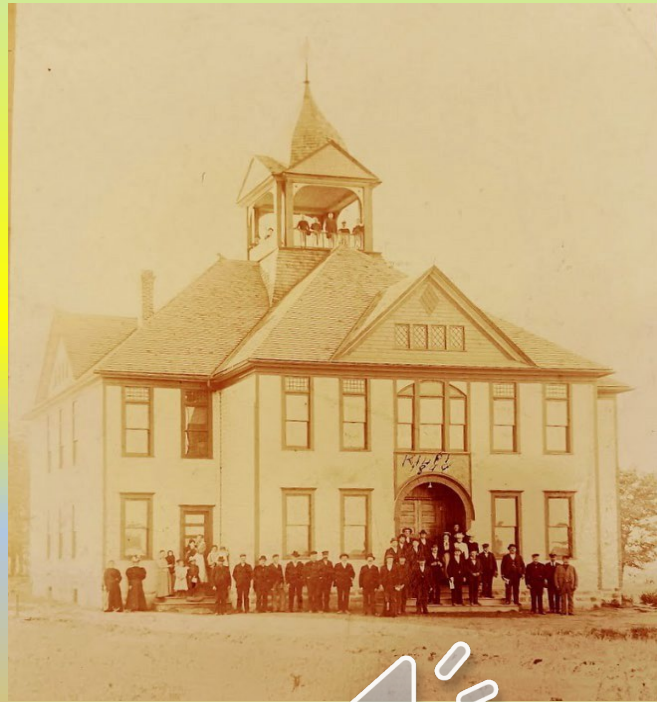


# Keeping Kilpi Hall Close!



*Kilpi Temperance Hall  
Dedication, 1899*

In 1892, several Finnish immigrant families settled in Conneaut, providing the nucleus for the founding of Kilpi Hall, and continuing the traditional Finnish customs that they had brought with them across the ocean to America. By 1899, these Finnish families were financially sound and comfortable enough to build a Temperance Hall which they named Kilpi Hall.

13. Kilpi Temperance Hall,  
dedicated July 16, 1898,  
Conneaut, Ohio

First persons that signed their names, with  
the intention of establishing a Temperance Society  
on Sept 28, 1894

John Bergman  
J. Laamanen  
J. Sikkilä  
Matti Luoma  
William Mäki  
Alfred Mäki  
Jaakko Lemponen  
Jani Mäki  
Thomas Mäki  
Jaakko Palo  
Matti Holma  
Jaane Holkko  
Matti Skyttä  
Juha Wiitane  
Elyas Antio  
Matti Rosendahl  
Matti Suokko  
Kustan Kari  
Erkki Matson  
Kusta Arko

Community Center  
osti Kilpi Seuran Talon  
Elokuun Es. päivä 1976

Wuimmoiset Jäsenet olivat

Ruusa Elonen  
Eden Sirtori en 12-7-  
Alex Elonen  
Saima Holkko 1916  
John Holkko 1-1-26  
Senja Kitiinaja 10-11-2  
Wm. Kitiinaja 2-2-26  
Arvo Rutar 2-2-21  
Tilda Laituri 11-25-22  
Jenny Västi 5-25-45  
Kaarlo Västi 5-25-45  
Katy Puhakka 11-18-23  
Wilma Perälä 10-13-35  
Verna Wargula 9-7-52  
Lillian Shoemaker 1-12-54  
Jenny Mäkelä 12-2-54  
Janny Niinistö 11-21-61  
Edward Västi 11-21-61  
Ely Hirsimäki 11-28-64  
Sorma Purola 11-6-64  
Ida Koyhka 12-6-66  
John Tarkkainen 2-4-69  
~~Eden~~

First twenty Persons of "Kilpi" Temperance Society

Return to J. Holkko

Kilpi means “shield” in the Finnish language and Finnish expatriates had learned to shield themselves against the evils of drink in their homeland and did not intend to forget them in their new country. They successfully built their “shield” hall in their new Conneaut community. They also brought other Finnish cultural customs with them, including their love of music, theater, and art, and sports and parties as well as community gatherings.







A Conneaut News Herald article by Diana Lewis dated February 16, 1999, celebrated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kilpi Hall. Kilpi Hall did not stand in lonely splendor. It was just one of the many 19<sup>th</sup> century Finnish halls polka dotting the Great Lakes region and across the country.

