

# THE NORTHERN FINNCATTLE – THE COW THAT ALMOST DISAPPEARED

## Arctic adaptation, folk strategies and state politics

Päivi Soppela and Nuccio Mazzullo  
Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Finland

paivi.soppela@ulapland.fi, nuccio.mazzullo@ulapland.fi

### WHAT DO WE STUDY?

This poster focuses on the Northern Finncattle, a breed that is well-adapted to the Arctic climate, but produces little milk compared to dominant commercial breeds in Finland. The displacement of Northern Finncattle was a particularly rapid process due to large losses of them during second WW, and the breed was almost extinct in 1960s. Now we can observe state efforts to save the Northern Finncattle from extinction, which is still an endangered breed (ca. 800 adult cows).

What makes this case interesting, is a paradox in the state politics that, in the first place, created policies to develop intensive agriculture across the nation at the expense of losing the Northern Finncattle breed, only to rediscover it as Finnish a heritage later on, while starting programs to preserve national breeds. For this study we have drawn from first-hand information from the experiences of past and present Northern Finncattle tenders which we have been able to interview in the past two years.

#### Cows of the fells and mires

"I am from fell landscapes from Salla, and there were mirelands too that were soft... and cows had to go to pastures to eat there on mires, on soft mires. And to rip those dwarf birch leaves and eat them and sedges and bogbeans and horsetails, that's on what they lived when they were grazing on pastures. And there were higher lands, the cows had to be lighter, a heavy cow couldn't have managed to walk there at all..." (SP, Tervola)

#### Milk for the family

"Well, we did not have (many Lappish cows) as there were just small cottages those days, so we had three (cows) and calves and then small stables ... but the cow was so important. And as men went to work in the forest, food was needed and the mothers would milk the cows and take care of children and the cow was really important. And out there these cows (like today), these big cows would not had managed at all." (SP, Tervola)

"And then it was so that the woman of the household took care of cows and was able to get enough milk for the toddlers, and that's what it was for." (HI, Ranua).

