

The history of Suomussalmi

Intro

Hello and Welcome to our podcast "Stories from Kainuu wilderness" where we share the rich history of Suomussalmi and Kainuu with you. Suomussalmi is part of Kainuu region, which is also known as Arctic Lakeland. Arctic Lakeland is the Northernmost part of Lake Finland. My Name is Tuula Uusitalo and in this episode we will focus on the history of Suomussalmi. I will now take you to a journey to explore the traditional attractions of Suomussalmi and the stories behind them.

Pre-history & Hossa rock paintings

The prehistory of Suomussalmi reaches back almost 10,000 years to the time after the ice age, when the earth's crust began to be gradually freed from the ice cover. These changed conditions also created life opportunities for human activity. Man became part of the ancient landscape. This happened when the current coastal areas of the Gulf of Finland and the Gulf of Bothnia were still covered by water.

The first settlement phase in Kainuu and Suomussalmi dates back to the time of the Suomusjärvi culture, which is i.e. about 8,000 to 6,500 years before the beginning of our era. The inhabitants arrived to the area quite soon after the ice melted, and based on the artefact finds, the people came from southern Finland.

Signs of human traces and prehistory can be experienced in Suomussalmi, at the Jalonniemi house where you can find a prehistory exhibition. In the exhibition, you can see some of the objects which have been found from Suomussalmi during archaeological excavations.

The ice age has also formed the basis for the Hossa National Park, which is one of our prides of Suomussalmi. The migration of the ice formed the rugged landforms in Hossa with its sand ridges and ponds.

Signs of human traces and prehistory can also be experienced in the National Park. These Well-known sights in Hossa are the prehistoric rock paintings of Värrikallio and the canyon lake of Julma-Ölkky.

Hossa National Park was established in 2017. This national park of Finland's 100th anniversary is located here in Suomussalmi, in the northern part of the municipality. The national park is an important tourist destination and it attracts tens of thousands of visitors to the area every year.

Suomussalmi through the ages

In this chapter we take a step towards this day.

Before the establishment of the Suomussalmi municipality, the area was called Kianta. There is speculation that the name was based on a language that was spoken in the area at that time.

However, the name was changed to Suomussalmi when the municipality was established in 1867.

In the 17th century, people arrived in Suomussalmi as part of the new settlement movement.

At that time, Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden. King Charles IV (fourth) of Sweden promised tax reliefs, which motivated peasants to settle in the region. The first four tax houses with their shingle fire lights are immortalised in the coat of arms of Suomussalmi as symbols of the first settlement. The livelihood was obtained by agriculture, fishing and hunting.

In the 17 - 18 centuries, life in Kainuu region was also challenging due to famine. The region faced harsh natural conditions followed by crop failure, hunger and diseases.

However, after these sad times, in the beginning of the 18th century, the state decided to help the new settlement with tax reliefs and with exemption from conscription, and so the population quickly began to increase again.

In the 18th century, secular power was still in the possession of the church, and so by order of the King of Sweden in 1764, a church was built in Suomussalmi and the municipality also got its own priest.

So the wooden cross church with a separate belfry was built. However, The construction of the church did not happen without problems, because the villagers did not agree with the construction work.

According to research, however, the church was finally completed in the beginning of the 19th century.

The old wooden church was destroyed in the winter war of 1939, like most of the buildings of the Suomussalmi church village.

The new church was built in the 1950s next to the soldiers' graves in the Suomussalmi church village.

Finland's independence

Between the years 1914-1918, the world lived in dark times. The world was dominated by the First World War.

At that time, Finland was part of Russian Empire and called Russian Grand Duchy.

However, Finland decided to strive to become an independent state from the Russian Grand Duchy when news about the downfall of Tsar Nicholas II was received in March 1917.

Finland became independent on December 6th in 1917 as a result of its own political and social development. The Church village of Suomussalmi served as the center of the municipality until the winter war.

After independence, Suomussalmi area was tested by wars - again. Battles of the Winter war were fought between Finland and the Soviet Union in 1939-1940.

The Church village was almost completely destroyed in December 1939 in the battles of Suomussalmi, and as a result of this, center of the municipality was decided to move to Ämmänsaari, on the west shore of Kiantajärvi, in 1940.

The name Ämmänsaari was changed to Suomussalmi in the late 1990s, but the name Ämmänsaari is still used, especially by the locals.

Source of livelihood in Suomussalmi

Tar has been produced around the world for thousands of years, and it was produced also in Finland for a long time. Tar was even Finland's most important export product for many years.

The demand for tar increased throughout Finland, and in the middle of the 19th century, tar production became an important livelihood also in Suomussalmi.

Tar was made by burning coniferous wood slowly in tar pits. When tar production decreased in Suomussalmi, it was replaced by forestry and floating works, which continued in Suomussalmi after the Second World War.

Ämmän Ruukki

After a while, people discovered that many lakes in Kainuu were rich in iron-ore. This was the era of Ämmä Iron (Ämmän Ruukki), which experienced many twists and turns during its existence. Ämmä Iron refined lake-ore into iron for about 40 years in the 20th century. The owners changed frequently and the wild expansion had its setbacks: the death of an owner, interrupted transport links and destructive fires.

After years, Ämmä Iron remained in history, and the buildings began to decay. The Suomussalmi municipality was built with the dissolved materials of the old iron factory. Nowadays there are only memories left of the ironworks.

Uitto

Uitto, known as the transport of timber by water, has been the most important form of long-distance timber transport in Finland from the 19th (nineteenth) century until the 1970s (nineteen-seventy's). Uitto was once also an important livelihood in the Suomussalmi region, as it was a significant source of income for many families.

