

Thunder Bay Sisu: Keeping Canada–Finland Ties Strong

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It takes a certain toughness of character to make a life in a cold, rugged, and isolated environment. The statement rings equally true for Finns as it does for people from Lake Superior's Canadian north shore. The Finns have a word to capture that character – *sisu* – which has also become a symbol of identity in the Thunder Bay, Ontario region. The tenacity and perseverance that is captured by *sisu* stands as a clear link, connecting one of North America's oldest and largest Finnish immigrant communities with Finland. Since Canada's first decade of Confederation, a steady flow of people and ideas have travelled between Thunder Bay and Finland. Thunder Bay's deep pride in its Finnish roots and embrace of its unique Finnish–Canadian *sisu* allows this Northwestern Ontario city with a “giant heart” to make significant contributions to maintaining and developing ties with Finland.

Today, some 14,500 people in Thunder Bay claim Finnish descent, equalling about 13% of the city's population and earning the title of Canada's largest population of Finns per capita. Thunder Bay's Finnish immigration history has followed the same broad patterns that played out nationally, with the first waves arriving from the 1870s, significant numbers more following the First World War and the Finnish Civil War, and the final major wave arriving after the Second World War. The lingering mark of this Finnish settlement is felt through numerous Finnish names on road signs and classroom roll calls, ubiquitous Thunder Bay saunas, and the favourite breakfast of locals – Finnish pancakes. But Finnishness in Thunder Bay is not only a familial matter. From the earliest immigrants bringing their songs, recipes, and lumbering techniques to current cultural, artistic, entrepreneurial, and educational exchanges, Thunder Bay's Finnish legacy continues to develop through reciprocity.

Thunder Bay has been joined to Seinäjoki, Finland, through significant historic immigration, but also through the cultural ties of the Sister City program since 1974. Beyond formal cultural exchanges such as this, Thunder Bay art and culture have a longstanding relationship with Finland. Perhaps the most striking Finnish presence in the city, the Finnish Labour Temple, owned by the community members of the Finlandia Association of Thunder Bay, has been a beacon of Finnish and Finnish-immigrant culture since its grand opening in 1910.

With a rich history of politics, theatre, music, dancing, and athletics, the Finnish Labour Temple continues to offer community programming with all the hustle and bustle of the early twentieth century. Traditional Finnish culture is still regularly performed at “the Hall,” with thanks to the Pelimanni Orchestra, Finnish men's and women's choirs, and the dance group *Kiikurit*. Performances by visiting musicians and dancers from Finland are, likewise, always warmly welcomed at the Hall. Occasional Finnish plays are still produced by the Thunder Bay Ystävyyskerho (Friendship Society) and others, complemented by a regular season of English-language productions by Cambrian Players. Painted stage backdrops, costumes, and props going back a century serve as a clear reminder of the Hall's vibrant cultural history that links Finnish and Canadian arts.

The Labour Temple frequently hosts special events that honour the unique culture of North American Finnishness. For example, each March, the Thunder Bay community packs the Hall for the celebration of St. Urho's Day. The accompanying parade is a true multigenerational event, including Finnish immigrant elderly, babies in strollers, and everyone in between. St. Urho's Day often stirs interest in Finland, bringing attention to Thunder Bay through media features, such as in YLE News in 2016.¹ Through

1 Vesa Marttinen, “Amerikansuomalaisten erikoinen perinne voi paksusti – Pyhä Urho täyttää tänään 60 vuotta,” YLE Uutiset, last modified March 17, 2016, <http://yle.fi/uutiset/3-8746893>.