ICELANDIC CONNECTION

ISSN #1920-423X

Vol. 65 #1 (2012)

Icelandic National League of North America's
94th Annual Convention

April 4 – 7, 2013

SEATTLE, WASHINGTON – THE EMERALD CITY

AT THE CROWNE PLAZA HOTEL

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VOLUME 65, NO 1 (2012) • WINNIPEG, CANADA

ICELANDIC CONNECTION

North America's quarterly magazine in celebration of the Icelandic Heritage
published by Canadian Icelandic Heritage, Inc., Winnipeg, Canada

SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADVERTISING & EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE
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SUBSCRIPTION RATES
CANADIAN $40 CAD yearly, $80 two years U.S. & INTERNATIONAL $46 USD yearly
E-JOURNAL $30 CAD /$30 USD
SINGLE COPIES $10 CAD plus postage
WE ACCEPT U.S. & CANADIAN FUNDS, MASTERCARD AND VISA

Typed submissions of articles, book reviews, short stories and poetry are welcome.
Unsolicited manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

E-MAIL SUBMISSIONS WELCOME editor@icecon.ca
VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT www.icecon.ca

Printed in Winnipeg, Canada by Dycom Direct Mail and Lögberg-Heimskringla
ISSN: 1920-423X

ON THE COVER

AT CENTRE, THE ARBORG LEGION SIGN. ORIGINAL PHOTO BY SIGNÝ MCINNIS. PHOTO COLLAGE CATHERINE MCCONNELL

World War I soldiers Arni Anderson and Friðrik Josephsson whose stories are told in this issue. One went missing in action, the other returned home and became a founding member of his local Royal Canadian Legion branch.

Editorial

Happenstance

by Elva Simundsson

The lives of the people in Middle Earth, according to the old Norse beliefs, are governed by the three Norns. They control our lives in their work. They card, spin and weave the thread of our lives in their wool. Events are woven into our lives by powers over which we have no control. Sure, we can regulate the little decisions – should I wear the winter boots or the summer sandals? Should I have a second cup of coffee? However, the big things mostly happen outside of our control. Sometimes these things are scary, but often they are enjoyable and are what makes our lives just that little bit more interesting. Our Icelandic connection tends to bring these kinds of happenstances into our lives.

An interesting series of happenstances came into my life recently. The story begins in 1978. In the late 1970s the Government of Canada was offering grants to Canadian ethno-cultural communities to put together histories of their immigrant settlements. The Gimli Chapter INL, now the Gimli Icelandic Canadian Society seized the opportunity to apply for such a grant. The Chapter then needed to find a writer/researcher to put the history together. I happened to be living in Gimli. I happened to be temporarily unemployed. I happened to have the good fortune to have been taught to read Icelandic by my parents which gave me access to the primary sources of information for the research. I was offered a contract. Eventually the history book was published. Over the next thirty years the book has been widely distributed in the areas of Canada where there are descendents of the Icelandic immigrants. It has been re-printed and is still available in the bookshops in Gimli.

Many years later, it so happened that Masanori Yamamoto, a Japanese professor from Hiroshima who had an interest in the Old Norse and Icelandic languages was visiting Vancouver, British Columbia. He discovered the home of the Icelandic Canadian Club of BC, 'Iceland House'. At a visit to Iceland House it happened that he was given a copy of the book. He read and re-read the book. His focus of interest shifted from Icelandic language to the history of the Icelandic immigrants in North America. He decided to translate the book into Japanese. He thought of publishing the Japanese edition. He contacted people at Iceland House to ask for help in obtaining copyright permission for the translation.

It so happened that the person who received his query had connections to Gimli. She contacted me. The Gimli Icelandic Canadian Society and I gave our permission for the publication. This fall we received six copies of the Japanese book. We decided to make a present of one of the copies to the Manitoba Japanese Cultural

Centre. It so happens that our Icelandic Connection board member Valerie Hoshizaki-Nordin is also a member of the Manitoba Japanese Cultural Centre. It so happened that Valerie was planning a trip to Hiroshima a week after we had made the book a gift for the Centre. She will take the book with her back to Hiroshima, look up Professor Yamamoto and ask him to autograph it for them.

The book was created in Manitoba, given away in British Columbia and then the Japanese edition came to Manitoba only to make the trip back to Hiroshima and back again to Manitoba. Happenstance? Certainly none of this was pre-planned, it is all a result of our shared Icelandic connections.

This issue of *Icelandic Connection* is an eclectic selection of articles that have been submitted to the editorial board. There is no defined theme to this issue. As you read our selection of articles they will give you a pause to reflect on happenstances. Perhaps something you read here will remind you of the happenstances that have come from the Icelandic connections in your life. Are these events random coincidences or are the Norns just making our lives a bit more interesting?

Our up-coming winter and spring issues will have a west coast of North America theme. Your *Icelandic Connection* will be focusing on the Icelandic-North American cultural communities in British Columbia, Washington and Oregon. Why? Because our Icelandic "Connectedness" (if there is such a word) will be meeting there in early April of 2013. The Icelandic National League of North America (INL) will be holding its 94th annual convention in Seattle, Washington. Icelandic clubs and organizations from all over North America will gather for an extended weekend of activities and programs that will connect us in our shared history and genetics. We want the content in our next two issues of Icelandic Connection to complement the work of the INL as it will be highlighting the Icelandic cultural communities bordering on the Strait of Georgia, Strait of Juan de Fuca, Puget Sound and down to the Columbia River. We are all connected through our shared geography and cultural heritage. It's our Icelandic Connection.

It's a long and slow haul – How *Icelandic Settlers in America* was published in Japan

by Masanori Yamamoto

First I will introduce myself briefly. My name is Masanori Yamamoto. I have been living for nearly 44 years in Hiroshima, Japan. I'm 65 years of age and I've been working at a junior (two-year) college called "Suzugamine Women's College" in Hiroshima for about 40 years (my major is 'History of English') and am going to retire next March. I've made a complete translation of Ms. Elva Simundsson's *Icelandic Settlers in America* into Japanese and the book has been published in Tokyo on the first of September, 2012. I will describe why *Icelandic Settlers in America* has come to be published in Japan. I would like to write about the process of how the original book was translated and published.

About 42 or 43 years ago I got interested in Old English(c.700-1150), and enjoying reading prose and poetry written in Old English. Old English is the language belonging to the same Germanic language family as Old German and Old Icelandic. Old Icelandic is also called Old Norse and is the ancestral language of the modern Icelandic and Norwegian languages. During my studies I noticed that in order to deepen my knowledge of Old English I must study Old High German and Old Icelandic (700-1100) in particular. Over time I became greatly intrigued by studying Old Icelandic.

As far as Old Icelandic is concerned, I taught myself using a short grammar guide included in E.V. Gordon's *An Introduction To Old Norse* and read with much appreciation *Saga and Edda, the pride of Iceland,* because in those days we didn't have Icelandic grammar texts written in Japanese. I remember I enjoyed reading such Icelandic sagas as *Njál's saga, Hrafnkel's saga Freysgoða and The Norse Discovery of America* (the stories of Eiríksson etc.) through the aid of the Penguin Classics. In addition, I obtained an Icelandic Linguaphone. That was forty years ago. Now we are lucky to have several Icelandic grammar texts both old and modern versions (modern version includes CD) in Japan.

Since I was attracted to Icelandic language and culture by reading books in that area, I got to know the Scandinavian history, one of which is that Norwegian Vikings immigrated and settled in Iceland about 870-930. Although I had lots of knowledge, I never thought about the emigrations and settlements of Icelanders in modern times. Unfortunately, owing to the college chores, my chances to read more books about Icelandic had been decreasing.

About 24 years ago, in March 1988, I first visited Vancouver, Canada. In the summer of the same year I revisited Vancouver, guiding around 60 students to a Community College – Langara Campus

– for a one-month overseas English study program. I really don't remember exactly, but under the auspices of the city of Vancouver they had a custom of performing some kind of entertainment in Stanley Park. That summer four Langara instructors accompanied me and my students to see the play "West Side Story". It was very exciting to see a play at Stanley Park, especially outdoors and at night. While I was there, I had one of the most amazing experiences in my life.

Just before the start of a performance, the four instructors introduced their friend to me. She had golden-hair and blue-eyes and she told me that her ancestors were from Iceland. She purposely tried to utter a few Icelandic words, imitating her aunt's way of pronouncing ".....My aunt speaks Icelandic like this.....". Of course I never understood what she said at all, though I imagined that she was uttering Icelandic words in an exaggerated way and it seemed to me as if Icelandic wasn't a fluent language for her. I was pleasantly surprised that a person who was speaking her aunt's mother country language was standing before me. On no account had I thought that I could ever come across a person related to Iceland in my life, even though there were immigrants in Canada coming from many countries all over the world. This event was a greater joy than watching "West Side Story."

After I returned to Japan, I was again reading about something Icelandic without knowing it. I took delight in reading about some Icelandic books and culture as well as an Icelandic Newsletter (about which I will write later) from Vancouver. Before I became aware of it, my interest was moving away from

language to emigration, specifically Icelandic settlers in North America. Of course while studying about Icelandic settlers in America I also enjoyed studying the Icelandic language, though it is not so easy for me.

Every year since 1988 I led my students to Canada. In March 1999, which was my 12th visit to Canada and 11 years after watching West Side Story, I as a faculty advisor was blessed with a chance to lead about 70 students to The Canadian International College in North Vancouver. One time during my stay there I was informed of the organization "Icelandic Canadian Club of British Columbia (ICCBC)" at Iceland House. From that time onward, never a day passed without thinking of going to the Iceland House.

I will never forget the 21st of March 1999. It was a rainy Sunday afternoon and I had some free time because my students' overseas English study programme in Canada had just completed the previous day. I had a strong desire to visit ICCBC. I ventured out of my hotel with a big umbrella available from the hotel. I took the Skytrain for about 30 minutes and got off at King George terminal station which was the fourth stop past New Westminster station which was my original station. I have a reserved nature and thought that people at Iceland House would be troubled by my sudden visit without an appointment. I forgot how cowardly I was and I thought, that day being Sunday, nobody would be there even if I went there. However, I just took the returning train from King George station and this time I got off at my destination station and put a coin into a public phone. I don't have a clear memory of what I said on the phone but it went something like this:

"I'm Japanese. I'm now touring in Vancouver. I'm interested in Icelandic culture..." On the other end of the phone I heard someone respond by saying: "Hello! Please do come here." I jumped on to a bus in a hurry with a feeling of both joy and anxiety. In my confusion, I didn't ask where I should get off or where was the right bus stop. I was utterly upset. I transferred my bus seat nearer to the bus driver and repeatedly said where I had better get off and how long it would take to get to the right bus stop. After about 20 minutes the driver said this should be it. Strolling around the place not far from where I left the bus, a lady came out of the building and told me to come in. I had a sudden visit to the Iceland House and all the people there welcomed me heartily. The monthly meeting of Iceland Club had finished a few minutes before I visited the "house."

After all the people who participated in the meeting had left, a lady had the kindness to show me several rooms including a library. I was overjoyed to be able to see the library because there were many books concerning Iceland. Then I was shown to a room. I happened to see piles of a blue-covered book on tables. They were Elva Simundsson's *Icelandic Settlers in America*. It was a great joy that I was dedicated a copy. The lady's name was Ms. Linda Bjarnason, who kindly took me to my hotel near Robson street on her way back to North Vancouver (where she said she was living.) That was another one of the happiest experiences in my life.

Five years later in my place of employment I have a colleague and native speaker of English whose name is Mr. Keith Hoy. Luckily he is from North Vancouver, Canada and I told him in detail about my visit to the Iceland House. When he went back to Vancouver, he spared no efforts so that I could join that club and in 2004 I became a member of ICCBC.

