THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN MAGAZINE

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On the Cover

Neil Bardal on the water at Vestmannaeyjar (the Westman Islands).

Ambassador of Iceland, Hjálmar W. Hannesson with his wife, Anna Birgis.

Editorial

by Hjálmar W. Hannesson

When Lorna Tergesen asked if I would write some words of greeting from the newly established Embassy of Iceland in Canada for the upcoming issue of The Icelandic Canadian, I of course accepted her kind challenge with pleasure.

Next year the magazine will be sixty years old. It is still going strong and adapting itself well to new challenges and times. It remains an important link in the preservation of the Icelandic heritage in North America. It will be able to continue that role as long as there are willing subscribers, contributors and volunteers. That includes people willing to write when called upon. My hunch is that people of Icelandic descent will never stop writing. It is in our genes! So the future should look rosy for printed matter having to do with things Icelandic! The way a strong Icelandic heritage link has been maintained in Canada is unique and a great foundation to build part of the Icelandic Embassy's work on.

Some would say that books, magazines and papers are on the way out. That they are being replaced by the internet, TV and radio. This is a fallacy, for never have books, for example, been published in greater numbers in Iceland than in recent years. I, for one am a staunch believer in the survival of the printed media, although it will have to continue to adapt to the changes occurring in our societies.

There are also those who suggest that embassies are a thing of the past in the age of instant communications. This is also a mistaken view. Personal contact will hopefully never be replaced by the mechanical and the technical. The Governments of the two close NATO—allies, Iceland and Canada, were certainly not thinking of uselessness when they took their decisions to establish embassies in each other's capitals. Diplomatic posts cost taxpayers´ money and are not established just for the fun of it. Both Governments deemed it of value to establish embassies in Ottawa and Reykjavík in order to even further develop relations which have been very strong for a long time. The classical embassy work has to do with deepening relations in the political and security fields, to promote mutually advantageous trade and to further develop cultural and scientific exchanges, to only name the main headings. And these are the tasks of the new Icelandic Embassy.

I presented my credentials to the Governor General in Ottawa on April 9 of 2001 as Iceland's first residing Ambassador to Canada. Consequently, the first Icelandic Embassy in Canada opened its doors May 1 and on May 22 it was formally opened by the Icelandic Minister for Foreign Affairs, Halldór Ásgrímsson, in the presence of his Canadian colleague, John Manley.

As these lines are being written on a beautiful November 11th, which is Remembrance Day in Canada, I have been Ambassador in this vast and varied country for seven months only. But what a marvellous and a challenging time we have had. The seven months seem like seven days!

I was reminded on this Remembrance Day, as Ambassadors took part in the ceremonies in downtown Ottawa, of the heroic Canadian men and women of Icelandic descent who served with such distinction in both World Wars, Korea and Vietnam. Many of them lost their lives in the fight for the preservation of freedom. The Jón Sigurdsson Chapter of the IODE in Canada published remarkable books on these Canadian heroes, men and women, of Icelandic descent. And we remembered them on June 17 in Winnipeg as we celebrated there the Icelandic Independence day. Recently when my wife and I visited Halifax we witnessed Canadian warships sailing off to yet another war—this time a

totally different war against evil doing terrorists set on destroying our Western civilization, fundamental freedoms and way of life. May God be with those who are fighting this crucial battle on our behalf.

In late April I had the good fortune of being able to take part in the annual meeting of the INL in Vancouver B.C. Our two memorable visits to Manitoba and New Iceland places, in June (Independence Day) and early August for the Íslendingadagurinn, the visits to Calgary for the opening of The New Iceland Saga exhibition and the unforgettable visit to Markerville where Stephan G. Stephansson lived, as well as the visit to Edmonton and the Nordurljós Chapter of the INL and other visits once again confirmed to us how strong the Icelandic heritage link is all over Canada. We also felt it strongly in the eastern part of Canada, for example during our numerous visits to Montreal, as well as Toronto and Nova Scotia. This heritage was celebrated during all of the year 2000 in a unique way.

After the USA, Iceland is Canada's closest neighbour and nearest European state, geographically speaking. Due to economic, cultural and geopolitical developments, trade relations between the two countries are now developing rapidly. This can to a large part be attributed to the new Icelandic pioneers who have moved to Canada in recent years, often temporarily, and set up companies or subsidiaries, nearly exclusively in the eastern part of Canada. These companies include fish processing firms, high-tech production for the food industry, software production, Icelandair, as well as Eimskip the Icelandic Steamship Company and Samskip, Iceland's second largest shipping company. The long awaited free trade agreement between Canada and the EFTA-countries, including Iceland, is certain to enhance this process even further. I see it as one of my missions while here to try to bring closer together the Canadians of Icelandic descent and the newly arrived Icelanders.

To all readers of the Icelandic Canadian I would like to repeat that the Embassy of Iceland in Canada is here to do all it can to promote and strengthen further the bilateral relations between the two countries. In that endeavour it has been an inspiration in the past months to find so much warmth and positive spirit emanating from people of Icelandic descent all over Canada. It is a source of great strength and I am most grateful for it.

Please do not hesitate to visit us, if not physically then at least at our home page iceland.org/ca and also soon at iceland.ca.

To all of us I wish a peaceful and happy new year 2002.

Thank You

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Sigga, Njall and baby Neil in 1941.

Neil Bardal

by Agnes Bardal Comack

When my eldest brother, Njall Ofeigur, married Sigridur Sesselja Johnson in June of 1936, we waited in great anticipation for their first child to arrive. Finally, we received the happy news that a baby was on the way. But there was not just one. Sigga was expecting twins. Sadly, when the time arrived on February 16, 1940, Neil's twin sister, Christine, was stillborn but the baby boy was strong and healthy. Neil Ofeigur is still strong and healthy sixty-two years later, but it is hard for me to not think of him as "little Neil" (as he was always called, in deference to his father who was better known as Neil than Njall.) Being the son of the eldest son, Neil was a special little boy in the eyes of not just his parents and grandparents, but of his many aunts and uncles. He was the product of two large Icelandic families.

Neil's father, who had served in the Militia during the thirties, had been immediately enlisted into the regular force when war was declared in September, 1939. Njall was a Captain in the Winnipeg Grenadiers and the regiment was sent to Jamaica and later to Hong Kong, where he was taken prisoner by the Japanese on Christmas day, 1941.

During that terrible waiting period, Sigga kept a very brave vigil, never being sure she would see her husband again. She moved from their apartment into the home of her parents at 1023 Ingersoll Street, which was then in the heart of the Icelandic district. The big house where Neil's Afi and Amma, Asta and Helgi Johnson, lived was always filled with visiting family members who were all living in homes nearby. Also, as Neil recalls, there was a steady stream of visitors of Icelandic descent and Icelandic was the predominant language spoken.

The picture of the soldier on his mother's dresser reminded little Neil that he had a father. He well remembers, at the age of five and one half, going with all the family to meet the troop train at the CNR station and being thrust into the arms of this strange uniformed soldier. This was October 1945.

The war was over. With his father home again, they moved back to the Bardal Block on Sherbrook Street where again the boy was surrounded by relatives. His Amma and Afi, Margret and Arinbjorn S. Bardal, uncles Karl and Gerry, with their families, all occupied suites in that Block.

Neil's father was anxious to complete his family and he, with Sigga, went to Vancouver where they adopted the lovely little blue eyed, blond haired daughter they had been longing for. With little Jean Anne, the family moved in 1952, to their home in Silver Heights, in what was then the outskirts of Winnipeg.

From the time he delivered papers at the age of twelve, Neil always had a job. He worked as a stock boy for the local grocer, drove a delivery truck for Eaton's and joined the Militia. He loved his cadet training with the Canadian Army Service Corps, where he was involved in the senior leader's program. It was the time of the Korean war, where he would have been sent to drive army vehicles had the war not ended.

Neil attended St. James Collegiate and United College. He considered entering the Lutheran ministry, but his father had other plans. Neil was informed that a position as apprentice was available in a funeral home in Toronto. He was on the plane the next day. He enjoyed his three years at Trull Funeral Home and graduated from Embalmers School with an Ontario license. When his father wrote that he was needed back in Winnipeg, Neil reluctantly left

Toronto and yet again experienced a five year apprenticeship in the family business. He admits that it was a great learning experience working with his father and his Uncle Karl.

As the two brothers were ready for retirement, Neil, at the age of twenty nine, bought a partnership in the business, which lasted ten more years. On June 5th, 1980, he opened his own business on Portage and Aubrey Street. Today, he also owns a crematorium housed in a large building near Brookside Cemetery which includes offices and a large reception area. His two sons, Eirikur and Jon, are being trained to eventually take his place. He also employs his sister, Jean and daughters-in-law Lisa and Leslie, as well as having help from his wife, Annette, who drives from their home in Husavik, near Gimli, three times a week.

I interviewed my nephew in his large office at the Crematorium, a lovely room full of memorabilia and pictures, with a piano against one wall. Where do you see an office with a piano? Neil took lessons from the time he was small boy and is now the assistant organist at St. Stephen's Lutheran Church. He had served as chairman of the Royal Canadian College of Organists. He told me that playing the piano brings him solace and he spends a lot of time playing for his own pleasure.

In 1994, Neil was appointed Icelandic Consul General.

I asked him -

Agnes: "How do you balance your career with your job as Icelandic Consul

Neil as organist at Knox United Church.

General."

Neil: "The two jobs have much the same rationale. I'm setting the scene for people's needs. As Consul General, I'm a resource for people dealing with all things Icelandic and with the best interests of the Icelandic Government."

Agnes: "What has been your greatest accomplishment so far?"

