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# Little Steamship on the Prairie: Grass-Roots Preservation and Artistic Interpretation in the Construction of Ethnic, Local, and National Identities

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Résumé de l'article

La vie énigmatique du pionnier finno-canadien Tom (Damianus) Sukanen (1878-1943) est abordée en relation avec son bateau à vapeur, le Sontiainen, qui est préservé de nos jours au musée et village des pionniers du Bateau de Sukanen (Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum), à l'extérieur de Moose Jaw, en Saskatchewan. Cet article examine certains détails de la vie de Sukanen et le large éventail de pièces de théâtre, romans, films et musicaux qui ont été produit à son sujet depuis les années 70. On y explore la question de la représentation du patrimoine au travers des musées et de la préservation d'artefacts.

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# **Little Steamship on the Prairie: Grass-Roots Preservation and Artistic Interpretation in the Construction of Ethnic, Local, and National Identities<sup>1</sup>**

THOMAS A. DUBOIS

**ABSTRACT:** The enigmatic life of Finnish-Canadian pioneer Tom (Damianus) Sukanen (1878-1943) is discussed in connection with his steamship Sontiainen, today preserved at the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum, outside of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. The article examines details of Sukanen's life and the wide array of plays, novels, films, and musicals that have been made about him since the 1970s. The question of representing heritage through preserved artifacts and museums is explored.

**RÉSUMÉ:** La vie énigmatique du pionnier finno-canadien Tom (Damianus) Sukanen (1878-1943) est abordée en relation avec son bateau à vapeur, le Sontiainen, qui est préservé de nos jours au musée et village des pionniers du Bateau de Sukanen (Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum), à l'extérieur de Moose Jaw, en Saskatchewan. Cet article examine certains détails de la vie de Sukanen et le large éventail de pièces de théâtre, romans, films et musicaux qui ont été produit à son sujet depuis les années 70. On y explore la question de la représentation du patrimoine au travers des musées et de la préservation d'artefacts.

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The Sukanen Ship Pioneer Museum

If you head south on Route 2 out of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan, you will see it on your right close to the road: a large wooden and metal building at the edge of an eclectic set of relocated houses, barns and shops that comprise the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum (<https://www.sukanenshipmuseum.ca>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IajfB3t8N4g>; Grant). The building is sited on a concrete slab, propped up by metal support poles, with a two-section wooden staircase leading up to its second-story entrance. Painted white, red and blue, with the flags of Saskatchewan and Finland proudly displayed at its entrance, the building is not a church, or a hall, or a library but rather, a *ship*: in fact, a would-be steamship crafted by a lone Finnish pioneer known by the English name Tom Sukanen (1878-1943). The ship bears the name Sukanen gave it during his life—Sontiainen, dung beetle—apparently in honor of its stocky, solid appearance. The existence of the Sontiainen ship on the prairie landscape of a landlocked Canadian province, some 1100 kilometers from Hudson Bay and some 1300 kilometers from Lake Superior (the two nearest bodies of water with sea access) is an interesting question in itself. Even more interesting, however, is the question of how or why such a ship has become emblematic of cultural identity for the people who have worked to preserve, maintain, and display it in an open-air museum outside of a small Saskatchewan town and of the various others who have explored, celebrated or interpreted Tom Sukanen and his ship in ways that reflect their

own ideas of heritage and identity in the context of a modern multicultural Canada or Finland. In this paper, I present the case of Tom Sukanen and the Sontiainen with attention both to the historical realities of the man and ship and to the various meanings that have become attached to them by artists and interpreters over time.

## Tom Sukanen and the Sontiainen, 1878-1943

The story of Tom Sukanen and his ship is known in broad detail from the testimony of locals who knew Tom during his troubled life in Saskatchewan. Their reports were eventually compiled into a booklet that is now for sale at the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum, *"Together at Last"* (Mullin et al.). Born in Finland in 1878, Tom (identified in the booklet as Tomi Jannus Alankola, 5, but elsewhere referred to as Damianus or Domianus Sukanen) immigrated to the United States as a young man at the turn of the century. He settled with his wife Sanna Liisa Rintala in Biwabik, Minnesota, where Tom found work in the iron mines and then farmed (Book). In 1911, at the age of 33, he left his wife, son, and three daughters and headed north to the area around Macrorie and Birsay, Saskatchewan, where his brother Svante had settled.

Finnish settlers to Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta totaled some seven thousand between the turn of the century and the beginning of the Great Depression (Lindström-Best and Sutyla 17). Finns came to Canada in two main waves: the first beginning in the late nineteenth century and ending around the time of Finnish independence (1917), and the second made up of refugees from the Finnish Civil War of 1918-19 and continuing through the late 1920s. The first wave totaled some 22,302; the second, 36,834 (Beaulieu et al. 3). In introducing the Finnish-Canadian experience to a scholarly audience, Michel S. Beaulieu, David K. Retz, and Ronald N. Harpelle note laconically: "Small Finnish farming settlements in Manitoba and Saskatchewan also make up the broader Finnish experience in Canada, but these have faded away" (4). In his *Red Finns on the Coteau* (Warwaruk 17-20), local Saskatchewan teacher and historian Larry Warwaruk supplies a great deal more information about the Finnish community to which Tom Sukanen migrated, placing the Finnish population in the area of Rock Point Saskatchewan at around one thousand in 1921 (Warwaruk 17). Most, like Tom, were secondary migrants, who, although originating in Finland, had initially worked in farming or in mining in Michigan and Minnesota. They began to settle the Coteau—an area of hummocky grassland and hills along the South Saskatchewan River—only after the Mesabi Iron Range strike of 1907. While in the USA, they had become familiar with unionization, socialism, and the Finn Hall institution, all of which they avidly imported to the Coteau. When the Finnish Civil War of 1918-19 pitted socialist Reds against capitalist Whites in a

short but brutal war, local Finnish Canadians sided strongly with the Reds (Beaulieu 35; see also Alanen).

Warwaruk cites accounts in the Finnish-American socialist newspaper *Työmies* [Worker] that recount the active role of both Tom (“Domianus”) and his brother Svante in socialist activities at Rock Point. At a January 30, 1914, gathering at the home of Isaac Keranen, Tom made a speech, which was followed by poems, songs, and dancing (Warwaruk 15). A February 1914 meeting was held in the home of “toveri” (comrade) Svante Sukanen, at which his brother Domianus was elected as news reporter for the Finnish Canadian socialist newspaper *Työkansa* [People of Labor] which, however, ceased operation in 1915 (17). The report in *Työmies* also noted that the Finns of Rock Point were planning to launch their own socialist newspaper, to be named *Vasara* [Hammer], which was slated to debut that same month. By 1918, the Canadian Post Office had stopped delivery of *Työmies* in Canada, and all foreign language publications in Canada were banned, as was the Canadian Social Democratic Party (Warwaruk 21). By 1919, Section 98 of the Criminal Code allowed for the deportation of aliens for various reasons, including political agitation. The Rock Point area Finnish community remained strongly socialist in leaning, however, building two Finn Halls, hosting in 1921 Sanna Kannasto, a Marxist political theorist from Sudbury, Ontario (Warwaruk 23), and sending some hundred community members to Soviet Karelia in the late 1920s, some of whom (disillusioned) eventually returned by 1932 (Warwaruk 67-76). By the late 1920s, Finns made up fully sixty percent of the Canadian Communist Party (Beaulieu et al 2018: 3). Warwaruk writes: “Farmers Union, Wheat Pool, Communist Party and Finnish Organization intermingled in the Coteau. Many belonged to all four” (Warwaruk 35). As members of the RCMP began regularly to disrupt Finn Hall dances to take names and direct the removal of pictures of Marx and Lenin (Warwaruk 86), many Finns, including Tom Sukanen, may have felt hesitant to continue their socialist activities openly. The local Finnish community by that time also included some White sympathizers as well as a substantial non-aligned contingent of Laestadian (Apostolic Lutheran) Finns, making a socialist outlook less than universal, even in the heavily socialist Rock Point area.

