

Interview with Frank Holmstrom

Calumet, Michigan

November 11, 1989

Interviewed by Todd C. Holstrom

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Todd Holmstrom: Todd Holmstrom interviewing Frank Holmstrom on the Holmstrom family history. I'd like to start today if we could with maternal Grandmother's side and going back to before coming to the United States if we can.

Frank Holmstrom: Okay, the maternal grandparents which would be your great-great grandmother and grandfather. Great-great grandmother was from a town called Joensuu which is an eastern province of Finland, they also, they were quite wealthy. They also had a home in Helsinki, they spent their winters in Joensuu or excuse me, their summers in Joensuu, their winters in Helsinki. The family name was Sorssä, actually Sorson but Sorsen is a Swedish name and they were Swede-Finns and when the Finnish took over the country from the Russians it didn't become fashionable, it wasn't fashionable to have a Swedish name so the family that currently lives in Finland adopted the Finnish version of the name, Sorssä. And it's S-O-R-S-S with umlauts over A [Sorssä]. The most prominent member of that family currently living in Finland is a fellow by the name of Kelvie, K-E-L-V-I-E Sorssä. Kelvie is a leader of one of the major left-wing parties of Finland. He's in his late fifties, early sixties today. At one time he was Prime Minister of Finland and is, was heir apparent to the Presidency of Finland. He may succeed to that someday but he's not right now currently in power as Prime Minister, he's the leader of one of the major parties. They had a good liaison with the Russians and Kelvie was frequently called on to maintain a relationship with the Russians before the Gorbachev Era. He currently, obviously is also very involved in the current negotiations. Anyway, Kelvie Sorssä is the first cousin, three times removed. A first cousin three times removed of yours, Todd. He's the son of the youngest brother of our, my great grandfather and your great-great grandfather. And when the Sorsons, nee Sorssä came to the United States they left their family summer farm to his younger brother and the younger brother maintained it right up until just a few years ago when he died at a very late age. I don't know exactly what his age was but he was in his nineties. And great grandfather left that farm to him when they left Finland. It's quite an extensive farm, it's right on the Russian border. In the Winter War of 1938-39 it was overrun by the Russians. Your grandmother was born in the sauna on that farm. They were there for the summer holidays and her mother was due right at the end or right at the beginning of September, so they stayed around for an extra week and she was delivered in the sauna there. Grandmother's name was Helen, Finnish version is Heli. I don't know exactly how that's spelled but she anglicized it to Helen. And she was born there in Joensuu. She's the only one of your great grandparents who were born overseas. The others were all born in the United States. They called Helen "A gift from America" because her older brothers all came to the United States and settled either in Chicago where most of them were educated at the Rush Medical Schools, or in Ishpeming where some of them had some local businesses. That was before the turn of the century. Her father came to the United States and lived here for about a year and a half and then went back to Finland and was reunited with his wife, as a result of that Helen your

