

Icelanders Arrive and Strive

A Manitoba Story

ROBERT C. A. FREDERICKSON

The Icelandic emigration to North America in the 1870s, culminating in the creation of New Iceland and its capital Gimli, just north of the boundary of the province of Manitoba at the time, was a fascinating saga. Unfortunately, I didn't learn about this, and my familial connection to it, until the mid-1990s. My third-generation Icelandic father and second-generation Swedish mother were married in Winnipeg in 1940. I was born in Grace Hospital in Winnipeg in June of 1941 and spent my first 31 years of life in Winnipeg.

I want to speak a bit about my education in Winipeg because there are a few impressive things about the University of Manitoba of which many Winnipeggers today might not be aware. I obtained an extensive education in a very liberal and cosmopolitan Winnipeg starting with kindergarten in 1946 and culminating in a post doctorate in neurophysiology completed in 1971, followed by extensive academic and entrepreneurial experience worldwide. Supported by an Inco Scholarship I took a year of engineering, followed by a year of engineering physics, and then a year of architecture in the early 1960s. At that time John Russell was head of the department of Architecture, rated during his tenure as number 1 in Canada if not North America. Following this, I worked with Dutch engineer Joop Burgerjon to help build the cyclotron in the basement of the U of M Physics Department. After this I obtained a degree in Physics then joined biology professor Dr. Phillip Isaac in the new master's degree program in Biophysics that he had just created. This program provided an excellent introduction to biology, and I subsequently joined the Department of Pharmacology to pursue a PhD in neuropharmacology. I began this program in 1968 during the last year of Dr. Mark Nickerson's reign as head of Pharmacology. Mark had escaped the US during the horrors of the McCarthy era and established a Department of Pharmacology in Winnipeg in the mid 1950s. This was recognized during his tenure as the number one Department of Pharmacology in North America, if not the world. Russell and Nickerson brought significant stature to the University of Manitoba and Winnipeg, and I was very lucky to benefit from this.

Robert Frederickson is a third-generation Icelandic descendant who contributes to several related projects. He holds a PhD in Neuropharmacology from the University of Manitoba.

As mentioned above, my extensive formal education did not include anything regarding the history of New Iceland. I didn't learn about my connection to the Icelandic emigration to Canada in the 1870s and the founding of the town of Gimli, during the fascinating saga of New Iceland, until the mid 1990s. My father, Robert Harold Frederickson, was a senior photographer with the Manitoba Government in the summer of 1952 when he died in a government float plane crash at Beren's River in northern Manitoba. There is a plaque (Fig. 1) hanging in the Manitoba Legislative Building to commemorate the 7 government employees who lost their lives in that terrible accident. I was 11 years old at the time and had 3 younger sisters.

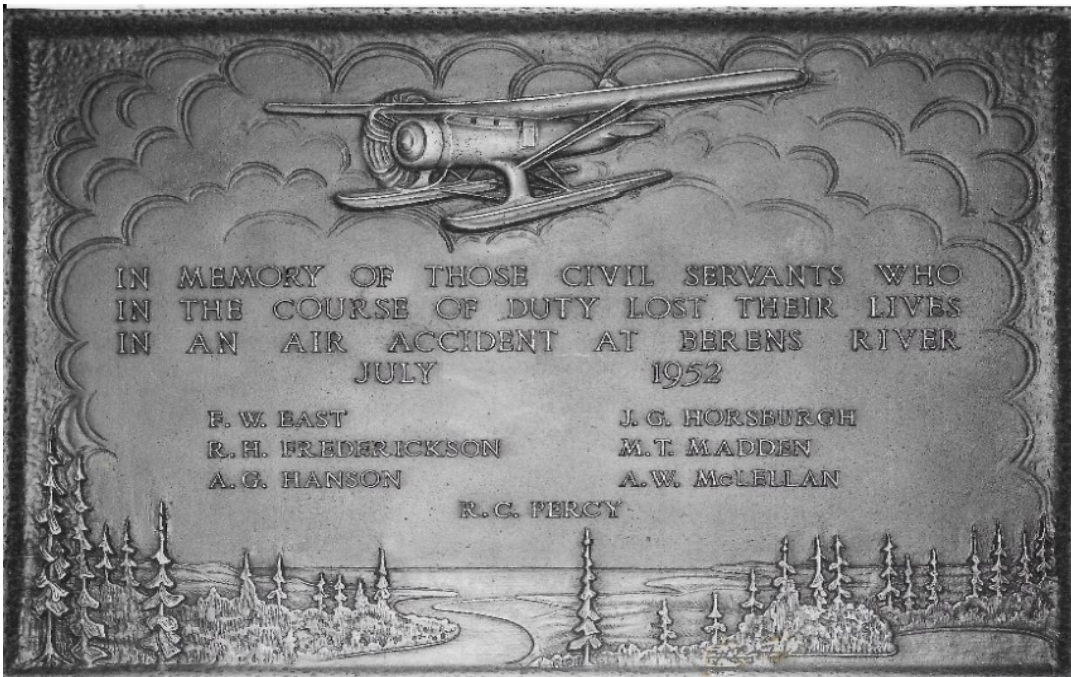


Figure 25: Plaque in the Manitoba Legislature in Winnipeg.