As noted in “*Together at Last*” (Mullin et al.) Tom eventually gained title to his homestead, farming successfully and amassing modest savings. In 1918, he returned to Minnesota to reconnect with his family, only to discover that his wife had recently died and that his children had been scattered among various foster homes, eventually becoming adopted and renamed. He managed to locate his son, now named John Forsythe, and convinced him to come to Saskatchewan. But the US authorities apprehended the father and son as they walked toward the Canadian border, and John was returned to his adoptive family. A second attempt at retrieving the son again yielded negative results

and Sukanen was deported back to Canada and barred re-entry into the United States (Mullin et al. 7). A deeply frustrated Sukanen found work in Canadian railroad construction and continued to farm, now unhappily resigned to a life without his family. He became legendary for his great strength and mechanical expertise, reportedly knitting himself a full suit of clothes out of binder twine (8), building his own sewing machine, a steam-powered threshing machine for the use of locals in the area (6), and even a large-sized tricycle, now displayed at the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum. People reported their astonishment at his capacity to lift massive loads of grain, steel and other equipment and carry them the six miles home from town (6).



Tricycle made by Tom Sukanen displayed at the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Museum

In 1929, Sukanen used a rowboat to navigate the Saskatchewan and Nelson Rivers, following them downstream to Hudson Bay, where he found work on a freighter bound for Finland (8). After returning to his farm later that same year, he seems to have come up with the idea of building a full-sized steamship of his own to eventually use for a grand second return to Finland. By that time, the onset of the Great Depression—which coincided with a protracted drought affecting the entirety of Saskatchewan—made Sukanen's ambitious purchases of steel, cable and copper a source of discussion and dismay among his neighbors.

Working entirely by himself, Sukanen constructed a 13-meter (43-foot) keel for his ship, a second wider section that would house ballast and a steam engine, and wooden top sections that would serve as the cabin and wheelhouse for the vessel. His plan, as recalled by his longtime friend and neighbor Victor Markkula (Mullin et al. 10), was to build the ship in pieces, float them downriver to Hudson Bay and then assemble them into a complete ship in the deep waters of the mouth of the Nelson. By 1940, he had begun to work on the steam engine on the shore of the South Saskatchewan River. His ship-building passion—by this time an obsession—had led to his near complete disregard of his farming and wage earning at the same time that the continued drought made agriculture in the region more and more difficult. A combination of poverty, constant belittling of his project by neighbors, and mean-spirited local vandalism drove Sukanen into deep depression, and local authorities committed him to a hospital for the mentally ill in North Battleford, where he died in 1943.

While eventually attracting dismay for his odd habits and ship building mania, Tom Sukanen seems to have been regarded positively in his locale, at least before his physical and mental decline. Mullin reports ample testimony that Sukanen was well-liked and appreciated by his neighbors for his ingenuity and generosity (Mullin et al. 6). Warwaruk's interview with Ellen Dressel illustrates the point (Warwaruk 90). Although Ellen had left Saskatchewan for Vancouver in 1934 while still a child, she not only recalled vividly her experience of bringing Tom coffee and sweets from her mother but told her own son stories of Tom to such a degree that the son eventually wrote a high school essay about Sukanen's ship building. The essay recounts Tom's having made a cover to protect his teeth from metal fragments when he was forging and notes the elaborate plans he had drawn on his ceiling (Warwaruk 90). Warwaruk concludes: "The story of Tom Sukanen has been told many times....Sukanen was a Coteau Finn" (90). In a 2014 piece "Dreams in the Dust: The Story of Tom Sukanen" in *Canada's History*, Rick Book recounts his father's boyhood memories of visiting with Tom in 1938 (Book). He and other children were apparently welcomed by Tom, who showed them around the ship while Book's father, fourteen years old at the time, avidly took photos with a borrowed camera. Book's father also recalled seeing one of the horse carcasses that supplied Tom with meat during his long decline. While his relentless work on his ship and consumption of aging horse meat drew disapproval and concern, the account in *Together at Last* suggests that Tom's deep depression at the end of his life stemmed from learning that his ship had been vandalized during his stay at the hospital: "After this, the hospital attendants said that Tom lost the will to live and sat staring into space" (Mullin et al. 15).

Eccentric and ambiguous, Tom Sukanen presents an imperfect model for an ethnic emblem in a Finnish immigrant community at times deeply torn regarding the labels of "good Finn" and "bad Finn" and the various other

stereotypes and portrayals Finns have acquired in their migration to North America (cf. Frandy 29). Finnish self-consciousness and factionalism aside, a man who left his family without contact for years, who pursued obsessive and unrealizable dreams, and who died penniless in a mental hospital would probably not qualify as an exemplary model in nearly any ethnic community in North America. The writers of Sukanen's biography allude to this fact: when Moon Mullin questioned Victor Markkula's son Wilf about the fate of the Sontiainen ship some decades after Sukanen's death, Markkula is said to have "said he thought it best to 'let sleeping dogs lie,' because some people thought Tom Sukanen was insane, and he did not want to cause the family any more problems" (Mullin et al. 17). Markkula had kept the remainders of Sukanen's ship hidden on his property before their eventual acquisition by Mullin and other Pioneer Village enthusiasts for restoration and display at the museum. The 2007 obituary for Sukanen's nephew Elmer Svante Sukanen in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix* ("Elmer Svante Sukanen"), the man who was the source of much of the family matter contained in the biography, makes no mention of Tom Sukanen. The Finnish community of Saskatchewan did not apparently play a large role in the preservation or restoration of the Sontiainen. The chapel built beside the ship, aimed at commemorating the small houses of worship that dotted the pioneer Saskatchewan landscape, was designed and constructed by Moon Mullin rather than by local Finns (Mullin et al. 24-25). Building such a chapel allowed the land adjacent to it to be considered a cemetery, which in turn allowed for the reinterment of Sukanen's remains from North Battleford to their present location alongside the ship, leading to the above-mentioned pamphlet's title *"Together at Last."* The pamphlet notes that this reinterment took place "with the full consent of the Sukanen family" (27), but not, apparently, with strong participation by the Saskatchewan Finnish community. Yet with its prominent Finnish flag, laminated information sheet printed in both English and Finnish, and remarkable local renown (see below), the Sontiainen and its troubled builder have become emblems of Finnish Canadian identity, with or without Finnish-Canadian support. At the same time, as the statement of Lieutenant Governor MacEwan made clear in the 1977 dedication of the ship, the Sontiainen and its maker somehow became, improbable as it might seem, emblems of Saskatchewan settler history and the "thousands...who opened this country" (Mullin et al. 34).