grandmother, your great-great grandmother was born and thus they called her A Gift from America because her mother was quite old when she had her, in her forties. And she was the last child of about fifteen births, nine of which survived to adulthood. And so they called her the Gift from America. After she was born they spent another two years in Finland and then returned, this time to the Copper Country, to Calumet where she had, or your great, your great grandfather, great-great grandfather, her father had several brothers who were in practice in that area. One of the brothers was a prominent dentist, a founding father of Suomi College, he was Oscar Sorson. Another was Charles Sorson who established the first private hospital in the Calumet Laurium area. It's still there as Calumet Public Hospital, that hospital was originally started on Florida Street by Charles and later on moved to Osceola Street in Laurium, it's a community hospital owned by the community, but Charles was the founding father. He was a prominent surgeon, got his original education at the Rush Medical School in Chicago and then from there studied in Europe, especially in Vienna, surgery in Vienna. He was extremely prominent in the United States and died a very young man in his late thirties, here in the United States. But was well known even when I was a child, I was born in 1936, there were many people in the community who knew him and when they found out I was related to him they had high praise for his surgical talents. That was some thirty years, almost thirty years after he had passed away so he had quite a reputation in town. That was Grandmother's brother, and her father, when they came back, when they came to the United States was on a speaking tour. In those days television, radio, and so forth was not available so people went out to lectures, public lecturers to be entertained. He was a prominent lecturer on the Finnish-Swedish circuit. He spoke both languages and lectured on various topics there. His wife was a society matron. He sort of married above himself, and from Finland he got the property in Joensuu and in Helsinki as a result of his marriage. That was his second marriage. According to family history, your Aunt Hellen and Uncle Ricky had both been to Finland and visited both with Kelvie Sorssä and Kelvie Sorssä's father who was the person who was left the legacy of the farm in Joensuu. Filling them in, they all said that, that the family, the Fernelius which was great grandmother, great-great grandmother Sorson's maiden name, was a wealthy Swedish family with some kind of French exposure from the Burnadette occupation of the Swedish throne around the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Apparently Fernelius is a French name, he came with Burnadette to Sweden, got involved in the army, moved over to Finland, got involved in the government of governing of Finland, acquired the property and so forth. Great-great grandfather Sorson married into that family and acquired the property. He then passed it onto his younger brother, sort of a male dominated accession. But in any case they took that property and are today still in possession of it. The, once the Sorsons came to the United States, the oldest Sorson uncle, or great-great grandfather did his lecturing thing. He died rather early after coming to the United States he died in 1907.

TH: In what year did they come to the United States?

FH: They came to the United States about, the second time, the first time they came to the United States in the mid-1890s, they came to the United States the second time about 1901. Interesting story there, just an aside, humorous aside. When they came to the United States even though they were quite wealthy, they brought along a Finnish cured ham and a traditional basket and so forth and various other things and when they got off the boat after clearing Ellis Island, Uncle Charlie was waiting for them and my grandmother who was about five at the time remembered it very vividly because when they got off with the ham Uncle Charlie was a little embarrassed, he took it and walked out to the end of the pier and threw it in and said, "You won't need this in the United States, there's plenty of food here." And the

other thing he did was provided my grandmother with the first North American or central or North American oranges which she'd never had anything like that before, and the result is she was just enamored with the United States. She had a good deal of contact with Finland after that but really had no desire to return to quotes-unquotes, the old country. She was very Americanized, of all the grandparents she was probably the most assimilated into the American Society and was very proud of being an American, naturalized American Citizen. From there they came to the Copper Country and they died young, or not young, early. Grandfather in 1907, grandmother in 1908. Your great grandmother, my grandmother was left an orphan, not totally orphaned. She was raised by her brothers, Charles, he lived until 1911 and then when he was, when he died she was taken over by her sister who was married to a Finnish minister in Ironwood whose name eludes me at the moment. I can't remember what it is, but she lived with him and then went to Michigan Normal in Marquette, Northern Michigan. Got a teaching certificate there at Northern and became the first Northern person in the family. Went back from the teaching certificate, taught in Toivola, Michigan for two and a half years, was then pursued by grandfather, my grandfather Torkola, your great grandfather Torkola and they were married in 1913. Grandfather Torkola's parents came from Turku in Finland, second largest city, a university city. They call it Finland's oldest city but it has a Swedish name which I can't remember right at the moment, but it was a Swedish settlement as well. Grandfather Torkola and his wife, your great-great grandmother came to the United States first in 1888 and settled in, outside of Cutbank Montana. And staked a claim, a mining claim there. They were very successful, struck a silver vein, mined it for three or four years, then sold the claim and went back to Finland very wealthy. They were very disappointed by their experience in Finland, the, their station was not as high as the Sorssä's or Sorsons and the result was that even though they had a lot of money, they weren't very well recognized in the local community, and grandfather, who had got himself involved in a business there, accused some people who were also in business there of being discriminatory against certain elements in the community, and he ended up saying he'd had enough of Finland and so they returned to the United States. They came to the United States just about the same time as, as grandfather Sorson. And they got here though in 1899 and they settled in Florida Location with is a suburb or or an adjacent location to Laurium. They built a grocery store and a livery stable about a block there, they built a family home next to the store. Built a duplex apartment above the, to the right of the store and another home to the left of the store. The house on the right became your great grandmother and great grandfather Torkola's home. They house on the left, the duplex, I was born in the upstairs of that house in 1936. And the Torkolas lived in the building adjacent to the store right up until they died in the, Jake, great-grandfather, your great-great grandfather died in 1943 and grandmother died in about 1958. She, she had the store when grandfather died, she started to slip and the result was that grandfather Torkola was her only son, your great grandfather Torkola, Frank whom I'm named after, took over the operation of the store. He was the, was also a, estate income tax or not income tax or not income tax, intangible tax and sales tax auditor. And he ran the store as a sideline. Grandfather and grandmother ran it as their principal business, they got here around the turn of the century with a substantial amount of money and when they died they still had considerable money on a relative basis they lost money in the forty years of being in business. It was not a particularly profitable operation, of course the town in Calumet was declining at that time.