Since receiving that copy of *Icelandic Settlers in America,* I have read and savored it. In the meantime I had a feeling to translate it into Japanese. Since then I had the desire to translate the book. A few years passed. And then I desired to publish the book. After full consideration, I talked about it with some of publishing companies. Two companies agreed. But every time they tried to publish, they came across a major obstacle – a copyright problem. I myself thought it was worthwhile to publish this invaluable book. No books about Icelanders' emigration to Canada had ever been published in Japan. I loved Simundsson's book so much that in 2005 I had the translated manuscript bound for myself as an article not for sale.

On March 11, 2011 a tremendous disaster on record happened in the easten part of Japan. It was quite natural that the TV pictures of this disastrous earthquake, tsunami and nuclear power plant in Japan were transmitted all over the world. Unfortunately the TV coverage of this disaster was played over and over. What will Japan be from now on? At that point of time, we had nothing to do but settle in and watch TV, hoping for the best for Japan.

About that time I wrote an e-mail to Ms. Margaret Bjarnason Amirault, editor of ICCBC, and thanked her for the sympathy and thoughtful words for all the trouble that had befallen Japan. I also mentioned in the e-mail that I was quite surprised after I had received the Newsletter from Vancouver informing me of the closure of Iceland House. I then went on to describe the involvement in Elva Simundsson's *Icelandic Settlers in America.* I wrote the following..... "I have had a dream that this book should be published. I wonder if there's any way to realize this, despite the fact that we cannot get a right from the copyright holder. Thinking of the New Westminster Iceland House being closed, this may be the last way to consult with somebody in charge in the Iceland House. I hate to trouble you, but if possible, I hope somebody in the Iceland House will talk about publishing the Japanese translation of Ms. Elva Simundsson's book." On April 2, 2011 I received a very pleasant e-mail from Ms. Margaret Bjarnason Amirault, saying that she knows the author personally and will phone her.

The one of the most wonderful things in my life happened again. On May 18, 2011 I received a letter from the author herself far away from Gimli, Manitoba. I have never imagined that I would receive a letter from the original author. She said she will agree to give me the copyright permission to proceed with publishing the Japanese edition of the book, after asking for permission from the Gimli Icelandic-Canadian Society (GICS). The letter also said, "... you have a publisher interested in taking your translation project to the next step.... This is exciting news and I am very happy to hear you haven't given up on the publication project." The author's words gave me the courage to continue.

Nobody could have imagined how flattered I was. I was speechless with delight. On May 13, 2011 I wrote back to Ms. Elva Simundsson and thanked her very much.

I really appreciated her permission in allowing me to translate the book into Japanese. On May 18, 2011 I got a second letter from her including a signed document (the letter of the copyright permission) for a Japanese edition. Needless to say, I wrote back and thanked her.

A year passed since that dreadful disaster. And on March 10, 2012 I sent an e-mail to a publishing company in Tokyo

in order to ask if a book dealing with Icelandic emigration and culture could be published. The books that the company deals with focus on North European Literature. After a few e-mails the editor showed a lot of interest and said that the *Icelandic Settlers in America* translation was worth publishing and should be included in his books already published [i.e. *An Anthology of World Literarure – North Europe Section*]. Since the book appears in a series related to North European Literature the editor felt it would be better to add a preface and with explanations concerning the 'beginning of Iceland' and 'Islendingabok and Eirik the Red'. The title of the Japanese translation *The Descendants of Eirik the Red – Icelandic Settlers in America.*

On April 10, 2012 I wrote a happy e-mail to Ms. Elva Simundsson, telling her ... "at last I found a publishing company in Tokyo which will publish the Japanese edition of the book. However, he is asking me to tell you some points he wants to add." The next day I received an e-mail from her saying that she was happy to hear I had found a publisher interested in taking my translation project to the next step.

In this way the Japanese edition of Ms. Elva Simundsson's *Icelandic Settlers in America* was completed by the end of August, 2012. My long-cherished dream had come true. Of course I never forget to thank the author Ms. Elva Simundsson and the editor Tamiji Yokoyama. Naturally I expressed my gratitude to them in the preface in the Japanese edition. It goes without saying that I must show my appreciaton for all concerned. Especially I wish to acknowledge the following people: Lorna Tergesen (the president of GICS), Nelson Gerrard (for his illustrations) and Margaret Bjarnason Amirault (the editor of ICCBC).

The man I never knew

by Judy Sólveig Wilson

Every November 11th, I sit and watch the Remembrance Day Service on CBC and grieve for a man I never knew. As I grew up in my *amma's* house at 735 Home Street in Winnipeg, she was the closest person to me. She and I would sit together each year. Every year. We would watch the ceremony. Nobody else was ever there with us. I'm not sure why, but it was always just the two of us. Now, many years after my *amma* has passed away, I still watch the same coverage. Year after year. Perhaps I think of myself as taking up the torch, as John McCrae wrote so eloquently in his poem "In Flanders Fields".

My *amma* always watched and remembered her brother Friðrik (Fred) Josephsson. They had immigrated to Canada in 1902 with their widowed mother Guðrún Ísleifsdóttir. My *amma* was four years old and her brother was six. After working for some years as a housemaid in Winnipeg, my *langamma* went to visit her sister who was married and living in the Argyle District of Manitoba. There she met the man who would be her second husband, and with whom she would have seven more children.

It was an unfortunate situation for my *amma* and her brother. Their stepfather was not fond of them, and did not treat them well. They worked hard on the farm until they reached adulthood. An old family friend who knew him, once told me that Fred was a wonderful singer. When he was among company, it was not uncommon for Fred and two other young men of the area to sing while somebody played the piano. I marveled when I found out his favourite song. It was "The Maple Leaf Forever".

World War I broke out. When he was old enough, Fred signed up. I often wonder: Was he desperate to get away from his home situation? Did he have such a strong feeling for his adopted country that he wanted to go and defend it in a war overseas? These are the things I will never know, and can only guess.

When the day came for him to take the train and go off to war, there was a snowstorm. His stepfather refused to take the horses out in the bad weather, so Fred walked six miles to the nearest train station carrying his kit. I recently read that First World War kits weighed between forty and fifty pounds. I often think of him struggling through the snow carrying all of that weight. A while back I obtained his military file from the Archives of Canada. He was only 5 foot 7 ½ inches tall, and very slight. He weighed 130 pounds.

Fred was injured three times during the war. Each time he was "cured" and sent back to battle. I leaf through the military file, trying to put together the man and the experience he had at war. I find out that he earned $20 per month, sending most of it home to his mother. At the end of the war he had $63.76 left in his soldier's savings account.

The war must have been horrendous. I read in the file that as men were killed in large numbers, battalions were combined and re-combined over and over. There simply were not enough men to constitute a battalion anymore. The answer? Combine

Guðrún Ísleifsdóttir and her son Friðrik (Fred) Josephsson. It was taken in 1916, before Fred went to war.

them. As I count, Fred served in four different battalions.

One night in September, 1918, my *langamma* awoke from a dream. In the dream, her son stood on a road. When she looked at him, he thanked her for the bible she had given him and said goodbye. She had just seated herself at the table to have coffee with her husband the next morning, when the postmaster came to the door. Fred was missing in action, and presumed dead. It was September 3, and the Battle of Arras was raging.

Fred never returned. His body was never found, or was never identified. The file says that he was finally declared dead on October 18, 1918. His name now appears on the Vimy Ridge Memorial, along with 11,285 other young Canadian men. I had always thought that those names represented Canadians killed at the Battle of Vimy Ridge. That is untrue. The men whose bodies were found and identified were buried in nearby graveyards. There is a place for their loved ones to visit them. The 11,285 names are those of men who were never found. They may have sunk into the mud or been blasted apart by mortar shells. Recently I obtained a picture of his name on the

monument, but it is only a name and not a man.

In the *Minningarrit íslenzkra hermanna,* covering Icelandic veterans of WWI, the section at the end was saved for those young men who never returned from war. There are 75 pages of names, biographies, and pictures. His picture smiles from page 456 of *Minningarrit,* but still I cannot know him. I do know one other thing from his military files. He had blue-green eyes.

My *amma* never got over the loss of her only full brother. If I glanced at her during the ceremonies on Parliament Hill, I would see tears in her eyes. Despite many hardships in her life, it was the only time that I ever saw my *amma* cry.

It was only a couple of years ago that I realized that it was not only my *amma* who lost Fred, it was all of us. Being so close to his sister, I'm sure he would have been a regular visitor at the kitchen table on Home Street, with a cup of coffee and *molasykur.* He might have married, had children, and grandchildren. I might have played with those grandchildren.

Two years ago, my aunt Valdine and I travelled to Ottawa. We went for the specific reason of viewing the turning of the page in the *Books of Remembrance* to the page holding Fred Josephson's name, which occurs every September 19. It was a beautiful ceremony, and we were seated with honour in the chapel, while tourists had to wait outside. We looked at his name in the book. Just a name. It's all that is left. Then we went over to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It is the body of an unidentified soldier from WWI. "Maybe it is him," I thought to myself. "Maybe it is the man I never knew."

My *Afi* the Soldier

by Shirley Palsson Segura

I live in France where the presence of war memorials is nothing short of phenomenal. Here, I don't think that there is a single village that does not commemorate the loss of its 'enfants' to the various wars. Additionally, lonely roadside monuments abound, street signs reflect battles and heroes, and plaques on the sides of buildings memorialize resistance fighters. Everywhere there are markers and one cannot live in this country without being totally aware…and thankful. The silent stone reminders have an added effect on me though, for often when I pass one I think of my grandfather… the grandfather who served overseas in World War I. I wonder what it must have been like for him and I wonder if the bloody horrors of trench-warfare caused or at least influenced his sometimes-contrary nature. I cannot even imagine what it must have been like. And so, often, when I stand in front of the 'monument aux morts' (monument to the dead) in my village square, I think of him, this man who went to war. That's when my heart goes home to Canada. I cannot help it. My head spins way back in time, back to my youth and the days of my mother's father, whom I called my Afi Arborg, and of going to town to visit him and my grandmother.

We were a farm family of Icelandic descent living near the town of Arborg in the Interlake region of Manitoba. I had a twin sister and three older brothers and I was crazy for town. It was six miles away. Being farm kids, going to Arborg for any reason was exciting. Usually the drive in was a small adventure in itself and even if it wasn't we'd be all revved up to turn it into one. Living in a rural community entitled us to knowing just about everybody that we encountered en route. Some of the neighbors drove unusual devices and it was a bonus when we chanced upon them on the way in. Often, we'd spy old Addi along the way, a bachelor who drove a little green jeep. After waving furiously, mostly at the funny contraption that he drove, the weathered little man would always smile and wave back. Other times we'd come upon Jói Ljósalandi. Jói, who always wore overalls and sported a jolly round middle, never owned a car and so he would drive the nine miles from where he lived near Hnausa all the way to Arborg on his Minneapolis Moline tractor. We'd giggle and wave, all the while thinking that we were big shots as our dusty blue Chevy Deluxe sped right on by him. Deep down though I'd feel sorry for him, thinking how humiliated that I would be if we had to drive to town on a tractor.

A train came to town at least once a week and if we were lucky enough to make it to the tracks at the right time, we'd sit and count the cars as they rattled on by. I always felt special when the whistle blew and the railroad men waved us on but our mother would always complain to everyone in her path that we'd had to stop for the 'God damn train'. Prairie trains were long and on a good day, or a bad day, depending on who was telling the story, we'd count up to 75 cars.

At times our rides into town were uneventful but sometimes the spotting of a certain black car, the presence of which was

very sporadic, caused me endless worry. Its driver, I supposed, was evil, because our parents clicked their tongues every time that they saw it parked anywhere and they did so, so consistently, that the car became the very personification of the woman behind its wheel. The automobile had an angry air about it and although I didn't know who the road hog at its helm was, I suspected her as being villainous, somebody akin to Walt Disney's modern day Cruella de Vil. I'd spy the intimidating beast parked somewhere and I'd shudder all the rest of the way to the village with the knowledge that the black car was back. We wouldn't see it for weeks at a time but then all of a sudden it would appear out of nowhere, overtaking our suddenly puffed out pale blue Chevy and leaving us far behind in the dust of the gravel road. I'd shrink down in my seat, not daring to move, and trying not to draw any attention to myself, while my mother clicked her tongue and my sister sat beside me as silent as I. Occasionally, the car would be parked next door to our *Amma* and *Afi's* house.

