

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FAIRBANKS -- It was Dec. 21, 1991 -- their 40th wedding anniversary -- and they wanted to see a movie. So Niilo Koponen changed out of his work clothes and drove to the theater to reserve tickets. His wife, Joan, would drive from the homestead to town to meet him.

Koponen was halfway through his fifth term as a state legislator representing Fairbanks. Joan was an accomplished horse trainer and non-violence counselor whose high cheekbones and healthy good looks made her seem much younger than 60.

The couple had lived on their Chena Ridge homestead west of town for the better part of four decades. Their five children were all grown. But the youngest, 33-year-old Alex, was visiting the house just then and decided to join his mother on the trip into town.

At the bottom of the hill, as she turned her Honda sedan onto the undivided Parks Highway, Joan remembered that she wanted to drop something off at the post office and started a U-turn, not realizing that a 2 ½-ton logging truck had rumbled onto the highway behind her. The truck crashed into the driver's side of the car, which might have been damaged worse if the roads hadn't been so icy.

"So instead of rolling the car, it just shot it down the road," Niilo Koponen recalled later. "The back of the car was smashed in and the side was all gone."



**Fairbanks homesteader, former legislator and lifetime liberal activist Niilo Koponen has spent more than a half-century fighting for union rights and civil liberties. His dreams for a better state are still a work in progress, he says. (Photo by Bill Roth / Anchorage Daily News)**



**Niilo Koponen stands outside his homestead home off Chena Ridge Road near Fairbanks. This portion is the original Felix Pedro cabin they moved from Olney in the early 1950's. (Photo by Bill Roth / Anchorage Daily News)**

Alex was buckled in and suffered only a concussion, but Joan was unbuckled and terribly injured. The collision broke her skull and ribs and pelvis. It punctured her lungs and left her unconscious.

Inside the car, Alex reached over and tried to clear his mother's airway to restore her breathing. A school bus stopped to help, and the driver reported the accident by radio. A nearby University of Alaska Fairbanks ambulance that was already staffed and ready quickly appeared.

In retrospect, each of those steps may have been the saving grace. Or maybe it was the combined effort of an entire hospital staff of emergency-room physicians and new specialists -- all of whom just happened to be gathered at Fairbanks Memorial Hospital that afternoon to map out new trauma response procedures -- who quickly switched from theory to action.

"Here are all these doctors having drawn up the guidelines, and 'Hoo-boy, now we can put them into practice,' " Niilo Koponen recalled. "By the time I got to the emergency room, I couldn't see Joan. She was surrounded by about 12 doctors."

Still, Joan's hold on life remained tenuous. She languished in a coma for several weeks as the family maintained a vigil at her bedside. The doctors said her chances of survival were about 50-50. When the new legislative session began that January, Koponen juggled his time constantly between Juneau and Fairbanks.

In early March, Joan finally emerged from her coma and was able to sit up and speak, though only sparingly. On the doctors' advice, the family transferred her to Washington state for physical therapy. In June, Koponen told his fellow legislators that he wouldn't run for re-election. He wanted to spend more time with his wife.

For Democrats in the state House, Koponen's departure



**Joan in a photo taken by her daughter Chena and used in "Building From Within," Joan's 1982 book about home-building.**



**Joan still suffers the effects of injuries she suffered in a car wreck near the homestead in 1991. Niilo left the Legislature after five terms to help care for her. (Photo by Bill Roth / Anchorage Daily News)**

from Juneau was a significant loss. His civic involvement and institutional memory stretched back to territorial days. His schooling reached even further, with graduate work at the London School of Economics and a Ph.D. from Harvard.

A 1992 Daily News story on the Fairbanks delegation described Koponen as Alaska's most unapologetically liberal legislator. He was also one of the most productive. In 1992, even with his wife in the hospital, he introduced seven bills in the state House, including his third effort to pass a state income tax.

