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ICELANDIC CONNECTION

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ON THE COVER

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NORDIC HERITAGE MUSEUM

The Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle Washington honours the legacy of immigrants from the five Nordic countries: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden.

Editorial

The *Icelandic Connection* goes west!

by Rob Olason
Seattle Regional Editor,
Icelandic Connection

With the issue of the *Icelandic Connection* you are now holding in your hands, the magazine has turned its gaze to stories of people and places on the west coast of North America. This focus was sparked by the Icelandic National League of North America's decision to hold its 2013 annual convention in Seattle, Washington. This is the first time the convention has been held in Seattle, and only the second INL convention to occur in the United States. Minneapolis was the first U.S. city to host the convention when the Icelandic American Association of Minnesota and the Icelandic Hekla Club of Minneapolis joined forces to stage the gathering in 2002.

The 2013 gathering in Seattle has been ably stage managed by organizer David Johnson. While relying on his local club, the Icelandic Club of Greater Seattle, David has also drawn on the regional clubs of Vancouver, Victoria and Blaine, to assist in making the April 4–7, 2013 gathering a reality.

In our own way, the *Icelandic Connection* has sought to stage a west coast gathering within the confines of these pages. We have turned to some familiar voices and some new, who explore the lives of individuals and events that contribute to early west coast settlement stories and beyond.

Our stories range from personal observations of what transpired for Icelandic prospectors during the frenzy of the Yukon Gold Rush, to a tour of "Icelandic Seattle." In between these book ends, we intersperse remembrances of the world the first west coast Icelandic settlers inhabited as they cleared land, fished, farmed and learned to adapt to this new land. In these pages you will also find the next installment of "The War Bride," the story of Esther Sigurðardóttir, who left Iceland to start a new life as a G.I. bride in Portland, Oregon, but found it was not the life she had imagined. We also explore some finely drawn portraits of unique personalities who made this region their home.

All of these stories speak to our Icelandic connections on the west coast, how the impact of this region played an important role in defining the Icelandic descendants who call this area "home." Exploring this home through word and photo is a fitting reflection of the theme chosen for the 94th Icelandic National League of North America convention in Seattle: "There's no place like Heima."

Taking in the sites of Icelandic Seattle

**by Jón Jóhannesson Jónsson,
with research by Linda Russo
and Beverly Forbes**

When the city of Seattle became the site of the 94th Annual Convention of the Icelandic National League of North America, executives of one local travel agency sprang into action to uncover Icelandic Seattle.

Agreeing to share the results of their research with readers of the Icelandic Connection, we present a tour designed not to spare the squeamish, but to expose Icelandic Seattle in all its glamour, controversy and hidden meanings.

Our tour is aboard the uniquely appointed Vinarterta Express tour bus, with its exterior of alternating horizontal light and dark stripes (seven light stripes alternating with dark) and its world famous custom designed high volume coffee dispensers at each seat. It should be noted that while other tour busses may include video screens to amuse the bored traveler, the proprietors of the Vinarterta Express have always bowed to the greater importance of an unlimited coffee supply in keeping travelers alert even during the long stretches between sights.

For the less adventurous traveler, we have many safe stops where we can stand in the shadow of an ancient global explorer, trade footsteps with an Icelandic Nobel prize winner, pause in two houses of worship, purchase a week's supply skyr and gaze upon the decaying home of the Greatest Western Icelandic Poet.

But we must also warn likely participants that the highlight of the tour will bring all who dare within an arm's length of unspeakable danger. At our final stop, those brave tourists willing to leave the safe confines of the Vinarterta Express will experience the check–burning harsh breath of the Fremont Troll when they face this hidden giant of the Pacific Northwest.

Before we approach that final challenge, our tour begins at a more sublime point, the Shanty Town Café, where the Vinarterta Express takes on the necessary gallons of coffee needed to complete our journey. This café located at 350 Elliot Avenue West, is not only our caffeine filling station, it is also the site of the earliest homes of Seattle's Icelandic settlers. Called, Dalurinn, this old Icelandic shanty town was destroyed during one of Seattle's real estate upgrades. The valley was filled in, leveled and renamed the Denny Regrade. Seattle INL of NA Convention organizer David Johnson offers this vision of Dalurinn as we sip our Shanty Town Café coffee, "Imagine a bit of a bluff coming up from Puget Sound and a gully or valley where the cafe now stands with Seattle Icelanders of the 1890s looking down from above at you." As we ponder this image of the ancients watching their present-day descendants who are trying to imagine what life in 1890s Dalurinn must have been like, the Vinarterta Express slowly lumbers into the open traffic and cruises toward our next stop.

After a charge through downtown Seattle traffic, the Express pulls onto the University of Washington campus to get us closer to the Suzallo Library, home to the Icelandic Book Collection and other important documents gathered from the Icelandic settlers in the Pacific Northwest. The collection also includes many primary documents, including the recollections of Guðrun Lindal Magnusson who moved from Manitoba to Seattle in 1922. In her memoir, she points out that her brother Walter authored several books including "The Icelanders of Canada."

Our tour is delayed at the library when several of our participants discover they are unable to check out the stack of books they had accumulated from the collection because none are enrolled at the university. Our tour guide deftly avoids the difficult task of separating Icelanders from their books by adding an unscheduled stop at the nearby University Bookstore. An hour later, as our happy tourists re-board the Express with bags of books in hand, the bus heads over to the heart of Icelandic Seattle-Ballard.

Our first stop is at 7706 25th Avenue NW in North Ballard, home of the Icelandic Liberal Church. This church along with the Free Church in Blaine, Washington was founded in 1928 by the Reverend Albert E. Krisjánsson. In addition to his work in the Unitarian Church, he was also a founding member of the Icelandic National League of North America, and served as the league's president from 1923 to 1925.

Prior to forming this congregation, a Unitarian and "Free Lutheran" group joined to create a non-denominational group in 1902 called Hallgrim's Congregation, named after Iceland's passion poet, Hallgrimur Petursson. By 1926 the congregation purchased the Calvary Methodist Episcopal Church building. While still known as Hallgrim's Congregation, the building became known as the Calvary Church. The membership eventually elected to join the Lutheran Synod of America as the Calvary Lutheran Church. The building at 7000 23rd Avenue NW

was eventually demolished and a new structure took its place in 1964. By 2008, declining attendance had taken its toll and the membership merged with Our Redeemers Lutheran Church and put the building up for sale.

As the Vinarterta Express pulls away from this closed chapter of Icelandic Seattle, we reload our coffee tankards and look forward to our next stop where so much of Icelandic Seattle history has been gathered.

The Nordic Heritage Museum at 3014 NW 67th Street offers three floors of permanent displays to delight the heart of any Icelandic descendant. The first floor features "The Dream of America." Here we see the immigration story told in life-like dioramas. In this story, no matter the country of origin, the end goal is settling in Ballard, home of this unique museum. The second floor explores the two major industries where our ancestors found employment in the Northwest: logging and fishing. We also find interesting displays of the tools, clothing and furnishing from the era. The third floor features a gallery focused entirely on Iceland. Oh, and quite by accident some members of our tour group discovered the floor also houses some other galleries where the other Scandinavian countries are featured. One of the many surprises of our Icelandic Seattle tour!

Our next stop is at the Seattle shoreline, or as we are now calling it, Ballard Shore. Technically speaking, this is really known as Shilshole Bay Marina on Seaview Avenue NW. But we know it as Seattle's monument to one of the world's greatest seafarers. Centerpiece of the Leif Erikson Plaza is the massive statue of Leif Erikson, which was first unveiled in 1962 at the Seattle World's Fair. Replicas of the statue exist in both Trondheim, Norway and at Erik the Red's farm in Greenland. The statue's current setting in Seattle was dedicated on October 7, 2007. The stature is now surrounded by thirteen basalt stones that are arranged in the form of a Viking ship. The stones hold the names of hundreds of Scandinavian settlers who made the Pacific Northwest their home.

Our next stop is a "drive by" of the home located at 3208 NW 59th Street. In 1929 the Icelandic novelist Halldór Laxness, stopped in Seattle on his way to Pt. Roberts, to visit with the resident of this home, whom he referred to as the greatest Western Icelandic poet. The homeowner was Jakobína Johnson. She resided in Seattle for over 68 years since her arrival in the city as a five year old in 1908. During those years she wrote, translated Icelandic literary works into English and was a passionate lecturer about her beloved Iceland. Her efforts not only earned Laxness' admiration, but she also received the Order of the Falcon in 1933. In 1959 she returned to Iceland to receive the Great Order of the Falcon from then Icelandic President, Svein Bjornson.

Our final stop on the tour may appear a bit unseemly as we travel into darkness under a bridge in Ballard. But this last site is the only place where such creatures can be found in Seattle. To our knowledge there are no "little people" here as you might find while traveling in Iceland. No highway had to be diverted to avoid destroying one of the places they are known to exist. But Ballard is home to a close "cousin" of an Icelandic spirit. Our tour bus stops in front of the giant "Fremont Troll" whose visage has been sculpted under the north end of the Aurora Bridge. Contrary to our warning of danger, the troll sits quietly today and fortunately no tourists riding the Vinarterta Express were harmed during this visit. But as the

tour guides warned at the onset of the journey, injuries have occurred on past trips.

Thrilled about surviving this brush with danger, several tourists point out the interesting shops surrounding the Fremont Troll and urge our driver to stop for a quick exploration.

One person insisted they noticed a Skyr shop as we pile out of the bus to continue our tour of Icelandic Seattle on our own.

"Working in the woods," and the lumber mills were major employment opportunities for Icelandic settlers in the Pacific Northwest. Postcard image is circa 1907.

Ben Sivertz: West Coast Icelanders

by W.D. Valgardson

Bob Asgeirson once told me that he was working in Winnipeg when he took the train to Vancouver for a holiday. He left in a blizzard and when he got to Vancouver, a gentle rain was falling and everything was green. He immediately booked a ticket back to Winnipeg, quit his job and moved permanently to the West Coast.

When I first arrived here (I was living in Missouri, and the phone rang and an English voice said, "Would you like to come back to Canada and teach at the University of Victoria?"), it was because a job was proffered and accepted.

Richard Beck had retired here. One of the great promoters of everything Icelandic, he had taught at the University of North Dakota until his retirement and then moved to Victoria. His wife had relatives here. When he died, he left his house to the University of Victoria to create the Richard and Margaret Beck Trust.

We all came to the West Coast at different times for different reasons, drawn here by weather, by jobs, by family.

When I came to Victoria, I had no idea that it contained an Icelandic history, that, at one time, an Icelandic community with a store and a church existed in Fernwood. All of this would be revealed by Ben Sivertz, the quintessential Icelandic Canadian.

I met Ben at the University of Victoria at a Richard and Margaret Beck lecture. Ben was short, slightly built, had a white goatee and was one of the most accomplished and modest individuals I have ever met. A lot of people respect, even worship money, and if someone is lucky enough or smart enough to accumulate a lot of money, a lot of people worship them. Ben wanted none of that. He took no credit for his wealth. He once said to me, "I don't know how it happened but everything I touched, turned to money." He was the only person I've ever known who owned an original Van Gogh. That kind of money.

However, it wasn't his money that made Ben impressive. It was his Icelandic-ness.

His parents were Christian Sivertz and Elínborg Samúelsdóttir. They emigrated, separately, from Iceland to Manitoba in the late 1880s. They met in Victoria in 1890. Christian and Elinborg married in 1893 and eventually had six sons.