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FH: Yeah, okay. The family name, Torkola is T-O-R-R-O-K-K-O-L-A but my grandmother thought there were too many consonants in it so she just anglicized it to T-O-R-K-O-L-A. And that's what, that was the first generation American generation used that spelling, the older folks used the other spelling. The ancestors of the Torkolas who are still in Finland are, were run into by your aunt Helen when she was in the Baltic with her sailboat. They were staying in a harbor in Helsinki, they were tied up there and they were interviewed by one of the local papers and the local paper published an account of the family and her, and she mentioned her ancestors and one day a distinguished looking gentleman came aboard the boat which was moored in Helsinki and said that he was a relative, he was married to a relative of hers and they, he took them home to dinner and discovered that this was Helen's second, first cousin, no second cousin twice removed which would be three times removed to you is married to a captain of an icebreaker and the captain of the icebreaker was the man who introduced himself that day. In any case they're still in Finland and still living in the Turku area and they are middle class naval officer I guess you'd call it. The, the Holmstrom side of the family came from a town called Luleå which is in Sweden. The Luleå Swedes were also in some way involved with Norwegians from above the Arctic Circle town called Burgen, no not Burgen, Tromsø. Grandfather Holmstrom was, great grandfather, my great grandfather, your great-great grandfather Holmstrom came, it was the first of the family clan to come to the United States. He came to the United States in 1876, he was prior to coming to the United States a sea-going officer, he was quite tall for his age. He was very tall, he was six foot four. He had a very unusual physical problem that one eye was out, he was a one-eyed man. And he liked to tell stories. His story was that he lost his eye fighting a polar bear in Spitzbergen. One of the first job he got which he got from his brothers was to go aboard ship as a carpenter's helper. Ship carpenters in those days were officers in the sail ships. Spitzbergen is, it's a group of islands north of Tromsø where they mined coal and so grandfather said he got so tall because when he went aboard ship he was a little kid and the crew felt sorry for him so they gave him their pants and he had to grow into them, they were much too big for him. In any case, he did that Spitzbergen run, became the ship's carpenter which was an officer on sailing ship. And then from there became the captain of a sailing ship, only they moved from the coal line to the immigrant line and he met grandmother Holmstrom whose maiden name was Juusola. And he met her on, while she was coming over with her parents, that's great-great grandmother Holmstrom. They met onboard ship, grandfather went back to Sweden and he made one more trip and then resigned his commission, took the boat back to New York and she settled in the section of the Copper Country known as Bumbletown Hill. Grandfather came first to a location between Calumet and Hancock called Boston Location. Boston was at the time was developing as a mining community. In his first job became building houses in Boston for the Boston Mining Company. They also built several shaft houses out of wood. He employed some real characters in his, Finnish characters in his business, in his corporate business, one of his people he employed was his half brother-in-law, grandmother Holmstrom, great-great grandmother Holmstrom's brother, name was Ed Juusola who subsequently lived to be about a hundred and two, and died in Bruce's Crossing. He was a friend of your grandfather Gustafson's. Ed, in any case tells a story about putting the top, the roof on a mine in Boston and the mine roof was several hundred feet high. A Finnish carpenter was working on it with Ed and the man was sliding off the roof and Ed reached out as he could to try to grab his hand, they just missed by a few inches and as the guy went over the top he said in Finnish, in classic Finnish understatement, "See ya around, Ed." And fell to the ground to his death. Grandfather built that property in Boston almost half the mining buildings and most of the company housing in the 1870s. He moved from there to Laurium and got into the contracting business. In the contracting business in Laurium he worked for a very