Our little family visited Gimli often when we kids were growing up, not knowing we had a strong connection to it. After graduation from the University of Manitoba I was hired by Eli Lilly & Co in Indianapolis and spent 26 years working in the US, and I would return often to visit Winnipeg and Gimli. During one such visit in the mid 1990s the family wanted to do some shopping at Tergesen's General Store in Gimli. I perused the book section while they shopped. In the book *The Icelandic People in Manitoba* by Wilhelm Kristjanson I found a picture of a Fridjon Frederickson (Fig. 2). There was a lot written about Fridjon in



Figure 26: Picture of Fridjon Frederickson in Wilhelm Kristjanson's *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*.

this book and back in Winnipeg checked in the Manitoba Archives and discovered that Fridjon was in fact my great grandfather.

The next summer I returned to Gimli and knocked on the door of the Gimli Information Centre. There was no answer so I turned to walk away when the door suddenly opened—two men appeared and asked: “What do you want—can we help you?” One of them was Rick Lair who was leading the initial stages of planning for the New Iceland Heritage Museum to commemorate the founding of New Iceland. I replied, “I’m trying to find information regarding my great grandfather.” “Who was your great grandfather?” they queried. When I responded, “Fridjon Frederickson,” they grabbed me and pulled me inside claiming that they had been looking for a relative of Fridjon as he had been such an important pioneer in the creation of New Iceland and Gimli.

I became heavily involved in this project, providing funding for the Museum and for a display commemorating *Framfari*, the Icelandic newspaper published for 2 years in New Iceland. I had proposed creating a diorama for the Museum consisting of a partial replica of the log house on the Icelandic River in Lundi (now Riverton) where *Framfari* was printed, with replicas of Sigtryg-gur Jonasson, Fridjon Frederickson and Halldor Briem, the founders and Directors of *Framfari*, standing in front, but this was maybe a bit too ambitious and never got done. At any rate, I learned that my Icelandic great-grandparents, Fridjon Frederickson (né Friðriksson) and Gudny Sesellja Frederickson (née Sigurðardóttir), were founding pioneers of New Iceland and had built the first house there that was also the first store and first post office in Gimli. In the Manitoba Archives I



Figure 27: Photograph of Fridjon and Gudny’s historic house in Gimli taken by their grandson Robert Harold Frederickson (in picture) in the summer of 1952.

found a picture (Fig. 3) of their house that my father had taken in the summer of 1952 just a month or so before he died in the plane crash. Dad appears in the picture, published in the *Winnipeg Free Press* at the time, and in Walter Lindal's book, *The Icelanders in Canada*.

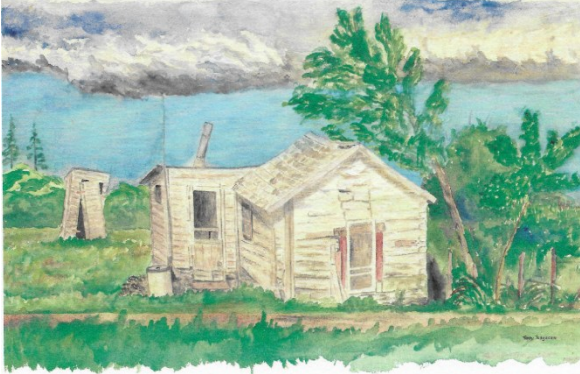


Figure 28: Painting of Fridjon and Gudny's historic house in Gimli from 1950 by Terry Tergesen. Figure 29: Robert C.A. Frederickson and his twin sisters, Shirley and Nancy, standing next to the painting hanging in the Icelandic Reading Room at the University of Manitoba.

Fortunately, I was also very lucky to connect with Terry Tergesen, owner of Tergesen's General Store in Gimli, before his untimely death in 2013, 100 years after Fridjon's death, and Terry kindly gifted me another important picture that he had painted of this historic house in 1950 at the age of 16 (Fig. 4). I donated this important historical painting to the Icelandic Collection in the Elizabeth Dafoe Library at the University of Manitoba where it hangs in the Reading Lounge that I had dedicated to the Collection in honour of Fridjon and Gudny. My lovely twin sisters, Nancy and Shirley, are pictured with me in front of the painting hanging in the Lounge (Fig. 5). We were meeting with the Director of the Collection, Katrin Nielsdottir, who I have been working with since the untimely death of Sigrid Johnson, the Icelandic Librarian at the time I donated the picture.