### **Thirty Years Later: The Rescue and Restoration of the Sontiainen, 1968-1977**

The road to the restoration of the Sontiainen, and its eventual status as an emblem of Saskatchewan history, lies not so much with Finnish Canadians as



with Norwegian Canadians, particularly Laurence “Moon” Mullin. Mullin’s identity as a Norwegian Canadian is explicitly noted in the booklet, as Mullin recalls his first conversation with Victor Markkula’s son: “Wilf Markkula enquired as to whether ‘Moon’ was a ‘Norski’? To which ‘Moon’ replied, ‘Yes’” (Mullin et al. 17). In subtle but noticeable ways, the Norwegian role in rescuing and restoring the Sontiainen is highlighted throughout the booklet.

People of Norwegian heritage have shown a penchant for building preservation and museums on both sides of the Atlantic (Hegard; Rentzhog; Cederström; DuBois 2018; Rue). Foreningen til Norske Fortidsminnesmerkers Bevaring (The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Norwegian Monuments) was founded already in 1844 for the preservation of Norwegian churches and other historical buildings threatened with destruction, and was central in the establishment of the world’s first open-air museum at Bygdøy, Oslo, in 1884, a model for Artur Hazelius’s Stockholm open-air museum Skansen (Hegard; Rentzhog 51; Fortidsminneforeningen; DuBois 2018, 334). In the USA, the Vesterheim Norwegian-American museum was founded in Decorah, Iowa, already in 1877, and added its first preserved building in 1913, making it the first open-air museum in North America (Rue 352, 354). Norwegian-American Isak Dahle’s Little Norway museum in Blue Mounds, Wisconsin, opened in 1928 and was praised by New York art critic Allen Eaton in his 1932 *Immigrant Gifts to American Life* as evidence of “the Norwegian deep sentiments for tradition” and singled out as a model in Eaton’s call for immigrant communities to document and celebrate their local histories (quoted in Bronner 175-6; DuBois 2018, 340). In the Canadian context, efforts to create museums and monuments coalesced particularly around the Centennial Year of 1967, with a National Museums Policy established in 1972, and the beginnings of a national infrastructure to organize and support museum efforts among Norwegian Canadians as well as others (Harvey and Lammers).

It was with this background and in this context that Moon Mullin, newly retired from a life of farming in Lake Valley, came together with other enthusiasts of the the local Antique Automobile Club to purchase in 1968 ten acres south of Moose Jaw as a place for the storage and preservation of their collections of vintage cars and trucks. Soon donations of buildings began, including settler cabins, a school house, an abandoned church, a general store, a blacksmith shop, a railway station, a service station, a grain elevator, and other buildings of the region’s past culture and economy. Although he had heard local stories about an eccentric local ship builder of the past, Mullin knew no further details of Tom Sukanen or the Sontiainen until his son happened to meet Wilf Markkula in Whitebear, Saskatchewan, some 260 km to the west of Moose Jaw (Mullin et al. 17). Markkula permitted Mullin to acquire the remains of the ship’s keel and hull, which, as Book notes, had been used for grain storage on Markkula’s farm. In contrast, the ship’s boiler, which Tom had constructed

on the shore of the South Saskatchewan River, had been cleared and sold for scrap during the process of damming the river to create Lake Diefenbaker (Mullin et al. 16). Initial funding for the restoration of the remains of the ship came from the New Horizons for Seniors Program, a national grants program designed to promote volunteerism among seniors and support community-based projects (Government of Canada). Mullin and other men and women of the newly-formed Moose Jaw organization relocated the ship from Markkula's farm and began a series of fund-raising events and souvenir sales coordinated by Moon's wife Hazel Mullin and aimed at generating funds for supplies and equipment needed for the restoration (Mullin et al. 1987). Work began soon after the ship arrived in Moose Jaw in 1972 and continued until the ship was dedicated in 1977.



'Monument of Labour' sign attached to the Sukanen Ship

In their application for New Horizons funding, the Moose Jaw volunteer organization identified their "intention...to dedicate the project to the early pioneers of Saskatchewan, as Tom Sukanen qualified as such a homesteader" (Mullin et al. 1987: 20). The plaque on the outside of the Sontinen placed in 1977, now well worn, reads: "Monument of Labour: To all early pioneers to whom we owe so much." At its dedication, Lieutenant Governor Grant MacEwan spoke of the "Tom Sukanen Era" of Canadian Plains history and dedicated the ship "to the memory of Tom Sukanen and thousands of others who opened this

country” (34). That the ship emblemizes Saskatchewan pioneer life more than Finnish-Canadian history is echoed in the statement of Elbow-born Norwegian Canadian Rick Book, who writes: “People view [Sukanen’s] stubbornness, his undisputed ability, and his independence with pride. For Western Canadians in particular, Sukanen’s ship is a totem of sorts, a symbol of the strength, resilience, work ethic, and, sometimes, madness it took to survive and prosper in this often harsh landscape” (Book). The “*Together at Last*” booklet waxes triumphalist when it recounts the efforts of a Minnesotan “wealthy, elderly man of Finnish descent” who tries to purchase the ship from the museum but is rebuffed (Mullin et al. 25): the Sontiainen may have been originally built by a Finn, but it now belongs to the wider Canadian community of men and women associated with the open air museum south of Moose Jaw, a polity linked not by Finnish ethnic heritage but by regional identity, sharing pride in their community’s survival on the demanding, sometimes brutal, Canadian prairie.

Within this redirection, Tom’s Finnish background and culture is portrayed in “*Together at Last*” in an exoticized and sometimes inaccurate manner. Some examples illustrate these tendencies. “Like many Finlanders, Tom had a dry humour and could make a comical comment with an impassive face” (Mullin et al. 8). “He painted the keel section with a sealer coat of horse blood. This was an age-old Finnish custom to prevent the corroding effects of salt water. Because of the rough seas Finlanders learned to build their ships sturdy enough to survive collision with ice flows, without damage” (12). “Vic Markkula went to see him shortly after he was admitted [to the mental hospital] and immediately suggested that they try Tom on a diet of filleted fish, uncooked, as this had been the main diet of Finns for centuries, as frying and cooking destroys the vitamins” (15). Most significant in this representation, which introduces ethnographic details that would be unfamiliar in either Finland or Finnish Canada, is the recovery of a letter Tom had written to his sister Aiva Pentilla of Spencer, Massachusetts (17). The pamphlet recounts the letter’s prophetic statement:

Four times there will be men who will try to raise and assemble this ship. Three times they will fail, but a fourth man will succeed. He will start the raising of my ship and it will sail across the prairies at speeds unheard of in this day and age, and will disappear in a mighty roar. My ship will go up and I shall rest in peace. (17)

In the booklet, the work of Mullin and the other Moose Jaw volunteers is presented as the fulfillment of this prophecy.