Ben says in his autobiography *The Life of Bent Gestur Sivertz – A Seaman, A Teacher and a Worker in the Canadian Arctic,* "The Icelandic families of Victoria were not numerous, perhaps twenty in all, settled mostly around Spring Ridge, the district now called Fernwood. This group of about 100 people spoke the language of their birth and were lively, friendly, and immensely helpful to each other as they sought social, economic, and intellectual orientation in the new

land. There were Sunday gatherings in different homes where the house would fill with people in an atmosphere of story and song, coffee and cake and poems – always poems. Recent compositions would be read and met with universal applause."

Ben's father, Christian, had spent four summers as a fireman and second engineer on Lake Winnipeg. He also spent twenty-seven months working at the Winnipeg Gas and Electric plant, twelve hours a day, seven days a week, for $1.50 a day. The CPR had started carrying passengers to the Pacific Coast in 1886 and in 1890, Christian took the train west. His parents, three brothers and a sister followed him to Victoria from Winnipeg.

There were other Icelanders, of course, settling not just in Victoria but in various parts of British Columbia and, even if the distances were large and the travel not easy, blood bound people together. The Thorlakssons, for example, were operating a cattle ranch eight miles south of Vernon. They wanted to send their daughters to Victoria for further education and appealed to Elínborg to give them room and board.

One fine summer day some years ago, Ben took Mattie Gislason and me on a walk-about through Spring Ridge. He showed us all the houses in which Icelanders had lived, named the occupants, told us their history and showed us the house where he and his brothers were born.

He didn't brag about how much money he had, or how he had served in the Royal Canadian Navy, had run a school for navigation, retired with the rank of Lieutenant Commander and been awarded the Order of the British Empire. He never mentioned that he'd had a career as a Foreign Service officer in the department of External Affairs and chief of the Arctic division in the department of Northern Affairs or was the Commissioner of the NWT. It was only with a bit of prompting from Mattie that he mentioned that the Hay River arena is named after him.

Christian's parents and Elínborg's parents left Iceland, not to have a great adventure, but because conditions in Iceland were dire. Political oppression, life threatening weather, hunger, lack of opportunity for a better life, caused them to move to Canada. Once in Canada, they played an important role within the

Icelandic community on the West Coast. One of their sons gave his life in the war.

The Icelandic community does not end at the boundaries of New Iceland. Many came there first because, as with all immigrant groups, individuals need a place where a transformation can take place: where English can be learned, where new skills can be mastered, where a new system can be assimilated. New Iceland and Winnipeg provided that resting place, that place of learning for many of the immigrants.

However, opportunity in New Iceland was severely limited. The Interlake of Manitoba was, when I was growing up, the second poorest part of Canada, after Newfoundland. The journey could not be over for many of those seeking a better life. They moved out, to Winnipeg, to the Argyle area, to Saskatchewan, to Alberta, to British Columbia, Washington State, down to California.

As the community fanned out seeking opportunity, each part became smaller, more a part of the larger, multi-ethnic community of North America. However, some traditions still exist, even if they only occur from time to time. When Viðar Hreinsson was in Victoria, I held a reception for him in my home. He gave a reading from his biography of Stephan G. Stephansson, *Wakeful Nights.* He also read poetry. I remembered what Ben had written about those early Sundays that 'the house would fill with people in an atmosphere of story and song, coffee and cake and poems – always poems. Recent compositions would be read and met with universal applause." And I invited them back, those who had come before us, to join us for an evening, to listen, once again, to poetry being read in Icelandic. I made them welcome and I know they accepted the invitation for the house felt full, not just from those of us who live In the present but also with those who created both us and our past.

Information for this article came from two of Ben's books: *The Life of Bent Gestur Sivertz* (available on Amazon) and *The Sivertz Family Book 1,* Christian Sivertz)

Memories of the Marietta Icelanders

by Gudrun Iwersen Beck
and Sigrid Westman Powers

Marietta lies about eight miles from Bellingham to the west along the bay, rising above the Nooksack River.

Sigrid and Gudrun remember several Icelandic families who had homes on small farms no bigger than ten acres. Many earned extra money selling milk, cream, and eggs to the local Co-op and raised produce for themselves. Sigrid and her late brother Carl lived on Rural Road (now Rural Avenue) with their parents Carl and Nita Westman (nee Agnete Iwersen).

Gudrun and her brother Gernot lived on the Hoff Road with their parents Valdimar (Nita's brother) and Kristjana (nee Soebeck). Gustav, the patriach of the Iwersen clan lived with them. He always had a showcase "Danish garden" with raised beds. He gathered the Iwersen clan for Christmas Eve around a freshly cut white fir tree which he decorated with American, Icelandic and Danish flags(and live candles early on).

Between the Iwersen and Westman properties, Mrs Bjorg Solvason lived in a small house with her children Herbert and Violet. The often told tale was that Herbert came home on his first day at school he told his mother, in *Íslenzk, "eg er tala Íslenzk ekki meira."*

Mrs. Solvason was legally blind, but had the "Icelandic ladies" in for cards. And she often called Gernot and Gudrun in for wonderful extra thin sugared *pönnukökur.*

Farther down Rural Avenue lived the Viking family. Thor (Þórarinn) and Ásta (Ástriður) Vikingur with their young sons Grímur,Eggert, Arnold and Gunnar. They were neighbor to the Westmans. The boys were playmates for Sigrid and Carl. The family resided there less than three years and returned to Iceland around the year 1929.

Continuing on Rural Avenue was the home and farm of Þorsteinn and Augustina Goodman and their five children, Arthur, Clara, Louis, August and Arnold. Their farm was somewhat larger and busy with dairy cattle,

Clara and her husband Gus Johnson built their home on land near the family farm. The Gunnar and Sæunn Holm farm was near the Marietta Elementary School and adjacent to the Goodman farm. They had no children but did raise a foster son. Sæunn always had delicious baked treats to serve whenever anyone visited.

Bjarni Gíslason was an early settler. Around 1900 he purchased forty acres of uncleared land and developed it into a successful dairy farm. Bjarni was a widower. Sigurveig Sigurðardóttir Baldvinsson, a single mother became the housekeeper for Bjarni in1922. Her children Sigurður and Soffía were part of the household.

Guðbrandur Sigurðsson (American name George S. Westman) and Sigrid (nee Kristjánsdóttir) settled on a farm in the late 1800s, probably 1885. They had four children, Sarah, Nettie, Blaine and Walter. Guðbrandur's son Carl Westman emigrated from Iceland in 1902 and joined the family. The Westman and Gíslason farms were located on the road

that is now named Shady Lane.

The Marietta Icelanders socializing was limited to visiting each other in their respective homes. There were no community gatherings. Special events such as the Iceland Independence Day were celebrated in Blaine and attracted the Icelanders throughout Whatcom County. Carl and Nita were part of the Kari Club of Bellingham and hosted the group in their home throughout the years of the club's existence.

Staying Overnight and Other Memories

by Robert Thorstenson

My earliest recollection of sleeping away from home occurred when I was about four years old. My sister Sylvia and I spent the night with *Afi* and *Amma* Thorsteinsson, my father's parents, who came from Iceland and lived next door in a large, drafty frame farm house.

I remember one dark night, with my sister Sylvia, following our father's flashlight, through the old orchard to Grandma's house. It was kind of spooky. We would walk to the gage in the old hand made picket fence, next to the root house, where they stored potatoes and apples in the winter.

I don't think I will ever forget the pleasure as a four year old child coming into the warm, cozy, bright kitchen ruled by *Amma. Afi* and their boarder, Siggi Scheving, would be noisily slurping their soup while *Amma,* like a little hen, fussed about the kitchen being sure that everyone was happy and had plenty to eat. Siggi, a bachelor who would winter with my grandparents, and build houses in Victoria in the summers, would put his hot soup in to his saucer and blow on it until it was cool. Then he would tip the saucer to his lips and drink the soup. The soup would be filtered through his large walrus mustache accompanied by glorious slurps that we children greatly admired.

The men, and any guests staying overnight, would retire to the dining room (the living room being used only on Sunday) and there they would chat about the day's events, while *Amma* would wash the dishes and clean up the kitchen. *Amma* would then open up a book and read to the assembled audience until nine p.m. when it was time for tired farmers to "hit the hay."

Lying in the feather bed, in the guest room, I can remember her calm voice, reading into the night in melodic Icelandic while the work-weary men dozed in their chairs.

I cannot explain adequately the wonderful feeling of peace and tranquility I felt at that time. The weather outside was freezing and the north wind was blowing hard, and it seemed like the inside temperature was about forty degrees Fahrenheit. The bed had a feather quilt which was warm and very light, it was like sleeping under a fluffy cloud.

Piledrivers And Fish Traps

by Pauli DeHann

The waters off Point Roberts used to be teeming with salmon making their way from the Pacific Ocean to their spawning grounds in British Columbia up the Fraser and Adams Rivers. For centuries, people of the First Nations gathered here to catch and dry salmon for the winter. Disputes over fishing rights were common between the natives and early Caucasian fishermen and the Indians were eventually edged out of their traditional fishing locations.

John Waller and Joseph Goodfellow experimented with trap fishing. This was an ingenious method, but proved to be all too successful. A newspaper article attributes Goodfellow with a cannery contract to supply 100,000 sockeye at ten cents each in 1897. Pretty soon canneries and fish companies from offshore were building their own and at one time the Point was ringed with fish traps. Stories are told of fish catches so large that the canneries couldn't keep up with them. Thousands of salmon were discarded and washed up on the beaches to rot. Fish traps were outlawed by the State of Washington in 1934.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE EINARSON FAMILY

The Queen Piledriver working in the waters off Pt. Roberts

In order to build a fish trap you needed a forest of tall trees, a lumber mill and a boat or barge with a pneumatic hammer and a crew. Point Roberts had everything except the hammer, but that was soon supplied. A paragraph in an 1897 issue of the Blaine Record Journal newspaper quotes: "The steamer "Island Belle", Captain L.C. Henspeter, came into the (Blaine) harbor on Tuesday night with a pile driver in tow from Anacortes for Point Roberts where it will be used for driving piles." This pile driver was called The Queen and for many years she had an all Icelandic crew.

Long pilings, logged from 100 foot fir trees were dragged to the south side of Point Roberts then dropped down a chute into the water at high tide. These pilings were driven into the seabed at regular intervals. Cotton nets were tarred at the Alaska Packers Association cannery site to prevent rot from the salt water, and then strung between the pilings to form an underwater tunnel that the fish would have to swim through. The tunnels led into an area that they could not swim out of and were then 'brailed' or pulled up by net into a waiting barge to be taken to the cannery for processing.

Planks were placed at the top of the pilings to form a walkway for workers, and a platform was built which would hold a small house for shelter. The shelter held a couple of bunks and a camp stove for making coffee or a meal. A shift of watchmen tended the traps 24 hours a day, seven days a week throughout the season. "Gordon Williams, a former resident and pile driver operator at Point Roberts, reported that the traps provided more employment for the local residents than did the canneries, since the latter provide only seasonal employment." "There was a division of labor consisting of web foremen, pile driver operators, steam boat operators, tenders and crews." (Point Roberts, U.S.A Clark, p. 62)

At the end of the season, the traps were dismantled. While the long piles themselves were saved for the next season, the planks were dropped into the sea where they floated up onshore. Many early residents collected these planks to use in building houses and barns.

