European ethnologists have been accused of making the world a much nicer, happier and safer place than it is. In the 1970s the German scholars Utz Jeggle and Hermann Bausinger pointed out that idealizing the past has been the besetting sin of former generations of ethnologists (Gustavsson 1980:31–32; Lehtonen 1995:177). In Finland the ethnological overviews of Finnish popular culture emphasize the united front of the rural community; poverty and destitution are not mentioned, as Satu Apo has pointed out (Apo 1984a:9–10; Apo 1984b:153). Therefore, it is not surprising that prostitution has seldom been treated in Finnish ethnological research before the 1990s; it actually did not exist in the texts of ethnologists. The situation – embroidering the truth and creating nostalgia – has been about the same in Sweden (Gerholm 1993:19), with the exception of Jonas Frykman’s book (1977) about women with bad reputations. However, all this can be accounted for by the history of ethnology, its roots being in national romanticism.

The aim of this article¹ is to try to find information on the everyday lives of women accused of prostitution in sparsely inhabited Finnish Lapland. This theme is a part of my research project “Women working their way through logging camps” which examines women in logging communities. Everyday lives of women are examined from three angles: First, their work in isolated homesteads taking care of children and cattle while husbands were away working in the woods for long periods of time; second, as cooks in the isolated camps among men; and third, as women on the loose, selling liquor and their company to lumberjacks. In this article the focus is on the third theme, prostitution.

The oral history material² – if accepted as such – used in this case study about prostitution on the periphery, far from cities, consists of documents produced by policemen when they were questioning women accused of prostitution. These interrogations of suspects were done in the years 1914–1916, 1918–1920 and 1923–1932 in Rovaniemi, a sort of a capital of this sparsely populated area. The main question in this article is whether this material, examination notes made by policemen, gives any information about the informal economy and everyday lives of the women accused of prostitution. As an ethnologist, I am not interested in whether the women were actually criminals or not, nor am I interested in the way society treated these women. What I will focus on is their life as women without permanent work in an area where men outnumbered women.

Lumberjacks of Lapland
Ecologically the conditions for the forest industry are the same throughout the northern coniferous zone. Through time, however, the regional biases in forestry have changed as the forest sector has expanded, since it was for a very long time possible to move on to new, virgin resource areas. That was exactly what happened in Finnish Lapland at the end of the nineteenth century: In the 1870s industrialists became interested in the vast untouched forest areas in Finnish Lapland and the opportunities they offered for a steam-driven sawmill industry on the coast of the Gulf of Bothnia. A professional group of lumberjacks who specialized in the felling and transport of timber was formed in the area. Many of them were like nomads, working in forests during the winter and autumn months, and
These pictures were taken in 1923 by Sakari Pälsi in the logging camps of Lapland. The pictures are from the National Board of Antiquities, Helsinki.
by rivers during the spring and summer months. Some combined logging with farming or reindeer herding, others with periods of unemployment or construction work (see Johansson 1994; Snellman 1996).

The following account of the everyday life of an American logger could just as well apply to that of his Nordic counterpart:

At the end of the 19th century loggers were largely transient workers, spending the winters in snowbound camps remotely located deep in the forests, and leaving in the spring, when logging and river driving ceased, for summer idleness or odd jobs. They frequently changed jobs even during the winter, walking from one camp to another and working at their trades (Wackerman 1949:67–68).

The logging camps of Finnish Lapland were meeting places for a heterogeneous group of men, many of whom were born beyond the boundaries of Lapland, a territory large in area. Men with different social and cultural backgrounds spent months in isolated logging camps built in the wilderness. River driving brought them closer to settlement but still they were mostly living away from society, where communication with people other than fellow male workers would have been possible. Due to long distances, for many it was only a few times a year that communication with women was possible: mostly in the spring and in the autumn (Snellman 1996:56–75).