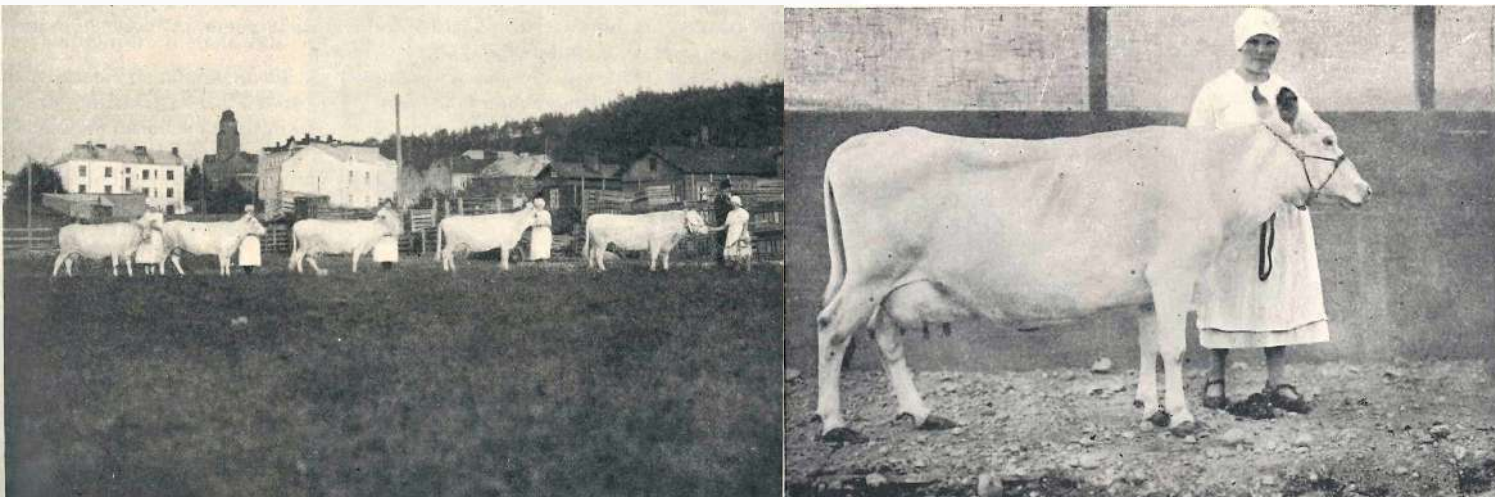
#### When the Ayshire breed came

"But then when they started to market these Ayshire breed cows, it started this ... expansion, it was this that displaced the original cow breed. ... it suddenly collapsed. There were only few cows left in some stables and farms around here. It was as if those female and male farmers all started to like these Ayshires ... As it (produces more milk) and is bigger. So it was like a shame, if anyone happened to have those little Lappish cows. And that's what they said to me; you don't get even a drop of milk for your coffee from each of them ... " (SP, Tervola)

"And to me that left a sense of bitterness when people said that from those little barrels you can't even get the milk for the coffee." (HI, Ranua)

### Folk selection

#### Bull cooperatives



Kuva 96. Kuvassa näytetään Pohjois-Suomen Lohjan kunnasta. Kuva 97. Ruusuvuorokasvatusta, pohjois-suomalainen eläin.

