

**FINLANDIA FOUNDATION FLORIDA CHAPTER**  
**The Early Years**  
By Bea Haapanen

Finns in Florida in 1954? Although one thinks of Finns living in the cold, snowy Midwest or Northeast United States, they found work and play in Palm Beach County as early as the 1920's. By 1954 there was a vibrant Finnish-American community that was growing by leaps and bounds. The Finns had built two halls, established several Finnish-speaking churches of different faiths, founded Finnish newspapers and Finnish radio programs, as well as stores and restaurants where Finnish was spoken. In addition to the snowbirds, natives of Finland discovered Florida and they established businesses such as motels, which attracted even more tourists from Finland.

In January of 1953, Yjro Paloheimo established the Finlandia Foundation, a national non-profit Finnish cultural organization. Mrs. Ella Lehto, who had recently moved to Florida from California, was aware of Mr. Paloheimo's work in Pasadena and wanted to introduce the Finlandia Foundation to the Lake Worth/Lantana Finns. The first meeting of the Florida Chapter was in Mrs. Lehto's home on October 9, 1954, and temporary officers were chosen. Edward Lammi, an attorney and Honorary Counsel, was president; Aino Carlson, secretary; and Sylvia Kivikoski, treasurer.

Permanent officers for the Florida Chapter were elected at a March, 1955 meeting. The president was Edward Lammi; Ella Lehto, vice president; Aimo Carlson, secretary and Willis Koski, treasurer. There were 20 members at the first meeting

The Fiesta Del Sol parade was an annual event in Lake Worth and in 1956 the Florida Chapter of Finlandia Foundation participated in the parade. Their float depicted an emigrant family saluting the Statue of Liberty with the motto of the Finlandia Foundation proudly displayed: *United We Reach High Goals.*

Dr. Vaino Hoover, vice president of the national Finlandia Foundation, was an honored guest at the March, 1957 board meeting of the Florida Chapter in Lake Worth, and a guest at the home of Mrs. Ella Lehto. Dr. Hoover gave an overview of the history and goals of Finlandia Foundation and pointed out that the main purpose was to establish a scholarship fund to aid deserving exchange students between the United States and Finland.

The first dance at the Casino, on January 15, 1959, was attended by 150 people. By 1962 Florida Chapter membership had increased to 140.

Thus, the Finlandia Foundation Florida Chapter was launched for many decades to come.