prominent Norwegian family as a subcontractor, the subcontractor's name was Ulseth, U-L-S-E-T-H. Ulseth's daughter is still alive, Molly Ulseth, she was a Township Supervisor for years, she's in her eighties currently and Ed Ulseth's, I think her father's name was Ed. In any case his most prominent contribution to the Calumet area was the Calumet Theatre which is a National Historic Trust building and one of the classic examples of community theatre, the Ulseths built many of the better buildings in Calumet, and grandfather subcontracted for most of the interior work on those buildings as he was a what they called a finished, finished carpenter which means basically they did the woodwork inside of the thing. Grandfather also contracted most of the houses in the Village of Laurium from part of Kearsarge Street, almost all of the houses on Tamarack, Pewabic, Iroquois, and First, Second, Third, and Forth Street, Laurium. Most of the better houses in Laurium grandfather did the contracting for, and many of the houses that he, other houses in town he did subcontracting for finish carpentry. He also was very good at building rubble foundations which, or had people who were good at building rubble foundations. He was a stickler for high quality materials, was reputed to have ejected a man who was selling him second rate materials, mill work, forcefully. So forcefully that he didn't bother to open the door, he just threw him through a door because they guy was trying to get him to pay for third rate materials that he'd sent him and grandfather didn't want to do that. Grandfather and grandmother Holmstrom had fifteen children, only six of which survived. Of the six that survived the oldest was your grandfather, your great grandfather Oscar who is the father of your grandfather. Oscar was a prominent banker, started banking at age eighteen and retired at seventy two. So he spent all those years from eighteen to seventy two with little time off for training in Detroit and Chicago and in Michigan, at Northern in Marquette, going to various banking schools. He ended up an officer in the Merchants and Miners Bank in Calumet when he retired it was the largest bank in the Upper Peninsula. It's no longer in that category. But so he was the oldest surviving son and then his younger brother was a, a member, he was a carpenter in his father's tradition and he went, settled in Detroit, did a lot of carpentering there and then was a member of the Michigan National Guard and was taken into active duty during World War I and became part of the Polar Bear Regiment that ended up in Russia at, after the Russian Revolution. His name was Al Holmstrom and he returned to Michigan and became part of the Detroit area building council, a leader in the labor union there, and also very prominent Finnish carpentry contractor in his own right. His youngest brother, surviving brother, Henry was

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Frank Holmstrom (FH): Ready to go? Moved to Seattle and was in the carpentry business in Seattle for years. When his wife died, late in life he married a woman from Oklahoma and moved there so he currently lives in Oklahoma. He's still alive. That's the youngest surviving brother then. Of the girls, the oldest surviving girl was Sophie, she married a fellow who was a school teacher and they lived in the Detroit area, and he was the principal of Oak Park High School for years. Your grandfather was the oldest of four sons, three sons, excuse me. Two sons, three, two daughters! And he went to work in the mine at a tender age, and he was born in 1911, he was working in the mine in 1928, started in the mine.

He was also a carpenter, worked for his grandfather, your great-great-great or your great- great grandfather, my great-grandfather, and his father was the banker. The...

Todd C. Holstrom (TH): Just like to interject here, my grandfather Tom Holmstrom then would be a Swede.