From early spring to late fall, the percussive thump of the Queen's hammer meant paychecks and prosperity for local residents. Who knows, had the great salmon runs been properly managed, Point Roberts could still be a prosperous little fishing village a century later.

Yukonfarar – The Yukon Farers: Icelandic Gold Seekers in the Klondike

by Nelson Gerrard

Based on a presentation in conjunction with the exhibit 'Yukonfarar' at the Icelandic Collection, University of Manitoba, November 2005

In August of 1896, George Washington Carmack, together with friends Skookum Jim and Tagish Charlie, struck gold on Bonanza Creek in the Yukon, launching what was likely the greatest and best known "gold rush" of all time. Like wildfire, word spread across North America and around the world, galvanizing thousands of adventurers into taking part in what became known as the Klondike Gold Rush.

Among the gold seekers in Canada's Yukon were no fewer than 40 Icelanders from as far afield as Manitoba, North Dakota, Utah, Washington State, and Iceland itself. The saga of these adventurers, known to their countrymen as *Yukonfarar* – the 'Yukon Farers' – is an all but forgotten chapter in our history. Fragments of this story, however, are preserved in a series of letters written by Icelandic 'Yukon Farers' – one of whom, Sölvi Sölvason from Winnipeg, penned the following lines on May 18, 1898...

"As nearly as I could reckon, the distance up White Pass is about 14 miles. … The road soon worsened … the snow became very soft, and in front of our tent a person sometimes sank up to his armpits – not to mention inside the tent. It is almost impossible for a person who has not experienced this to comprehend how hard it is to endure such conditions. With just one small tent for a cookhouse and sleeping quarters, a man lies, sits, walks, and crawls on his bed clothing, and everything – food and clothing – becomes mixed together. In the evening, a man arrives tired, cold, and wet, with his little tent, first setting it up and then gathering some firewood so it is possible to heat a little food. A man is freezing cold on the one side, and scorching hot on the other. He then drifts off to sleep in calm weather and awakens to a howling blizzard, the wind having created snow drifts inside the tent, right over his bed. A man has to get up half-naked none-the-less..."

For those of us with Icelandic connections, the saga of the 'Yukon Farers' is an intriguing story for a variety of reasons. Beyond the obvious fascination this odyssey holds for us this chapter in our community's history serves to illustrate some interesting points about history in general – and the way we as individuals relate to and connect with history.

First, we relate to history on a personal level, then we establish a broader, more panoramic connection in the context

of national or international events. For example, through the participation of Icelanders in the Gold Rush, those of us who share Icelandic ancestral roots or who identify with the Icelandic community discover a personal link with this major historical event – especially if an ancestor or family member was directly involved. In this way our pursuit of our own history can connect us with broader historical events and awaken in us an interest in and appreciation of history on a much broader scale.

Second, the saga of the Icelandic 'Yukon Farers' illustrates the power of *primary sources* to bring history to life. First-person, eye-witness accounts by these Icelandic adventurers are filled with vivid details and first hand glimpses of people, events, and experiences that personalize history for us and bring it to life.

Third, letters and poetry written by the 'Yukon Farers' include deeply personal expressions of identity and vivid insights into the self concept of these Icelandic immigrants. Through their individual responses to these events, which some took time to commit to writing, we are offered glimpses into their minds and souls as shaped by their Icelandic and North American experiences – which in turn enable us to gain insights into their thoughts, their values, and their sense of their place in history and the greater scheme of things.

But first, back to the idea that a relatively narrow interest in family or community history can serve as a gateway to wider interests and understanding... in this case how our common Icelandic connection links us with the Klondike Gold Rush.

My own interest in the story of Icelanders in the Klondike is a classic example. It began more than 20 years ago through family history research undertaken for Wyn Solvason, then resident at Husavik south of Gimli. Wyn was the mason who did the stonework on my home, and when I decided to add a stone gateway he and I agreed on an exchange of work – his masonry for my genealogical research. It turned out that Wyn's paternal grandfather, Sölvi Sölvason, had gone to the Klondike from Winnipeg in 1898 – and never come back. Then I discovered Sölvi's Klondike letters – all in Icelandic – and so began my own voyage of discovery about the Icelandic experience in the Klondike. Through family history, I thus developed an abiding interest in this fascinating chapter of Canadian history. In a similar way, an individual might develop an interest in the events of World War I through the participation of a family member in that war – or a curiosity about the United Empire Loyalists through a personal line of descent from a Loyalist ancestor.

Secondly, I suggested that a primary source – such as an eyewitness account – has the power to breathe life into the events of history. Through primary sources such as letters and documents, we glimpse vivid details of history as it was unfolding and gain fascinating insight into events otherwise known to us only in the very broad strokes of history books.

For example, this report from Winnipeg dated March 10, 1898 records history in the making. *"On Saturday next, three Icelanders from this city will be setting off for the goldfields of the Klondike. They are Sölvi Sölvason, Jón Jónsson Hördal, and Jón Valdimarsson. These men will be departing from Winnipeg with the C.P.R. for Vancouver, from whence they will travel north by sea, then inland over the so-called White Pass and down the Yukon River. With them they will have provisions for at least*

one year, and as they are all hard working men, hardy and in good health, it will take tough going indeed to discourage them. We wish them all the best of luck and success in seeking their fortunes in this great land of promise."

Later, through the eyes and pen of Sölvi Sölvason, we catch an unexpected glimpse of the great diversity of people streaming to the Klondike. *"One sees people of every nationality here – the most noticeable of whom are the Frenchmen – and there are men from every walk of life, including ministers and doctors. These men are not here only to minister to spiritual and bodily ills; they too carry and pull, just like the rest of us who have been created to toil. There are also some couples here with children, and even a considerable number of girls. Some dress like men, in hairy leather trousers, while others are in short skirts up to their buttocks, with boots to the knee."*

Through Sölvi's letters, we also witness first hand the hardships and dangers encountered by the 'Yukon Farers'. *"On March 29th… we began transporting our goods over the worst 2 1/2 miles, along a river which passes through a narrow gorge. In places we had to climb over huge boulders, and there was rain and sleet every day, so that we were up to our shins in muck and water. Everyone put his best effort forward, and those who didn't have the manhood to do it, had to buy it! It was amazing how men remained so calm, though the river was swallowing up the ice from under their feet, and they proceeded over a snow bridge only three inches thick. When the first man and horse fell through, a wooden bridge was quickly fashioned as a replacement…"*

Later Sölvi describes a first hand brush with death and the perils of the rapids on the Yukon River. *"We set off from Lake Bennett on May 29th after having been there for a month. Nothing untoward happened until we arrived downstream at the gorge four miles above White Horse. Many were taken aback at the sight there, and some who had been ready to take on almost anything up to this point began to hesitate for the first time. I am not sure whether it is true, but it was rumoured that two men killed themselves the same day we arrived there. I do know for a fact, though, that many men lost their boats and everything aboard at this stage of the journey."*

As for the Icelanders in particular… *"…Jón Bíldfell, Hjörtur Jónsson, and Jón Valdimarsson hired an experienced man to guide their boats through the gorge – one of which half-filled with water that damaged their goods somewhat. … I took my own boat through, with the help of Jón Hördal. I am afraid that no one would have insured our lives or property, because at least three men are needed if things are to go as they should – two to row and one to steer. Just the same, we managed amazingly well and got through without a drop of water in our boat."*

Through Sölvi's letters we also catch a glimpse of man's propensity for cruelty and Sölvi's own empathy for the helpless victims. *"The worst of it was to witness how the dog teams were abused. These poor beasts had no strength left to pull the heavy sleds over the clay and rocks, and if there was a pause they dropped down exhausted, only to awake to a nightmare as they were beaten with sticks until their cries echoed among the cliffs. There were also men who kicked and punched their dogs, threw them aside, shot them, cut their throats, or turned the sleds over on top of them, crushing them to death. Men can be unbelievably cruel when they are unchecked."*

Through Sölvi's accounts, we become privy to the widespread corruption encountered by hapless and naive gold seekers as soon as they set foot in the North. *"We were obliged to wait in Skagway*

for one day, while our bill of lading passed inspection in the customs house there. First they demanded $87 from us – $50 for a 'Bond' and $37 for endorsing our papers, which was the work of a few minutes. This we considered a bit steep. They then checked their adding and gave us the figure of $66, but we weren't happy with that either and asked them to check again. Their last figure was $30.50. One can see from this that customs officials in Skagway and their assistants, the Custom Brokers, are in collusion to get as much as they can out of the prospectors…."

And later on, after arriving at Dawson City, Sölvi witnessed corruption on a higher level, involving government officials. *"Many knew that there was an area along Dominion Creek that was supposed to open up this month, but there was something strange about the whole affair. It was leaked that some special permit had to be obtained, but few knew exactly what kind of permit this was. An advertisement was then posted, notifying the public that this land would be opened up on Monday, the 11th of this month, but before that day arrived, another poster appeared on the 9th, cancelling the first notice and throwing these claims open two days before the public expected. Certain men, in the meantime, had already sent in their applications long in advance and were ready with their claims. The vultures, apparently able to see through office walls, knew all about this and set off in a stampede on Friday evening. Those who knew nothing saw the stampede, and realizing something was afoot, joined in, about 500 in all. They ran as hard as they could with their hats and caps in hand, dripping sweat, half-naked, blue in the face and bloody... A distance of 50 miles is a considerable trek, and when one takes into account that the road is so bad that horses … rip themselves open on all the sharp snags and sticks which are everywhere, then it is not surprising that these men had their clothes ripped off their backs and were in rough shape. – And what did they gain from their stampede? Most of them came back with bloodied limbs and burst lungs, only to discover – once they arrived at the Government office – that the claims they had staked had already been allotted long before, to a few favorites of the Government… So it goes here. Life is difficult, one big rat race…."*

Included in Sölvi's letters are also revealing glimpses of life in Dawson City – with equally revealing editorial comments added by the writer. *"It is uncanny how peaceful the town is. One almost never sees a fight or drunkenness; people are courteous with one another and mind their own business – unlike what one experiences in many other places. It would be an excellent idea for all gossips and slanderers to come here, because here no-one listens to such talk, and these busybodies would therefore have to find themselves other occupations…"*

Also, *"There are, of course, some fools who hang around saloons and allow drunk women to lead them by the nose into the dance halls and then into a restaurant, but these are a small minority. There are, on the other hand, large numbers of men who work together and watch for every opportunity; they are like vultures who divide their prey among themselves, and as soon as they detect a victim, they swoop down one after another."*

And of course, Sölvi also provides glimpses of living conditions. *"I don't regret coming here in the least. Of course I am not overly fond of the various hardships, and the water – it is bad enough to kill an ox. There is a half teaspoon of clay left in the bottom of your coffee cup when you're finished, and this in spite of the fact that I make coffee with a 'coffee bag' (kaffi poki)."*

Finally, Sölvi includes occasional updates on his countrymen... such as this one, written at Grand Forks, Yukon, on Dec.15.1898: *"…All the Icelanders here*

are in good health with the exception of one man, who calls himself Krist, from Utah. I am told that he is ill with scurvy and is in Dawson. Jón Jónsson from Winnipeg has recently earned himself $300, in addition to which he owns half a claim on Too-Much-Gold Creek. Jón Bíldfell has earned himself half–ownership of a lot downstream on Sulphur Creek. Thorkell Jónsson, the carpenter, is plying his trade in Dawson. Jóhannes Helgason was in Dawson for a time this summer, but he then left there and I have not seen him since. Jón Hördal owns a claim on Balder Creek. He is now working on Sulphur Creek and keeps half of whatever he finds. With him are Ólafur Jónsson from Utah and Jón Valdimarsson. They say they are finding – at the most – 5 cents worth of gold per pan (one pan is about two shovels of gravel), but the owner of the claim says this is not true, and that they have found as much as 30 cents of gold per pan. I won't presume to judge which account is true. Björn from Utah owns half a claim on a creek which empties into Hunker Creek. Hjörtur Jónsson, who arrived here this spring, stayed over the summer, then sold his possessions and set sail down the Yukon River. Eiríkur Runólfsson came here this fall. I have not yet seen him and do not know what he is doing. Jónas Bergmann has been in Dawson for some time now. We – Eiríkur Sumarliðason and I – are here in Grand Forks."