The existence of multiple Kilpi halls although called by different names highlighted the facts of Finnish immigration patterns to the United States. Historians have labeled the years between 1870 and 1930 as the “Great Migration” of Finnish people to North America, although Finnish people had come to America in smaller numbers before America became a country.



In 1870 only about 3,000 Finnish immigrants lived in America, but by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early twentieth centuries the number had swelled to about 340,000. Their reasons for leaving their homeland included seeking religious freedom, better economic opportunities, and the desire to escape Swedish and Russian political influences and domination.



By 1910, Conneaut counted at least 500 Finnish people in its census, with many of the men working on the railroads and docks to support their families. Kilpi hall gave them the feel of home away from their homeland and brought light, laughter, and music into their lives and to the Conneaut community.







As time progressed, so did Kilpi Hall and the generations of people who practiced their talents and enjoyed themselves within its walls, then time slowly stopped for Kilpi Hall. In 1975, the Kilpi Hall trustees sold the empty and deteriorating Hall to the Conneaut Community Center which moved in and renovated it over time using fund raising campaigns and grants. `



Two previous executive directors had resigned before Joan Newcomb assumed the directorship in 1978 when she and her volunteers spearheaded a successful campaign to purchase and renovate the building.

Part of the renovations of Kilpi Hall included removing the original cupola which had fallen into disrepair, but the renovators designed the Newcomb Performing Arts Terrace on the North lawn to replicate its distinct design.





Commenting on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kilpi Hall, Executive Director Penny Armeni said, “We’ve always maintained the Finnish Heritage of the building. We are the Conneaut Community Center, but the building is Kilpi Hall. We use the Kilpi Hall shield sometimes and we always keep a Finnish flag in the main hall.”



Band picture taken in the  
Worker's Hall of the  
Conneaut Band. Jack Kultti  
was the director.



The Center celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary throughout the year of 1999., focusing on one special event, a Finnish Fest on august 21, 1999. Other activities to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary included a dinner concert with Matt Carducci titled “Songs to Warm the Heart,” an Irish night featuring corn beef and cabbage and an Afternoon Quilters Tea, Captain Gary Peters conducting a workshop on flyfishing, and teaching a meteorology for backpackers and boaters, and a Coffeehouse Concert with the Heights guitar duo, trio “Brokenstraw,”



During the 1939-1940 period, the Finnish Ambassador to the United States was Hjalmar Procopé. He presented his credentials on June 20, 1939, and remained in office through the Winter War period. Ambassador Procopé was present at the dedication of the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 World's Fair in New York, where he delivered a speech. He appeared in Conneaut in 1940 at Kilpi Hall to raise funds for the Winter War against Russia.







Celebrating the end of World  
War II, Conneaut 1945



# Kilpi Hall: The Reawakening of the Conneaut, Ohio, Finnish Community Center

By Joan M. Newcomb





From Small Town, November-December 1982

In August of 1975, a group of residents from Conneaut, Ohio, population 14,000, gathered to discuss the possibilities of establishing a community arts center.

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Conneaut at that time lacked a facility capable of housing continuing education classes, and boasted neither a theater, a movie house, nor an exhibition area. The town's only facility capable of handling performing arts was the high school gym, although the community possessed rich reserves of musical, dramatic, and artistic talent. This seemed to indicate that such a project would have solid local support.



