

## FROM UTOPIA TO TOURISM: HOW THE FINNISH UTOPIAN COLONY OF PENEDO, BRAZIL, TURNED INTO A TOURIST PLACE.

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper shows how an ancient Finnish utopian colony founded in 1929 in the Brazilian rural area found tourism as an alternative for its own sustainability. Tourism activities began in the colony in the 1940s after the end of the vegetarian utopian experiment. This vegetarian and naturalist Finnish colony was part of an utopian project created in the tropics by Toivo Uuskallio and some young idealistic followers in 1929. This new business was a successful way to maintain the pioneers and their families. Penedo maintained its local culture and grew as a place where Finnish pioneers and their descendants had their own culture as an additional attraction for tourism. After the end of this experience, tourism became its main economic activity as hospitality had its beginning in the Finnish immigrants' houses in the 1930s. Those activities were based on contemplation tourism, as the place is near a National Park and impressive surrounding nature, and on the attractions of Finnish culture such as the handicraft, food, and dance. Between 1940 and the 1970s there was a huge growth in the number of hotels and small inns. During the 1980s and 1990s the contemporary tourism industry process brought many changes to Penedo. Staged authenticity, as MacCannell (1999) writes, was reflected on some activities, such as the Finnish dance groups, created to show traditional dancing to tourists, and also with the architectural changes, with buildings constructed in Finnish vernacular style, in a way to show tourists that Penedo was a Finnish colony. This process included the creation of a Santa Claus House as found in Lapland, Finland, as a link between Penedo and its motherland, in a process Hobsbawm (1997) called 'invention of traditions'. Other authors such as Urry (2001), Shields (1992), and Judd and Fainstein (1999) helped to understand the process of tourism in this place, showing how such a global process in contemporary times is close to image-making, and its importance for the history and urbanism of a place. This paper studies local history through many of the pioneers' writings and some studies of its planning history and the utopian formation of Penedo, studied in a MSc thesis (FAGERLANDE, 2007). Many Finnish immigrants such as Ampula (1997), Valtonen (1998), and Hildén (1989) wrote their memoirs, an important element to understand the entirety of this process. Local foundation and the beginning of the tourism process was reported by Alva Fagerlande (1996;1998), Melkas (1999), Hottola (2006), Mascarenhas (2005), and is part of a PhD thesis on local history and the process of local place-image and its relation to tourism in small Brazilian villages.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tourism became an important activity for many places in the world, and some small towns boosted their economies with ethnical tourism based on their heritages. This happened in many Brazilian towns, in places originally founded by European immigrants. This paper studies the transformation that took place in Penedo, an ancient Finnish utopian colony founded in 1929 in a Brazilian rural area that saw tourism as an alternative to its own sustainability, especially based on the Finnish heritage. Originally an utopian agricultural project, Penedo constructed its landscape to satisfy the tourist gaze, based on its ethnical heritage. How this happened, and the importance of this heritage for tourism-related activities is discussed here, in an attempt to understand how this reinvention of small towns based on a controversial process of transforming themselves into themed environments can help local traditions to survive.

Tourism activities began in the colony in the 1940s after the end of the vegetarian utopian experiment. This vegetarian and naturalist Finnish colony was part of an utopian project created in the tropics by Toivo Uuskallio and some young idealistic followers in 1929. This new business was a successful way to maintain the pioneers and their families. Penedo maintained its local culture and grew as a place where

Finnish pioneers and their descendants had their own culture as an attraction for tourists. After the end of this experience, tourism became its first economic activity, as hospitality had its beginning in the Finnish immigrants' houses in the 1930s. Those activities were based on contemplation tourism, as the place is near a National Park and lovely nature, and on the attraction of Finnish culture, handicraft, culinary and dance. Between 1940 and the 1970s there was a huge growth in the number of hotels and small inns. During the 1980s and 1990s, the contemporary tourism process brought many changes to Penedo. Staged authenticity, as MacCannell (1999) writes, was reflected on some activities, such as the Finnish dance groups created to show traditional dance to tourists, and also with the changes in the architecture, with buildings constructed in Finnish vernacular style, in a way to show tourists that Penedo was a Finnish colony. It is part of what Gottdiener (2001) calls the construction of themed environments when many elements of Finnish vernacular architecture, cuisine and folk dance were used to attract visitors to Penedo. This process included the creation of a Santa Claus House, as in Lapland, Finland, as a link between Penedo and its 'motherland', in a process Hobsbawn (1996) called 'invention of traditions'. Other authors such as Urry (2007), Shields (1992), Judd, and Fainstein (1999) helped to understand the tourism process in this place, showing how such a global process in contemporary times is close to image-making, and its importance for the history and urbanism of a place.

