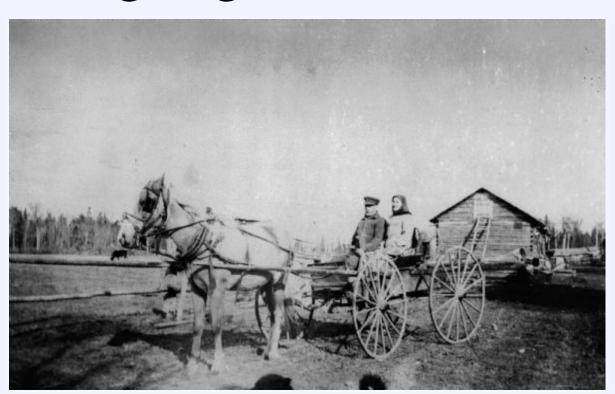
Postvernacular Language: Cultural Heritage in Oulu, Wisconsin



Oulu, Wisconsin (est. 1904), was known for many years as a close-knit Finnish American farming community. Residents say the name started as 'OUlu' but has shifted to 'Oolu,' just as residents shifted in favor of using English. While the heritage language is no longer used for daily communication, there was a gradual shift whereby the secondary, symbolic associations of the language became privileged over its communicative usage, reaching a stage that Shandler (2008) terms postvernacular language.

Postvernacular language has been conceptualized on four macro-areas: spoken, visual, discursive, and performative (Brown & Hietpas 2019). While this is useful in examining the domains in which the heritage language is used, this reported usage focuses on the heritage language as inherently fragmentary—an attempt to capture the remnants that have been able to endure in spite of language shift across multiple domains. A transdisciplinary approach, integrating enthnographic methods and analysis, creates a more holistic picture of the development of postvernacular language by examining what usage across these areas reveals about the values of the group, as well as the role of other factors such as a sense of place. This poster uses a transdisciplinary approach to postvernacular language, focusing on performative and visual aspects, to show how the Finnish language transitioned from a marker of ethnic heritage, to one of local identity in Oulu, Wisconsin.

Language and Community Shift



The community shifted from mostly bilingual Finnish-English speaking in the early 1900s to majority English-speaking about fifty years later. This is evidenced by census records which list mother tongue and ability to speak English (below), the circulation of Finnish language newspapers in the community like *Pelto ja* koti (right), in addition to church re- known, Oulu, Bayfield, Wisconsin, 44799 cords, and oral history interviews.



(above) "Henry & Maria Getto in Buggy" from the Wisconsin Historical Society, un-(below) 1920 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.

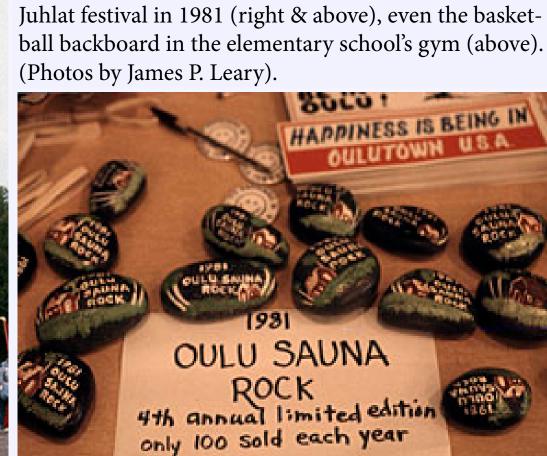
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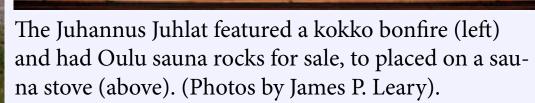
After the 1950s, more commuted to the cities for work and smaller farms closed as Oulu's population shrank. The community held local celebrations such as their midsummer Juhannus Juhlat through the early 1980s. Local bands like the Oulu Hotshots (lower right) sang songs in both Finnish and English and Finnish was the mother tongue for many of the community's oldest members. A welcome sign to the community was painted on a large rock and included a Finnish flag (left). Most businesses in the community closed by the 1990s as well as the local elementary school-which had doubled as a gathering place for community festivals and wedding receptions.





