

Interview with Helen Waisanen
Marquette, MI
April 22, 2010

Subject: Aura Jamboree

START OF INTERVIEW

Kathryn Johnson (KJ): Good afternoon, today is April 22nd, 2010. We are in Marquette, Michigan. My name is Kathryn Johnson and I'm interview Helen Waisanen. Helen, what is your full name and what is your birthday?

Helen Waisanen (HW): My full name is Helen Waisanen. My birthday is October 4th, 1928.

KJ: Thank you. Will you spell your last name please?

HW: W-A-I-S-A-N-E-N.

KJ: Okay, great. Thank you, and how are you connected to Aura, Michigan? A-U-R-A.

HW: I married Fred Waisanen who was from Aura and was born and raised in Aura.

KJ: Okay, great. I just thought I'd ask, what is your maiden name and maybe where did you grow up?

HW: My maiden name was Hill, Helen Hill and I grew up in the Ontonagon area.

KJ: Ontonagon, great. Do you have any particular memories of Aura that you would like to share?

HW: Well, we've had a summer home there on Point Abbey for close to 60 years and that's where we would spend summers at the cabin. Then we got involved with the Aura Jamboree.

KJ: Okay, great. We'll jump right into the Jamboree here. Can you tell me about how the Jamboree was started and who were the original organizers?

HW: To start the Aura Jamboree, it began in East Lansing, Michigan where my husband taught at Michigan State and my son was involved with the folk music group in East Lansing and he has some _____ from his folk music group that were interested in starting a Jamboree in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. So, my son John told them to contact his dad and his dad would know a place and one of them, _____, happened to be a student of my husbands also, did come to Fred and asked about the Jamboree and he said, "Yes there is a place in Aura which we'd be happy to have a Jamboree," and that's how it began.

KJ: And what place was that? Was that the Aura community hall?

HW: Yes.

KJ: What was the funding source for the Jamboree?

HW: Donations at the door.

KJ: Oh that's it? No original start up money?

HW: Nope.

KJ: It's a community event.

HW: Right, the people. There were some people that provided. I don't know was it sandwiches or sloppy joes. We made a little money on that for the hall because the hall had no funds at that point.

KJ: What year was this? Do you remember?

HW: I think it was 1976.

KJ: Okay good. Do you remember who the original musicians were, how many there were, how many people attended?

HW: Well, I think that there may have been a dozen or so musicians. The one locally who was involved with it was Helmer Tervis, he was a fiddler and of course, my son knew him and so did my husband. He was willing and there was another one, who has since died, Kenny Salo, among the first in that. I think that was it among the musicians. That first year, I don't think that _____ Tikkanen was also a musician that played with them but I don't remember that he was there the first year. Some of the musicians that we had that first year were from East Lansing. There was a group of them that came and knew my son and knew Bob Fleck and Jane Alice. So, we had a bunch of them.

KJ: So did the musicians just stay with you? I mean, did you host them in your house?

HW: No, they stayed at our cabin, right. So, we had music all night long.

KJ: Oh that's wonderful.

HW: Little sleep, but...

KJ: Music at the hall and then music back at the cabin. That's nice. Do you remember approximately how many people from the community came to attend the event? Was it very small?

HW: It was a small number that first year.

KJ: Do you think it was maybe in the 20 range or was it closer to 100?

HW: I think maybe 20 to 30 people, I don't think it was much more than that.

KJ: And was it just one day?

HW: Yeah, just one day.

KJ: So, when did the Aura Jamboree begin to grow and how did it grow into the community even that it is today?

HW: Well, it struggled for many years and I think that the point that it started to grow was really one year they had a reunion at the L'Anse High School; all school reunion. And they provided some music that many of the people didn't care for, it was rock music or something. I don't remember what it was. A number of people said well, there's a dance in Aura let's go to that. Then it started growing a little more after that.

KJ: So, you just mentioned a dance. Was there always dancing involved along with the music?

HW: There was usually an afternoon performance, and then we had dancing in the evening.

KJ: And the same musicians would perform in the afternoon and evening?

HW: Yes.

KJ: Where do you think everybody learned how to do their dancing?

HW: Well, a lot of them like my husband learned when they went to Pequaming High School. They had ballroom dancing.

KJ: At Pequaming High School, they had ballroom dancing?

HW: Yes because Henry Ford wanted everyone to have ballroom dancing.

KJ: How about that. So they had to learn the waltz and probably a polka?

HW: And then of course, you know, I'm sure when everyone in Aura went to these dances that were always at the hall everybody would dance these dances so that was another way. A lot of people knew how to dance, especially the older immigrants that would dance.

