



The Age Of The Knife Fighters

by Lani K. Thompson

Introduction

The Age of the Knife Fighters was a unique period of Finnish history that began around 1790 and ran around 100 years. During this time, the murder rate increased sharply, with approximately 2000 murders committed in the Southern Ostrobothnian re-



Knife fighters Antti_Rannanjärvi_and_Antti_Isotalo

gion, or around 10 murders per year per 100,000 people. The increase in crime only affected this one area. Violent crime in the rest of the country was relatively low during the same time. Other crimes like assaults, robbery and gambling were also high in Southern Ostrobothnia.

Reasons

Many reasons have been postulated for the high number of homicides during this time. Veli Verkko attributes it to the violent genetic nature of the Southern Ostrobothnian people, along with their inability to tolerate alcohol. Kustaa Vilkuna, an ethnographer who wrote *The Knife Boys*, *Money Weddings*, and *The Pietists*, theorizes that the custom of selling alcohol at weddings, in order to raise money for the bride and groom, gave rise to the knife fighters. Yrjö Alanen argued that the Southern Ostrobothnians started fighting with knives when Romany arrived in the region and fought in the market place. Other theories revolved around the 1808-09 war with Russia. Russian grain became cheaper than Finnish grain so domestic grain was sold to make alcohol. Because Southern Ostrobothnia was so isolated, the people there kept the alcohol they made and drank it themselves. Other theories revolved around the custom of holding inter-village fights, the low standards and cowardice of government officials, the custom of wearing knives as part of the folk costume at festive occasions, and attempts by the peasant class to free themselves from orthodox thinking.

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“Going ‘Round the Villages”

Knife fights occurred at social events like dances and weddings. They also broke out during card

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A Brief Look At Puukkos

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Introduction

The Finnish puukko or sheath-knife is an all-purpose tool and a symbol of Finnish heritage, but it's also a dangerous weapon. According to the National Board of Antiquities, as of 2007, puukkos were used to commit 1/3 of all murders in Finland. In addition, they were the weapon used in 3/4 of all attempted homicides. In Finland, it's not legal to possess a puukko in a public place.

Appearance

Puukkos are short knives with a handle around 4 inches in length and a single blade that's even shorter. Traditionally, puukkos have birch handles, or handles made from other types of wood, and the word "puukko" originally meant a "knife with a wooden handle". Other materials traditionally used include elk horn or bone, although modern knives are often made with plastic handles.

History

Puukkos dating back to medieval times have been found in archeological excavations of towns and castles. Local puukko making traditions began evolving during the 18th and 19th centuries. In the early 1800's, Fiskars ironworks began manufacturing puukko knives about 62 miles west of Helsinki. By the middle of the 18th century, southern Ostrobothnia became a major knife manufacturing center. In 2007, there were 5 puukko factories and around 40 small scale puukko-makers in Finland.

Uses

Puukkos make good wood-carving tools and are used to make wooden spoons, containers, birch-bark objects and other items. Fishermen, soldiers and hunters all carry them. In addition, they've been used as cutlery and to prepare food. Puukkos are worn as part of the national costume and are seen as both a practical object and an object of art.

Knife Fighters

The Southern Ostrobothnian region of Finland is famous for its puukkojunkkari, or knife-fighters who were active

in that region during the 19th century. Knife-fighters caused trouble at weddings and funerals and had a reputation for stealing and chasing after women. Famous knife-fighters like Antti Isotalo and Antti Rannanjärvi were immortalized in popular songs that are still sung today.

References

1. [National Board of Antiquities: Exhibition Archive 2007 – Puukko, The Finnish Sheath Knife](#); Risto Hakomäki; 2007
2. [The Puukko Knife of Härmä](#); Rannanjärvi-Laukanen; 2000



A Kauhava puukko knife made in 1892 by Juho Kustaa Lammi. Housed at the National Museum of Finland. More pictures available at the [National Board of Antiquities](#).

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Wilho Saari Named Performer of the Year - 2011

Wilho Saari, a master kantele player and composer from Naselle, Washington was named as a 2011 Performer of the Year by the National Finlandia Foundation. Saari grew up in a house of kantele players and his great-great grandmother was Kreetta Haapasalo, one of Finland's best known players and composer of Mun Kanteleeni (My Kantele). However, Saari, who is self-taught, didn't start playing kantele until he was 50 years old.



Saari has a BA in Music Education from Seattle Pacific College and teaches kantele to students around the country. He plays in the "Haapevsi" style, holding his kantele with the long strings closest to him and, when playing the 10 string, is a plucker, not a strummer.

In addition to playing kantele, Saari composes music and has over 2400 tunes to his credit. In 2010, 365 of his compositions were collected in a book called "Tune-a-Day", which was published by Dr. Arja Kastinen. Saari has also recorded two CDs.

In 2006, Saari received a National Endowment for the

Arts Heritage Fellowship and he is also a former recipient of a Washington state Governor's Heritage award for his work as a kantele teacher.

As performer of the year, Saari will travel throughout the country, and will be performing at FinnFest USA 2011 in San Diego between August 12-14 and at Finger Lakes Finns in Ithica, New York on September 18.

For more info about Wilho Saari, read "[This Makes Me So Quiet](#)" and an interview he did with the [National Endowment For The Arts](#).



