

ICELANDIC CONNECTION



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Icelandic National League of North America
95th Annual Convention
May 15-18, 2014

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ICELANDIC CONNECTION

VOLUME 66, NO 1 (2013) • WINNIPEG, CANADA

On the Cover	3
Editorial Lorna Tergeesen	4
Christmas in Iceland Rev. Valdimar J. Eylands	6
Faces of Christmas Bill Holm	11
Santa's Last Year Kim Martinsen	14
The Present That Turned Into a Passion Valdi Stefanson	15
The Light in the Church Tower by Jón Trausti, translated by Ninna Campbell	19
Christmas Memories Julianna Bjornson	22
Christmas 1993 Kristiana Magnusson Clark	25
Cold Weather Chay Lemoine	27
Enchanted: Iceland is my Muse Erica J. Green	33
Helgi Olsen's Memoirs	35
Poetry	
Christmas Eve	42
The Mess	43
Book Review Names For The Sea: Strangers In Iceland Reviewed by Helen Sigurdson	44
Contributors	47
The Back Page	48

ICELANDIC CONNECTION



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ON THE COVER



PHOTO: KAREN JOHANSSON

Þvörusleikur, the Spoon Licker
A Jólésveinar doll handcrafted by
Karen Johannsson of Winnipeg, MB

Editorial

A Christmas Visit to Iceland

by Lorna Tergesen

The season of Christmas fills most of us with joy and anticipation. Many others feel the pain of loss or anxiety caused by the stressful situations brought on by the season. However, generally cheerful feelings prevail. The anticipation of family and friends sharing time together is the focal point. The extras that are so special are small children in all their excitement, and of course, food and gifts are part of that.

Recalling past Christmas celebrations can be so enjoyable when you go back in your mind to the thrill of some very special Christmas concert, family gathering or gift. Reliving the nights when as a young parent, you are trying desperately to follow poor instructions on how to put together the required toy, or else staying up so late to complete the sewing of tiny doll outfits that are far more difficult to make than regular clothing for children. Then we might worry about family members out on the roads in very bad weather who you know are on their way to celebrate with you. Bringing back with fondness, memories of long gone grandparents, parents or family relatives, with thankfulness for the time you were able to share with them. Yes, Christmas can be a very emotional time.

One very special Christmas for me was in 1997, when my parents, Betty Jane Wylie, Terry and I went to Iceland for the

holidays. It was such a great visit. Having been to Iceland during summer months showed us some traditions celebrated over there. Before leaving, I had asked my Icelandic friend, Jón Jónsson if we needed to pack fancy clothes. (I am known for packing very light.) He assured me to take our very best and to be prepared to wear them often. How true this was.

There were some very special moments over there, as when on December 21st at 7 pm, we had the opportunity to visit the Glaumbær Museum in Skagaförður. We were ushered in with only a lantern. The temperature was controlled to 5C, so as to maintain the artifacts in the museum. By sitting in the *baðstofa* we were able to imagine an entire family in that small room. Someone with a candle or lantern being the reader or tale teller, women sitting with their knitting or darning in the poor light. It was very telling. The following day on entering a hotel where the smell nearly knocked one over, sat town people enjoying a feast of *Skata*. I did not try it as I could not tolerate the smell!

The sun rose just after 11 am (and we did see it) but it dropped from view about 2:30 pm. However, the wonderful blue hue of the winter was just like a picture post card, with little farm lights dotting the mountains here and there. It was not as

overcast as I had imagined.

Our Christmas Eve was in Akureyri. At about 4 pm, the entire family seemed to disappear into their bedrooms to prepare for the evening. This is one of the events when we wore our best clothes. The meal was sensational, especially the breast of grouse. I came home telling people about Icelandic Christmas consisting of 3 C's – coffee, chocolate and cognac! Later in the evening we attended a Christmas service in Akureyri's big church that has about 100 stairs to climb! This was the third service that evening and the church was totally full.

Presents were exchanged after church, but there was only one present per person. Christmas day was very quiet with family and neighbours coming to call until in the evening when the young people dressed up in their best and went to a dance. Another wonderful treat was to swim in the outdoor

pools while the temperature was -20C. You needed to duck under the water every so often to keep your head warm! What fun.

The entire visit was wonderful. New Year's Eve was a major event with a huge bonfire on the beach. My Canadian senses had me worried, as young children were running about and folks mingling about with their drinks in their hands. But then as midnight neared the fireworks began! Again, I had a hard time to relax and enjoy it as folks around me were lighting their own fireworks, regardless of age. Despite my anxiety no one was hurt and it really had been a very spectacular show.

From all our board members, may we wish you the very best of the season.

Merry Christmas and a
Happy New Year.



Askasleikir and Gluggagægir

Christmas in Iceland

Reprinted from *The Icelandic Canadian Winter* 1994

by Rev. Valdimar J. Eylands

Certain aspects of the Christmas season are uniform and universal among Christians the world over. Others vary greatly according to historical antecedents, cultural development, traditions, temperament, physical environment, and profession of religious faith. These things mould people in their outlook upon life, and determine the manifestations of their intellectual and emotional habits. The cardinal message of Christmas: "Unto you is born this day a Saviour which Is Christ the Lord," is the same from "Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strand." But in the sunny south where the sky is constantly blue, where life is easy and the people lighthearted and highly emotional, their interpretation of this message is apt to be unlike that of people of totally different temperament, living under adverse physical conditions.

The character traits of the Icelander, as well as his physical and mental habits are somewhat akin to the soil of his native land. Iceland, as is well known, is a land of great contrasts, of ice and fire. The majestic mountains and glaciers with their silvery hoods shrouded at times in clouds of gold or grey, the deep blue firths, the rugged and outwardly barren landscape, the lava fields, the lakes, the lean meadows, the occasional volcanic eruptions of fire and mist, the roaring waters tumbling from towering rocks into bottomless ravines, or the steaming water spouting from the bottom of the earth; all these have

contributed to the mental outlook and philosophy of the Icelanders. The ice being more frequently and more abundantly in evidence at all times of the year than the fire, the people have through centuries of their associations with this grand and gruesome phenomenon become somewhat cool, aloof and stoic in their attitude and rarely betray their emotions.

There are times and seasons however, when the Icelander thaws out, forgets for a while his drudgery and the arduousness of his toil on land and sea and rejoices in the common denominator of man's hopes and aspirations. Christmas is one of these times.

Christianity in Iceland is already more than a thousand years old. One of the unique features of the country's history was its formal acceptance by a parliamentary action in the year 1000 of the Christian faith. Of course the Althing's vote to accept Christianity did not make the land immediately Christian, but it gave the Church a chance and the religion of Christ did eventually supplant the religion of Odinn and Thor. The Christmas festival displaced the Roman *Saturnalia* the alleged birthday of the sun and the Norse Mid-Winter festival at which oblations were offered to induce Odinn to grant a prosperous summer season. Many traits of the old faith were however long retained among the people and these together with numerous strands of folklore and superstition made themselves felt in the

religious and intellectual life of the nation for centuries. Many of these superstitions clustered around the Christmas festival and appeared, peculiarly enough in the weirdest type of complicated demonology.

Among the earliest reference to the Christmas festival found in the classical literature of Iceland is that contained in the Saga of Grettir the Strong. (*Grettissaga* chapters 63-64.) Grettir, the hero of the story was killed at Drangey in 1031. Several years prior to that date he was a guest, at Christmas time, in the home of Steinvör of Sandhaugar in Barðardal. On the nearby farm of Eyjadalsá was an old temple which had been converted into a church, served at the time by a priest, named Steinn. The singing of mass at Steinn's church had apparently become a fixed custom at the time of Grettir's visit. But Steinvör's farm was haunted by trolls, and two men, including her husband, had been snatched from their beds on two previous Christmas nights, while the lady was away at the Eyjadalsá church attending midnight mass. They had been carried into a cave underneath a nearby waterfall to serve as Christmas dinner for the trolls. The third Christmas night, at which time Grettir was her guest, Steinvör did not dare to leave the house lest the misfortune be repeated. But Grettir volunteered to stay at home, so that she could go. During Christmas eve he tackled the female troll who came to fetch him, dismembered her and later disposed of her husband by diving through the waterfall into the cave. This story shows two things: the early observance of the festival among the people, and the terrible fear and superstition prevailing at that time.

It is difficult for modern men to appreciate the demonology of these early days. But to the ancient inhabitants of northern Europe nature was animate and the spirits either assisted man in his struggle

of life or they conspired against him. The idea of the conspiracy of evil spirits was accentuated in the cold and rugged north where danger seemed to lurk at every turn. For a long time Christianity was unable to dispel the gloom of these beliefs. True, the concept of God was clarified. He became a person, but somewhat removed from the affairs of men. The devil on the other hand remained on the earth, it was his domain, and his legions assumed the forms of trolls and fairies whose business it was to harass the people and beguile their souls. The world became a veritable theatre of devils, against which man had to be constantly on guard. This world of evil spirits became particularly annoyed and active at the coming of Christ who had deprived them of their real power. Every recurring celebration of his birth brought them new frenzy in their frustration and caused them to redouble their efforts to bring mischief and misfortune to men. All this folklore belongs to the ancient past and is no longer taken seriously by anyone. Nevertheless the old fables are still alive in the consciousness of the nation and only by knowing this background can we fully understand the peculiar customs attached to Christmas, especially in the remote parts of Iceland.

In Iceland and in all other countries, Christmas is the festival of children. In the monotony of the cold and dreary winter days Christmas is the bright spot in the lives of the children in more ways than one. It is looked forward to long before it comes, and talked about long after it has passed. Special preparations are made for the festival, even in the humblest of homes. Among the first signs of approaching Christmas is the keeping of the Christmas-log. This is a book into which are entered the names of all guests who come to the house from the first day of Advent until the day before Christmas.

On Christmas eve all the names which have been entered in his book are written on narrow strips of paper, and placed in a hat, or a book, out of which the men in the house draw the names of the female guests; and the women the names of the men. The names thus drawn indicated who was to be the Christmas partner of each person (*Jólasveinar-Jólameyjar*.) This was great fun, but sometimes it could also become a source of considerable disappointment.

Sometime during the Advent season a trip had to be made to town to secure provisions. This was often a long and dangerous trip in all sorts of weather. Sometimes two or more farmers would join an expedition for this purpose. The usual provisions secured were flour, raisins, prunes, coffee, sugar, and frequently also some kind of liquor. Sigurður Ingjaldson, a former resident of Gimli, Manitoba, tells in his autobiography of an exceedingly hazardous journey which he made as a boy, for this purpose. He was sent on a several days' journey to secure provisions, including a small barrel of brandy. On the way home he encountered severe

snowstorms on the mountains, and nearly lost his life. He had to leave most of the liquor in a distant community and the balance was almost all consumed by his companions before he got all the way home. Excessive drinking at Christmas, however, was rare. Even those who were ardent admirers of Bacchus refused to accept his comforts on Christmas eve or the first Christmas day. Those days were too holy for carousing.