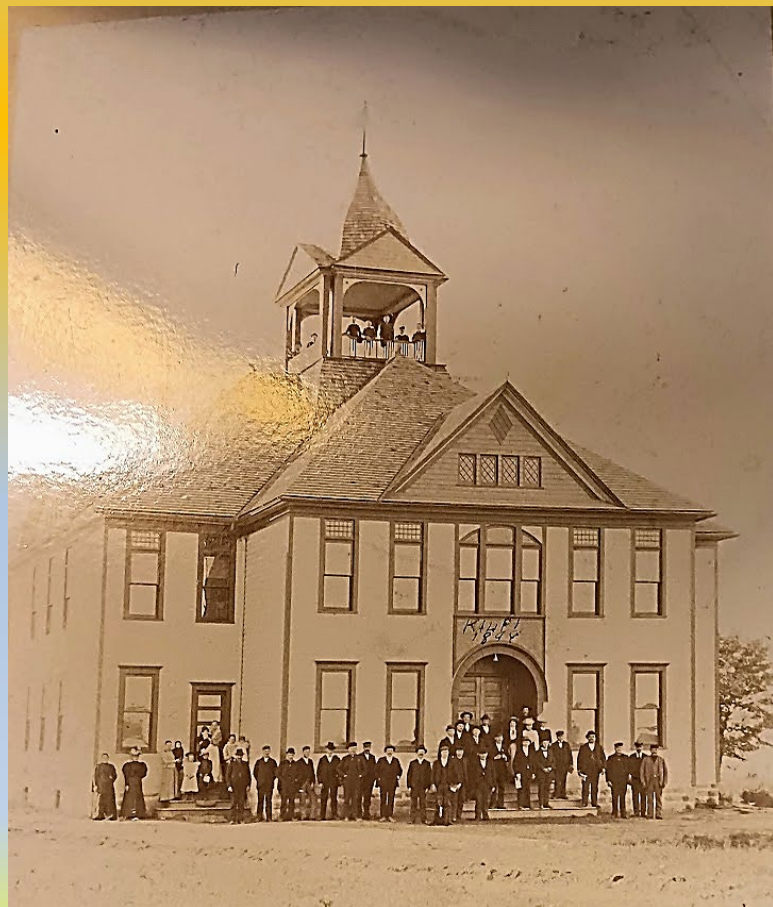
Helped by an interested attorney who donated his services, the group incorporated in October 1975 and adopted the name Conneaut Community Center. At that time, the membership numbered 30. Today it has reached more than 300. Each founding member donated \$10.00, and with the \$300 raised the Center began an intensive membership campaign.



Several people volunteered to spearhead the effort, while others wrote the incorporation bylaws and developed an art center proposal to present to the city council, local businesses and industries, the chamber of commerce, the ministerial association, and other service organizations. All enthusiastically supported the idea, and it soon became necessary to look for a building to house the proposed programs. Several facilities stood empty in the town but with the good advice of several bankers and realtors, the Center decided to purchase Kilpi Hall, lying at the foot of Buffalo Street and overlooking Lake Erie.



Kilpi Hall, a Finnish Community Meeting Hall built by Charles Gran in 1899, had stood largely derelict for eight years and faced demolition. Some of the Finnish trustees, legal owners of the structure, had been looking for appropriate buyers and when they read the Center's proposal, they believed their search had ended.







Since the planned activities included ones similar to those enjoyed by Finnish residents in the past, the trustees cooperated fully with the Community Center's aims. Their selling price looked almost like a gift: \$15,000 dollars.

Although the frame building needed much repair, it was basically sound and local building inspectors believed it was easily salvageable.

The hall has more than 6,000 square feet of usable space. The main floor contains a 150 seat theater/multi-purpose room, a stage, two dressing rooms and two offices; the basement area has two large craft rooms, an old kitchen, and two storage rooms, while the second floor consists of a large dance studio, three small classrooms, and three storage areas.

The Center's management realized that the building might be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. At their urging, an Ohio Historical Society representative arrived from Cleveland to inspect the building and meet with the trustees and an interested local architect. Based on the recommendation of this group and the observation that Kilpi Hall was one of the few Finnish Meeting Halls still standing in the Great Lakes region, the building was added to The National Register.



The Community Center Trustees then began fund-raising. They first appealed to a county-wide philanthropic organization, the Civic Development Corporation of Ashtabula County, which had financed other projects. The Corporation granted \$4,000 to serve as seed money for the renovation.





The check generated a great deal of enthusiasm , and as the Center's first substantial contribution it enabled the organization to hire an architect who helped in drawing up preliminary plans and assured that state regulations were being met. Fortunately, a Finnish architect, Raymond Koski, expressed a personal interest in the project.





In the meantime, three of the Center's trustees and the attorney also negotiated with Conneaut's four leading institutions (two banks and two savings and loan associations) for a \$40,000 loan needed to purchase and renovate the hall. They arranged for a unique cooperative plan through which each institution loaned \$10,000.



In July 1976, the Center's officers signed the mortgage agreement, making them the building's owners with all of the attendant responsibilities. Work began immediately, using the Finnish architect, a Finnish contractor, and many volunteers.