Closeup of Parts of the Sukanen Ship

The ship itself, with its gracefully shaped hull and hand-made parts, testifies to Sukanen's prodigious skills as a metal worker. "*Together at Last*" reports the awed remarks of engineers who surveyed Tom's handiwork (12). A visiting seaman's admiration is likewise recounted: "A seaman said it was...one of the best appearing and best-constructed vessels he had seen in years" (25). Presumably, it is important for the ship's role as a symbol of Saskatchewan ingenuity and perseverance that it is not only an unexpected sight on the Canadian prairie but one that epitomizes what Book describes as the "strength, resilience, work ethic, and, sometimes, madness it took to survive and prosper in this often harsh landscape."

### **Theatre Passe Muraille's *The West Show*, 1975**

Even before the completion of the Sontiainen's restoration and dedication in 1977, the story of Tom Sukanen and his ship began to attract literary renderings. The first was in a brief one-scene vignette included as the opening of the Toronto Theatre Passe Muraille's 1975 *The West Show* (Bessai and Kerr 21-22). Like other productions in this Ontario-based company's repertoire, *The West Show*, Bessai and Kerr note, explore two opposing elements in the "'myth' of Saskatchewan": a tendency toward isolated individualism (a characteristic exemplified in the play's portrayal of Tom Sukanen) and a countervailing

tendency toward social cohesion and collectivism (Bessai and Kerr 8). The brief four-page script for the Sukanan vignette features only three characters standing around an improvised representation of a ship: Tom Sukanen, his appreciative neighbor Stenner, and a curious visitor Cochrane. After correcting Cochrane on the proper pronunciation of his surname (with stress on the first syllable not second), Tom introduces his ship in commanding and pedantic terms:

TOM: This is the keel of my boat. Nine feet high! Lap-planked. Tarred and caulked. And then what did we put over that Stenner?

STENNER: Horseblood!

TOM: And why did we do that, Stenner?

STENNER: Cause—cause it don't corrode!

TOM: So the salt water won't corrode the planking. (Bessai and Kerr 21)

Tom upbraids the skeptical Cochrane on driving a car without knowing how to turn a piston or cam shaft (23), and announces his intention to use his ship to return to Finland:

TOM: I had an uncle in Minnesoda [sic.]. He was ninety-two when he died. Right up to the last he always wanted to get to Finland but he never got there. I'm going to get there. And the hull of my boat is going to be filled with wheat to feed the starving people of Finland. (Bessai and Kerr 22)

Stenner recounts to Cochrane Tom's premonition of the prairie being eventually flooded, while Tom's self-reliance is epitomized by his refusal to ask for help of anyone else to haul his ship. When he at last collapses into the arms of a supportive Stenner, Stenner addresses the audience:

STENNER: South of Moose Jaw, the land is very flat. And right in the middle of this flat prairie, just off the highway, this boat stands—rising thirty feet into the air. The place where that boat was built is now under Diefenbaker Lake. (Bessai and Kerr 22)

Tom's premonition has thus been fulfilled by the establishment of the lake that aimed to put an end to the periodic droughts that made life in Saskatchewan so precarious for farmers of his day. And Tom Sukanen becomes a "totem" of Saskatchewan character.

## Ken Mitchell's *The Shipbuilder*, 1977

Dedicated to Moon Mullin, Moose Jaw native Ken Mitchell's 1977 play *The Shipbuilder* was written as an entry in the University of Regina's national playwriting competition (Mitchell 1977). It won that contest and premiered in 1977, the same year as the Sontiainen's official dedication. In Mitchell's play, Tom Sukanen becomes a Jaanus Karkulainen, who arrives in Saskatchewan to settle near his brother Jukka, who has anglicized his surname to Crook. Jukka and his shrewish Anglo wife Betsy seek assimilation into broader Anglo-Canadian society, pressuring a recalcitrant Jaanus to embrace Anglo conformity by attending the local church and abandoning his Finnish ways. Jaanus stalwartly refuses their every effort—retaining his last name, building himself a sauna, and spending hard-earned cash on coffee. As he alienates himself from his brother and sister-in-law, he also becomes a topic for gossip in the backbiting local community.

Jaanus interacts mainly in the narrative with his trusted Ontario-born neighbor and friend Larry Bender, a character reminiscent of *The West Show*'s Stenner. Larry is filled with admiration for the resourceful and hardworking Jaanus, whose help proves decisive in Larry managing to prosper on his own homestead some ten miles away. Although strongly anti-Bolshevik, Jaanus is an eager proponent of cooperatives, building a threshing machine that he and Larry use to process their own grain as well as that of some neighbors. Their act and the income it generates makes it possible for Larry to afford Christmas presents for his kids, but also undercuts the profits of the supercilious and malicious Austrian-Canadian Mike Scholer, who previously held a monopoly on threshing with his large and expensive factory-built machine.

The play skirts most details of Sukanen's troubled marital life but includes a scene which recounts Jaanus's attempts to retrieve his daughter Karen from her foster home in Minneapolis after he receives word that his wife has died. Karen, who doubles as Anne-Marie (Jaanus's childhood sweetheart and the chorus in the play), recounts her terror at being accosted by her strapping and unpredictable father. Jaanus ("Johnny Crook") is jailed for thirty days, attempts to retrieve his daughter a second time, and then a third, receiving harsher and longer sentences each time. Jaanus's demise, however, comes not from the American or Canadian legal system, but from the intolerance of Betsy and Jukka Crook, the meddling of the ill-willed Mike Scholer, and the conniving of the frequently inebriated Irish-Canadian ne'er-do-well, Jimmy Cannon, described as "a town idler" (Mitchell 1977: 9). Their actions ultimately lead to Jaanus's arrest and commitment to the Battleford mental hospital, putting to an end Jaanus's dogged dragging of his ship across the prairie toward the river that Jaanus hoped would allow him to reach Hudson Bay. The play ends not with this

image of defeat, however, but with a triumphant Jaanus at the helm of his ship, rounding the last bay on this way back to Finland and his beloved Anne-Marie—a dramatization of the unrealized hopes that motivated Jaanus throughout the narrative.

While employing stereotyped images of Finns—their penchant for coffee-drinking, cooperatives, and sauna—Mitchell's play focuses mainly on the oppressive legacy of Anglo conformity that had become problematized in Canada by 1977. When first talking with his brother Jukka, the two men display opposite attitudes toward cultural assimilation, Jukka adopting the conformist approach:

Jukka: So, Jianni! It's been a long time. Welcome to Canada.  
Colder than Suomi!

Jaanus: But there are Finns here?

Jukka: No—we're all Canadians now. (Mitchell 27)

Jukka's wife Betsy betrays her attitudes toward her husband's immigrant background later in the play: "And I was always proud a Yuki. You'd hardly even know he's Finnish! Never hung around the Finnish hall, makin' drunken speeches and carryin' on like others I could name. He worked hard at fittin' in..." (33). The play's problematization of past attitudes toward immigrants resurfaces later in the play, when Mike Sholer, Larry Bender, and Jimmy Cannon discuss the topic:

Sholer: They hoard it [=money] up so they can bring another gang over on the next boat. Immigrants! Mark my words. The D.P.s are takin' over the country.

