

Informant: Ed Illola  
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Collector: Jim Leary

I pulled off at the Poplar Post Office around 4:15 and called the Illola residence. I knew, from an earlier letter to the project by Joyce Illola, that she and her husband, Ed, were part of a group called the "Finnish Folk Dancers." Ed answered the phone and gave me directions to find their place. I headed south off of Highway 2 on County P and turned into the first driveway on the right past the Gravel Pit Tavern.

The place was a modern, ranch style home with a deck on the back. There was also a large ple building that served as a garage housing an RV and some snow plow attachments. Ed invited me in. He's perhaps in his late thirties, tall and blue-eyed with thinning hair and a slight pot belly. He works at the Northwestern Middle School. Joyce was not home, so Ed proceeded to tell me about the dance group.

They are only three years old and consist of from ten to fifteen couples. They have been practicing regularly at the Washington Junior High in downtown Duluth on Wednesday nights. They perform throughout the year at various regional festivals (including Bayfield's Apple Festival) and some of their members will participate this year in the Smithsonian's Folklife Festival. The members are all of Finnish descent, indeed some are fairly recent Finnish immigrants - including their teacher, Aarne Kangas. Members come from the Iron Range, Duluth, and the Cloquet, Minnesota area (which is the original home of Ed and Joyce). In fact, Ed and Joyce, Minnesota transplants, are the only Wisconsin members.

The Finnish Folk Dancers are pretty clearly a revivalist group. They dance Finnish, not Finnish-American dances; they wear old world costumes; and they (or at least Ed) seemed to have little interest in researching the kinds of dances performed by local old timers in their social dancing heyday. Indeed, Ed seemed to be a pretty good example of that ethnic who looks to the old country's traditions in a romantic fashion without paying very careful attention to his own family's and community's earlier ethnic traditions. The Illola house, for example, was filled with bright Finnish objects of recent design and linen maps of Finland festooned several walls. Meantime, Joyce was studying Finnish accordion tunes from some books. Of course, this phenomenon is worth studying, in its own right.

The Illola's cordially invited us to accompany them to one of their dance practices. If we arrived at 5:00 or so on Wednesday night, we could travel with them to Duluth and back. Maybe next week?