Rowing and shipping were an important part of local history in Suomussalmi and tell about the region's strong connection to waterways and nature. Although these traditional forms of transport are more rare today, their importance as cultural heritage and historical legacy is still important.

Culture and tourism in Suomussalmi

Suomussalmi also has a diverse history in the field of culture and tourism. In the 1950s (nineteen-fifty's), the white waters of Kainuu rapids were discovered by tourists.

Emäjoki rapids route of Suomussalmi included ten rapids, and sometimes these rapids were skilfully lowered by former tar boat rowers to the delight of tourists. Today, these rapids are harnessed for power use. In 1967, Suomussalmi's local museum was established, and in 1969, the opening of Hotel-Restaurant Kantakievari was celebrated on the shore of Jalonuoma. In 1988, the Spa Kiannon Kuohut was built as a continuation of the hotel.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the municipality got its own library and the Citizens' College called Kianta-opisto. The cultural life also became livelier in Suomussalmi when amateur theater activities started in the 1970s. In addition, nature values and tourism were also seen as important, so the government owned company Metsähallitus established Recreation area to Hossa in 1979, and later in 2017 the area was changed into Hossa National Park.

The Silent People

Moving on to the 1980s, significant cultural milestones of the history of Suomussalmi have been, for example, the creation of The Silent People. This environmental artwork from artist Reijo Kela was built for the first time in 1988. Nowadays this installation consisting about a thousand turf-headed figures stands along the Highway five. In the summer, tourists are served there in Niittykahvila Café, where you can enjoy campfire coffee and pancakes.

Winter War Museum Raatteen Portti

Suomussalmi municipality is also well known for the battles between Finland and the Soviet Union during the Second World War. One of the most popular and well known sights in Suomussalmi is Raatteen Portti, the Winter War museum.

Raatteen Portti was opened in 1992. It is a fascinating tourist destination and the whole area is a big part of Suomussalmi war history. The Winter War exhibition describes Suomussalmi before the Winter War, evacuation preparations, the impact of the bitterly cold winter during the war, the fate of the Red Army, the valuable spoils of victory Finland gained from Raate Road, and the conditions to which people returned after the war.

Next to the museum, there is also a unique Winter War monument made of around 17,000 stone blocks, with its central statue called Avara Syli (Wide Embrace). The stones of the monument remind us of the victims of the battles, while the 105 wind bells hanging in the center statue remind us of the 105 days of honour that this war lasted. The monument was unveiled to the public in 2003 and was designed by Erkki Pullinen, the former environment secretary of the municipality of Suomussalmi.

Museum Raate Road is 18 kilometres long, and it continues via battlefields and ends near the Russian border. In addition to the Winter War Museum, at the end of Raate road there is an old border guard station which is nowadays Raate Frontier Guard Museum. It was built in 1923 and it has been restored to its 1939 appearance. You can visit the museum during the summer season.

You can also get to know the military history of Suomussalmi at the Suomussalmi tourist office in the Jalonniemi building, where nowadays you can find the Vaietet Arktiset Sodat (Untold Arctic Wars) - digital exhibition. Suomussalmi has 12 monuments or other sites where you can learn about the war history of Suomussalmi. It is possible to order guided tours to battle areas and other historical sites from Suomussalmi tourist office.

Great men who influenced Suomussalmi

Nearby the eastern border of Suomussalmi you can find a definitely beautiful and almost forgotten route that is one of the oldest access routes in Finland. This route is called The Viena route.

The fascinating history of the Viena route extends far from the past to the trade flow between Viena Karelia and Finland. Elias Lönnrot, Finnish doctor, who compiled Finland's national epic Kalevala, also walked this path when he collected traditional Karelian poetry from the people for the Kalevala epic.

Elias Lönnrot worked as a doctor in Kajaani and passed also through Suomussalmi on his poetry collecting trips.

Ilmari Kianto and linna

One of Kainuu's most important national writers, Ilmari Kianto, lived most of his life in Suomussalmi. He lived in his artist home in Turjanlinna, located in Suomussalmi. Kianto wrote more than 60 novels during his lifetime, and some of the most famous ones, such as "Punainen viiva (The red line)" and "Ryysyrannan Jooseppi" (Jooseppi from Ryysyranta), deal with life of the poor in Kainuu. 2024 will be the 150th anniversary of the writer, Ilmari Kianto.

The area around Turjanlinna is one of the most interesting cultural destinations in Suomussalmi. Kianto moved to Suomussalmi with his wife and son in 1907.

Kianta cruises

Some of the courtyard buildings in Turjanlinna have survived to this day and they function as an open-air museum during the summer time. M/S Kianta-ship cruises to Turjanlinna from the end of June to the middle of August every day. The duration of the cruise is two hours. The ship is also available for private hire.

There is no open road to Turjanlinna, but you can get there with a guided summer cruise on the Kianta Ship. Historic M/S Kianta was built in 1912.

The history of Kianta-ship is related to the transportation of timber over waterways, which was a significant source of income in Suomussalmi for a long time.

Outro

The colorful and varied history of Suomussalmi has left unique marks, which are still present in Suomussalmi today. We hope that this podcast episode has given you vivid images of the past and present in Suomussalmi, inspiring you to plan a visit here.

In the summer, it is possible to order guided tours from Suomussalmi tourist office. With guided tours you can get to know the history of the area in more detail.

The "History of Suomussalmi" is a summary of the five podcast -episodes of "Stories from Kainuu wilderness" - podcast. In addition, information has been collected from sources like Visit Suomussalmi and the webpages of Winter War Museum Raatteen Portti.

Thank you for tuning in!

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