Then our mother would say, "Get in the house girls, and quick".

I wondered what the big deal was but I was scared to ask. I wasn't sure that I wanted to know.

Our grandparents lived in a tall two-story home with gray shingle-siding. Something never felt right about the big old house that was just 'parked there' on the side of a quiet street in town. Its siding was dull and cheerless and it looked like it had long since given up waiting for someone to take it back to where it belonged. It had been moved in from the Vidir/Framnes area west of Arborg where our grandparents had both grown up, and it was far too big for the small town lot on which it sat. Its upstairs held four rooms, each one deserted and barely furnished save for the odd dresser. I was always curious as to how the bedrooms might have looked in the 'olden' days when the house was still happy and people had actually lived in them. They were stinky and musty smelling and water stains marked the tattered wallpaper. Our Aunty Sigurros, our mother's youngest sister, had been born in one of them but I always wondered at anybody ever having lived on the remote deserted floor, never mind having landed up in one of these dusty old rooms upon your entry into the world like our poor Aunty Sig had. I was six and I was always feeling sorry about something.

Our grandparent's house was ancient! The weathered front door was enormous but it hung square and true, swinging freely on its hinges each time I busted through it with my siblings. The pungent odor of stale wood, a painful smell that I always imagined to be coming from the dark oak staircase, hung in the air… assaulting our senses each time we entered the old place. The staircase hugged the wall on the right of the foyer and as it rose up it curved and disappeared around a corner, making the steps precariously narrow on one side. The stairs dominated the entry and since I suffered from a fear of heights, I was scared witless of them. When I did manage to muster up the courage to climb to their very limit, usually egged on by my twin and my cousin, I would feel like I'd conquered Mount Everest. Then I would spend the whole time worrying about how I was going to get down again.

Along with all of their worldly possessions, our grandparents resided in two rooms of the house. While the parlor masqueraded as their bedroom, a big oil heater naturally divided the great room into a sitting room/kitchen. A table and a few mismatched wooden chairs, their backs ornately carved and painted an unlikely beaming shade of pink, sat on one side of the heater while a modern electric stove competed with a wood-

burning annex for the remaining space in the corner. On the other side sat a fancy buffet with mirror and a sofa. Photographs of our mother's dead sister crowded other family photos on small tabletops and walls while an enormous picture of our *Afi,* the soldier, looked down on them all from the wall in the room in which they slept. My *Afi* the soldier! He looked good in his uniform, standing straight and tall, but for me it was hard to recognize the handsome young man in the photo...this man I did not know.

Amma and *Afi's* parlor-turned-bedroom sat open and exposed for all to see. Just like us our grandparents had no indoor plumbing and so a pot under their bed sufficed for the night. I didn't like the fact that their bedroom wasn't hidden from view and that you could see their 'piss pot'! I didn't like to think of my grandparents having to do that and so I was embarrassed for them. I also thought it odd that they should have to live in their living room and so I was embarrassed about that too.

At the back of the house was an attached lean-to that had once served as a kitchen. Our mother told us that as a child, she had often slipped out of her upstairs bedroom window on warm summer nights and sat on its roof watching the stars in the sky. She liked to brag that during thunderstorms she had climbed out there and watched the lightning and listened to the thunder roar, sometimes getting caught and drenched in the ensuing downpours. My mother wasn't scared of heights and so I believed her although it was very hard for me to picture her as a child, and so, my mind would see her as my full-grown mother sitting up there on the roof in the rain.

This old forgotten kitchen reeked of 'town' and of another time when our *Amma* and *Afi* had owned a café called "The Coffee Shop". We'd rarely entered a restaurant and having never seen a banana split or a sundae we didn't even recognize some of the paraphernalia that lined the kitchen shelves but our mother had grown up in town, and so we considered her worldly. A strange knife with a curved blade that our grandfather had used to cut bananas from the great heavy bunches in the olden days lay in a drawer with a selection of silver spoons, some of them long and beautiful. Our mother told us that bananas used to come in gigantic bunches, just the way that they grew and that great hairy spiders, deadly tarantulas even, had sometimes stowed away in the colossal clusters and come to Canada from far away places. And so, I would imagine our *Afi* to be standing in his café, a safari hat on his head, wielding the sickle-shaped instrument and skillfully maneuvering it to free the banana bunches from the cluster for our *Amma,* who needed them for her cream pies and her banana splits. All this while our *Afi* would be fending off the hairy insects and stomping on them.

In the forgotten kitchen a dignified old hand pump stood guard. Painted a strange pale shade of yellow, it sat faithfully beside the long-abandoned sink on top of the counter. Our grandfather got his water from a well out back of the place and the old pump had simply come to town with the house. I wondered why we couldn't take it home and hook it up in our kitchen. Our well was a long way from our house and our water pail was always empty. The pump was obviously something from the 'olden days', something that wasn't useful anymore and so after several futile inquiries, I finally left it at that.

Located in the wasted space under the stairway and concealed behind a door in one corner of the sitting room, was a walk-in pantry. Fascinating foods that our mother never bought like store-bought peaches and tins of fruit juice, sat on shelves just at eye level. I wondered why

our grandparents lived so differently from us. Fancy cookie tins from days gone by lined the shelves and I'd stand and visit with them, staring at their pictures and willing myself to be a part of their pastoral scenes. It was here in one corner of this pantry that our *Afi* kept his cribbage board on a pretty, paper-lined shelf… our *Afi* the soldier, our *Afi* who had served overseas in World War I. Sometimes when we came to town the board would be out in plain view. I never knew quite what to think when that board was out. It was a bad sign. It usually meant that our grandfather had stayed up the whole night playing cribbage with the likes of Beggi Peg Leg and the Zator brothers. That's when our mother would grow disgusted and we would wonder at what the problem was. Our mother would be angry, our *Afi* would be cantankerous and our poor gentle *Amma* would be distraught.

Arni Anderson

The Zator 'boys' were a couple of hopeless bachelors who'd been in the war. Somehow, anyone who'd been in any war had the right to be a little more hopeless than the next guy, but I wasn't too sure how. Beggi, who was an Icelander like us, had a wooden leg and lived all by himself in a little caboose. Apparently, he was hopeless too. I just assumed that he had lost his leg in the war but really I didn't know where he'd lost it. We would hear stories about all of the times that he had taken his peg leg off and then gotten up; forgetting that he only had one leg. It was beyond me as to how you could forget that you only had one leg. I couldn't understand why our mother went on when our *Afi* played cribbage and so I always felt sorry for my grandfather, wondering if it wasn't she who was the unreasonable one. After all, mothers did have a way of sometimes being unreasonable.

My sister and I were always greeted with a very loud "Hello tvíburar (Hello twins)," the morning after one of his 'cribbage nights'. He'd put my sister and I up, one on each knee, and the three of us would immediately start to sing while our mother squinted her eyes and pursed her lips, tilting her head ever so slightly and giving him her warning look. Away we'd go, our *Afi* singing the loudest.

"Oh the cat had a kitten and the kitten had a pup. Hey old lady is your rhubarb up?"

The words made no sense and neither did our mother's dirty looks but that didn't matter, we'd just keep on singing, repeating the rhyme over and over and over again until quite suddenly, it would be time to leave. On these days we didn't stay long. Puzzled, we'd ride home in the back seat of the Chevy wondering why it was that our mother reacted so angrily each time that she heard the 'Rhubarb Song'. Of course I never asked. I wasn't at all sure that I wanted to know.

That the only place we'd ever heard this song was at our *Afi* Arborg's house didn't dawn on me until many years later and so it was then that I started to wonder about its origin. I still wasn't sure that I needed to know the truth behind the song but one day, on a hunch and feeling brave, I sang it to an older co-worker whose husband had been to war. I explained that I'd never heard the song anywhere else.

"Oh, that's certainly a lot nicer than the original version," she responded.

It hurt a bit, hearing that there was another version. After much coaxing, she finally agreed to sing the true version to me, half whispering, nervous and anxious, as if she was divulging some great guarded secret. The song turned out to be an old wartime ditty that the 'boys' had sung behind the trenches in World War I. Our *Afi* had changed the words to accommodate us, his dear little granddaughters. It was pure smut! Ugly! And it took a while to register.

"My *Afi* sang that!" I exclaimed.

Suddenly I understood my mother's every reaction, why she'd been uneasy each time she'd heard it for the 'Rhubarb Song' had just been a cover. Tucked skillfully away behind its pure innocence and its silly words, the real and so much darker side of life had sat smoldering away all along…the seedy side of life and war, the hatred, the killing, the dying…and my *Afi* had been there.

While our grandfather sang the song with us every time he had been on one of his 'toots', he never once slipped up and we of course didn't even know what a bender or a toot was. We thought that he was just happier on some days than he was on others. We were quite used to people being happier on some days than on others. He was always good to us. We didn't mind his 'benders' so much because whenever he'd been on one he'd steal our hearts away, stuffing us full of store-bought cookies and juice and daring our mother to stop him. That's when we were most truly his precious granddaughters. On 'better' days he would make us beautiful double-ended bubble blowers out of copper wire and we would sit on his back step with our cousin who lived right across the street, and blow bubbles into the wind. We spent hours this way, watching the wind carry our bubbles off into the great blue sky, contemplating what was in store for us and ultimately creating the bond that was going to last a lifetime between the three of us…

Sooner or later a car always honks (the French love to honk their horns) or a baby cries waking me from my memorial sleep and I am always forced back to reality. I live in France now. As I read the names of the dead on the 'monument aux morts' in my village square, I still cannot imagine having to go to war. Thank you my Afi. *Thank you.*

Toast to Iceland

Rev. Stefan M. Jonasson
Íslendingadagurinn
Gimli, Manitoba
Monday, August 6, 2012

As much as Icelanders may love their native home, it may be fairly said that many of the finest testimonials to our shared and beloved ancestral land and its people have been offered by those whose lives carried them far away from this home, across oceans and continents, for whom distance came to accentuate the beauty and bounty of the land they left behind. It was on an April evening back in 1839, at a gathering of Icelanders dwelling in Copenhagen and perhaps dreaming of independence, which was still more that a century away, that the great nineteenth-century poet Jónas Hallgrímsson offered a short but sublime tribute to their homeland, *Íslands minni* – A Toast to Iceland:

Þið þekkið fold með blíðri brá,
og bláum tindi fjalla,
og svanahljómi, silungsá,
og sælu blómi valla,
og bröttum fossi, björtum sjá
og breiðum jökulskalla —
drjúpi' hana blessun drottins á
um daga heimsins alla.

Our land of lakes forever fair
below blue mountain summits,
of swans, of salmon leaping where
the silver water plummets,
of glaciers swelling broad and bare
above earth's fiery sinews —
the Lord pour out his blessings there
as long as earth continues! [1]

Since that day, every subsequent toast to Iceland has been, in some measure, a frail attempt to capture the crisp poetry, simple elegance and soaring inspiration of Jónas's original, which remains the epitome of all tributes to the rugged and majestic land of our forebears.

As the descendant of emigrants rather than a native son, Iceland was long the land of my dreams but not the land of my nurture, a place familiar through stories rather than experience. Yet the first time I visited the country with my sister and brother, when the plane landed and the flight attendant came over the public address system saying simply, "velkomin heim," it seemed as though her words applied as equally to us as they did to those native Icelanders returning from abroad. Welcome home! Where else in the world are travellers greeted with the assumption that they are somehow returning home? What other place in the world could seem more at home to those of us who were raised on the lay and legend, saga and song that has conveyed the Icelandic culture to its daughters and sons, its grandchildren and great-grandchildren, wherever they may live?