Cleanliness was one of the principal features in the preparations for Christmas. Everything had to be washed and polished. The women of the house would labour with pots and pans, lamps, window panes, and all objects that would respond to rubbing until they were spotless. The week before Christmas great washing could be seen swaying in the winter winds all over the community. The weather did not always lend itself to drying clothes at that time of the year, but there was an ancient belief that God would bring a thaw and dry weather just before Christmas to enable poor people, whose small homes did not provide the space for indoor drying, to get



ready for the season (*Fátækraþerrir*).

Cooking and candle making occupied a great deal of time in the Christmas preparation. The every day fare of the country people was very simple, but at Christmas something special had to be provided. Sweet cakes and pastry were made in abundance in large households, and enough candles had to be moulded for every member of the house. In my youth the women were relieved of this last duty by the importation of candles made abroad which could be purchased in the stores.

During the busy days of Advent, the old stories of trolls and fairies were told and retold, especially for the benefit of the junior members of the family. The principal Christmas troll, who was particularly the terror of little children was a female witch named “Gryla.” According to some versions of the story she had thirteen sons. They started to come, one at a time, thirteen days before Christmas, and left, one a day, for thirteen days thereafter, the last making his departure on the day of Epiphany. They were big ugly fellows cleft to the neck, with big round feet like pancakes. During the days of their sojourn they grew fat on gossip and profanity, and were reluctant to leave the homes where this food was provided in abundance. Otherwise they were quite harmless but a great nuisance. The following names indicate their nature, and their favourite tricks: Candle Beggar; Candle Licker; Door Peeper; Window Peeper; Gate Smeller; Meat Hooker; Pot Licker; Sheepfold Ghost; Ravine Ghost; Short One; Bowl Licker; Skirt Blower; and Cheese Glutton. Gryla herself was not as harmless as her sons; she carried a great sack into which she would throw naughty children and bring them to her husband for Christmas.

The shepherds strove to have their

herds gathered in and fed before darkness fell on Christmas eve. The cows were milked earlier than usual, and by six o'clock a special feeling of calm, dignity and good will prevailed throughout the home. By this time all the people were assembled indoors, dressed in their best, and thereafter no work was done unless it was absolutely necessary. Lamps and candles were lit, and placed in every nook and corner, on tables and shelves, and even in the long turflined hallways. The lady of the house, would then ‘invite the fairies,’ a ceremony in which she walked sunwise around the house, chanting an old rhyme:

*Come those who want to come,
Stay those who want to stay.
Go those who want to go
Without harm to one or mine.*

This initial duty performed, the ‘húsfrú’ would return to her quarters, and open a long chest, containing gifts for everyone of her household. These were usually garments, socks, shawls, or shoes. Every one must have something new for Christmas; to be left without a gift was a bad omen, and made the person so neglected an easy prey for the goblins (*Jóla-kötturinn*). Following this came a divine service, consisting of two hymns and a Christmas sermon, usually read by the father, or the oldest male member of the family. The service ended with the ‘Christmas kiss,’ (*Jóla-kossinn*) a greeting extended in the manner indicated by the master and mistress of the house to the children, and other members of the household, and then by them to each other in turn, with the familiar “*Gleðileg Jól.*” Then came that feature of the celebration to which the children usually looked with the greatest delight and anticipation: the Christmas dinner, one plate for each person with such an abundance of provisions that they usually lasted for several days. Following the meal, chocolate and coffee

were served with *'pönnukökur'* and delicious cookies of the most ingenious designs, known as *'laufabrauð.'*

In my youth there was no dancing or card playing permitted on Christmas eve, or on Christmas Day. Thereafter both were practised throughout the community. The weather permitting, church services were usually attended on Christmas Day or the Second Christmas Day which was also a legal holiday.



Gryla

There was something fascinating about these simple Christmas customs, which I heard about or experienced in the days of my youth. Somehow the whole atmosphere was changed, and the surroundings became more congenial in every respect. Christmas came as a ray of light in the dark, dreary and monotonous existence of the people. The entire season was charged with a spirit which challenged men to be noble, and they responded to that challenge the best they could. Even those who ordinarily paid only slight attention to the contents of Christianity seemed to realize that the spirit of good will was also for them, and should be practised by them in their relationship with others. That is what made Christmas in Iceland a delightful season.

Customs have changed a great deal in Iceland during the last quarter century. The seasonal trimmings of Christmas have changed, the folklore probably disappeared, but the spirit remains the same. Instead of following their noisy pagan ancestors in making the season a mere winter festival, and instead of following New World trends in choking the spirit of Christmas in commercialism and superficial celebrations, the modern Icelander observes the season in harmony with its original character — it is a season of rejoicing, a season of light and love.

Faces of Christmas Past

by Bill Holm

From the book *Face of Christmas Past 1998*

At Christmas, the gavel of tradition bangs on the table to call the house to order. We have always done it this way, so do it now. We have always eaten – oysters, lutefish, ham balls, fill in the blank – so we shall eat them again. In towns like Minneota, the solid front of Christmas habit brought even the atheists to church on Christmas Eve. The Jewish doctor's children acted in the Sunday school Christmas pageant. A Hindu could not have escaped appearing in the manger scene, toasting the holiday afterwards with garishly decorated butter cookies dunked in thin coffee.

Yet tradition, anywhere in America (and certainly in the Midwest) is a strangely jackleg affair, hardly old enough to qualify as tradition at all, rather only invented procedure. A tradition must be so old that it is true origin, while lost to us consciously, remains quick inside the cells of the body. Tradition grows from the texture of the grass, the shape of the hills, the colour of rivers when the snow melts, the swampy pasture where our great-grandfather's horse stumbled and broke his leg. We haven't been long enough in Minneota to earn that kind of tradition.

But what about the old country, you ask? Didn't tradition travel over on the boat from Ireland, Norway, Iceland and Belgium? A majority of Minneotans descend from those stocks, hardly over

a century ago. But traditions seem not to travel well over water; most sickened in the mid-Atlantic and expired shortly after they stopped off the horse cart onto the tall grass prairie. This is a country of interrupted traditions, just entering a difficult puberty to start growing real ones. The physician poet, William Carlos Williams, described us well, if a little harshly, as “tricked out.../ with gauds/ from imaginations which have no/ peasant traditions to give them/ character...”

But at Christmas, my mother, Jona, “tricked out” her house with gauds that would have astonished even Dr. Williams, and as she would have briskly assured him, she had plenty of character. She might have defined tradition as anything you did once that looked good to you, so you practiced it forty or fifty times more – and behold you have invented “tradition.”

Jona Sigurborg Josephson Holm, my mother, was a woman of extraordinary energy and vitality. In her, the life force was not an idea but an eruption. Born in 1910 on a farm to parents who spoke little or no English, she longed for education, travel, adventure, the Big World. She escaped all of seven miles south to Minneota to graduate from high school, worked in Leland's Drug Store illegally filling prescriptions, and in 1932, after years of courting and cajoling, married Bill Holm, her childhood sweetheart, to return seven miles north to

yet another immigrant farm only a few miles from her parents. No college, no career, no New York – not even Minneapolis, half a lifetime away on mud roads. Just an unpaid-for farm, a drafty shack of a house, kerosene lamps, a pump over the sink, and a two-holer outhouse. These bare details of her life are not peculiar; hers is the story of a million women of her generation in the rural United States – and probably in the big cities too, though school was easier there.

Like most of that million, she didn't whine. If luck and circumstance thwarted her longing for beauty, elegance, an exciting life, she would act out her longing by inventing her own version of them wherever she was. Without having any idea what "art" or "taste" were, she possessed, probably from birth, the equipment of an artist; a skilled hand, a sharp eye, a willingness to make mistakes, and mammoth reserves of energy. She crocheted, she knitted, she embroidered, she painted figurines and wooden plates and breadboards, she made ceramic ashtrays, lamps, bowls, casserole dishes, she glued beads and gewgaws on any recyclable object, however unlikely, she canned and baked and pickled, she collected stamps, hand ruling the pages with a Parker fountain pen after checking her perforation gauge, she sewed dresses, shirts, coats, and when they wore thin, patches on top of the patches. Whatever interested her at any given moment, she surrendered to it in excess. Without ever having heard of William Blake, she practiced his maxim by instinct: *The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom*. When wooden plates captured her attention she painted fifty for relatives, fifty for neighbors and friends, fifty to sell (though mostly she gave them away), and another fifty for storage under the bed, just in case. Not only was her enthusiasm contagious, she owned no resistance to the enthusiasms of others. If a neighbor learned from the radio or a crafts magazine how to

make pink swan soap dishes out of plastic dish soap bottles. Jona swung into action and tried a few hundred herself. None of her projects, however, intruded into the time she spent on her real passion: human beings – creatures capable of language and conversation, the telling of stories. She entered a room talking, eyed the company to see who might need cheering up, finishing the sentence when she closed the door behind her. When she died, one of her friends, amazed that death had been tough or fast enough to do Jona in, sighed and said, "She had only two speeds, high and off."

Her house became the gallery for her projects, and at Christmas, her favorite season, the show doubled or tripled in size to overwhelm the cramped little farmstead. Out came the boxes of handmade tree ornaments, the painted figurines of Santa and his whole retinue – reindeer, elves, sleigh, a set of wise men and camels and an electrified manger scene with blinking lights, angels of various colour and design, dishes and bowls decorated with poinsettias and mistletoe, the embroidered Christmas tablecloth and napkins, the rosemaled napkin rings, wooden plates painted with Christmas motifs and Yuletide greetings in four or five languages, Christmas bric-a-brac on every flat surface, handmade candle holders of maybe fifteen designs with scented candles burned nightly for a month, their smells of lavender sachet, pine forest, and spicy cinnamon oozing together in the drafty rooms, and finally, my favorites, the Christmas angels made from folded magazines shellacked and spray painted to a board-like stiffness, and the *piece-de-resistance*: the Christmas toilet seat cover with a gay red winking Santa Claus waiting for your hind end (this came after acquiring a flush toilet in 1950).

And it was a house of "gauds"; no subtle earth tones or delicate pastels for Jona – she loved bright, intense, gypsy colour: red,

hot pink, purple, orange, gold, lime green. These wise men had style; these angels played tambourines, not ethereal harps. In a bleak old farmhouse on the bleak north crest of a bleak hill on a bleak prairie with the bleakest climate on the continent, this house, inhabited by Scandinavian Lutherans, looked like a Hungarian restaurant decorated for a Chinese wedding.

My mother cared little for the theology of Christmas. She was, at best, a nominal Lutheran, faithful to Ladies' Aid and do-good projects but casual in her piety. Her Christmas music consisted of breathy performances of *Heim Sum Ból* (*Silent Night in Icelandic*) and *Jingle Bells* on a Hohner harmonica – and this only after a well laced Tom-and-Jerry or two. She loved the festivity of Christmas, the chance to create some light and noise and gaiety at the bottom of the year's darkness, cold, and silence. If you had to live in this godforsaken place at least show some evidence of being actually alive. Maybe that's the real kernel of psychological wisdom underlying the Christmas rites anyway. Jona's extroverted nature guided her to stumble into that wisdom unconsciously.