KJ: Do you think the older immigrants learned back in Finland?

HW: I suspect they may have, yes, but they still danced and all their children danced of course because they'd go to dances as children. I don't know how much the husband did because his family was fairly religious.

KJ: Did you ever dance with Fred? Was he a dancer with you? Did you ever learn how to waltz or polka?

HW: Yeah, I did learn at my hometown _____, outside of Ontonagon and we had a hall and that's where I learned how to dance.

KJ: Did you have community music there too? Anything similar?

HW: Yeah, all these communities have ethnic groups and they had their little halls and dances there.

KJ: And out there in ____ was it a Finnish community or...?

HW: It was a Finnish community, yes.

KJ: Okay, so returning back to the Jamboree and how it grew, you had mentioned that the reunion at the L'Anse High School was one big event and now I think it's going into its 34th year. Does that sound about right?

HW: I think it's the 33rd or 34th.

KJ: Okay, so do you remember approximately when that reunion would've been? Was that in the '80s or maybe the '90s?

HW: No, I just don't remember but I think if it was it was the late '80s or early '90s. I think but I just don't remember for sure.

KJ: Okay, so what has been your specific role in organizing the Jamboree over the years?

HW: Well, I sort of sat on the sidelines for a number of years. Fred was doing most of it and working with people at the hall and then after he retired and what was it in '86 when he retired? And we moved to here, Marquette and still continued to go to our summer place and I was no longer teaching. I got stuck on the hall board but I wasn't at a meeting and so, that's when I became more involved.

KJ: And what kinds of things would you do? What kind of hands on work?

HW: Just all kinds of work there. I know one of the first things I did was organize a list of musicians because my husband wasn't very organized in keeping lists with a lot of names when we didn't know where the people were and they deceased or something. So, I was cleaning up the list of names to send invitations. We've always invited musicians to come and asking them if they're coming and say yes or no. So, that we would at least have an idea of how many musicians are actually coming. It's been changed over the years to ask them: when do they want to play and what time of the day and that's so we can get them in the program. In later years too when they have so many musicians, sometimes musicians are a little unhappy because you didn't get us on the program. Well, you never sent in your reply, they learn quickly.

KJ: Do you know how many musicians there are performing today?

HW: I think about 100; I think it's been around that.

KJ: So, it went from just a handful to 100 musicians and now is it a two or a three day event?

HW: It's a day and a half. Friday evening and Saturday and the reason for that is because we had so many musicians and we couldn't get them all on Saturday.

KJ: So then it expanded to Friday night?

HW: Yeah, we start at 5:00 on Friday evening. It can go on until midnight and then Saturday we start at about 10:00, formally start at 10:00.

KJ: So, how is the Jamboree funded? Are the musicians paid at all?

HW: They're paid. They get an entry ticket and 5 dollars worth of tickets for food or drink. That's it.

KJ: So, you think the musicians are going there because it's something that they enjoy doing and they're happy to participate?

HW: I think that's the reason why they come because a lot of them have later gotten invitations to come to the Marquette Hiawatha thing but we don't pay anybody.

KJ: Back to the organizing of it. When they're performing there at the Aura hall, does it have to be rented and is there a cost associated with that? Who organized that?

HW: The Hall Board takes care of the hall and you know, we don't do any rental for the Jamboree, never have. So, it's because it's a hall association.

KJ: Okay, so the hall—it's the Aura Community Hall Association that's actually organizing the Jamboree.

HW: The board members, yes.

KJ: So, they don't have to rent their own hall because it's their hall. So, what are some funding sources for the hall then other than the Jamboree?

HW: Well, one year I think we got some special funding from I think the State of Michigan when Fred was more, I don't know yet, maybe he was still at Michigan State, I don't remember. We were able to get some musicians from Finland and that was by some special funding but other than that the hall has raised all the money for it.

KJ: Just from the community?

HW: Just from all those who come to the Jamboree.

KJ: That's its main source of funding?

HW: It's been their main source of funding so they have added onto the hall and they have gotten heating units and they have— very early fundraising was in the early years Fred organized a fund and we didn't have any money because the hall sort of was getting pretty bouncing. The foundation was so rotten on it. I organized a fundraising campaign of people buying a brick for the foundation and so we got it funded that way. So, we had a foundation built you know, reinforced on it and then after all then the Jamboree has paid for everything else. Renovations to the kitchen and the large area that we have for serving food down there and beverages because we used to just have a tarp on the side of the building where we served all the food and it was pretty uncomfortable in that warm sun. It was a hot day or if it rained, you know. It was hard but we've been very lucky. I think there was only one year that

it has rained like hard that day. Now, they have built a ramp in there for handicapped people to get in. so, we have a lot of handicap people coming now in recent years.