The lumberjacks were mostly men who had migrated to Lapland. Though not officially recognized, due to the fact that many of them were seasonal workers from eastern and southern Finland and they were registered there, but at least in practice, men outnumbered women in Lapland for some time. For the topic under consideration, prostitution, this outnumbering is essential: Work as a lumberjack was physically demanding, so one can assume that the first tides of immigration were composed overwhelmingly of unattached young men in the prime of life, with the physical strength needed in the work. It must be stressed here that this is only an assumption: even though Finland is famous for its detailed demographic statistics, the seasonal workers are a problem in that sense. Seasonal workers could live permanently hundreds of kilometres from the communities where they were officially registered.

As the forest industry was established in Lapland at the turn of the century, the population of, for example, Rovaniemi, tripled. In 1870 the population of Rovaniemi was around 4,000 and in 1910 around 11,000 (Enbuske 1997:88–89). However, the statistics do not tell the whole truth. At the same time there were thousands of seasonal workers, all men, who worked in Lapland without being officially registered. So far no one has been able to give the exact number of them (e.g. Ahvenainen 1970; Enbuske 1997; Snellman 1996). It has been estimated that each year more than 10,000 men drifted to Lapland to work, and most of them either started looking for work from Rovaniemi (because of the railway and the fact that the timber companies had their offices there), or returned to their home communities via Rovaniemi. Rovaniemi was also famous for its fairs which attracted lumberjacks during times of unemployment (Snellman 1989).

Most likely 10,000 men wandering to the forests of Lapland through Rovaniemi every winter is an exaggeration, but even if the number was much smaller, the ratio between the male and female population stays the same. From oral history material

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collected among lumberjacks, one can read that those who came to Lapland to work at the logging camps were either bachelors or husbands who had left their wives and families at home. Even though bachelors did marry local girls, there certainly was such a shortage of marriageable women that the unwed seasonal workers were condemned to single blessedness by simple arithmetic.

Mass migration had knocked normal male-female ratios completely out of balance. Nonetheless, again it is impossible to deduce this from the statistics. The demographic statistics of Rovaniemi indicate that the male population outnumbered the female by only 4,198 to 4,123 in 1900. In the narratives of lumberjacks, however, one can learn that a man usually officially left his seasonal worker’s status only for two reasons: if he was married or if he gained possession of a farmstead. According to same oral history material it was easier to get a homestead from the state if one was married (Snellman 1996:187). All in all, again it is shown that oral history material can fill the gaps in the archive material.

Gradually, a part of the workforce settled permanently in Lapland and lumberjacks became official residents of the area where they worked. In 1950 more than half of Lapland’s rural male workforce was seasonally occupied as lumberjacks (Heikinheimo & Ristimäki 1956:17). From the Second World War onwards forest work was gradually mechanized and professionalized, and therefore the profession of the old-time lumberjack became history.

Since there was an overwhelming surplus of males in Lapland for some time, the situation had its consequences. The existence of this large itinerant single male population created an environment, known as the “rest and recreation culture”, in which prostitution could flourish, and flourish it did everywhere where there were lumberjacks: in population centers such as Rovaniemi, but also in small villages and logging camps built in the middle of the wilderness.

According to a Finnish social historian, Antti Häkkinen, prostitution was not common – at least in the sense we understand it today – in the Finnish countryside before the 1890s. The situation changed radically between the world wars: the expanding amount of so called roughneck occupations, i.e. lumberjacks, railroad and construction workers, kept the courts busy with charges against women accused of a disreputable way of life. Not only was prostitution criminalized, but also vagrancy, idleness and alcoholism (Häkkinen 1995:70).

Those women accused of indecent behaviour were questioned by the police in order to find out whether they should be punished by society or not. Usually women were asked to tell their life stories in order to find out how long they had led the life they were accused of. They were also questioned about their lifestyle for the same purpose. In addition to that, the police described the circumstances of the arrest. Therefore, the notes include information about the small routines of people living on the margin, and about lives of individuals. Yet one must remember that the information is construed by the examiner, not the interviewee.