This paper is part of a research work on how the local heritage can be used as part of a process to reinvent a place's image, and how Penedo successfully changed from a rural community to a tourist place, using its cultural Finnish heritage to become an attraction to new visitors. Penedo tourism's history can be compared to that of New Glarus, Wisconsin, USA, described by Hoelscher (1998) as an important example of how local history can contribute to the economy of small towns and to maintain cultural identity. Hoelscher studied this ancient Swiss colony that is said to be 'more Swiss than Switzerland' (PARADIS, 2004, p.195), where ethnicity-based tourism helped the place to recreate its urban landscape and become a tourist attraction.

Local tourism history is understood through many pioneers' writings and some studies on its planning history and the utopian formation of Penedo, studied in a MSc thesis (FAGERLANDE, 2007). Many Finnish immigrants such as Ampula (1997), Valtonen (1998) and Hildén (1989) wrote their memories, an important element to understand all this process. Local foundations and the beginning of the tourism industry process was reported by Alva Fagerlande (1996; 1998), Melkas (1999), Hottola (2006), Mascarenhas (2005), and is part of a PhD thesis on the local history and the process of local place-image and its relation to tourism in small Brazilian villages.

#### **The History of the Finnish vegetarian colony of Penedo: the utopian period - 1929/1942**

Penedo was founded in 1929 by Toivo Uuskallio and a vegetarian Finnish young idealistic group. It was part of a religious and naturalistic movement in Finland that wanted to promote equality among people, and create a new society in the tropics. Uuskallio thought God was in Nature and Brazil would be a perfect land to turn his ideals into reality, far from great centres and in a tropical country.



Fig. 01 - Location of the Penedo Brazilian map.

Source: SOUSA; FAGERLANDE; HONKALA, 2002.



Fig. 02 -Group in front of farm in residence [1931].

Source: Author's collection

The group bought an old farm and started a community there. There was a Housing Project, and opening roads and building houses was the first part of the project that was done. The architectural project was the same for all houses, as a model to show men's equal condition in the new land (FAGERLANDE, 2008).

Agriculture was the main economical activity in the beginning, despite the fact of the land being very poor as a result of the previous intense coffee farming that had ruined the place. There were no trees and the soil was depleted. No animals were admitted as they were all hard-core vegetarians. Uuskallio's ideas prohibited even coffee and milk, and people could eat only grains, fruits, and vegetables.

After trying to grow many types of grain, only orange tree plantations succeeded. This was the main activity during those days in the 1930s. Penedo was then a rural community with many houses and plantations, albeit with many difficulties (FAGERLANDE, 2007).

One economic alternative was to house guests in their own homes. They were simple places, although many other European people were interested in going there in search of some traditional European food, in line with their own traditions.

#### **Tourism in the colony**

The first place to receive guests was Reiman's house in 1932. The Finnish Consul's family travelled from Rio de Janeiro to stay there and it was the beginning of a continuous process of receiving people in the colony (FAGERLANDE, 1996). That is how tourism began, and after a while many other homes were receiving guests and had to be enlarged. Later on, the ancient farm house also started to work as an inn, helping the Finnish pioneers to earn some money during those difficult first years of the colony.

With the beginning of Second World War the orange business collapsed and the vegetarian utopia ended in 1942, with the bankruptcy of Fazenda Penedo. Part of it was sold to a Swiss company that grew medicinal plants, Plamed. As it did not work very well, they sold it again and all the place was split into lots as a summer vacation place called Cidade de Ferias Itatiaia (Itatiaia Holidays Village) in the 1950s. That was how Penedo got many streets, as it is until nowadays.