While acknowledging its almost hopeless prospects, he decried the alternative of balancing the state budget by simply drawing upon rainy-day accounts that ought to be preserved for the harder times ahead. He felt today's Alaskans needed to pay their own way. He worried that the system was broke -- in more ways than one.

"The problem with politics is not just the presence of a few 'bad apples,' " Koponen wrote in a parting letter to his colleagues. "The process itself is archaic, cumbersome and largely incomprehensible to those not directly involved."

He planned to use his "new freedom" as a nonlegislator to repair state government from the outside.

But at best, he says today, that's still a work in progress. So is Koponen, at the golden age of 75.

Last summer, the members of the Alaska Civil Liberties Union -- an organization that Koponen and two other Alaskans co-founded in the early 1970s to combat what they perceived to be the political intolerance of the day -- voted to award him their Charlie Parr Lifetime Achievement Award.

Introducing him in his plaid shirt and great white beard to a sold-out crowd (which filled the large banquet hall at the Hilton Anchorage partly to hear political humorist Molly Ivins), former AkCLU president June Pinnell-Stephens of Fairbanks recalled Koponen's meager origins in New York's Bronx borough as the son of Finnish immigrants.

She told of his experiences as a Depression-era scrounger in the '30s, a Quaker-inspired pacifist in the '40s, a reverse desegregationist in the '50s (becoming the first white



**Joan and daughter Chena ride near the Koponen homestead. To Joan, "a homestead meant horses," Niilo says of their decision to move to Alaska. Joan taught all five of their children to ride.**

graduate of a formerly all-black college in Ohio) -- all before he and Joan ever departed for Alaska, where they've lived on their homestead ever since.

But at that, Pinnell-Stephens only scratched the surface.

## **ANIMALS NEXT DOOR**

"We call it a 'hysterical monument,' " Niilo Koponen said.

He was speaking about the attached cabins and barn that have grown together on the family homestead over the past half-century. His 195-acre site still enjoys an uninterrupted view of the Tanana River valley and the Alaska Range to the south.



**View from Koponen house by Gary Newman**

To visit Niilo there today is to return to an older, simpler Fairbanks -- in the most literal sense possible. The oldest part of the home is a historic cabin first used by the prospector Felix Pedro, who discovered the gold that gave birth to the town.

Disassembling it log by log, Niilo and Joan were able to transport the old cabin in pieces to the homestead they began to clear in 1952, then reassemble it with a nice new view of mountains Deborah, Hayes and Hess to the south.

Thirty years later, Joan published a book called "Building From Within," in which she interviewed neighbors who'd built their own homes. One chapter tried to make sense of her own experience. At first, she and Niilo wanted to build a grand house of log and stone, she said. But after they raised the initial log cabin, their most immediate need was a small, attached barn for a Jersey cow.

Five years later, with three young children under the roof (Karjala, Sanni and Chena), the cow got bumped outside so the barn could be turned into a bedroom. Then a newer, grander barn was built onto the house to provide an attached stable for Joan's horses. Five years after that, with two more children (Heather and Alex), the livestock got bumped again, and half of the barn was converted into a new kitchen and family room. And that's how the homestead kept growing, she said.

"We built upwards, outwards and sideways with logs and with frame."

It was her idea to have the living room and barn share a wall, Joan said. It saved walking across the yard to feed the animals on winter nights when the temperature fell to 40 below (they also kept goats and chickens in the basement). The body heat of all the animals helped warm the house, but she enjoyed the aesthetics of it too.

"I like to hear them snoofling and snorting on the other side of the wall," Joan wrote. "I like the feeling that they're part of our scene."

A constant stream of visitors and friends was part of the Koponen homestead scene as well -- as soon as they built a proper Finnish sauna.

The sauna had its practical side. It allowed them to get clean without using a lot of water. Without a well, they had to haul water a great distance and were disinclined to waste it on extravagant tub baths. By sharing the saunas with neighbors, they saved even more on energy -- as soon as the favor was returned.