What she made was not "kitsch", kitsch implies a consciousness of fashionable taste satirically undermined. Jona invented beauty – as she understood it. Her creations connected not so much to her ego as to her affectionate desire to please others. If you admired a piece of her handiwork, you went home with it. As a boy, sometimes overwhelmed by the crowded gypsy camp atmosphere inside the house at Christmas, I kept wishing for more traffic, more guests to do a little thinning and pruning on the collection. It would have done no good; she would simply have

swung into action and invented more. The Icelandic Christmas tradition inside her family and immigrant culture evaporated in the new world, except for a few Christmas recipes that were adaptations of food that had already begun to disappear from real old country tables. One ritual function of a tradition is to create connection inside a community. So, lacking Iceland, Jona made do, announcing "This is now tradition; help yourself."



Leppalúði

Santa's Last Year

by Kim Martinsen

I grew up an Air Force brat, born in Gimli, Manitoba in 1957 to an Acadian Air Force guy and a local Icelandic-Canadian girl. My Dad worked in radar which meant he spent a good deal of time looking for flying objects in the sky, or at least that's what he told us. Needless to say, he was one of the very few who had actually seen Santa Claus. Every year on Christmas Eve, he told us kids that he spotted Santa flying with his reindeer across the sky. We never questioned this, why would we, he was our Dad and he would never tell us anything but the truth. Because Mom also believed him, we knew there was a Santa Claus.

Christmas came and went with a lot of family and fun and every year Dad let us know that he had spotted Santa on the radar on his way to deliver presents around the world. We would get so excited and full of anticipation it was hard to sleep. After Mom and Dad went to bed and we were sure they were sleeping, I would wake up my two sisters and brother and go downstairs. We were lined up by age just like the old flour, sugar, coffee, tea canisters – biggest to smallest. Giggling and bumping into things and each other we tried to sneak downstairs as quietly as possible to see if we could see Santa. I was sure I could hear him moving around in the living room and I was a little nervous in case we actually saw him. When we got downstairs our stockings were full, so we ran to the dining room table to see if Santa had eaten his *vínarterta* and drunk the hot chocolate left for him. Sure enough, every time there were only crumbs left. We just couldn't figure out why every year we

missed seeing him. As time went on and the older I got, the more I thought that surely we would catch him one day.

At around age 11, we were living in northern Alberta where Dad worked at a radar base. Early one evening around Christmas, I was lying in my room with our German Shepherd dog Cindy, and my friend Carla, when she asked me if I believed in Santa Claus. Well, of course I told her I believe in Santa – my Dad tells me that he sees him and his reindeer flying every Christmas Eve on the radar screen. She looked at me for a long while causing me to be worried. Was there a Santa? That thought didn't last long. Why would Dad tell me there was a Santa if there wasn't?

Carla then said, "You know I think there is a Santa. There must be because your Dad wouldn't lie to you and the radio and TV wouldn't be reporting the Air Force tracking Santa as he goes around the world."

We didn't want to believe that there wasn't a Santa. Finally, I decided to call Dad into the conversation to ask him.

"So Dad, is there really, I mean really, a Santa Claus and do you really see him on your radar every Christmas Eve?"

He said, "Of course there is a Santa Claus and yes I track him every Christmas Eve on radar, just like I've told you every year."

Well ... all Carla and I could do was look at each other with relief as he walked away singing, "*Here comes Santa Claus, Here comes Santa Claus, Right down Santa Claus lane, Vixen and Blitzen and all his reindeer...*" We just knew it! There really is a Santa Claus.

The Present That Turned Into a Passion

by Valdi Stefanson

Ahh, remember the magic of Christmas? For me, the best time of the year.

Remember scouring the T. Eaton's catalogue to identify that quintessentially perfect "must-have" for Christmas? Well, after that, it was the quest to make it happen. I'd go to my Mom and sweetly ask if I could get "_____" for Christmas this year? Actually, it was a rhetorical question because I already knew the answer by memory. My mother's perennial answer was "Let's wait and see what Santa brings you." Her answer left no means of response, or recourse. However, I viewed it as worthwhile, because I planted a seed. Beyond that, it was simply a matter of waiting and see what showed up under the tree.

This story is about Christmas 1967. Our family's pre-Christmas shopping brought us to the Eaton's store on Portage Ave in Winnipeg. For some reason, we were in the basement level, at the catalog sales area. There on the display floor sat an Eaton's Viking snowmobile. Well, my brother and I got googly-eyed. Right then and there, we decided to combine our respective wishes and ask for a snowmobile – that we would happily share.

You see, this snowmobile thing was catching on, big time. Snowmobiles were experiencing a paradigm shift. Throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s I had seen snow machines. They were hauling in the daily catch of pickerel from nets strung



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VALDI STEFANSON

This old Moto Ski was the best Christmas present! Here we are having fun on Lake Winnipeg.

under the Lake Winnipeg ice. These bulky machines were not exactly “recreational”. They were stodgy, slow moving “tractors”. No one considered them for fun or for recreational use.

I credit Armand Bombardier for “inventing” the modern recreational snowmobile – with his front engined, small and agile Ski Doo. By the latter half of the 1960s, people began to think of a snowmobile as a sporty fun machine, instead of the fishing/trapping/logging workhorse they had been to date.

That’s that! My brother and I had to have one. The challenge was to get Dad to buy one for us – for Christmas. We schemed and crafted logical arguments to justify the sizable expense:

This was one present that would suffice for two kids. It would be a practical tool for

farm chores. Everyone else was getting one.

In subsequent family discussions these points were politely posited. For my part, I thought this was enough. As with Christmas before, let’s wait and see what happens. After all, I had made my case. My brother had a different, more proactive approach. In fact he was downright tenacious! Starting on Armistice Day and through to Christmas, he never missed a chance to advocate for a snowmobile. One claim I remember was, “So the car won’t start: well, if we had a snowmobile we could use it to make an emergency grocery run”. Or, “Hey, getting a Christmas tree out of the pasture sure would be easier if we had a snowmobile.” Also, “Instead of hitching up the horses, feeding the cattle could be easy, if we just had a snowmobile.” It got so incessant that even I was



Snowmobiling out to ice heaves on frozen Lake Winnipeg



PHOTOS COURTESY OF VALDI STEFANSON

Having fun in the cold, crisp air. Notice toboggan in tow.

embarrassed when another “justification” was interjected into family conversation.

In the end, I think that it was partly an admission that a snowmobile would indeed be a practical farm tool but also a means to quiet my brother. WOW, we got a 1968 Moto Ski for Christmas. My father explained that he had, just days before Christmas, intended to buy a Ski Doo, but the local dealer was sold out of them by then. Perhaps to Dad the Moto Ski was a second choice, but to us kids it was a home run!

That poor Moto Ski Zephyr. We rode and rode during the Christmas break and it didn’t end even after we were back in school. The two of us devised a protocol to

share the machine after school hours. Each day we would each take a two hour shift, alternating first and second shifts. While one of us was riding, the other would do his farm chores or homework assignments. Dad made up a rigid hitch for our toboggan so that on weekends, other kids could share the fun of riding the fence-row drifts. The challenge was to buck off your toboggan passengers. What fun – and this was in an era of real cold winter weather and before snowmobile suits. I sure could have used some *Thinsulate* and *Gortex* outerwear back then. No problem, it was old fashioned fun in the cold crisp winter air. (Compare that with today’s youth who think weekends are

for a marathon session with their X-box!)

Fast forward to today. Here I am just another old guy trying to relive the fun and exhilaration of my youth. That Moto Ski for Christmas has led me to a personal addiction to old snowmobiles. Even though I live in Minnesota, I have a noteworthy collection of Western Canadian snow machines. Brands that rolled out of snowmobile factories in Beausejour Manitoba, Regina and Lanigan, Saskatchewan and Calgary Alberta. All these brands are long gone but not forgotten. In fact, with new snowmobiles costing over \$ 12,000, it's no wonder the big trend these days is to find some old retired sled and fix it up. For less than a \$ 1,000 investment, Dads and Grandpas are getting a "barn find" into running condition and inviting a new generation to discover the fun of winter weekends putting around the place. Vintage rides are now organized throughout the Snow Belt.

Indeed, it is the fastest growing segment of the snowmobile industry right now.

For me, these old two-cycle engined sleds are easy to understand, to fix and enjoy. I have over 50 of them and readily admit that this hobby has turned into a compulsion. However, to me it is a history lesson in motion. As President of the Antique Snowmobile Association of America, I try to serve as curator and educator by promoting and preserving the rich heritage of the early days of snowmobiling. I author articles in snowmobile publications and host a series of snowmobile DVDs.

At vintage rides around here, my greatest joy is to have someone come up and say that they have never heard of the snowmobile brand that I am driving. It gives me a chance to discuss these Western Canadian models and the good-old days. And to think, it all came about because of a very special Christmas present. The magic of Christmas!



Now addicted to old snowmobiles...

The Light in the Church Tower

A Christmas Story by Jón Trausti Translated by Ninna Campbell

“Is it true, mamma, that God always creates some miracle on Christmas Eve?” asked little Ólöf. But her mother was dejected and full of anxiety and did not answer.

“Is it true mamma?”

“Who has told you this, my child?”

“Amma”.

“Oh, please don’t be unraveling my brains, my blessed child!”

“I wish I could see God create a miracle.”

“You shouldn’t let anyone hear this nonsense. God does not create miracles for man’s enjoyment. He makes them because of love and mercy for those who are needy.”

Ólöf heard the quiver in her mother’s voice. She wandered away, but didn’t know what to do with herself. She felt sad that everyone was so downcast in spite of it being Christmas Eve.

“Aren’t you going to dress in your Sunday clothes mamma? Christmas is here.”

No reply. Her mother said nothing.

Ólöf went out to the kitchen where the helpers were keeping the Christmas food warm. Everything smelled so good. There was no gladness there either. The child looked with questioning eyes on everyone, but no one answered her question.

The best living room in the house was closed as if a corpse was in it. The Christmas tree was inside and no one had begun to decorate it.

Then Amma walked past her.

“When are we going to light the candles on the Christmas tree Amma?” asked the girl.

“Not until your daddy comes home” answered old Ólöf, and tears ran down her cheeks.

Little Ólöf did not ask about anything more, she returned to her mother, and found her sitting in the same place as before, pale and sickly, with her chin in her hand. She said nothing to her, and climbed up on the sofa and began to cry, falling asleep through the tears.

The home was filled with anguish.

The minister had been sought by a young couple on a farm in the district, to marry them on Christmas Eve. He had not returned and it was already pitch dark and a blinding blizzard had arisen. The minister’s wife still sat with eyes filled with tears, and listened to the tumult of the weather outside. She jumped whenever the house shook from the wind. Her mother, old Ólöf glided like a shadow past her. “He will most certainly be accompanied” she said very low.

The minister’s wife did not reply. Certainly he would be accompanied. But she was more afraid of something else – that he would have been tricked into drinking wine and then his guide would be gone. He would be weakened midway home. It would not be better, even if another man was out there with him.

The storm shook the house. She looked up and at her surroundings.

Where had her mother gone?

She had disappeared. Why had she been in the minister's room? Likely she had been checking the hearth there, because by now the wind was so strong. The old woman was thoughtful in every way.