#### Herd Register

White colour & milk output emphasized

1905

1925

2WW

1950

1970

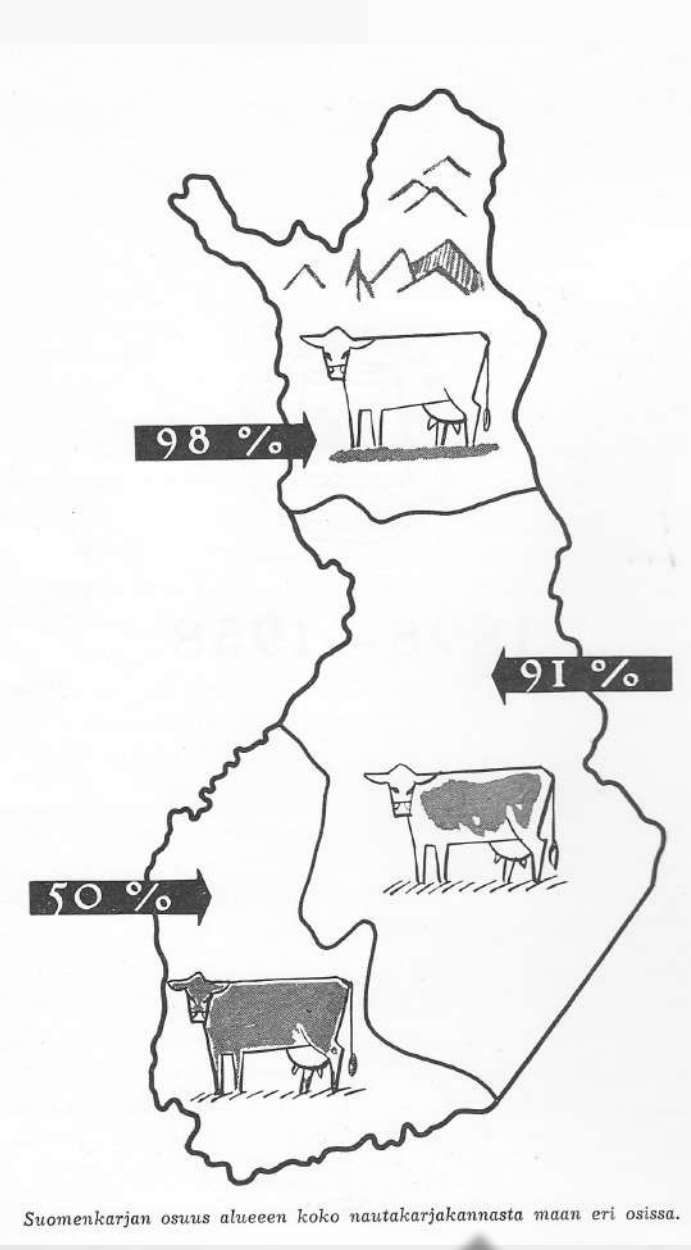
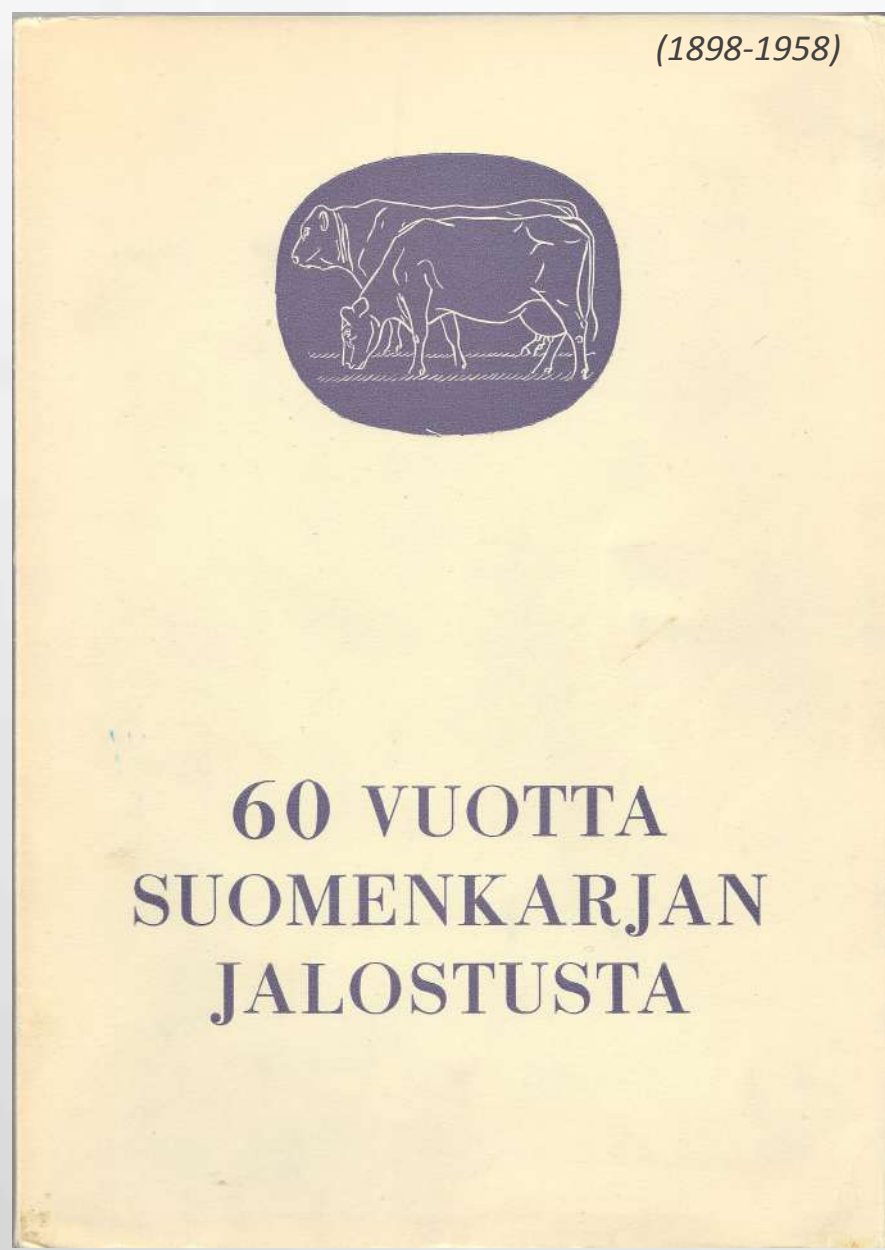
1985