"At one time on Chena Ridge, you could go to a sauna at somebody's house every night," Niilo told Fairbanks historian Jean Lester (quoted in her book, "Faces of Alaska"). "We staggered the nights. Friday nights we went over to Miller Hill to Bill Berry's sauna. Not only did everybody keep clean, but it was a great way to keep warm."

That would have been his frugal Finnish side talking. It amazes Koponen to hear people use the phrase "tax-and-spend liberals" when he's so loathe to spend money himself.

"I'm a 'cheapskate Democrat,' " he said. "You put your money into good things. You don't just throw it around."

## **DEPRESSION-ERA ROOTS**

He was born in New York on March 6, 1928. His parents lived in a five-story cooperative apartment complex in the Bronx. Most of the families there spoke Finnish or Yiddish.

Times were still good in '28, but the disastrous stock market crash of '29 and the Great Depression were right around the corner. By the time Niilo Koponen could walk out the door on his own, the signs of economic distress in New York were everywhere.

His dad had held a decent job in the shipyards as an electrician for Bell Laboratories, but when the cutbacks came, they let him go.

When he was a boy, Koponen recalls, his family bought food at the Harlem co-op. There was a community garden in their neighborhood where they could grow some vegetables. He helped tend the garden, then combed the streets for deposit bottles and gave his mom the money.

His friends included all the Finnish kids, a few secular Jews, an Irish kid, some Germans -- a multicultural street gang. He attended the local public school, PS 82, and spent a lot of time in the public library.

When he reached secondary-school age, he began attending the New York High School of Music and Art. He liked to draw, Koponen said. He was always sketching. He remembers

that someone signed his yearbook, "Whenever the lesson begins to bore, Niilo doodles by the score."

The school was multiracial and progressive. It opened in the 1930s to offer opportunities in the fine arts to low-income kids. He remembers a "beautiful" black classmate who ended up marrying the singer Harry Belafonte. He remembers learning to enjoy school just for the sake of learning. "In some ways," he said, "it was more like college."

He graduated from high school in 1945 and went to work at a wholesale co-op. He stocked shelves, repaired office equipment and painted posters for sales. After two years, he began attending night classes at tuition-free Cooper Union College in New York, studying civil engineering.

He also grew more politicized. In those days, Koponen says, almost everyone he knew was either a New Deal Democrat or a Norman Thomas socialist. Even the Republicans were progressives, like New York Mayor Fiorello "The Little Flower" LaGuardia.

Koponen was a newly fledged pacifist, partly due to his growing association with the Quaker Church and partly in response to the U.S. decision to drop atom bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which killed more than 100,000 civilians. So he applied for "conscientious objector" status with the draft board, though it was never officially confirmed.

In 1948, Koponen quit his job and college to join the American Friends Service Committee, a Quaker version of the modern-day Peace Corps, and journeyed to southeastern Finland to help build shelters for Karelian refugees (Finns whose land on the Karelian Peninsula of pre-World War II Finland was seized by the Soviet Union).

He also got in touch with his Finnish roots, both in terms of landscape and language.

"The real barrier is the bloody language," he said. "Someone once said that Finnish sounds like Japanese spoken by Italians."

The people he assisted there were mostly homesteaders. For someone who'd been sequestered in the urban environment of New York most of his life, there was something appealing about the open air and "northernness" of Finland.

## **HOMESTEAD DREAMS**

Three years later, newly married, Niilo and Joan Koponen would embark on their own northern homesteading adventure. But first they had to meet each other. It happened like this.

Returning to the states in 1948, Niilo Koponen recouped awhile in New York, then left for Yellow Springs, Ohio, where he'd been accepted as a student at Antioch College. Antioch then was a small liberal arts school that combined an innovative academic program with community service. Other students who'd been drawn there included future civil rights activist Coretta Scott King, paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould -- and Joan Forbes, an attractive New Englander with an abiding love for horses.

