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## Finnish Sauna or Steam Bath Explained by Alfred Erickson and Arne Johnson

WLBZ Radio

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**University of Maine Raymond H. Fogler Library Special Collections Department**

Transcript of a sound recording in MS 608, WLBZ Radio Station Records, Bangor, Maine, 1931-1973

Title: The Tradition of the Finnish Sauna or Steam Bath Explained by Alfred Erickson and Arne Johnson

Date: April 3, 1957

Recording number: Tape 19, part 3

Length of recording: 11:36

[Transcript begins]

BILL MINCHER: There is an old saying in Finland that if brandy and a sauna cannot help a man, then death is surely near. Monitor ran across that saying a short time ago, and in an effort to find out just exactly what it means, we have visited, and are here, at the present time, at a sauna located at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Arne Johnson in Warren, Maine. What does the word sauna mean, Mr. Johnson?

JOHNSON: Well, it's, in English, it mean a steam bath, you know. It's very necessary. It's, It's the only way you can, it's the only place you can, you can wash yourself up in the Finland. I mean, in the old days, when they went in the wilderness, the first thing they build up the sauna, they lived there until they had the house built up. They had that, the so-called sauna, or steam bath, you know, at least every Saturday, or very often, summertime, in the hay season, they had it every night. And we're still having it here, you know, twice a week or so.

MINCHER: There are a great many Finnish families in this area. We're in Warren, Maine, as I said. And I understand that just about all of the homes do have a sauna, is that right?

JOHNSON: Almost, almost every one of them. Well, we had this when we came here about ten years ago. There wasn't, well, there was an old fashioned one, out on a wheel there, you know, too far away from the house and then my wife said we got to have a bathroom. I said, okay, well we gonna have a sauna first, and that's why, that's what we had first. Now we have the both of them.

MINCHER: All right, and also on hand here is Alfred Erickson, who lives in Thomaston and who helped us meet the Johnsons. We've talked with Mrs. Johnson a little while ago, and now we're going to actually take a sauna here in just a few minutes. First, I would like to describe the place briefly. We're in the dressing room, or undressing room. Outside, first, it's a small room, probably about, oh, six feet by seven or eight. And just behind me is a door which leads into the, what I would call, the steam room. Would that be right?

ERICKSON AND JOHNSON: Yes.

MINCHER: And inside there, there are several tiers of seats. That room in there, I would say it was a little smaller than this. And over in one corner is the device which produces the beneficial steam and I'm gonna ask Mr. Erickson to tell us how it works.

ERICKSON: Kiuas, which is what we Finnish people call it, is the... where we get the heat from. That's whether it's built so that there's a firebox on the dressing room side of the sauna. That sauna is the word for the steam box and on the inside is space there for field stones. They had to be either field stones or are washed beach stones, beach stones, but they have to be clean, not soft. They all have to be hard.

MINCHER: They're all selected especially?

ERICKSON: Selected. They're all the same shape of a cobble stone. At the same time, they're not, they're not as soft as some of the cobblestones are. That's why they are selected. And if you can get a nice beach stone, they are, they give you the best of steam.

MINCHER: Should they have, a what, a hard surface or

ERICKSON: Hard surface, and hard all through.

MINCHER: And fairly smooth?

ERICKSON: Smoother the better, because there will be no, no, nothing dropped off of them like you have a soft stone, it's brittle and it'll be apt to break and get that stuff into the sauna, which isn't good. It blocks the capacity of the steam.

MINCHER: I see. Well, all right, let's turn back now to Mr. Johnson and find out just what the principle of operation is. I understand that there were some switches involved. Now, what's the story there?

JOHNSON: Switches?

MINCHER: Aren't there some twigs around, or something that

JOHNSON: no no, no you, oh, now I know what you mean, yeah. We call the vihta. It's a made from the first leaves. Is that right? Is that what you call them?

ERICKSON: That's right. They are made from tender birch twigs. The better, the younger, the better they are. And they're taken in the season just before the leaves drop, or where they still have the leaves. And they're stored through the winter so they can be used at all times, and then they're put on the top of the steam or on top of the stones. And water is thrown over them. Now Arne is going to demonstrate. [Says something in Finnish .... w-i-h-t-a, vihta ]

MINCHER: Uh, huh. And now we've moved over

JOHNSON: First you take these vihta, you know, and soak it in there in the hot water and then you place it over that steamer, or whatever, we call a kiuah, you know. You place it over the hot stones and then when it gets nice and soft, you know, then you can start the water. Let me show you. At the same time... [sound of a rush of steam]

MINCHER: Wait just a minute. We gotta, boy, I gotta put this in the bag ...