The first renovations included installation of a donated hot water boiler heating system, complete rewiring of the building, and the installation of new plumbing. The workers preserved the simple 1890s décor as much as possible; volunteers polished and rewired the light fixtures, stained, and varnished the wainscotting, refinished floors deemed to be in repairable condition, covered badly damaged floors, installed new wallboard and plaster wall, and added new rest rooms.





Many of the Victorian items found in the building were used for decoration; others which had no potential use for Center activities were auctioned to raise another \$2,000 to further the renovation process.

In January of 1977, the hall hosted its first stage performance, “Laura,” the mystery play, perhaps stirring ghosts of former Finnish actors who first trod the boards in the hall. The building remained cold and drafty, and the audience kept their coats on, but they enjoyed the experience, nonetheless.



Rehabilitation monies soon ran out, although much remained to be done. The Center needed more funds so it sent proposals to the National Trust for Historic Preservation and again to the Civic Development Corporation (CDC) of Ashtabula County. Funds were unavailable from the Trust, but the CDC provided hope. CDC, a corporation consisting of business, industry, and individuals from the county raises capital improvement funds for nonprofit organizations working in conjunction with the United Way, which also provides operating expenses for some of the same groups.



CDC is unique because it has granted funds to arts-related organizations as well as to traditional social service agencies, and because it gives recipients a large amount of freedom in dispersing the grants. CDC campaigns occur once every five years, so the Center waited until 1980 to receive funds applied for in 1977.





In the interim, work continued sporadically and cultural activities continued, although groups could only use the first floor and basement areas. Classes, plays, movies, art exhibits, craft shows, and two festivals, (a Finnish festival, and one honoring the gallant sailors who ply the Great Lakes) were very successful. The community also began an annual Craft Caravan which hosts over 30 craftspeople each November. Other events included a quilt show, musical performances, public service programs and Town Hall Meetings.

While the building was not aesthetically impressive during this stage of rehabilitation, its interior did appeal to Universal Studios as a setting for the television movie, “Harvest Home,” filmed locally. Expressing great pleasure in the effort to restore the old building, visiting actress Bette Davis said it reminded her of the New England of her youth.

Still, the unfinished second floor rooms and the drab insul-brick exterior remained a constant impetus for further action and donations of time, materials, and talents continued to roll in. For example, the Pittsburgh and Conneaut Company built and installed a fire escape from the second floor and the Rotary Club donated a fire door to bring the area up to fire code standards for use.





Such cooperation was and is still common. The long list of donations includes a wide variety, such as paint, authentic 1890 costumes, used carpeting and a 1913 Steinway baby grand piano. The Center has accepted only minor federal aid. The CETA program provided excellent workers to assist in renovating the second floor and basement areas while monies provided by Title V of the Older Americans Act paid for workers to staff and maintain the office. Volunteers paid for all of the rest of the work.





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In September of 1980, the Center received a \$34,700 grant from the CDC to renovate the building's exterior. The contractors, mindful of the structure's architectural significance, referred to early photographs during construction. To make the most of funding, the Center insulated the building with blown-in material and added aluminum siding (a replica of the original wooden ship-lap siding), new gutters, a new roof, new exterior lighting fixtures, three new metal doors with panic bars, a new chimney, cement steps, and a porch and driveway approach.







Although The National Trust discourages the use of aluminum siding, the Center's Trustees wanted to use the most economical and maintenance free materials possible while still recognizing the building's historic importance.

The neighborhood's ugly duckling was transformed into a lovely blue and white swan during a relatively short time. With completion of the exterior, demand for the use of the building doubled.

Recently, the Center received the "Neighborhood Revitalization Pride Medallion" from the Ashtabula County Board of Realtors, an honor they not too modestly accepted.



The Center continues to grow in the breadth and scope of its activities and eagerly looks to the future when further renovations and refinements are planned. Any project requires people of great dedication to lead. Fortunately, the Conneaut Community Center has located a large number of individuals who have given freely to ensure the success of the Kilpi Hall project. A remarkable aspect of this endeavor is that the Center has remained independent of city, state, and federal entanglements. The Community Center is truly an effort of, by, and for the community.

