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From Iowa to Finland and Back

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International Student Exchange Program

In October of 1989 Iowa State University and the University of Joensuu in Joensuu, Finland signed a student exchange agreement. Dr. Kim von Weissenberg, Assistant Dean of Forestry at the U of J, traveled to Ames to meet with Iowa State officials and develop a student exchange agreement between the two universities.

The program was set up so that each school would host a student from the visiting university and find work experience for him/her. The agreement was signed for a three year trial period, and the option, to extend the program is open if agreed upon by both universities.

The first year of the program proved to be very successful. Following are two interesting articles written by this year's participating students Janne Vitamo from the University of Joensuu and Scott Davis from Iowa State University.

From Iowa to Finland and Back

When I enrolled in the forestry curriculum at Iowa State University, I knew that a vast number of opportunities would be available to me. However, I never expected to have the once in a lifetime opportunity that I experienced during the summer of 1989.

A summer in Finland was not part of my four-year plan when I graduated from high school in 1986. I would have jumped up and down just knowing that a summer in the mountains of Colorado was also part of the plan. Summer school in Montana? Yes, that was included too. All of these were great experiences, but this summer in Finland was by far the highlight of my career as a student (so far).

As a forestry student in a predominately agricultural state such as Iowa, I could not ask for more. I had the opportunity to work in a country with almost seventy percent of the land area covered with forests. Over forty percent of Finland's exports are forest based products. As you can see the Finnish depend heavily on forestry in their economy. A summer internship in a country like this is great experience for any forester. It doesn't matter if the forester is from Finland or from Iowa.

The summer of 1989 started off moving very quickly. I finished my last final at Iowa State on Friday afternoon, and I was in my home in Finland on the following Tuesday evening. So many new experiences made the entire situation feel like a dream moving in fast forward. I probably had all of the same feelings that every student has had on their first trip abroad.

The period of time between the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport and Joensuu, Finland covered twenty hours total. Within that time period I met many new people from around the world, and I had so many new and exciting experiences that there was enough for a ten page letter home on the second day.

One of the problems with living in a foreign country is adapting to the new language and culture. I found all of the language and cultural barriers to be an exciting challenge. The simple tasks of grocery shopping, mailing letters, and answering the telephone become difficult tasks in a foreign country, especially when you don't speak the language. Before the end of the first week, however, I could go into the grocery store and the post office without them knowing that I was not Finnish. No, I didn't learn the language. I just learned how to stumble through the important words and smile a lot.

I was aided in fitting into the Finnish culture by the fact that I looked more like a Finnish person than my Finnish roommate. Even before I had left the United States in New York’s JFK International airport, a man began speaking to me in Finnish thinking that I was flying home.

Scott Davis doing research in Finland.
As long as I didn’t open my mouth I could be as Finnish as I wanted to be. When I had to speak Finnish, bad things happened. Trying to tell someone that I live on Nuottanienmentie street is as hard as it looks. The standard greetings such as “hyva paiva” and “teriviet” for “good day” and “hello” became difficult with a Midwestern accent.

The exchange program was set up so that the exchange students could gain work experience and learn about forestry in the host country. While I was working for the University of Joensuu, I was assigned to several different research projects. I had the opportunity to work with several different researchers throughout the summer. The job included working in the field, in the laboratory, in the greenhouse, and at the computers.

At different times during the summer, I had the opportunity to attend some of the summer courses and field trips offered to the forestry students. It was difficult to comprehend much from the lectures, but many of the students helped me by translating the important information. It gave me the opportunity to meet many of the students, and I also got to see how their courses were structured in comparison with those at Iowa State. I was surprised to find very little difference in the summer courses offered by the University of Joensuu and the summer camp offered by Iowa State University.

Throughout the summer I had many opportunities to travel around Finland and the surrounding countries. I felt that I should take every opportunity to see new territories. It may be a long time before I get the chance to return for a second visit.

There were too many highlights throughout the summer for me to mention in one article of this size. I will, however, briefly mention some of them to give you an idea of how memorable the summer was for me.

I met a lot of new friends while I was traveling. On one long weekend I took a canoeing trip with a group of Finnish students from all over the country. Before the trip, I had never met any of them. After three days of canoeing and camping with them I found I had made some very good friends.

Short trips with friends from Joensuu were also a big part of the summer fun. I will always remember the many canoeing and fishing trips as well as the target shooting and sightseeing trips that filled the weekends and evenings with fond memories. I think that those fun times with good friends will be what I remember the most about Finland.

The most interesting trip of the entire summer was a four day trip into the Soviet Union. I took a Finnish bus tour into the city of Leningrad, the Soviet Union’s window to the west. During the trip I saw some of the world’s most beautiful architecture, I learned a lot about the history of the city, and I had the opportunity to talk with some of the people. I found it quite interesting to speak with the young people of the country. It was difficult with the broken English, but it was fun to compare the views that we had of each other. I cannot explain everything that happened and feelings that I felt while I was in the Soviet Union. I can only say that I enjoyed the entire four day experience, and it is one that I will never forget.

Other highlights of the summer included several trips to Helsinki, Finland, to visit friends and a ferry trip to Stockholm, Sweden, with three of my Finnish friends. It may have rained the entire time that we were in the Swedish capital, but we still had a great time.

There are many things that I still miss now that I have been home for a while. I miss the friends that I made, the wonderful Finnish saunas, the Salmiaki (candy), the Karalian pies (hard to explain), and many other things that I will always think of when I think of Finland.

To summarize an entire summer in one sentence sounds impossible, but I am going to try. It was a great experience that I will remember my entire life!

— Scott Davis