Bender: Your old man was a D.P., Sholer.

Sholer: Well, so what? I was born here! I belong here! Folks are asking me to run for the Conservatives.

Cannon: They don't give a damn if he's German! Right, Mike?

Sholer: I'm not German. My father was Austrian! And a land-owner, not some bog Irish peasant—! (56)

While the play calls attention to these attitudes, it also reinforces them by shifting ultimate attention in the play away from Jaanus—portrayed as exotic and unfathomable—toward his Anglo neighbor Larry, whose enlightened attitudes and goodwill underscore the notion of the basic decency of the ordinary Canadian. *The Shipbuilder* is a play more about Canadian identity than about Finnish identity or heritage.

## Stephen Surjik's *Shipbuilder*, 1985

In 1985, Mitchell returned to the topic of Sukanen with a short screenplay entitled *Shipbuilder* (Surjik 1985). The directorial debut of Regina-born Stephen Surjik, with production and cinematography by Charles Konowal, the National Film Board of Canada-financed six-minute short recounts Sukanen's story from the point of view of a young rural girl who witnesses in wistful admiration and eventual sorrow Tom's ceaseless efforts to build his ship. Narrated by Icelandic Canadian poet and novelist Kristjana Gunnars, the film invokes the Finnish identity of Tom and his community as a given: "He had *sisu* when other Finns had forgotten the spirit of bravery. And because they forgot no one could help." As the watching young narrator, played by Sasha Konowal, looks on, a lone RCMP officer is depicted approaching, shown only by his boots, uniform and hat, as the narrator recounts: "They came and took him away to the Battleford Asylum. That must have broken him. Within a year he was dead." The film closes with a closeup on a historical photograph of Sukanen as the fictive narrator asserts: "But I know he never quit traveling on his journey, because his dream did carry him home to Suomi." With its haunting soundtrack featuring cello and strings by Marcelle Nokony and Greg Zuck, vivid scenes of horses straining to pull the ship's massive keel across the prairie, gruesome images of the narrator inspecting the remains of one of Tom's dead horses, and images of actor Galen Wahlmeier endlessly at work forging and hammering, the short film encapsulates many of the key elements of the Sukanen story that will recur in later productions.

## Andreas Schroeder's *Dust-Ship Glory*, 1986

If Mitchell's portrayals, like that of Sukanen museum pamphlet, portray Tom Sukanen sympathetically, Andreas Schroeder's *Dust-Ship Glory* (1986) takes a different tack. In the preface to his novel, the British Columbia-based Schroeder recounts first sight of the "utterly and splendidly incongruous and absurd...Sontianen" [sic.] at its roadside site on a drive through Saskatchewan. A well-established novelist and professor of creative writing, Schroeder became immediately intrigued by the story of the "obstreperous" Sukanen, writing: "For a few weeks of reckless optimism, I actually thought I might have run into a story virtually full blown, every writer's fondest fantasy, having only to set pen to paper and take dictation" (viii). Soon, however, Schroeder writes, it became clear that telling Sukanen's story would involve more effort than mere documentation: "Old-timers' recollections often proved secondhand and hazy. There had clearly been an attempt, by certain people, to soften and warm Sukanen's caustic personality until he'd become alarmingly reasonable and



even altruistic —a virtual St. Christopher” (viii). While not noting Mitchell’s play, Schroeder recounts interviewing Mullin as well as other locals who had known Sukanen personally. Presenting accounts he had heard in partially fictionalized form, he asserts: “I am...convinced that this portrait bears a closer resemblance to the real Tom Sukanen than most of his contemporaries, friend or foe, have been prepared to countenance” (ix).

The resulting novel portrays Sukanen as taciturn, stubborn, and often disagreeable, surrounded by a vindictive and unwelcoming local community that deeply resents Sukanen’s singularity. The opening scene of the novel depicts locals arriving at Sukanen’s camp to deride him and attempt to burn his ship. Sukanen resists brutally, using one of the men’s bodies to smother the fire, leaving the man badly burned, an event that is referenced in far less graphic terms in *“Together at Last”* (Mullin et al. 9-10). When Sukanen attempts to find out why the vandals have chosen to target him, the badly injured Kleppner hisses:

“Just who the hell . . . d’ya think . . . y’are?” Sukanen unstiffened, perplexed.

“It’s you that’s ... buildin’ ... that’s buildin’ the goddamn thing! Eh? It’s you that’s ... buildin’ it ...” Sukanen regarded Kleppner doubtfully, as if the incongruously plucked and singed harvest-hand had just handed him a hammer and called it a saw. “What makes ya ... think ... you’re so piss-assed special!” (9-10)

The irritation that men in the community show toward Sukanen and his project is slight, however, in comparison with the unbridled animosity displayed by women, a tendency that Tom, and the broader novel, amply return. Female characters are portrayed as dictatorial, emotionally abusive, and irrational, with the underlying suggestion that the harsh conditions of the drought-stricken prairie have pushed them over the edge. As Tom’s friend Vihtori opines, after reflecting on his wife’s mysterious practice of saving chicken bones to hang in trees, “Sometimes I wonder whether women belong on the prairie at all, you know. Maybe this isn’t the right place for them” (48). Tom readily agrees. His own wife, the novel details, permitted him only sporadic access to her bed for the purpose of begetting children, and refused to let him interact with the three children which eventually resulted before she dismissed him entirely. He is frequently reported by narrators in the novel as calling women “witches” and suspecting them of spoiling his livestock and seed. In interspersed first-person testimonies by various community women characters scattered throughout the novel, we see an element of truth in Tom’s assertions: their words are spiteful, meddling, backbiting, and histrionic.

Schroeder's negative portrayal extends to the entire fictionalized settlement of Manybones. As one of the characters puts it: "And Manybones is gone now, but even in its day it was a miserable little hole, full of fussy little people with fussy little fates. It seems like no one ever got what they were after" (159-160). Tom's role in the community, Schroeder seems to suggest, is to challenge conventional wisdom and practice, or, as his friend Vihtori puts it, "plough the ground":

Suddenly he [Vihtori] realized also, it became clear to him that he felt, that such people [as Tom] should be, in some way, protected. More for everyone else's sake, maybe, than for their own. That the trouble they caused was actually important. That they ploughed the ground (129).