The kitchen doors opened. The cold air blasted throughout the house.

"Could it be him?"

The minister's wife stood up, opened the door to the kitchen just a little, and peered out. The snow flakes flew into her face, as fine as flour and ice cold.

In the shed stood a man, covered with snow, and he stomped the snow off himself. It was the hired hand coming in from the animals in the barn.

"Isn't the weather terrible outside?" asked the women in the kitchen.

"Pray for us", said the hired hand. "This is the worst that I have ever been out in.

Has the minister come home?" he asked after a short silence.

No, unfortunately he has not come home, he was told.

"Would the minister's wife like me to go to meet him – or at least try?"

"No" replied the minister's wife, as she closed the door. She knew, that it would be useless to put the man's life in danger. In all likelihood, they wouldn't meet each other in such a blizzard anyway.

She had seen her mother in the kitchen with the other women. She had been standing there with a handkerchief in a headscarf, and held the other hand underneath her apron.

It was the church torch and one candle that old Ólöf held under her apron. And as soon as the hired hand went inside, she sneaked out into

the snowstorm without anyone noticing her, as she walked straight to the church. She could barely manage to walk through the storm and she was covered with snow when she arrived at the church. She closed the door carefully, took out the matches and lit the candle. Then she walked through the church all the way to the chancel. The frozen floor creaked under her feet, and the faint light flickered in the church from the candlelight. It was cold, dark and ghostly but she was not afraid. Inside the chancel she put the torch aside and knelt down. On the board above the altar was a painting of Christ, when he was reviving the son of a widow. The picture was blurry in the candlelight, like a dream.

She tried to pray to God, but had trouble collecting her thoughts. The storm shook the church so much that she shivered from the cold. She thought she would get more courage to pray if she were here. She was going to pray to God to lead the minister home from the storm in some wonderful way, otherwise there was no hope. But now she lost all her courage and could not pray.

There were many crevices running under the slope and on the other side of the river was nothing but flatland. The minister had to be somewhere in those flatlands trying to find his way home. It was certain that the crevices were impassable from slush.

She sank down onto her hands, overcome with sorrow, but the spirit of prayer did not appear, not the spirit she had hoped for. She looked with tear-filled eyes up to the altar and painting. All the pictures shook before her eyes. It seemed as if the picture of Christ was walking back and forth on the board.

"My Jesus! Give me the



Stúfur

strength to pray so that my prayer will be heard!" she said.

But she could not pray, couldn't find the words. All she could do was cry and shiver. Her thoughts were all wandering. What if she tried to ring the church bells?

The sound would travel far. It could be, that it would lead the minister on the right path. She took the light and tottered up to the tower where the bells were. The tower swayed in the wind, like a ship on a raging sea. The bells hung there, white with snow, rolling back and forth. They were actually ringing themselves. The tower was facing all directions and had windows on all sides. They were covered with shutters inside and locked. Ólöf had another idea. The ringing bell sounds would be muffled in the wind, but light from that height should be seen for long way off, no matter how dense the snow was. This idea gave her strength and daring.

She was well aware how dangerous it was to have a torch light in the tower in such weather. The tower could be swept away and the torch light could ignite everything. But she didn't let anything stop her. With cold and wizened fingers she pried the shutters off one by one until they were all down. Then she fetched the altar candles from the church and lit them. The tower shed its light out onto the darkness like a lighthouse beacon.

The minister's wife still sat crying and listening. Little Ólöf slept on the sofa. The house seemed deserted. Suddenly the kitchen doors opened and someone walked into the shed. The cold air blew right through the house. Nobody walked through the hallway in such weather. The minister's wife listened, this was the voice of her husband.

"God be praised! He has

come home!" she said loudly and hurried to the kitchen. Out in the shed stood the minister, all covered with snow and a man with him. In the open doorway two snow covered horses were seen.

"He has come! He has come!" was heard throughout the house.

The minister's wife ran straight into his arms and kissed him. She detected to her joy, that he had not touched any wine. When she looked around, she saw that all the adults in the home had gathered in the kitchen. Joy shone on every face.

The hired hand went out into the storm to look after the horses. The man who accompanied him was of course asked to stay overnight.

"Was it really bad?"

"I have never been outside in such weather" replied the minister. "But why is there a light in the church tower?"

Everyone looked at each other. No one knew and with such joy no one missed old Ólöf.

"Well" said the minister "this light has saved us. We had become totally lost here near the flatlands. I have never seen such a bright light as this one, when we first saw it.

It guided us over the crevices, otherwise I do not know whether we could have made it over."

Then a hired girl was sent out to the church loft. Ólöf was still sitting there up in the tower, blue from the cold and watching over one thing, that the torchlight would not set the church on fire.

"Wake up now, my Ólöf" said the minister's wife and leaned over the sofa. "Christmas is here. Your Daddy has come home, God created a miracle while you slept."



Stekkjastaur

Christmas Memories

by Julianna Bjornson

Christmas means so many things to so many people, yet as we age the meaning changes for us. When I was a child growing up in the Interlake area of Manitoba, Christmas always meant beautiful white and crisp snow. If we were lucky, it would snow and be cold enough for a skating rink in the back yard in early December. If an influx of snow were to happen in BC where I now live, Vancouver and the lower mainland would be shut down for weeks! Even still, snow means Christmas for me.

One favorite Christmas adventure was the putting up of all the Christmas decorations and getting the tree. It just put that time of year on a whole new level. I remember one year my father took us on a several mile trek to find the perfect Christmas tree. He would chop it down “in the wild”, while we, of course, would drag it back to the truck. One year, I remember saying to him, “Are you sure we should be going down this snow covered road?” He was quick to answer with, “Of course; it’ll be fine. Have I ever been wrong about this sort of thing before?” I think you can guess what happened next. When we got completely and utterly stuck, I told him that my sister and I just “didn’t have the muscles” to push the truck out properly. He readily replied that “since we didn’t have a driver’s licence” to drive it out either, it would be a “good starting point for us to build those muscles” by pushing the truck! One way or another we did get that truck out of there, and got home with three beautiful Christmas trees

in the back, not to mention a backache. No harm done though because it was a funny story we would tell each other (and others) again for years to come. It is a memory that still makes me chuckle as I write this just because it was an experience I’ll never forget. My children, Kai, who is five, and Brady, who is three, have always lived in a city, and will never get the chance to go and chop down a tree in a snow blanketed forest like ones straight out of the Christmas movie, “Frozen”.

Another favorite Christmas event as a child was, of course, the gift exchange and the whole Christmas Eve tradition. Our Christmas Eve tradition was always very much set in stone. We would eat a huge Christmas dinner with the whole works: turkey, stuffing, fresh vegetables, and whipped mashed potatoes and gravy. The favorite part of that meal was the desserts that Mom made for us. She had everything imaginable as a dessert, and we certainly ate our fill of that and chocolate sweets prior to leaving for the Christmas Eve service at Riverton/Hnausa Lutheran Church. It was really neat for us to see people who had long moved away from Riverton come back and be there for that service. I loved, and still love, the whole experience of the Christmas Eve service: the candles, the singing and just the general feeling of the people in the room. I liken it to the people in Whooville from the *Grinch Who Stole Christmas* because whatever their lives were like, they all seemed happy at the Christmas Eve service. My most favorite part of the night was when we lit up the

candles and sang my favorite song, “Silent Night”; it was just so magical for me. It really has stayed with me over the years, and even here, if we are not home (with my family for Christmas), we go to a Church to celebrate and give our children the same experience that we both had as children. Luckily for me, I married a man, Timothy Vuorela, who loves Christmas as much as I do. He even agreed to be married during the Christmas season in 2006!

After church, we would come home and sing several carols around the piano together. When I was a child, it seemed like the singing went on for an eternity, but I see how fondly I look back on that family time together. To this day, I remember my Dad’s voice booming around the piano (the only time he ever sang) and my Mom’s soprano while singing “Silent Night”. To their credit, my family never complained when I asked for its singing year after year. In later years, my sister, Valdine, took over the piano playing as she was always the most talented!

I will definitely give her that! After that, came the gifts, and for any child, this is really special. My sister and I would usually get a variety of gifts each year. As early as I can remember, we would swear secrecy to each other as to one of the gifts which we knew the other was getting. To this day, my parents never knew – and hopefully, my mother will never read this! The whole idea of the gift exchange was paramount for any child and it was just as magical for me, too.

Christmas Day invariably meant that we’d trek over to Steinbach for my Mom’s family’s Christmas. We would always come late, but, hey, we were always the longest drive away! It was always the same traditional meal as what we had for Christmas Eve, except for the dessert. My Aunt Georgie always made her plum pudding, an old family German favourite, and Mom always brought the kuchen – a type of German crumb cake. No matter what we ate, we always had lots of fun! They were a talkative lot, so I remember lively debating and laughing around the rooms, while the children were playing and making lots of chaotic noise downstairs. Boxing Day was always reserved for my father’s side of the family; in particular, my Aunt Roni (Gudrun), Uncle Jim and their family in Winnipeg. We would LOVE to go there because she made the most fabulous roast beef dinner I had ever tasted. She would have the traditional English Yorkshire pudding



Pottasleikir and Gáttaþefur

and her gravy was to die for. Geez, I am sounding like a food addict, but I tell you, it was good! We always complimented her and she would always credit her husband's family (Scottish/English) recipes for it. Not only was she a good cook, but my Aunt Roni was an even better shopper so we would unswervingly visit the psycho St. Vital Mall on Boxing Day for the great sales, too. Crazy times because it was not always so much fun dealing with the Christmas rush to spend gift certificates, take back clothes and the like. Even still, it was a good memory just because it always meant that I was with my Aunt, my sister, and Mom – though no big surprise that Dad stayed to visit with Uncle Jim!

Once we got older, the race was on to get back in time for the Boxing Day social in town. Everyone who was anyone was there at that time of year. Again, many people who no longer lived in Riverton came back for such events, so it was almost like a family reunion, of sorts. I guess Mom and Dad must have put their feet up at home, but we never made it back until the wee hours of the morn; after all, we did like to dance. The last big event before we had to go back to school was, of course, New Year's Eve at Gerri and Harold Finnsen's farm in Vidir, Manitoba. I tell you, I have not met a more humorous and loving family in my life (other than my own, of course). The adults often played a variety of card games, while we kids 'fended' for ourselves. The older cousins (Glen, Donna and Karen) were off to University by that time, but we always had fun times with Kristinn, the youngest. He loved it because he was the male star. He was *Magnum P.I.* to our *Charlie's Angels*. It was a hoot. The most favorite part of the night was Aunt Gerri's delicious Icelandic feast – here I go with food, again. She made the rúllupylsa, the vínarterta, and even pönnukökur, some years. Sometimes, Uncle Harold would

stick his delicious barbequed ribs in there, too. However, I do remember the horror of finding out one year that the rúllupylsa was made from cute little sheep, but otherwise, I loved every morsel! It was also neat to see my parents let their hair down. The laughter was unmistakable and it sure made me realize the importance of being around one's family at Christmas time. It also showed me how people relaxed and enjoyed being with their kin. In fact, the adults – truth be told – always got just a tiny bit tipsy, so customarily we also ended up watching movies on our own. One year, we watched, *The Way We Were*, and another, *Scarface*. Al Pacino sure had a temper in that one. Another year I also remember my sister and I debating with Kristinn as to what band was the best on the planet: Kristinn earnestly believed in *Ric Ocasek and The Cars*, while we had our money on *ABBA*. No clear winners were established that year!

