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KATHERINE JOHNSON

One of the first Finnish immigrants to Thunder Bay and perhaps the very first was Katherine G. Johnson, a woman of strong character and convictions who played a prominent role in the early Finnish community. Katherine Johnson was born on September 18, 1845 in Siikajhki, Oulu. She spoke little of her early life but at the age of sixteen, after competing' "rippikoulu" (confirmation), left for America. In 1862, after a six week crossing over the Atlantic, she reached New York, from where after a brief stay, she made her way to Cloquet, (Minn.). She was married here to Andrew Johnson and they spent several years trying to run a farm. This venture didn't prove successful however and the couple moved to Duluth where their oldest daughter, Ann, was born. Here too, times were difficult (oli demokratien aikana) and when the Johnsons heard of work to be had in the Thunder Bay area with the building of the CPR, they moved north in 1876.



C. Johnson and Husband Andrew arrived in Port Arthur in 1876.

Katherine Johnson was fluent in English and Swedish as well as Finnish and had no trouble in adjusting in the growing community at Prince Arthur's Landing. With her husband she started a boarding house-restaurant-bar on Cumberland St. This was Norway House and was situated on Pearl Street.

The Johnsons, as well as Isaac Erikkila, developed ties with St. John's Anglican Church. Their son, Johan Alexander, was baptized here, (it is a tradition in the Finnish community that he was the first Finnish male to be born in Port Arthur), their names appear as witnesses in marriage ceremonies as early as 1884, and a daughter attended Sunday School there.

While Katherine Johnson had been a member of the State Church in Finland, it was not until she arrived in Port Arthur that she experienced a religious conversion. She described it like this. Her daughter, Lillian, was attending St John's Church Sunday School (where her older sister taught). One Sunday Lillian announced that she wouldn't be going to Sunday School but would be going to heaven and she died that very day with no sign that she had ever been ill. In the St. John's records of

1895 is recorded under burials this entry:
"Lillian Amanda Johnson, 8 years old, Norway House, Pearl St."

Apparently, this experience affected Mrs. Johnson deeply and she decided that it was sinful to operate a bar. Norway House was promptly transformed into a grocery store which the Johnsons operated by ordering groceries from Eaton's mail order catalogue and then selling them. From this period, the name of Andrew Johnson appears less and less frequently with Katherine , the dominant figure. In 1905, St. John's burial records include the name Andrew Johnson, who committed suicide at the age of fifty-four.

After her conversion, Katherine Johnson was "on fire for the Lord" and decided to expend her considerable energies in building a church. She sent her children, who could all speak English, to solicit money for the project and she herself requested donations from the companies with whom she did business. Apparently, it was her daughter, Ann, who approached Joseph King who donated the property for the Wilson Street Church.

However, soon after the Wilson Street church was built, there was trouble of some sort between Katherine and other church members and by 1899, the Apostolic Lutherans of whom she formed a part, moved to Fort William. She donated land on McLaughlin Street herself to the church and her son Alex was one of the church trustees.

The Fort William church was sold December 7, 1910, and by December 27, the first meeting of the transferred congregation was held in the house of Kalle Rahhala at 233 McIntyre Street, Port Arthur. Names mentioned in the minutes of the meeting are Kusti Beck, Esa Nietula, Mrs. K. Johnson. Kalle Heinaaho, Wilho Kalenuis, Willie Kraft and Otto Maki.

Thereafter the congregation met in the homes of church members until 1912 when land was purchased for $750 at 250 Van Horne Street from Katherine Johnson. A church building was erected the following year. The founding members were Katherine Johnson, Alex Johnson, farmer, Johan Koistinen, labourer, Kalle Rauhala, stone cutter, and Kalle Ahonen, carpenter.

With the death of Andrew Johnson in 1905, Katherine sold her grocery stood on Pearl Street and moved to 168 N. Cumberland where she had a boarding house. Mrs. Johnson lived here until her death in 1937 and during this time her home was the starting point for a new life and a meeting place for many Finns immigrating to Port Arthur.

Mrs. Julia Mikkila, who came to Port Arthur in 1912, illustrates the popularity of the Cumberland Street boarding house. Mrs. Mikkela had received a ticket to Canada from a distant relative in Port Arthur and as there were some complications she

never received the ticket. At a church meeting however, she heard an Apostolic preacher mention that he was leaving for America and she decided to trace her ticket and take the same boat to America as the preacher had intimidated he would in the course of a conversation. She met the preacher on the deck of the Empress of Britain and he gave her an address in Port Arthur where he told she would be welcome, 168 N. Cumberland.

Mrs. Mikkela duly arrived at the Johnson boarding house and after spending two nights there, Katherine Johnson found her a job at the Algoma Hotel where she worked as a maid in the silver pantry for twenty dollars a months. The Johnson boarding house was one of many in Port Arthur and played an important function in the immigrant community. A new settler was welcomed here, was introduced to job prospects, and had a centre where she (or he) could receive mail, talk-to other Finns, and generally start to feel his way in the new world. In the Johnson boarding house, fellow Laestadians were given an especially warm welcome and it appears that within the Finnish community there were several similar nuclei geared for Finns of different classes and convictions.

Katherine Johnson's prestige within the Laestadian church was considerable and when the Apostolic church was moved to Port Arthur in 1912, it was Mrs. Johnson who sold her property for the use of the Apostolic Lutheran Church of Port Arthur for $150.00. She continued to play an important part in its affair and her impact on the surviving members is still felt.

Katherine G. Johnson died on March 5, 1937 at the age of ninety-one and in many ways her long life was a dual one. On one hand she was very involved in the Finnish community -- her church roots were there and her main concern was to help fellow Finns successfully enter the Thunder Bay community. On the other hand, she was an active member of broader Port Arthur society -- she ran a successful business; she owned land including the present B Golf Links road; many of her children and grandchildren married Anglo Saxons and were perfectly bilingual. In short, the sixty-one years of this first settler spent in Port Arthur embody a great deal of the Finnish immigrant experience.

This sketch of the life of Katherine Johnson was based on an interview with her grand-daughters, Miss Edith Nuttall and Mrs. Ada Thompson