With the end of Fazenda Penedo, agriculture was no longer the local business and tourism became the new main economic activity. With the money paid by the Swiss company, many families expanded their small inns which became hotels. They were still small, but with better structure to receive their guests, many of them foreign.



Fig. 03: Hotel Bertell [195-].  
Source: Author's collection

After this incipient beginning, tourism helped the colony very much. Many other families had the so-called pension ('pensões'), guesthouses where visitors stayed with their families. They were known for their ladies' names as women were the ones responsible for the business when men were working on the land.

Many Finnish women, such as Liisa Uuskallio, Siiri Bertell, Hilja Hannonen, and Ms. Ikkelä had their small inns where guests were offered traditional Finnish food, such as bread, cakes, biscuits, and strawberry jams. There were also many walks to the mountains and rivers, and the Finnish dances.



Fig. 04: Reiman Guest House [195-]. Source: Author's collection



Fig. 05: Pousada Penedo, 1951 Source: Author's collection

As many visitors travelled to stay in Penedo, local inhabitants began many other activities, such as the production of handicrafts to sell to tourists as another income activity. At first clothes, tissues, hats, carpets and even jam were produced for local consumption but then it became interesting for tourism. Toivo Asikainen was one of the pioneers, producing 'smooth luffa'<sup>1</sup> hats, used by the pioneers to protect the skin from the strong tropical sun. There was also an initial production of strawberry jam and liquors in 1934 as an experiment to create some kind of economic production in the colony. Later, carpets initially produced for local use were bought by the inns' guests. They were produced by Matti Toro, Maija Valtonen and also by Eila Ampula, who started to produce them not only for domestic use but as artistic products. There were also painted tissues and embroidery work created by Eva Hildén, T-shirts and other clothing items made by Helkka and Maarit, and handmade candles by Martti Aaltonen. All those artisans were old local inhabitants who tried to maintain Penedo's traditions, and used them as a way to survive economically.



Fig. 06: Smooth luffa handicraft. Source: Author's collection



Fig. 07: Ball at Clube Finlandia [195-] Source: Author's collection

Another important activity brought to Brazil by the Finnish pioneers, also important to maintain their traditions was the sauna. This typical Finnish bath was more than a hygienic activity for Finns. It was a true cultural habit, a place for social meetings, and also very important to the initial project that was related to a naturalistic way of living. The first sauna in Brazil was one built near the river, close to the farmhouse, in 1929.

At that point, the community created the Clube Finlândia, a commercial and social association, in 1943, where all pioneers met and helped each other with their agricultural business. It was a cooperative association and also a place for social and cultural meetings. The Saturday dance, with Finnish and Brazilian music, became a regional place of interest receiving people from other towns around Penedo. Not only Finnish people, but also Brazilians and the tourists were invited to come to the Club and enjoy many traditional Finnish dances, very different from Brazilian music and dance. During this period, the Finnish culture and nature were the main attractions for tourism. It was present in Penedo's daily life, as nearly all inhabitants were Finnish, and the natural difference from Brazilian daily life was what attracted those first visitors. Nobody needed to do anything about that or to create attractions. There was the sauna, the Finnish balls and dances, handicraft, food, everything quite different, inspiring Brazilian visitors or other Europeans to go there.

#### Staged authenticity in Penedo

As tourism became a major business in Penedo and people no longer had agriculture as their main business, it was important to have media showing what happened in Penedo. An important occasion was during Penedo's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 1979. It is possible to see that occasion as a turning point in Penedo's life. There was good media showing the colony, the local people, their traditional activities and customs, handicraft, and dance (HILDÉN, 1989).

The presence of an organized folk dance group was very important, as it can be seen from many photos in magazines. Since 1974, this group was created at Clube Finlândia by Anneli Turunen to dance on special occasions, helping to maintain this important tradition. During the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, not only the veterans, but also many young descendants joined the group. They wore traditional clothes, called national clothes that represented many parts of Finland, and were always worn by the pioneers on special social events. After that event, it turned into a *dance show*, no longer only a cultural representation of traditional social meetings, but to show visitors that Penedo was different and Finnish. Those activities were part of a starting process of using Finnish culture to attract tourists to Penedo. The presence alone of Finnish pioneers was no longer the element responsible for that, but new activities programmed for that. That is what Shields (1992, p.6) calls the construction of place-image, when local history is very important. That occurred in Penedo, which began to be known as the 'Brazilian Finland'.

