The Bones of My Ancestors
by Laura Plummer
“We all carry, inside us, people who came before us.”
- Liam Callanan
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My husband and I moved to Gloucester in 2014, seeking cheaper rent and the perks of island living. However, as we followed the coastline up from Boston with our few possessions in tow, I sensed another force guiding us northward, like a ship to a lighthouse.

I quickly became aware of the waves of immigrants that had shaped the city. The area’s Finnish history fascinated me. According to genetic tests, I was approximately one-eighth Finnish. Hoping to learn about my heritage, I joined the Cape Ann Finns and attended Finnish cultural events on the island.

I began building a family tree for my known Finnish relation, my great-grandfather. Chester Peterson was from Marion, Massachusetts, so I started there. My sources included census records, certificates of birth, death and marriage, and newspaper archives. I scoured genealogy websites and consulted genealogy experts.

I found evidence of Chester’s life in Marion starting at age 13: class photos from 1916 and 1917, a 1926 marriage certificate, a 1942 World War II draft card, census records from 1920 through 1950, and a 1964 obituary. What I failed to locate was a record of his early childhood.

Revisiting his marriage certificate, I saw he had listed his birthplace as Gloucester. The ancestral connection to my new home intrigued me, but I did not pursue the lead right away. When I resumed my investigation, it revealed local roots dating back at least 130 years.

My partial DNA profile:

- England & Northwestern Europe: 49%
- Finland: 14%
- Norway: 9%

Your community with a connection to this ethnicity region:
- Western Finland
- Satakunta, Pirkanmaa & Southern Ostrobothnia
- North Western Pirkanmaa & South Ostrobothnia
An Immigrant Tale

Finland was under Russian rule from 1809 to 1917. Over 200,000 Finns had emigrated to the U.S. by the early 20th century, seeking freedom and opportunity. Recruiters guided them to specific communities like Cape Ann, which needed skilled laborers to work in its many quarries.

Matti Petkelkangas was born in 1857 in the village of Kuusaa in Haapajärvi, Western Finland. One of seven children, he regularly attended holy communion until 1886, when he left for America. He found work as a stonecutter and blacksmith in the quarries of Gloucester. There, he learned to speak English.

Kajsa Josefiina Harjunpää was born in 1866 in Teuva, Western Finland. On June 26, 1891, she received her passport and departed for the United States. Josephine (as she was known) was working as a maid in Gloucester when she met a Finnish laborer ten years her senior.

In 1891, Benjamin Harrison was president, women could not vote, Carnegie Hall held its first concert, and Thomas Edison unveiled his early motion picture device. And, on Christmas Eve, Matti and Josephine married in Gloucester and rented a room at 42 Langsford Street. These were my great-great-grandparents.
The family name was changed to Peterson as the children came. Josefina was born in 1895, Lovisa in 1897 and Matt Jr. in 1899, though infant cholera claimed the boy in 1900. A fourth child perished prior to 1900. At 974 Washington Street, the couple welcomed Andrew in 1901, Chester in 1903 and John in 1905.

In May 1906, baby John was admitted to Addison Gilbert Hospital with burns. Josephine became pregnant again in February of 1907. By late April, the brood lived at 10 Munsey Lane. Husband and father Matti suffered from general ill-health. In May, he passed away after a brief battle with pneumonia. He was 49.

In June, while the family lived at 26 Willow Street, John died in the hospital just shy of his second birthday. When Ludwig arrived in November, Josephine was a young widow with five hungry mouths to feed. To make ends meet, she began taking in Finnish boarders.

The clan resided at 23 Arthur Street in 1909. In 1910, Josephine operated a boarding house at 391 Main Street. Josefina and Louisa, then 14 and 13, were working as live-in servants for other Gloucester families. They would eventually leave the city and never return. Lovisa would marry at 16.

By 1916, Chester lived 100 miles away in Marion. Josephine moved Andrew and Ludwig to 39 Willow Street in 1917. That same year, Lovisa succumbed to a bacterial infection. She was 20. In 1918, Josephine stayed at 37 ½ Sargent Street, though she would be back at the Willow Street address from 1919 to 1922.

In 1922, the family returned to the Sargent Street house, where Josephine would remain until her death. By 1926, Andrew had relocated to Penn-
sylvania and married a Finnish girl with whom he emigrated to Finland. Ludwig was the sole child of Josephine who never left her side.

Josephine Peterson had come to America seeking a more prosperous existence. While she did become self-employed, her life was mainly one of struggle, uncertainty and heartbreak. On September 5, 1928, she passed away at 62, having buried her husband and half of her children.

If not for Ludwig, my ancestors’ legacy on Cape Ann would have ended there. But Josephine’s lastborn followed in the footsteps of the father he never met, becoming a prominent stonemason and carpenter. A month after burying his mother, he married a local Finnish girl.

Ludwig brought his teenage bride to a one-room cabin overlooking a private quarry where they would have three children. He named his only daughter Louise in honor of his late sister Lovisa. Chester also named his youngest daughter, my Nana, Louise. It was a testament to how much their big sister had meant to the boys.
Living History

By the time I started my research, Ludwig’s offspring would have been almost 90, and I assumed they were deceased. When I learned that Louise was not only alive but living in Gloucester, I immediately set out to find her. My late grandmother’s cousin was 89 and my last living relative from her generation.