The life story of 33-year-old Saima was written down by the police in 1928. In a few lines one can read not only the sad history of an individual but also about war orphans
of the Civil War\(^5\) and the questionable system of taking care of the ill-fated:

… was an illegitimate child, no sisters or brothers, father not known, mother dead. Has been married, but the husband was killed in the Civil War and the four children of the couple were taken away from the mother and their maintenance was entrusted to the lowest bidder. Was a parish pauper herself until the age of 15, since when has earned living by being a maid in different farms in Lapland. Two years ago moved to Rovaniemi. Summer 1927 she was in Kemi. The winter of 1927–1928 has been living in the cottage of Sierilä without work, earning her living by selling home-brewed beer, lemonade and tobacco. Admits that she has taken an drink when men visiting Sierilä have offered her one, but has not known the men because they have been vagabonds (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:2).

**Needlework and Bootlegging**

Women without permanent work lived on the margin in many ways: their homes were on the outskirts of communities and their lifestyle was despised by “decent” people. Even lumberjacks who visited their flimsy shacks whenever possible often describe them in a negative way. Affection is not necessarily mentioned in their narratives, but the women’s ugliness – with some exceptions – and alcoholism are. A very typical recollection includes heavy drinking, a hasty coupling, passing out and a hangover the next morning. The company of men was as important as the company of women. Therefore – and to reduce the price – a man had the woman only for himself, but a group of men were waiting in line for the same woman. The location could be anywhere, for example, inside a cottage or a shed or outside in the bushes. Lack of affection and plenty of alcohol for both the men and women is striking (Snellman 1996:192–198).

This is what we usually hear about prostitutes, and that is also the sort of information that is emphasized in the material – not that it is a surprise as after all the interviewers, the police, were interested in possible crime. They were not anthropologists. Yet some information about life beyond the life of a social outcast can be found in the documents. In the following, the information given in the documents which includes information about sources of income other than prostitution is summarized.

Hilda (18 years old) was arrested on 10 June 1916 at 7 p.m. She told the police that the previous September she had left the home of her parents in Kemi, the neighbouring town. The reason can be read between the lines: in July she had given birth to a baby, now in the care of the girl’s parents. The past nine months she had been living in three different towns without permanent work. In February she had moved to Rovaniemi, but soon her male companion had been sent to prison after being charged with the procuration of women. Simultaneously Hilda was sent to the nearest hospital because she had venereal disease. She told the policemen that in addition to prostitution her income consisted of washing and repairing clothes, washing dishes and selling home-brewed beer. She had visited her hometown every now and then, which could mean that she was seeing her baby (OMA, Sign. CIIIe:1). Hilda disappears from the documents after this one arrest. Being charged with prostitution did not mean that the person would be a prostitute all her life (Häkkinen 1995:20). Drinking is not mentioned in the report, which is quite exceptional.

On 6 March 1919 two women, Lyyli and Maria, were arrested at five in the afternoon
in a cottage on the outskirts of town. Eighteen-year-old Maria, daughter of a crofter, had already been in prison for prostitution. After prison she had first lived with her parents for four months and later with a man in the centre of Rovaniemi. She had earned her living partly from needlework. At some time she had been in the hospital for four weeks because of venereal disease. On 7 July 1920 she was arrested again at 3 p.m. at the same cottage – known to the police “as a place where prostitutes and thieves live”. The records state that Maria had been dating mostly soldiers lately (OMA, Sign. CIIIe:1).

Maria’s life continued along the lines typical for a prostitute. At the age of 25 Maria is an alcoholic and also physically abused; she had scars on her face and head (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:2). According to contemporary accounts, the erratic lifestyle of prostitutes was soon visible in their physical appearance (Häkkinen 1995: 120, 171). Maria had already been imprisoned for four times, in 1919 for 4 months, in 1921 for 6 months, in 1922 for 12 months and 1924 for 15 months. Now she was sent to prison for 12 months. At times she had been working as a maid or in hay-making (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:2).