As I write this, the last of the Bjornson clan, my father's brother, Haraldur, died in late October. I think, for me, it hones in the fact that those memories will always travel with me and be with me – no matter where I live. The fact that my Bjornson family cousins now want to go on 'reunion' vacations together is really a testament as to how a family's bonds are strengthened by the people within them. Each of my Christmas memories have been strengthened through the love of the people surrounding me. With my marriage, now comes the juggling of spending time with each side of the family at Christmas. I want my sons to always have the same opportunities to get to know our family as I had, so we always make the trek either to Winnipeg, or they come here, so that we, as an entire blended family, are together for Christmas. Without family, the true meaning of Christmas just isn't the same.

Christmas 1933

by Kristiana Magnusson Clark

Christmas is a time of traditions, some old, some new, but all very meaningful and wonderful to children at Christmas time. Our Christmas of 1933, in the Interlake town of Arborg, Manitoba, was a time of certain traditions from Iceland and of other traditions born in the heart of our family and kept up generations later.

One tradition kept up from Iceland was that each and everyone of us sixteen children had to have something new for Christmas, be it a dress sewn over but new to us, a new pair of socks or shoes, or even new hair ribbons for the girls or suspenders for the boys. Another custom from Iceland was to keep a light on, all Christmas night, to light the way for any travellers who might have lost their way along dark and lonely trails.

In Iceland the “huldufolk”¹ were very much a legendary part of Christmas festivities. One of the traditional customs there was to clean the house up before Christmas and to leave food for the huldufolk on Christmas Eve. We would ask our parents if the huldufolk would be coming to dance around at our home while we were away at church. However, we were told that the huldufolk would never find their way from Iceland to our little Canadian town.

Another old custom was the beautiful

Evensong held on Christmas Eve in the churches of Iceland. In our town of Arborg the Annual Lutheran Church Christmas Concert was usually held on Christmas Eve or else on the Sunday night before Christmas Eve.

So, on that special Christmas Eve in 1933, eleven of us children hurriedly put on our best clothes, packed our costumes and angel wings for the Nativity scene and started off for the Lutheran Church with Mother and Dad. The four oldest ones stayed behind to look after the new baby and to trim the Christmas tree so it would be all ready for us when we got back from the concert. Perhaps they felt too, that they might see the huldufolk, just in case they did find their way to Arborg. There was magic in the air that night as we wended our way across the frozen trails on the Icelandic River to the Lutheran Church. As we walked single file along the narrow

path we could feel the crunch of the hard snow under our feet. Above us the moon shone forth from a sky studded with shimmering star beams of light. In the stillness of that Holy Night the church steeple pierced the night sky, beckoning us on to the brightly-lit church.

As we entered the building the blaze of hissing gas lights dazzled us. On one side of the pulpit stood



Kertasnikir

the massively-splendid Christmas tree, adorned with popcorn balls, green and red streamers and silvery icicles, now glittering with reflections from the gas lamps. On the other side of the pulpit was a makeshift raised stage with the organ just below. We gazed in wonder at the Christmas tree, then hurried backstage to change into our costumes for the concert.

The room at the back of the stage was in utter confusion – coats and clothes piled high on a table, a mad scramble to change into costumes, the Sunday School teachers rushing around, Timmy crying that he had forgotten his welcome words and little Molly crying because her angel wings had come undone. Through all this bedlam the gentle voices of the Sunday School teachers

helped to quiet things down a bit.

Suddenly the church bells began to peal. The church, filled with organ music, alerted us to be ready. Finally we heard Reverend Olafson's announcement. "The children's program will now begin." Everything seemed to fall into place as we marched on to the stage. Under Freda Danielson's able direction our Christmas songs rang out with joy. Little Timmy remembered every line of the welcome words; the Three Wise Men looked resplendent and solemn as they placed their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh before the Christ Child; Molly beamed happily as she sang with the other angels, her angel wings now firmly anchored with a hidden pin. Finally the concert ended with the whole chorus softly singing "Silent Night."

The Christmas tree candles were now lit with long tapers by two elders of the church who then kept up a vigil by the tree lest the candles catch on fire. We children walked down the stage steps where each one of us received a red mesh bag filled with Christmas candy and an orange. We then proceeded slowly along the aisles of the church, singing a particular adaptation of the lovely Christmas hymn "In Bethlehem a Child Is Born" sung in Icelandic.

As we walked home from the church, eagerly awaiting the excitement of the Christmas tree at home, one of the younger boys shouted, "Look at the beautiful lights ahead." There ahead of us we saw the glittering lights of the cross at the top of St. Benedict's Convent, shedding a brilliant glow against the night sky. This was a special night for the cross was only lit up on Holy Nights or for some special occasion. The starry sky above, the shimmering lights on the cross, the joy and wonder in our hearts – these were all there in the magic of that Christmas night Anno nineteen thirty-three.

¹ Huldafolk – hidden people, fairies



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Cold Weather

by Chay Lemoine

I spent the winter of 1985/86 in Reykjavík Iceland. I had read somewhere that our reality is a physical manifestation of our subconscious. If this theory is true then that year my subconscious was cold, dark and depressed. At the time I was attending Háskóli Íslands (University of Iceland) trying my best to live a fantasy of learning Icelandic and befriending the Icelandic people. But I had been at the University for three months and received a few cursory hellos but I was no closer to understanding Icelandic culture or the language than I was when I arrived in late August. I had experienced cold Midwest winters but this Icelandic winter seemed colder, gloomier and seemed to be directing its wrath at me personally. If the Icelandic gods were testing me then I was a complete and total failure.

I knew that Reykjavík was going to be nothing like the Laxness novels that I idolized. But one of the unexpected aspects of Iceland is that it combined the expected with the unexpected. On the surface it seemed to be malleable. The country and people were not so different from the Amer/Euro model that there was not much cause for immediate alarm. But the Icelandic sensibility is as vast as the ocean that surrounds it. In 1986 my nationality made me suspect.

I was constantly reminded of the fact that I was an American. Perhaps it was a victory for Icelanders if I should falter. They seemed to have no trouble handling all things American, language, culture and food but I struggled with all aspects of Icelandic society.

When after a couple months of trying desperately to get a grasp of Icelandic at the University, I decided to have a talk with my Icelandic instructor, a young female. I told her that I was having trouble following the classroom instruction which was entirely in Icelandic. I was doing hours of work outside of class but I seemed to be getting nowhere. I could understand nothing of what was going on in the classroom. She listened intently but I knew as I spoke that help was NOT on the way. Immediately after I finished talking she said that “Americans learn Icelandic every day?”

“What does that have to do with me?” I asked. She just shook her head.

I thanked her for listening and I left the office. We both were speaking English but we were not communicating. And there lies the problem. There was much that was lost in translation. Even if there was a turn around and I began to understand the language there was so much more I did not understand and I was not going to gain that



Þvörusleikur

understanding at the University. I was the American that failed.

I had come to Iceland feeling as if my life was a single note played over and over again. My education at the American university went well. I had a few jobs so I could be gainfully employed. Yet I was slowly marching into the sunset without experiencing heaven or hell. I was profoundly unhappy in the United States. Now I was tasting defeat but even that wasn't bitter. It just felt extremely inconvenient. I had so little joy in me that a little pain was at the very least the confirmation of my existence. But in all honestly I was not surprised at my failure. What did surprise me is that I thought it would come because of a lack of effort on my part. But I can honestly say no one wanted something or worked harder toward attaining it than I did.

Which came first the painful depression,



Hurðarskellir

the language or the weather? It's more likely that out of chaos they all developed at the same time. My depression seemed to dull all of my senses including my sense of taste. I took my Lýsi (cod liver oil) in the morning with ease and after an old Icelandic man told me his father heated his; I tried it warm. I did find comfort on the weekends going out and drinking with the Icelanders. After a few drinks I was not the odd ball American in Iceland but another drunken body staggering down Bankastræti. My beverage of choice was Brennivín and Coke. I chose the Brennivín because I thought it would help me fit in with the alcohol crowd but I found that few Icelanders my age drank it. After a couple of weekends I began to like not only the taste but the effect. I became just as drunk on vodka but on Brennivín. Mt. Esja seemed to come alive and I felt as I could speak Icelandic like a native. And to my surprise I did. I remembered the words and phrases from the class. It was a surprise to some I drank with. I was a drunken American speaking perfect Icelandic. Where the words came from I don't know because they certainly did not come as freely in the classroom. I was told by my fellow drinkers that so few speak it well and that book Icelandic sounds nothing like the real language. I was encouraged to not only speak more but to drink more. And I took their advice and drank and talked until I staggered home at 4 am happy I could "tala íslensku".

It was a very cold Friday when I decided that I could not endure one more class at Háskóli Íslands. I realized that I was not looking for an academic understanding of the country but an emotional and physical one. I left the University and made my trek home in the cold and snow. My decision to quit the University made my already depressed state almost unbearable. My dreams and expectations were destroyed. It was more than my inability to gain what

I wanted from my visit at the University but I truly loved the country. I would have to leave as I had an educational visa. I literally crawled back to my rented room on Skólavörustígur. I sat on the bed and began making plans to return to the United States. But I knew that I could not leave – not now. I counted my money and I thought that I could stay a while longer – perhaps enroll in some language classes I had seen advertised and find a job. Was that possible? My next inclination was to drink myself to death. I was deeply and darkly depressed. Earlier in the week I had bought two fresh bottles of Brennivín. It was 6 pm but it was pitch dark outside. I began to drink.

I was just starting to feel the effect of the alcohol when I realized that I could not get comfortably drunk without a shower. This tendency of “excessive grooming” was an American trait that I was going to embrace no matter how long I stayed in Iceland. Two showers a day was the norm and more if I happen to go to the pool. I poured myself another drink after the shower. I ran out of coke but instead of going out and buying more I decided it only cut the flavor of the Brennivín which I began to savor. I was jolted out of my torpor by the sound of young people yelling. It was now around 2 am and the Reykjavík nightlife was just starting to explode. From the standpoint outside my window I had an excellent view of Mt. Esja. The mountain is not only beautiful but has a mystical feel and I felt as if it held the answers to all of my difficulties. But there is no doubt the mountain will tell lies to keep from revealing its secrets. It was amidst the blur of intoxication that I decided to walk to the top of Mt Esja. That was impossible since it was across the bay but at that time I was drunk enough to ignore what was impossible.

It is here that the details become foggy. I remember walking and taking long swigs out of the bottle. It was starting to snow

heavily and I was soon out of the downtown area with a few homes scattered on both sides of the street. I felt exhilarated, joyful and dejected. The snow began falling harder. My whole body was white with wet, cold snow. The world was beginning to slowly disappear and I would fall and then stand up again. This happened several times until I must have given up.