Neil: "The state visit of President Vigdis Finnbogadottir in 1989. Unlike the usual two day visit of a visiting Head of State to Ottawa, this visit lasted nine days and covered much of Canada, from L'Anse

aux Meadows, Newfoundland, to Alberta and Manitoba, focusing on the one hundredth anniversary of Islendinagadagurinn in Gimli. This trip re-established the connection between here and Iceland, which wasn't dormant but there was not a lot of activity.

When I was president of the Icelandic National League, I had met with President Vigdis in Vancouver in 1988 and we discussed the possibility of this trip. We had hoped the Canadian Government would follow through. I worked very hard travelling to places across the country rounding up people of Icelandic descent. Protocol people were involved and very encouraging. I worked along with the Executive Secretary of the President in Iceland, Kornelius Sigmundsson, but after much preparation we became discouraged. We thought we had failed. Finally, the invitation came from the Governor General Madame Sauve in May of 1989.

President Vigdis mesmerized the whole country with her charm and intelligence. She invited the Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba, George Johnson and his wife Doris, to bring an entourage to Iceland and things started to happen. Then, Einar Benediktsson, the Ambassador to Washington, took a great interest in New Iceland in Manitoba and the Icelanders in Canada.

Neil and Mayor Ingebjorg Gisladottir in 1996.

Neil with David Oddsson in Iceland, 1996.

That trip in 1989, woke up a lot of Icelandic genes. It was amazing to come across people who would tell me, "My Amma was Icelandic." I now call it the "Amma Button." Icelandic Ammas have a fierce pride in being Icelandic and have instilled that pride in their children and grandchildren. I found a network of sensitivity to Icelandic things from people in the highest ranks of Canadian society.

In preparing for the year 2000, I went to Iceland with David Gislason, who had been asked to chair a committee to set up events. There 200 major events across the country from l'Anse aux Meadows to Snorri's party in Ottawa, attended by the President of Iceland, David Oddson, and our Prime Minister, Jean Chretien were planned. It was a high profile of very successful events including the arrival of the Icelandic Symphony Orchestra to Winnipeg and major events in Vancouver and Markerville. The story of Gudridur, the first European woman to bear a child, Snorri, in America, was interwoven thoughout all of these events.

As a result, things began to happen. President David Oddsson discussed with the Canadian Prime Minister more flight plans to Halifax. The University of

Manitoba, the only University with an Icelandic Department and collection, received a one million dollar gift from the government and people of Iceland. New Iceland was recognized by Canada as the Republic of New Iceland from 1875 - 1888."

Agnes: "What do you hope for the future?"

Neil: "Now, with the aftermath of this celebration, we want to increase trade between Canada and Iceland, which virtually did not exists prior to 1995. We have the Port of Churchill with a viable rail line to Winnipeg, which is the centre of the best truck, rail and air routes to all parts of North America. There is now a great exchange between the Universities of Iceland and the University of Manitoba, not only between the Faculties but also the Presidents of the Universities. This has never happened before. A trade mission went to Iceland led by our Premier Doer this past August and came back full of enthusiasm for things that can be done."

Agnes: "What kinds of things would they trade?"

Neil: " Software. The Icelanders have created some of the most sophisticated software in the world. Regarding the fisheries, Icelanders waste nothing of their catch. It is not only used as food but also as pet food, fertilizer, etc. Nothing is thrown away. Regarding safety issues, Icelanders have designed safer boats and equipment and have fewer tragedies. They have tubs to keep fish cool until it brought to source. Being so centrally located, Winnipeg is a much better way to travel to Europe over the polar route and because of our central location, raw material can be processed here and distributed much easier. We now have the sharing of ideas and an exchange of University Professors. The potential for close ties with Iceland is mind boggling."

As well as all of these activities, Neil is not only involved as a Funeral Director and owner of his business, he is also Registrar, Western School of Funeral Services and Board of Administration under the Embalmers and Funeral Directors Act of Manitoba. He is Past President and a current member of the Manitoba Funeral Service Association, Member of the Funeral Association of Canada and Member of the Cremation Association of North America.

He also serves on the Board of the the Riverview Health Centre Foundation and is a member of the Manitoba Club, Rotary Club and Canadian Club. He was active in the Masonic Order and became a Deputy Grand Master.

Neil has been a faithful member of St. Stephen's Lutheran Church in Canada from 1992 until 2000. He also served on the Board of Directors of the Lutheran Life Insurance Co. from 1990 until 2000.

The greatest honour Neil has received is the Order of the Falcon. He says this gives him some peace with his mother's spirit. Sigga had high hopes that he would become a lawyer instead of following his father's footsteps.

Neil says he has read every book that has been written about Canada's participation in the Hong Kong story. The impact of that time has affected his life extremely.

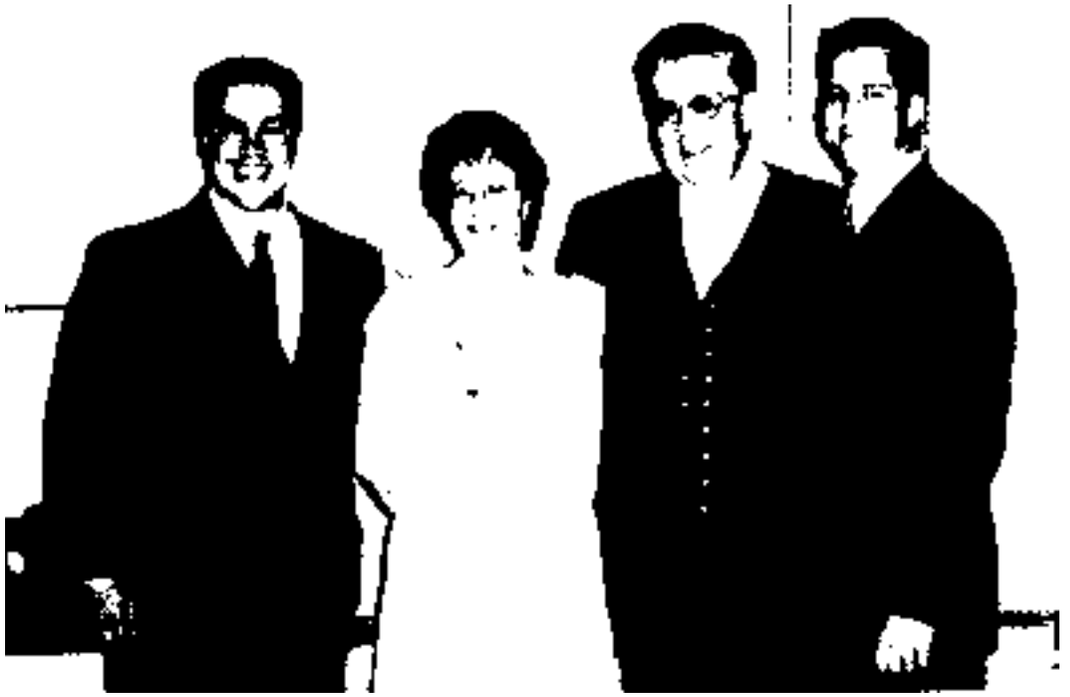
He has been to Hong Kong. He has seen where the prison camps were and where the battles were held. It is a proud but tragic part of Canada's history. He has had a warm and wonderful relationship with the members of the HK Veterans Association of which he is also a member.

As well as playing his piano for solace, Neil reads biographies and Icelandic literature and keeps in condition by walking three miles four times a week.

Neil and Annette share a lovely home in Husavik with a large enough yard for Annette to keep her Icelandic horse. Their home is called "Svartakot," after the birthplace of Neil's afi, Arinbjorn, which was located in Iceland in Barðardalur, south of Husavik. As well as his two sons, they have two grandchildren, of whom they are very proud, Catherine Eirika and Arinbjorn Stefan. They are anticipating the arrival of their third grandchild in the new year.

Neil has spent many hours in his car driving visitors, especially to the Interlake district where he loves to show them the historical sites. He thoroughly enjoys the opportunity to have the one to one relationship that this time together affords. Personally, I cherish the three hours or so that I spend with my nephew as he drives me to Þorrablot in Arborg every spring.

To me, my nephew may always be "little Neil," but I know that to all of our family, to all of his many friends and to the hundreds of people who turn to him in their time of need, he looms tall as a tower of strength, wisdom and compassion.



Erik, Annette, Neil and Jon Bardal, taken at the Hotel Fort Garry in Winnipeg on August 4, 2000.

Rosa Benediktson

Icelanders Leave Dakota to Pioneer in Alberta

by Rosa Benediktson

The following are excerpts from speeches given by Rosa Benediktson:

The first Icelandic pioneers in Alberta came chiefly from North Dakota. They were the men that first broke and settled in a country that then was wild and rugged, but time and the hand of man has turned this into a thriving community. Who would have believed when looking over the vast manless wilderness, that Icelanders would be the first and have the biggest share in making this land as it is today. It now can be compared to any other community of the same age. The Icelanders were all poor and what was worse, had spent their best years and health in the Old Country. After coming to this continent they traveled from place to place and had to work so hard.

The Icelanders moved here in 1888 from Pembina County, North Dakota. There was one family, Olaflur Gudman, in Calgary before that time. He likely came in 1887 and his father and brothers shortly thereafter.

There were several reasons for people wanting to move from the rich and fertile Pembina County. They knew that Dakota was a land of future prosperity and richness that would repay their efforts and expenses one thousand fold but it seemed like it would take such a long time that some of them would not make it through that difficult period.

Most of the Icelanders that immigrated to Dakota were from either the Lake Winnipeg area or from the Old Country. They had come almost penniless and most of them had to go heavily into debt to work their land. They had to mortgage the land and their possessions to get implements and animals for farming. They could get the loans but at very high interest rates. It was impossible to repay the loans from their small scale farming operations. It seemed to be the same situation their forerunners, some 874 settlers, had faced. They either became slaves to the loan companies and the money sharks or moved out. As before many took the later way.