Lyyli’s life story is similar, her life circulating around home, prison and hospital. She had left her parents’ home at the age of 19 and had been working on farms and at an inn. At the age of 21 she was sent to penal servitude for four months, charged with prostitution. After returning to Rovaniemi she started working in a delivery room of the hospital but because of a venereal disease she had to give this up and become a patient in the hospital herself. The next years of her life she was either living with her parents or in the hospital receiving treatment for her venereal disease. At times she was working as a sales girl in a shop or doing needlework for a living, but from the dates of the arrests one can read that she was the companion of lumberjacks: the arrests took place at times and places where there were a lot of lumberjacks. She was also arrested in neighbouring towns (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:1).

Needlework was also a source of income for 17-year-old Impi, who was arrested on 4 November 1926. In the examination she told the police that she was going to work in a tailor’s workshop. When she was examined again the next year she told the police that in addition to prostitution she had earned her living by needlework and crocheting lace for sale. Impi who, according to the notes, had started loose living when 15 years old, lived in the home of her parents, which is rather exceptional in the material (OMA, CIIIc:2). Yet there are other examples of that, too, e.g. 23-year-old Anna who was arrested 1 January 1928. According to the police, the wall-eyed girl had earned her living by selling coffee and home-brewed beer all over northern Finland. Apparently the market had been in the remote logging camps of Lapland and the mother had acted as a pander for the girl (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:2).

Hilda (aged 54) was arrested on 20 October 1931 because for a long time she had been unemployed, without a permanent residence, drinking and sleeping with vagabond lumberjacks for money or liquor. Her only other source of income was laundy. She had lived partly in sheds and partly in cottages where lumberjacks spent the periods of unemployment. The police interviewed Hilda about her life. She said that her father had migrated to the United States
when she was 9 years old and died there soon after. Hilda moved to her uncle’s home when she was 12 years old. At the age of 14 she started working as a babysitter and later as a maid in different places. She changed places frequently. At the age of 32 she left her home village and moved southwards to work first as a maid and later in a sawmill. When she was about 40 years old she came back to Rovaniemi. In the cottage where she lived with other women not only was sex for sale, but also home-made beer, lemonade and tobacco (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:2). In the lumberjacks’ narratives Hilda was one of the most remembered persons (e.g. SKS, Lumberjack Traditions 1969, Oskari Vuorinen).

Another person also found in the lumberjacks’ narratives is Hilma (SKS, Lumberjack Traditions 1969, Oskari Vuorinen). A crofter from the neighbouring village was questioned by the police on 17 October 1931. Apparently a customer of Hilma, he told the police that he had come to Rovaniemi the previous Monday after which he had been drinking. The day before the questioning he went to Hilma’s cottage where he had been drinking home-brewed beer with a number of people until he passed out. When he woke up in the morning his wallet was gone. The 39-year-old Hilma had been questioned by the police many times. From the records we learn that she was a daughter of a farmer, and she had lived with her parents until she was 19 years old. She had also worked at agricultural tasks at home and on neighbouring farms. At the age of 19 she married a tenant farmer and moved to another community. After nine years of marriage the husband died and Hilma was left with three small children. The maintenance of the two older ones was entrusted to a farmer in the village, and the baby who a little later died at the age of 6 months was left with the mother. At the age of 30 she moved to Rovaniemi where she apparently was a madam of a modest brothel. Hilma gave birth to another child who was taken away from her at the age of four. Earlier Hilma had also worked as a masseuse, but because of a bad drinking problem, she was no longer able to do massage (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:2).

Aino (26) was arrested on 27 July 1927. Two years before she had bought a cottage in the centre of Rovaniemi and started a business. She rented lodgings to men and women and sold home-brewed beer, coffee and tobacco to vagabond lumberjacks. The women were naturally prostitutes working for Aino (OMA, Sign. CIIIc:2).

Conclusion
The Canadian writer James H. Gray summarized the social life of western Canada with a few words; “Getting drunk and getting laid” (Gray 1995:ix). That characterizes the social life of itinerant lumberjacks and the sources of income for prostitutes as well. Selling alcohol, in this case strong home-made brew or moonshine, was illegal because of prohibition and therefore a successful business. Those who did not drink it too much themselves could make a nice – though illegal – living. However, the business had its dark side: undressing for men inevitably led the same women to put on the unpleasant dress of the prison or hospital, both far away from Rovaniemi.

