

Family finds relatives in Finland

By Roz Kohls
Staff Writer

Harvey Barberg of Cokato found his ancestral homeland in an unexpected place, smack dab in the middle between Sweden and Finland.

The Torneo valley region was neither Swedish nor Finnish up until a war in 1808, when the Russian Czar drew a line on a map down the middle of the Tornea River. The Czar declared one side for Sweden, the other for Finland, said Barberg from his fifth-generation family farm four miles north of Cokato.

Those who live in the Torneo Valley region to this day consider themselves not Finnish nor Swedish, merely people, he added.

Harvey and his wife, Heidi, and his cousin, Dick Barberg of Howard Lake, and his wife, Rose, returned July 26 from Overtorneå, Sweden.

Overtorneå is the town on the banks of the Tornea River, where the Barberg family originated. Isak Barba and his wife, Eva, came to Cokato in 1866 and built a white-oak log cabin, which is still part of Harvey and Heidi's house now. The Barbabs changed their name to Barberg because there was another Barba family already in Cokato.

Harvey and Heidi have three children. Their son, Erick Barberg of Cokato works at Procare Services and raises beef cattle. Their daughters are Lorna Mahlstedt of Cokato, expecting her sixth child, and Heather Ravndal, a preschool teacher in Saint Anthony.

At first, no one in the Barberg family could figure out from where Isak and Eva came. The name of the place didn't seem to be in any records or on maps of Finland.

In 1991, Harvey and Heidi visited a jazz festival in Finland and Heidi had asked about the town at an information booth. The town in Sweden is so far north that the province it is in is split in half by the Arctic Circle. Residents eat moose and reindeer as frequently as US residents eat beef, Heidi pointed out.

After some correspondence with genealogists there, the Barbergs were invited to a homecoming at Overtorneå. The summer festival, "Matarengi Marknad," is similar to the Cokato Corn Carnival, and was July 14-16.

When they arrived July 10, little did they know the Barbergs would be guests of honor. The story of their family reunion and Isak's immigration to America was featured in a special section of the newspaper in Overtorneå. They stayed at a four-star hotel, were served food from gourmet restaurants, taken on tours, and entertained the entire time they were there.

The highlight of the event was when the Barbergs were invited by the commissioner of the province to ride the river on his sauna boat. Harvey said he believes the commissioner of the province is the equivalent of the chairman of the Wright County Board of Commissioners.

A sauna boat is a houseboat that tows a floating sauna behind it. The Barbergs have their own sauna, built in 1880, which they enjoy frequently in Cokato. They were delighted to use the floating sauna also, but not eager to rinse off in the icy cold river afterward, Heidi said.

They also enjoyed a Lions Club-sponsored sauna after a Lions Club salmon fry, she added.

Not counting children, there were 35 relatives at the homecoming who took the Barbergs around to various family sites. The first was Eva's family farm, which is still used as the Rovainen summer home 140 years later.

Isak and Eva lived in a farmhouse that is still standing and in good condition although it has been empty for the past 40 years, Harvey said.

They also toured the site where Isak was born 10 miles to the south of Overtorneå, but only the house's footings remain.

In addition, the church in which Isak and Eva were married still stands, and the Barbergs listened to music played on the same organ that played for Isak and Eva's wedding.

Northern Sweden and Finland look much like Minnesota although the weather isn't as extreme. It never got warmer than a dry 80 degrees. The winter is moderated by the Gulf of Bothnia to the south.

The Barbergs saw snowflakes, however, even though it was July, when they climbed a high hill near Overtorneå, Heidi said.

Overtorneå also had midnight sun, so sleeping was difficult. Part of it might have been excitement from all the attention the Barbergs received, though, Harvey said.

Harvey can speak fluent Finnish and most of the Finnish can speak English. People from Overtorneå are equally fluent in Swedish.

The economy of Overtorneå is based on dairy farming, timber and salmon fishing.

Heidi was especially interested in the food they were served. For breakfast, for example, instead of serving milk with cereal, a large bowl of yogurt was put on the table. People from Overtorneå put a scoop of yogurt in the bottom of their individual bowls and poured their cereal on top, Heidi said.

In addition to the standard eggs and bacon breakfast, they served tomatoes, cucumbers, cold cuts, and cheese, Harvey said.

Heidi's favorite were the cloud berries. The yellow berries grow wild in northern Sweden and Finland, and are eaten on cheesecake, cereal and ice cream.

