

## Yrjö “George” Paloheimo: Cross Culture Philanthropist

By K. R. Halme

Yrjö Paloheimo was born in 1899, the youngest of five brothers, to Karl and Gertrud Paloheimo. Yrjö’s father and uncle were industrialist who started with a sawmill in the 1890’s and grew the business into a major lumber, bricks, glass, and electrical conglomerate. Growing up at their country home on the shores of Lake Tuusula, the Paloheimo children mingled with, and married into, the families of some of the country’s foremost artists, creating one of the most cultured of extended families imaginable, seeped in the lore of Finnish national identity. Jean Sibelius’ daughter, Eva, married Yrjö’s brother Arvi; Eero Järnefelt’s daughter, Leena, married his brother Olli; and Pekka Halonen’s daughter, Anni, married his brother Paavo. While never abandoning his Finnish roots, Yrjö did make a departure from the family pattern set by his brothers; he fell in love with America and the mystique of the Old West.

After completing a degree in agronomy, Yrjö came to the U.S. He bought a used 1923 Ford and went on a year and a half tour of the country to see the U.S. agricultural industry first-hand. Along the way he took odd-jobs, started using “George” as an easier first name, and first became acquainted with the country’s Finnish communities. (Years later, one elderly Finnish-American lady, unaware of his upper-class background, was heard to remark, “Oh, I knew him back when he was a penniless delivery boy, and just look at the wealth he now has married into.”) In southern California he worked on a citrus farm in Ojai, and even attended the Rose Parade in Pasadena. By now he was at home in this country, and was particularly in love with the western U.S. It was the place he wanted to be. When “George” finally returned to Finland, this must have been apparent to others too, as his father soon sent him back to the U.S. to try and develop a market for Paloheimo wood products in this country.

In 1933 he left the family’s business for a post as secretary-treasurer of the Finnish consul general’s office in New York. Then in 1933, as the assistant director of the Finnish Travel and Information Bureau, he was appointed Commissioner General for the Finnish Pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair. He worked closely with famed architect Alvar Aalto, who designed the Finnish Pavilion at the Fair, and also developed working relationships with such notables as Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Eleanor Roosevelt. He was even a repeated guest at the Hyde Park estate of Sara Roosevelt, Franklin’s mother. Paloheimo was now moving in New York’s better social circles, and it is here in 1945 that he met Miss. Leonora Francis Curtin of Santa Fe and Pasadena at a dinner party. Both were well into their 40’s, and a year later they were married.

With the end of the World’s Fair and the subsequent world war, Yrjö had become Field Secretary of the Help Finland campaign in the U.S. As such, the newlyweds spent their honeymoon crisscrossing the country to raise funds for Finnish war relief. It was during this time that Yrjö began developing his ideas on unifying Finnish-America by establishing a national organization.

In 1948, Yrjö was appointed as the Honorary Consul for Southern California, which later included Arizona and New Mexico as well. The Pasadena mansion—built in 1906 by Leonora’s maternal grandmother, Eva Scott Fényes, and her second husband, Hungarian nobleman/physician/scientist/author, Adalbert Fényes de Csokaly—became the Finnish Consulate for the West. At the same time the Paloheimos became a family by adopting four Finnish

children: Nina, George, Eric, and Eva. Consul Paloheimo relocated the chalet style building to the grounds to serve as a sauna and guest house. In 1953, it became the birth place of the National Finlandia Foundation and was later converted into the Finnish cottage museum.

Paloheimo's consular duties (1948-1964) and Finlandia Foundation presidency (1953-1962) tended to keep the Paloheimos tied to Pasadena, but even during these years they spent as much time as possible away at their other properties. Even while they were in southern California, they often resided at their Carpinteria lemon ranch where Yrjö had added a home of his own design. Uniquely, the modernist style home built in the 1950's had a small, circular, Native American "kiva" room at its center. Consul and Mrs. Paloheimo were also managers of the old family estate in Finland, Kallio-Kuninkala, where after the war the couple had established agricultural and horticultural school for orphaned boys. However, perhaps their primary interests were centered in Santa Fe, where Leonora and her mother had long been instrumental in developing, promoting, and sponsoring Native American and Spanish colonial cultural identity—what has more recently become celebrated as "Santa Fe Style."

Here in New Mexico, George's long love affair with the west was fulfilled. The cultured Finnish diplomat transformed himself into a New Mexican rancher. Top hats and tails gave way to western shirts and bolo ties, and the mansion on "Millionaires Row" gave way to a small, primitive, centuries-old adobe. In 1933, Leonora and her mother had bought a 400 acre property south of Santa Fe as a get-a-way and sheep ranch. It now became a home to the Paloheimos. Plumbing and electricity were added, and there was plenty of acreage for the children to roam free in. It was a historic location with the remnants of a number of other old buildings on the property, which the Paloheimos began restoring. It was not long before the idea of creating a 200 acre outdoor working museum on the now expanded 700 acre site became their "pet" project. When Leonora's mother passed away in 1972, the Paloheimos moved permanently to her handsome residence on three acres in central Santa Fe known as Acequia Madre House. That same year the ranch held its first public festival, and its transformation into the living history museum, El Rancho De Las Golondrinas, was well on its way to becoming fully realized.

The Paloheimos spent their lives connecting cultures, and connecting the past to the present. Yrjö Paloheimo died in 1986 and Leonora in 1999, their legacy includes:

The Finlandia Foundation  
El Rancho de las Golondrinas Museum  
Kallio-Kuninkala campus of the Sibelius Academy  
The Pasadena Historical Museum, and Finnish Folk Museum  
The Acequia Madre House

In addition, the Paloheimo Foundation provides ongoing support for: The Southwest Museum (a legacy from the Eva Scott Fényes era), The School of Advanced Research (formerly a regional archaeological research center, a legacy from the Curtin era), and Finlandia University.