I also suggested earlier that the saga of the 'Yukon Farers' offers us glimpses into the values, self-concepts, and philosophical outlook of these Icelanders. Their letters and poetry afford many such insights.

For example, through the poetry of Sigurður Jón Jóhannesson of Winnipeg, who together with 11 other Icelanders set off for the goldfields via Edmonton and the Athabaska River, it is evident that even in the late 19th Century, Icelandic immigrants in Canada associated themselves with the Vikings. In joining the great Klondike adventure, they saw themselves as modern heirs to a proud Viking heritage with heroic mythological overtones, and in this context they were inspired by heroic values – courage, daring, and adventure… In Sigurður's own words, in his poem "Klondike"…

Nú í vestur víking halda
víkingar að fornum sið,
hamrabúum heiftir gjalda,
hrímþursana berjast við,
sem þar heims um allan aldur
ómælandi fólu seim;
ramman huldu gólu galdur
goðin yfir sjóði þeim....

Röskir drengir rjúfið hauga,
rammar vættir herjið á;
hlífist ei við dökka drauga,
dólga rænið, hver sem má;

In loose English translation...

Now westward in a vanguard fare
Vikings as in days of yore,
To visit vengeance on Cliff Dwellers,
And vanquish Giants of the Frost,
Those who from the world's beginning
Have guarded gold and untold
wealth...
Treasure of the ages hidden
By powerful magic of the gods....

Hardy lads, dig up the mounds,
Assail the spirits there within;
Be undeterred by ghosts of darkness,
Rob the trolls, whoever can;

It is interesting that the poet sees a parallel between the adventures and feats of his countrymen in the Klondike, and the heroic ventures of mythological heroes of old, who battled the powers of darkness for gold and glory...

This heroic theme is echoed in the following three selected stanzas from a poem entitled "Gullneminn í Klondyke" (Gold Seekers in the Klondike") by Sigurjón Bergvinsson, at one time of Brown, Manitoba…

3. "Klondyke mína hvessir sjón,
krafta beinum gefur.
Að treysta afli líkt og ljón
lífsins dómur krefur.

4. Heróp berst um heljarslóð,
hörgul Klondyke fjalla;
Að sækja fram í svelnis móð,
og sigra, eða falla.

11. Á eyðimörk er harðlæst hurð,
hefir sú gull a baki.
Veltum grjóti! Veltum urð!
Veltum Grettistaki!"

These lines defy translation, but they depict the Klondike adventure as an epic battle to the death, inspiring the utmost strength (like that of a lion) and the battle spirit of a *berserk*. The final line alludes to the saga hero Grettir, known for his great feats of courage and strength…

In another poem by Sigurður Jón Jóhannesson, entitled *"Rödd úr Eyðimörkinni"* ("Voice from the Wilderness"), blended with hints of Viking bravado are expressions of the poet's personal sense of his own mortality in a strange land, his desire to be given a Viking burial, and his belief in a spiritual voyage after death…

"Hér ef skyldi ég beinin bera
brattra millum fjalla tinda,
heygður mun ég að háttum feðra,
en helskó mér ei þarf að binda.

Skófrekt því ég ætla eigi
eilífðar á brautum vera,
anda minn þá ofar skýjum
ópreytandi vængir bera."

"If here my bones should find their rest,
High among the towering peaks,
Build me a mound, as our forebears did,
But don't bother lacing new shoes on my feet…

Those… I don't think I'll need
On the road to the great hereafter;
Above the clouds instead, my spirit
Will soar on untiring wings."

And finally, we get a glimpse of Sigurður's world view and cynicism – about power and money – in his philosophical verse entitled "Gold".

"Gullið heimsins geymir völd,
Gullið er hans megin afl.
Gullið vora glepur öld.
Gullið er sem viðsjalt tafl."

"In Gold lies the world's power,
In Gold lies the world's strength,
Gold is the folly of our time,
Gold is a dangerous game."

Post Script:

If readers should happen to know of additional names of Icelanders who participated in the Klondike Gold Rush, or of letters, artifacts, or photographs relating to this chapter of our history, please contact Nelson Gerrard by e-mail at eyrarbakki@hotmail.com, by phone at 204-378-2758, or by mail at Box 925, Arborg, Manitoba, R0C 0A0.

Following are the names of known

Icelandic 'Klondike Farers':

Albert Jónsson (Johnson), Winnipeg
Ármann Bjarnason, Winnipeg
Árni Thórðarson, Winnipeg and Gimli
Ástráður Jónsson, Lundar (died in the Klondike)
Bergvin Jónsson, Winnipeg, Seattle
Bjarni Stefánsson, Hallson, Piney
Björn Magnússon, Utah
Björn Stefánsson
Eiríkur Runólfsson, Akra, ND
Eiríkur Sumarliðason, Winnipeg
Geir Jónsson Reykdal? Winnipeg, Seattle, San Francisco.
Guðjón Vigfússon, Iceland
Hálfdán Jakobsson, Mýrarkot, Tjörnes, Iceland, returned to Iceland 1902.
Hannes Snæbjörnsson Hanson?
Hjörtur Jónsson (Hördal?), Winnipeg
Jóhann Jónsson, Winnipeg
Jóhannes Helgason, New Iceland, Seattle
Jón Jónsson 'Yukonfari', Point Roberts, Seattle
Jón Tryggvi Jónsson Bergmann, Winnipeg, Seattle, Medicine Hat
Jón Jónsson Bíldfell, Winnipeg
Jón Jónsson Hördal, Lundar
Jón Sigfússon Bergmann?, Gardar, ND
Jón Stefánsson, Hallson, Piney
Jón Thorsteinsson 'Hotel', Gimli
Jón Valdimarsson, Winnipeg
Jónas Bergmann (Captain), New Iceland, Vancouver
Jónas B. Brynjólfsson, New Iceland, Winnipegosis
Júlíus Jakobsson Eyford?, ND
Krist? (from Utah)
Kristján Guðmundsson
Kristján Matthíasson, Sinclair, Man.
Kristján Sveinsson, Helena, Montana
Kristján Pétursson, Hayland
Lárus Sölvason, Víðir
Magnús Pétursson, Nome
Marteinn Jónsson
Oddbjörn Magnússon, Winnipeg
Oddur Jónsson, New Iceland, Vancouver
Ólafur Jónsson, Utah
Sigurður Jón Jóhannesson, Winnipeg
Sveinn Bjarnason, Winnipeg
Sölvi Sölvason, Winnipeg, Point Roberts
Teitur Ingimundarson Thomas, Winnipeg
Thorkell Jónsson, Vancouver, Victoria
Thorkell Sveinbjörnsson (Charlie Oddstad), Argylebyggð, Manitoba

A West Coast Woman: Bertha Jones July 17, 1872 – July 5, 1974

by Judy Sólveig Wilson

Born Guðbjörg Júliana Jónsdóttir in Bægisársókn, Eyjafjarðarsýsla, Bertha was the daughter of Jón Snorrason and Guðbjörg Sigurðardóttir. In 1887, when she was not quite 15 years of age, she emigrated to Canada with her older sister Sigriður Valgerður Jónsdóttir, who was 22 years old. They landed in Quebec City.

Here the story has two versions, with some believing one version and some the other. The first version is that being very clever, Guðbjörg decided to use an English name upon immigration so that she would have an easier time being accepted into the country. The second version holds that when the immigration officer asked her for her name, she said "Guðbjörg Jónsdóttir." Steadfast in her ways, she repeated herself each time she was asked. She refused to help the man understand her name in any way. Finally, he wrote down what he could make of the name – Bertha Jones. In either case, very shortly after immigration she proudly told friends and family that she was the only Icelander she knew whose name could be pronounced in Canada.

The two sisters travelled west. Sigriður wished to go to the area that is now Saskatchewan, eventually marrying and settling in the Tantallon area. Because Bertha was so young, it was decided that she should stay in Winnipeg. There she lived among Icelanders who were already there. A while after her arrival, she went into service with Mrs. Ross, one of the famous Ross family in Winnipeg, soon becoming her personal maid. She excelled at this job, and became a great favourite of her employer.

When Bertha turned 18, Mrs. Ross used her connections as a member of Winnipeg society to obtain a position for her at Government House, the residence of the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba. At that time this position was held by John Christian Schultz. She held a variety of positions at Government House, from head meat cook to lady's maid. While in service at Government House, Bertha learned all about the finer things in life. Her knowledge of fine china, crystal, and the best liqueurs remained with her all her life. When visiting relatives, she was observed turning over the china when she thought nobody was looking. She was checking the credentials. She also had a habit of dinging her spoon against the glasses to see if they were real crystal or not, by the sound. She developed a respect for Courvoisier cognac, which was often served to guests at Government House, and she had a sip of it every morning for her entire life. She had a firm belief that only in Winnipeg were the finest liqueurs available, and thus relatives often had to assure her that a particular bottle of Courvoisier had been purchased there.

Of course, many influential people were guests during her years at

Bertha Jones 100 years old
July 17 1972

Government House, but her favourite was Princess Louise, granddaughter of Queen Victoria. The two young women were exactly the same age. At a picnic held in honour of the visiting Princess in 1900, she signed a stone in pencil and gave it to Bertha. In turn, Bertha signed it. She kept this stone for many years, eventually passing it on to a niece. By far, it was her most prized possession.

Eventually, a couple who were dignitaries from the United States convinced Bertha to come and work for them in California as a lady's companion. She took this opportunity, and moved with the family to California, where she lived for many years. Although Bertha never married, she raised two girls who were relatives from Saskatchewan, while living in Los Angeles. She was very generous and always concerned about her family. She knew that her brother, Jón, was struggling with raising a large family in Piney, Manitoba. Never a letter came from his sister Bertha that did not have a ten dollar bill in it.

Bertha retired at the age of 85. She was a real Victorian lady, who sewed lace on the sleeves of her dresses if she felt that they showed too much of her arms. Bertha had always felt strongly that Canada was her true home. At 90 she decided that she would move back to Canada so that she could die here. She chose the west coast because she had loved being near the sea in California. She lived for many years in the Icelandic care home, Höfn in Vancouver. Upon shaking hands with her niece's husband, she bluntly stated "You've never worked a day in your life." His hands were too soft to have worked hard. He had a desk job.

Bertha had very firm ideas about etiquette. Once, when sister-in-law Ólína visited her in Vancouver, she wanted to combine the visit and see a friend who worked downstairs in the kitchen at Höfn. Bertha was horrified. "You don't mix with the help", she scolded. Luckily, Ólína did not listen to her and went to visit her old friend anyway.

