

Interview with Carl V. Pallompaa
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Marquette, MI
Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi
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RM: Carl, we'll start with your birthdate.

CP: Everyone celebrates my birthday. It's the 31st of December. The year was 1930.

RM: Could you give us a little background of your family, where they were from, were they immigrants?

CP: They were immigrants. My father left, he was born in 1891.

RM: His name?

CP: His name was Calec, or Charles E. Pallompaa. He left from Finland in 1913 in the month of June. My mother was also from Finland. She was born in 1899 in the month of July and she left with her whole family in 1909. She was a little better than 8 years old when she left.

RM: What towns were they from?

CP: My mother was from Vossa, where incidentally in August of 2003 they're holding America Days. We're hoping to be there. My father was from a city called Ahtari.

RM: What did your family do in the old country?

CP: My Dad was 22 years old when he left. I think he was feared of being conscripted into the Russian army. This is my assumption, I have no actual papers to prove that. My mother was just a young child.

RM: Were they farm people or urban folk?

CP: I'm not sure. My Dad was on a farm. He had an older brother and the farm was going to him anyway.

RM: So he was out fending for himself. How did they come to the Upper Peninsula and the Ishpeming/Negaunee area?

CP: I assume that my grandfather and grandmother made the trek with their children because there was work.

RM: What were their names?

CP: Their name was Jarvanen. But when they left Finland they had a Swedish name of Vidbeck. My father came because he had friends already in the area working in the mines. That's where he worked his lifetime.

RM: So that would have been a typical chain migration. Which mine did your father work in?

CP: Lake Shaft, which is in the Salsbury Location, and then he went to the Cliff Shaft or the Barnum Mine. That's where he spent his life.

RM: How did your parents meet?

CP: That's a good question. There were enough Finns in the area and they were both members of the Bethel Lutheran Church. It could have happened there or...

RM: A picnic or something.

CP: Yes. They celebrated a mid-summer every year with a regular party. Cleveland Woods, which is somewhat east of where the Cliffs cottage is. There was a big area with pines and maples, benches and a place for a fire where they celebrated the mid-summer as they did in Scandinavia.

RM: That's the background. Now something about your background.

CP: I grew up in Ishpeming. I had an older brother and two older sisters who spoke English because they were in school before I was. They taught my mother to speak English. I didn't have to worry about Finn with her. But when my father was home it was Finn. I went to high school in the Ishpeming High School. Right after graduation, during an English class, Ben Renz, who was the teacher, had set up students in the next room to record as we're doing today so that students in the next classroom could listen to them read. When I came out this one day there was Paul Krowly the station manager for WJPD and he said would you like a job. Commencement was on Friday and I started as an announcer on Monday in June of '48.

RM: With no training. Just your natural ability.

CP: That's what they said.

RM: When you and your brothers and sisters went to school, which was your first language, English or Finnish?

CP: At home it was Finnish. Outside the home it was English.

RM: So you were bilingual as a small child. And your Dad was adamant about that?

CP: He refused to talk English at home. The phone rang one day and he was home alone, this was after the phone was installed. After many rings he finally picked up the phone and shouted, "Nobody Home" and hung up. He knew those words.

RM: He spoke English at work. It was just when he had to speak it. You all went to school bilingual. Did you learn the official Finnish language or a dialect?

CP: It was a dialect. To this day I can be in Finland and somebody can tell me they know where this dialect came from.

RM: So you got your start in 1948 at the radio station.

CP: That went through until '49 when I signed a contract with the Boston Braves. They had a try out camp in Negaunee. I was signed to a contract to play Class D baseball with the Braves organization. The radio station became a little upset that I was going to leave so they said you don't have a job. I thought it was unfair, but I didn't have much to do with it. That fall I went hunting and was shot in the head, neck, and shoulders by my hunting partner. That was in October. In the following December my shoulder became so sore I couldn't even pick it up let alone throw a baseball. But I had tickets and took a train from Ishpeming to Myrtle Beach, SC, went for 2 weeks to a try out camp with the Braves organization and they sent me home. I was a bit frustrated with myself and life. I joined my brother and my dad and uncles and brother in laws in the mines. I worked there until I went to Korea. I went into the army for 2 years. In 1958 I was laid off. I went down to Waukegan and stopped into _____ Labs and a fellow was there. I asked the lady at the desk if they were hiring. He turned around and said where are you from? I said upper Michigan, he said you're hired. He didn't even know my name. But the UP has a good work ethic I guess at that time. I worked there. My wife was expecting our 3rd child and my mother became ill. She called and said you better come home she's suffering with liver cancer. She died in January. So I stayed home and went back into radio. I worked for a couple years and in 1961 I started at TV 6 and I've been there ever since.