On that first visit to Iceland, we stopped at several of the places that figure

so prominently in our family stories – farmsteads and churches with ties to our family extending over generations, whose names were inscribed in the family genealogies, familiar to our eyes and ears. In the church at Oddi, we gathered around the lovingly carved baptismal font where our *langamma* and other kinfolk had been christened, absorbing tales about its early minister Sæmundur the Wise and his adventures aboard – not least of which was his purported return to Iceland riding the back of the devil in the form of a seal – and his nineteenth-century successor, Matthías Jochumsson, who was likewise widely travelled but whose love for his homeland led him to write the lyrics of Iceland´s stirring national anthem – a hymn really – *Ó guð vors lands.* Afterwards, we wandered through the churchyard, looking for a familiar name on one of the stones, some tangible evidence that our family had once dwelt in this holiest of places, though no names immediately leapt out at us. Like so many rural churchyards, there are more unmarked mounds than marked graves and the sparsity of gravestones and surnames alike at first hid the resting places of kinfolk from us. At the family farmsteads, the farmhouses which once stood there – homes of turf and stone and wood – have long since dissolved back into the earth, though their names remain to bear witness to the lives of our ancestors.

Now it seems that there are two kinds of visitors to Iceland: those who travel there once, and who cherish the memories of their visit for a lifetime, and those who are seized by the country's embrace, returning again and again. I am one of the latter. On subsequent visits, I have been blessed to visit every quarter of the land, in the company of family and friends, returning with some 17,000 photographs, hundreds of books, dozens upon dozens of compact discs and videos, and more than enough memories and stories to carry me to a ripe old age. I have what is jokingly called "Iceland on the brain" and there is no cure – no cure at all! It is a condition that one carries to the grave. It has been my good fortune to look out to sea from the banks of Vopnafjörður, from the farm my *langafi* knew as a child; to wander the woods at Kjarnaskógur, a model of reforestation; to stand drenched and chilled near Iceland's countless waterfalls; to walk along the pebbly shoreline of Bólungarvík, where my *afi* lingered before sailing to Canada; and, most recently, to stride across the coarse lava and rock-rimmed *tún* of a great-great-grandfather who is said to have had a quarrel with the *huldufólk* there – and lost.

Iceland's natural landscape is enough to win the heart of any sensitive soul but, for those of us whose ancestors dwelled in this amazing land, every hill and every beach, every stream and every hot spring, every cairn and every horse trail is haunted with stories and alive with ancestors. The landscape isn't simply beautiful; it's personal. With Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, who looked back at his home in saga times and returned there to his certain death, and with the fictional farmers of Halldór Laxness's novel, *The Atom Station,* who built a church with no altar other than a window to the panoramic countryside, I profess the same creed: the hills are beautiful.

Alda Sigmundsdóttir, whose blog *The Iceland Weather Report* has captured the attention of thousands, writes, "The Icelanders have no palaces or stunning monuments of which to boast, but they do have their manuscripts, which they count as their most valuable national treasures." [2] Now notwithstanding her rhetorical splendour, Alda isn't entirely correct, for Iceland does have its palaces and monuments, although those who

are looking for a northern Taj Mahal or Buckingham Palace are sure to miss them. Iceland's Westminster is nestled in the great outdoors at Þingvellir, where free people gathered to discuss the affairs of the nation long before the kings and queens back on the continent thought to convene their citizens in houses of parliament. The cathedrals at Skálholt and Hólar, rising with startling grandeur in the midst of sparsely-populated rural districts, testify to the spiritual traditions that informed the lives of the Icelandic people across the generations, while small churches dot the landscape, serving as both shrines and community centres in even the most isolated places. In nearly every district, public pools and recreation facilities encourage athletics, from swimming to *glíma* to soccer and—need I even add it, in this Olympic season? – handball! The new concert hall Harpa rises from the sea and glistens with a thousand colours, night and day, as it echoes with the melodious sounds of choirs and orchestras, folksongs and jazz, reflecting in both light and sound the richness of the country´s musical heritage. And safely displayed in The Culture House, for all to see, are the ancient manuscripts themselves – the old sagas and Eddas that reveal the Icelanders as a literary people, steeped in history and genealogy – the early offerings of a literary culture that would flourish in more recent centuries in the form of poems and novels with a worldwide audience.

In this country with a population less than half the size of Winnipeg can be found all the culture necessary to sustain a entire nation – all the poetry and prose, all the music of every genre, all the cinema and broadcasting, all the painting and sculpture, all the ceramics and weaving. Everything! Absolutely everything!

Icelanders have preserved and enhanced their natural landscape, and have reached the heights of cultural achievement, while building a modern, democratic society that is repeatedly ranked as one the happiest and most peaceful societies anywhere in the world. And they have done so while maintaining one of the narrowest – if not the narrowest – distributions of wealth anywhere in the world, demonstrating for all to see that a nation can be cooperative and competitive at the same time, prosperous yet equitable, innovative yet egalitarian. Affluence and equity are not contrary qualities, but complementary ones. Throughout the course of human history, people have risen or fallen together.

And so we salute the land of our ancestors, with its pristine lakes and colourful mountain summits, its glistening glaciers and steaming hot springs, its thundering waterfalls and hard-won pastures. We give thanks for the swift, sure ties of love and kinship, solidarity and friendship, which bind us together, even today, across generations and oceans, and which reach out with welcoming arms to all who would cherish Iceland and its traditions. We stand amazed before the rich outpourings of culture, representing the highest strivings and aspirations of humankind. And we celebrate the modern democratic spirit that characterizes its people, inspiring the world with their determination and resilience, their social harmony and fairness, their essential decency and ingenuity. And so, with one voice we cry: To Iceland!

1. Translation (with minor edit) from Dick Ringler, *Bard of Iceland: Jónas Hallgrímsson, Poet and Scientist* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 168.

2. Alda Sigmundsdóttir, T*he Little Book of the Icelanders* (Reykjavík: Vaka-Helgafell, 2012), 13-14.

Halldór Laxness in Los Angeles: Under Surveillance

by Chay Lemoine

Halldór Laxness, after having spent time in the Benedictine monastery St. Maurice de Clervaux in Luxembourg, arrived in Los Angeles in 1927 with aspirations of becoming a Hollywood screenwriter for silent motion pictures. Like early Americans who heeded the call to "go west" Halldór was energetic and motivated. Fortunately for lovers of great literature that dream did not come to fruition. Although he did not write for film, the two years that he spent in Los Angeles were not wasted. The two years as an unemployed screenwriter were productive and formative.

It was while in the United States that Halldór had an important epiphany and developed his distinctive Icelandic literary voice. While in the United States, Halldór began work on what would become his first major novel *Salka Valka.* Halldór developed his strong socialist principles while observing the starving unemployed in the street and was also introduced to Upton Sinclair whose socialist politics and penchant for writing social novels influenced young Laxness.

Halldór saw the social implications of socialism and was naïve regarding the political aspects. This naïveté would continue to be a facet of Halldór's "socialist period". Halldór's lack of understanding of political power as the primary social determinant may have led to his being unaware of his blacklisting by the United States later in his career and it may have contributed to one of the more significant episodes of his time in the United States when he was detained by the police and threatened with deportation.

When Halldór arrived in Los Angeles Hollywood was in a flux. In 1927 Warner Brothers in the midst of a financial crisis risked a deal with Western Electric and produced the first commercially successful talkie *The Jazz Singer.* The huge success of the film transformed the motion picture industry. By the end of 1928 of the 28,000 movie houses in the United States over 13,000 were equipped for sound. By the end of 1930, silent movies were dead. If Halldór fell in love with the silent film as art form he was not alone. Charlie Chaplin believed that talkies were "ruining the great beauty of silence". He feared that that one of the oldest art forms, the pantomime, was under threat and of course he was ultimately correct. For many years Chaplin refused to make a talkie. This restructuring of the focus of Hollywood could have been a factor in Halldór having a difficult time gaining employment as a screenwriter. Halldór was a great story teller and the new films that were being written for release as talkies were most often musicals and action films with car chases. One of the prevailing characteristics of the very early talkies was that they there were so universally bad.

Halldór unaware of the difficulty

of working in the Hollywood dream factory, arrived in Los Angeles excited and ready to write great films. Within a week of arriving in Hollywood he set about finding an agent. "I have been in contact with a damn great woman about becoming an agent for me; she has been an agent for various well-known men in the film world". Halldór was very much smitten with Tinseltown. "Life here in Hollywood is enormously entertaining during the evenings". He began in earnest to learn the art of film making. In order to make money for his stay in California Halldór hit the lecture circuit speaking for various organizations most of the time relating to Icelandic topics. Although not all were lucrative he would sometimes get as much as $100 a lecture.

In 1928 Halldór got the break he was waiting for. He writes his fiancée Inga in Iceland "As I write these lines, everything seems to indicate that my "game" here in Hollywood is achieving some results…in other words I have succeeded in getting Hollywood interested, and there are 50,000 dollars at hand to film a script written by me". The screenplay was to be filmed in Iceland and Halldór was concerned that if the details were not taken care of immediately there would not be enough sunshine for filming. The film did not get beyond the planning stage. The studio later had the idea of moving the setting of the script to Kentucky to which Halldór told them "that he did not come there to be made a fool of".

While in the United States Halldór began to discern the different sensibilities in the people of the lands he has visited and those of his countrymen. In a letter to Inga in March of 1928 Halldór wrote:

I feel that if I do not start to 'pull myself together' from now on I shall be just a rootless piece of wreckage for the rest of my life. It is insane to tear oneself away from the culture of one's own country and to roam about among foreigners for years on end. In that way one will not be of full value anywhere – will neither be whole or half, and nowhere accomplish anything positive…Nothing has taught me better to appreciate Iceland- the land and the people – than my stay in the million-peopled cities of the United States and my experience of the spirit prevailing there….I have lived through a number of adventures here which has taught me to judge my worth in relation to my nationality. I am an Icelander, the complete Icelander - that is what I have learned In the course of the past few months.

This profound realization changed the course of Laxness' life and the life of Icelandic and World Literature. It is a decision that could be an obvious one simply expressed as "write what you know". But it was one that was not congruent with Halldór's goal of writing for the world. Would the world be ready to hear the herald calling from a small island nation of so few and which had never expressed its unique vision on a grand scale? To quote "Vladamir Nabakov "Genius is an African who dreams of snow". That improbable dream grew to produce some of the greatest books ever written.

In December of 1928 Halldór wrote an article for *People's Paper* in honor of Sinclair Lewis' fiftieth birthday. Halldór describes the article in a letter to Sinclair written in January 1930 "The great part of my essay about you is a study of the trends of American civilization as embodied in the commercialist and pointing out your mission of throwing down the standards and creating new ones." He observed in the article that Americans were prevented from accessing information that would allow them to become knowledgeable of social issues. "In this case every one hundred per cent of Americans is a

complete idiot". The article was reprinted in *Heimskringla* in January 1929. The official telling of the story seems to be lacking in believability. The 100% idiocy comment was said to infuriate Icelanders living in Canada and the United States. Why it angered the Canadians is unclear. Several Western Icelanders (Icelanders living in the United States) under the leadership of G. T. Athelstan who worked in the pest removal business contacted Washington and filed charges again Halldór saying that he intended injury to the United States.

In early June, 1929 Halldór wrote to his fiancée Inga, "The day before I came here to Ojai I was taken by policemen and brought to the police station in Los Angeles, where they conducted a private interrogation with me – I saw the documents that they had already gathered about me had become four-five thumbs thick. I was told that I had dangerous, political views which aimed at toppling the reigning social order and I had written articles about the United States in which I said that American were "idiots" etc."

This reaction seems like an extreme response to an article written in a country that had a little over 100,000 people where it expressed the view that Americans knew little about social issues. Halldór's passport was taken from him and he was confronted with a "false translation" of the article. According to Halldór's account he was then allowed to produce his own translation. This seems like an unusually generous act by the authorities. Halldór outraged, sought advice from Sinclair who advised contacting the American Civil Liberties Union. According to a *The Los Angeles Record* article Halldór was threatened with deportation. It would seem that eventually there was little interest in pursuing the case and under the auspices of the American Civil Liberties Union. Halldór received his passport back in October.