Schroeder portrays Tom's Finnishness in large measure as a feature observed from the outside. When Tom is depicted speaking Finnish to his brother and neighbors, he speaks in clear and polished English, but when speaking to Anglo-Canadians, Schroeder presents his English as broken and at times barely comprehensible. An interview at the mental hospital concerning his plans for his ship illustrates:

How did you expect to get your ship to the river? *I am be draw it. I have-it three horse, but when I come in spring they kill-it some. No horse there now.*

What killed them? *I don't am know. I don't am see. It am be in the yard. Another one they kill-it. It was be hurt on prairie and come home. It sticked from foot right in heart.*

I'm not sure I follow. Are you saying someone or something killed your horses? *This horse all dead now. I don't am seeing them. Sometimes I be hear-it something, something. Maybe womans, maybe-so. Egyptians.*

Egyptians? Kylla. *Egyptians. Egyptians.* (243)

Schroeder presents locals' stereotyped views of Finns. A worker at the railroad station where Tom's supply of metal was delivered states: "Of course these cross-grained Finlanders were known to be like that. Had their own ideas about everything, and once they had them, it was game over. You showed them a chicken and they'd argue it was a goddamn egg" (18). He later observes: "they were handy buggers, these Finlanders, when it came to monkey-wrenching"

(29). A nurse from the hospital remarks: “Those Finnish people, you know, there’s sometimes something very dour about them” (248). Reflecting Anglo-Canadian distrust of Finnish socialist tendencies, a former Manybones resident quips: “We’d rib’m a little bit, you know, about bein’ a pinko an’ that sort of stuff—most alla them Finlanders was commies at the time; cops hadda shut down their hall, everythin’ — but hoo boy, he sure could get touchy when he got poked” (78). And even the Finnish-Canadian Christina Thorndike remarks about Tom’s behavior: “That isn’t just *sisu*, that’s demented!” (219).

Tom’s dealings with Anglo authorities comes most poignantly portrayed in his unsuccessful attempt to retrieve his son, Einar Roanen, who has placed an ad in a Finnish newspaper seeking his father. Tom rigs up a feeding mechanism for his livestock and walks to Minnesota, where he is prevented by the authorities from bringing his son to Canada and is instead imprisoned and barred re-entry into the USA. Schroeder portrays the court record of Sukanen’s plea for parental rights:

D. Sukanen: You tell-it me what you be do-it now mine boy.  
 M. Kelly: You are not owed any explanations on the matter, Mr. Sukanen, as I’ve already told you. But I’m sure he’ll be properly taken care of. (96)

A similar officiousness characterizes the actions of the local Canadian judge who insists that Tom be institutionalized, against the protests of a sympathetic RCMP corporal. Tom’s singularity is an inconvenience and embarrassment, and consignment to a mental hospital removes him from public notice. Tom eventually lapses into a months-long catatonic state, staring vacantly while occasionally regaining enough consciousness to make small carvings of objects like his beloved ship, most of which the nurses dispose of in the ward’s woodstove.

In 2018, Elaine M. Will produced a graphic novel adaptation of Schroeder’s novel. While closely relying on her source text for most details, Will creates a more sympathetic ending for the work, in which Tom’s friend Vihtori visits him in the hospital. Vihtori enters into Tom’s catatonic imaginative world, in which both men cling to the remains of Tom’s ship, now destroyed at sea. Vihtori is distraught at the loss of the ship but Tom takes it in stride, reflecting simply “It’s all right, Vihtori, you’ve got to be prepared for these sorts of things.” As Tom drifts toward the afterlife, Vihtori calls after him: “Go without me and don’t be scared.” Tom’s makes his final reply, in a voice of final contentment: “It’s beautiful.”

## Chrystene Ells's *The Death of Tom Sukanen*, 2014

A generation after Mitchell's play, Chrystene Ells' film *Sisu: The Death of Tom Sukanen* (2014) provides both an updating and a re-Finnicizing of the Sukanen narrative. The film focuses on Sukanen's final days in the North Battleford mental hospital, where the troubled Tom experiences traumatic memories and dramatized flashbacks that acquaint the viewer with his childhood in Finland, his immigration to America (to escape Russian conscription), his marriage to a Finnish wife (Katja), his decision to homestead in Saskatchewan, the death of his son, and elements of his storied life after arriving in Macrorie. Ells intercuts Sukanen's story with moments from the *Kalevala*, inventively and evocatively illustrated with Ells's own cartooning, and backed by a sound track that includes folk fiddling and the Värttinä-like vocal performances of the Finnish women's a capella ensemble Me Naiset.

In the liner notes to her film DVD, Ells notes that she first heard about Sukanen and the Sontiainen during her childhood in rural Alberta. After a successful artistic career in San Francisco working as an illustrator and puppeteer, Ells returned to Canada, eventually settling in Regina, where she enrolled in an MFA program at the University of Regina. *Sisu* was her MFA capstone project. Her work on the film included travel to Finland, extensive conversations with Sukanen family members and former neighbors, and collaboration with hundreds of volunteers and friends.

Ells's liner notes to her film DVD correct some of the erroneous information provided in "*Together at Last*." Tom's original Finnish name is cited as Damianus Aho Sukanen, and he is said to have met and married his wife Sanna-Liisa Rintala in Finland rather than in Minnesota. Original photographs of Tom and his ship have been supplied by Tom's granddaughter Nina Peacock. The notes also detail a key element of Ells's approach to the narrative:

One of the primary questions people ask me is whether I think Tom Sukanen was crazy or a genius, as if that is all there might be to the story, and until my research trip to Finland in 2007 I did not have an answer. In Helsinki, I met a woman who listened to the story of Tom Sukanen with great interest, and then responded "Yes, it makes perfect sense." People have said a lot of things about Tom's story, but no one has ever said it makes sense. She explained that, in her opinion, Finnish men, while traditionally masculine, are also deeply sentimental; therefore she viewed Tom's act of embarking on an epic, poetic, and nearly impossible task following personal tragedy as a natural reaction for a Finnish man. In other words, the

genius Tom Sukanen was perhaps not crazy, but simply Finnish. (6)

Viewing Sukanen through the lens of fragile masculinity, dramatized poignantly and wryly in contemporary Finland through the films of Aki Kaurismäki (Nestingen), Markku Pölönen (DuBois 2005), and others, Ells provides a new framework for understanding Sukanen, one consonant with contemporary Finnish (and potentially also Finnish-Canadian) culture. Listening to the woman in Helsinki, Ells allows modern Finnish understandings to throw new light back on the ambiguous story of a long-dead Tom Sukanen.

At the same time, Ells makes ample and prominent use of the more tried-and-true Finnish-North American notion of *sisu* (Aho 1994), featured in the very title of the film. Covered in passing in Mitchell's earlier works, and obliquely in Schroeder's novel, Ells's film includes extended dialogues in which Tom explains the concept of *sisu* to his young son before leaving for Canada, and in which Tom and his wife argue about whether his actions actually constitute true *sisu* or not. Speaking to his son Taivo with a slow and heavy Finnish accent, the character Tom states: "You are Finn, Taivo. You have *sisu*. *Sisu* is what get a Finn through life. A Finn never give up. Always keep going. Even if he is dying he don't give up." After a long musical sequence depicting the youthful Tom making the arduous trek from Minnesota to Saskatchewan by foot (a detail also recounted in "*Together at Last*" as well as *Dustship Glory*) a bed-ridden elderly, institutionalized Tom is depicted stating in humorous reflection: "I remember walking six hundred miles. *Sisu*. Why not take train?" Tom's *sisu* is closely linked in the film to his stubbornness and persistence, both depicted as ultimately fatal to Tom but nevertheless characteristically Finnish.