The typical life story of a prostitute includes leaving home at an early age, work as maid on farms and starting a life of vice around the age of 20. The impression one
Hanna Snellman gets from the life stories of the women is that prostitution is connected with alcoholism — though which one came first is very difficult to determine. A professional prostitute in 1920s Helsinki spent half of her time in the prison for women or in hospital for venereal disease. There is no reason to believe the situation would have been different in Rovaniemi.

The aim of this study was to see whether the interviews with women accused of prostitution conducted by police have information about other sources of income these women had. The results are that the material concentrates — not surprisingly — on prostitution. “The documents describe encounters of ill-fated lonely persons with difficulties in life,” as Antti Häkkinen has stated (1995:9). Yet some information on other kinds of income can be obtained. Mostly these women earned their bread and butter as drinking companions of itinerant lumberjacks. Most of them had worked as maids at some time in their lives and their labour was still needed, at least in hay-making, a task which demanded all the workforce available. Rovaniemi was a centre where different services were needed. Therefore it is not a surprise that these women earned their living partly from washing and repairing clothes, washing dishes, selling coffee, lemonade, home-brewed beer and tobacco or massaging. These all belong to the sector of the informal economy, a field that is difficult to research because of the lack of sources.

Notes
1 This article is based on a paper presented at the Second European Social Science History Conference in Amsterdam, 7 March 1998.
2 This paper is an experiment inspired by Carlo Ginzburg’s article “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist”, published in Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method (1992). Ginzburg writes: “The analogy which is the subject of this brief essay struck me for the first time several years ago in Bologna while I was attending a colloquium on oral history. Historians of contemporary European societies and distinguished Africanists and anthropologists were debating the different ways of dealing with oral evidence. Suddenly it occurred to me that even historians of early modern Europe — a noncontemporary society which has left enormous amounts of written evidence — sometimes use oral sources, or, more precisely, written records of oral speech. For instance, the judicial proceedings of lay and ecclesiastical courts might be comparable to the notebooks of anthropologists, recorded centuries ago.”
3 Loggers were the very first labour occupations that attracted the attention of Finnish ethnologists. Already in 1959 and 1960 questionnaires about river driving and forest work were sent out by the University of Turku. These questionnaires contained questions such as “describe loggers’ clothing” or “how did local people stand in relation to lumberjacks?”, and informants were asked to answer the questions in writing. In addition, in 1969 the Tradition Archive of the Finnish Literary Society arranged a competition entitled “Lumberjack Traditions”. Again informants were asked to respond in writing, but this time they were not given questions, but simply asked to tell about their lives as lumberjacks. In 1988 a settlement society functioning in Lapland arranged another competition entitled “Logging Camp Traditions”. For this competition informants were asked to write their life stories or describe a year of their life. The above-mentioned narratives provide the backbone source material for my study of lumberjacks (Snellman 1996), but there is also other oral history material available: namely, fieldwork by the author. In 1986 I documented contemporary floating work in Finnish Lapland for the National Board of Antiquities. I had done some interviews earlier (1983), but on a larger scale I started collecting life-history material among retired

Hanna Snellman
Ph.D.
Department of Ethnology
P.O. Box 3
FIN-00014 University of Helsinki
floating and logging workers in 1988. By various means I have amassed 224 informants in my study, of whom one-third have been interviewed.

4 Matti Enbuske from the University of Oulu has kindly provided me with this information.

5 On war orphans (altogether about 20,000 after the Civil War), see Pulma 1987:126–136.

6 On the system, see Pulma 1986:113.

7 On prohibition (1919–1932), see Peltonen 1997:96.

8 On similar unlicensed saloons in Helsinki, see Hakkinen 1995:57.


10 On the tasks of women in a rural setting, see Isacson 1994:58–62.

References


OMA. *Provincial Archives of Oulu, Finland.*


SKS. *Tradition Archive of Finnish Literature Society, Finland.*