This incident is an important one as it was revisited in the press in the United States when reporting that Laxness had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It was used as way of demeaning Halldór's accomplishments and to portray him as a political extremist. Much can be gleaned from Halldór's letter describing the event. "I was told that I had dangerous political views, which aimed at toppling the reigning social order…". Writing an article on Sinclair and reporting that Americans are prevented from having all the information about the machinations of their government does not read like the writer is trying to cause a civil uprising. But the following preamble does seem to call for such action.

It is the historic mission of the working class to do away with capitalism. The army of production must be organized, not only for the everyday struggle with capitalists, but also to carry on production when capitalism shall have been overthrown. By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.

This preamble to the Industrial Workers of the World constitution is more in line with the call for action suggested by the police. Laxness' part time job of giving lectures may have caused him to be under surveillance and made him a candidate for deportation. Halldór gave a lecture at an IWW meeting supposedly on "fish". He was said not be impressed by their anarchist activities. Still a "foreigner's" association with this organization could result in action by the Federal Government.

Bill Haywood founded the Industrial Workers of the World in Chicago in 1905. The aim of the IWW (often known at the Wobblies) was to overthrow capitalism

and to establish socialism by uniting skilled and unskilled workers. During World War I the IWW was considered anti-war and it members were accused of draft evasion, sabotage and criminal syndicalism. By 1917 membership was over one hundred thousand. During the next ten years, through efforts of the Federal Government, membership fell drastically.

The union became widely known for its revolutionary goals and its violent reputation. During the First World War it was subject to vigilante attacks and prosecution under federal and state espionage, sedition and criminal syndication laws. During the last year of World War I the government moved to seize the records of the IWW and its locals. In California, because of the pressure by the Federal Government the IWW began to move its recruiting activities from the city to the farms. They were blamed for the August 1913 riots on a ranch in Wheatland, CA in which several public officials died.

Over the subsequent years, members of the IWW were shadowed. Ralph Chaplin editor of the *IWW Solidarity,* a union newspaper published in Chicago said "we were being shadowed night and day by federal and city gumshoes". Steps were taken to deport members of the IWW who were not citizens of the United States. The Bureau of Immigration denied naturalization to the members of the IWW during the 1920s on the grounds that an individual could not be a member of the IWW and be attached to the principals of the constitution. Since many core members of the IWW were immigrants, deporting or threatening to deport foreigners with any association with the trade union was a way that the Federal Government sought to make it unstable. They were often very successful.

It would have been more likely that the four-five thumbs thick file that was presented to Halldór was not likely merely the result of an article written in Iceland but the result of having spoken at the IWW union and his association with the labor union members however brief. It is not unreasonable to assume that every meeting of the union was under surveillance. Although Halldór may have talked about "fish" it is likely that his talk was peppered with comments that would be sure to please his audience and displease the Federal authorities. Even Halldór's association with Sinclair would make him suspect. Sinclair's views would be considered moderate in comparison with the IWW but like today many at that time consider radical Communism and Socialism to be of the same ilk. The subsequent lack of interest that was shown after Halldór was detained was more likely the result of Halldór's lack of continued support for the organization.

Halldór has a history of being profoundly unaware "that the dunces of the confederacy are all against him". Coming from a land of few he felt that every human had significance and it was a matter of merely explaining to the unaware the depth of the suffering of the poor and disenfranchised and the collective would gather to offer solace. Halldór eventually came to realize that real change comes from the creation of cultural mythologies that influenced minds and hearts. Halldór created new tales derived from the mystical landscape of his homeland and he began to write as if the world's very existence depended on producing works of great humanity and insight. These books have changed the lives of people around the world who have experienced his vision of hope, and humanity. The revolution is continuing perhaps in a way that Halldór may not have anticipated. While under watchful eyes of Federal and local authorities the seeds of insight that changed the literary landscape

forever were planted in the mind of a young Icelander amidst the chaotic world of Los Angeles.

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* Those with an interest in the life of Halldór Laxness would enjoy the excellent biography *The Islander* by Halldór Guðmundsson. It is the best and the most comprehensive biography of the writer currently available.

Divine, Deranged, or Fraudulent?
The Controversial, Short Life of Indriði Indriðason

by Ray Cavanaugh

On 31 August 1912 Indriði Indriðason – the individual around whom the Icelandic spiritualism movement was largely established – succumbed to the effects of tuberculosis at the Vífilsstaðir Sanatorium. He was 29 years old.

Indriðason's strange story begins on a remote Icelandic farm, where he was born in 1883. Details regarding his youth are sketchy, and it is likely that he received no formal education. His life becomes far more documented at age 22, when he surfaced in Reykjavík, where he worked as a printer's apprentice at the *Ísafold* newspaper.

During this time, Indriðason crossed paths with a certain woman at the house where he boarded. There was something about him that produced a strange effect on her. It wasn't anything amorous, but rather something more vague and mysterious.

Intrigued, the woman brought Indriðason to meet her friend, the writer Einar Hjörleifsson Kvaran, a connoisseur of interesting personalities. Kvaran felt even more strongly than she did that Indriðason was extraordinary, and that the young man could possibly tap into a channel beyond the scope of normal phenomena.

For the purpose of investigating Indriðason, Kvaran formed the Experimentalist Society. As if such attention wasn't flattering enough for Indriðason, he was also paid a legitimate salary. The one caveat was that he mustn't dare attempt to communicate with the spirit-world unless Society members were present.

It is important to point out that the Experimentalist Society was not some ramshackle group of madmen. Aside from the fact that its leader Kvaran was a prominent novelist, the Society's members included a high-ranking judge, an academic theologian, a psychiatrist and a newspaper editor, Björn Jónsson, who would later become Iceland's Prime Minister!

As Indriðason entered trancelike states, witnesses purported to feel a suddenly enhanced connection to dead relatives. Indriðason himself claimed his psyche was overtaken by his deceased granduncle, who had taught Icelandic at the University of Copenhagen. It was alleged that, during one such episode, he had successfully predicted a fire in

Copenhagen. Indriðason claimed the phenomena were becoming so intense that the Society relocated its sessions to an altogether separate venue.

With prominent citizens believing that there was something supernatural about Indriðason, he would soon become the "biggest celebrity in Iceland" and a "highly controversial figure." The book *Icelandic Spiritualism,* written by Loftur Reimar Gissurarson and William H. Swatos Jr., says that "the appearance of Indriðason in the beginning of 1905 undoubtedly played a major part in getting [modern] spiritualism established in Iceland."

Though some newspapers gave support to the Experimentalist Society, other editorial coverage ranged from scorn to outrage, dismissing the Society members as "charlatans and clowns" practicing a "ludicrous ghost-religion." Some labeled the Society's pursuits as "disgusting sickness and heresy" and bemoaned that "eminent and distinguished citizens were now practicing black magic."

In 1909 Indriðason and his fiancée, Jóna Guðnadóttir, caught typhoid fever while visiting the remote village where Indriðason's parents lived. His fiancée soon died, and his own health would never recover. From his Society sessions he was "forced to retire due to illness." An already tenuous physical condition worsened when he also contracted tuberculosis. He was then sent to theVífilsstaðir Sanatorium.

Before reaching the age of 30, Indriðason – the man who many believed could connect the living with the dead – joined the latter group. Soon after his death, the Experimentalist Society was dissolved, though it eventually saw a resurrection as the Icelandic Society for Psychical Research.

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

Published: Sunday, December 25, 2011, 3:00 PM

by Anne Saker, *The Oregonian*

Chapter One: Two letters

Buried inside *The Oregonian* of February 16, 1946, a story carried the headline, "11 G.I. Brides End Journey."

The ninth paragraph took note of Esther Sigurðardóttir and reported that she had "traded her Icelandish name for that of Mrs. Emerson Gavin just last January 4. Blonde, blue-eyed Mrs. Gavin and her soon-to-be-discharged soldier husband will live temporarily at the home of Mr. and Mrs. E.C. Gavin, 2826 S.E. 101st Ave."

A big photograph accompanied the story. Esther, a beauty with a sweet smile, a button nose and a beginner's English, gazes directly into the camera. She is 18. Her tall, handsome husband of six weeks, Army Pvt. Emerson Lawrence Gavin, called Larry, is 22. The photo captures him in profile; his expression blends happiness and fear. At right, his mother, Florence, hovers, looking away.

The young couple met when Gavin spent his World War II service at the U.S. base near Iceland's capital, Reykjavík. They eloped, then Esther announced to her family that she would follow Larry to Portland, in Oregon, in America.

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An Icelandic surname testifies baldly to paternity: father's first name with the suffix -sson or -dóttir. Among her people in Reykjavík, the war bride was known as Ragna Esther Sigurðardóttir The gentle girl was 13 when her mother died. Her father soon remarried and had more children.

Even though Esther had wed in secret, her father later threw the customary party at home. Her family begged Esther to delay her departure, she was so young, this was so sudden. And while Larry was polite and shy, her father worried. Esther simply said she was Larry's wife now. She would cross an ocean and a continent to be with him.

She promised to write. They let her go.

Months passed until the first letter arrived, dated May 18, 1946.

Dear father, I am wondering why I don't get letters from you. I have written you 6 letters and 2 wires.

Maybe you have forgotten me, or I have done something wrong, so you have to be angry?

If I have done something wrong, can

you please forgive me?

I am so far away from you and want so sorely to get some news from you and my brothers and sister.

Dear father, I am your daughter and will always be, maybe I have been a bad daughter.

I will never forget you while I am alive, I am so sorry; I never get a letter from you.

Seventeen more months went by without a word from Esther. The next letter carried a photograph of her outside a house with a brick chimney and a tall shrub. She holds her infant son, Raymond Leslie. The letter's date is Oct. 13, 1947.

My dear father, I am so happy to get a letter from you, but I don't understand why I don't get more letters from you, you tell me you have sent 6 letters, I only got 2.

This is my address. It is the new house Larry gave to me after the birth of our son. I told you in the last letter I had a son.

You asked me in the last letter, how things are going between me and Larry, we have been separated for 4 months now, he came and asked me to forgive him, he said he didn't understand why he does such things. I love Larry a lot and that will be better for the baby to stay together, we are happy now, you don't have to be afraid.

Larry asked you to forgive him, and says such things should not happen again.

Larry has always wanted to have a beautiful home and beautiful boy; you don't have to be afraid that he will do "it" again. He asked me to ask you if you can read English, if he writes to you.

Dear father, do you think I have done the right thing to forgive Larry and let him come back? I am so happy with Larry and there is no man who can take Larry's place.

I hope you are well, and could take a holiday and come over and visit us, we have a big house and there is always a place for you.

Dad, it will be great if you could come and see how good a housewife and mother I am.

You are a grandfather in America; it will be great if you could meet your grandson.

I send you some photos; I hope you have got those I send you before.

Be in the safe hands of God,

It is your loving daughter Esther (and Larry & Raymond)

That was the last word from Mrs. Emerson Gavin to the people who knew and loved Ragna Esther Sigurðardóttir. All of her father's letters came back to him. Going to America himself was prohibitive; in the years right after World War II, phone service was not universal, and calls were expensive. Sigurður Pétur Íshólm Klemenzson spent the rest of his life seeking people in his country and in Portland who could look for Esther. All the communication was by mail.

He died a shattered man in a 1970 house fire, bequeathing his heirs the mystery of Esther.

Chapter Two: His first marriage

Nearly a millennium ago, Iceland gave world literature the sagas and the Eddas, the first prose and poetry of Odin and Thor, royalty and magicians, giants and tricksters, all with interesting kinfolk. The epics speak of life on a volcanic island touching the Arctic Circle that long ago bred a hardy people.

Today's population of 320,000 is about half that of Portland's, and most Icelanders are distantly related. A family story is a community experience. For 60 years and three generations, the family of Ragna Esther Sigurðardóttir Gavin wrote chapters to the mystery of her disappearance in Portland.

But the search was difficult work from

halfway around the world. Her brothers and sister took over from their father, but their efforts went nowhere. A break came in 1993, when Esther's brother Kristinn Sigurðsson prodded the Icelandic Embassy to look. That search unearthed a 1985 obituary in *The Oregonian* for Esther's mother-in-law, Florence Gavin, the dour presence in the newspaper photograph of the war bride's arrival.