Ells's directorial choice to depict Tom as driven by deep sentimentality and yet ruled by the strictures of *sisu* make her film's main character more recognizable and familiar to a Finnish and Finnish-Canadian audience, retrieving the narrative from the well-meaning but sometimes farfetched exoticism of Moon Mullin, the Anglocentric Canadian allegory of Ken Mitchell, and the individualist ethos of *The West Show* and Andreas Schroeder. As Ells puts it: "I realized that establishing a connection between Tom and his Finnish cultural heritage was more than a flavoring, but in fact one of the primary pins that...hold the film together."

At the same time, however, Tom, his wife, and mother (the latter two only glimpsed in flashbacks) are the only characters in the film portrayed as ethnically Finnish. The film includes no portrayal of Tom's brother Svante, who lived alongside him in Saskatchewan, and whose children closely and frequently interacted with him. And although the character of Tom's real-life neighbor and friend Vic Markkula plays a prominent role in the film as Tom's observer and occasional defender, Vic speaks with no accent and dresses and acts much

like the other Anglo-Canadians of the film. Ells's Vic largely repeats the sympathetic Stenner of *The West Show* or Larry Bender of *The Shipbuilder*. In confining Finnishness to Tom alone, the film partially continues the tendency to isolate and exoticize Tom Sukanen as a mysterious other, utterly unlike his more run-of-the-mill Anglo-Canadian neighbors, who are puzzled, sometimes bedazzled, and ultimately troubled by his unexpected and seemingly erratic behaviors.

## Martin and Fogliato's *Mad Ship*, 2012

In 1993, Toronto-based David Martin and Patricia Fogliato formed Enigmatico Films, eventually co-writing a screenplay that became the basis for the 2012 film *Mad Ship* (Martin). Like Schroeder's earlier *Dustship Glory*, the film's advertising notes that it is based on a true story, but *Mad Ship* takes far more license with its narrative than previous renderings of the Sukanen story, making its characters Norwegian and relocating their prairie experience to Manitoba. Michael Marshall's cinematography also gestures strongly to Nordic film in palette, staging, and lighting.

The film begins in a windswept and wet coastal Norway, where Tomas Sorensen (played by Nikolaj Lie Kaas), convinces his skeptical wife Solveig (Line Verndal) that they should take up farming in North America. A confident Tomas promises that they can return to Norway if things don't work out. Together with their children Petter and Liv (Gage Munroe and Lane Styles), they initially make a good go of farming in Manitoba, but two years of drought and an impatient bank create a financial and familial crisis. Tomas journeys to the city to seek wages to pay off the bank loans, gaining skills in coffin-making and embalming and enduring the unwanted sexual advances of his employer (Rachel Blanchard). Solveig remains behind at the farm, where she struggles to make ends meet while a sleezy banker (Gil Bellows) threatens foreclosure and, similarly, makes unwanted sexual advances. When Tomas eventually returns home, he finds his wife dead and his distraught children orphaned. In a fevered attempt to return Solveig's body to her beloved Norway, Tomas dismantles the farm buildings, ignores his children's welfare, and begins to construct a ship to follow a route reminiscent of that which Sukanen may have intended in his plans to reach Hudson Bay and then the Atlantic. Laying Solveig's coffin on the ship he has laboriously constructed, Tomas doggedly drags his contraption across the prairie, trailed by his weary and hungry children who are unable to reason with him. The striking images of Tomas's efforts to drag his ship recall similar scenes in the 1985 *Shipbuilder* but are rendered in a far slower and more dramatic fashion. In her 2013 review of the film, Linda Barnard writes: "The sight of the makeshift ship being dragged across the prairie towards and unseen

river on a farm cart, Tomas pulling like a beast while his resigned children follow, makes for a truly cinematic moment.” *Mad Ship* is a dark exploration of economic and sexual abuse and resulting madness, one that seems designed to shed light on the exploitation undergone by migrants in the past and present.

In altering the narrative’s ethnic and regional details, making Tomas intensely (obsessively) devoted to his wife, and presenting his shipbuilding as the unambiguous product of madness, *Mad Ship* departs markedly from earlier renderings of the Sukanen-Sontiainen story. In earlier portrayals, Tom is always described, for better or for worse, as a Finn, and the drought-ridden Coteau of the 1930s Saskatchewan is always described, for better or for worse, as central to the story. In earlier portrayals, Tom’s married life is acknowledged as an unmitigated disaster, and the question of his possible insanity is typically left for the contemplation and conjecture of the audience.

Mortin and Fogliato’s transformations of Sukanen’s story are paralleled by the film’s transformation of the Sontiainen: the filmic ship bears little resemblance to the vessel preserved outside of Moose Jaw: sleek, wooden, masted, and mounted on a wagon, the filmic version resembles more a Viking knarr than Tom Sukanen’s decidedly modern and immensely heavy iron steamship. The process of its construction unfolds rapidly rather than in the years-long inchingly piecemeal fashion of the actual Sontiainen. And where a scoffing community in earlier versions of the narrative endlessly puzzle over the motivation for and practical errors of Tom Sukanen’s mysterious plans for building, transporting, and ultimately employing his ship, Tomas’s purely deranged intent and plans are never at doubt among those who witness his futile attempt to return to Norway. *Mad Ship* is untethered from either the material or immaterial moorings of earlier versions, transforming into a story that suggests but no longer attempts to reproduce, the narrative and images familiar to anyone who has visited the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum. These alterations make the film both a transgression of, and release from, the putative historicity of earlier renderings.

At the same time, this unmooring, this uncoupling of the narrative from its historical antecedents and the physical remains of the Sontiainen, can permit the story to assume new meanings. As actor Gil Bellows comments in an interview made at the time of the film’s premier, the film begs for “an appreciation and responsibility for the sacrifices that people made to come to this country. Maybe look at the people you love in your life and think, ‘Would I go to some of these lengths to be there for the people that I love the way that these characters do for the people that they love?’” (Noe).

**Hanna Kirjavainen’s *Sontiainen – balladi koti-ikävästä*  
[The Sontiainen—A Ballad of Homesickness], 2020**

On February 5, 2020, just on the eve of the arrival of the devastating Covid-19 pandemic that affected Finland as well as the rest of the world, the small Helsinki theater Teatteri Avoimet Ovet [Open Doors Theater] debuted a new musical entitled *Sonttiainen – balladi koti-ikävästä* [The Sonttiainen—A Ballad of Homesickness] (Kirjavainen). Written and directed by Finnish dramatuge Hanna Kirjavainen, the play's advertisement calls it “Tragikoominen ja rouhea” [tragicomic and gritty]. It is also decidedly jaunty, combining details of Sukanen's difficult life with tunes and lyrics drawn from Finnish folk music, particularly as presented in J. Karjalainen's two Finnish-Americana albums: *Lännen-Jukka* (2006) and *Polkabilly Rebels* (2010). If Finnish themes are marginalized or misrepresented in earlier retellings of the Sukanen story, here they are made central, as Kirjavainen's text emphasizes Tom's socialist leanings and Finnish-American identity, while making ample use of Finnish-American music and language.

