

## The Kraatari House Revived

The Kraatari House (Kraatari is old Finnish for *tailor*) stood by the road named Varilantie in the town of Kaustinen for 148 years until one misty Friday, in the autumn of 2016, it was hoisted, almost in one giant piece, onto a transport vehicle platform and relocated to a field in Pajala called Finnerpelto.

Many locals in Kaustinen had already lost hope of someone renovating the building that housed so many memories of the small town. People fondly remembered not only the beautiful, ornate eaves, but also the genial atmosphere that had been created within the house by Juho Wirkkala and his son Otto, both tailors, for almost one hundred years.

The last inhabitants of the Kraatari House, a widowed housewife, Betta Wirkkala, her daughter, Annikki and the rest of her family moved out of the house in 1968. The main building remained empty along with its surrounding cowshed, outbuilding and sauna. In the beginning, the remaining members of the family used the house as a shared summer house of a kind. On occasion it was also used as accommodation for some visitors to the Kaustinen Folk Music Festival.

Little by little, the interest the family had held in the use of the building waned. Broken windows and a roof punctured by a fallen tree put the integrity of the house under stress. The buildings around the house deteriorated enough to be turned into firewood.

Limiting the options of what was to happen next to the main building was a protection clause in the zoning documentation that had been introduced at some point during the history of the house. A member of the family attempted to save the building by moving it and turning it into a summer abode. Based on the protection status, however, the Finnish National Board of Antiquities and the zoning office put a stop to the plans.

It seemed that the Kraatari House would eventually fall apart where it stood. Deserted and alone, it awaited its eventual collapse.

### **Virkkalan Perinnesseura (*The Wirkkala Tradition Association*) wants to save the Kraatari House**

In 2013, a few individuals interested in the Wirkkala family decided to set up an association to preserve its traditions. They called it the Wirkkala Tradition Association (Virkkalan Perinnesseura ry). From the start, their aim had been to look into whether the Kraatari House's future could be discussed with the town's officials one last time. They also had to come up with a new location for the house. So with an open mind, they got together to consider under what conditions the building could be moved to a new location, while still holding on to the principles of historical preservation.

As the association would soon discover, a number of townsfolk wished to see the birth home of artist Ilmari Wirkkala saved from decay. By 2015, the centenary of his son Tapio Wirkkala's birth, the association was hard at work to salvage the house.

The town officials presented some considerations to the association: If the house was renovated fully according to tradition, it could become, in part, a museum, open to the public at least some of the time every week. The house would also need to be relocated to an environment where it would fit in terms of the zoning and the architecture of the house itself. Should these conditions be met, the association just might get the permission to relocate the house.

The association immediately felt that the conditions were appropriate. They proceeded to calculate a budget for the project and they subsequently sent out a funding application to Pirityiset, a local Leader action group aimed at developing the countryside as a living environment. The association made

preparations with the owners of the Kraatari House and considered various options for collaboration with two other local associations: the Kaustinen Local Heritage Association and another local heritage group, Kyläsavut ry. Meanwhile, the Virkkala Tradition Association was not only engaged in the house project, but was active in other ways as well. For instance, it conserved a triptych painted by 18-year-old Ilmari Wirkkala and published the memoirs of Abraham Björck.

One last hurdle was the zoning document which stated that the surroundings of the house were protected, and this threatened to put a stop to the effort. In the end, after two years of struggle, the parties responsible for zoning got together and found that the original grounds for protecting the surroundings of the house were no longer applicable since the delightful milieu around the Kraatari House had already gradually disappeared over time. This meant that prohibiting the relocation of the main building was no longer justified.

Planning permission for the final Finnipelto location was granted, the neighbours were consulted and both Pirityiset and the local Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment greenlighted the effort. Meanwhile, volunteers had been stripping the inside of the house over the course of a couple of years, confident that the permission for relocation would eventually come.

The current aim of the association is to renovate the Kraatari House and turn it into a museum showcasing the tailoring tradition – but not only that. It will also showcase the Virkkala family's other artisan skills, starting from the early 1800s when Elias Wirkkala made wheels for horse carts.

Joonas Wirkkala, who built the house in 1868, was a tanner until 1891 when he sold the house to his brother-in-law, Juho. Joonas and Juho's eldest sister, Leena-Kaisa, and their families moved to the United States, from where Juho, in turn, had returned after spending some time there practising as a tailor. Juho brought with him a Singer sewing machine, the oldest of its kind in Kaustinen, which is currently being stored temporarily at the town's regional museum.

Juho's old Singer will eventually find its home at the New Kraatari House, as the renovated, relocated house is now known. The house itself comes with a long history and multiple layers. While its logs are relatively unimpressive, each of the rooms had been wallpapered from the start – and often with stylish wallpaper. The ceilings were crafted with skill and, for the most part, the original flooring is still intact. The ultimate aim is to return the Kraatari House to a state where one can observe its history from the 1880s until the 1960s. The New Kraatari House is a cross-section of the life of an artisan family in Kaustinen. The family had a small patch of land, a couple of cows and some chickens, while the main income was generated by tailors, Juho and Otto, who made and resized trousers and jackets for men.

The house will become a shared space for various local associations in Kaustinen. It will also be available for rent by out-of-towners for such needs.

In the vicinity of the relocated house, an outbuilding housing a heating unit and other such necessities will be erected. Going forward, the outbuilding will potentially come to hold some items of interest related to the Virkkala family as well.

In September 2016, Virkkalan Perinnesseura ry staunchly believes that the official inauguration of the New Kraatari House will take place in the summer of 2017 when Finland celebrates its 100th year of independence. Meanwhile, the Kraatari House itself boasts a great old age of nearly 150 years.

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