When I fell the last time I must have landed on my back because I could see the snow falling on my face slowly burying me. I remember thinking that I was glad I had taken a shower. Perhaps this was because my Mother always told me to wear good underwear so if something should happen I wouldn't be embarrassed. I was ready. My underwear was in good repair and I had taken a shower. The snow fell until there was darkness all around me. The world had become very, very quiet. I was


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cold at first but this didn't last long. After several moments of waiting I decided that I wanted to sleep. So I turned a little to get comfortable and I was not aware of much except for a bit of fear. I wasn't terrified but I was not comfortable with my situation. I did fall asleep but I awoke with a start when I found myself looking into the eyes of an angel. I couldn't tell if it was a male or female angel but of course that is the nature of their species. This angel was a beautiful rosy colour and glowed a soft pink. I felt the warm and it took me in its arms and held me. I was safe.

I heard a loud banging over and over. I crawled slowly out of a deep dark hole. My head was throbbing and the pounding made the throbbing more painful. I was in my bed and there was a pounding on the door. I realized that I was naked so I wrapped the quilt around my body and dragged my leaden feet toward the door. Standing there was a teenaged boy. I just stared. He looked familiar but I was in no condition to ask any questions. "Yes" I said.

"Hello I'm Einar". He shifted his weight. He seemed to know me.

"Einar? Look I had a rough night... and could you come back tomorrow?" I turned to go back to my bed.

"You don't know me? I saved your life."

"You saved my life...I don't think you are talking to the right person."

He leaned in a little and whispered "I saved your life, last night, I brought you home".

The fog cleared slightly and I looked into his face – red hair framing a light pink complexion. "So you're my angel?"

"No I'm not an angel" said Einar, "but can I come in? I speak English."

"I'm sorry Einar come in. You could come in even if you didn't speak English. I'm sorry I didn't recognize you at first. So you are the one that brought me home."

Einar walked in as if he was there

before. He looked around. "Nice place you have here". Einar spoke in quick damaged English but this expression was perfectly phrased. I immediately recognized an idiom from the movies or television. The small room was anything but nice. I had clothes scattered all over, pierces of hardfish on the end table. There were empty coke and Brennivín bottles scattered around the room. It was a disaster and even more of disaster in the eyes of an Icelander where cleanliness was a judge of character.

"Pull up some rubbish and have a seat. So you found me last night and brought me home? How did you know I lived here?"

"You told me." Einar just stood in the middle of the room and looked at me without moving his glance.

"Oh I guess I was at least partially coherent. You must think I am a moron."

Einar screwed up his pink nose a bit "what is this moron you are always talking about?"

"A moron? Oh it's someone who.... doesn't always...."

Before I could figure out the meaning of the word Einar chimed in "I will be a moron too."

"No, no Einar you don't want to be a moron".

"Why not? Do you think that Icelanders can't be morons?"

"No I certainly don't think that at all but...."

"Then I am moron," Einar proudly announced.

I was in no condition to argue so I agreed that he was too a moron. This seemed to sit well with him so as long as he was happy I let the matter rest. I looked around the room for some clothes to put on and I located a pair of shorts that I could easily slip on.

"Do you want some coffee or...what time is it anyway. Is it lunch or dinner time? I have no idea."

Einar stood his ground watching me carefully “It’s seven at night”.

“You mean I lost the whole day. Thank you for bringing me home Einar.” He was starting to make me a bit uncomfortable with the head on stare. So I asked “What are you looking at”.

“You are a real American aren’t you?”

“I suppose so yes – as apple pie.”

“I see you in the movies. You are the first that I see in a room. I like Americans.”

“You seem to be in the minority. Not many people seem to like me here.”

“Icelanders think you are from the base or that you are here because you want to watch us. But I know you’re not.”

How do you know that?

“I know the base konnies or the konnies that are here because they think it is something new. You are something else. How do you like Iceland”.

“I like it very much but I don’t think it likes me very much.”

“Oh Iceland likes you. If it didn’t like you then you would not be here or you would be dead”.

Einar strolled around the room as if my garbage strewn room was a park. “Nice place you have here” he repeated. His strawberry blond hair and pink complexion made him look almost like a doll – he was so perfect except for his legs. One seemed to be shorter than the other. But Einar made

good use of this problem so that every step he took seemed to be turned into a dance. He danced around the room and with each turn he danced faster. There was something about Einar that was surreal and I couldn’t help but asking “are you sure you’re not an angel”

“No he answered I am a Icelander. I am from Iceland, the greatest country in the world.”

“Oh OK. I just find all this so strange. Would you like some coffee?”

I dressed quickly and I directed Einar to the community kitchen. I told him what I was doing here and he told me about his life in Iceland. I must admit there was times when I laughed at him rather than with him. He also laughed at me when I described my current plight. But we both had the ability to laugh at ourselves. And he had no problem telling me that he saw “sheep homes” that looked better than my room. So he didn’t really mean what he said about it being a “nice place”.

I asked him what kind of music did he listen to and he said “American music always”. Except for “Gaggó Vest” which is the best song that was ever written since the beginning of time”. I knew the song as it was played constantly on Icelandic radio. I agreed it was a good song. He clarified that by repeating it was “the best song since the beginning of time” and added “it is a

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Icelandic song”. We talked and drank coffee for hours.

At some point in the evening I realized I was no longer depressed. I felt a slight panic, excused myself and went to the bathroom almost as if to look for the depression. I looked in the mirror as to give myself some frame of reference. I looked like a train had run over my face but I didn't not feel any of the sadness that I had carried around with me for months or perhaps even years. I reassured myself it would surely return tomorrow. I had grown strangely fond of my pain.

When I returned we sat quietly for a minute or two. Einar broke the silence and said quietly “you cry when I carry you here”.

“Yeah? I have been having a hard time here. I'm not surprised. I'm sorry if that made you feel uncomfortable.”

“Icelanders don't cry much. But I see why you cry. Iceland is not easy but you don't worry. I am here now.” He said it was if his arrival was preordained and he was apologizing for the delay.

I almost cried again. “Thank you Einar”.

“I have only one American friend and that is you.”

Whether or not the depression returned I knew I was not going back to the Háskóli. I could learn all I needed to know about Iceland from Einar and he seemed willing to teach me. But even if I never saw him again, which for some odd reason I knew would not happen, everything was going to change for me now.

Eventually after midnight I kicked him out – literally – and I went back to

sleep. I woke up around 9 am refreshed with an entirely different perspective. Around 11 am I went downstairs to the bakery and bought a bag of pastry. I realized I was being followed by a young man around Einar's age. He was listening to a cassette tape nodding his head with the music. He yelled over the music in his head. “I'm Siggi, Einar's friend”. Siggi spoke perfect English unlike Einar's which threatened to fall apart at any moment.

“Hi Siggi” I shook his hand.

“I am here to be your friend too, he said taking the ear plugs out of his ears.

“Thank you Siggi I need a few friends here”. I asked him about his music and he expressed his love for rock and roll. We shared a few bands and walked quietly down the street eating the pastries I bought. Einar has obviously sent Siggi on this errand of mercy but he seemed to find the task enjoyable since I had a whole bag of pastries and talked about seeing Led Zepplin and Queen in concert in the United States.

When there was a lull in the conversation he smiled and said hesitantly “I am a moron like Einar”. He sheepishly added “Einar said Icelanders are better morons than Americans”.

“Did he say that?” I asked.

He nodded and glanced at me to make sure that I was not terribly offended. “Well perhaps you are right... but I would say that it might be a tie – you know 50/50. Wouldn't you say?” Siggi nodded in agreement and we walked down Bankastræti in silence.



Giljagaur

Enchanted: Iceland Is My Muse

by Erica J. Green

Perched at the edge of the seashore in southern Iceland, I watched as massive waves crashed against the black sand beach. I took a few steps back and pulled on my winter coat, feeling powerless and tiny against these enormous waves. But I couldn't turn away, for lined up along the shore were bright blue pieces of the glacier. Enormous chunks of age-old ice, set against the black sand, seemed to glow. Looking like apparitions, it was as if the ice drew me toward it. So bright

and blue and intricate were the designs I could not turn away.

Instead I stood there for what may have been hours, before wandering between the sculptures, marveling at the outrageous shapes, the electric blues and aqua colors, at the unbelievable chiseled ice, wondering how many centuries it took for them to shift down from the top of the glacier, float through the lagoon and finally end up here, at their final resting place. Soon, these unbelievable sculptures would disintegrate



PHOTO: ERICA J. GREEN

as they were swept out to sea.

I knew I'd found a special site, one of those unique places on the planet where something phenomenal was taking place, inspiring me to think about the world and my place in it. After two years of living in Iceland, I learned that while Jökulsárlón was one of these such locations, in fact Iceland was a country full of incredible beauty that inspired me to write and to be creative.

I'd moved to Iceland to, among other things, work on my writing. With a twenty-year career in the book publishing industry, working as an editor and a freelance writer, I sought out places where I could focus on my craft. Little did I know that Iceland was the ideal location. Reykjavík is the first UNESCO non-native English speaking City of Literature in the world. In a country with a population just over 300,000 more Icelanders read and write books than any

other country in the world. It's said that one in ten Icelanders publish a book. I should have known that the land of the sagas would be literary, I just hadn't realized that even today there is a thriving literary scene.

In downtown Reykjavík there are literary walking tours, a museum housing some of the original manuscripts, and bookstores everywhere. Not to mention well-appointed libraries and cafes on every corner where one can sit and read or work on your writing. Not too far outside of the city is Gljúfrasteinn, the ancestral home of Halldór Laxness, Iceland's Nobel Prize winner. He was awarded the prize for literature in 1955.

During my stay in Iceland, I drove around the country on the famed ring road, exploring fishing villages in the north, viewing puffins from atop windswept cliffs in the West Fjords, climbing mountaintops



Bjúgnakrækir and Skyrgámur

to view bubbling earth and geothermal vents, and to watch the geyser shoot water thirty feet into the sky. Of course too, I found time to soak in hot pots and listen to new Icelandic music. The natural beauty spoke to me. And the quaint and quirky cafes, with their high-octane coffee, fueled me. Here, I was able to complete a draft of my novel and write numerous articles for publication. Maybe it was the nature, maybe it was the coffee, maybe it was the elves, or maybe it was simply the spirit of the place. Whatever the magic formula, Iceland became my muse.

Erica J. Green is the co-founder of the Iceland Writers Retreat, www.icelandwritersretreat.com, an event April 9-13, 2014 that is open to all. Famed authors from around the world will lead small-group workshops on the craft of writing. Between intimate workshops and lectures, delegates will have the chance to tour the spectacular Golden Circle, sit in the cozy cafes of Reykjavik, soak in geothermal hot springs, listen to new Icelandic music, meet contemporary Icelandic writers, and learn about the country's rich literary tradition.

