Reading Stones
An Interview with John W. “Jussi” Wayrynen
By Wayne Soini
EDITOR’S NOTE

This interview contains excerpts from a full-length interview conducted in 2018, by Wayne Soini, founder of the Cape Ann Finns. The interview was originally part of the Cape Ann Many Finns, Many Stories project. Editing was primarily for clarity. The term “Finns” is an abbreviated way to refer to anyone of Finnish descent.

The Gloucester400+ Stories Project accepts stories about Rockport because Rockport was once part of Gloucester. Jussi Wayrynen (the subject of this interview), lived in the Pigeon Cove neighborhood of Rockport. His name was pronounced “you-see” with the accent on the first syllable.

FOREWORD

John W. “Jussi” Wayrynen was born March 16, 1930, in North Bend, Oregon after his parents headed to the West Coast to pursue economic opportunities. They returned Pigeon Cove when Jussi was four years old. His parents, Amanda and Otto, were “100% Finn,” Jussi liked to say, and he grew up speaking Finnish and English. Jussi was a talented and well known stone mason; one of his works included the steeple of Saint Ann’s Church in Gloucester. One of his other passions was hunting in New Hampshire along with his brothers, sons and friends.

In New Hampshire on a hunting trip, left to right, Jussi’s brother Walter, brother Everett Jylkkaa, and Jussi, circa 1950.
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BY WAYNE SOINI

You were born elsewhere, then you moved to Rockport. What did the ocean mean for the Finns?
Well, the Finns are stonecutters, and more. But, they had fishing boats out of Pigeon Cove Harbor, too.

The lobster boats?
Yeah. Because they went fishing. They did everything.

But you didn’t have an interest in that, I guess.
No, not as far as making a living down there. But of course, kids all like fishing, you know. They’re fishing for mackerel.

To bring home to the mother.
Oh yeah, Mother could cook anything. My mother was such a good cook, it was amazing. I’ll tell you a funny story about my mother’s cooking. The kid I grew up with that later got me in the stonemason’s union—we was kids trying to catch this pollack down the wharf. There was one big one. Gee, we finally caught that. We brought it up to my mother’s. And she says, “You caught that big fish!” We’re kids, all excited. She says, “Good. Now I’ll cook it for you.” So, she baked it, stuffed it somehow. And my friend, Bobby Anderson, he went to his mother and told her my mother was the best cook in the world. And she said, “What do you mean? I buy the best steak, the best everything. You get so much good food at home.” He said, “Yeah, but she cooks everything so good. If she cooked a skunk, I’d eat it!”

Was your mother born in Finland?
Oh yeah. She’d come to this country in 1906, I guess. She was about 17 years old.
She came to Rockport?
Yeah, because she knew Finns in Rockport. And they were able to come here because she had a good job sewing clothes. It was considered a good job in Finland making two dollars and 50 cents a week. But the old stories was you go to America, the streets were paved in gold and everything. But she wound up working harder here than in Finland. She got to this country, and she went doing housework and cooking. And she only got two bucks a week. She was saving her money to go back to Finland. Then she met her husband.

Did she become a citizen?
She became a citizen. They were supposed to do that in World War II. They was forced into it—something about everybody had to register for drafts and stuff. Anyway, she said she had to go to night school to study. So, they had her and a couple of other Finns, couple of old Italian ladies in a little night school. And I remember she was learning how to spell cat, dog, stuff like that. When she came back she’d say, “How’d you kids do?” We said, “We did all right.” She says, “Look at me. I got a star on my paper.” She laughed like hell.

What was your father’s job?
He was a baker.

Do you remember in Pigeon Cove where he worked?
No, but he had a baker shop on King Street. Jeez, that was almost before I was born, I guess, because he was there earlier. And I never got into none of the baking. My older half-brother did, but that was it. My father’s brothers in Finland had a chain like Dunkin’ Donuts. There was three brothers. And the
other two brothers, they still got the baker shops in Helsinki, Finland. They wound up millionaires. So, the kids asked my father, “Father, how come you didn’t make it?” He’s a fantastic baker. And he said he was the black sheep of the family.