Involvement with the New Iceland Heritage Museum connected me to Valgeir Þorvaldsson in Iceland, who was at the very same time creating the Icelandic Emigration Centre in Hofsós, Iceland. The Centre (Fig. 6) is situated on a beautiful Arctic Ocean fishing harbour in northern Iceland. I first met Valgeir in the summer of 2001. I was there with my wife and daughter, and while our daughter Kristin was unexpectedly riding a horse through the mountains of northern



Figure 30: The Icelandic Emigration Center in Hofsós, Iceland.

Iceland with the visiting European Riding Group, I visited the Icelandic Emigration Center in Hofsós where Nelson Gerrard introduced me to Valgeir. That was my first trip to Iceland, but I have returned once or twice a year every year since. In 2006, during a tour of Iceland provided to me by Atli and Rúnar Hreinsson—Atli, former Consul General for Iceland in Winnipeg, kindly provided me with a very informative introduction to Iceland.



Figure 31: Nelson Gerrard, Robert Frederickson, Atli Ásmundsson and Valgeir Thorvaldsson meeting at the Emigration Center in Hofsós in 2006. Figure 32: Valgeir at the starting point of the emigration presentation at the center.

Valgeir and I became very good friends and have been working together on several interesting projects ever since. One of those projects was the bed and breakfast guest house at our northern resort Kolkuós near Hofsós. Figure 9 shows the area with an old farmhouse and slaughterhouse, on the 300 hectares of land surrounded by a salmon river on one side and the Arctic Ocean on the other, pictured before we started renovations.



Figure 33: Old farmhouse and slaughterhouse on the 300-hectare Kolkuos property. Figure 34: The Kolkuós property after renovations started showing the site of the oldest Viking village in Iceland.

Figure 10 shows more of the property after renovations were started. The little island used to be connected to the spit of land projecting north of the house and was the site of a Viking Age harbour and trading place. The University of Falun, Sweden, the Viking Ship Museum in Roskilde, Denmark, the nearby Skagafjörður Heritage Museum and Hólar University College carried out an archeological dig that confirmed this (Fig. 11).



Figure 35: Valgeir at the site of the archeological dig on the Kolkuós property.

ter Valgeir and his team of carpenters had renovated it. The site is now a very popular bed and breakfast that Valgeir runs.

The government in the area was going to turn this site into either a garbage dump or an oil refinery. Valgeir enlisted me, and more importantly former President Vigdís Finnbogadóttir, to help convince the government to abandon these ideas and lease the property to us for 55 years (free of cost if we renovated and looked after the property). Figure 12 shows Valgeir in front of the old farmhouse, and Figure 13 shows it after



Figure 36: Valgeir in front of the old farmhouse before the renovation. Figure 37: Kolkuós guesthouse after the renovation.

During my many visits to Iceland I met many impressive Icelanders, including relatives descended from siblings of my great-grandparents who had remained in Iceland. One of these is Þorsteinn Ólafsson who like me is retired now, but who was founder and former chairman of Iceland's largest and most valuable company, Marel HF. He and I are no longer just *frændi* (cousins) but best friends. During these many visits I also had a chance to visit my great-grandparents' family farms on the Melrakkaslétta Peninsula in northern Iceland, Hóll and Harðbakur, and learn how beautiful and interesting Iceland is. Given what I learned during these visits, my interaction with Valgeir's Icelandic Emigration Center, involvement in the preparation of the New Iceland Heritage Museum in Gimli, and in the

archives in Iceland and Manitoba, as well as boxes of historical family material, including old pictures and letters, I decided I should pull it all together to provide as complete a picture as possible of the remarkable lives of Fridjon and Gudny. I chose to write a two or three book series entitled: *New Iceland and Beyond: A 175-year Icelandic-Canadian Saga*. The first book *Icelanders Arrive and Strive: A Manitoba Story* has now been published by Friesen Press. This book and my first book, on quantum mechanics, and the rest of the Icelandic-Canadian series are discussed on the website: www.RobertCAFredrickson.com. The books are available from several publishers worldwide and can be ordered on the website.

A Few Excerpts from and Comments on *Icelanders Arrive and Strive: A Manitoba Story*

Back-cover copy:

*Since the Viking era, Icelandic emigrants have been forging new paths and communities. *Icelanders Arrive and Strive - A Manitoba Story* shares, through the journey of one family, the story of how Icelandic emigrants settled in Canada and shaped the country's history.*

Author Robert C. A. Frederickson connects a personal history - full of memorable characters at momentous moments - to the broader story of how Canada came to be. His great grandparents, Fridjon and Gudny Fridriksson, played a significant part in Manitoba's development through pioneering, community building, interacting with key historic figures, such as Lord Dufferin, and paving the way for the legal and political contributions of their son-in-law, Thomas Hermann Johnson, who became one of Manitoba's most popular politicians and contributed to major liberal legislative achievements.