FH: Yeah, Tom Holmstrom was a miner. The, so we've covered, roughly covered the Holmstrom side of the family. There's a couple of other little anecdotes, I think that are interesting. The Holmstroms that were from Luleå were recently rediscovered by a good friend of the family, Bill Jackson, when he was there. Bill grew up in Laurium a few doors from great-grandfather's home, my grandfather, your great-grandfather's home. And Bill discovered that one of his cousins from Sweden was married to one of our cousins from Sweden, also from Luleå. And in the course of that we discovered we were related through that activity. He is an engineer for a Swedish firm and he travels all over the world on engineering project. He's a civil engineer in Sweden. So there's still some Holmstroms in Luleå who are direct relations of ours. The, that of course, information was gleaned by Bill when he was over there looking up his ancestry. Which other relatives had we covered on the Holmstrom side?

TH: The Holmstroms...

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FH: Then grandmother Holmstrom's relatives were Waaras, their, I think the spelling of that was W-A-A-R-A. That's was the Finnish spelling, that's the way they spelled their name. She married my grandfather Holmstrom, your great-grandfather Holmstrom. Her parents were immigrants, they came here in the 1890s, 1894, about circa 1894. I'm not exactly sure on that, but they lived until the middle, just after World War II, and they were farmers in the Bear Lake area of the Keweenaw, that's the eastern part of the Keweenaw Peninsula between Calumet and Hancock. They had a lot of daughters, one surviving member of that family and that's Aunt Julia, who's eighty-three. She was raised or lived in Detroit for a long period of time and then returned to the Copper Country to retire, her husband, when her husband died. She joined two sisters who were retired up here and when they passed away, she's the last surviving member of the Waara family. Grandmother and grandfather Waara were of Finnish peasant stock, farmers. They came to the United States for, to find an opportunity to farm, the farmed in Bear Lake until they died. Primarily they had a dairy type operation, typical Finnish construction, log cabin barns, and a nice, substantial clapboard type house. But it was, it had, the thing that I remember about it when I was a little kid they had a traditional Finnish sauna where they didn't have a stove, there was a pile of rocks, you build the fire in the pile of rocks, the smoke went out through the ceiling. When the rocks were good and hot you closed the, you kicked the fire, you took the fire out of the stove, you closed the roof, hole in the roof, and then everybody went into the sauna and threw water on the rocks. So that if you went in right away you would have plenty of steam because the rocks were still hot. If you waited around it'd started to cool off. Needless to say it was quite primitive, but basically that was the original kind of Finnish sauna. It wasn't too long ago when I was poking around in the back of Cedar Bay where the family cottage is that I ran into one that had had its roof collapse, but it had the same construction, and also on that same property was a Finnish barn, traditional Finnish barn made out of logs. And that barn had also lost its roof but the walls were still standing. Point is that grandfather and grandmother Waara were farmers and had a large dairy herd and continued to maintain it right until grandfather died and a few years after he died grandmother died. The girls, your great-grandmother Ida was about, I think the second oldest girl. And she married Oscar when she was eighteen, he was