Well now if you have noticed a slight change in the tone of his microphone, it's perhaps because I have placed it inside a plastic, a plastic freezer bag, because of the fact that when the water hit the stones in here, a tremendous waft of steam arose and that is not good for broadcast equipment. So I think that probably there is some slight difference in tone and there's also a slight difference in the atmosphere here in the sauna. You can smell a, well I'm trying to place it in the category here now. It's something like hay, it's a rather sweetish smell, which has arisen from the stones over there. When the vihta and the water were combined to produce the steam. These stones, of course, are very hot. If it were dark, completely dark in here, it might be even, you might even be able to see some red heat, I don't know.

ERICKSON: They glow.

MINCHER: But, yes, Mr. Erickson says that there is a glow to them. And now, it is just about as hot as I can stand and I don't know whether, how the microphone is standing up here. I am over near the door where it seems to be a little bit cooler. Mr. Johnson is up on the top tier, up, of course, where heat rising, where it's the warmest.

JOHNSON: Yeah, come on up.

MINCHER: And Mr. Erickson has gone up to the top there now and I'm still going to stay down below as soon as, uh, as long as I have the microphone in my hand.

ERICKSON: Now this is the effect, the sound effect you get when you throw water, now it's supposed to be warm water, but I'm throwing cold water. It is apt to spatter more than usually, but usually we throw warm water so it won't cool off the stones much, but this is the cold water [sound of steam] and the temperature....here at present is probably approximately 160 degrees, and a few more, without difficulty, we could raise it to 170 or more.

MINCHER: How often do you have to replenish your steam, just as often as you want to?

ERICKSON: You can continue, with this type of a sauna, you can continue all night long. You just add simply more wood to the stove and it'll continue all night long and as many friends and neighbors that happen to come along come and still steam at midnight tonight if they want to.

MINCHER: And this is a sort of community affair, isn't it? I mean you

ERICKSON: Well, a neighborly affair, let's call it.

MINCHER: Oh yes, that's what I meant to say.

ERICKSON: By invitation, we'll often come to Arne and and Twiney, Twiney is Arne's wife, Mrs. Johnson, who often calls up and says the sauna is heated. You better come over.

JOHNSON: Sometime we have here are six, seven and sometimes ten people, you know, like Saturday nights, you know, they come over, you know, for a cup of coffee and so, you know, from the night, you know, and of course we always have, if anybody happen to drop in in the middle of the week, you know, it takes only about 15-20 minutes to heat the sauna. This is one of them latest one, what they call a [?]

stoves, you know. It's made from steel, all ship steel, you know, and he can be heated, [?] stove, with just a few piece of wood, you know. Inside 15 minutes, it's hot enough.

MINCHER: Now, we're hearing a gentle slapping sound, here now, and that is, these birch branches, are being used. Now, what's the what's the purpose of those?

ERICKSON: That is to arouse the circulation in parts of your body where the steam hasn't reached yet and likewise if you feel itchy or if you don't feel clean, that will loosen up and start the circulation of your body. That is the principal reason for it. I don't know what Arne would you say.

JOHNSON: Oh, that's exactly right, yeah.

ERICKSON: Yeah.

JOHNSON: The more you beat yourself the more you get the circulation, you open open up your pore, you know, and then you take a cold shower afterward, and it's very healthy.

ERICKSON: Usually when these people come out of the sauna, they're as red as a lobster, a boiled lobster, or rather, and that's caused not alone because they've washed themselves but they will have beaten themselves with the birch switches.

MINCHER: Mr. Johnson, you said before we started the recording of something about most people in Finland being born in a sauna. Would you tell us about that?

JOHNSON: Well, in the old days, there wasn't no horse-through, and there was a long way to the town, so they... and very often there was no doctor at all. So women, they used to help each other, and then there was a midwife, at least one, one in every town. But it was far away, and like in the winter time, it was very cold and very often they were snowed in, so it was the only place to get hot enough and get hot water. It was the heat of the steam bath, what we call a sauna. Even in today's, lots of lots of kids, they are born in a sauna. It was the only way to them warm and cleaned up, you know, because it's, it's very, very cold water up there, up to 50 60, you know, below.

MINCHER: Okay, thank you very much gentlemen. Now I'm going to put down the equipment and join you, and I can tell from the certain amount of steam which I have had here already that this is going to be an enjoyable experience. And this is Bill Mincher of WLBZ in Bangor speaking from a Finnish sauna at Warren, Maine, at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Arne Johnson, returning you to Radio Central.

[Transcript ends]

For more information about this transcript, audio recording, or other materials in Special Collections at the University of Maine, contact:

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