Koponen, however, wasn't able to join them. He couldn't raise the \$600 in tuition. So he enrolled in nearby Wilberforce State College, until then an all-black college, and completed his bachelor's degree in social work in three years. During his last year, he sometimes attended social events hosted by Antioch. At one of them, a folk dance, he met Joan.



**Wilberforce yearbook**

Her background was upper middle class, Koponen said. Her father was a psychologist in Cambridge, Mass., and she'd graduated from a Quaker school before college. In December 1951, after a whirlwind courtship, they were married. In February 1952, they loaded up their Dodge Power Wagon and set off for Alaska.

Why Alaska?

Part of it was the idea they shared about "open country," Koponen said. Joan was a free spirit and independent. "To her, a homestead meant horses." To him, he said, there was probably some kind of "northern tropism" at work, like the way the sun attracts the face of a sunflower, only in reverse.

He went to work for Fairbanks Exploration Co., the old F.E., a gold mining operation north of town. He started as a condenser plugger, then moved up to electrician. Soon he became vice president of the union. He enjoyed it all, Koponen said.

"It was hard and dirty, but working on the line crew and electric crew both, I got out to every one of the dredges and dredge camps. Then, being grievance man for the union, I got to know people on a number of different levels," he told Lester in "Faces of Alaska."



**Niilo and Joan leaving New York City for Fairbanks, Alaska**

"All the while, we were raising the family and trying to farm. I remember I started out at 97 cents (an hour) the first year, and three years later when I left, I was getting \$1.97 an hour."

As early as 1954, he began attending meetings of Alaskans who favored statehood. Territorial leaders had agreed to follow the "Tennessee Plan" of adopting a state constitution first as a way of gaining support for statehood in Congress. A constitutional convention would be held in Fairbanks the next year. First, however, an election would be held to select 55 delegates to the convention. Koponen decided to run.

Campaigning for a strong bill of rights that protected personal liberties, he also argued in favor of a unicameral legislature -- a House without a Senate -- to emphasize proportional representation. He wanted a strong initiative, referendum and recall plank as a safeguard against "the abuse of power by dishonest officials." And he wanted the constitution to guarantee the right of Alaska workers to organize in labor unions.

But Koponen fell short in the vote count ("I spent \$45 on the campaign," he said, "and somehow I didn't get elected"). Which is one reason why, for better or worse, the Alaska Constitution was written without a Finnish point of view.

## **INTO THE LEGISLATURE**

For the next 20 years, Koponen devoted his life to both giving and receiving education. In the mid-1950s, he enrolled at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (then called the University of Alaska) and earned a second bachelor's degree, this time in anthropology. He began teaching at a local grade school.

In the late '50s, when Alaska was finally granted statehood, Koponen and his family departed for England, where he'd been admitted to a one-year graduate program at the London School of Economics. After returning to the homestead the next year, he continued teaching and served as a delegate to the founding of the National Education Association-Alaska, the state's largest teachers union. Then a doctorate degree beckoned.

He'd been accepted into the Harvard Graduate School of Education, so in 1962 the family ventured Outside once again. At Harvard, Koponen helped develop racial-integration busing plans for school districts in Boston and Hartford, Conn. In 1966, he graduated with a Ph.D. in education.

There were opportunities to remain in Massachusetts, Koponen says, but he and Joan were homesick for the homestead, though sometimes it beat them up (like the time he was clearing trees and a heavy branch cracked him in the head).

"I've bled on this ground," Koponen laughs. "Literally."

With his doctorate, he accepted an offer to become principal of Barnette Elementary School. After a few years, he transferred to University Park Elementary School, closer to the homestead. There, he and his staff developed a team-teaching curriculum and other innovations, including some that were challenged by the school board.

One complaint, Koponen said, was that his teachers allowed students who had completed their work to read what they wanted. They could walk across the room and get a book.

