Book on Finnish sauna traditions features Cokato’s historical savusauna

By Kristen Miller
News Editor

COKATO, MN – With Cokato being the home of the oldest existing savusauna (smoke sauna) in North America, it’s no wonder it was so prominently featured in the newly released book, “The Opposite of Cold: The Northwoods Finnish Sauna Tradition.”

“Several really significant parts of the story take place in Cokato,” said Michael Nordskog, author of the 177-page coffee table book.

Nordskog grew up in northern Minnesota with a sauna at his family cabin, which is featured on the cover of the book.

In 2004, he wrote an article about this sauna for Brainerd’s Lake County Journal from research he conducted prior to rehabilitating the family sauna. This is also where he first worked with photographer Aaron Hautala, whose photos illustrate the book.

Since the focus of that article was more on his family sauna, Nordskog felt there was a void left for other people in the area who had a deep appreciation for saunas.

Out to prove that the sauna – pronounced “sow-na” as it’s quickly pointed out in the book – was more than “the smelly room next to the Holiday Inn pool,” Nordskog, with the help of Hautala, set out to explore various types of saunas and the traditions and history that accompany them.

Through their travels across the Great Lakes region and Finland, “The Opposite of Cold: The Northwoods Finnish Sauna Tradition,” took on a life of its own, with each sauna having a story to tell, beginning with the oldest existing sauna in North America — Cokato’s savusauna at Temperance Corner (three miles north on County Road 3).

Cokato’s savusauna


“I had to have a picture of the oldest existing sauna [in North America],” Nordskog said.

Since Cokato is also home to Saunatec Inc., the largest distributor of sauna equipment in North America, Nordskog’s trip served two purposes.

Harvey Barberg, president of the Cokato Finnish-American Historical Society, remembers speaking with both Nordskog and Hautala during their visit two years ago.

Explaining the history behind the sauna, the book refers to Barberg’s great-grandfather, Isak Barberg, who, with neighbors Nils Selvåå and Peter Salmönson, built the log bathhouse in its original location in Section 18 of Cokato Township. Harvey and his wife, Heidi, now live on the farmstead.

Barberg explains in that book that the sauna was moved to its current location after a road was built leading into town, ultimately creating quite a scandal for passersby unfamiliar with the sauna custom.

“The sauna stood in plain view of passing strangers, among them non-Finns who could not help but stare at the Finns cooling their bare heels and naked above,” Nordskog wrote.

Barberg, who is a “sauna-loving person” himself, says sauna is quite the opposite of what some may presume.

“It’s much of the same behavior you would have at church. It’s very somber . . . subdued conversation. There is no hanky panky involved whatsoever,” Barberg said.

He was very much impressed with the work of both the documentation and the photographs, adding that the book really coincides with the historical society’s motto, “We remember so others won’t forget.”

“[This book] is a great way to honor sauna and keep the tradition alive,” Barberg said.
“There is so much story and documentation of where [the different saunas] came from and the people’s history,” he added.

As a charter member of the Viewfinders Camera Club, Barberg had nothing but praise for Hautala’s work, noting how difficult it is to shoot interior photos such as the photo, of the inside of the savusauna on page 11 of the book.

“I am just totally wowed by it,” Barberg said. “His lighting is phenomenal.”

Any photographer can tell you just how important light is, which is why Hautala arrived at Temperance Corner at the crack of dawn to get, what he calls, the “sweetest light” as the sun rose.

Photos of the historical sauna, like the one on page 9 in the book, were taken one August morning in 2008, just a month prior to the restoration of the building.

Hautala wanted to capture these buildings with as much warmth seen as is felt, which is why he used the early morning light to turn this rather cool and gray sauna into something warm and golden, giving an “on-fire look to it.”

“My mission was to capture it in the light I see it, and the people of Cokato see it,” Hautala said, referring to not only the building, but the agricultural landscape surrounding it.

North America’s sauna headquarters, Saunatec

During a second visit to Cokato, Nordskog toured Saunatec, “the world’s largest corporation in the sauna and steam bath business,” and spoke with its president, Keith Raisanen.

In the book, Raisanen shares information about the sauna industry in North America and how the market has changed throughout the years.

Some of the changes Raisanen has seen in the North American market is that the sauna is no longer an “ethnic product” and has become more of a “lifestyle product.”

Twenty-six years ago, when Raisanen started in the business, he could see on a map where most of the sauna equipment sold. Typically, it was in markets of strong Finnish heritage such as northern Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

Since then, the market has become “evenly distributed throughout the US,” Raisanen said, with the exception of the Deep South. This change is likely due to the fact that saunas are becoming more recognized as a wellness product.

There are five different photos in the book featuring heaters sold by the Cokato-based company, including a Finnleo electric stove, along with several wood-burning stoves, according to Raisanen.

Raisanen found that Nordskog captured both the history and essence of the old traditional sauna, but also what today’s sauna has become, showing “sauna is alive and well.”

Nordskog wrote that the Cokato facility is “situated less than three miles as the crow flies from the oldest sauna in North America.”

“It’s quite a jewel we have in our own community,” Raisanen said of the pioneer savusauna at Temperance Corner.

Inside ‘The Opposite of Cold’


The book is “for people who grew up with Wednesday- and Saturday-evening saunas (or watched their steaming neighbors running toward the lake), and for those who dream of one day having their own,” as stated in the synopsis.

The book’s foreword was written by award-winning Minnesota architect David Salmela, whose designs are captured throughout including his best-known sauna design, the Emerson Sauna in Duluth.

Among the book’s contents are chapters highlighting “Sauna in the New World,” “Immigrant Saunas in the Lake Superior Region,” “Finland’s Sauna Culture,” “The North American Lakeside Tradition,” “The Value of Heat,” and “Keep the Wood-Fired Sauna Tradition Alive.”

In an excerpt from an essay Hautala wrote following the assignment titled, “Cold in the north. Hot in the sauna: A look inside one Finnish-American’s photographic journey into ‘The Opposite of Cold,’” he talks about what sauna means to him.

“I’ve been asked many times why sauna is so essential. And to this I had no adequate response. But now, after years of photography, countless conversations with sauna lovers from around the globe, and the release of this book, the answer has finally hit me.

Sauna isn’t a building.
Sauna isn’t heat.
Sauna isn’t sweat.
Sauna isn’t steam.
Sauna is life.
Sauna is story.
Sauna is family, safety, strength, nobility, and honor. Sauna is warmth mixed with humility and candor.

Sauna is respect and the cherished memories of those who no longer join us in the sauna.

Sauna is a way of life, a right of passage, and part of a rich, a warm history.

This winter season light the Saturday night sauna, stoke the stove, pour the water, and take in the steam whether in your own sauna, or that of a sauna friend.

Hyvää joulua! (Merry Christmas)

**Purchase 'The Opposite of Cold'**

*The Opposite of Cold* is available through the Cokato Finnish-American Historical Society for $28, with proceeds benefiting the society.

To purchase a book, contact Susie Keskey at (320) 286-5001.

Autographed copies of the book can be purchased at [www.theoppositeofcold.com](http://www.theoppositeofcold.com) for $34.95.

This book is also available at major book stores.