KJ: That's great.

HW: They can get into the hall.

KJ: One of the things that I noticed about the musicians, who were playing at the 2009 jamboree, was that one set of musicians would be in the hall and the hall itself would be packed with people watching. There was all sorts of music going on outside where musicians would wander around and have little mini jam sessions with each other and crowds would form around them as well. How do you think that evolved and how long as that been happening with the Jamboree?

HW: I think that has been happening since the very early years, when there were more musicians coming and that they liked to jam outside and they'd organize groups sometimes. You know, a new group would get formed and they'd go on stage to perform and that's part of the Jamboree is the fun of listening to music outside. Whitewater has been particularly good because they got their start really at the Jamboree when Evan and Laurel were very young. They used to clog on the stage and perform.

KJ: Oh, how about that.

HW: When Betty and Dean would come and they usually had another musicians until the children got old enough to perform.

KJ: I think I heard that Laurel was actually in Finland doing some study of music there and Evan was at Juliard going to school there for his musical abilities.

HW: I just heard him yesterday on the local PBS station, he was being interviewed I think for some kind of opera or something. He's in New York, somewhere in New York, he and his wife are there now.

KJ: Steering away from the folk music and going into opera?

HW: I guess so, it's quite different but they still come around.

KJ: Well, that brings up an interesting point about how the younger generations are influenced by the music and of course, they grew up in a very musical family and their parents were always playing and singing. I think they were particularly influenced by that but if we could take a step back, I'd like to know how John Waisanen learned his musical abilities and if you could tell me a little bit about what his talents were.

HW: Well, we lived in Central America for three years from '63 to '66 and so, both the boys had guitar lessons. So, they learned basics on the guitar when we were there. When we came back, John was in high school and when he finished high school or about at that time he got involved in music again. He started building banjos.

KJ: Who taught him how to build banjos?

HW: On his own, he learned.

KJ: He learned on his own?

HW: Yeah books I guess, he started building the banjo. You know, making the neck and all the elaborate carving work on that because he was very handy in doing that kind of work. So, he started taking banjo lessons and of course, John had the guitar, he could always play there guitar but he preferred the guitar in earlier years. That's what I think he was playing then in folk musician groups in East Lansing and after that then he started going into fiddle music. He had had some fiddle training when he was in fifth grade in East Lansing that was before we moved to Costa Rica. He had a chance to learn a little bit of fiddle music and of course dropped it then because we were gone. So, in later years he started on the fiddle and seemed to prefer the fiddle almost more then the banjo. So, he was playing the fiddle a lot more in later years.

KJ: And when you were living in East Lansing and then in Costa Rica while he was growing up and learning these instruments, were you coming back to Point Abby every summer outside of Bora and was he bringing his music with him and was he sharing that music with anyone or was he just playing on his own?

HW: I don't know if he was doing that much but he was also working on a degree, on his bachelors degree, because he started out at U of M and he didn't like it there and then came back to East Lansing to work as a janitor at Michigan State for two years.

KJ: Whatever gets you free tuition right?

HW: Well, he just worked there full time and that's when I think he started to pick up the musical stuff because he had a little more time after work and carving. When he would get finished with his janitor work, they have to throw away the old bars of soap you know, from the dormitories and he'd be carving them up into art pieces. I think his wife still has them. So, then after being out in that work world he didn't want to pursue, he went back to Michigan State and then started working on his Bachelor's degree. He was in the Honor's College there and he was doing some interviewing of like Helmer _____ - he was doing this for some class project and interview Helmer because Helmer has sort of dropped the music from earlier years and had been playing and started picking up himself on the fiddle again after John interviewed him. So, it sort of worked into more music talent and John played with some groups in East Lansing and still plays with those folk musicians. There must've been quite a large circle of them; I don't really know them too much. We used to just come up usually in August to the cabin, always. So, then after I started teaching we decided that Fred would not be involved in summer school anymore and either would I and we'd just come up here for the entire summer. Then of course, John came up but then he got married a few years after. I think after the Jamboree started and then he and his wife would come up.

KJ: So, when John was a kid, were there any folk influences that he was exposed too in Aura or in Point Abby?

