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Matti Kurikka was a tall man with thick, black hair, and blazing dark eyes. He was eloquent, charismatic, and passionate. Women freely admitted that they found it difficult to resist the Finnish writer's "animal magnetism."

"Kurikka liked women and women liked him," noted one admirer. "Their husbands, however, had other ideas, and his frequent affairs caused constant friction."



Matti Kurikka's (standing) biggest opponent over the role of women and sexual relations outside of marriage was his former best friend, Austin Makela (far right), who worried about the stability of his own marriage.

A dynamic man with futuristic visions, Kurikka used his charm and persuasive abilities to attract 2,000 Finns to Malcolm Island, British Columbia, in the early 1900s. There, not far from the northeast corner of Vancouver Island, they established a utopian commune called Sointula, the Finnish word for harmony.

Kurikka made his living as a newspaper editor, playwright, and lecturer and was known to Finns throughout the world as a socialist, theosophist, and idealist. A master speaker and writer, Kurikka inspired those who heard him or read his works.

His dream was to free Finns from the tyranny of the religious and political hierarchies present in Finland near the turn of the century. He proposed a "model community founded on selfless regards for the well-being of others," and stated that "once this rotting world sees the possibility of utopian society...the whole nation will join us." He advocated "a society based on the power of love, justice, and harmony," and stressed that "love develops and creates, hate can only destroy."

A confident Kurikka made his plans seem practical as well as desirable. He had the power to arouse tremendous loyalty and to convince others to abandon

their homes and jobs to pursue his idealistic visions. But wherever he went, Kurikka's impractical nature and his attraction to women inevitably left behind residual resentment and anger.

By age 37, Kurikka's idealism had cost him his marriage to a wealthy Helsinki socialite, a prestigious reputation in Finnish political circles, and his position as editor of a prominent Finnish newspaper.

Depressed about these matters and concerned about increasing Russian dominance of Finland, he persuaded 200 Finns to move with him to Australia where they would form "a high cultural life of freedom far away from the evils of the outside world."

But the utopian colony failed and Kurikka accepted an invitation from some Finnish coal miners on Vancouver Island. Desperate to escape their dangerous and low-paying jobs in coal baron James Dunsmuir's mines, they wanted Kurikka to help them establish a commune.

In 1900, while the Finns searched for a site for their utopia, Kurikka toured Canada and the United States, giving lectures and soliciting members for the commune. Kurikka began his talks in a soft, slow voice that forced everyone to lean forward to hear what he was saying.

Gradually he would raise his voice and become more animated until finally he was striding about the stage waving his arms dramatically. By the end of every speech, energy and enthusiasm was surging through the crowd.

"Come you proper sons and daughters of Finn mothers who comprehend that freedom is at the start and finish of man's purpose," he challenged his audiences. "Come live with us in freedom, where all are equal in the harmony of shared thoughts and all find satisfaction and pleasure in the protection of the weak."

Kurikka promised that every aspect of the colony – work, education, and entertainment – would be shared by all. Work would be accomplished on a cooperative basis, men and women would receive equal wages, and the commune would assume responsibility for children, the sick, and the elderly.

He promised day-care centres, disability insurance for workers, and theosophy – a religious philosophy that advocated love, freedom, and harmony with nature through mystical insight.

Kurikka gave several lectures in Astoria, Oregon, where it was noted that the number of women in each audience grew as word of the speaker's "glowing good looks" spread through the community. At a time when women had no

property, wages, or voting rights, Kurikka's utopia promised women equal pay and the freedom to speak and vote at meetings.

Kurikka's physical appearance may have drawn the women to the meetings, but it was his stirring oratory and innovative ideas that convinced them to go home and pack their families' possessions.

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