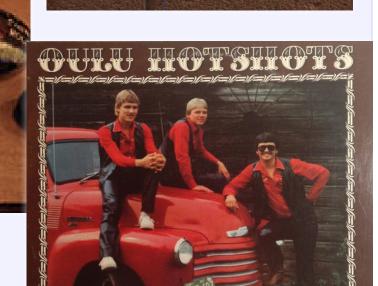


Tinnish was used on many signs at Oulu's Juhannus



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The Oulu Cultural and Heritage Center (OCHC)

It was as businesses were closing that Duane Lahti decided to purchase his family's old homestead-the Palo homestead. His family worked for several years to restore the buildings, earning a spot on the National Register of Historic Places. As people heard about the project, Duane was contacted about various buildings that might be of interest and together with other community members created the Oulu Cultural and Heritage Center (OCHC), which has grown to include the Pudas house, the Northern Co-op building, the Pedersen Chicken coop, the Fairview schoolhouse, the Bjorni-Korhonen savusauna, the Saaski millhouse, and the John Aho house, all in addition to the Palo Homestead.





Most buildings moved to the OCHC were in different stages of decay. The roof of the Pudas house had almost entirely deteriorated as seen in this image taken before the building's relocation (above, left; photo courtesy of the Lahti family). After years of restoration work, the upper story now hosts a museum of local material culture and is an active part of the OCHC (above, right; photo by Mirva Johnson). The OCHC developed a logo for the centennial which features the Oulu rock and notably has "Oulu" equally as prominant as the Finnish flag (below).



Duane Lahti comments that the OCHC has "become kind of our gathering place now," showing that its role in the community is far greater than just a museum preserving the region's material culture and vernacular architecture (Lahti and Lahti 2018). It is a space where community festivals are hosted, in addition to weekly coffee and conversation hours.

The OCHC hosts items of material culture such as baseball jerseys from several decades (above right), and a loom for weaving rag rugs that had been transported throughout the community (right). (Photos by Mirva Johnson).

OCHC Summer School

For the last several years (except during the Covid-19 pandemic), the OCHC has partnered with the local South Shore school district to offer three weeks of day-camp style summer school classes on site. One of these weeks is focused on local history and during this week, students have taken short Finnish lessons, conducted oral history interviews with local residents, learned Finnish folk dances, songs, and recipes, and had visiting authors and storytellers teach them about local conservation efforts and indigenous history.



At the OCHC summer school, students learn how to bake pulla, a Finnish bread spiced with cardamom, (above, right) from long-time Oulu resident Betty Reijo (above). The OCHC often sells pulla at festivals, including their annual Juhannus Juhlat where they host silent auctions, raffles, and construct a Midsummer pole (right). (Photos by Kaitlyn Berle 2017, Mirva Johnson, Tim Frandy).



As the OCHC works to teach students what is important about their community's history and what it means to be from Oulu, the activities include aspects of traditions that may be recognized as Finnish, but are chosen because of their association with Oulu's past. Importantly, the Center is not trying to recreate the community festivals and traditions the way they were, but rather is open to creating new traditions as they celebrate the community's history. The Juhannus celebration in 2018 differed from the celebration of the 1980s in that the concessions included fewer items with Finnish names, there was less signage in Finnish, and they created a Mayflower pole (above, right) rather than a bonfire or kokko.

For many in Oulu, a shift from speaking Finnish to speaking English coincided with the closing of many local businesses and a loss of a sense of community. While Finnish is no longer used for regular communication in the community, using Finnish language and flags signals not only the placement of a symbolic value on its usage, but a connection to the community's past and a time when the community was still close-knit. The OCHC has worked to successfully re-establish a sense of community through preservation and celebration of local heritage. Postvernacular language in Oulu, Wisconsin, is thus not so much symbolic of a connection to an ethnic heritage as it is a celebration of local history, community, and identity.



Interested in learning more about the Oulu Cultural and Heritage Center? Visit their website at <u>ouluculturalcenter.org</u> Or follow the QR code to watch a short documentary, "The Oulu Cultural and Heritage Center."