The embassy tried to look for the survivors. Larry Gavin eluded contact. His brother, Bill Gavin of Portland, was helpful at first. At the next phone call, he resisted questions, said he hadn't seen Larry for years. A third call found he had changed his number.

Over time, Kristinn Sigurðsson hired two private investigators. He paid 50,000 krona, about $400, to a criminologist in, of all places, West Virginia. Still no Esther.

But those searches had at least confirmed that Esther and Larry divorced, in 1951. In Reykjavík, her family studied the shocking contents of the Multnomah County Circuit Court file, including the revelation that at the end of her marriage of less than five years, Esther had a son and a daughter.

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In her divorce suit, Esther said Larry "has been guilty of a course of the greatest cruelty toward her rendering her life as his wife a burden in that time and again, he has set upon and bodily beaten her, hospitalizing her the fifth of July 1951 and upon her release again beating her without any provocation and threatening to kill her."

With Esther not able to care for the children and Larry charged with assault, the hospital arranged for Raymond, 4, and his sister, Donita, 13 months, to stay at the Waverly Baby Home.

Pioneers founded Waverly in 1888 to care for Oregon Trail orphans. In 1931, the home moved to a new, impressive brick building on Southeast Woodward Street and 35th Place; the governor's wife attended the opening. Waverly's mission expanded to care for abandoned and mistreated children. Many of its charges were eventually adopted.

Even after Esther got out of the hospital, a juvenile court order kept her children in the baby home. But Esther aimed to get them back at her divorce trial, Dec. 5, 1951, at the Multnomah County Courthouse before Judge Donald E. Long.

Larry did not show up. But Esther took the witness stand to testify that when she had recovered from the July beating, Larry put a gun to her back and forced her to drop the criminal charges. She had witnesses to his death threats.

Judge Long asked, "Is your health good now?"

"No," Esther replied, "I am really nervous."

But she was already rebuilding. She now worked at the White Stag Clothing Co., and she shared an apartment with a woman who could care for Raymond and Donita while Esther was on the job.

Long said the Waverly Baby Home had reported that the parents rarely visited. Esther objected: "I have seen them every week, and I buy them whatever I can."

The judge granted the divorce. He ordered Larry to pay $100 a month in support, about $870 today. He gave Esther full custody and directed her to the juvenile court to collect her children.

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Exactly one month after his divorce, Larry Gavin, by then 27, went to Seattle to marry Patsy Huson, 18, a descendant of Jesse Applegate, who blazed the southern trail to Oregon. This second marriage lasted longer than the first, and it was

even more violent for this wife and their five children. He thrashed his boys, and he considered it his duty as a father to initiate his girls sexually.

Melissa Gavin was 8 when her father asked for a back rub that led to incest. Her childhood ran on constant terror, and secrets abounded. Larry never mentioned having a mother, or a brother, or anything.

Yet just as unpredictably, Larry could be a charmer, a storyteller, a great dad sometimes. He taught his kids how to fish and to plant a garden. One Christmas, the Gavin children awakened to five brand-new bicycles under the tree.

Larry did a lot of jobs: delivering milk, driving a truck for *The Oregonian,* even programming early computers. But he couldn't hold one for long, and he often rousted Patsy and the kids at 2 a.m. to leave for some undetermined destination. Melissa counted up once: nine grade schools, six high schools.

Larry could disappear for days at a time, but it was worse when he came home, often in a rage, and he would beat his wife until covered in her blood. Patsy Gavin left him a thousand times, it seemed, but she always went back for her children to have a father.

When, at age 12, Melissa heard her father ask her little sister for a back rub, she could take it no more and found the courage to tell her mother. In lieu of criminal charges, Larry went for a mental evaluation at the Oregon State Hospital in Salem. He was examined and released.

Patsy finally divorced Larry in 1970 and settled in Vancouver. Melissa considered her mother a savior. Larry went on to a third marriage, eventually a fourth. Melissa saw him one Christmas but stayed away from him.

The secrets seeped out. In October 1985, Patsy announced to her children that their father did have a mother, she had just died and the family was going to her funeral the next day. Larry did not attend. His brother Bill and his family came, the first time Melissa had heard of them.

Melissa stumbled into adulthood. She married and divorced twice, had three children.

She worked for years in food service, even owned a place in Camas, but it went out of business and into bankruptcy. She had fond memories of her 10 years tending bar and tables at Wilfs at Union Station, the place to party for Portland money of a Simon Benson vintage.

She nursed her mother until Patsy died in 1997. She cares for her mother's horses to this day.

She met a nice man, and they moved into a bright, roomy house in Vancouver that she filled with stability, family dinners, holiday celebrations.

On Christmas night 2008, she finished cleaning up and sat at her computer for idle surfing. She thought of her father. She typed his name, and in a blink appeared a phone number in Jacksonville, Fla.

Living a retiree's life in the sun. She thought about that fact for two months.

Then she dialed the number. Larry's widow answered and said he passed away the month before.

Melissa hung up. Relief, giddiness, flowed. He was done. Dead. She could lock up the nightmares and walk in freedom. She tended to her family, her horses, her home. Melissa found some peace.

More than a year went by. Then a professional genealogist in Portland called and said she was working with a family in Iceland. She wanted to know what Melissa could say about her father's first marriage.

Continued in Volume 65#2

Helgi Olsen's Memoirs

Part II of a series of Helgi Olsen's memoirs

Continued from Volume 64 #4

L.H. Olsen Memoirs, Part 6

For a year or two the Nova Scotia newspapers and private letters from friends in the west had been full of the good times the prairie provinces were experiencing. A building boom was on. Everyone was employed. This news was quite disturbing to those settlers in Mooseland. (The Icelanders, as more appropriate, had changed the name to Markland.) New railway construction was expanding east and west from Winnipeg. They finally decided that the whole colony would vacate their present holdings and seek greener pastures in the golden west.

It was in the month of June 1883 that the disappointed group of colonists that just seven years previously had unpacked their coffers containing their sole worldly possessions, were now about to repack them for the journey to Winnipeg and points south. This time they would be going to a country that was already, to a certain extent, peopled by their fellow countrymen. There were less of those feelings of the unknown and uncertainty that beset them when they had first arrived in Nova Scotia. They had learned a little of the Canadian language and were therefore able to fend for themselves. They were no longer considered to be Eskimos, as was so often thought by the Nova Scotians when first they heard of these fair-skinned Icelanders from that far away place up in the Northern Atlantic.

The government of Nova Scotia was very helpful in relieving the colonists of their land holdings and helping to dispose of personal property so all had some cash in their pockets when they were about to take the train to their western destination.

The CPR had finished the rail line to Winnipeg and was working on the western division and branch lines south and north. Saskatchewan and Alberta were not at that time established as provinces but were part of the Northwest Territories. It was not until 1905 under the Sir Wilfrid Laurier's government that parts of the Territories were made into provinces.

The trains in use in those days were an old fashioned type. The steam engines were four-four wheelers, with a tall smokestack and they burned wood. The coaches were mostly of wood and the seats were of a folding type that could be used as seats in the daytime and pulled out to make bunks for sleeping. There were also upper bunks that could be dropped down to sleep in but they were not as elaborate as today. These coaches were called colonists as they were built especially for the colonial immigration trade. The meals that were served on these trains were quite substantial and much appreciated by the settlers, so the whole journey west was enjoyed by all.

A stop was made in Montreal and the travellers got out to stretch their legs. Many took a stroll along the main street, window-shopping. When the train was about to pull out one of the passengers came running forward shouting, "Biðið piltar. Guðrún mín varð eftir," meaning that his wife was being left behind. Just then she was seen running, holding her long skirts up, along the platform. She explained that she was only trying on some hats and had forgotten the time.

Formerly, travellers had gotten off at

Sarnia and travelled by boat via the Great Lakes to the port of Duluth but now the railway track had been built along the north shore of Lake Superior. The immigrants arrived in Winnipeg on June 15, 1883. Two weeks later my brother Fred was born, with the assistance of that great humanitarian and midwife Rebecca Jonson, who, with her late husband, had arrived in Winnipeg a few years earlier.

Helgi Olsen's Memoirs, Part 7

Glowing accounts of the flourishing conditions in the new city of Winnipeg were shared between the Icelanders in Nova Scotia. Stories of the great boom that was in progress, resulting from the arrival of the railway to Winnipeg and the word that the railway was continuing on to the Pacific Coast were heard in Nova Scotia. All this excited the longing of the discontented pioneers. They made plans to get rid of their property in the Markland settlement. On June 10th, 1883, the settlers loaded their effects on to colonist cars and said good-bye to Nova Scotia forever.

Father decided to go along with the group so he gathered up his belongings and joined the others at the station.

The trip to Winnipeg was rather tedious but outside of that it was uneventful and they all arrived in Winnipeg in good spirits. They were tired but most had the feeling of relief. Outlook on life looked so much more promising here in the west, with wide-open prairies unobstructed by mountains, forests or human habitation. And, indeed, their fortunes took a change for the better from the moment that they landed in Winnipeg.

Friends and relatives met the traveller in the old Immigration building, close by the C.P.R. station. There they had the chance of cleaning up and getting tidy before meeting any visitors. Their city friends had by now learned the jargon of the Winnipeg Icelanders. "Oh Mamma, varst þú seasick on the way?" was common for young girls who had gained employment in Winnipeg, and had almost forgotten their mother tongue.

Father and his brother Björn were fortunate in getting a house that was for rent not far from the station, this was on Euclid Avenue and the rent was $10.00 per month. Both immediately got work on the railroad leading south from Winnipeg to Grand Forks, but had to quit when the cold weather set in. During the winter months, they made a little extra cash by going out to buck wood for the residents for a dollar a cord for three cuts or seventy-five cents for two cuts, but only fifty cents if the wood was merely sawed in two pieces.

The group that had lived in the Markland settlement, in Nova Scotia, split up after coming to Winnipeg. Some going to Pembina County in the United States, others went to Churchbridge, Saskatchewan, while most stayed in Winnipeg. All did well for themselves, both financially and spiritually.

Björn decided he would like to go out farming, while father wanted to be a city worker. Father was fortunate, as the spring after their arrival in Winnipeg the G.F. Stephens Paint and Glass Company hired him. He became chief paint mixer and was in full charge of warehouse production. He was with this firm until he died, prematurely, at the age of fifty-four in 1902. His death was from the lingering effects of his ailment and former operation.

Now with a permanent job, Father looked around to expand. He bought one lot on Boundary Street (Boundary Street later became Maryland Street and was the western limits of the newly organized city of Winnipeg.) He also bought two lots on the street west, McGee Street. The two lots on McGee Street each had a house and were always rented. So financially he was doing quite well.

Helgi Olsen's Memoirs, Part 8

It was the 15th of June 1883, when my parents arrived in Winnipeg from Nova Scotia. Two weeks later, my brother Fred, was born. There were now three in the family: Oliver born in Iceland, Guðrún (Jenny) born in Halifax, and Fred born in Winnipeg. Three others were born on Boundary Street, Dan, Leonard (or Helgi, as he was familiarly called), and Anna. This was quite a family to support. With his daily wages boosted by the income from the cows Father soon had a brighter outlook on life.

The 1882 boom was now about finished. The shadow of the rebellion (by the Métis for land rights) that was brewing in the Northwest Territories had a detrimental effect on business and created a lot of hardship during the winter of 1884-85. The fighting didn't last long. A great victory celebration awaited the troops on arrival back in Winnipeg. The city hall, that famous monstrosity, was being built on Main Street, the welcoming ceremonies taking place amid the rubbish of construction material. Peace and quiet reigned in the western provinces. Land settlements increased. People from many countries flocked by the thousands to Western Canada.

When the Selkirk settlement scheme was first planned, the whole area was divided into six Parishes. All surveys were based on these Parishes. The land was divided into lots, all facing the river and extending back for two or more miles. All land titles, when describing the particular property, specify in which parish the piece of land lies in.

