

## FILM REVIEW

**At Laskiainen in Palo, Everyone is a Finn.** Directed by Thomas Vennum Jr., Elli Köngäs-Maranda, and Marsha Pentti. Produced and distributed by the Smithsonian Institution, Suite 2600, 955 L'Enfant Plaza S.W., Washington, D.C. 20560. 57 minutes. 16mm, color. 1983.

Reviewed by Carl Rahkonen

Laskiainen is a Finnish sledding festival held on Shrovetide, the Tuesday before Lent. In Finland, Laskiainen is a private celebration in which family members and friends gather for an evening of sledding, followed by traditional foods such as pea soup, rice pudding, and **pulla**, a type of Finnish sweet bread.

The film, **Laskiainen in Palo**, concentrates on the festival as practiced by Finnish immigrants and their descendants in and around the town of Palo, Minnesota. In Palo, Laskiainen has been transformed into a public extravaganza, requiring weeks of planning by community officials and culminating in a large, public event.

The film begins by showing the elaborate preparations for the various events. The cross-country skiing track is cleared of brush, and the large sled tracks are made by applying more water, praying for more cold weather, chipping the edges down again and so on. There is a rehearsal for the presentation of the King and Queen of the festival, and we see scenes of the planning committee going over last minute details.

The festival proper is very well documented. The outdoor activities include sled races, cross-country skiing races, broom ball, ice hockey, and a chainsaw competition. In a gymnasium, we see an arts and crafts display which features everything from lace-making to lustercraft. Many traditional Finnish crafts are shown side by side with non-traditional and non-Finnish crafts.

The film also emphasizes the traditional foods asso-

ciated with Laskiainen, such as the special pea soup, which requires over-night preparation, ham, fish, potatoes, Finnish breads, "squeaky" cheese, which squeaks when you eat it, and the rice pudding containing a single almond. Luck comes to the person receiving the almond. The festival in Palo also has many varieties of non-Finnish foods, such as beans, pizza and lasagna, which come from the influence of other ethnic groups.

One important event is a large public dance, at which the King and Queen are presented. The music played is everything from Finnish polkas to Dixieland. The film concludes with a view of a public concert featuring many Finnish performers as well as performers of other ethnic backgrounds. Particularly interesting are the stories told in **Fingliska** (Finnish with a liberal borrowing from English) and **Finglish** (English pronounced like Finnish).

**Laskiainen in Palo** makes a valuable contribution to the study of tradition and change. It shows how some traditions are preserved better in the New World than they are in the Old. Also well presented is the concept that traditions change. For example, the current chainsaw competition was originally a two person saw competition featuring husband and wife teams. The film uses old home movie footage to compare the past with the present festival.

A second significant contribution of this film is to the study of ethnicity. It shows that there is no pure tradition or ethnicity. In every aspect of the festival - in the food, the music, and the various events - a mixture of cultural traits is found. Laskiainen is truly a community festival, and the entire community is involved, regardless of ethnic background. The film documents the tolerance and mutual appreciation of ethnic variety during the festival: "...everyone appreciates everyone else's ethnicity." This points out the significant idea that ethnicity can be something which brings various peoples together, rather than something which separates them.

The film may also be useful in the study of **folklorism** and its place in the broader context of folklore. Many

of the things seen in the film can be called "folklore on the stage." There are extensive scenes filmed in arts and crafts stores which cater to tourists, but at the same time preserve and transmit traditions. The makers of the film present a complete picture of the activities associated with Laskiainen in Palo and leave it up to the viewer to decide about "authenticity." The commercialization and festivalization of traditions are contemporary issues which deserve more scholarly attention. This film provides a good starting point for discussion.

I, being a Finnish-American, thoroughly enjoyed the film. If I had to criticize this film, I would say that its length (57 minutes) may seem long to general audiences. Unfortunately, it is probably too long to show during a single class period. A shorter film could have been a valuable tool in the classroom. Perhaps a second, shorter version could be made from the original. Another minor criticism is that the chronological sequence of events in Palo is not evident from the film.

**Laskiainen in Palo** is a very well made film about a living tradition. The information presented is of itself interesting to the folklorist, but the film can also provide a good starting point for discussion of contemporary issues in folkloristics.

Helsinki