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Outbound Report—Finland

In July of 2013, I represented Kansas and the United States 4-H Program as an outbound States' 4-H representative. I lived with a host family for four weeks and lived the life of a native Finn. Of the things I experienced, I will share with you two of the most “Finnish” things I enjoyed.

First, I experienced the Midnight Sun. Since Finland is located so far north, the sky is lit by sunshine for up to 70 consecutive days and nights in the northern most parts of the country during the summer months. In the south, Finns experience between 15 and 20 hours of pure sunshine throughout the summer. Since I was located in the northern portion of Finland, I never saw darkness. The sun would go down at approximately 10 or 11pm, and then rise above the horizon again at around 4 or 5am. The sun never truly set; instead it would just hide below the horizon for a few hours, cast a light similar to that of dusk in Kansas.

The other traditional pleasure I enjoyed is the Finnish sauna (pronounced SOW-nah). Finns use the sauna as a relaxation mechanism, and attribute its use to the outstanding physical and mental health of many Finnish people. The most traditional sauna is a “smoke sauna” which is heated by burning wood. The smoke is allowed to fill the sauna for approximately four hours, and is released just prior to the use of the sauna. Second, there is also a wood-heated sauna that uses a pipe to divert the smoke as the wood burns, like a typical wood stove. In addition, there are electric saunas and infrared saunas that are quicker to heat and are growing more popular.

Of the saunas I described, I enjoyed wood saunas and electric saunas. I was able to see a smoke sauna, but was unable to use it at the time. Specifically, I most enjoyed a wood sauna at the summer home of my host-grandparents. Finns enjoy saunas as not only a relaxing recreational activity, but also to bathe. To do this, as is typical at summer homes on the lake, a water canister is connected to the metal wood stove. The water is heated and mixed with cold lake water to make it a comfortable temperature for bathing use. Then the sauna user participates in a series of swims in the lakes, sweats in the sauna, and finally bathing. It seems very strange and foreign to Americans and people of other cultures, but it is actually a most enjoyable and satisfying experience. By mixing relaxation with a regular daily function, it becomes more like an at-home spa experience.