So we find that I was born on Boundary

PHOTO COURTESY OF DON OLSEN

Family photo: Helgi, Lára, three daughters and one son, Summer 1945

Street, in the Parish of St. James. Boundary Street was so named because it was the western limit of the new city of Winnipeg. (The name was later changed to Maryland Street.) This west end was commonly known as the prairies, as there were just a scattered number of houses, mostly dairy farms. To the west of Toronto Street, was a long waste of open prairie, as far as the eye could see, with the exception that away out west was a long street called Thomas Street. Here was a row of large houses of the segregated red light district, which appeared to all appearances, a very busy city within a city, with the constant movements of horse drawn cabs to and fro conveying customers back and forth

Helgi Olsen's Memoirs, Part 9

The historical growth of Winnipeg reads like a novel. From 1872, the year of Incorporation, it was enlarged in 1892 to include part of St. Boniface and Fort Rouge south of the Assiniboine River; then again in 1902 it was extended to its present city limits.

The name Fort Garry was changed to that of Winnipeg at incorporation. The word Winnipeg comes from the Indian word meaning muddy waters. Every spring the soft Red River gumbo got so churned up during the heavy rains that it took a long time to dry up. Carts and wagons were getting mired on the Main Street so it was thought to be more appropriate to name the new city from its natural environment.

The main thoroughfare going north from the Fort, later named Main Street, contained so many low spots that the traffic went around the puddles and eventually the street was laid out wide enough to avoid these wet spots. In the late eighties, attempts were made to pave Main Street with cedar wood blocks but the heavy drays soon cut through the blocks and they were constantly being replaced. Only with the

PHOTO COURTESY OF DON OLSEN

Helgi and Lára on Vancouver Island ca. 1961

coming use of concrete and asphalt were the streets made firm enough to bear the weight of traffic common to all city thoroughfares.

Motive power was oxen for slow moving traffic while dray horses were used for such jobs as drayage within the city. Light horses did delivery service. Many of the more affluent homeowners had their own private horses kept for their carriages. In the winter these men could be seen driving along the streets in a nice cutter and wrapped up in their buffalo robes, the harness being decorated with a belt of round bells that jingled melodiously as the steeds high stepped along the icy streets. When turning the corners the sleighs would slide right across the street sometimes with ludicrous results as a young man and his girlfriend found themselves thrown out and were mixed up in all their robes, much to the delight of the bystanders.

In the year 1882, the City of Winnipeg granted a franchise to A.W. Austin to operate a horse-drawn streetcar. Tracks were laid on Main Street from the CPR Station, south to Assiniboine Avenue and along Portage Avenue west to Kennedy Street, then south to Broadway and east to Main Street. Owing to the soft condition of the soil the rails were laid on logs that were put down side by side. This was also done so that the horse's feet would not get caught between the ties. A team of horses hauled these streetcars while the driver stood on a platform that was attached to the front of the car. A conductor was along too, to collect the fares. These horse drawn streetcars were in use until 1892 when electric power was installed in Winnipeg, the power being generated by a steam plant just off Water Street. The Winnipeg Electric Street Railway Company supplied power to shops and homes. The cars were small and rather crude at first. They were driven by a motorman and had motors at both ends. A second man acted as conductor and took the fares. At the end of the line, instead of turning around the two men carried the cowcatcher from the front and hitched it to the other end, put the motor levers in place and away they went. The wheels were set in the center so when the car went over some rough part of the track it would rock back and forth just like the Toonerville Trolley.

Besides the Main, Portage, and Broadway run, there was the Belt Line that ran west on Notre Dame to Sherbrook, north to Logan Avenue, then east to Main Street, from Main Street to Portage Avenue and around the corner to Notre Dame Avenue.

The Park Line was opened about 1900. It ran out to River Park, then the most popular recreation park in town. Other streetcars ran out of town, one to Headingley, another to Stonewall, and a third to Selkirk. These out-of-town runs were soon abandoned as they did not pay. On the Park Line's summer run, they used open cars with the seats crosswise. You entered anywhere from the side. The conductor swung from aisle to aisle carrying his ticket box in his hand. There were no Sunday schedules. One-man-controlled cars were installed shortly before the First World War and the Sunday service was then also first introduced.

Artificial gas was installed in the late 1870s. Streetlights were set up on Main Street from the Depot to Broadway. This meant that a man made rounds each evening to light the lamps, then again in the morning to extinguish them. Gas lines were also installed in homes for lighting and cooking. This was considered more modern then the old-fashioned coal oil lamps.

Water was the big question in the early days. Those who lived some distance from the river had water peddled to them from ox-drawn carts. The water was pumped from the Red River at the foot of Water Street (hence the name) into barrels and

sold for twenty-five cents per pail-full. Then one or two enterprising young men had water wells drilled and sold water from those wells. Soon the City had wells drilled at convenient points. There the water was free for the taking. Sewers and water mains were installed in the downtown section some time before the turn of the century. The water was then pumped from the Assiniboine River just east of the Maryland Bridge. The pumping station was on Cornish Avenue where the Cornish Library now stands.

Helgi Olsen's Memoirs, Part 10

My older brothers and my sister went to schools that were nearest at that time. The Mulvey School was the nearest. It was on Maryland Street, just south of Portage Avenue. When that burned down, in 1894 or 95, Oliver went to the Carlton at Carlton Street and St. Mary's Road; Fred went to Central at William Avenue and Ellen Street; Jenny went to Pinkham at Pacific Avenue and Tecumseh Street; and Dan and I attended the new Mulvey School after it was rebuilt in 1896; while Anna attended the new Somerset School on Sherbrook Street and Notre Dame Avenue. There was no dearth of schools in those days, but we had to walk over a mile to get there, in all sorts of weather, but we didn't mind as we were hardy in those days long past, but not forgotten.

The Mulvey School had the unique reputation of having been built five times and burned down three. The School was built on Maryland Street at the corner of Broadway Avenue. It was named in honour of Charles Mulvey, the then Chairman of the Winnipeg School Board.

The first building was of frame construction, two stories high, with outside toilets and was heated by a huge wood-burning box stove. There were two classrooms, one on each floor. This building was erected in 1888. This school burned down one cold winter night in 1890. Another building was erected on the same site and of the same size. This time bricks were used.

It was soon discovered that this school building was far too small for the growing population and another building was built, a little to the south. This building was of wood construction and was two and a half stories high. The first two floors were used as class rooms, while the attic was used as a public museum. It was reported that this museum contained the greatest collection of early Manitoba and western artefacts and of Indian lore. But, very unfortunately, the school building caught fire and was completely destroyed, museum and all, in 1895. Steps were taken immediately to erect a new school, this time of brick and stone.

I recollect quite distinctly the many classes and teachers in charge from grade one up. Miss Harris was my first teacher in grade one. She was kind and gentle but quite firm in her decisions. Miss Hill in grade two was very fond of music and marching. I remember marching around the room while someone played a mouth organ. One even played a violin, Siggy Torfason. The grade three teacher was a Miss Collins. She was very interested in all Indian legends and explained so well, the meaning of Indian words found in Longfellow's poem, "The Song of Hiawatha." We could picture the scene of the black forest behind the tepee and the bright and shiny waters of Gitche Gumee. I believe that she was part Indian and very smart and bright. Grade four was another Miss Harris, no relation to the Miss Harris in grade one. It was while I was in Miss Harris's grade four class that the incident of the cat killing happened.

It was a cold a frosty morning in mid-December. The children hurried into their

classrooms as it was too cold to stand around outside. I was entering the schoolyard this particular morning along with a lot of others. The front door opened suddenly and the Principal, Mr. Clark, came out holding a small cat by its hind legs. He then turned to his right and swung the cat a number of times, up against the brown stone basement wall, then turned to the crowd of children that stood there opened-mouthed in horror, and threw the body of the cat among them saying: "Here is a football to play with." He then turned around and went back in. This affair was duly reported in the daily newspaper but the School Board took no disciplinary action against the Principal.

The grade five teacher was a typical Irish woman. She had red hair and a temper to match. But, in spite of that she was a good teacher and very conscientious in her duties.

Miss McKracken was a noble woman, precise in all her manners and she really tried hard to get her pupils to pass their exam tests. Grade seven and eight were in the charge of the Principal, except when there were too many pupils. The overflow was taken care of in the spare room on the main floor. Here at Mulvey School I did my preparation for my later life and pleasant nostalgic memories still linger.

On the prairie, lying between Maryland Street and Toronto Street was a little rise that in the early spring thaws became a small island. Here when the air became warm and we liked to play outside, we would take off our shoes and stockings and wade across (It was about a foot deep). On the island the ground was nice and dry. Here on many occasions, up to fifty or sixty kids would gather and play games: pom-pom pull-away, prisoner's base, tippy and knobby. This was a sort of lacrosse game, played with two rubber rings tied together by a piece of string and a straight stick was used instead of the usual webbed stick and ball. This island would be about where Victor Street is now. The most

PHOTO COURTESY OF DON OLSEN

Lára, Helgi and Ann Eyford (Lára's sister) Iceland July 1962

fun was in the evenings when we would sit around a fire and roast potatoes. There never was, to my knowledge, any roughness or disturbances. The kids were all of a friendly nature and were out for a good time.

Helgi Olsen's Memoirs, Part 11

Winnipeg was fortunately blessed with many natural beauty spots that were kept and preserved as public parks. River Park, on the Red River, has now been turned over to urban developers and has become a residential district. In its heyday, River Park was a large park with a racecourse, baseball diamond, and lacrosse field within a fenced-off enclosure. Outside the fence was a recreational area, with a large dance pavilion, concession booths and a Zoo of considerable size. The Park was owned by the Winnipeg Street Railway Company and drew its profits from the well patronized streetcars that ran out there, a distance of about three miles. In the summer time, they would run open cars, with seats set crossways. The fare was at all times five cents or six for a quarter. The park supervisor was a relative of mine by marriage, Nickolas Ottenson, called Nick for short. His wife Anna was an aunt on my mother's side. We used to go out there a lot to spend the day, and then drop in on my aunt for a cup of coffee.

One summer, the Park received a consignment of a small herd of elk. That fall, Nick invited some friends, among who were my brothers Oliver and Fred and me. Oliver had just bought himself a new coonskin coat and a nice Christy stiff hat. The group were taken around and shown what was going on and then we were taken into the enclosure where the herd of elk were feeding at a hay rack. As we neared the animals we noticed the bull elk held his head up in an alert manner. This bull elk had always been a pet with Nick so he walked up to it and began to stroke it when suddenly the deer rose up on its hind legs and chopped down on Oliver. Oliver just had time to duck and thereby save his head but the deer's sharp pointed hoof clove through the new hat, ruining it completely. Nick came immediately to the rescue as the now apparently roused animal was determined to get at Oliver again. Nick managed to keep the elk back while we all scrambled to safety through the gate. It appeared when talking about this animal's attack on Oliver that the deer took offence to the smell of the new coonskin coat he was wearing. If Oliver had not ducked just at the right time, the deer's hoof would have cloven his head right open. Nick never took any chances with his animals thereafter.

Winnipeg was not always as well served with public utilities, as it is now. The first water used was from the rivers, that were then uncontaminated or polluted as they are now. Those living back from the river had water delivered to their homes. All rainwater was carefully preserved and used for washing. Wells were later drilled and pumps located at convenient points, where one could go and bring home two pails full, at a time, by using the wooden water carrying racks that kept the pails from rubbing against one's legs. Water was also drawn from these wells to flood the skating rinks in the wintertime.

Just behind our place, on what is now John M. King School ground, was a rink maintained entirely by the kids in the neighbourhood. The water had to be brought in from the well that was at the corner of Ellice and Sherbrook. It was over a quarter of a mile, but that did not deter the boys. They borrowed barrels, washtubs, wash boilers, and even some carried the water in pails. With many eager hands, the job was soon done, and the fun began with playing hockey, skating or what have you. On bright moonlit nights, or any other night, when lanterns were brought out and with an old phonograph playing some waltz tune, folks would skate in rhythm to the music and a wonderful time would be enjoyed by all.