HW: Well, except that maybe Fred and I would go to dances at the hall but I don't think the children usually came with us. You know, in the evening when we went there. Fred and I were always interested in folk music. He had _____ records and Burl Ives. These are the kinds of things. That's the kind of music the kids got, you know Burl Ives and his songs for kids. So, I guess that may have influenced him.

KJ: Where would you and Fred go to dances?

HW: The only place me and Fred went too was the Pier in the U.P. We never went to the dances in East Lansing.

KJ: Did you have any favorite musicians?

HW: None in particular, I don't remember who they were or who they usually played at the hall.

KJ: So, would that have been when the kids were little? Would that have been in the '60s?

HW: Well, the we weren't coming up to the cabin as much because well those years that we were in Costa Rica, there was one summer that of course, we couldn't come and we had a paid leave. So, we came up one summer. So, we were away from there at times and then the children are growing up so we'd come up usually for August until about _____. I started teaching in the early '70s and then we'd still come up with the kids and of course they were getting older and going there own ways more. Then when I retired, I think it was about '86, then we became much more involved with the Jamboree. So, it had been going on for ten years, just small. There was a small active group that did help out and they were involved. As I said, Fred was more involved in those early years. He organized and contacted the musicians and things like that.

KJ: So, were there community dances in Aura before the Jamboree?

HW: Oh yeah.

KJ: When and who organized them? Who was playing?

HW: I don't know really. You know, because we weren't in the area at that time. So, it would be sometimes if you found out there was a dance at the Aura Hall we'd go there. Another person that would know about it is Irene Waisanen who lives in Cheboygan because she taught school there in the early years and then she married Henry. So, she would know more about that part then I would because you know, I wasn't around. So, I think there were just different community groups that would organize a dance. I don't really know how they were organized. I wasn't involved.

KJ: Just show up and have a good time. That's what I like to do. So, if you look at the Jamborees over the past 30, do you think that there's been a change in whose coming, whose attending, who's playing as musicians? I mean besides the fact that it's grown, do you think it's maintained a sense of tradition or do you think it's changing and modernizing to a certain extent or do you have many thoughts on that?

HW: As I said, in recent years now I haven't been that involved but I think it has been a lot of the same people coming up all the time and then as the younger ones join in like the local groups. There's the

Augustine family, they're from Aura. _____ teach in L'Anse and then their kids are into it so, that's another family group that's been involved with it. As I said the Lehto family has been involved with it from way back because you know, the _____ children all went to the hall. They were dancing and that.

KJ: Who were the Lehto children?

HW: Well, Lila was married to _____ Lehto and there was _____ Lehto and his wife who I had once seen at the hall, you know often at dances. Now, their children, Lila's children, some of them don't live around here but they come up during the Jamboree. They're always involved with the Jamboree and I don't think she is doing it anymore but she'd always participate with her family.

KJ: As a musician?

HW: As a musician. She would sing earlier, I think she played the guitar but she has a daughter who plays the piano and another one that plays the guitar and a son who's a drummer and so, quite a few of her children who are involved with it. So, those daughters, of course, most of them—Huey, the one who is the drummer of course, lives in Aura; most of the other children don't live here. They live in Wisconsin.

KJ: And is Lila Lehto the one who might have the connection of a family relation back to Viola Turpeinen?

HW: Yeah.

KJ: Okay, somewhere on her mother's side?

HW: It would be on her mother's side. I know her mother's—I remember in the early marriage her mother was Mrs. Turpeinen to me. I didn't know anything more about it and I don't remember what Lila's maiden name was.

KJ: And you yourself got to see the famous Viola Turpeinen?

HW: Yes, just that one time.

KJ: And where was that?

HW: I was in Silver City near Ontonagon.

KJ: Do you remember approximately what year that would've been?

HW: Well, it was probably in the early '50s because we were married already and I think we had at least one or two children then.

KJ: Did she draw a big crowd or was it just a small one?

HW: Oh yeah, she always drew crowds everywhere she went and I think that was sort of—I think she had some trouble with a man who I think was her husband, I don't remember the history of her very

much. He was spending a little too much time at the bar that night. She did very well and she was quite elderly at that point.

KJ: I wish I could've seen her myself. I've enjoyed listening to some recordings. So, back to the Jamboree, what do you think is the future of the Aura jamboree?

HW: Well, it looks still good to me. I think the person who replaced me, Glenda Hiltunen as president is gung ho and she and her husband keep it going and there are some other board member's like Helen and Bob Foster who have been involved with it since they moved to Aura. I think Bob, I know was on the board ever since his children were real small and they're all in their 20's now. So, that's been a long time. There's some others too but they've been—those two families have been involved or were always ____ were very much involved with it but they were quite elderly at that point too and have since passed away and their son lives downstate and he's always participated in the Jamboree but now he's in ill health and doesn't participate anymore.