nineteen. He was working in the bank for a year, he had been pretty much established in Calumet. She lived until 1951 and died of cancer, not too long after her parents had died. Oscar then remarried and was married for another twenty years before he passed away. Grandfather Holmstrom was a first-gener, you know, a first-generation American. Grandmother Holmstrom was a first-generation American. Grandfather Torkola was born in the United States and went back to Finland with his parents who were the, the mine people, and so he lived in Finland for a short time even though he was born in the United States, that made him a natural-born American citizen. And Grandmother Torkola whose maiden name was Sorson, the Northern Michigan grad or certificate, certificated person was the only non-natural born citizen of your great-great-grandparents, or your great-grandparents, of your great-great grandparents they were all born overseas, either in Sweden or in Finland, on the Holmstrom side of the family. On the Gustafson side of the family I have gotten some information from various sources, one was your grandfather Toivo Gustafson. Toivo was a first-generation in his family to be born in the United States. He was, his father left Finland in order to avoid being drafted into these Tsar's Army. I'm not too clear on how, whether he was of Swedish descent or Finnish descent, but in any case, when he moved, he moved out of Finland into Sweden and took the Swedish version of his name, Gustafson, at that time to avoid having to serve in the Russian Army. At that time when you went into the Russian Army, the enlistment or the tour was for ten years and they usually held a funeral service for you because they very seldom saw you after that. So it wasn't what you'd call choice-duty. And your chances of surviving those enlistments were very small. A lot of people left the country rather than serve in that army. In any case grandpa Gustafson went from Sweden to the United States and when he came to the United States he settled in Wolverine, which is south of Calumet. Excuse me, north of Calumet. And went to work in the mines there, right around the late 1895 era. As soon as he was able to put a few dollars together they moved out of Wolverine and moved to Painesville, Michigan which is between Bruce's Crossing and Trout Creek and bought a farm. It wasn't too long after he bought that farm, however that he died. Your grandfather was ten years old when that happened. He was the oldest boy and he took on the chore of running the farm. His sisters, he had I think four sisters. They all decided to leave as promptly as possible. They didn't like the chores involved in farming, mostly milking cows. Which they had a colloquial way to describe them, he called them shit-tails. And he didn't want to milk'em. And so they moved to Detroit and as fast as possible, there was plenty of work down there, especially for Finnish maids who had a great reputation as the best maids that money could buy in those days, in the, around the turn of the century or just after the turn of the century in the '20s. And so they had no trouble getting work. Most of them went down and were integrated into the Finnish community there. They married Finnish kids who had, also had Copper Country origins, whose fathers in many cases went down to work in the automobile plants. And then they in turn worked in the automobile plants or in various other occupations. Several of the Gustafsons are in, school teachers in Detroit. I, one of your mother's aunts was a school teacher there and she was sort of an inspiration to your mother when she decided to find a profession and go to Northern Michigan. Another of the aunts worked in a department store in Detroit and had that occupation. One worked, started to work in the automobile, Ford Highland Park Plant during the war and she stayed on to retire. And her husband also worked in the automobile plants there. Your grandfather continued to run the farm in Painesville, married your grandmother who was a orphan girl, semi-orphan girl. She, her, when her parents died, the frequent tradition in those days when you had young children was instead of putting them into an orphanage was to, if they were old enough to farm them off as Mother's helpers. Mother's helper simply meant that you did housework and took care of the children and did washing and did the barn chores and any other

job that came along and as a result, you were integrated into the family as sort of a poor-relation. The, your mother met your grandfather at church and they were married, at an early age, and they prospered in Painesville on the farm, they bought a farm in Trout Creek. Your father continued to run the Painesville operation for your great-grandmother and, who lived on that Painesville farm and he also expanded his farm in Trout Creek to a very successful, large operation. He got a job with the county and he was a county road maintenance man, and so he knew everybody in the area because in the days when he was in his prime all the roads were gravel and it was his job to see that they were well maintained, and when the spring break-up came it was a difficult time. And of course, obviously in the wintertime you had to keep those roads opened and clean and so forth. So he was extremely well-known in eastern Ontonagon County and highly respected. It happened that he also became a good friend of Ed Juusola who was the guy I told you about who was related to your great-grandfather, great-great-grandfather Holmstrom. His half-brother-in-law, and he passed on some of the stories about Ed Juusola who was notorious as a story teller and a fabled character who was highly respected in the community. Your grandfather also had a great deal of prominence in the Trout Creek community, your grandfather Barney was extremely, great-great-grandfather Barney was extremely prominent in Calumet. The Torkolas were extremely prominent in that area. The Sorsas were also very prominent in that area, the Sorsons were founding fathers of the Bethlehem Lutheran Congregation in Calumet and Suomi College, and the grandmother Torkola, nee Sorson was the first graduate of Northern Michigan, since that time we've had a large number of Northern graduates including all my brothers and my sister, Helen and then we go on and on from there because we're now working on the third generation of Northern Michigan graduates.

TH: Alright, thank you. I'd just like to clarify for any listeners Guston is my mother's family, and thank you for the interview, and this concludes it.

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