Another reason for the single men and new arrivals from the Old Country to leave Dakota was that most of the best land in Pembina County was already taken up. They wanted to try someplace else to become independent. There were also some that could not stand the cold dry climate. These, among other reasons, were the reasons that people wanted to leave Dakota.

In March of 1888 a meeting was called to talk about leaving that spring. At the meeting were about thirty people. The main advocates were Olafur Olafson of Espihole, Dr. Einar Jonasson and Sigurdur Bjornson. They told people how dark the outlook was to stay and how pressing it was for some people to leave before they lost everything. It was agreed to move away that spring. Then they discussed where to go. Most of them had their minds set on the mild Pacific Coast. In their mind, the panorama of the Pacific with the ocean, mountains, valleys, bays and inlets, was a magnet, without much consideration to the costs and other obstacles to getting there. Some of the more thoughtful men did not think it advisable to move until they sent someone out west to find a place and make preparations. That man should travel at the expense of those that intended to move. The meeting elected Sigurdur Joshua Bjornson for the trip. He was to go all the way to the coast and look for a place for an

Icelandic settlement. He was instructed to look for a place with good land, lakes and rivers. They intended to go into mixed farming and fishing. He was also to make other arrangements, such as for tickets, etc. Money for the trip was raised by free will donations. We think that all concerned paid their share, although we think that he had less than he should have had for such a trip. Most of these people had "tight shoes" to bind in money matters and had to shape their cloaks to their size.

Soon after, Sigurdur took the Northern Pacific to Vancouver. From there he went to Vancouver Island and as far north as Nanaimo, about 300 miles north of Victoria. I think on that trip he did not have much chance to look around. He did not, in his judgment see any place on the Pacific Coast to lead his flock. Some thought he fell down on his mission, but on second thought it must be considered that he did not have the time or money to travel from place to place. In this position, he started his return journey without making any decision.

When Sigurdur returned to Calgary, he met Olafur Gudman and they talked about the immigration west from Dakota. Olafur had shortly before taken a trip north to look for land along the Red Deer River. He said there was good land there and a good place for an Icelandic settlement. Olafur had already filed on a homestead there for himself and his father. That may have been the reason that he wanted the Icelanders to settle there, although he was always known to do the best for his countrymen. He urged Sigurdur to go north and look at the land and he sent his brother, Sigfus who had been there, with him. On that trip, Sigurdur looked at the land three townships north of the Red Deer River. He liked the area and had Townships 36, Ranges 1 and 2 set aside for the Icelandic immigrants. He returned to Dakota on the first of May.

Sigurdur had written to some of the leading men in Dakota from Calgary, describing his trip. He said in a letter to me, "I like the country north of the Red Deer River, the soil is good and lots of grass. Alternating plow land and hay meadows with clumps of trees, here and there. Good fishing in the lakes and rivers, the winters are said to be shorter and milder than in Manitoba and North Dakota." When Sigurdur returned to Dakota many had sold what they could not take with them Some were disappointed that they were not going to the coast but they had not changed their intentions to leave. Sigurdur urged them to go to Alberta and and settle in the place he had picked for them.

He said he thought that as for climate and the lay of the country it would suit them fine. So it was decided. They had sold their belongings for about half price so they were all poor. The amount of money they had was very small to move many

hundreds of miles and settle in an isolated, wild country. Some did not have any more than their fare.

On the 20 of May, 1888 they started on their journey. People and effects were drawn on horse wagons to the border. In Gretna they bought tickets to Winnipeg, which cost them three dollars each. No livestock could cross the border unless they were held at the border for 90 days, at the owner's expense. That was out of the question. Sigurdur informed that cattle prices in Alberta were very high, which was right. It was decided to buy a few cows in Gretna and ship them west. Twelve cows and a yearling were bought at a price of $20 to $25 a head. Most of these cows were in bad condition and of poor breeding. A box car was hired for $85 to take the cattle and other effects to Calgary. One man had free passage to look after the cattle. The journey to Winnipeg continued.

In Winnipeg they stopped two days to buy household effects, such as cook stoves and utensils, as Sigurdur thought they would be more expensive in Calgary. This was a mistake as after paying the freight the cost was as much or more. People also visited friends and relatives in Winnipeg. At last tickets to Calgary were bought They got them for half price, $17.50 per adult.

In the group that left Dakota were the following family heads; Sigurdur Bjornson, Olafur Olafson, of Espihole, Benedikt Olafson, Jonas J. Hunford, Benedikt Jonas Bardal, Dr. Einar Jonasson, Sigurdur Arnason, Bjarni Jonsson and Gisli Jonsson Dalman. Also in the group were three single men, Gudmundur Thorlakson, Jon Gudmundson and Josef Jonsson. In Winnipeg, two more families joined the group, Johann Bjornson and Eyolfur Helgason, and one single man, Jon Einarson. They left Winnipeg on the 20th of May and arrived in Calgary on the 1st of June. The group stayed in Calgary for several days. There were some that wanted to stay and work to earn some money before they went north. There were a lot of jobs to be had in Calgary at that time. Olafur Gudman advised them to stay for awhile and it would have been better had they done so but the majority wanted to get to the promised land right away.

At that time there was no railroad north from Calgary and all transport was with horses. A railroad had been promised and it had been indicated that it would run through the area where the Icelanders were going to settle. From Calgary to the Red Deer River is about 80 miles. In the rainy seasons the road was very bad. They hired a man to haul their belongings north, using money, which at that time could have been of better use. They also had to buy horses to move their families and effects and to use at their new location. They bought three or four team of horses, harnesses and wagons. The horses were small, in bad shape, not very satisfactory and expensive. The stay in Calgary was prolonged making preparations and as a result of the unusually heavy rains. Around the middle of June the journey north was started.

The journey was slow and troublesome because the horses were in bad shape and the rains made the road almost impassible. Several times the wagons had to be unloaded to get out of the mud. Except for the drivers the men had to walk. Often the men had to carry the women and children over the worst mud holes. It was surprising that the women and children got through without loss of life or health. Consider the women sitting on a load of their personal effects with a group of children around them, often wet and cold and then at night laying down on the cold and rain soaked ground. They did not travel far in a day, more or less ten miles per day. On the sixth day, they got to the Red Deer River at what was later called "Midlibakki" or Millbank. It was a great relief to have got that far without any serious mishaps, although with many adventures.

The men and beasts were tired so they pitched tents and rested. They thought it was a rather lonesome trip from Calgary to the Red Deer River. They had passed five houses along the way. Those houses had been there for some time and some were run as stopping places for travelers. There was considerable traffic on the road and they sold necessities to the travelers at very high prices. The rest of the country was unpopulated. Further north and closer to

the Red Deer River, known as the "Big Red," there were a few new houses along the Little Red Deer River, which runs from the south west into the Big Red. It became known as the "Little Red Deer Settlement" and is now heavily populated.

The first pioneers there came from the eastern provinces with money, and are now well off. Though they had overcome a lot of obstacles on their journey, the largest was still before them and would for many years cause the newcomers a lot of trouble and damage. That was the mighty Red Deer River, which for the next decade would defy people with its turbulent waters when in flood. To the north and northwest, across the river lay the promised land that their Joshua had led them to.

There was one house on the north bank and in it lived a bachelor named L. Sage. The outlook was dark. If they found a way to cross the river they would be isolated for who knew how long. It was the hope and dreams of a prosperous future more than anything else that gave them the spiritual and bodily strength to go on. They hoped that a railroad would run through or near their settlement and were encouraged to find a short distance to the west of their campsite a section of railroad grade under construction. They also found machinery for a saw mill. It was all new and owned by the Athabaska Company. Two log houses had been built, a house for living and a store room. The watchman said that the company would build a saw mill and start to work soon.

The Icelanders saw it as an opportunity to get work and lumber for their houses. The mill was built but unfortunately only operated for a short while and did not help the newcomers. They were determined to get across the river but how to get the people and cattle across was the puzzle. There were two small one-man boats which the Icelanders used frequently to cross the river. One day Sage told Bjornson that he had cut some logs the winter before on the tongue of land between the Medicine and Red Deer Rivers and if the Icelanders would help him raft them down to his place he would ferry them and their belongings across the river. He talked big and indicated it would not be much of a job. So it came about that Bjornson accepted his offer and asked for volunteers for the project. The ones who volunteered were Benedikt Bardal, Gudmundur Thorlakson, Jon Gudmundson and Jon Einarson. They were willing to go and thought by doing so they had solved the problem of crossing the river. Sage had a team of black mares, the best in Alberta, at the time. It was said that Sage had hauled a load of 5000 pounds from Calgary, but I do not know the truth of that story. I know that he thought a lot of that team and that they could do almost anything. Sage had to cross the Medicine River to get his logs. The Red Deer was in flood. Sage thought he could ford the river with his black mares. He started into the river with the Icelanders but as soon as they got into the river everything was under water. One of the mares got tangled in her harness and fell but the other mare swam, with everything, back to the same shore. The Icelanders were standing in the wagonbox up to their armpits in water. When the upright mare got footing on the river bank the men jumped out and cut the fallen mare loose. Where they stood the men could just touch bottom. It was said that Sage changed his mind and that the Icelanders never said a grumbling word. The men and horses finally got safely up the river bank and nothing more was ever said about rafting across the river. All the Icelanders got out of that adventure was to risk their lives and get wet, nothing else.

As nothing had been gained by the adventure with Sage, the men started to figure out some other way to get across the river. The rains continued and it looked as though it would be a long time before the river could be forded to get the people and luggage across. Some of the men had brought lumber with them from Calgary so it was decided to build a flat boat to use as a ferry. Olafur Olafson, Benedikt Bardal, and Gisli Dalman had some experience building boats on Lake Winnipeg. They took on the job of building the boat while the group waited.