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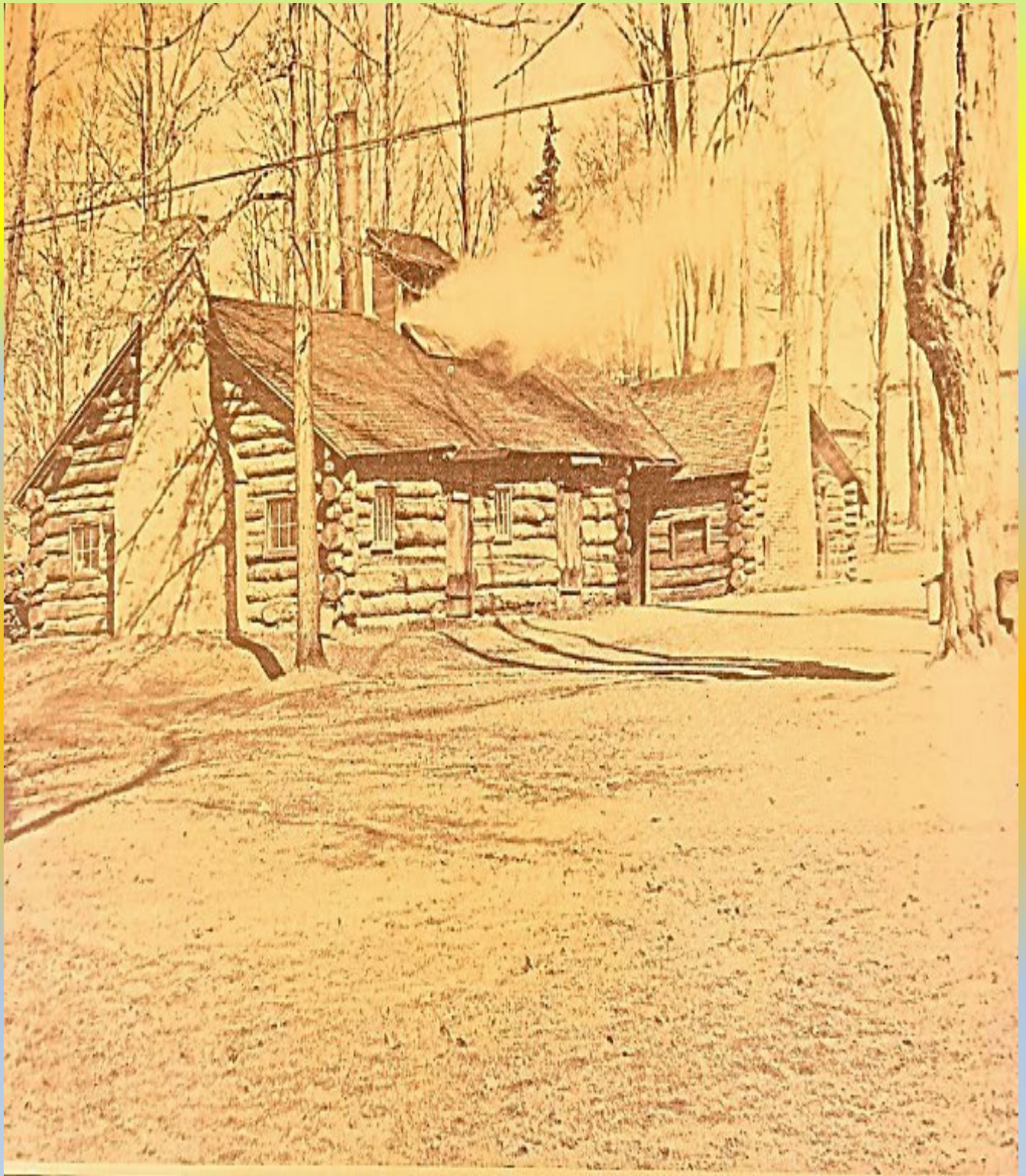


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Conneaut Arts Center

Kilpi Hall is once again a place to gather for music, dance, theater, and fellowship. As of winter of 2012, we formally changed our name to the Conneaut Arts Center.

CAC partners with several businesses throughout the county to bring artistic enrichment to the community. The Conneaut Arts Center is a non-profit organization that was established in 1976 and is located on the beautiful Lake Erie lake front, in Conneaut Ohio. The Conneaut Art Center offers dance, theater, visual arts, exercise, music, for both youth and adult artisans within the community and surrounding areas.

Website: [Conneaut Arts Center.com](http://ConneautArtsCenter.com)



# Conneaut Area Historical Society and David Cummins Octagon House

<https://capturingconneauthistory.com/>