When Bertha celebrated her 100th birthday, her nephew Ed Johnson and his wife Frances hosted a party in her honour. Many family members attended from near and far. She received greetings from the prime minister and the queen, and was very pleased with them. She had never cared for Richard Nixon. Surprisingly, President Nixon sent Bertha a hand-written letter of congratulations. Although the reason behind this is unknown to the family, it is thought that she may have been familiar to Mr. Nixon through her California service. In any case, the letter changed her opinion of Nixon, raising him up a notch in her estimation.

On her 101st birthday, she was very disappointed because she had believed that the celebration of that day would be even bigger than the one for her 100th birthday. A bigger party was planned to mark her 102nd birthday. Sadly, Bertha died very suddenly at the Höfn home only 12 days before the event.

Bertha kept her keen mind and thinking abilities until the day she died. She loved to talk about politics, the Royal Family, and hockey. She read widely in both the Icelandic and English languages. She always supported causes that she felt were worthwhile and belonged to many Icelandic North American organizations. Her death marked the passage of an era, where modesty reigned and a code of behaviour had to be strictly observed.

She is buried in the Ocean View Burial Park in Burnaby.

Icelanders of Point Roberts

by Pauli DeHaan

Point Robert is a peninsula that extends down into Washington State from British Columbia, on the 49th parallel. Surrounded on three sides by water and Canada on the fourth it sometimes feels more like an island and we have, indeed, been accused of living on "island time". The local joke is that we sometimes get lost in the Point Roberts time warp. Icelandic immigrants came to settle on Point Roberts, starting in 1893.

The first Icelander to visit Point Roberts was a woman, Guðlaug Jónsdóttir. She was married to a man of French descent named Disotel. They came by boat from Bellingham to check out the new Wadhams Cannery and their favorable report interested four other Icelandic families to move to the Point. Word of mouth soon reached the Icelandic community in Victoria B.C. and several more families joined them in 1894.

These Icelandic immigrants were attracted to the Point for employment in the fishing industry and affordable land, though the acreage they bought entitled them to "squatter's rights" only. The Point at that time was a U.S. Military Reserve.

They worked hard to clear the forest for pasture, build homes, plant gardens and fence in the livestock. More settlers moved in. A post office, store and second cannery were established and the Point was rapidly becoming a real community. Uncertainty about whether their land holdings would be revoked by the Federal Government prompted the community to action. To quote an excerpt out of Richard Clark's history book *Point Roberts, U.S.A.* an 1895 letter sent by Helgi Thorsteinson to his parents in Iceland states:

"We had quite a scare the other day when someone read in a newspaper that all the settlers on Point Roberts were to be driven off without receiving any compensation for their homes or their work. It happened in a place not far from here and the place was taken for a fort. We settlers on Point Roberts got together and signed a petition, which was sent to Washington, D.C. asking that Point Roberts be opened for homesteads. I would feel terrible if we had to leave this place. I feel so well here, better than anywhere since I came to America. Our children are healthy and I have never been homesick since I left Victoria. We look forward to a good future here. I have no idea where we would go if we have to leave." (Thordarson, 1975:17)

"Finally, in 1908, the long awaited dream came true. President Roosevelt opened Point Roberts for homesteaders. Each family was allowed the land they were living on." (Thordarson, 1975:25)

These immigrants brought with them their beloved books, belongings and traditions from the old country. Children spoke Icelandic in the home, not learning English until they went off to school. They started *Haf Stjarnan,* an Icelandic Literary Society, to exchange

books and debate various topics of interest. Church services were held in each other's homes until they pooled money and resources to build Trinity Lutheran Church in 1921. Special events are being planned this year in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the congregation, 1913 to 2013, with a special service to be held on July 21, 2013.

They were intrepid farmers, coaxing crops out of the gravelly loam. Some had egg farms and produce to sell to the local canneries and fishing boats. Other farmers shipped cream from purebred Guernsey cows to Bellingham by boat to be churned into butter for Whatcom County tables. A small supply ship brought goods, mail and passengers to the Point three times a week from Bellingham and Blaine until a daily overland route was started in 1934 by an Icelander, Ted Solomon.

Though Icelandic settlers held plays and early church services in Icelandic, they also integrated into the community at large by holding positions on the Township and Cemetery Board. They worked on the road gang, first cutting a swath of trees through the forest, then, with the help of a donkey engine, laid out logs to form a corduroy road that would hold up in the rainy season.

Icelandic settlers in Pt. Roberts became Postmasters, Justice of the Peace, and owned businesses such as Ben's Store, the Iwersen Cannery, the Breakers Tavern, the Cannery Ballroom, Burns Realty and Julius Realty. The fishing industry was a good source of employment when salmon were plentiful. Many first and second generation offspring had successful careers in the fishing industry in Alaska and Puget Sound.

The largest cannery, Alaska Packers Association, closed its Point Roberts branch at Lily Point in 1917, moving their canning operation across the bay to their Blaine holdings. The George and Barker Cannery operated on the West Side until 1930. A final blow to the local fishing

PHOTO COURTESY OF POINT ROBERTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

Point Roberts Washington, early 1900s

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE POINT ROBERTS ARCHIVES

Helgi Thorsteinson homestead, Point Roberts

industry came in 1934 when the "fish trap" method of fishing was outlawed in the State of Washington.

Smaller canneries such as the Iwersen Cannery were not able to sustain employment after 1962. With the demise of the fishing industry, many residents moved away for employment. What was once a large ethnic population has dwindled down to just a few.

If you take a stroll through the Point Roberts cemetery, you will notice many Icelandic headstones, some 77 of them represent those who were born in the old country. A recent monument was placed there with this inscription: "In memory of the first Icelandic settlers in the area. Her excellency, Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, President of Iceland, October 22, 1988."

While many of the original farms are now overgrown by quackgrass and blackberry vines, and many fine farmhouses have sunk to ruins, the spirit and memory of those early immigrants live on in the minds of those who knew them and those who share their bloodlines.

Sources:

"Point Roberts, USA," The History Of A Canadian Enclave by Richard E. Clark. Textype Publishing, 1980.

"Echoes Of The Past," by Runa Thordarson, privately printed, 1975.

The Steam Whistle

by Pauli DeHaan

"The piercing sound of the steam whistle at the top of the Cannery building announced the arrival of salmon to be processed. It could be heard all over the Point and it brought workers out from their homes and down to the Iwersen Cannery for work. Gus, Ing and Doddi had bought the holdings of The Lighthouse Packing Company and turned their efforts to canning salmon, clams, clam nectar and smoked salmon under 'The Breakers' brand. They canned clams and nectar for Ivar Haglund (Ivar's Restaurant) in Seattle at one time." (P DeHaan, Point Roberts Cemetery booklet 2006:5)

The old steam whistle re-appeared many years after the cannery closed and it was given to the Historical Society from the estate of Bud Siewert by his request. Visits with my cousin Paul Thorsteinson, then 84 years young, are always a pleasure and we invariably talk about the Point's history. When I showed him the steam whistle, his eyes lit up, and he said "Gol, you've got to get that fixed by New Year's".

Paul remembers that the whistle was blown on a regular basis, three times a day, at 8 a.m, noon, and 5 p.m. If you heard two blasts in a row, it was a call to work. In lieu of telephones, the whistle called cannery workers out to handle a load of fish that had arrived at the dock for processing, and this could happen at any time, day or night.

"One of the Cannery Managers used to let the kids take a turn pulling the steam whistle chain to announce the time. I was looking forward to taking my turn, when one of the summer kids pulled the chain too gently and the whistle let out a short squawk. He pulled it again and pretty soon people started showing up for work! This put an end to letting the kids take a turn, and I missed mine by two days."

PHOTO COURTESY OF IWERSEN FAMILY

Iwersen Canning Company, Point Roberts Washington

The War Bride: The disappearance of Esther Gavin becomes a family legacy

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by Anne Saker, *The Oregonian*

Continued from Volume 65#1

Chapter Three: Iceland calling

Esther's family in Iceland pursued every possible avenue. One effort, in 2003, elicited a letter from the Southwest Hall Street office of lawyer Les Swanson, then honorary consul of Iceland in Portland, who reported that a search was unsuccessful.

In 2009, Esther's nephew Gudjon Bjarnason Isholm hired a professional genealogist in Portland, Peggy Baldwin, whose first step was to find Larry Gavin or his family. When Larry's daughter Melissa steadied herself from the shock of Baldwin's question – a first marriage? – she said she needed time to talk with her family.

Another of Dad's secrets. Just thinking about it stirred up horrible dreams or insomnia.

Melissa's brothers and sisters had no idea Dad had been married before, either. Patsy, their mom, was dead. But Patsy's sister, Margie O'Rourke, knew the name Esther.

Long ago, Aunt Margie said, the newlywed Patsy answered the phone one day and found herself talking to a woman who said she was Larry's first wife, Esther. She pleaded for money to get the two children from her marriage out of a baby home. If not, Larry and Patsy needed to claim the children. A stunned Patsy delivered the message to Larry. They got in a fight, then he left angry.

Several days later, he returned and said Patsy never had to worry about Esther or those children again, they had been taken care of.

Esther was 23. She was not heard from again.

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After hearing Aunt Margie's story, Melissa played out the scenario: Esther must have been angry. How dare he go on with a new wife and toss her and the children aside. Maybe Esther was even trying to warn Patsy.

For days and nights at a stretch, Melissa typed her memories, now in full rebellion against their exile. Larry asking for a back rub. Larry mercilessly beating Patsy, the fever plain in his face that he would kill, then seeing his five children staring at him, stopping, walking to his car and driving away. Melissa put her

memories in book form and called it *Web of Shadows.*

When the professional researcher in Portland followed up in 2010, Melissa relayed what she now knew about her father's first marriage. She said if Esther's family wanted to talk, she was willing.

Christmas passed, 2011 arrived. Early on Jan. 5, Ralph Painter, the beloved police chief of the Columbia County town of Rainier, went to investigate a prowler at a car-stereo store. Painter confronted a young man; in their struggle, Painter lost control of his weapon, and the prowler fatally shot Painter in the head.

Charged with first-degree murder was Daniel Butts, 22, of Kalama – Melissa Gavin's nephew, her sister's son.

A judge sent Butts for a mental evaluation at the Oregon State Hospital, about 40 years after his grandfather, Larry Gavin, had been examined there. The next four months passed in a blur as the latest family crisis dominated Melissa's life.

Then at the end of April, Melissa picked up her ringing telephone. Iceland was calling.

Some experts look at the global economic crisis and pin it, at least in part, on Iceland.

A decade ago, under Prime Minister Davíð Oddsson, Iceland's three national banks went private, then took on massive debt. The 2008 global crash closed the banks in a collapse that in relative terms was the worse suffered by any country, ever. Oddsson even made *Time* magazine's list of 25 people to blame for the world financial turmoil.

In April 2010, the eruption of Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano shut down air traffic in Europe.

The economic and seismic turmoil badly rattled Icelanders, by nature modest, thrifty and harmonious. Then on April 24, Easter Sunday, Icelandic television told the nation a family story... of the war bride Ragna Esther Sigurðardóttir going to a place in America called Portland, Oregon, where she became a mother then disappeared, perhaps due to foul play.

That's when Melissa answered her phone to talk with Herdís Elísabet Kristinsdóttir, Esther's niece.

