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Duluth--- Problems with spellings, pronounciations and immigration officers caused many Finnish people to change their surnames when they came to the United States.

Donald W. Larmouth, instructor in English at the University of Minnesota, Duluth, explains how this happened in an article, "Finnish Surname Change in Northern Minnesota" published in the current issue of American Speech magazine.

Many Finnish names described a place, such as a family homestead. In the name Peramaki, "pera" means "distant" and "maki" means "hill." Because of pressures to simplify their names, Peramaki became Maki and Korpijarvi (korpi "swamp"; jarvi "lake") became Jarvi.

Other Finnish names have what Larmouth calls derivational endings such as "la" or "en," both of which can mean "place of." By dropping the ending, Knuutila thus became Knuuti and Saarinen became Saari.

While less common in Minnesota, some Finnish immigrants merely translated their names into English. Thus, Niemi became Point, and Maki became Hill.

Others changed to names which were similar in sound or easier to spell. For instance, Hannula became Hanson, Mattila became Mattson and Kyro became Johnson.

Larmouth even found a reversal of this process in a northern Swedish resident who ethnically was a Finn, so he changed his name from Peterson to Pekkala!

Larmouth notes, too, that the pressures of the English spelling system caused many "phonological" changes in Finnish surnames. For example, "j" always corresponds to "y" in Finnish (as in Jarvi), but now is pronnounced as a "j."

(more)

He writes that almost half the Finnish people he talked to in Minnesota had not changed their surnames at all, nor had their forbears.

The UMD English instructor says Finnish is widely spoken in Northern Minnesota and that many other Finnish traditions, including the 'sauna' have been maintained over the years.

Continuing such traditions, Larmouth says, is helped by the fact that many Finnish families continue to live on small farms, even though they earn their living in the wood and mining industries.

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