From the beginning of the colony, in 1929, it was possible to see photos of weddings, parties of all kinds, with people wearing those clothes. After the dance group was created, those clothes were used in a way to show how Finn Penedo was, as a tourist attraction. The group began to make presentations every Saturday and was one of the first experiments to stimulate tourism and maintain Finnish traditions. It was something programmed for visitors and showed how the local culture could be important to local tourism business. It was what Urry (2007) said about how the tradition industry in Europe was important to tourism in many countries, helping to maintain local traditions, while linking it to the travel trade. It was a great change for the local tourism scenario. A place where tourism began quite 'naturally' was trying to follow the global needs of tourism.

Those activities were what MacCannell (1999) calls staged authenticity, something re-created for tourism consumption, which existed as a cultural trace, but became a spectacle, with a specified place and time to happen. It is no longer something existing only as local culture, but something used as a commercial activity, to sell the local image, selling the place as a Finnish Colony, helping other local commercial activities such as hotels, restaurants, and small shops to sell their products to many visitors. It is not only a commemoration of local culture, but something to be shown on magazines, television, and other media.



Figure 08: Dance group, on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary.  
Source: Manchete Magazine, 1979.

Penedo has changed much during in recent years, with a large number of new inns, small hotels, restaurants, and all kinds of small shops. There was the traditional handicraft and also many Brazilian people that opened all sorts of small shops. Tourism boosted many of its activities, and there was much support to Finnish activities, especially at Clube Finlândia. The local commercial association always helped the Finnish and their descendants with cultural activities, helping to maintain Finnish culture, and also as an attraction to tourists. Many events, such as gastronomic festivals (Festival das Trutas), and also the Pikkujoulu (Small Christmas), the traditional Advent commemoration, were occasions when the community joined together the Finnish, their descendants, and many Brazilians.

As a result of this need to find new tourist attractions linked to Finnish culture and traditions, those Brazilian merchants had the idea to build a Santa Claus House in Penedo, inspired by Finland's original one. That was thought as a way to preserve the Finnish character of Penedo and create a new attraction for the place (FAGERLANDE, 1999). The initial idea evolved into something bigger, where the Finnish culture could be represented; its image would be more strongly associated to the traditional vernacular architecture, beyond the Santa Claus House. The whole place was called *Pequena Finlândia e Casa de Papai Noel de Penedo* (Little Finland and Santa Claus House), opened in November 1998, with a Finnish Santa Claus visiting directly from that country.

The place was a new landmark in Penedo and very important for its image. The place was a real Finnish colony, but nothing looked very "Finnish" there. The pioneers did not have that on mind when they built their houses and it was not important, until that moment, to have places similar to those in Finland. Urry (2007, p.18) describes about how important it is to create places to be contemplated through dreams and fantasies, different from all we are used to live with, and this expectation is made by many non-tourist activities, such as the cinema, television, literature, magazines, music, and video, that are important for the tourist gaze.



Fig. 09: Santa Claus House / Little Finland  
Source: Author's collection, 1998



Fig. 10: Dance group at Santa Claus Square  
Source: Author's collection, 1999

The enterprise has many handicraft shops, restaurants, coffee shops and a theatre<sup>ii</sup>, and looks like a traditional small Finnish village, inspired by Rauma, Naantali, Turku, and Porvoo<sup>iii</sup>. Architecture, as in a thematic park, is the inductor of its image, and helps to show the concept of the project, showing how an ideal Finnish village looks like. Masonry houses simulate wooden houses and all colours are authentic, copied from Finnish catalogues, giving truth to the place. Some details, such as wooden fences and the name of the shops, initially required to have Finnish names, gave a more realistic Finnish image to the 'village'. There was stimulus to sell Finnish products or handicraft with some connection to the local production, and also shopkeepers should use traditional Finnish clothes as part of the 'staged authenticity'.