It was on the 27th of July that it was decided to cross. The people, luggage and

wagons were ferried across. The horses were led behind the boat and the cattle were made to swim across. Everything was done before night fall, without mishap. It had been a tiresome, dangerous task for both man and beast. That night they pitched their tents near Sage's place. They were on the north side of the Red Deer River, eleven families and four single men, a total of about fifty people. Included in the group, was Gudmundur Jonsson, Olafur Gudmans father who had joined them from Calgary and had previously homesteaded in the area, and Jon Jonsson, who had left Dakota the winter before and had worked for Olafur Gudman. Olafur had hired him to help his father build a house on the homestead. While there Jon filed on a homestead for himself and his father who was still in Dakota. Jon went back to Calgary to work for some time but his wife and family stayed with the group.

The next day, the 28th of June, the men started to look around. Everybody had had enough traveling and wanted to settle down. They scattered far and wide looking for suitable places to build. Some went farther than necessary, for they found it hard to work together when they were so far apart. Now, after ten years, it gives me shivers to think back to the situation then - to be out there with women and children, altogether penniless in a wild country, 100 miles from civilization and the comforts of life. It was awful and for a long time many paid for the dream that brought them out here. But on the other hand, it was marvelous how well everything went and how well all of the obstacles and hardships were conquered by those first pioneers.

Most of us have agreed that the age of this settlement is June 27th, 1888.

Pioneer Women
Address by Rosa Benediktson

Madam Chairwoman, Ladies and Gentleman;

The role of the pioneer woman was different from the present day life of a housewife. They lacked the amenities, which we of this modern age, take so much for granted. They had to be brave, fearless and resourceful, in order to meet the needs of their family, and to take part in the building of a good community, from a wilderness area. It required strong faith, and determination to come to an unknown land, where you had to carve out your existence, with your bare hands, so to speak. I do not ever recollect hearing of how hard a task it was. Rather it was a challenge, which that hardy breed of women met with courage.

Both my grandparents with their teenage children emigrated from Iceland in 1873 to Wisconsin, U.S.A. and settled on a homestead. Their next move was to Pembina, North Dakota. Again they homesteaded in the fertile Red River Valley, in contrast to the hardwood forests of Wisconsin.

Then after 16 years in the U.S.A., my

The Hola School

parents decided to come to the North West Territories. So in the spring of 1889 they set forth, bound for Calgary, which was the railroad terminus at that time. The family consisted of my parents, their three young sons and my paternal grandmother. Their destination was what is now the Markerville District some ninety miles north of city, where a group from Dakota had gone the year before. My father set out to locate a homestead and to build a home while the family stayed in the city.

In August my father returned and so began the sojourn to the homestead, which would take four or five days with a team and wagon. Crossing the Red Deer River was often a stumbling block in those days as it floods in the summer when the mountain streams which feed it, melt. My father led the horses across the river but in midstream he felt as though he was about to be swept downstream. He looked back at mother and she smiled at him and he regained his footing and all arrived safely across. Later he composed a poem in which he attributed their good luck to the encouraging smile that my mother gave him. "I was not a bit afraid" my mother told me.

On October sixth that fall mother gave birth to twin daughters. Her next door neighbor did midwifery so she officiated and all fared well. My mother perhaps had some duties that were not common to all pioneer women. My father was a poet and in addition to being "a tiller of the soil" he devoted any time off such as rainy weather days when he couldn't farm and wakeful nights to the pursuit of his hobby, as he called it. It was imperative that my mother see to it that he was not unduly disturbed when engaged in his literary work. When he was preparing his manuscripts for the publishing of his poetry he worked most of the night in order to meet the deadline for the publications. My mother would get up in the night and brew my father some coffee, which I'm sure was greatly appreciated.

The first school in the community was built just east of my parents' home on the homestead. Several young people stayed with my parents for a period of time in order to avail themselves of a bit of education. School teachers quite often boarded

with us down through the years. The school was also the centre of social activities. My mother and aunt sang in a choir which one teacher organized. He accompanied them on his flute. The Markerville Icelandic Ladies Aid Society was a pioneer venture. Established in 1891, it is still functioning. The ladies prepared the lunch and made coffee in my mother's kitchen for social functions. In appreciation they presented my mother with a silver tea service before the turn of the century.

My mother acquired a new range with a warming oven and reservoir early, possibly the first in the community. She also brought a new sewing machine with her from the U.S.A., a gift from her father and brother. This of course was an invaluable item for the pioneer woman who had to have dress making capabilities. She was also able to help her neighbours who had no machine but several daughters.

My parents had a family of eight, six reached maturity. One son died from diphtheria in the U.S.A. and my sixteen year-old brother was struck by lightening and died instantly, so they had their share of sorrow, as did most pioneer families. But they met trouble with outward composure and my father composed touching poems to their memories.

Those pioneer women often had to be alone with their young children on the homestead whilst their husbands sought employment away from home in order to acquire some cash. My father was away from home for two summers with a survey crew around Edmonton in the very early years. So my mother with her young family and my grandmother were alone on the homestead. Prairie fires were prevalent at that time and dreaded. One such fire came raging from the west fanned by a strong wind. It jumped across the river, headed for the house. The family had packed up what they could and were ready to vacate. Luckily there was a damp, boggy area just below the house so the fire died down and all were safe. My paternal grandmother made her home with my parents. She was a frail woman, but lived to be 81 years of age. I never saw her do housework but she was an artist at turning virgin wool into wearing apparel for the family. She spun very fine wool, sometimes three ply. She knit lovely lace from sewing cotton and fol-

A class at the Hola School.

lowed English instructions, a language, which she taught herself to read and understand. She gathered reeds, dried and braided them and made straw hats for the boys. Such resourcefulness!

My brothers made their homes with my parents for a period of time after they were married while they were building their homes. There was always plenty of company at our house. Neighbours dropping in on the way to town and of course on the way home to bring the mail. There seemed to be more time for neighbourly visits then. My mother had a large family to cook for and it required skill to do it economically and well.

Pioneer women were often called upon to administer nursing care and doctoring to their families as the closest doctor was in Calgary during those earliest years. My sisters developed a severe type of whooping cough. My parents feared for their lives. But my mother nursed them back to health. I had pneumonia when I was young so at the first sign of a cold I well remember the hot ginger tea I had to swallow, which I detested, and the hot mustard foot bathes I had to take. It must have been the right treatment for me.

So you see those pioneer women besides being a good helpmate for their husbands had to be industrious and skillful in many facets. We gratefully acknowledge their contribution to the building up of our lovely land and the secure home life, which they helped to promote for us. We revere their memory. Thank you.

Hola School 75th Anniversary Celebration - 1979

Mr. President and Friends;

It is indeed a pleasure and a privilege to be present here at Hola on this 75h Anniversary Celebration.

I thought perhaps, it might be of interest to review the history of the school, a bit. The first Hola School was built on my father's land, just east of the old home. It was of log construction and its dimensions were 18 feet by 26 feet, with a small anteroom. Thor Gudmundson and my father were chosen to be a delegation to legalize the formation of a school district and to see to the erection of the school. Logs were cut out west some distance away and they were floated down the river and hauled to the building site. Everyone helped with the building, which was completed and ready in the fall of 1892.

John Gudmundson was the first teacher and his only qualification was that he had himself been to school for a short period of time. There were 30 pupils and he was able to help his pupils, greatly. Other teachers followed, all from Eastern Canada. The school filled a great need in the district and the pupils came from quite distant points to attend school. Quite a number stayed with my parents for a period of time. This school operated for 12 years. It was also the centre of all social life in the district.

Then in 1904 this present school was built and, I believe, Asmundur Christianson was the head carpenter at that operation.

Hola comes from the word meaning hilly. In Northern Iceland there is an Agricultural School named Holar and it has been in operation for a very long time. It is out in the country in a beautiful setting. There is also a church there as it is an ancient diocese and also a high tower with a circular stairway inside. This tower was built as a memorial to Bishop Jon Arason, who lost his life during the great religious reformation which took place in Iceland in the mid 1500's. There are also other buildings such as the home of the principal and dormitories. It was my good fortune to spend one week there in 1953.

Hola has nostalgic memories for those of us whose lot it was to attend it. For myself, I enjoyed everyday of my school life from the time my father took me by the hand and put me in the care of my first teacher, Miss Daly, a big Irish woman who came from Eastern Canada. I remember her talking and explaining my lessons to me but I only understood two words in English, they were yes and no. She was a good teacher and we children soon learned to understand the English language. Then a new world opened up before us.

I have such pleasant memories of my teachers, each one different but all contributing some thing of value to my life. My school mates also were a fine bunch of companions. We played hard, studied hard and always got along well at Hola.

So it is a pleasure to see how well the old school is preserved as a community centre and I wish for you and your community, many anniversaries in the future. Thanks.

P.S. I have long had the opinion that in other circumstances or other times my mother would have been a career student. She loved school and college.

Letters

Freyja Arnason, left, in Mexico with cousin Meredith Harrison.

Tuesday, March 3rd, 2002

Hola amigos y familia!

I first arrived in Guadalajara, Mexico at the end of September 2001. My journey down to this Mexican city was fraught with neurosis. Although I am a fairly experienced air traveller, flying merely two weeks after September 11th resulted severe anxiety. My cousin was travelling with me although this did little to lessen my fear. I spent the five hour plane ride nervously ringing my hands, compulsively tucking my hair behind my ears, humming funeral songs and thinking of all the many things I had not accomplished in my tragically short life.