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games, in drinking places, at market or home, or in the road. However, the majority of knife fights happened when gangs of young men traveled from farm to farm or from village to village. This custom of “going ‘round the villages” started out as a way for young people to get together to sing and dance, but it became a way for them to acquire liquor. Young men would decide to “go ‘round the villages” after they’d already gathered for a dance, a funeral, an auction or some other social event. Gangs would descend on a farmhouse and either ask for or demand a drink. Refusing could mean being assaulted or killed, so “hosts” began selling drinks to their guests. In addition to alcohol, gangs looked for excitement and would go around breaking windows, throwing rocks and logs at houses, pounding on doors and generally causing a disturbance.

Weapons

In his book, *The Knife Fighters*, Heikki Ylikangas examines the methods and weapons the knife fighters used to commit murder. Surprisingly, according to him, knives were only used about 16 percent of the time. The weapon most commonly used was a “wooden striking instrument”, like a piece of fencing, firewood, or a stake. Other weapons included crow-bars, pothooks, pokers, axes and weighted whips. Some killings were even done by unarmed men who suffocated, punched or kicked their victims to death.

Fighters

Most knife fighters were young men, and gangs were usually formed by the sons of farmers and by hired hands. Crofters and soldiers also joined gangs. Farmers didn’t usually join but, when they did, they usually became leaders because of their higher social position. Victims of gang killings varied, depending on the social rank of the gang leader. Individual knife fighters who committed murder, were more likely to be farmers, and their victims were more likely to be from the same social class as they were. As the Age of the Knife Fighters progressed, relations between farm hands and other

groups, including farmers, sons of farmers and crofters began to deteriorate and both killers and victims were more likely to be farmhands.

The Age Of The Bad Men

Soldiers played an important role during this time period. They were one of the first groups to start fighting with knives. They were an independent group, not answerable to a single master as other groups were. Because it was hard to find men to serve in the army, it wasn’t easy to discharge soldiers who abused their positions. These ‘bad’ soldiers became models for some of the worst crimes. The term *puukko-junkkari*, or knife-fighter, was originally a term that people of the time gave to military units that deteriorated into bands of criminals. Knife fighters were highly condemned, and most people of the time period referred to this age as the Age of the Bad Men.

Final Thoughts

If the knife fighters were so terrible, and by all accounts they were, why do people admire them, and sing songs about their horrifying deeds? In *Stubborn and Silent Finns With ‘Sisu’ In Finnish-American Literature*, Raija Taramaa writes about the Finnish knife, or puukko as a symbol of a free man, and a way for him to defend his honor. Finns place a high value on freedom and honor. Perhaps, when they sing songs of Antti Isotalo and Antti Rannanjärvi, they do not applaud the crimes these men committed. They raise a toast to the spirit of freedom and independence that the knife fighters have come to symbolize.

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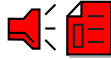
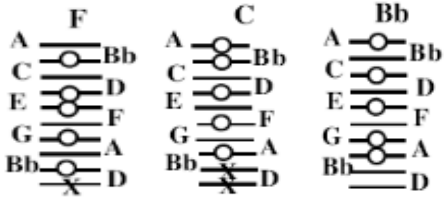
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Tune Kantele To F

Isontalon Antii



Traditional Finnish Folksong
 Arranged by Lani K. Thompson
 English Translation by Harri Siitonen

1 F C Bb

I - son - tal - on Ant - ti and Ran - nan - jär - vi were talk - ing to one an -

4 F C Bb F

- oth - er. You — kill — Kau - ha - va's ug — ly — sher - rif and

7 C F

I'll — wed his hand . some wid - dow.

:::Isontalon Antti and Rannanjärvi
 were talking to one another.:::
 :::You kill Kauhava's ugly sheriff,
 and I'll wed his handsome widow.:::

:::First the stairs were smashed to bits
 and only then the wallboards.:::
 :::Isontalon Antti walked in the lead
 the biggest of the brawlers.:::

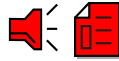
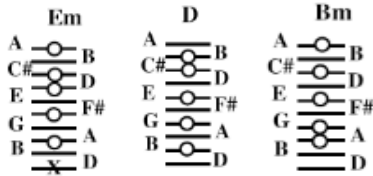
:::The blood of Vassa does not tremble
 nor rusts a Kauhava steel blade.:::
 :::Grab his neck, stick a knife in his back
 if he otherwise doesn't heed you.:::

:::Do not talk against Rannanjärvi
 since Rannanjärvi is dead now.:::
 :::In Rannanjärvi's graveyard plot
 a marble statue stands now.:::

Tune Kantele To Bm

Teemu Teekkari (Drinking Song)

Traditional Finnish Folksong
Arranged by Lani K. Thompson
English Translation by Harri Siitonen



1 ♩ = 108

Em D Em D Em

So out to sea we sailed now boys. Hur -
And there I found what I had sought. Hur -
Let's throw our lot to geth - er now. Hur -
Now, be - fore I end this song of mine. Hur -

4 D Em D Em

- rah, hur - rah, a gain hur - rah, to look for hap -
- rah, hur - rah, a gain hur - rah. I've got - ten my cheer
- rah, hur - rah, a gain hur - rah. We'll drink as long
- rah, hur - rah, a gain hur - rah. I'll e - ven teach

7 Bm En Bn En Bn En

- pi - ness on the waves, how hap - py we are now. x4
- ful na - ture back, how hap - py I am now. x4
as we're a - live, how hap - py we are now. x4
my girl to drink. How hap - py I am now. x4