What first struck me was her size. Louise shared my Nana’s petite genes. I next noticed her lavender-tinted white hair, which she wore in a short stylish shag. She greeted me sporting gold hoop earrings, a gold cross necklace and gold-framed sunglasses on top of her head.

I accepted that Louise might not be eager to talk about the events of her past, if she could even remember them. To my delight, I encountered a woman whose memory was exceptionally sharp and who seemed to have been waiting for someone to examine her long and interesting life.

She presented a stack of albums containing a hundred years of photos. Each picture sparked a memory, described in vivid detail. I put faces to names I had only read in government documents. I wondered how the individuals in the images would feel about me telling their stories.

From that initial visit, Louise embraced me like a long-lost relative and indulged my endless curiosity. She was as eager to know what I had uncovered concerning our shared origins as she was to tell her stories. I would show up with muffins and my notebook and listen to her reminisce.

She was born the middle child at the quarry house in 1933. In the post-Depression years, the family lived hand to mouth, sometimes having to trap pigeons for food. They used an outhouse and hauled water up from a well for cooking and cleaning.
“My neighbors had money and a nice house,” Louise recalled. “They called my house the shack.”

But quarry life also offered built-in recreation. Trees provided endless entertainment in rope swings, hide-and-seek and climbing. Louise and her brothers raced each other across the frozen water on skates in winter. In summer, there was no better place to cool off.

“I considered myself the best swimmer around,” Louise said. “But I was afraid to swim out too far. We had big eels in my quarry and snapping turtles.”

Louise’s maternal grandmother, mummo, instilled in her an appreciation of Finnish culture. She would take Louise polka dancing at Wainola Hall on Langsford Street, the center of Finnish social life on Cape Ann. Afterward, dancers would enjoy a buffet of traditional food.

“There was nissua. It was like a big round doughnut, plain and covered with sugar. It was delicious.”

Louise was not as fond of her grandmother’s viili, a fermented yogurt popular in Finland.

She still remembered the Finnish phrases her mummo had taught her, rattling off the translations of “good Finnish girl” and “good Finnish boy.”

“If my grandmother wanted us to be quiet, she’d say, ‘Ole hiljaa.’ If I wanted to tell somebody off, I’d say, ‘Haista menoin paska.’ I won’t say what that means.”

Louise was a student at Lane School at the corner of Washington Street and Morgan Avenue from grades one to six. Most of her peers were Finnish like herself. She and her brothers walked to and from school with the other Finnish children from the neighborhood.
“Everything was different then,” she told me. “All the Finnish people knew each other.”

For grades seven and eight, Louise went to Central Grammar School. One summer, Chester brought his daughters from Marion to visit. Despite bonding quickly due to their shared name and age, Louise and my Nana would meet just once after that.

Louise attended Gloucester High School for two years. She left at 16 to work at Harbor Cove Fisheries, where she and other girls wrapped and packed the daily catch as it came off the boats.

“The manager was Finnish, and she liked me because I was a good worker,” Louise said. “She made me the box girl. I used to make the boxes, carry them from the barn on my shoulder and put them down the chute.”

At 18, Louise left for western Massachusetts, where she married and raised her children. When I met her, she had only returned a few years earlier to be close to the kin that still called Gloucester home. Incredibly, the quarry house was still in the family five generations later.

A Road Trip Back in Time

With a map of Cape Ann on my passenger seat, I journeyed around the island, stopping at all the locations where my forefathers had lived. Some addresses no longer existed. Others looked as they might have more than a century ago. I had passed these sites dozens of times before, unaware of my connection to them.

One site on my road trip back in time was two acres of rugged terrain deep in the woods of Gloucester. I approached a rustic dwelling with a clapboard exterior that idled at the edge of a small private quarry.
The residence had been expanded upon over the decades, but the original structure where Louise was born still perched above the quarry on pillars of stacked stone. A granite staircase descended from the weathered deck directly into the water, daring me to dive in.

I envisioned my great-granduncle Ludwig chopping wood for the next addition or shed he planned to build. A teenage Louise and my Nana lounged lazily on the stone staircase, dipping their toes into the cool water as they gossiped. And my great-grandfather Chester raced his nephews to the buoy marking an old lobster pot.

My final stop was Seaside Cemetery, a hilly expanse of grassy rows with headstones dating back to the mid-1800s. The groundskeeper pointed out where the bones of my ancestors were buried in unmarked graves. I imagined cutting stones for a living, but not having one to mark my grave.

In 2014, I washed up on Gloucester’s rocky shores by mere coincidence. Or maybe my ancestors were calling me to this place because they wanted their stories told. After all, in their own small ways, they helped make the city what it is today.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Plummer is an American writer and poet from Massachusetts. Her work has appeared in numerous print and online publications, including The Sun and Chicken Soup for the Soul. Read more at lauraplummer.me.

EDITOR’S NOTE

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