Alas, we made it safely to Guadalajara. The ride from the airport was relatively uneventful. My first impressions of Mexico were of black-haired children riding in the backs of trucks, air, heavy with exhaust fumes and deliciously warm weather. We were pretty proud of ourselves for making it that far without any major disaters. We relaxed and looked forward to settling in at our new house.

Upon arriving at our homestay we were greeted by our Mexican host mother. Her welcoming words "No put tampon in toilet!" This was followed by what sounded like an angry tirade in Spanish delivered at a speed that would make any non-native speaker´s head spin. I settled into my room. It was clean and comfortable with the obligatory gory crucifix secured directly over the bed. I drifted off into a restless sleep and woke up an hour later, terribly ill. Thus I spent my first night in Mexico hugging the toilet bowl and making friends with swarms of ants that lived in the cracks of the candy-pink tiles on the bathroom floor. Disaster number one.

The next day it was cold and pouring rain. I was afraid to touch anything, eat, drink or even breathe because I had no idea what had made me sick. I went shopping for bottled water and nearly panicked because I didn´t recognize any of the brandnames. Huge vats of handsanitzer, sunscreen and mosquito repellent cluttered my dresser. The malaria pills were taken every Tuesday morning. I got lost on the buses, the air was polluted, the men were lecherous. Everyone seemed to be calling me "Gordita," which means little fat girl. When I introduced myself to Mexicans they replied with confusion "Fea? Tu nombre es FEA?" (Fea means ugly girl). I spent a lot of time at the English movie theatre and the internet cafe in a desperate attempt to feel closer to home. I hated Mexico.

Fast-forward a few weeks. It turns out that everyone was calling me "Guerrita" which means blond-girl, not "Gordita", which means fat-girl. I adjusted to the buses, I hadn't been sick again, and my reasons for coming to Mexico in the first place came back to me: the excitement of travelling, improving my Spanish, experiencing a

new culture. Volunteering in a developing country had long been a dream of mine and I was ready to fulfill it.

Guadalajara is the second largest city in Mexico. Home to over 5 million people and counting, it is said to have the most moderate climate in the world. The temperature rarely rises over 30 degrees celcius or falls below 15 degrees celcius. It is about a six hour drive north of Mexico City and five hours east of Puerto Vallarta.

The first thing that struck me about Guadalajara was that in a city of 5 million people there were very few buildings over 2 stories high. They have flat roofs and are connected in the space-efficient European style. There are no front yards, no bright green meticulously coiffed lawns to admire while you meander past rows and rows of rectangular houses painted in bright pinks, oranges, blues and yellows. Adding to the colour of the buildings is the ever-present graffiti which few house-owners bother to paint over. The effort is futile.

Downtown Guadalajara is a contrast between beautiful colonial buildings and the growing modernity of a rapidly developing city. The Cathedral is the centre of the city surrounded by plazas and fountains. There are government buildings adorned with murals by famous Mexican painters. There are street vendors selling fruit, chips with chile, limon y sal, street performers and beggars showcasing their various festering injuries or their tiny malnourished children in pleas for help. Mercado Libertad is a huge market located a few blocks from the Cathedral. Here you can buy anything from rosary beads, to a gigantic pig´s head on a stick, to designer jeans.

It is easy to get from downtown to the suburbs. Guadalajara has a subway system and limited though it is, it is by far the cleanest underground train I have ever had the privilege of using. Far more commonly used, however, are the city buses. Oh, the buses. Noisy, polluting machines crowded with people and driven by lunatics at bone-rattling speeds on the winding, bumpy roads. Each bus driver decorates his own bus. You are guaranteed to find a large image of Jesus or the Virgin Mary, rosary beads hanging from the rearview mirror and a charming picture of a naked woman in a submissive sexual pose. Also popular are large squiggely sperm stickers, plastered to the dashboard window. I am still puzzled at this phenomenon.

Despite their fascinating decor and the fear of lunatic drivers, buses are the most convenient mode of transportation. There are many of them, their routes cover the entire city and they are fast. Buses are also the preferred mode of transportation when travelling to Puerto Vallarta, the nearby towns of Chapala, Ajijic or all the way down to Chiapas.

Guadalajara is a modern city, but it is said to be one of the most truly "Mexican" cities in all of Mexico. There are very few foreigners here. Not many people speak English, and the Mexican culture is alive and well. This is brought to the foreigners attention about every two weeks when there is one holiday or another celebrated with spectacular parades, mariachi music, throngs of people in the streets, spicy food and bright smiles. I have never fully comprehened the historical or religious signifi-

cance of all these holidays but I've noticed that they often revolve around various virgins. My knowledge of Catholocism is limited, but is there not only ONE virgin?

The most interesting fiesta I have experienced is "Dia de los Muertes," or Day of the Dead. On November 2nd of every year Mexicans make altars for their loved-ones who have passed away. These three tiered altars are adorned with intricate paper cut-outs, pictures of the dead, candles, marigolds and carefully prepared dishes of the dead's favorite foods. The altar in my host mother's house came complete with the dentures of her dead mother, proudly displayed as the center piece.

In general I have found Mexicans to be friendly, warm and helpful. My host mother was an exception to the rule. She rarely got out of bed until 4 in the afternoon at which time she would begin her daily routine of chain-smoking, drinking Coca-cola and checking her e-mail with her little fluffy white dog in her lap. Around seven every night, she would shower with the door wide open, dress up in her fanciest duds and head out to the BINGO hall, returning home at about three in the morning. She was a well meaning lady and despite her unusual lifestyle I don't regret the time I spent in her house. She provided me with many interesting stories.

As a result of Magdalena's deficiency in providing a home away from home environment, the travellers and students living in her house became very close. My "Mexican family" was an interesting mix of American, Canadian, German, British and Japanese people. We formed friendships that will withstand the tests of time and distance. One of the benefits of travelling is the bond of frienship formed between people thrown together in intense situations.

Another great place to meet people is at the school. I teach English and study Spanish at the Vancouver Language Center. The School is constantly filled with wanderers, passing through for a few weeks of Spanish instructions or a month of employment teaching English. English teachers in Mexico have a culture and lifestyle of their very own. We are people of all ages and backgrounds with a desire to experience different cultures and support ourselves financially while doing it. Teaching English can be hard work, it doesn't pay well in Mexico but it is rewarding work in and of itself.

My volunteer experience has been eye-opening, heart-breaking and life-enriching. Every week I hop on a bus that drops me off in a very poor area of the city. The dusty streets are lined with makeshift shacks held together with old bricks, tarps and rusted pieces of scrap metal. The volunteers make their way around the neighbourhood, stopping at various dirt-floor shacks where we are greeted with shy smiles and generous offers to share in some food or drink. We collect the children, ages 4 to 13 and walk with them to the church where we provide them with a meal. Following the meal we give lessons in basic hygiene, help with homework, sing songs,

play games and most importantly provide friendship. These dark-eyed, bright children have led difficult lives plagued with the kind of poverty and tragedy most of us cannot imagine. They hunger for affection and attention that most Canadian children take for granted. Yet they possess the same insatiable curiosity the same love of laughter and fun, the same hopes and dreams. What is truly devastating is that most of these children will not have the chance to realize their dreams. Most of these children have an understanding of the harsh realities and injustices of life that are beyond our comprehension. And the hope that I see in their beautiful dark eyes will fade to be replaced by the dull shades of bitterness and despair. Sometimes I hate Mexico.

Yes, even now sometimes I hate Mexico. When I'm walking down the street and everyone is staring at the tall, blond blue-eyed gringa and I proceed to trip over one of the giant holes in the uneven sidewalk, I hate Mexico. Some days the incessant catcalls, whistles and lewd remarks of the men get to me and I curse under my breath "I hate Mexico!". I could kill whoever taught them the phrase "Hey baby, you wanna to F--- me tonight?" When I want to call my parents and it costs me two dollars a minute I hate Mexico. When I'm having a bad Spanish day and I can't string together a coherent sentence and I feel like a complete and utter moron, I hate Mexico. When I get lost on the buses, when someone grabs my bum, when I see little children covered in filth asking for money, I hate Mexico.

However, when one of those children at La Escuelita puts their small warm hand in mine and looks up at me with overwhelming trust and love, my heart wants to explode. When I'm sitting on the beach watching the blazing Mexican sun set over the Pacific, I wonder at my fortune in life. Sitting under the stars with other travellers from around the world, enjoying tequila, the nearby mariachi music, the sounds of the busy city, fascinating stories and endless laughter, I know that there is no other place I would rather be at this time in my life.

Mexico is a land of contrasts: extreme poverty and fabulous wealth, generous smiles and resentful scowls, polluted cities and wildly exotic verdurous mountains, hot days and cool nights, romance and lechery, despair and hope. It is no surprise that my feelings about this country are just as extreme. I both hate and love Mexico.

Right now I am living with a friend from Saskatoon in a wonderful little Inn called Posada San Pablo. I have been teaching English and enjoying the culture, the long lazy afternoons. I plan on travelling for the next month or so before heading back up to Manitoba and my beautiful Willow Island, which is the only place on earth that will ever be home for me. I look forward to the long summer nights spent with family and friends on the shores of Lake Winnipeg. Espero que tu vida esta llena con sonrisas. Hasta Pronto mis amigos. Besos y abrazos!

Con cariño,
Freyja Arnason

PHOTO BY SUSAN CHRISTENSEN

Leif Vopnford

Viking Vopnford

by Kelda Vopnford

Iceland is a nation whose people are as visionary, bold and strong, as the land itself. An island continent once forged by countless volcanic explosions and settled by Viking warriors and their families, it eventually became home to only those who could seize and conquer the countless challenges of rugged terrain, sometimes demanding weather and constant attacks. Tempered by these many challenges, Icelanders grew to possess an indomitable spirit to achieve and succeed. In the bold and strong traditions of the Icelandic heritage, Icelanders continue to carry their own compass. And, as the once dominating Viking naval and ground forces did, they still follow their own "magnetic north".