RM: What did you do at TV 6? What were some of the programs you were on?

CP: Initially, while I was in radio on Sunday afternoons I had a half hour show where I played Finnish music. Somehow we made some records to play. I didn't say too much, just played the music. They had an Italian hour at the same time. So when I went into JPD the policy was that if you were on air talent you had to learn what went on behind the camera. You had to learn to operate the camera. I was doing the weather and I'd run the camera for the news and sports. The newsman would run the camera when I did the weather. The sports man would wrap films on the 16mm projectors. So you had a good insight as to...make sure you're in focus and in the center of the frame etc. I think it's a policy that should still be in effect.

RM: But you had to do all this in between the show.

CP: This was 1961. In 1962 in February I went to the General Manager's office, his name was John Borgen and there was Eugene Sinervo who was the program director and subsequently worked here at Northern. Tom Quayle was there. He owned travel agencies in the Upper Peninsula. He convinced John Borgen that TV 6 should have a Finnish program. The number of Finns in the area, we could get people to go to Finland and his travel agency could make some money.

RM: His name was what?

CP: John Borgen. He was the General Manager. Tom Quail was owner of Quayle Travel Services.

RM: And that's like the bird?

CP: Quayle.

RM: This was in 1962.

CP: 1962 near the end of February. Borgen said you and Eugene start a show and let's go on the air the 25th of March. That's it.

RM: How did you feel about this?

CP: We were excited about it. We had no material of any kind. Just a couple records. You have to have something.

RM: No images or film.

CP: So we gathered up all the books we could find. They were all black and white pictures and added some music. Everything was done live Sunday morning. Eugene came up with the name Finland Calling, which was appropriate because Finland is calling for you to come and visit. And the name Suami Cuzu is exactly what that means.

RM: So the title of the show tied into this travel concept.

CP: Finland is calling you to come visit.

RM: Okay.

CP: The show started March 25 and in June we went to Finland with 18 people. That was our first tour. It took off. It was a half hour at first and then it went to an hour in that fall. Then for a short time it was for 2 hours on Sunday morning. Talk about tough. To fill 2 hours.

RM: At that time you didn't have video, you just had film.

CP: Old pictures that we had to use a camera with.

RM: What did you have as a library?

CP: Very limited. We had a turn table in the control room and if we were fortunate enough to have an album, we would have to make a list song 1, song 2, song 3. Song 1 is "Somewhere My Love" cut 1 side 2. The engineer would follow that list and put the needle on the turntable and as the record was playing, if someone jarred the table you could hear it because everything was live.

RM: At that time did you do the dedication as well? So he had to have the right...

CP: Yes. He had to have the right song. Sometimes they played the wrong song and hold it hold it hold it. I still think live television is the best because once you've said it, it's gone. There's no way to correct it.

RM: What did Eugene do with the program/

CP: We both got together...we only worked together for one year, til '63. I left. I had a disagreement. Besides the Finn show I was doing the weather sponsored by Blatz Beer. I was initially hired to do sports which was sponsored by Busch Beer in Houghton. I started doing sports and it involved pouring a beer on the air and you had to have a good head on the beer. The acting General Manager was L. Pain. John Borgen had gone away to our sister station WLUK. L. Pain said Blatz Beer wanted you to go back to doing the weather. They're unhappy with you doing competitor's commercials. I was hired to do sports. I'd never done weather.

RM: Oh, you'd done weather.

CP: I had done weather. We had a disagreement and I said if you'd like to look for another weather man and a sports man I'm gone. I can't believe sponsors are dictating the policy of the station. I left and went back to work for JPD. Eugene carried it on the rest of that year.

RM: What year was that?

CP: '63.

RM: So all that happened very early.

CP: Yes. For one year I was gone. Eugene kept the show going.

RM: He spoke Finnish?

CP: He spoke Finnish as well as I did, which at the time was limited. We were the laughing stock of the area because our Finn was so bad.

RM: You had learned it as a child, speaking the dialect. But then you didn't speak it for a long time.

CP: And to be able to interview people with the proper language...

RM: How did you work that out?