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Herdís and her longtime partner live in Reykjavík with their two young children. She works as a specialist in the finance department of an insurance company. Like most Icelanders, she is fluent in English. She loves New York.

Her father was Esther's brother Kristinn Sigurðsson, and all her life, Herdís had watched him launch search after search. When he died, Herdis inherited the mystery. She feared the records of the early searches were destroyed in the house fire that killed Esther's father. Now, Herdís felt an urgency to press on: Esther's sister, Dagny, is 91, and her two half-brothers are 78 and 64.

Herdís told Melissa that the story on Icelandic television led to a deluge of offers to help... even from the sister of Davíð Oddsson. Tears running down her face, Melissa promised Herdís : I will join you.

Herdís emailed all the information she had collected, and Melissa stayed up late reading, thinking, crying, sorting the paper into chronological order, filing it in three-ring binders, cross-referencing...

Then the former prime minister's sister reached out to Melissa.

The mystery intrigued Lillý Valgerður Oddsdóttir. Married with four children, Lillý Valgerður had worked as a secretary for 20 years in Reykjavík City Hall. She had already tapped an ancestry database popular with Icelanders to find that she and Ragna Esther were sixth cousins.

She also contacted *The Oregonian,*

suggesting a follow–up to the 1946 arrival of the war bride from Iceland.

One night at home, Melissa flipped through her files and stopped at that newspaper photograph. She rooted out the 1947 snapshot of the new mother holding her infant son. Side by side, the photographs spoke to the Larry Gavin effect. In less than two years, her beauty had been wrecked. Left eye blackened, teeth broken, button nose smashed.

Melissa reread Esther's two letters that ached with loneliness, begging her father not to be angry and to send word of her sister and brothers. Melissa decided Esther got only two letters from home because Larry intercepted her mail.

To look for Esther's children, Melissa contacted the Department of Human Services, which had taken over the duties of the Waverly Baby Home. The brick building on Southeast Woodward Street and 35th Place has been closed for four years. A DHS official said the department had Raymond's files but not Donita's, and anyway, Melissa was not entitled to see them.

She tried the cold-case unit of the Portland police. Retired Detective Dennis Baker was sympathetic but said the case was awfully old.

Melissa steeled her nerve and called Bill Gavin in Northeast Portland. He said he hadn't seen his brother since 1950. Don't call again.

She remembered from that funeral that Bill and his wife, Barbara, had three children, and she tracked down the eldest daughter, her cousin. They had not spoken since they buried Grandma, and Karen Gavin was eager to meet.

At Shari's in Troutdale, in a booth with Melissa over coffee, Karen said the story in her family was that her father, Bill, was the product of the marriage of E.C. and Florence Gavin. But when that couple had married, Florence was already pregnant with Larry by another man. Larry grew up taking a lot of abuse.

Karen also remembered sometime in the early 1990s a call came to her parents' house from Donita, seeking information about her birth mother and father. Karen's mother told her no one was interested and hung up.

After two hours, the cousins were worn out. In Shari's parking lot, they hugged tightly.

In September, Melissa wrote to Herdís , Esther's niece, that she was out of ideas. Her comfort was that Raymond and Donita did not grow up Gavin: "They were lucky that Larry did not get his hands on them as he did with all of us."

Through the search, Melissa had come to realize, too, that given Larry's brutality, her mother must have known what was going on with the back rubs that weren't back rubs ... but her mother couldn't fight back.

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In early October, Lillý Valgerður Oddsdóttir was at her home thinking, again, of Esther... the shame she must have felt, her whole American dream collapsing, marriage over, children gone.

Her own parents divorced in her childhood, and Lillý Valgerður spent four months in a Reykjavik children's home. When she was reunited with her father and brother, 12–year–old Davíð promised his little sister that one day he would tear the place down.

Davíð Oddsson began his political rise as mayor of Reykjavík, and during his tenure, he had the children's home demolished.

Staring into her computer screen, Lillý Valgerður searched for the terms "Waverly Baby Home" and "secret records."

She got an Oregon Supreme Court ruling from 1958.

She read it once and realized immediately what she had. Two days later, Herdís wrote Melissa with the subject line "VERY IMPORTANT": "Lillý found on the internet for us this case."

Melissa read the court ruling, but she didn't get it. She didn't see it. She told Lillý Valgerður it was unrealistic – it can't be true. Lillý Valgerður pushed, read it again! The names, circumstances, dates match up.

Melissa read the ruling three or four more times. Then a chill came over her.

Could it be?

Is it possible?

The court ruling told the next chapter in the story of the war bride.

Chapter Four: Allen vs. Allen

On Sept. 24, 1958, the Oregon Supreme Court ruled on an adoption gone bad.

The adoptive parents were Jeanne and Benson Allen of Portland. He was the grandson of timberman, philanthropist and Portland city father Simon Benson, who built the Benson Hotel, endowed Benson Polytechnic High School and installed the Benson Bubblers on city street corners to offer working people a refreshing alternative to spirits.

Already the parents of one adopted daughter, the Allens took in a brother and sister who by 1953 had been in the Waverly Baby Home two years. The Allens soon discovered the girl was "mentally deficient" and that Waverly officials had withheld the information. They sued the home for putting the girl up for adoption even though the birth mother had not surrendered her parental rights.

The Supreme Court decided no law allowed the breaking of the adoption contract. If anyone had a right to sue, the majority opinion said, it was the birth mother.

The Oregonian published an Associated Press dispatch from Salem about the decision involving prominent local citizens in a messy case.

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Melissa Gavin reread the court decision into the night, weaving facts that were new to her with the ones she had.

The war bride from Iceland, Esther, married Larry Gavin, and they had two children, Raymond and Donita. As Esther was recovering from a beating at the hands of Larry, the children went into the baby home. Esther and Larry divorced in December 1951, and that was the last trace of Esther – until Lillý Valgerður Oddsdóttir found Allen v. Allen.

The Supreme Court decision said that on Jan. 31, 1952, Esther went to Multnomah County juvenile court to reclaim her children. But she could not pay the $40 fee for Waverly's care. So the juvenile court made Raymond and Donita wards of the court, "so to remain until they arrive at legal age." The children were to stay in the baby home until a judge decided otherwise.

Esther worked at one of Portland's largest employers, White Stag Clothing Co., and had a roof over her head, child care and a court order for full custody, and still her children were taken from her.

As she studied the ruling, Melissa could picture what happened after that... Esther calling Patsy... Patsy telling Larry... Larry finding Esther and making good on his threats...

On Oct. 20, 1953, the baby home asked the juvenile court to make Raymond and Donita available for adoption. The father had that day signed his consent. The mother, on the other hand, had not been heard from in more than a year. Two letters to her were returned.

By Christmas, the Allens had brought the children into their Eastmoreland home.

By spring, they finalized the adoption. Raymond Leslie Gavin, 7, became Robert Benson Allen. Donita Gavin, 3, became Debra Jeanne Allen.

Over time, the Allens found Debra's problems insurmountable at home, and they got a court order committing Debra to the Fairview Home in Salem, where Oregon institutionalized the mentally deficient.

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Justice Gordon Sloan wrote the 4-1 majority ruling and said the brethren had labored over a dilemma that would have challenged Solomon.

"We have extended our research well beyond that contained in the briefs of the parties in an endeavor to find every writing that could shed some light on the right of adoptive parents to denounce their obligation when unforeseen costs and deficiencies occur."

Sloan decided the baby home did have legal custody of Debra through the Jan. 31, 1952, order that took the children from their mother and made them wards of the court.

Justice George Rossman offered a vision out of Dickens: "Since the natural parents are not parties to this proceeding, they would not be bound by the outcome of this suit, and thereupon Debra would have lost not only her adoptive parents but also her natural parents. Thus an eight-year-old girl would be cast adrift in the world without home or parents. Surely no court in a civilized land would reach a conclusion of that kind."

Now that Melissa Gavin and the Icelanders knew these were Esther's children, the clear question became: Where are they?

Continued in next issue

A Letter from the Edge

Foreword and Translation by Elin Thordarson

Jakobína Johnson (née Sigurbjörnsdóttir) was born in Hólmavaði in Suður-Þingeyarsýsla, Iceland, in 1883. At the age of four she immigrated to Canada with her father Sigurbjörn Jóhannsson, a poet himself, and her mother María Jónsdóttir Halldórson. The family settled in the Argyle district of Manitoba. In 1904, Jakobína married Isak Johnson in Winnipeg, and together they moved to the Ballard section of Seattle, Washington and soon became American citizens. Together they had seven children; their only daughter would pass away in 1942 and one of their sons would never return from the Second World War. And then Jakobína lost Isak in

1949. There is nothing here to distinguish Jakobína's life from any of her Icelandic or American sisters' lives, but Jakobína's life was vastly different from others. When the many tasks placed upon a busy mother and homemaker were through for the day, Jakobína would sit up late at night and put on paper the fruits of her fertile mind. In her life she was a poet, and published a collection of poetry *Kertaljós (Candlelight)* in 1938 and later, the year her daughter passed away, a book of children's poetry *Sá ég svani (I Saw a Swan)*. She is also known for her translations, her first ever published translation a poem "Við Verkalok" by Icelandic–Canadian poet Stephan G. Stephansson. She is said to have translated some of the sagas and spent a good part of her life translating Icelandic children's songs into English, notably "Northern Swans", "Moonlight", "Iceland's Song" and "Swansong on the Moorelands". In 1920 Jakobína Johnson began her correspondence with the poet of New Iceland, Guttormur J. Guttormsson. She became a principle translator of his poetic work, translating his "Góða nótt", most notably. She was also working on translating at least one of his plays. Jakobína received the Order of the Falcon in 1933, and her seventieth birthday was commemorated with a radio address in Reykjavík.

This letter, transcribed and translated, comes from a series of letters that Jakobína wrote to Guttormur between 1920 and 1930. This letter belongs to Guttormur J. Guttormsson's collection of correspondence housed in the Manuscript Department at the National and University Library of Iceland, Reykjavík.

Seattle, Nov. 22. 1922.
Dear Guttormur,

I thank you for your kindly letter. I don't want to spend time talking about myself this time around – but just thank you for your kind words and advice. Could believe that I will send my manuscript (40 translations) to this English group you speak of – but not before I am finished with your play.

"And what's going on at the Lögberg?" you say. Lying right in front of me here is the latest issue, just arrived – a week old. First I look for the poems, and what do I find, "Dýrasaga" by Ó.L.J – "uncivilized" (this is a word I picked up from Lögberg) quite a lot. Also an English translation of "Gott átt þú hrísla" by some H. Elíasson – a great heavyweight (this one I picked up from you). First one becomes ill – and then resentful – as this is given the same treatment – and the same appreciation – as that which is of better quality – There is no standard – hence no satisfaction in the acceptance of poetry by such people. A friend of mine here, an educated woman, wrote a clever criticism of Skúli's output in "The Scandinavian" and the Lögberg has not published it to date – it was sent a month ago. It was in English. They would have to translate it.

I liked your translation of Mrs. Salverson's poem [1] – it sounded natural and pretty. O, I hope she is downright clever – we need just that, there are so many who advertise us in a way that hurts.