It is from these roots that my younger brother and I were conceived. And it is from the indomitable will to persevere and succeed that Icelanders share, which my little brother derives his athleticism and competitive attitude.

Even as a baby, Leif displayed rare strength and coordination. I can remember my father hanging Leif by his hands from the top bar of the swing set. Leif was only about 18 months old, as he still had a diaper on and his "binky" (pacifier) in his mouth. At that tender age, Leif could pull his weight up with his arms and "chin" himself on that swing set bar. My father was so proud of him for being so strong that whenever we had company, he'd take Leif outside to the swing set that summer to let Leif do his chin-ups!

From the moment Leif arrived upon this earth, he was blessed not only with a tremendous natural athletic ability, but with a competitive drive that makes him push himself to excel; and more importantly, a natural charm and charisma that makes him instantly likeable to everyone, even those meeting him for the first time. Back in the 50's, I think Leif would have been described as a "man's kind of a guy." He was always just one of those little boys that people would gravitate to, and everyone would be smiling while they watched him.

My father used to do some business with the Seminole Indian Tribe in the State of Florida, and the Chief of the Tribe, James Billie, became a friend of our family. He was completely entranced by Leif's charm, and I can remember one Christmas vacation, much to my mother's dismay, when the Chief took Leif home with him for an overnight visit while we were in Southern Florida. Chief Billie took Leif out on an airboat to "catch" alligators in the swamps of Lake Okeechobee. That's just the kind of kid Leif is!!

What a strange coincidence that Leif got his athletic start in playing for a Pee Wee Football League in Omaha, Nebraska called "Li'l Vikes." My parents enrolled him at seven years of age in this league and Leif continued to play until he was nearly 14 years-old. At that time, he was a member of the Junior Varsity Football team in our home town of Blair, Nebraska, and time restraints forced him to quit his beloved Li'l Vikes team.

While Leif was a pre-teen, besides playing Pee Wee Football, he played YMCA Basketball and Little League Baseball. When he was in the 4th grade, he was the only 4th grader to make the "Fifth Grade Traveling Team" for the YMCA League he played in.

Leif is a Senior at Blair High School now, and was the Quarterback for our football team as a Junior and Senior. Not only did he play Offense, as the QB, but he also played Defense as a "Free Safety". He came in 2nd in the State of Nebraska, both as a Junior and a Senior, with six intercep-

tions. This year Leif was named to the Coaches' Poll as an "All Conference" player, and also made "All State."

Leif not only excels in Football, but in Basketball and Track as well. Last year in Basketball, his first year as a starter, Leif made Honourable Mention to our Conference, again with his Defensive efforts. His coach, Mark Williams, is once again depending upon Leif and his drive, ambition and competitiveness, to guard opposing players who tower over Leif's six-foot two-inch frame. Just last week, Coach Williams was quoted in the paper saying "Leif has a chance to be the best defender in the conference. There are not many young men in the conference as athletic as Leif. Whenever I ask him to be 'the man,' he never lets me down. When I need a 'go-to' man, Leif always steps up to the plate."

Last year, as a Junior, Leif broke the 29 year old Blair High School record for Triple Jump. He's been to the State Track Tournament every year since he was a Freshman, and medaled as a Junior. His goal this year is to win at the State Tournament. And knowing the resolve and dedication that my little brother possesses, thanks to our Icelandic heritage, the dedication my mother and father showed in encouraging him to play and making sure they were at as many of his games as they could attend, he will probably do just that!

Writers Note: Leif plans to attend the University of Nebraska at Omaha with a football scholarship.

Margret Sveinsdottir with daughter, Steina

Rosa Benediktson

Sigurgeir Jónasson and Kanaiveig Olafsdóttir

PHOTOS COURTESY OF N. GERRARD, ICELANDIC HERITAGE CENTRE

Icelandic Women

by Lark Barker

Walk down any street in present day Gimli, Manitoba, and you will be cognizant of the strong Icelandic heritage that exists. Gimli boasts one of the largest Icelandic communities, and Icelandic festivals in North America. Icelanders in Manitoba have maintained a strong tie with their Icelandic ancestral homeland.

The Icelandic collection at the University of Manitoba Elizabeth Dafoe Library is the second largest in North America, with the government of Iceland contributing a substantial amount of money to fund its updating and maintenance. It is astounding that a small community founded by only 365 immigrants 125 years ago could foster a legacy as lively and strong as the one that exists today. The foundation that allowed for Gimli, and all Manitoban Icelanders, to maintain their heritage and thrive in a new land, was built by Icelandic immigrant women.

The Icelanders sustained their culture, and thrived in their new nation, due to an individual determination and a series of integrated societies and community organizations. That women were in charge, or helped found many of these organizations is astounding—considering the heavy demands faced by new immigrants. More astounding is the trivialization of these organizations' crucial role in their communities in the writing of history, and the importance and impact of the immigrant women within them. Icelandic women were ominously left out of the writing of Icelandic history in Canada. If mentioned, they were only portrayed in their physical feminine boundaries. As anthropologist Maxine Seller notes, much has been written about men, much less has been written about women who emigrated to North America. Historians, regardless of ethnicity or gender, have overlooked the contributions of women to their communities.

Fifty years ago, anthropologists had begun to examine the social roles of immigrant women in their cultures. However, it was only when the women ventured out of their homes and became important participants in organizations such as the labour strike, or suffrage movement, that their work was viewed important and influential. That women's roles were only being viewed in the context of gender specific roles in relation to the family sphere, and not on the broader text of society as a whole, greatly downplays the role and validity of the essential role of immigrant women in family survival and cultural transgression. A. Weinberg states, "The study of immigrant history has been distorted and impoverished by the omission of women's roles."

This article hopes to recover an accurate account of the historiography of women's immigration history, and to objectively detail a specific case of immigration history, that of the Icelandic immigrations to New Iceland and Winnipeg. The article will also analyze the role and impact of Icelandic women on their families and communities. These objectives hope to be fulfilled by addressing the role and impact of the immigrant women that have been ignored, or overshadowed.

Although there were families and single men who emigrated, single women were enticed by the prospect of their high commodity as domestic servants. In a speech given in 1890 to the Lutheran congregation, Friðrik Bergmann had stated, "Here to this country has come a whole group of Icelandic females. More females than men." A lot of women that came were single and of best age. They had heard from immigration experiences and officers that they could make a lot of money as maids,

nannies, and farm-hands so this is what they came to do.

When the first group of Icelandic immigrants arrived at the Red and Assiniboine Rivers on 11 October 1875, the government representatives advised that with winter fast approaching, those who could get jobs should remain in Winnipeg and do so. Evidence suggests that between 35-50 young single men and women remained. Most young women received employment as domestic servants. Many wanted to make money to start a business, send home to Iceland to relatives, or to save up to return to Iceland more prosperous. As immigrant Hrefna Borgford notes, ". . . my parents (Elsie Lilliendal and Jon Asgeirsson) had planned to return to Iceland after making their fortune in Canada." Preacher Friðrik Bergmann had stated in his lecture, "If careful and don't overspend a girl can save a lot of money and send some home if she were planning to return." In a letter to her brother in Iceland, Rannveig Briem (Sigtryggur Jonasson's wife) noted that "Womenfolk in service in Winnipeg are paid from $5.00 to $15.00 per month, while menfolk working for farmers earn as much as $25.00 a month . . ." In his letter to his father, B. Andresson (who at the time was a recent immigrant to Winnipeg), mentions talking to a friend, Sigridur Thorlaksdottir. He states that she had made $8.00 at first, then $10.00, and is now making $12.00. "She has repaid Johann Kristjansson the $36.00 she borrowed for her fare and she has also bought a sewing machine for $20.00." Although no description of working life is available for this time, immigrant Margaret Frederickson describes the hours involved at her job at the Pauline Chambers Candy Factory in 1909.

As she recalls, "I made $3.00 per week, working 8:00am to 5:00pm, six days a week, with an hour off for lunch and no coffee breaks."

Upon their arrival in New Iceland the Icelanders faced great hardships which threatened the colony's survival. The climate and topography that met the Icelanders in New Iceland was greatly different from that of home. Brush forest was difficult to clear, and made land transportation and cultivation difficult. There were no tractors or horses the first year, so clearing was done by hand. The Icelandic women played a major role in overcoming the hardships and disease that were to threaten the colonies survival in its first year. As Frank Hall recalls, "My mother worked in the field, and so did the children." The initial lack of sanitation, coupled with swamp and swarms of flies saw a smallpox epidemic of 1876-1877 which killed over 100 of the Icelandic settlers, leaving only 10 to 12 households in the colony unaffected. As a result, the Health Board in Winnipeg placed New Iceland under quarantine, which ended up lasting 228 days.

This epidemic of small pox is well-known in the history of New Iceland, and Manitoba. What is not as well known is the courageous undertakings of two women within this time, who played pivotal roles in ensuring the survival of the colony. One of these women, Aldis, Mrs. Grimur Laxdal, played a critical part in the colony's survival through this period. After being vaccinated, she was permitted to cross the quarantine line at Netley Creek. As W.J. Lindal writes of her performance, "During the winter there was a desperate need of medical supplies. On three occasions, Aldis walked all the way to Winnipeg, a distance close to 60 miles. She would, at least the first night, have to sleep outside in the heavy bush."

Another courageous woman was midwife Snjolaug Johannesdottir, who is remembered to have entered homes during the smallpox epidemic, although unvaccinated, and nursed the patients.