Fig. 11: Little Finland pond  
Source: BRANDÃO, 2001



Fig. 12: Little Finland's inner street  
Source: Author's collection, 1999

The project includes a small pond, typical in Finland, separating the village from the part that would represent a forest, where Santa Claus House is located with its toy factory and a traditional Finnish sauna. All the buildings, even those made with bricks, looked like traditional log houses, covered with parts of logs. This is very traditional in old houses in Northern Europe, and a Santa Claus House should be like that (FAGERLANDE, 1999). Inside the house there is Santa Claus receiving kids all year long. The house is similar to an old traditional Finnish house with many handcrafted objects brought from Finland. Fantasy and history were mixed to entertain and give an idea of how far the country Penedo's pioneers came from is.



Figure 13: Santa Claus home - interior  
Source: Author's collection, 1999

The main idea for the project was to build an attraction for local tourism, but also something close to Finnish traditions. A Santa Claus house is an invented tradition, even in Finland, and it seems like what Hobsbawm (1997) says about the way traditions are invented and how people use those ideas to their benefit, especially in tourism. The image of Santa Claus is a good attraction for local tourism, and also something linking Penedo to Finland and its culture.

Another point of this project, apart from tradition, was the issue of authenticity. MacCannell (1999) discusses the importance of authentic or non-authentic attractions and whether tourists want to see them or not. MacCannell calls those places as *staged authenticity*, something that is produced for tourists, based on local history or tradition, but not exactly an original fact. The most important is what tourists want to see, their gaze upon it (URRY, 2007).

Santa Claus House and Little Finland is a thematic shopping mall, with many references to a park. Sorokin's (1992) analysis about idealized spaces seems to make sense in a place like that. In the 1990's, Penedo needed some new tourist attractions, based on what MacCannell (1999) calls staged authenticity, as part of the architecture of spectacle (DEBORD, 2007). This experiment of having Finnish architecture there, even if as a copy of something that never existed there, is linked to the idea of some thematic parks, creating a perfect scenario for many traditional activities such as dances and gastronomy, facilitating a revival of those Finnish activities that were disappearing in Penedo.

The way many activities, such as the Clube Finlândia dances and traditional handicraft, tapestry and food were maintained was possible only with all that process that brought attention to Penedo's Finnish character, attracting more tourists and showing people, even Finnish families, that it was possible to sell Finnish products to tourists. The media attained by this process was important, appearing in magazines and on television in Brazil and in Finland.

All those activities show how the Finnish heritage was important to transform Penedo into an important tourist attraction, helping the local economy to survive, and also the use of themes in the village became itself the attraction, as it happened in New Glarus and other small villages in the US (HOELSCHER, 1998; PARADIS, 2004). The construction of a themed environment, as Gottdiener (2001) describes, was very important for Penedo, including ethnic architecture as built in the Santa Claus House and Small Finland. Using its Finnish heritage to attract new visitors helped to preserve many traditional elements of local culture, and not to destroy them. This paper wants to show how it is possible to use themes to preserve local culture, as it is turned into a commodity, and this process helps to maintain it.

#### Urban changes - a new central area

There were many changes in Penedo as a result of the construction of Santa Claus and Little Finland. It became a tourist attraction and as in 1999 there was the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the colony foundation, a Festival promoted by Clube Finlândia and Santa Claus House and Little Finland had the attention of many Brazilian newspapers and television. Also, there was a group of Finnish visitors, including dance and music groups. The opportunity of having a place representing Finland so well was very interesting to all Finnish visitors, including journalists, that had news published in that country about Penedo and its new enterprise. Penedo began to have more attention from Finland, stimulating links between the two countries.



Fig. 14: Penedo's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in a Finnish newspaper.

Source: Uutislehti 100, 1999



Fig. 15: Vale dos Duendes Shopping Centre.