I sit here still late at night, and have been translating your Act IV.[2] Something always occurs to me that I want to ask – so I stopped with the translation to try to put to paper what I want to say – but what a difference it would make to talk by the fireside. – I have been thinking so much "English" tonight, – I am sure you will forgive me if I lapse into it at times – you will possibly have much to forgive before I am through – I get a sort of maternal feeling for the matter over which I am working. I want to fondle it and make it appear as well as possible. Now it came to me gradually that the dear one who dies in the fourth act should be called Joy – not

Hair. That losing the hair from worry was not painful enough nor a matter to be made a sweet and sad and impressive incident of in a symbolic play. It seemed to me so real and pathetic that it would mean so much to The Intellect and Sympathy as a wedded couple, to lose their Joy. To me this would elevate the tone of the play a little – am I all wrong? – She could appear the same, emphasize the idea of hair by an abundance of it. Nothing would have to be altered but the name.

Then I wanted to say this, that I chose the name Sympathy, though I fully realize that "Viðkvæmur" really means more. One is always up against things like that, but I feel that one must avoid always the grotesque. That which is perfectly permissible in Icelandic often becomes just that, if literally treated – absurd or grotesque. I shall avoid that everywhere, and try to keep the tone of the play dignified, for the idea is good and the treatment striking. I consider the length just right. I contrasted slightly the longest speech of Gold in the fourth act, but feel that I got the points all in.

I see that I have started to write badly and now your quatrain comes to mind (I had fun with it) about your nerves. This is always my most difficult time of year. Short days, not enough sunlight, everything wet. It is best for my nerves that I go to sleep early – and again I think it will be fun to write on a bright sunny summer morning. The sunshine enlivens me – as do the beauty and mild weather. I don't think you mean what you tell me – that horrible incidents fascinate you – no I don't think you do. You that said "þeim sem fram hjá fegurð lífans fara í vöku – góða nótt!" [3] – I say that to myself often. And now I must say good night – I think I had much more to say, but I am tired.

Very sincerely,
Jakobína Johnson

I shall finish translating the play in a few days, but not copy it till I here [sic] from you again.

Bjarnason, Ingibjorg S. "Jakobina Johnson." *Árdís.* (1956): 45–49. Print.

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1 She is referring to Laura Goodman Salverson who wrote the Governor General's Award winning auto-biography *Confessions of an Immigrant's Daughter* in 1939. She also wrote *The Viking Heart* (1923) and The Dark Weaver (1937), which also won the Governor General. The poem Jakobína is referring to is Guttormur's translation of Laura's "Qui Bono" which appeared in an issue of *Lögberg* dated 9 November 1922.

2 She is referring to the translation of the fourth act of Guttormur's play *Hinir höltu,* meaning *The Lame.* The dramatis personae in this play are described in great physical detail. The characters such as Reason, Sympathy, Hair, Eyes (to be played by twins), Nose, Ears (another set of twins), Mouth, Hands and Feet (two more sets of twins), and Gold, described as wearing a kind of suit that gymnasts wear with a red cape, red eyes and massive gold sword sit atop a sloping stage meant to incorporate these parts into one entity.

3 This is a couple lines from Guttormur's poem "Góða nótt", which Jakobína translated. These lines read: "Those who, drifting, miss the beauty / of their waking hours. Good night".

POETRY

Öxarárfoss

by Jakobína Johnson

Sing me of times departed,
Bard of the cliff and plain—
Times of whose golden passing
Echoes and dreams remain;
Echoes of great beginnings
Canyon and gorge retain.

Hear I the lawman reading
Codes to a chieftain throng—
Vikings by law defining
Standards of right and wrong—
Logberg a throne befitting
Heroes of ships and song.

Hear I the skald intoning
Mythic, impromptu staves—
Freedom and soaring singers
Ever the Norsemen craves—
Iceland his bravest epic
Sung to the Arctic waves.

Skeena River Fishermen

by Clara Olafson

It's night! — but to us on the Skeena
Another long day has begun,
A day with no definite beginning
It goes on from sun to sun.
For we are the ones who are fishing,
Awaiting the 'soverey hordes'
That lighten our tasks of their burden
And lift us to heights of lords,
Around me the boats are all drifting,
A miniature city it seems,
The waters now calm and sparkling
While above the silvery moon beams.
And then there are nights of blackness,
Nights when the waves run high,
Nights when the winds are howling
And not a star in the sky.

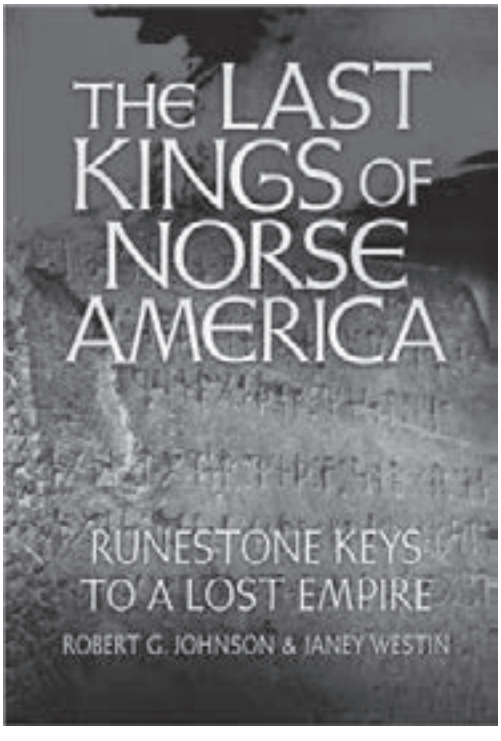
Still we go on with our fishing.
Hundreds in number we are,
Struggling for dear independence
Love of the life of the free.
Some say it's the 'call of the ocean',
The tang of the salt-laden air,
Romance of the home-coming salmon,
That keep us all fishing here.
Here and there cheery voices will greet you
Their password "how goes it today?"
When the nets are all in we'll make some coffee.
Rest and talk for an hour in some bay.
We are people from many a nation
Some have come from a far away strand,
But if fighting for right, or fishing,
Canadians united we stand.

This poem was composed by a fisherman's wife, Clara Olafson, in the mid-1930s and was sung to the tune of "Red River Valley" by the Soland school children at one of the June concerts.

Book Review

The Last Kings of Norse America
Runestone Keys to a Lost Empire

by Robert. G. Johnson and Janey Westin



Reviewed by David Collette

Publisher: Beaver's Pond Press
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The extent and timing of pre-Columbian Norse presence in North America generates a lively debate in academia. Get the likes of William Fitzhugh, Brigitta Wallace, Pat Sutherland and, if he was still alive, Helge Instad, into a room to talk about their beliefs and theories of where and when Norse exploration occurred and it would be quite an event. Using a narrative style *The Last Kings of Norse America,* written by the father and daughter team Robert G. Johnson and Janey Westin, joins the debate on the history and authenticity of several of the most controversial finds related to the Norse exploration and settlement in North America from 1000 to 1364 A.D.

At the 2012 Íslendingadagurinn I listened to the authors present a lecture on *The Last Kings* and then spent the evening with them over dinner discussing the book. Robert and Janey are neither historians nor archaeologists by career or education but are experts in their respective professional backgrounds. Robert is a Professor of Geology where the scientific method is routinely used to solve complex problems. He started his career with industrial and climate change research and ended as a Professor in the Department of Geology and Geophysics

at the University of Minnesota. Janey attended the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and the University of Minnesota to complete a B.A. in Japanese. She is a trained calligraphic expert and educated in the art of stone carving. As a professional calligrapher she has focused on medieval manuscripts, letter forms and stone inscriptions and carvings.

What began as an interest became a decade long project of focused research by Robert and Janey leading to their theory presented in *The Last Kings* that not only did Viking Age Norse explorers reach North America as per the sagas but that there were Norse settlements deep into the continent for centuries after the initial explorations by Leif Erickson and Thorfinn Karlsefni. Their theory is that in 1356 a future king of Norway, Prince Haakon VI, was dispatched to visit the Norse settlements in North America on an expedition led by Commander Paul Knutsen. Robert and Janey have created a very comprehensive theory that connects the Kensington and Spirit Pond runestones, the Newport tower, blonde natives in America, the similarities between Old Norse and the Algonquin languages and culture, and holestones in rocks strewn across the center of North America.

The book is divided into two main sections. In the first section the reader goes on a voyage from medieval Norway to Norse settlements in North America. In section two the reader is presented the supporting research and facts behind the theory. Robert and Janey warn the reader in their introduction that the first section of the book is a story weaved together from fact and fiction. The narrative style

makes for enjoyable reading though academia will be quick to point out that there are not enough known hard facts to support the details of the story. Regardless of what academia thinks, a reader of *The Last Kings* will find an introduction to almost all of the finds and theories about medieval Norse settlements in North America.

The narrative starts with a trigger event worthy of a best-selling adventure novel. In the case of *The Last Kings* that trigger is the geopolitical situation playing out in Scandinavia in the 1300s. Plague, war and economic decline create a situation where King Magnus of Norway and Sweden needs to respond to an action by Norwegian Nobles to proclaim Prince Haakon VI, Magnus' young son, to be the King of Norway. As part of the intrigue Magnus sends Haakon and Paul Knutsen to North America to bring the continent back to the Catholic Church and restart the flow of taxes and goods, like furs, to Scandinavia.

The story takes the reader along with the Haakon/Knutsen expedition as it visits a Norse settlement on Rhode Island, explores the Great Lakes, sails up the east coast and travels to the south end of Hudson Bay, travels the river systems from Hudson Bay down to the plains of Minnesota and then tries to return to the Atlantic Ocean via the Great Lakes. This section presents a complete theory that connects the Kensington and Spirit Pond runestones, a historical proclamation from King Magnus, holestones found in rocks on the prairies, the Newport Tower, medieval maps and genetic and cultural influences by Norse settlers. It is a very comprehensive theory that has now to be proven. The reader must always remember that a lot of the story is not based on proof, it is only a theory and their theory is in conflict with many mainstream academics. There is a lot of painstaking archaeological fieldwork to be done before the story presented in *The Last Kings* will be accepted.

In the second part of the book Robert and Janey provide detailed information on the field research and analysis leading to their statement that the messages contained in the Kensington and Spirit Pond runestones are not only authentic but are from Prince Haakon's expedition. The infamous Kensington runestone was discovered by Olof Ohman on his farm in Minnesota in 1898 and the Spirit Pond runestone by Walter Elliott on the Maine coast in 1971. These runestones have generated controversy ever since and Robert and Janey present a very convincing technical and detailed analysis of the location, history, inscription and physical characteristics of the runestones. For example, the Kensington runestone refers to an island. Original academics reviewing the runestone and its location immediately used the mention of island to prove it was a fake as the stone was nowhere near an island when found. Robert and Janey propose that there were islands in the 1300s. While today there are no islands anywhere near the run stone during field interviews the authors found out that the original settlers had drained the land so they could plant crops. Many navigable river systems and smaller lakes have been made to disappear in the last 150 years.

Similar analysis is done with the Spirit Pond runestone. The story written on the rune stone tells of a storm that sunk one of ships of the expedition and gives a location of the accident relative to Spirit Pond. Using these distances places the location of the accident on the southern end of Hudson near the entrance of the Nelson and Hayes River. It is not a stretch that any medieval Norse expedition to the heart of the continent could have entered a river system from Hudson Bay. Artifacts have been found in the High Arctic by the Canadian archaeologist Pat Sutherland while the American James Enterline has suggested Ungava Bay as a location of Norse exploration. Both these locations are only days of sailing from Hudson Bay and there is little reason to doubt that over the centuries Norse sailors would have entered Hudson Bay either following the coast or because a storm took them there.