How times have changed. Then, people made their own fun, in those far off days. Even the dancing is not the same. All is so much more artificial and the people and the people do not enjoy themselves as we did.

There were graceful ballroom dances, where cards were used to assure you of a partner. Waltzes, two-steps, schottisches, and the graceful lancer were on every program. Then there were the ever common and fun provoking square dances, where you would swing your partner off her feet.

In the country dances, the fiddle was the most common musical instrument. It was considered classy if there was a guitar accompanist. A mouth organ and an autoharp, played by the same man, were lots of fun to dance to. When a square dance was called, a man would jump out on the floor and beckon to the girl of his choice, who would be watching closely, hoping to be called up. Going home in the early morning, when you were tired after dancing all night and sweating, you would wrap up in blankets and cuddle down in a double box, with a spirited team trotting away to the sound of the sleigh bells. The hardest part of all was when you got home there were the chores to do; milking the cows, cleaning the barn and so forth. But it was all fun.

Continued in Volume 65 #2

POETRY

Lost and Found

By Vala Hafstad ©

We search for so much in our lives:

For love and for husbands and wives,

For meaning, compassion and hope,

Or someone with whom to elope.

For deals on Italian wine,

Or gifts with a purchase online,

For diets that do not depress,

And jobs without worry or stress.

We look for a room with a view,

For passions we want to pursue,

Or hobbies that make us feel free,

And things brought ashore by the sea.

And often our mind will not rest,

For we can be truly distressed

If we cannot find what is lost–

A search for oneself can exhaust.

This happened to someone I know:

To Iceland, alone, did she go.

She walked off her bus dressed in black,

But wore something red coming back.

In red, no one knew who she was.

Apparently, it was because

In red, she looked young and so fair.

Besides, she had tied back her hair.

But where was the woman in black?

She left and she never came back.

They searched by the canyon and stream.

My friend, dressed in red, joined the team.

She crossed over glacier and ice

And covered some areas twice.

Exhausted, she came to a creek.

The water was clear–how unique!

Her face was reflected right there

And, suddenly, she was aware

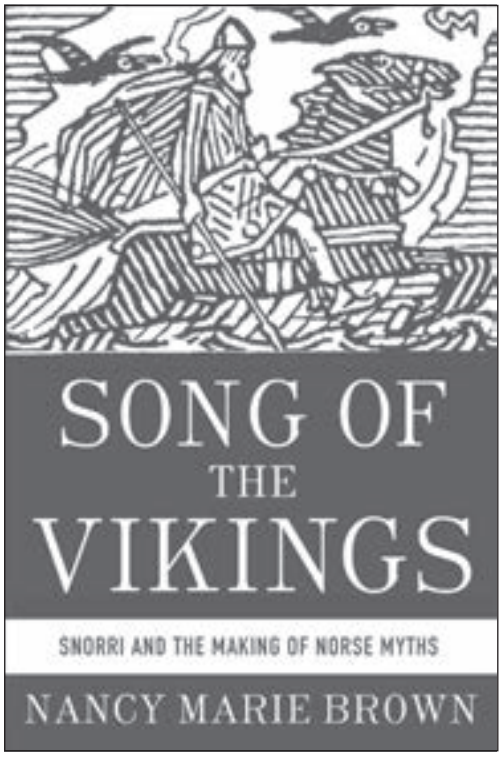
The woman she thought might have drowned,

Was she–yes, herself–she was found!

Book Review

Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths

by Nancy Marie Brown



Reviewed by Christina Sunley
Pulisher: Palgrave Macmillan
October 30, 2012
Hardcover, 256 pages
ISBN-10: 0230338844
ISBN-13: 978-0230338845

Has the day finally come when the medieval Icelandic writer Snorri Sturluson becomes a household name? Hardly. But Nancy Marie Brown's new biography, *Song of the Vikings: Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths*, may take us as close to that day as we're likely to come.

Aside from medieval scholars and Icelanders, few people claim familiarity with Snorri Sturluson. Yet if anyone can rescue Snorri from obscurity and bring him to life for modern readers, it is Brown, who has already proven her ability to write compellingly about obscure figures from Viking times in her highly praised book about Gudrid the Far-Traveler (*The Far Traveler*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2007).

In this well-researched and lively account, Brown depicts Snorri as a complicated, deeply intelligent, fiercely ambitious man, fat and gouty and prone to drink. She takes us from Snorri's birth into the powerful Sturling clan; to his fosterage by the most learned man in Iceland; through his career as lawspeaker and chieftain, including a stint in the Norwegian court; on to his literary works; and finally to his gruesome assassination under the orders of the Norwegian King, cringing in his cellar in his nightshirt, pleading for his life.

It was an ignominious end for one who had once been the most powerful man in Iceland. (Brown goes so far as to claim that Snorri yearned to be the "uncrowned king" of Iceland at a time

when Iceland was the rare country in Europe with no sovereign ruler.) Born to a leading family, Snorri married a wealthy heiress, acquired multiple land holdings, and at one point owned seven chieftaincies. Brown portrays Snorri as a cunning power broker who even arranged his children's marriages to serve his own ends, alienating many of his extended family in the process.

That Snorri was a wily politician is undisputed. How he used that power ultimately, however, is still unresolved. Brown states that "Snorri's greed and ambition cost Iceland its independence." But such a claim is by no means historical fact, and Brown herself admits that Snorri's dealings with King Hakon of Norway at a critical juncture are still in dispute. In forming an allegiance and accepting the title of Baron from King Hakon in 1220, did Snorri also pledge that he would persuade Iceland's leaders to succumb to Norwegian rule? If so – and historians still disagree on this point – did Snorri's actions really bring about the loss of Icelandic independence twenty years after his death? Was Snorri, one of Iceland's most revered writers, also a traitor?

These questions are still unresolved in Icelandic historiography. The truth, as Brown readily admits, is that there is a dearth of information about Snorri's life: no letters, diaries or contemporaneous accounts. Most of what we know comes from the writings of a nephew of Snorri's who did not think well of him. Yet despite the lasting smear on Snorri's reputation left from his shady dealings with the King, Snorri's legacy as a writer of great import is undisputed.

Although authorship was a murky issue in Snorri's era, a time when writers' names were rarely linked to their works, it is now generally agreed that Snorri is the author of three key works of medieval literature: *The Prose Edda, Egil's Saga,* and *Heimskringla. Heimskringla* is an exhaustive chronicle of Norwegian kings through the twelfth century and has become a key source for historians. *Egil's Saga* tells the story of the mercurial Viking warrior-poet Egill Skallagrímsson and is considered one of the major Icelandic sagas. Yet it is for *The Prose Edda* that Snorri is most well known today.

The Prose Edda is a treatise on the art of skaldic poetry, which was a verse form that relied so extensively on a knowledge of Norse mythology that without such understanding the poems were virtually incomprehensible. Any pagan worth his

salt would understand these references, but after a couple of centuries of Christianity, Scandinavians were losing their collective ability to appreciate such verse. *The Prose Edda* was Snorri's attempt to keep skaldic poetry alive by not only explaining its complex verse forms, but also the Norse mythology upon which the poetry relied.

As it turns out, Snorri's book has become the main surviving source of Norse mythology. Almost everything we know about Freyja, Odin, Loki, Baldur and Thor comes from Snorri. While Snorri didn't succeed in preserving the art of skaldic poetry, he did manage to save the life of Norse mythology, and Brown does a wonderful job of weaving these myths throughout *Song of the Vikings*. Yet she also raises an interesting question, and it is here that the book's subtitle, *Snorri and the Making of Norse Myths,* comes into play. Did Snorri simply record the Norse myths – or did he have a hand in creating them?

Snorri, Brown contends, may have attempted to document fragments of surviving myth as a purely academic and historic exercise, but ultimately he embellished and possibly even invented Norse mythology as we know it:

"Our modern understanding of the ancient Scandinavian belief system… is a product of Snorri's imagination."

Take, for example, the myth of how the world began in Ginnungagap, where life was first sparked by the juncture of fire and ice. Or Ragnarok, the Norse apocalypse, depicted in a dramatic clash of fiery eruptions and blackened skies. All reminiscent of … Iceland. Certainly not the geologically tame countries of Scandinavia where such myths supposedly originated, long before Iceland was even settled. Did Snorri, who had lived since birth amidst Iceland's volcanoes and glaciers, add those details himself? And was Odin as important to the Scandinavian pantheon as Snorri's *Prose Edda* makes him out to be – or as the deity of poetry, was Odin simply Snorri's personal favorite among the gods, and in reality much less important than Thor?

That Snorri brought a Christian perspective to his rendering of Norse mythology is generally acknowledged by modern scholars, but the idea that certain myths or aspects of them might actually have been invented by Snorri is an interesting – and controversial – contention.

On safer ground is Brown's effort to prove Snorri's literary legacy, to which she devotes the last chapter of the book. Snorri's name may not be well known today, but Brown maintains that eight centuries later his influence is widely felt through popular depictions of Norse myths and Viking heroes, including films, comic books, video games, and, of course, books. Most famous is J.R.R. Tolkien, who was a fervent reader of Snorri's works and found in them inspiration for his famous *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Then there is Wagner and his *Ring Cycle,* as well as the twisted misappropriation of Norse mythology by the Nazis. Fantasy writers who Brown sees as indebted to Snorri include Ursula K. LeGuin, Stephen King and J.K. Rowling. Literary authors include Michael Chabon, Neil Gaiman, and A.S. Byatt, all of whom have produced recent works based on Norse myth.

Ultimately, *Song of the Vikings* shows us that despite his obscurity, Snorri – whom Brown dubs the "Homer of the North" – does indeed live on.

Contributors

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VALA HAFSTAD grew up in Iceland. She lives in Minnesota and is a frequent contributor to the news-related poetry website Poetry24, where "Lost and Found" was first published.

REV. STEFAN JONASSON Born and raised in Winnipeg, the Reverend Stefan M. Jonasson is minister of the Unitarian Church in Arborg, Manitoba, and coordinator of services to large congregations for the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Except for a short hiatus, he has been a member of the editorial board of the *Icelandic Connection* since 1981.

CHAY LEMOINE is a Halldór Laxness scholar and teacher from Edwardsville, Illinois. He has published articles on Laxness in *Mannlif, Icelandic Grapevine, Lögberg-Heimskringla, The Icelandic-Canadian,* Papers on Language and Literature and is a past columnist for *ICENEWS,* a Scandinavian online newsmagazine where he wrote about Laxness on occasion. Chay has also appeared in the Icelandic made documentary on Laxness called *Anti-American Wins Nobel Prize* where he discussed his research on the blacklisting of the writer. Many of Chay's articles can be found online by visiting "Laxness in Translation" and clicking "blacklisted"from the list of options. Chay welcomes questions and comments from *Icelandic Connection* readers by email at chayusa@gmail.com

SHIRLEY PALSSON SEGURA was born and raised in Arborg, Manitoba. She is currently living in France with plans to move back to Canada and her roots. Besides being the produce manager in a grocery store, her art and writing are her two main passions.

ELVA SIMUNDSSON is a retired professional librarian living in Gimli, Manitoba. She is a member of the *Icelandic Connection* board and a regular editor for the journal.

CHRISTINA SUNLEY is the author of *The Tricking of Freya,* a novel about a young woman who uncovers a family history that takes her back to Iceland. She considers *The Tricking of Freya* as having been written under the influence of Snorri Sturluson and especially his *Prose Edda* and *Egil's Saga.* Like many people of Icelandic descent, Christina is a proud descendant of Snorri. She lives in Oakland, California.

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

MASANORI YAMAMOTO is a professor of English Literature at Suzugamine Women's College in Hiroshima Japan. His interest in the Old English language led him to an interest in Old Norse and Icelandic and eventually to the story of the nineteenth century immigration of Icelanders to North America.

PHOTO: KENT LARUS BJORNSSON

The Back Page

Statue of the young Sigtryggur Jónasson, as he would have appeared on his voyage to Icelandic River, July 1875

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