In Kirjavainen's narrative, Tom arrives in Ellis Island at the age of 35, identifying his profession in his immigration interview as a ship builder. He is also obliged to designate his racial identity from a long list of profiles read off to him by the immigration agent. Before completing his processing, he witnesses the ill luck of his former girlfriend Katri, whose husband Matti is denied entry because of trachoma. Once in New York, Tom encounters his brother Ilmo along with his pregnant partner Maria. The couple are not married, since, as Ilmo and Maria inform Tom, they are socialists now and don't believe in the institution of marriage. The couple are star struck in seeing the Finnish politician Leo Laukki who has also just arrived from Finland. Laukki (1880-1938) was active in communist circles in Finland, the USA, and the Soviet Union. He figures later in the play as a recruiter, seeking volunteers who are willing to leave Saskatchewan and the Upper Midwest to help build Soviet Karelia.

In Duluth, Tom meets a Finnish-American Kerttu and the two fall in love. Kerttu is from a mining family but runs a business making syrup. She uses an abundance of Finnish-American words in her speech: *ruuminkihaussi* for “rooming house,” *paateeraa* for “bother,” *Dädi* for her bedridden father, *peipi* for “baby,” etc. She is a devoted and understanding spouse although given to frustration at Tom's endless planning of machines and failure to mind the boiling syrup. When Ilmo abandons Maria and his children—making Maria an “elävän leski” [widow to a living person]—Kerttu and Tom assume economic responsibility for them, straining their budget and leading Tom to decide to try to homestead in Saskatchewan. Leaving Kerttu and their newborn son behind, Tom leaves, promising to return to bring the family north. When Tom promises “Minä rakennan sulle sinne kotimaan” [I will build a homeland for you there] Kerttu poignantly replies: “Minä vaan oisin niin halunnu olla sun kotimaa” [I



just would have wanted to be your homeland]. With Tom's leaving, Kerttu too becomes, like Maria, what Finnish migration historians, drawing on Finnish folk songs, term "Amerikan leskit" ("America widows"): women whose husbands have disappeared and who cannot legally or socially move forward in their lives without knowing whether their husbands' fates (DuBois and Cederström 18-19, 52-53). After years without word, she writes:

KERTTU

Rakas Puoliso. Odotan sanaa sulta, mutta sanaa ei tule. Pelkään että oot kuollut. Jos taas olet elossa, mikä kamala lasti niskassas painaa? Sellainen, joka erottaa meidät? Auta että ymmärrän miksi sinä et vastaa. Minä oon uskollisna sulle! Sun rakastava vaimosi, Kerttu.

Dear husband. I wait for a word from you, but no word comes. I fear that you have died. If you are still alive, what horrible burden are you having to shoulder? One that separates us. Help me to understand why you do not answer. I have been faithful to you! Your loving wife, Kerttu.

In Kirjavainen's script, Tom's (and Ilmo's) marital life become not mysterious enigmas but a familiar feature of the historical experience of Finnish migration to North America. After their deaths, Katri, Maria, and Kerttu together form a sometimes mocking, sometimes reproachful ghostly chorus in the play, a parallel to the weird sisters of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. And in the play's ending, after Tom has died trying to complete his ship, his ghost agrees to let the three female ghosts accompany him on his journey to the afterlife. Kirjavainen's text creates a different meaning for the earlier pamphlet's title "Together at Last."

While homesteading in Saskatchewan, Tom is shown to be highly successful in producing many needed and appreciated inventions and in farming. He occasionally begins to write to Kerttu but then fails to follow through. After six years, he returns to Duluth to retrieve his family, only to discover that Kerttu and his child have died. He returns distraught to Saskatchewan, where he begins to build his ship. Throughout the play, Kirjavainen does not shy from depicting the rampant racism Finns faced in North America: from the Ellis Island questioning of Tom's race, to the derogatory statements made about Finns by characters (e.g. "Finskit sikiää ku rotat" [Finskies breed like rats]), to observations of the ways Finns were excluded from employment because of their socialist tendencies, Kirjavainen states plainly what characters or authors of other versions of the Sukanen story voice only more cryptically.

J. Karjalainen's two albums tend toward the lighthearted in comparison with some of the more poignant songs that were born of the great Finnish

migration to North America (Leary 2015, DuBois and Cederström). The play deploys the songs in sometimes ironizing manner. When depicting the arrival of the “Better Farming Train,” meant to educate Canadian prairie settlers about the science and innovations of modern agriculture, the play features a song which appears on the *Polkabilly Rebels* as track 1, a jocular piece that J. Karjalainen learned from James P. Leary’s field recording of “Jingo” Viitala Vachon’s performance of it in Toivola, MI, in 1981. Leary included it as “Sian Tappaiset” [Pig Slaughter] in his 1986 album *Accordions in the Cutover: Field Recordings of Ethnic Music from Lake Superior’s South Shore*. Mount Horeb: Wisconsin Folklife Center, (LP 2 side D, cut 6), which Leary shared with Karjalainen during the latter’s research in preparation for his album. In the play, the wild and humorous exaggerations of the song’s massive pig slaughter and all the meat it supplies provides a wry rejoinder to the equally farfetched promises of prosperity and security promised by the Better Farming Train.

Although the play makes ample reference to such Canadian details, including mention of the famed Ontario scientist William Saunders (1822-1900) and the Red Fife strain of wheat he helped develop, reviews of the play make no reference to Canadian elements. A blog review posted by “Veikka” on the site Me Viisi on February 6, 2020 notes: “Tom... ei tiedä, onko suomalainen vai yhdysvaltalainen” [Tom doesn’t know if he is Finnish or from the USA]. In a review published in the online journal *Demokraatti* dated February 26, 2020, Rolf Bamberg describes Tom philosophically as: “yhtäaikaa karskina puurtajana ja haaveellisena utopistina. Faabelin muurahainen ja heinäsiirkka elävät samassa persoonassa” [at once an industrious worker and a dreamy utopianist. The fabled ant and grasshopper rolled into one]. And although various reviewers draw comparisons between Tom and refugees of the European migration crisis, they do not mention the environmental crisis in which Tom’s story unfolded on the prairie of Saskatchewan, or the historical significance of that protracted drought for the identity of people living in the province today, or for their approaches to the story and ship memorialized at the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum.

In many ways, Tom Sukanen and his Sontiainen have become vessels carrying a cargo of heritage for Saskatchewan Canadians, Canadians more generally, Finnish Canadians, and Finns. Although certainly linked to the history of Finnish immigration to the Canadian plains, the ship, its preservation, display, and artistic interpretation become emblems of something more elusive: a notion of individual will and collective destiny in times of environmental stress and cultural conflict. The repurposing of Tom Sukanen’s ill-fated obsession constitutes an interesting focus of research for scholars and practitioners of heritage studies today, an illustration of the sometimes-unlikely symbolism and resonances that preserved artifacts can acquire among people seeking to commemorate and celebrate an imagined and shared past.

## NOTES

1. My title pays tribute to Arnold Alanen's "Little Houses on the Prairie" (Alanen 2005), itself an allusion to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder 1935), which appeared around the same time that Tom Sukanen was building his boat. In writing this article, my gratitude goes to John Nilson, who first introduced me to the Sukanen Ship Pioneer Village and Museum and the Sontiainen.

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