CP: Just by listening and practicing. Mostly by listening. Being with people and learning how. I still don't know grammatically the 17 cases. There's no way to know that unless you went to school and did it.

RM: So you never had any formal training.

CP: No. No formal training. I got a call at JPD from Jim Tommling, who was then the General Manager, and invited me to lunch. We got together and he said I want you to come back and do the Finn show and I want you to come back and do sports. Eugene had designated a wish to me at Northern. He was a graphic artist. Fine. Be right there. Went back in the spring of '64.

RM: What programs did you have after that? You did the sports...

CP: Then I went into writing commercials and the creative services. Beginning with the salesmen, I would call on you for instance that you had purchased time and discuss with you, what image are you looking to have done on television, then write the commercial. Arrange for the videographer or photographer to shoot the video, put it all together and present it to you to see if it meets your approval. Once it did, it went on the air.

RM: So this was another skill and whole area that you went into, advertising.

CP: Not selling, but creating.

RM: You were doing the news, the broadcast...

CP: But during the creative services, I was no longer on the air. No more news. It was strictly daytime.

RM: But you were still doing the Finland...

CP: Still doing the Finland show. Until 1967, it was done live every Sunday morning. Then they went to tape. I started taping on Thursdays, and now it's on Wednesdays.

RM: What other...when I came into contact with you, you had...

CP: In '73 they asked if I would host this daily show, Upper Michigan Today. It started in November right around this time of year on TV 6 at 12:00 for a half hour. I did that

for 14+ years. I was still also working in the Creative Services Department. I cleared my desk for that and go down and do the show and then come back and write some commercials.

RM: So that's why you've gotten into...somebody was talking about that, that when they came on the program you didn't have your own script to go with them, you just went cold and let them...

CP: I still do that today. I don't like to ask questions prior. I don't like to have a written script. We have a general idea what we're going to be talking about and let the guest run with it. If the guest is not forthcoming, yes, no, then you die. Then you get rid of that person and bring in somebody else.

RM: Do you ever have to...when you're taping is there a disaster. I come in and just say yes and no...

CP: I've got enough music to go to.

RM: But then you also have to be careful if you've announced me.

CP: We'll bring the guest in and if for some reason it dies I graciously say thank you and...

RM: Okay. So you would cut me off mid time and then...

CP: What we didn't do is discuss the Symposium that was held last Friday. We forgot even do that.

RM: I didn't even think of that.

CP: I found the sheet later on.

RM: That's okay. You continued working in advertising and...

CP: I did that until about 1986 or 7. Then I went back into the News Department full time. I started anchoring the morning news, which I enjoyed. Getting up early in the morning, which I enjoy doing anyhow, and doing the news for the last 14 years that I worked.

RM: Then you'd be done relatively early in the day.

CP: And there was nobody else in the building to worry about.

RM: What were some of the high points and low points of Finland Calling, maybe the most famous personality you had on the program?

CP: I learned that the President of Finland _____ was going to be in Hancock in August 1976. I made arrangements through the Embassy at Finland that I would have a chance to do an interview with him. I go up to Hancock and I meet one of his advancement and I'm told I can only ask one question. One question. I have to have that question in advance. What do you ask the President of a country, one question? If you remember during the '76 Olympic Games, _____ fell or stumbled during the 10,000 meter run and picked himself up and won the race. He was a Finn. I couldn't ask him about that. We had worked out, this fellow from the Embassy and I, a question that made sense. This fellow fell. One question only, in advance.

RM: It would have to be a broad question.

CP: It was a broad question. What his reactions were to the fact that there were so many American Finns in this area and what kind of a greeting could he share with them this day?

RM: That was it?

CP: One question, thank you very much and it was done.

RM: They didn't give on this.

CP: One question and it was done.

RM: Oh my word.

CP: I was the only media person to get close to him. Nobody else got near.

RM: Was there a reason? Or just a policy?

CP: It was just his policy. He didn't want to get trapped in any way.

RM: Okay. I can see that. You get all these people sniping at you and the media coming at you. So that was a high point?

CP: It was exciting, but the security all around the place and getting a TV 6 Camera right there. It was only one question, it didn't fill up the show, but I had the chance to interview a number of Ambassadors, the Prime Minister of Finland who visited a few years ago, also in Hancock. A number of US Ambassadors to Finland and Finnish Ambassadors to the US have been on the show. I think just the average John Q from Finland, they have been the most rewarding experiences for me because it's their first time. In fact I just interviewed two people last week, their first time ever in Finland. A retired police officer from Helsinki for 34 years and how proud he was to be here and to find that they do have roots here and how clean it is and friendly the folks are. That's very rewarding for us to hear those kinds of comments from the average citizen.