Your father passing away when you were seven... how did that impact you?
Well... my mother was fantastic anyway. We had to work in the gardens, and mow the lawns, all that stuff, try to make an extra few bucks. We just did what you had to do.

What kinds of events and activities did they have for Finns in Rockport?
The Finns had a Finn Hall on Forest Street. They used to have the dances. They called them Finn Hops.

Did you go to any of them?
Oh, yeah. Well, when we was kids, when the mother and father went to one of these Finn Hops, they didn’t have babysitters. They brought the kids with them. We used to run around the halls. We would try to dance like in the old films, have fun, that’s all. For refreshments, they had the coffee and stuff. But us kids—we weren’t into that stuff. We just watched them dance, and when the dance was over, they lugged us kids home. The music at the dances was all recorded stuff. They played records. They used to have live music, but that was before my time.

Now you were an athlete at an early age. How early were you doing some athletic things?
Oh, probably seven or eight years old.

And what was that?
Baseball in Pigeon Cove Park.

And who were you playing baseball with?
Probably everybody I knew. There was only eight kids, Steve Ward, and Peter—Young Billy never learned. Gee, they all played. Vick Cornigary, he was an Italian Finn. Whoever was in the class, we played baseball. And we played a lot. Usually, we played a game called Scrub. When you went down to the park, when they were going to play some baseball, somebody would hold a Scrub 1. Somebody else would hold a 2, 3, 4. Whoever got Scrub 1 got to bat first, and if he was a good hitter, you didn’t get out until somebody caught your fly ball. Little
games, funny games. (In scrub baseball, players take turns between batting and fielding, there are no teams.)

What was your favorite position to play?
I played all the positions, and I wound up being a catcher. Well, first, when I got into high school, I was playing first base. My brother Otto was a great baseball player. He was six years older than me and played first base. The same coach that coached me had coached my brother, so he wanted me to play first base. But when we went to go try out into those next steps, Legion Baseball Junior League, nobody wanted to catch. They were scared of being a catcher. So they had me try it. And that’s where I wound up permanently. The best coach we had was a guy named Albert Wright. Fabulous coach. And when he saw me playing a little catch for that junior league team, he says, when high school started, and I went and tried out for his team, he says, “You’re going to be the catcher.” I said, “Good.” Because I played a little first base for him to begin with. But he says he never seen a kid that could scoop them out of the dirt like the old Finn from Pigeon Cove.

Now you came of age that way, as an athlete, about during World War II, right?
Yeah. I was 15 when World War II ended, 1945. That’s when I started catching.

Did you get scouted by professional teams?
Yeah, I had a tryout with the Red Sox, and a tryout with the Philadelphia Phillies. It was very, very interesting because I could hit like a son of a gun, and I had a good arm. And when we went and tried out with the Red Sox, the scout says if I’d come to some place in New York, he’d put me right in the starting lineup. I couldn’t go. I didn’t have no money to leave Pigeon Cove. I was that young. I just got married. So that ended there. So then we had to try out with the Phillies. And all they said was, “Keep coming out to catch batting practice,” and I caught batting practice. It was quite an experience.

Where was the Phillies tryout?
Braves Field, national league.

So you made it to Boston.
Yeah, we was up there and it was interesting. They give you a Phillies uniform and you felt like
a big shot, 19-year-old kid. But when I tried out with the Red Sox, they was having me throw to second base about ten or 15 minutes, because I could hit that left field wall, you know? If you stand at home plate, it looks like it was going to fall on you. That’s how close. So anyway, one of the guys—I forget his name, but he hit like 400 in the 1880s and ‘90s. And he was an old timer watching us hit. When I got up to bat, I hit a couple good line drives. I hit them off the wall. And he changed my way of hitting in one way I’ll never forget, because I could hit a long ball when I was a kid. He says, “Get the bat up behind your ear. That’s where the base hits are.” So I changed my swing a little bit, which worked. But I didn’t hit the long ball no more like before because up there, when you see all the balls, you hit for average.