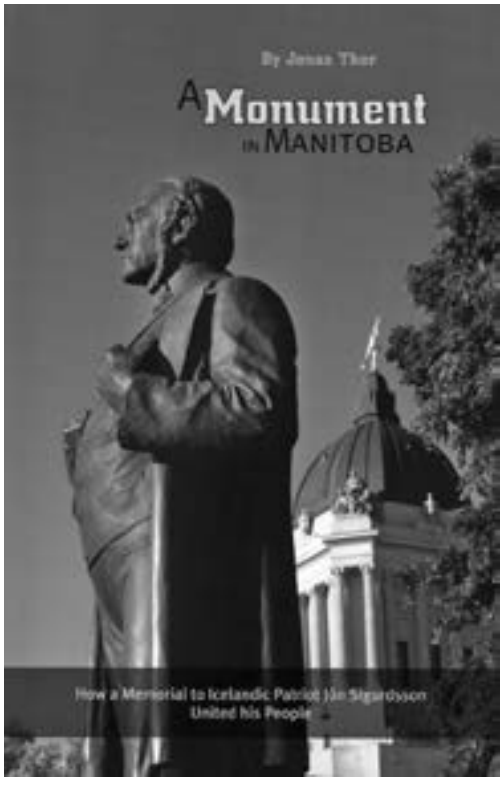
The authors end *The Last Kings* with many appendices to support their theory by providing data and analysis on the carbon dating data of L'Anse aux Meadows artifacts, the proclamation of King Magnus initiating the expedition

and the manufacturing technique and grammar of the Kensington and Spirit Pond runestones. For example, academic analysis of the runestones has discounted the message due to grammar. The authors present a convincing argument that the runic message is real. They propose the message was written by a 14th century author who was writing in a blend of new and old that has not been properly assessed by 19th and 20th century academics.

The Last Kings of Norse America is a great starting place for those interested in reading one book that encompasses almost every major Norse-related finding in North America. Robert Johnson and Janey Westin have done an incredible amount of field research and academic study to weave together their theory. After reading this book you realize that there is much Norse history in North America yet to be discovered. With the changes in climate, the ability to get into the Canadian North and advances in search and research technology there is an excellent opportunity that new pages of Norse and North American history will be written over the next few decades. Just like the original Norse that came to North America over a millennium ago to look over the horizon into the future, this book will catalyze their descendants to look over the horizon into the past. It is a recommended read.

A Monument in Manitoba
How a Memorial to Icelandic Patriot Jón Sigurðsson United His People

by Jónas Þór



Reviewed by Dwight Botting

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2011
Translated by Daniel Teague
Softcover, 159 pages
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Each June 17 an important and meaningful ceremony is held on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislative Building at the monument of Jón Sigurðsson in commemoration of his birthday. Jón Sigurðsson is considered to be the father of Iceland's independence. Those of us who regularly attend this event are always struck by its importance to Icelanders and Western Icelanders. This is borne out not only by his contribution and by the many dignitaries and spectators who attend, but also by the fact that the Government of Manitoba has proclaimed June 17 as Jón Sigurðsson Day in our province.

This book invites us into the origin of this statue; its significance to the Western Icelanders and the details of the process by which it came to be located at its present site. The unveiling of the statue occurred on June 17, 1921. Jónas Þór offers to explain why this event is regarded as a milestone in the coming of age of Canada's Icelandic community.

The book explores in some detail a number of small "p" political issues facing the Icelandic immigrants. It explains the conflicts that existed between those who were in favour of founding a new order in Canada and the northern United States versus those wanting to stay close to their Icelandic roots. At the basis of this

conflict was the somewhat cold send off that many of the Icelanders felt when they embarked upon their journey to North America. Many were regarded as traitors for leaving the tough conditions back home. Then, with a focus on Manitoba, Jónas Þór relates the issue of Liberal and Conservative differences in the community as well as the ever important tension between the Lutherans and the Unitarians. He also references the rural and urban immigrants and their differing attitudes particularly on assimilation into Canadian life.

All this is mainly conveyed by the author's use of speeches and editorials. Some of the key figures include the Reverend Jón Bjarnason and politicians Baldvin L. Baldvinsson and Thos. H. Johnson. Many others quoted in the story. And taking no back seat in the debate were the two predominant Icelandic Canadian newspapers, the *Lögberg* and the *Heimskringla.* Their constant tracking of the issue and exhortations to support the memorial cause are most impressive. Many of their editorials are published in this book. In fact the book also uses minutes from meetings of the various iterations of the memorial committee to illustrate the issues and slow deliberate process by which decisions were made. These accounts display the strength of the literary and analytic abilities of many of these Western Icelanders.

The issue of the statue arose in 1910 when it became known that a memorial to Jón Sigurðsson was to be established in Iceland. Back in Canada this precipitated a sincere movement to provide a cash donation to the cause, which brought into the open many of the simmering differences in the community. It is to the credit of a number of strong individuals that a fund raising campaign was born and continued. The target of fundraising campaign was to raise 10,000 ISK, or about $2800.00, with the guiding principle that no one should be expected to donate more than one dollar. This latter point was made to demonstrate the broad commitment of the Western Icelanders to the cause and to provide some assurance that the campaign would not be dominated by big ticket donors. An important motivation for many was that donations provided a way of extending an "olive branch" back home and renewing ties to the homeland. In June, 1911, the target was reached and the funds were conveyed to Iceland. The Icelanders were most impressed upon receipt of the funds and shortly thereafter offered to have a duplicate created and sent to Manitoba. After some debate the locals decided to accept the offer.

A new round of considerations was now at play. In the end the site of the Legislative grounds was agreed to and authorized by the Manitoba government. Backdrops to the unfolding of this agreement included strong lobbying for a Gimli location, World War I, and the all too familiar delay in the construction of the legislative Building due to funny business over budget. Another hurdle which received minor treatment in the book was the founding of the Patriotism Association and its attempt to unseat the existing Memorial Committee. Throughout the book, the reader cannot help but be struck by the plenitude of detailed nuances in the many arguments of the practical issues. However, when it would appear that things were going to be tied in a knot, decisive leadership prevailed, forcefully settling many of the sub issues, thus moving the process along.

What Jónas Þór wants us to know is that the operations of the various committees almost always included influential members of the Icelandic community and that they overcame their

political and religious differences in a concerted effort to have the monument become a reality. In the end, Icelandic unity prevailed over local differences. As Jónas puts it, "swords remained sheathed".

The reader of *A Monument* will be exposed to the emphatic use of primary sources and the noticeable lack of exposition which would have gone a long way to help tie matters together. As an example, the book ends with the full text of two of the main speeches at the 1921 unveiling of the monument, but provides no conclusions or attempts to bring the story past that date.

However, for those of us interested in the details and some of the remarkable thoughts of those past local leaders and their ability to compromise, it does not disappoint. A few heavy hitters have assisted the author in his endeavour and one should conclude that some have helped him gain access to important archival material.

If you read this book, next time you attend the Jón Sigurðsson Day Celebrations on June 17, you will be able to grasp more completely the emotion and commitment that surrounds this monument to that remarkable individual. I truly believe that *A Monument*, once again tells a story about the strengths of the Icelandic culture, a culture into which I married long ago.

Note: Conclusion of Helgi Olsen's Memoirs will be printed in the next issue

Contributors

GUDRUN IWERSEN BECK shared childhood recollections with her cousin Sigrid Powers for the article "Memories of Marietta Icelanders."

DWIGHT BOTTING A retired educator, Dwight Botting has always lived in Winnipeg. Throughout his life he has taken a close interest in history and the arts so stories of the Icelandic immigrants relate to this profile. He has been married to Karen, nee Borgford, for 44 years. Karen is the current President of the Jon Sigurdsson Chapter of the IODE.

DAVID COLLETTE has been active in the Icelandic Canadian community his whole life. He grew up in Winnipeg, Manitoba and now lives in Cincinnati, Ohio where he is a Director of Marketing for a large multinational corporation. In the past three years he has been voraciously reading material like *The Last Kings* to prepare for the Fara Heim expedition (www.faraheim.com) to search for Norse presence between Hudson Bay and Iceland. This past summer the Fara Heim team travelled to Hudson Bay and York Factory via the Nelson River to begin that search. If you are interested in joining the team as a participant, researcher or sponsor he can be reached at david@faraheim.com.

PAULI DEHAAN "I guess I have always had an interest in local history, but somewhere along the line I realized the importance of writing down the fables and foibles of everyday life and characters. I remain active in the Point Roberts Historical Society. For information contact: historicalsociety@pointroberts.net.

BEVERLY FORBES grew up among a large Icelandic extended family in Blaine. After a career in education, primarily in the Seattle area, she has returned to her roots and now makes her home in Blaine, along with her partner, Ken. She is enjoying once more the strong Icelandic connection the area affords.

NELSON GERRARD is a Manitoba historian and genealogist specializing in the Icelandic immigrant experience in North America. The author of *Icelandic River Saga* and *The Icelandic Heritage,* he has also created such exhibits as *Yukonfari,* highlighting the story of Icelandic gold seekers in the Klondike, and *Silent Flashes* (at Hofsós, Iceland), which explores pioneer era photography. He is currently compiling *Gimlunga Saga,* a three-volume pioneer history of the Gimli area, and a book version of *Silent Flashes.*

JÓN JÓHANNESSON JÓNSSON grew up listening to his *Afi* tell stories of his adventures working in logging camps, when ferocious bears and other animals of the forest were his frequent companions.

LINDA ELIN TOMASSON RUSSO was born in Minneapolis, MN. Her father was from Iceland and her mother of Icelandic descent from Riverton, MB. She lived in San Jose, CA and in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood and now Tacoma, WA. Through her parents' membership in Icelandic Clubs in Minneapolis and Northern California, she has been involved with clubs all her life. She is carrying on that family tradition today with the Icelandic Club of Greater Seattle.

ELIN THORDARSON, an *Icelandic Connection* board member, is currently working in the Winnipeg libraries. She is a graduate (October 2011) of the University of Manitoba's Icelandic Department's Masters program. Her thesis *A History of the Unconsoled: The Plays of Guttormur J. Guttormsson* is the first graduate level piece to be written on The Poet of New Iceland's works.

ROBERT THORSTENSON – 1931-2009. Growing up on a bluff overlooking the sea at Point Roberts peaked Bob's interest in the fishing industry of the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. He became the principal founder of a canning company that later became Icicle Seafoods. He was an historian and was inducted into the United Fishermen of Alaska's Hall of Fame. He worked with John Sabella in Seattle to produce an Alaska Fishing History series on Video and DVD. Series information can be found at www.johnsabella.com.

W. D. VALGARDSON is the author of a number of books and plays. He a past editor of *Lögberg-Heimskringla* and the author of blog site http://wdvalgardsonkaffihus.com.

JUDY SÓLVEIG WILSON was a professional librarian, and is a writer, a mother and *amma.* She is involved in a variety of types of volunteer work and groups, including being the co-founder of Mið Eyja, the new Icelandic club of Central Vancouver Island. She grew up in the old Icelandic neighbourhood in the west end of Winnipeg and now lives in Nanaimo, BC.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PAULI DEHAAN

The Back Page

Astkaert Heimili (Point Roberts) was built from discarded fish traps that washed up on the beach during a storm. Built by Magnús Magnússon, he and his wife Ögn raised their family in this home they called "Elskan."

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