2004

Grand Duchy of Finland | 1917 Finland became independent

#### Breeding Association

Pohjois-Suomen karjanjalostusyhdistys (1905-1946)



The cows and their tenders crossing the national border from Tornio to Haparanda during the evacuation of the Lapland's War 19.09.1944 (Photo: SA archive)



Pioneers for revival of Northern Finncattle in Lapland at 1970's: Kerttu ja Leino Lehto, Arpela, Tornio (Photo: Hilkka Jankkila ©)

#### Folk breeding practices

"How it reproduced as cows and bulls were in natural pastures in the old times, so see, in summer it (the bull) searched (cows) from there (in the forest), and nobody knew whose descendants were the calves then, the cows just calved!" (SP, Tervola).

"It was the same population which was rolling here. Farmers took a bull in their turn and raised it, and it was then used for breeding (for the cows of the whole village)...  
... So (later on) when the bull cooperatives were established, the bulls were separately brought here... A bull was brought from other districts, had different 'blood' and was raised. One started to buy bulls and the bull cooperative always got a new, and again a new bull. So then it (the herd) started to change... The breeding process went to better direction like that, but later when these Ayshire cows came to markets and started to get common, then it finished this original breed." (HI, Ranua)

#### A cow who survived the winter war

"I was just thinking to tell you how well this breed copes with the cold. Well, this is an old story, it happened during the war. It was when evacuees left from Salla to Sweden. And cows were taken then too, older cattle tenders walked the herds, or eldest daughters. So one cow went lost from the herd and found her way to Paasonkaira where my grandfather had his haystack...  
(Next spring came and people returned back to Lapland)  
... It was April and what a surprise was waiting for him! A white cow. Quite right, she was alive, she had dug down a huge cave into the stack, eaten, lived and reindeer and moose had visited her and hares and others... About -40 degrees was temperature over that war time. Awfully harsh winter. Yes, and it was during spring winter then, or it was May or so, when she had calved and given birth to a female calf."  
(RI, Ranua)

### Subsistence economy

### Pressure towards high production – commercial breeds

#### Endangered breed

The losses during the war and evacuation were great; for example during Lapland's War the herds of Inari, Utsjoki and Petsamo were slaughtered and the rest were moved to Sweden or southern Finland.

#### New technics

Artificial insemination

The displacement of Northern Finncattle was rapid in 1960's and in 1970's only few herds were left.

### C o l l a p s e

#### Research

#### Pelso gene bank

#### Revival? How?

National Gene Resource Program

Pelso Prison in Vaala keeps a living gene bank of the Northern Finncattle (ca. 50 cows).



Photo: © Lappari

A recently started project, LAPPARI, examines how to promote the production of Northern Finncattle's milk and refine it for innovative product, to increase its value and markets. The project is conducted by the Arctic Centre and Luke and funded by the EU's Agency of Rural Affairs. The overall aim is to get recognition for Northern Finncattle as a valuable local breed and support local producers.

Further information: [www.arcticcentre.org/lappari](http://www.arcticcentre.org/lappari)  
[paivi.soppela@ulapland.fi](mailto:paivi.soppela@ulapland.fi), [anne.tuomivaara@ulapland.fi](mailto:anne.tuomivaara@ulapland.fi)



### CONCLUSIONS

Among several motives that have surfaced, there is the concern of cattle tenders of not having received due respect for their breeding practices. Until recently, the prevailing attitude has been that of belittling Northern Finncattle breeders' efforts, and state policies have aimed to influence their breeding choices towards greater milk production. Although the milk yield of Northern Finncattle is lower than commercial breeds, the milk has many superior properties that suit well eg. for cheese production. Furthermore, these cows are an excellent example for the implementation of sustainable farming in the Arctic with their modest but diverse food consumption and suitability for outside forest grazing and low-heated or unheated stables. The Northern Finncattle milk has a great potential for novelty dairy and farm products (tourism, green care activities). There are positive signs of revival of the husbandry, particularly among young farmers and hence this stage we are living can become the renaissance of the Northern Finncattle in Lapland.