Once the quarantine was lifted, many shifted the struggle from fighting disease to fighting starvation. That most families survived was a result of tireless work done by all members of the family, and a frugal budget administered by the woman of the household.

Many women had run the family farm back in Iceland while the men were out doing various jobs. In an article in Heimskringla in 1907, immigrant K. Asg. Benediktsson published this passage of a description of his farm from 1870, in his native district in Iceland, Kelduhverfi in Thingeyjarsysla. "The womenfolk helped separate the lambs and ewes at penning time, a three-week period during which the two were kept apart at night, and weaning was usually finalized in the ninth week of summer. After weaning, the women were kept busy with dairy related chores, haying, and managing the household." Canadian politician Magnus Eliason, whose parents emigrated from Iceland in 1900, admits that his father was a poet and not a farmer, and if it hadn't been for his mother the family would have never survived. As he states, "I doubt the livestock would have survived without my mother. She kept organized, resting about half an hour each day after lunch, but otherwise hard about her tasks." Eliason adds that although his father was a hard worker, his mother was the "livestock person"; having worked as a hired maid on a farm back in Iceland. This account seems quite typical as similar recollections are told by Economics Professor Leo Kristjanson, and author Laura Goodman Salverson. Kristjanson's father ran a store, and as he notes, "didn't know how to milk a cow." Laura Goodman Salverson, whose parents immigrated in the early 1880s, recalls, "With determination and tireless energy she (Laura's mother) kept the little establishment off the rocks, working from dawn till dark, whatever the state of her health, her only vacations those enforced rest periods when another blessed event called a halt to the never ending work at hand. Father, meanwhile, continued flirting with fate (trying to get a job)." An extraordinary case of a woman's workload is recounted by Wilhelm Kristjanson; who had heard this story from one of the woman's ten children. "Mother washed the wool, carded, spun and knitted it into mitts, socks and underwear for the whole family. For some years she made all our shoes from sheepskin. She made butter from the milk of ten to fifteen cows. When the men were away she often milked all the cows. My mother might make fifteen hundred pounds of butter in a whole summer."

Besides the pertinence of their household chores and acting financier of the family budget, women provided a crucial addition to the family income by leaving the family to find work, or selling or bartering homemade goods. In the 1870s, winter employment was scarce. Many women had to travel in search of employment, including a party of six who walked from New Iceland to Winnipeg on the frozen lake and river. "These six rented a single, unheated room and slept on the floor, with the result that the health of one of the group was permanently affected." Icelandic women proved to have greater success than men at finding work, due to the surplus of skilled labourers and the demand of domestic servants in Winnipeg and farms around Manitoba. Their salaries ranged from $8.00 with English skills, to $6.00 without. If no jobs could be found locally, women would walk to Winnipeg to find work at scrubbing floors or washing dishes. This was seen as a necessary act to ensure the families survival, and was deemed better than borrowing money.

In an excerpt of the minutes from one of the colony's council meetings, the Reverend Pall Thorlaksson had suggested that "women should make the trip up into Manitoba on foot." Magnus Eliason recounts the story of his mother, Margret Sveinsdottir who, after being widowed, came to New Iceland in 1900. Upon arrival she left her children with her brother, and went to work in Winnipeg with an English family to earn wages and improve her language skills. While most women were single, some were married and would have to leave home to help with the family income. They would return in spring and summer, when the men could usually find work on farms.

The women also added to the family income by selling their knitting. Although there was no spare time set aside to knit, many did so while combining several activities that all members of the household could engage in. Each night, the women sat and knitted socks and mitts that would be bartered while the husband read to the family. This combined 'extra' time for work with what little time a woman had with her children. As Goodman Salverson

reminisces, "What I liked much better were the times when mamma brought out the spinning-wheel, and I sat at her feet, carding tufts of wool, listening to the fascinating histories of Snow White and Rose Red and the Seven Dwarfs, Kitty, the King's Daughter, and the pretty tale of Laufey and Linuk." There was a great demand for woolen socks and mitts among fishermen and freighters on the lakes and logging camps around New Iceland. However, the prices paid to the producers were, as Nelson Gerrard puts it, "a modest 5-10 cents per pair of mitts and 25 cents for a pair of heavy, knee-high socks." As Frank Hall recalls, "my mother would spin and knit mitts, socks and scarves for other people, and was paid ten cents for carding and spinning one pound of wool." Although paid poor wages for their material, many women greatly added to the family income, knitting in every spare moment be it while walking, sitting, or talking. Evelyn Jonasson had spun, knit, and sewed for all her family's groceries.

As she recalls, everything needed to barter for goods was provided by the farm; sheep provided wool for the clothes (women sheared, washed, dyed, and spun it; even wool underwear which she noted were especially comfortable), and taxes were paid for from selling cream and eggs. The main source of income for the Eliason's came from beef, lamb, eggs, and cream that they produced on their mixed farm. This proved not only valuable for consumption, and could almost be considered currency. These products proved almost as good as money in obtaining certain material goods. The poverty of the rural immigrant was not caused simply by the geographic location. Icelandic families in Winnipeg also faced hardships. One difficulty faced by Icelandic immigrants from 1880-1914 was that Winnipeg was expanding and had a surplus of skilled carpenters and tradesman producing a highly competitive market. As a result, many woman had to work to ensure the survival of their family.

In a letter home to Iceland dated 26th January 1879, immigrant Arngrimur Jonsson of Winnipeg stated, "There is little news to report about Icelanders here in town; there is little work to be had here in winter except sawing wood, which is the main occupation of those Icelanders who have no fixed abode.

"Many immigrants were unprepared for the lack of jobs awaiting them in their new homeland. As Goodman Salverson notes, "It would have been astonishing for my father to think that upon coming to Canada his skill would not be reliable as to provide a decent living for his wife and children. It would have been surprising had he even dreamed that a good craftsman (carpenter and leather-worker), with a very decent education, could so effectively be reduced to the status and the misery of a slave in the glorious country that ballyhooed it magnificent opportunities by way of press and prophet."

Since arriving in Canada Salverson's father had suffered from the effects of ship's fever, which proved additionally detrimental to the family's survival since the only work freely available to the immigrants was hard manual labour. Once he did find employment as a saddle-maker, it was Salverson's mother's duty to sustain the family on the wages earned (which proved a most difficult task). In Salverson's case, her father made $5-6 a week, or around $24.00 a month. From that, $5 went for house rent, $4 for wood and kerosene (twice as much in winter months), thus leaving $15.00 for the entire month for food, clothes, and medical supplies for an entire family. She remembers that, "we usually ate pickled sheep's head, because it cost 5 cents a piece, liver, or shank bone."

That the Icelandic culture sustained immigration and thrived in longevity in its new country, demonstrates the enduring strength with which the Icelanders have preserved their heritage. The importance of cultural transmission was apparent from the moment the Icelanders arrived at New Iceland, and was mainly initiated by the women. This is not to suggest that the men did not play a role in the development of New Iceland, but to illustrate the commanding role that women played. The essential impact of Icelandic women on the development and growth of their communities cannot be denied.

An integral part of maintaining culture and heritage was through a series of organizations initiated or run by women. With the creation of these organizations, the women provided a commitment towards the survial of their culture that far extended family and home. Although each community had an organization, six major organizations (which are representative of the organizations of the smaller communities) were created in and around the area of New Iceland; The Women's Society of New Iceland, The Icelandic Women's Society, the Senior Ladies' Aid Society, the Aurora Reading Association, the Ladies Aid of Winnipeg, and the Suffragette Society. These organizations were essential in areas of education, religion, health care, taking care of the poor, and looking after new immigrants. Many of these organizations, such as the Senior Ladies' Aid Society, was created within the context of the church, but was not restricted by religious boundaries. Besides community organizations that supported the Icelandic heritage, the Icelandic women were also concerned with the collective population of women in Manitoba and their rights as citizens. Icelandic women were among the pioneers in the suffrage movement in Manitoba. There had been a suffragette society in Iceland as early as 1894, and its impact made its way to Canada. The movement was born out of an article published by Briet Bjarnheðinsdottir in 1885, with a subsequent suffrage paper being founded in 1895. As Wilhelm Kristjanson explains, "Icelandic suffrage played an active and, for a period, a prominent part in the campaign for woman's suffrage in

Lárus Guðmundsson & Ingibjörg Guðmundsdóttir and daughter, Laura.

Manitoba." As a result, Icelandic women were the first to petition for women's rights and to battle for women's suffrage in Canada. An Icelandic feminist who had an extraordinary impact on the Manitoba and Canadian suffrage movement was Margaret Benediktsson who emigrated from Iceland in 1887, at the age of 21.

As Kristin Wolf points out, "Western Icelandic women commanded an important role in the development of the early settlement and beyond, displaying a strong, indomitable spirit that matched well the pioneer ethos that helped shape the foundations of their community."

Although Icelandic women have been minimized in Icelandic history, their importance was recognized within their communities. When the colony of New Iceland was founded, it was written into law that widows be supported by the colony. This illustrates the respect and high regard the Icelandic community had for women. As the law stated, Under Article IV: Duties of The Public, Section 5: Support of Widows and Orphans, states, "The inhabitants of each district shall be, obliged to support widows and orphans in accordance with such rules as the majority of the district residents approve; furthermore, those, also, who for special reasons cannot maintain themselves."

This respect is also shown in the petitions for women's suffrage that circulated throughout the Icelandic districts in 1910. The petitions contain many male signatures, from a variety of vocations.