Helgi Olsen's Memoirs

Part V of a series of Helgi Olsen's memoirs

Continued from Volume 65 #4

H.O.'s Memoirs. Part 19

In the Province of Manitoba there are four lakes and one town all bearing the name of Shoal Lake. One of these lakes is in the Interlake area, about half way between Lake Winnipeg and Lake Manitoba. This lake is about thirty-two miles in length and ten miles at its widest point. It is broken down into three separate sections. South Shoal Lake that has been reserved as a game sanctuary for a number of years. Hunting and shooting of wild fowl is strictly forbidden within certain limits. These limits have become known as the firing line. Here hunters would lie in wait for the geese that would be coming in to rest at eventide or in the early morning. In the spring migration and again in the fall, flights of geese would come to rest by

the thousands. Resting on the water after feeding on the grain fields near by. It was the same with the ducks. The difference would be that the ducks would breed in the marshes surrounding the lake.

The second section reached from the Harperville Narrows to the Inwood Narrows. This was a much smaller body of water and was not a game preserve.

The third portion of Shoal Lake was that around which the Icelandic settlement was located. This is the area that is of interest in this narrative.

Hunters used to come out to Vestfold to shoot and usually take back with them their quota of ducks.

I remember one time, three fellows from Winnipeg stopped at our place. They were apparently experienced hunters and soon got their bag of birds. They were sitting around the kitchen swapping yarns.

One of the men, Hargrave by name, was cleaning his gun. It seemed that he had forgotten to unload it before starting to clean it. He held the gun upright between his knees as he sat in a chair to one side of the room, when the gun went off. The barrel was about six inches from his nose. His face was badly singed. The shot went up through the roof, leaving quite a scar as the shot tore through board and shingle. This was quite a shock to those sitting around. Mother was standing at the stove making coffee. The noise and shock made her faint, but nothing more serious. She was always nervous when guns were shown in her presence.

It was a bright warm day in early



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September. I was idling around the barn, with nothing particular in mind, when three men drove in on a single horse and buggy. I recognized these men by sight. Two were schoolteachers, one from the Charlton School and the other taught at the Roadway School. I don't recollect their names, but the third was a theological student, who was acting pastor at the Anglican Church at Clarkleigh, his name was Mr. Anderson. He had three initials that I don't recall. He later moved to Saskatchewan and was Premier of that Province for a number of years.

They asked me if I would have time to guide them out in the marsh, as they would like to get a few ducks to take back with them. This I agreed to do. We put the horse in the barn and fed it hay. I went to get my gun and let Mother know where I was going, and walked down to the marsh. The weather was too warm and calm for ducks to be flying around at that time of day. The odd duck did come within range of fire.

These men had never been out in a marsh before, so this was all a great novelty to them. We had to wade across numerous necks of water to the island farther on. This island was called Oak Island because of oak trees that grew there. As we were crossing over one of these narrow necks of water, a small flock of ducks flew over. All raised their guns at the same time and fired. Two ducks dropped into open water some distance away. In their excitement to retrieve these fallen birds, two of them, one was Mr. Anderson, stepped off the tuft of grass that they were standing on and fell into the pit, about five feet deep. When they arose from the puddle, the mucky water streamed down their faces, and queer looks were on their faces when they got back onto firm footing. The third man standing and watching these fellows emerge from the water burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, so that the other two soon forgot

their sad predicament and roared with laughter considering this to be a wonderful joke. They were out for excitement and they were getting it. Needless to say, they had forgotten all about the ducks that were slowly floating away. I had to go and retrieve them myself.

Even though the weather was warm, it was decided to go on to the island and dry their clothes. On the far side of the island the water was clear, so we stripped and took a long leisurely swim. The clothes were drying at a fire that we had made previously before going into the lake. Mr. Anderson made a sketch of the incident when the men emerged from the swamp and one of himself, too, of course. This drawing was so true to life that a photo would hardly show a better picture.

As the weather cooled towards sunset they were able to shoot the number of birds that they wanted and went home

quite satisfied and highly elated over the glorious adventure and thanked me profusely for my part and for taking time off to accompany them out into the marsh.

H.O.'s Memoirs Part 20

The day after the family arrived at Vestfold, I was out watching my brothers mending fence around the vegetable garden, when I noticed two boys come walking across the fields. One I knew, as he was a Winnipeg boy and was out for a holiday. His name was Oli Erickson. He was about four years older than I, about brother Dan's age, as they had played more together than what I played with him. Oli became a good hockey player, but was unfortunate to lose an eye while playing one night. He now has just one eye to see with but that did not handicap him to make a living as he became a successful rancher and raised a family of

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eight boys and two girls.

The second boy appeared to be about my age or maybe a year older. His name, he told me, was Einar Johnson and he lived with his parents on the next farm three quarters of a mile to the west of our place. He was about my size. I liked him at first

sight and he showed that he liked me. Two days later he came over alone and asked me to come along with him. He had an errand with our neighbour to the south, the Freeman's.

On the way, he showed me how to spot a bird when it had left its nest on the approach of man. We found three nests; one was that of a killdeer. I saw a bird was staggering around, with what seemed to be a broken wing. I tried to catch it, but it kept out of my reach and finally flew away singing its common name of killdeer, killdeer. When I got back to where Einar was standing, he explained that this was a ruse to lead me away from its nest. He then showed me where the nest was under a clump of grass that was in the center of an alkali spot. The second one was the nest of a catbird. This bird tried to scare us away by its call that sounded like the hissing of a cat. The third nest was that of a crow.

This nest was in a tangle of willow bushes and hard to get at. There were young in the nest so we went away with the parent birds cawing their harsh warning.

Mr. Freeman was having a new house built on a high knoll within a big wooded area. His old house was down by the lake and in a very exposed spot for the weather. The family lived in an old abandoned log house near by, so that is where we headed.



Ketkrókur

The family consisted of five girls and one son: Magnia, Lena, Ada, Runa and Emily. The boy's name was Vilbald, called Bill. The whole family was sitting around a table, in this little rude log house, drinking coffee. Einar left his message and we were naturally invited to sit down, as others got up to make room for us. I felt terribly embarrassed among all these strangers, but they were all nice and polite. We did not stop long. When it was time to go Einar went around shaking hands with everyone. I, of course, followed suit, much as I hated to make the round. I soon discovered that shaking hands was the common way to thank one and say goodbye.

Einar and I soon became bosom companions. I became a frequent visitor to the Johnson home Mrs. Johnson became a second mother to me. Her name was Stefania. Einar's father was named Bjorn, and the two sisters Jonina and Bjorg, all very nice people indeed. The many adventures and deeds of daring that we went through, the eighteen years we kept up our comradeship would sound like Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Einar was the dominating type and wanted to run things, which was alright with me to a certain extent as I was more of the easy going sort, but still wanted to have some say in the matter.

For the first few years we were about the same height and weight. Then Einar took the notion to grow. In two years, he grew to be five foot ten inches in height and 190 lbs. in weight. I stayed at five foot six inches tall and under 150 lbs. on average so Einar could handle me in our wrestling and all our other sports. Einar's great achievement came when he started to take part in field and track events at local picnics. There were some very interesting events, when runners like Steve Holm who was considered unbeatable, took part. Einar won by points as his great strength

carried him through the many events that were called for.

Another worthy competitor was Tom Shannon from Harperville. He was about Einar's size and build. It was always a good show to see these two compete on even terms. One would be a winner one time and the other at another time.

Grettir Athletic Club of Lundar organized and controlled by Paul Reykdal who was a merchant in Lundar and took an active part in community affairs, especially sports. Einar was the leading point getter for the Club though he had many worthy opponents. Gusti Magnusson was the finest long distance runner that the Icelanders ever had. He ran with a nice, smooth gait that appeared so effortless. Some suggested that he might qualify for the Olympics if he had the proper training. He did however, win many medals at the Icelandic Celebration being held at Gimli on the first Monday in August each year. Then there were Bjorgvin Stefansson, Oscar Thorsteinsson, Einar Erikson and Thorhallur Halderson. These all won the overall championship or medals at the Celebration. Einar, at these events, won the championship four times in a row, thus winning the Clemens, Arnason, Palmason and the Hanson Cup outright. He later donated these cups back to the sports committee for further competition.

Einar and I were very fond of dancing and used to take in dances even though the weather was bad. We would rush through our chores and leave early so as to get stable room at the hall. There were more horses on Einar's farm, so usually used his horses. We would take in the dances at Ideal School, Hayland School, Seamo Hall, Lundar and the familiar hall at Markland. This was always a popular place. It was only four miles away on the other side of the lake. It was built in 1904 by volunteer labour and small donations

from those who could partake of the actual work. A barn capable of housing twenty teams at one time was erected to the rear. The roof was of rails and straw and quite inflammable. Very few accidents ever did occur at the country schools or halls, but a close call was narrowly averted when a large crowd attended a concert at the Markland Hall. The barn was full of horses and others tied outside and well blanketed.

The concert program was over a little after eleven o'clock and refreshments were being prepared when Einar, I and another fellow thought we would take a look to see how things were in the barn. Just as we opened the door, a commotion among the horses called our attention and we noticed that a lantern, that had been hanging on the rafters, was lying on the ground and the oil had spilled out and was setting fire to the hay that lay around there. I immediately grabbed the lantern which was now all on fire, ran out with it and threw it out into the snow bank, scorching my hands while doing so, in the meantime the other boys and others that came a long just then, stamped out the fire and by doing so saved the place from a dangerous situation. If we had been a few minutes later, the whole barn would have been on fire and the forty or more horses would have been destroyed. There is no animal more helpless or more contrary than a horse when caught in an accident or some other unusual circumstances, such as going through a deep snow drift, falling through the ice on the lake as we had experience with at a later date.

I did attend the Vestfold School for a few months each summer to finish my grade schooling. I was always considered to be stranger and got blamed for much mischief, some that I deserved and some I did not deserve. Like, at one time, a girl was sitting at a desk in front of me. This girl had long hair done up in two braids.

When she sat up her braids would sweep across my desk. Once I had my ink well open and her hair braids got into the inkwell. I noticed this and started to wipe the ink off when she jerked her hair away from my hands. She naturally blamed me for having put her hair into the well.

She told her parents about this and they wrote a long letter to the teacher. I was chastised for this serious offence which I denied having done on purpose. The teacher took a lenient view and all was soon forgotten. But this just went to show that a stranger kid from the city was vulnerable to blame and excuses. This was proved from another incident that happened at another time.

It was the afternoon recess and the kids were playing outside the school yard, when one of our fellow pupils, who was not at school that day, came riding to where we were gathered and stopped to say hello. Then in a playful mood he started to ride into the crowd. This started a horse back fight, trying to unhorse the man. This was all in fun. But he kept after me, so I grabbed up a handful of soft dirt and sure enough it hit square in the face. The bell rang and we filed back into the schoolroom.

After four, Einar and I took a walk over to the Einarsons who lived a hundred yards from the school. We were talking to Einar Einarson, a young chap that lived there when we noticed a man come riding, his long legs swinging in rhythm with the horse's gait. When he came up close, he jumped off his horse grabbed me by the shoulder and let fly with his big fist. I was standing up against a fence post. I ducked the blow and his fist hit the fence post, cutting the skin enough so that it bled. I had a new white shirt and the blood showed up on my collar. Just then the ladies of the house came out to see what the noise was about and thought that I had been hurt and bawled their neighbour

out in no uncertain terms. I was let go his anger had abated and he went home.