KJ: Do you think there have been any efforts to reach out to the younger generations to share Finnish folk music with them to help keep it alive?

HW: I think there are the younger people in Aura, you know, that have come like the Augustine children and the ____ but there's been some local kids that I saw this—I think it was Matt Koski and I think he's at Tech or someplace now and I know he was playing there last year. Also, another person that was a younger generation—well is a retired young generation now, he's been taking part in it since he moved up here after he retired. So, there's some continue and that's all I can think of and there probably others too that I'm just not remembering because I haven't been involved with it for several years.

KJ: How do you think that Finnish folk music influences the identity of somebody who is Finnish-American? Do you think that plays a big role in their identity? Some people talk about Finnish-American identity as you know, this idea of "sisu" or the language being passed on you know, there's all sorts of ways that identity can be influenced. Do you think music has played an important role?

HW: I think it has, yeah. I really think so.

KJ: Do you think there's really anything in particular about Aura that has helped to pass on these traditions and these ideas of having a Finnish-American community?

HW: Well, I think that's where the hall has helped. A lot of communities like the community that I grew up in; the hall has been torn down years ago so there's no kind of central location for that kind of activities. I guess if you go to Ontonagon maybe, I really don't know. I really haven't been that involved with Ontonagon but there are still some folk musicians. They used to be Art ____ and ____, he was always involved with the Jamboree from earlier years when he was still running his bar and ____ he'd come to the Jamboree and other musicians would come play. You know, he had a bar and that's where he played his traditional music and people would always flock to his bar because there was always dancing at Art's bar. So, some of the bars have continued that and many places too but I think the hall has helped keep that kind of ethnic tradition going all these years.

KJ: Do you think there's anything different about Finnish folk music and how it plays a role in continuing this tradition when you compare it to say, Italian-Americans or you know, some other ethnic group?

HW: I don't know. I think it's been rather strong among the Finns, you know the music, particularly the accordions and things like that being only associated with the Finnish culture I'm probably biased in that.

KJ: Me too. Okay, do you have any closing comments? Anything else you'd like to share?

HW: No, well, you know I'm surprised that the Jamboree has kept going all these years and I don't know. If we help to keep it going, I was involved with it for thirty years and I was president for I don't know, about half of those years. So, I was very closely involved with it and I was more involved with it in the growing years because I came to be president soon after I retired, I guess but it still continues to go and Glenda Hiltunen just kept the tradition on and all that. Everybody knows what they have to do and how many works and people come and volunteer their two hours in the kitchen, helping out. So, we don't pay anybody, nobody's been paid ever and a lot of those people are people who are vacationing up here, who come here and help. That's why they come up, "Well, were coming for the Jamboree! We're coming up there to help work." And some local people too. So, it still seems to have the enthusiasm to keep going, so how long I don't know. We had that Head Start school that is on the hall property; that the hall donated to Head Start. I think that's been continuing to go and that's where the hall board always meets in the wintertime, because it's heated and we close down the hall for the winter rather than to heat that building all year long. It seems like it's still going strong, I've mentioned it to more people about it in recent years because the groups I've gotten more involved with and most everyone says, yeah I've heard of the Aura Jamboree. Even though, we can't advertise in the Marquette because Hiawatha takes our poster _____.

KJ: Really?

HW: Because they started a year or so after we did and we had that 3rd weekend in July which was the week that we chose and they had the fourth weekend. There are five Saturdays in July and Art on the Rocks is on the last Saturday of the month. So, they're on the same day and I know my husband did once speak to them. He said we had year first. They just ignored us. Maybe, if he just spoke to the wrong person, I don't know but anyway.

KJ: It hasn't stopped the musicians.

HW: No, it hasn't stopped the musicians and we get musicians from downstate and from Chicago area and different places around. _____ some very fine musicians and some of them get to old and don't come but other younger people keep coming.

KJ: I think it has a very strong tradition of community involvement and has the potential to continue to be this wonderful community organized, community event.

HW: Yeah, and the people who are on the board, know that they do a lot of work.

KJ: Well, everyone appreciates all of your hard work, that's for sure.

HW: Like I said, I continued on with it for several years until my husband got ill and passed away and I still continued for a little while but I decided after thirty years I needed to.

KJ: Time to just enjoy the music. Okay, well thank you so much for you time this afternoon. I really appreciated that.

END OF INTERVIEW