When I got back to playing with the town team—I was on that or some team anyway—and one of the guys says, “Wonder what you did to Jussi at that tryout. He don’t hit that long ball no more.” I says what they did was change my swing. Instead of getting down and getting the leverage, they said, “Get it up behind your ear,” and then you swung different. And the reason to get up—that was so you could hit the real fast ball when it arrived. But that’s where it ended. I didn’t hit no more long balls. And I think that’s what ruined that part.

But the whole thing was when they asked me how old I was—because the regular Red Sox guy that caught batting practice, he come up to me and he says, “How old are you?” I said I’m 19. He said, “That’s where you made your mistake. When they asked you your age, every baseball player, even in the big leagues today, is two years younger than he says. When you said you was 19, he said, “They left you like a hot potato.” If I said I was 17, they’d have stuck with me and kept me right in there.

So, when you said 19, they figured you were 21.
Right. And they figured they were going to spend too much time getting you ready for the big leagues. That’s the way it figured out.

Honest Finn.
Well, I could lie like the rest of them. But I didn’t know that. I didn’t know you lied about your age. It was so interesting. It was funny because when we was warming up, a couple of the pitchers out in the bullpen—the Phillies manager, one of the famous pitchers whose name was Schoolboy Rowe—he’s already famous for throwing knuckle. So, Schoolboy Rowe could lean
right on the top. I was warming up two guys. All he said was, “Those guys are kind of small for pitchers.” And then that’s the manager. He’s the one that—because there was a big-league ballplayer from Gloucester, named Sy Perkins. He was retired, but he was one of the coaches. So, then they sent him over, and he says, “You’re doing pretty good. Want to catch batting practice for the big boys?” I said sure. It was very interesting.

So you spent hours or days doing this at Braves Field.
Only one day. A couple hours. That’s all we had.

One day. But they wanted you to stay for longer and do that.
They wanted you to come back each day while they was in there. Probably so they wouldn’t have to pay someone else to catch batting practice. So anyway, I couldn’t go up there. I didn’t have the five bucks. It cost you five bucks to take a train up and go over and come back. Big waste of time. I had to work.

Where were you working? What was your job?
I was working construction a bit with my brother, doing side jobs, mason work and all that stuff. Then I went in the Tool Company. I was around 20 years old. Because you had to work.
You married young, had kids, you had to feed them. And it wasn’t a good job. If I was on the hammer, I liked that. I was good at it. But when they put you on the grindstone, oh, that’s the worst job in the world.

**Why was the grindstone so bad?**
Oh, it’s awful. Standing in one spot all day grinding pieces of steel and stuff like that. And because in the winter, it’s cold. It was just lousy.

**The job you liked was with the hammer?**
Oh, yeah. One of my old classmates says, “Get a job in the Tool Company. They got big money.” I said, “What’s big money?” He said, “Well, it’s making $55, $60 bucks a week.” At that time, she had a 40-hour job. The most you could get was a dollar an hour then. So I went down there, got the job. But I had to go twice. I worked there three years and got laid off. Then we went to work, a couple of us, for the B&M Railroad. We worked there one winter as railroad carpenters. Then when they laid us off, to collect unemployment—because the railroad had their own unemployment—you had to go to a place of previous employment. So I went down to the Tool Company. Figured I won’t get hired again, but they put me back, they hired me. I wound up three more years.

**Tell us, Jussi, how did you eventually become a stone mason?**
We used to cut stone when we was kids by watching the old-timers. There were tons—a bunch of them. They all cut stone in those days. And I says, “I can do that.” And I did it. And I was good at it, starting when I was around 12, 15. We used to cut stones around the yard, just extra pieces laying around the yard at 24 Stockholm Avenue. I made a set of steps for my mother when I was in high school.

**Did you speak with the (older) people about their old days in the quarries when the granite industry was big?**
No, but when we was kids, two quarries were still running, Leonard Johnson’s quarry and Fitzgibbon quarry. It wasn’t quite closed out. We used to haul it up the tracks from Pigeon Cove. It was on the border. That was in Gloucester.