RM: It's from the heart. It's the person. How do you plan some of the programs?

CP: If I know that I'm going to have guests, I can plan my music to go along with the requests that have come in. Someone might like a pretty song. What is a pretty song? I'll choose a ballad or waltz. A polka wouldn't be a pretty song. Rock n Roll certainly isn't pretty. Then try to find video, which I try to find early on Wednesday morning and put it all together to coincide with what the guest will be talking about. For instance, Anita Johns will be talking with me on Wednesday about holiday travel and our trip to Hawaii. Then we're planning a trip to Finland in August. She will be talking about that. When you appeared, if you noticed I have an Italian song for you.

RM: This is the first time I've ever had a song dedicated to me. I had gone and left. Then we watched it on Sunday morning. It was a very appropriate song.

CP: Besides working at the station, in April of '64 I went for political office on the Marquette County Board of Supervisors at the time. I was successful. I served 9 years on the County Board and 2 years as Chair. After that a friend who served as the Republican Party Chairman in this area asked if I would like to have my name thrown in the ranks for Highway Commission. I didn't know what the commission was, but I became an appointee to the Highway Commission. I served in there for about 14 ½ years. That was '73 to '86. For that duration, that's why the Welcome Center south of Marquette is named in my honor.

RM: We've talked about the program, what was your involvement in FinnFest '96?

CP: I was elected President for that event, which I enjoyed immensely. It turned out to be the most successful of all FinnFests held so far. Good volunteers. We had good weather, if you remember. I'm looking forward to having it come back in 2005.

RM: Did that take a lot of work?

CP: 3 ½ years of meetings. Every month at least 2, which I think was important. It was important to get everybody coordinated. We had 24 people at the top of the list and each committee had good chairmen who took their task to heart and handled it well. It's proven in the success we had.

RM: There were no observable glitches of any sort.

CP: We had two minor accidents while here on campus. That could have been disastrous. Campus was under construction at the time.

RM: Yeah, it looked like a war zone. That's incredible. You were with WLUC, when did you retire?

CP: June of '95. That was my last stint on the morning news, but I continued doing the Finnish program once a week. I will continue as long as I can enjoy it. When it gets to be a task then I'll fold.

RM: How many trips have you made to Finland, and how many people have you brought with you?

CP: This one was in '62. If memory serves me correctly now, this August will be the 25th guided tour that I'll be taking. I had the opportunity to be in Finland one other time in the month of February with the General Manager at the time. We had gone in '82 and it was a disaster. Things didn't work out very well. It was no fault but the Finnish tour agency who had screwed up for us. So in February the boss and I went to coordinate the '85 tour in Finland and that was successful. 25 guided, 26 total.

RM: Do you have relatives over there?

CP: I still have one aunt living, 9 first cousins and their children. I'm guessing I've taken 1200 people to Finland or Scandinavia.

RM: How do you spell Sinervo?

CP: S-I-N-E-R-V-O, his first name is Eugene.

RM: Where was he from? Was he from the Marquette area?

CP: I think he was from...he lived east of Marquette, Sand River. He had friends in the Superior area. I'm not sure. I don't remember.

RM: I think they had an article about him and his involvement in Alger County. Earlier you mentioned that you worked in the mines. At that time in the late '40s there were still a lot of immigrants working in the mines. Probably a little more colorful than today. Were there any interesting characters that you encountered, or stories you'd like to relate?

CP: My first partner in the mine, I started on the 30th of July in 1950 and as I went underground it was a bit of a frightening experience. You're going down in the cage with 13 or 14 other fellows depending on their size. I was assigned to work with Matt Beckerleg, who was an immigrant from Cornwall, England. He was short, bow legged and he had the cottony accent. I worked with him for several weeks, mostly with our hands or a pick and shovel. Listening to him was enjoyable. Through him I became appreciative of others in this world of ours. We're not just Finns or Americans. We're a mixture of many. I got to know a few Italians. I worked with John Binallio. He had a good Italian accent. It was fun. That's why I keep saying my best job was in the mine. You had this association. Your job was there when you got there, it was there when you left. No headaches. Just hard work.

RM: You didn't have to take anything home. Do you know the spell Beckerleg's name?

CP: B-E-C-K-E-R-L-E-G.