"We had a hearing, and I remember they asked me, 'What are you trying to teach the children, Dr. Koponen?' And I said, 'Well, I want the children to learn to think for themselves.' And somebody said, 'We don't want them to think for themselves -- we want them to think right!' "

The school superintendent seemed to feel the same way, Koponen said. So the next year he accepted a new job as district director of research, planning and federal programs. Then two years later, the planning job was eliminated and Koponen's school days in Fairbanks were over.

That's when he began working to develop Head Start programs in Alaska villages. And child care programs in Fairbanks. And food banks. And interracial community groups. And a volunteer fire department on Chena Ridge, donating five acres of his homestead as a site for a station.

Finally, in 1980, he ran for the state House and lost, narrowly, after two recounts. He ran again in 1982 and won. Then won again in his next four bids for re-election.

In his 10 years in the House, Koponen compiled one of the most liberal voting records in the Legislature. He succeeded in strengthening Alaska's worker safety laws. He introduced a bill to guarantee to all Alaskans the availability of an abortion. He championed crime prevention over the high cost of incarceration. ("Criminals don't come out of the woodwork," Koponen said during one legislative debate. "They come out of the second grade.") He introduced a bill to afford "whistle-blower" protection to Alaska workers. He tried to make Alaska "a nuclear-free zone" (following reports in the 1950s of fallout that drifted to the North Slope from open-air tests done elsewhere in the world, resulting in health problems for Alaska Natives). He backed a bill to raise taxes on title insurance companies. ("Anything you can get out of those buggers," Koponen said, "I'll support it.") In 1990, he was one of only three legislators whose voting record one year after the Exxon Valdez oil spill received a "100 percent" approval rating by the Alaska Environmental Lobby.

And he proposed a state income tax in three of his last four sessions.

## COMING HOME

"I don't throw much away," Niilo Koponen said recently, leading a tour around the perimeter of his cabin and barn.

It's a habit he carries from the old days in Fairbanks, when supplies were short and replacements were expensive.

"We didn't have junk," he said airily. "We had components."

If that's true, then the inside of the Koponen homestead cabin these days is especially rich with components.

There's a great, white blizzard of correspondence and other unattended slips of paperwork in the region of a desk. There are shelves and shelves of books that wrap from room to room. There are old pizza cartons filled with photographs that document family travels to places ranging from Finland to Fairbanks.

In the bathroom is a haunting picture of Gemini, the young gray wolf that Joan raised for two years as part of a research project for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In the now-horseless barn is an elaborate filing system of well-cataloged magazines and old newspaper clippings.

Above the table in the kitchen is a forest of old campaign buttons from local, state and national elections: "Dissent is Patriotic." "I'm a Notti Body." "Bread Not Bombs." "Mild About Anchorage."

None of the rooms was ever really finished, Joan wrote in her pre-accident book about the homestead.

Somewhere along the way, their lives as builders lost momentum.

"But I've made peace with the unfinished state of things," she wrote. "After all, I'm not finished -- why should the house be?"

After the tour, as Niilo settled down at the kitchen table, Joan walked in the door with her caregiver and joined the conversation. A visitor asked her when was she born.

"It was 1931 ... April 13," Joan said. "So I'm an old lady now."

She still suffers some of the aftereffects of her accident, though the "equine therapy" the family pursued immediately upon her homecoming almost worked miracles.



**Niilo has a collection of Alaska campaign and political buttons.**  
(Photo by Bill Roth / Anchorage Daily News)

In the hospital after emerging from her coma, Niilo said, Joan slowly began to use her muscles again. Eventually she was able to sit up and the family could bring her home. Until then, Niilo said, she'd only spoken a few words.

"So we wheeled her toward the barn and opened the door to the stables. And the horses were there. And she took a deep breath and she uttered her first words: 'Ohhhhhh,' she said. 'That smells nice!' "

Koponen says that's when he decided to resign. That's when he came back home.

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