Now this was not the end of the affair. Two years later farmers from different parts of the country had sold cattle and they had to deliver them to Oak Point, and receive their payment. I took a few head that we had sold and Einar delivered some that he had sold. We had taken receipt of our money and were in Joe Halverson's store buying our household supplies to take home when in walked our good friend the neighbour. We noticed that he had indulged too well though not to wisely. When he saw me he came immediately to where I was standing and was about to grab a hold of me uttering a long string of curse words. I managed to avoid him. Then he saw Einar and made for him. Einar was standing close to the door. As he was about to reach for Einar he tripped and fell out on to the store's platform. By

then a large crowd of curiosity-seekers was standing around watching what was going on. He was in an excited mood but his sons managed to calm him down and get him into the wagon and home.

Now the strange part of all this performance was that previous to this affair and ever after we were all the very best of friends. But for the effects of liquor, this flare up would never have taken place. It did leave a lasting effect on my memory.

Our friendship between Einar and me lasted until after the First World War, when I had a spirit of independence and wanted to go my way and not to feel in any way obligated to him. Einar became a big cattle rancher with a flock of boys to help him out and maintain the large herd of hereford cattle that he raises on his ranch at Oak Point.

Conclusion in next issue

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PHONE ORDERS WELCOME

POETRY

Christmas Eve

by Norma Guttormsson

Every year we looked forward to Christmas Eve,
my brother and I,
although we were poor
and there were no gifts to buy.
Mamma promised to do her best
to find a way to make
a special meal for her family –
a gift for us of rabbit steak.
And rather than just ordinary bread,
she filled it with raisins instead.

One year Mamma fell ill on Christmas Eve;
Pabbi knew not what to do
to give his sons the yuletide gift
we always looked forward to.
He slaughtered a pig to do his best
to find a way to prepare
a special meal for his family –
he knew that we would care.
Pabbi was pleased that he was able
to bring Christmas dinner to our table.

That year it was bitterly cold on Christmas Eve
and also in our shack.
Bedclothes froze to our mouths
as heat at night we did lack.
Our neighbours came to do their best
to bring cheer to the door
and a special gift for our family –
for they had some baking in store.
We cracked the ice on the water pail
to enjoy hot coffee and share a tale.

In New Iceland, we looked forward to Christmas
with family and friends who kept their promise.

(Inspired from my Afi's correspondence about the conditions in New Iceland, circa 1875-1890)

The Mess (anonymous)

I took a walk one afternoon
And started humming a little tune.
I had not gone very far
When I heard a little car.
As it passed it gave a roar
And stopped where I had stood before,
The driver hollered: Do you want a ride
And as I had no place to hide,
I said "Yes"

When I finally got out
I didn't know my where about
And so I had to find a phone
In order to call the folks at home
When I told them they made a fuss
And said I had to take a bus
When I got to our house
I must have looked like quite a louse
Why, oh why had I said yes
And got myself into this mess.

Poem found on a piece of paper tucked inside a dictionary in the trunk of an abandoned vehicle in Kár Simundsson's yard.



Picture drawn by Mikael Bergmann Hauksson

Book Review

Names For The Sea: Strangers In Iceland



Reviewed by Helen Sigurdson

Paperback: 368 pages

Publisher: Granta Publications Ltd.

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Language: English

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Names for the Sea – Strangers in Iceland is a beautiful blending of memoir, travel book and love story for the ever mysterious country called Iceland.

Sarah Moss is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Warwick University in the U.K. This book is based on her experiences as a visiting lecturer at the University of Iceland in 2009-2010.

At the age of nineteen Moss had spent a “crazy summer” with a girlfriend in the wilds of the Icelandic countryside. She had always had a dream of returning to Iceland, and this opportunity gave her the answer to that dream, when she was offered and accepted a job at the University of Iceland in Reykjavík. This time however, she had her husband and two young sons with her, and this book tells of their experiences with fine detail and humour.

Their lives were immediately affected when moving to Iceland by the financial crash (*kreppa*) of 2009, which caused the value of her salary to be cut in half. They were also affected by the eruption of the volcano Eyjafjallajökull in April 2010, which not only covered their near world with ashes, but also delayed all air travel, causing Moss to miss an important job interview in Singapore.

With wry humour Moss invites the reader to accompany her on her many experiences, including to cook “only Icelandic food as long as it doesn’t involve blood pudding.”

Most fruits and vegetables are

imported and whale meat and cod are compromised by the “save the whale” and “cod war” campaigns. Lamb became her staple meat. As butter and cream are cheap, wonderful cakes, breads, biscuits and pancakes, as well as the always delicious *skýr*, are readily available. The custom of eating cooked sheep’s head, and the habit of putting sugar on potatoes were left to the Icelanders however!

Moss and her family lived in the only available flat in an incomplete complex in Reykjavík. Interesting features of their home included heated floors, a washing machine that said hello, a party line telephone, and huge windows. She is very interested to note that many Icelanders have summer homes in wilderness areas. From her descriptions of some of the large houses in the city, to the humble homes on farms and in fishing villages, the reader gets a good picture of life in modern Iceland.

Learning to drive in Iceland was a daunting task. Many rural roads were unsurfaced and city roads seemed to be “cut offs” instead of connectors. Driving on the “wrong side of the road”, dealing with drivers who did not indicate (believed to be “nobody else’s business”) and drivers who used car mirrors only to apply makeup made for tense times on the roads for Moss. “Was that girl steering with her knees because she needed both hands for texting?” she wonders. It seemed to her that every person in Iceland, not just every family, owned an oversized SUV!

Going to school in Iceland for her children revealed a much more open and relaxed atmosphere than in England. There were no locks or cameras at the doors, and children were trusted to move about unattended. Books were not read to the very young-“that time is for play”. The leaving age for students is age twenty. Education is important. In her own back

to school experiences at the University, Moss finds that several of her students are already parents and many are older than her former students in the UK. The belief is to have children “while you are young but not necessarily with your life partner”. And although Icelandic modern literature is rife with violence, rapes and murders, this certainly does not reflect life in modern Iceland. Moss notes with great interest and writes at length about the fact the “every Icelander appears to have a relationship with knitting”, and women in particular seem to knit everywhere, even in her University classes. Knitting cafes are familiar places, which gives Moss, as a keen knitter, great pleasure.

Moss describes areas of Iceland as “viewing the world before it is finished.” Visiting places where volcanoes had erupted, listening to stories of local people, and walking over fields of bubbling hot mud and volcanic craters gives a feel of “another world.” To be in Iceland when Eyjafjallajökull erupted was fortunate, or not, as the case may be! She describes well a time when she and her son had an opportunity to view the fresh water pouring down over the beautiful fertile valley after the eruption.

The sections of the book telling of the “hidden people” are so well written that it is easy to be drawn into the world of these

Rev. Stefan Jonasson

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mysterious forms of beings. One example of this is when the author travels to meet Thorun in her Summer home. Thorun immediately points out a lady, “out there by a table.” This was one of the hidden people, clearly seen by Thorun. Thorun explains to Moss the differences between elves, ghosts and the ‘hidden people’ in Icelandic belief. As the author describes the stories she hears of the elves and hidden people in Iceland, the reader is drawn into the mystery and beliefs of this fascinating part of Icelandic life.

When the author and her family first moved to Iceland they felt “like foreigners.” The changing weather, northern lights, blizzards, volcanoes and the effects of the northerly time zone all added to this sense of difference, and are

well described in the book. As time goes by the family make new friends and learn new ways to live in order to feel less like foreigners.

Leaving Iceland was difficult for the family in the end. Later Moss and her family would return for another visit and explore further parts of Iceland. Moss describes the landscape of fields of black lava and rock, fire, water, earth, sky and flat green fields near volcanoes that they see. They observed the many species of birds and marvelled at the unique and beautiful nature and landscapes that is Iceland.

The last words in Moss’ book are “I’m still not ready to leave Iceland”, and by reading her book you can understand why she feels this way.

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KRISTIANNA MAGNUSSON CLARK lives in BC and has been an active and generous contributor to the magazine for years.

REV. VALDIMAR EYLANDS (1901-1983) was born at Laufás in Viðidalur, Húnavatnssýsla, Iceland and emigrated to North America at the age of 21. He earned a degree in Theology from Luther Theological Seminary in St. Paul, MN and served several congregations in North Dakota and Washington. In 1938 he became the pastor of the First Lutheran Church in Winnipeg, MB, a position he held until his retirement.

ERICA JACOBS GREEN is a freelance writer and editor and is the co-founder of Iceland Writers Retreat and the children’s book production company, Ever After Studio. Erica has worked in the publishing industry for nearly twenty years. She currently lives in Washington, DC with her husband, two children, and a house full of traveler’s artifacts.

NORMA GUTTORMSSON, MEd, is the daughter of the late Dr. Pétur Guttormsson and Salín Reykdal. Her grandparents are Vigfús and Vilborg Guttormsson of Lundar, MB, and Kristján and Sigurborg Reykdal of Baldur, MB. Norma is a retired ESL teacher living in North Vancouver, BC.

BILL HOLM (1943-2009) was born and raised in Minneota Minnesota, the son of Icelandic pioneers. He was a marvelous mix of educator, poet, essayist, humourist and piano player; dividing his later years between his two homes in Minneota and Hofsó, Iceland.

CHAY LEMOINE is a Halldór Laxness scholar and teacher from Edwardsville, Illinois. He has published articles on Laxness in *Mannlíf*, *Icelandic Grapevine*, *Lögberg-Heimskringla*, *The Icelandic-Canadian*, and is a past columnist for *ICENEWS*, an online newsmagazine where he wrote about Laxness on occasion. Chay has also appeared in the Icelandic documentary on Laxness called *Anti-American Wins Nobel Prize* where he discussed his research on the blacklisting of the writer. Chay welcomes questions and comments from *Icelandic Connection* readers by email at chayusa@gmail.com

KIM MARTINSEN was born in Gimli Manitoba, grew up all over Canada and has made her home in Smithers, BC for the past 24 years where she has raised a daughter. She travels back annually to Gimli to meet with family during Íslendingadagurinn.

VALDI STEFANSON has a consulting business named Your Utility Watchdog. Valdi’s passion is international service, through Rotary. He designs and implements humanitarian projects in South American countries including Guyana, Bolivia and Nicaragua. Additionally, Valdi collects, restores and displays vintage and antique snowmobiles. He is the President of the Antique Snowmobile Club of America.

HELEN SIGURDSON is a retired school teacher who is the author of a memoir and has published reviews for the *Winnipeg Free Press* and the *Icelandic Canadian*. With her late husband Frank she visited Iceland in 1979. Her granddaughter, Dr Erika Sigurdson is experiencing joys and challenges of a foreign academics at the U of Iceland in Reykjavík.

JÓN TRAUСТИ was one of the best short story writers in Iceland. His real name was Gudmunður Magnússon, but called himself Jón Trausti when writing stories and poems. He died in 1918 from the “flu”. The story appeared in the children’s paper “Baldursbrá” July 3, 1937.





The Back Page

This Santa is drawn by Klara Bergmann Hauksdóttir

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