Although there was a high regard for women, it was in the context of their roles as wives and mothers, not as women. In a sermon to the Lutheran congregation of New Iceland, Preacher Friðrik Bergmann discussed the '*importance for women to receive education, so that they can liberate their souls, participate in community talks, keep out of poverty, attract a man, raise intelligent children, and make their homes attractive.*' However, he goes on to state, "the most important role of a woman in making her home is to take care of the wounds her husband comes home with fighting to make a living." This contradictory issue of gender equality within the Icelandic community continues to cause controversy, and is perhaps best understood by a speech given to the Icelandic National League by anthropologist John Matthiasson. When discussing the topic, Matthiasson stated: "My own conclusion, based upon my reading of literature on women in societies around the world, is that while there may never have been true equality for women in Iceland, their social position was much higher than the world average, and certainly more so than that of other European women, whether in ancient times or more recent ones."

The importance of an accurate and complete history of our community's roots is vital in our understanding of our nation's existence. As Wilhelm Kristjanson wrote in a letter to celebrate Manitoba's centennial in 1970, "The pioneers built the foundation for our way of life today." This is why it is important for historians to re-approach past histories which have neglected the importance of women's work, based on their gender. Although there has been extensive work done on Icelandic women and their impact on their communities, little of this work details their experiences in a context that is fitting. A context which portrays them in their own right, and not as 'supporting roles'. As historian Richard Tomasson states, "Once we leave the world of the old Icelanders, we could speak of the silent women of Iceland . . .The absence of women from written Icelandic history before the twentieth century is remarkable in its near totality; women apparently were only wives and mothers, concubines and mistresses, housekeepers and doers of all sorts of work." This has diffused the history surrounding the survival of the strong Icelandic identity that remains in Manitoba to this day. By highlighting the essential role Icelandic women played in the survival of their communities, this article will hopefully be a valuable contribution to the study of women's immigration history. It also hopes to add to and enrich the numerous studies that have been done on Icelandic immigration, emphasizing the history of Icelandic women.

Poetry

North Shoreline

by Karen McElrea

The end of the world is where sun meets snow.
The afternoon and I withdraw into late gloom
as the children hunt wordlessly for snow-bugs,
wood chipping at ice. They become still at the
last flash of day and then retry their limbs, not
trusting the illusion of a black blanket's thaw.

I don't exist, nor is there such a hue as that
watery orange sun. If they dig deep enough,
will they find him staring brighteyed with a
last promise? I'll bring you fish, elskan mín,
and together we'll build a proper smokehut.
You mustn't cry in this bitter air. Don't cry.

There is nothing to move the fine crystals
between us and a long horizon: no spruce
or soft slopes or deer or bear. Nothing to
hold the eye but the vision of next spring
without a son or daughter. Twin orphans
can become nothing with no provisions.

They move toward me, smiles creasing
scales around their mouths. Air wriggles
between pinched thumbs and forefingers.
"My worm's biggest," they say together.
Darkness melts between them, spreading,
as a howl tunnels through the invisible sky.

Book Reviews

Swimming into Darkness

by Gail Helgason
Coteau Books, 284 pages, $18.95 Canada
$16.95 USA ISBN # 1-55050-186-0

Reviewed by Norman Sigurdson

"Being thirteen is like standing on the soft ridge of sand that divides the shallows from the deep waters," writes Gail Helgason in Swimming into Darkness, her first novel. "You want to be pulled in. And you don't."

Much of the novel traces this adolescent ambivalence and explores themes of loyalty and responsibility.

The novel takes place mostly in and around rural Gilead, Saskatchewan, in the summer of 1962 when the narrator, Thora Sigurdson, is a "thin-boned" thirteen-year-old with "lank hair the colour of straw", spending the summer at her parent's lakeside cottage.

Alternating with this story are chapters set in Edmonton in the summer of 1998, when Thora is now an historian on the cusp of fifty, clad in denim skirts and Birkenstocks. She is weathering a failed relationship with a geologist named Paul, and obsessing over her current project, the restoration of the pioneer homestead of Markus Olafsson, a "humble Alberta farmer (who) produced the finest poetry in the Icelandic language since the thirteenth century." Markus' homestead is set to open as a museum in two weeks, but there is a persistent leak in the basement and Thora's donors are beginning to get nervous about the project.

Markus Olafsson, who is loosely based on the poet Stephan G. Stephansson, lived on this homestead on the banks of the North Saskatchewan River, in what has now become suburban Edmonton. By day Markus plowed the fields. At night he wrote Icelandic poetry "that once ranked him with Emerson and Whitman, and perhaps still would do, were it not for the daunting difficulties posed by English translation."

But in 1914, when Markus was 61 years old, his son Siggi was killed by lightning while out haying, and Markus turned his back on poetry forever, leaving the final volume of his "Sagas of West Icelanders" unfinished.

In the fall of the summer described in the novel Thora's Uncle Gisli discovers a cache of Markus' letters while cleaning out his attic. The letters were written to Markus, cousin, Kristjan Sigurdsson, Thora's great-grandfather. Thora asks her father, Bjorn, to translate the letters for her,

and her interest in them leads to her eventual career as an historian.

1962 was the year that Saskatchewan's NDP government brought in the first Medicare bill, paving the way for universal health care across Canada eight years later, but at the time prompting a bitter month-long doctor's strike beginning on Dominion Day.

Thora's best friend, Gretchen, is the daughter of the town's only doctor, the charismatic Scotsman, "Mac" McConnell. The McConnells, whose summer cottage is next door to the Sigurdsons, have befriended Thora. Mrs. McConnell helps lead Thora to her career in archeological history by building a scale model replica of the Sigurdson homestead where Bjorn was born.

But the doctor's strike forces everyone in town to take sides, and tests Thora's loyalty to Gretchen and the McConnells. Thora remains publicly neutral. This neutrality is mirrored by her perhaps deliberate inattention to the realities around her, an inattention which has fatal consequences. "Now I see that I always wanted to leave things blurry;" says the middle-aged Thora about her younger self. "I feared the certainty of sharp lines and unassailable facts."

Thora was not, she recalls elsewhere, "a particularly curious child, certainly not about the past." But the tests and traumas of the summer shape her older self. "In my field, historical archeology," she says, "my job is to look backwards and at the same time figure out what the future would have looked like from an earlier perspective." Still, she admits, "I've trained myself not to get mired down in the present."

Thora's present includes not only her Olafsson project, but also her ruptured relationship with Paul. Helgason, whose short story collection *Fracture Patterns* (1995) contains many strong women characters, creates in Thora a vivid and unforgettable narrator. Thora is a remarkable mixture of compassion and hard-headedness, which she turns on her examination of herself on the brink of young adulthood. But, the narration by her middle-aged self shows many unintended resonances of lessons not learned..

The novel is suffused with water imagery—stagnant, murky, cleansing and unforgiving, life-enhancing and deadly. (The novel's opening line is "We are here because of the lake, my father used to say.") This sustained motif is Helgason's greatest accomplishment in the novel. In one particularly impressive passage Thora and her mother learn of Bjorn's heart attack "out on the ice" at the curling rink, while the minister who has come to deliver the news makes unsatisfying tea from the wrong water as his boots leave "cookie-size pools of water" on the floor.

The chapters set in 1962 are the heart of the novel, as Thora struggles with the realities of the "adult" world, and they contain some of the most moving and poetically described scenes, partly because Thora has learned to revel in detail and "excavate" her past. The sections set in 1998 are not always as strong, the characters less deftly drawn. Still, Helgason pulls it all together in the end as images and foreshadowing come together to allow Thora to solve not only the mystery of the leaking basement at the homestead, but the greater mystery of why Markus abandoned poetry.

Swimming into Darkness is a luminous and haunting story told with confidence and skill. I look forward eagerly to Gail Helgason's next book.

Contributors

FREYJA ARNASON is a graduate of the University of Manitoba with a major in Political Science.

LARK BARKER is currently teaching Business Communication and English at the International University, Tec de Monterrey, Mexico.

ROSA BENEDIKTSON (1900-1995) was the youngest child of Stephan G. Stephansson and his wife Helga. In 1953, Rosa travelled to Iceland to unveil a cenotaph erected at Arnarstapa in Skagafjörður, Iceland on the 100th anniversary of Stephan G.'s birth. On August 10, 1975 Rosa addressed a crowd of Icelanders and Canadians gathered on the occasion of the dedication of Stephansson House as an Alberta provincial historic site, and at the age of eighty-two she once again addressed those gathered, this time, to celebrate the official opening of the House.

AGNES COMACK is a wife, mother, amma, artist, writer and octogenarian. She lives in Winnipeg with her husband Hugh.

HJÁLMAR W. HANNESSON - teacher, diplomat, ambassador, was presented to the Governor General in Ottawa Canada with his Credentials as Iceland's first Ambassador to Canada, April 9, 2001. His wife is Anna Birgis and they have three children and four grandchildren.

KAREN McELREA'S work has appeared or will be in future issues of various publications, including Geist, The Prairie Journal of Canadian Literature, Event, Boomerang (UK), Broken Pencil, (EX)CITE, Kiss Machine, The Nashwaak Review and Wascana Review. She lives in Winnipeg.

NORMAN SIGURDSON is a Winnipeg-based freelance writer whose book reviews appear frequently in the Winnipeg Free Press. He has also written for the Toronto Star, the Kingston Whig Standard, the Montreal Gazette and other publications

KELDA VOPNFORD is 21 years-old and lives in Omaha, Nebraska. Kelda and Leif's parents are David and Barbara Vopnford, their Icelandic grandparents are Sigrid and the late Walter Vopnford, of Point Roberts, Washington.

The Chieftan went down in a late fall storm (1915) at the mouth of the Red River, as it was heading for Lake Winnipeg. It was a North Easterly storm and the waters were too shallow causing it to run aground. It was loaded with goods. It capsized and sank in a matter of minutes. The crew all escaped on life boats. Later the Cheiftan was washed ashore, basically buried in the sand. It was never salvaged.

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