Source: Author's collection, 2007

Another important consequence of the project was an urban change. Penedo did not have its centrality defined before, as all restaurants, hotels and shops were not concentrated in just one place, but along the main road in the valley. When the new complex was inaugurated, as it is at the corner of two streets, Rua das Velas and Avenida das Mangueiras, it became the area where new shops, restaurants and shopping centres were built. Many traditional shops and restaurants were there before, but many others were built around them, and it has been Penedo's central area since 1999. Many of those new places were also tourist places, as the Shopping dos Duendes (Dwarves Shopping Centre), following the same fantasy idea of the Santa Claus House, and also something reminding the Nordic origins of the place.

Apart from the architecture, the creation of folk dance groups, such as the Penedon Pippurit, and later the PKY - Penedon Kansantanssin Ystävät (Friends of Penedo folk dance group) were stimulated. Those groups dance not only at the Clube Finlândia Saturday dance, but also in the Santa Claus House and Little Finland amphitheatre. Recently, Clube Finlândia promoted a Finland Festival to celebrate Penedo's 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, with the participation of a good number of local people to promote Finnish culture, with good results. There were dance and music groups from Finland, lectures on culture and history, and sports events. This festival was part of the community participation in the redemption of history and memory of the place, and had no participation of public or governmental authorities. It showed how that process of turning it into a spectacle is sometimes important to preserve local traditions and how tourism is part of this process.

### Conclusion

After a period of decline in its tourism, and also with the end of many traditional Finnish activities in Penedo, the local commerce is now developing a process of revitalization. After the inauguration of the Santa Claus House and Little Finland, many changes took place in Penedo, not only in the urban domain but also in recreating the local image. The success of the new place stimulated new enterprises such as other shopping centres, all of them thematic. It also increased the number of places using Finnish names, even without any link to Finland or with their owners without any kind of relation with the country. It became a strong sales attraction to have a Finnish name or some relation to that architecture.

Although some Finnish-like attractions were created, the presence of actual Finnish-origin attractions also increased. Shops like *Kielo*, selling traditional Finnish handicraft created by Helena Hildén de Souza and the Finnish Martti Vartia's restaurant *Koskenkorva*, that existed before in Rio de Janeiro, are some examples of how Penedo came to be a place where many traditions could be rediscovered, with commercial acceptance. Other old shops such as Eeva Hohenthal's shop specialized in jams, liquors and handicraft, began to produce and sell more Finnish



products, such as pulla, korvapuusti and piparkakku, traditional breads and biscuits.

There was also interest in the commemoration of Penedo's 70<sup>th</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> anniversaries. Those events attracted visitors not only from Brazil, but also from Finland. The Finland Festival, commemorating Penedo's 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary was important to rally the local community around Finnish cultural events. That was important to publicize Penedo in the local and regional media, helping tourist activities. All those events were important to increase local identity, and part of the population began to understand the importance of its own local culture, not only as something abstract, but as another way to earn income.

Penedo is still an important tourist attraction, receiving visitors from Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and many other places from this important Brazilian region. Nature continues as an important reason for tourists to go there, but also the continuity of Finnish culture and activities is important and is reinforced by actions that help preserve both its culture and image.

The presence of local traditions, as Clube Finlândia and its museum and dances is important, and also new enterprises such as Santa Claus and Little Finland, commercial places reinforcing Finnish image of the place. These activities help preserve not only local jobs, but especially maintain a Finnish presence in Penedo.

Penedo is an example in Brazil of what Hoelscher points that happened in New Glarus, USA. A small place with not many attractions has a great number of hotels, restaurants and is an important regional leisure place because the local community could use its local Finnish culture to attract visitors, and was successful in the process of becoming a themed environment, an important way to stand out from other small villages, and be an attraction amongst many other places in Brazil. Even without many other great attractions, Penedo survives being a themed place, using its Finnish character to attract visitors, proving that it is possible to combine local history, even that which is sometimes recreated, and some traditions, with what tourists want to see, as fantasy and new attractions prepared for them.

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<sup>i</sup> A plant from Cucurbitaceae family, named 'bucha' in Portuguese, intensively used before the invention of plastic.

<sup>ii</sup> The theatre was named Sibelius but is not in use at this moment.

<sup>iii</sup> Small historical villages on the coastal region of Finland.