**So you watched the old timers. Did they teach you how to hold a hammer? Did you learn**
by watching and doing?
Yup. You could just take old tools that were laying around and use them and try them out. That’s why me and Bobby Anderson, my friend, the Swede—we started cutting some. Later, I got out of the Tool Company and into stone mason work through Bobby. He was a terrific stonemason. He was working at a low union, but because he was so good, he got hired all the time. So he told me, “Why don’t you get out of there [the Tool Company]?” He says, “Come up with me.” I says, “Well, I ain’t got to serve an apprenticeship three years, do I?” He said, “No, you’ll work with me. You don’t need anyone; you’ll learn so fast.” He said, “When we was kids, you could do that better than the rest of us. So if I carry you for a couple weeks, you’re in, stonemason’s union.” So it worked out. I called him up in spring and he said, “I’ll get you on the first job. Come up.” So I wound up cutting stone and laying bricks for the next 40 or 50 years.

I used to watch my grandfather. He’d make a stone wall or something, and I’d watch him moving this rock around and looking at it—looking at it before he ever tried to split it. Did you do that?
Oh, yeah.

What was involved in that, looking at the rock?
They say granite from Rockport doesn’t have a—what do you call it?

A grain?
Yeah, grain. But I says, I don’t care what you call it, grain, but it has an easy way and a hard way, because of how it comes out of the quarry. One way it cuts easy. But to go a crosscut, that was the hard way. If you understood it a little bit, it wasn’t hard to figure out.

So you could tell by looking at this stone that was in your yard, even as a kid, that it was easier to cut this way than the other way?
Yeah, but you got to feel that. They call it reading the stone. You rub it on the top. If it’s rough, that’s the hard way. If it feels smooth, that’s the easy way. So you cut it the easy way, and it opens right up.

Nobody told you that? You discovered it?
Yes, in a way.
Was there a feeling among the Finns about the unions? Some thought unions were good, some thought unions were bad? Do you remember any of that argument or debate among the Finns?

Oh, they always argued them. Well, they claim it’s the unions that closed up the quarries. But it’s actually the unions is what give guys better wages in the long run. So there’s a good and bad for all kinds of stuff if you look at it right. But see, in them early quarry days, my mother’s first husband worked in the quarries. They were nine hours a day, six days a week for four bucks complete. He didn’t get no dollar a day. That would come up later.

Was there sick leave?

No sick leave. No sick leave. No sick leave. You got sick, that was your tough luck. Listening to the old stories was interesting. But the pavement cutters got two dollars a week more than the regular quarry workers.

Why was that?

Because they had to know something; had to have skills.

There were a lot of Finns in the area: Rockport Finns, Gloucester Finns, especially Lanesville Finns. Did they all work together?

Oh yeah, they all got along. And they played ball together, played on the same teams a lot of times. Oh, yeah. I played softball after I got through playing baseball. Played for years in Plum Cove. All the players were good. There’s Art Lano, the Finn that was on the original team when I went, the Lanesville Privateers. He was really great. There were lots of other Finns. The Maki brothers, Howard and John Maki. I’m trying to remember all them guys. Bob Natti had the slow pitch league that could hit them out of the park. And that guy that hit them out of the park was my kid named Christopher. He visited me yesterday, him and the grandson.

So he inherited your longball.

Yeah, he had unbelievable power. Very strong.
AFTERWORD

Jussi Wayrynen gave this interview on October 8, 2018, while a resident at the Seacoast Nursing Home in Gloucester. Before the interview, he volunteered in a stoic tone and with a wry grin that he expected to be there “for the duration.” On June 2, 2022, Jussi passed away, one of the truest of the “Old Finns” mourned by his surviving family and Pigeon Cove neighbors, as well as by the greater Finn community of Cape Ann. He was 92 years old.

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To learn more about the Cape Ann Finns, please visit capeannfinns.com.