*Set shortly after Confederation, between 1872 and 1927, this epic of nation building is a model for modern times, showcasing strength, courage, liberalism, humanitarianism, and moderation in leadership and governance. The first historical chronicle of the series, *New Iceland and Beyond - A 175-year Icelandic-Canadian Saga*, this book sets the stage for recounting the ongoing adventures of Icelandic descendants in Manitoba and across the country and globe.*

On the scale of the universe, the earth is a very small place. From the point of view of a nineteenth century earthling, however, the earth might have seemed a rather large place. Of course, even on the latter scale, the earth still contains many small places. One such small place is an island, called, in fact, Island (pronounced eesland), known in English as Iceland. [...] This unique little island (i.e., its native Icelanders) boasts the distinction of having created the first parliamentary democracy in the western world. The Icelandic Althing was established around AD 930 [...]

The Northern Quarter of Iceland has been further divided into various sections, the northern most of which is called Thingeyjarsysla. In the furthest northeast corner of Thingeyjarsysla is the Melrakasletta Peninsula, which juts bravely into the Arctic Ocean [...]. One of the northernmost towns on this northernmost peninsula is a little fishing village called Raufurhofn.

Bracketing this little village are two farms, the first called Holl, the second called Hardbakur. These farms are not small. When the farmer-owner of Holl in the twenty-first century, approximately 130 years after this story began, was asked by the author about the size of this farm, he responded, "I don't now, it goes forever." Holl is about five kilometers south of Raufurhofn and is blessed with a trout lake and a salmon stream, and more recently, a small airfield. It is a sheep farm on which the sheep are allowed to roam "forever", until they are rounded up in the fall. Some of these sheep are black, as black as the sand on the beaches that form the eastern boundary of "forever", beaches that are lapped by the waters of the Arctic Ocean.

Hardbakur is twelve kilometers north of Raufurhofn, on the most northeastern shore of Melrakasletta, the most northeastern peninsula of Iceland. The shores of the Arctic Ocean on this farm are covered with stones and littered with driftwood [...] from Arctic regions that have forests (including Norway, for example). There are no forests on these northern Iceland farms, and not much grows on them. The folks survived by raising sheep and catching seals and fish when possible. [...] Besides the farmhouse and barns at Hardbakur, there is a special hut filled with life-saving equipment, and which bears a plaque stating that this structure was dedicated to the folks at Hardbakur by the Queen of England in gratitude for their having saved British sailors after a shipwreck that occurred offshore during one of the storms in the 1900s (Fig. 7).

Thomas went on to become one of the most popular politicians in Manitoba's history. He served from May 1915 to November 1917 as Minister of Public Works, part of 1916 as acting premier, from November 1917 to June 1922 as Attorney General [...] as well as Minister of Telephones and Telegraphs. He was the father of the bill providing Proportional Representation, and many of the reforms he introduced benefitted women. These included the Dower Act, which was the creation of a board to fix minimum wages for female employees, and legislation to give women the right to vote in provincial elections and to hold political office.

Excerpt from the Foreword

*For nearly 30 years I have run a museum and genealogy center in Hofsfós, Iceland called the Icelandic Emigration Center, and as a result I have heard many stories of those who left Iceland in the late 1800s and early 1900s, all hoping for a better life in a new land. *New Iceland and Beyond* is a story that stands out strongly amongst the others. [...] I want to thank Robert Frederickson for documenting this remarkable history and giving us the opportunity to learn about the lives and struggles of a couple who led so many people to a better life in their new country. I know others will enjoy reading this tale as much as I have.*

Valgeir Þorvaldsson

Founder and Executive Director

The Icelandic Emigration Center

Excerpts from the Foreword of Clarion Book Review

*A story of a community's hardiness, willpower, and perseverance, *New Iceland and Beyond* extols the successes of a generation of Canadian settlers.*

*Robert C. A. Frederickson's *New Iceland and Beyond* is a stirring history of an unsung migration movement and its legacy.*

Centering Frederickson's great grandparents, Fridjon and Gudny, the book uses their stories as a window onto the larger history of Icelandic-Canadian immigration at the turn of the twentieth century. It opens with a panoramic history of Iceland's Norse founders, cycling through tales of courageous adventurers whose exploits and bodies of literature left an outsized impact on world culture.

There is a strong sense of Icelandic exceptionalism in the book, which goes a long way toward validating that judgment.

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