RM: And he spoke with a Cornish accent?

CP: Aye. How are ya eh? So many have said “Say ya to da UP eh” They credit that to the Finns in the Upper Peninsula. It’s actually from Canada or from England, eh.

RM: The other day at the Symposium they were talking about possibly it was a French Canadian affirmation of some sort. Then the Native Americans said the Indians have this attachment that they’ll put to a statement. But they were using it. He was speaking English, but it was with...

CP: You had to tune in. You had to listen carefully. That made you appreciate what was being said. You didn’t just let it slide over your head like a normal conversation. You had to listen.

RM: Was he also speaking in a Cornish word pattern?

CP: I can’t answer that. I don’t remember.

RM: Was the English the English we speak now?

CP: It was English, but with an accent.

RM: I’m just asking because at the Symposium there were two women, you had one of them on Kate. Then there was another woman who works in the same area and she’s trying to see if there were any Irish here in the early days who spoke Celtic. When she talked about that I became interested because what about the Cornish. When you were in the mines were a lot of them speaking in an identifiable pattern?

CP: The Finns, you knew...how’s come you don’t hello me when you know me so easy? That would be a Finnish immigrant. Then you had the Swedes, they were all there. I guess the only ones I don’t remember being in the mines I worked in were Polish, they came later on, and German. But Italian, English, Finn, Swede, my goodness, they were there. And you knew when they spoke where they were from.

RM: Okay. So they were all speaking their brand of English.

CP: You knew, if it was Finn, I drilling now tomorrow and lasting later. You had tune in to what they were saying.

RM: So the words were there, but they weren’t in order.

CP: You betcha. Trapper Hakala was another character I remember at the Cliff Shaft Mine. He had a habit of only working 4 days a week. This was continual. He would go

on a drunk on Friday. The mining captain went to him...I never did know his real name, but he was called Trapper. Why are you only working 4 days? He said well I can't make it on 3.

RM: How would you spell that?

CP: H-A-K-A-L-A.

RM: Do you remember any other stories like that?

CP: Just off the top, no.

RM: How about when you were growing up in the Finnish-American community. Can you talk a little about that, the different activities? You said they have the mid-summer celebration. Did they have something at Christmas?

CP: Those mid-summer celebrations ended while I was growing up. I don't ever remember attending them other than going to the area where my Dad said they had been held. He would always go through the woods and I would go with my mother. If there were trees down on the shoulder, we'd take them home for firewood or sauna wood. The Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company owned this whole area and they had a gardener. It was very well kept up. Coming home with my mother one day carrying groceries there was a dead branch about 4 inches thick and 15 feet long that had fallen off the tree. She said when you get home, come back and bring that home. I climbed up the stone wall and into the...I had the branch on my shoulder and a gentleman came up to me and said who gave you permission to take that branch? I said my Mom. He said go ahead.

RM: Was that garden a landscaped garden?

CP: Oh yes. Well maintained. The whole grounds around Cliffs Cottage, it was taken care of by this gentleman.

RM: Was that common practice from the time they put the place up?

CP: Oh yes. We as kids, there was a great big gate, stone wall, all the way around the property, we would wait, we had heard that W.G. Mather was going to be in the area. We would wait. And when the big car came around the bend, we would be there to open the gate. He'd give us all some change. We thought that was pretty classy.

RM: Did you do any skiing when you were younger?

CP: I jumped when I was a kid. I was 5'2 when I went into high school and 6'2 when I graduated. So the coordination was pretty bad. Jumping requires a lot of coordination and the ability to get over the skis. I think by the time I was a junior, my ski jumping...but it's always been my best winter time sport. Mostly cross country.

RM: Anything I missed or that you want to add? Family, Finnish life, Finnish clubs or organizations?

CP: I belong to the Vossa. It's the Monitor lodge, 163 of Ishpeming. My neighbor convinced me of that. We are members interested in promoting our Scandinavian heritage. That's been fun for the last 15 years now. I'm a member of the American Legion, the Elks Lodge, both of which I'm Commander or Exalted Ruler. I haven't learned how to say no yet.

RM: When you retire it becomes a big problem.

CP: Well I think it's important that a person remains active when they retire. Don't be a couch potato. I know many who've told me that when I retire I'm just going to hang loose and watch TV. They're not here anymore. I'm not saying that's the reason for it, but be active, what the heck.

RM: Well very good. Thank you.

CP: My pleasure.