After the festival, the Barbergs traveled farther north to check out the area where the Lantto family of Cokato originated. When they crossed the Arctic Circle, they were "baptized" with a scoop of river water poured over their necks, and given a certificate announcing they had crossed over into the land of "the Sun, the Light and the Colours."

On their way back through Finland, they met more relatives from a different branch of the family. By accident, the Barbergs were just in time to enjoy another family reunion, Harvey said.

The Barbergs learned from their trip that possibly Isak chose to come to America because he was an illegitimate child and didn't have land rights. They also discovered he had a brother, and that there is an entire other family of Barbas they didn't know existed, Harvey said.

In addition, they noticed the people of Overtorneå preserved and maintained old things. They didn't trash old things just because they are old, as people often do in the United States, Harvey said.

Barberg-Selvälä-Salmonson Sauna, Cokato



Abandoned log savusauna similar to the one in Cokato, Pelican Lake, 1964.

"Sauna" is the word used to describe the Finnish practice of bathing through heat, sweat, and steam, and the building in which this bathing takes place.

Sauna has been practiced for centuries in Finland, and Finnish immigrants to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not want to leave sauna behind. Often, the first structure they built on their new rural property was a sauna, which they could live and bathe in while they built their other farm buildings. That was the case with the Barberg-Selvälä-Salmonson sauna in Cokato, Minnesota—the oldest savusauna, or smoke sauna, still existing in Minnesota and likely in the United States.

Finns first came to Cokato in 1865, looking for available farmland. Three Finnish families—the Barbergs (also known as the Barbas), Selväläs, and Salmonsons—were among the town's earliest settlers, moving onto their adjoining homesteads by 1868. That year, the families agreed to build a shared savusauna along the property line between the Barberg and Selvälä farms.

Traditionally, sauna occurred at least once a week, often on Saturday nights, throughout the year. The simple savusauna was a wood building with a hearth inside. The hearth was covered with rocks that could be heated to great temperatures. Also inside was a wooden platform for bathers to sit or lie on, near the roof to maximize the savusauna's heat. Steps and a lower bench were available for those who did not want the maximum temperature. A fire burned in the savusauna's hearth during the day and then was put out, allowing the smoke in the sauna to dissipate before bathing. The hearth's heated rocks kept the sauna warm for hours after the fire was put out and provided heat for the bathing that followed.

Sauna users like the Barbergs, Selväläs, and Salmonsons sat in the structure long enough to sweat and then cooled off by going outside or rinsing with cold water or snow, if available. They would repeat the process as needed. Bathers also used whisks made of flexible birch branches to beat and stimulate the skin, which caused cleansing through exfoliation.

Non-Finns in Cokato and elsewhere were unfamiliar with sauna. They did not know what their Finnish neighbors were doing in sauna buildings, which looked to them like strange little huts, and there was great speculation. Adding to the controversy was the standard practice of taking sauna and cooling off naked, often outside in the air if the sauna did not have a separate dressing room, which many early Minnesota savusaunas did not. The Barberg-Selvälä-Salmonson sauna was one of these, so the families cooled themselves in the fresh air, naked. This was fine when their property was remote, but it caused quite a stir as Cokato grew and one of the major town roads was laid out along the Barberg-Selvala property line, right next to the sauna.

In 1885, the controversy over the Barberg-Selvälä-Salmonson sauna went to court. Members of the community accused the Selvälä family, who had bought the Barberg and Salmonson families out of their shares of the sauna by then, of strange religious or other practices related to their sauna use. The Selvalas proved to the court that they were upstanding citizens and good Lutherans, and that they were just using the sauna to get clean; they won thirty dollars in damages for the accusations made against them. However, the Selvalas were ordered by the court to move their sauna to a more private location on their property, away from the road. They were given an additional forty dollars to do so. Nils Selvala moved the sauna, but used it from then on as a shed, taking the money his family had won in court to build a bigger, nicer sauna elsewhere on their property.

In 1979, the original 1868 savusauna, which had been moved a number of times since the 1880s, was moved one last time to Cokato's Temperance Corner, named for the social hall that has stood there since 1896. The original savusauna became one of a group of buildings celebrating the Finnish heritage of many in the region, and now, it is cared for by the Cokato Finnish-American Historical Society. In 2008, the savusauna was repaired and fully restored to its original appearance.

The link to the original

[barber-selvälä-salmonsson](#)