

The Argyle Icelanders



A gathering of Icelanders from the Grund and Bru districts, 1922. Back Row: Gisli Bjornson, Walter Frederickson, John Goodman, Paul Frederickson, Albert Oliver, Mrs. Landy, Siggi Landy, Gudmundur Nordman. Fourth Row: Byring Hallgrimson, Jonas Helgason, John Breidal, Mrs. Gudrun Goodman, Mrs. Bjorg Christopherson, Hernit Christopherson, Theodore Johannson, Mrs. Kristjana Johannson, Mrs. Paul Frederickson, Mrs. Kristbjorg Martinn, Mrs. [mba Eggertson, Mrs. Laura Nordman, Conrad Nordman, Bill Frederickson, Mrs. Gudrun Frederickson, Mrs. Margret Olafson, John Olafson, Mrs. Thora Wagstaffe, Magnus Nordal, Mrs. Bena Nordal, Mrs. Veiga Jonasson. Third Row: Mrs. Sigridur Helgason, Gunlauger Davidson, Mrs. Margaret Davidson, Oli Arason, William Christopherson, Tryggvie Arason, Mrs. Dora Anderson, Oli Anderson, Paul Frederickson, Mrs. Elisabeth Frederickson, Mrs. Lauga Johnson. Second Row: Mrs. Carrie Helgason, Miss Gudbjorg Goodman, Mrs. Sena Anderson, Jonas Anderson, Pete Goodman, Svein Sveinson, Bjorn Anderson, Mrs. Kristin Anderson, Arni Sveinson, Finnur Johnson. First Row: Axel Sigmar, August Arason, S.A. Anderson.

"We who are here are Canadians first even though we are proud of our Icelandic origin because our Icelandic heritage has provided us with a background which we believe contributes a great deal to good Canadianism. "

- words of John P. Sigvaldason in an address to the First Lutheran Church, Winnipeg, in 1964.

In Iceland in the early 1870's, poverty was extreme and natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions and blocking of harbours by polar ice created discouraging hardships. Icelanders began immigrating to America, some sailing directly to Quebec, others to New York. Many of these found their way to Kinmount, Ont., but conditions there were bad. In October of 1875, Sigtryggur Jonasson, with the assistance of John Taylor, a missionary who was to become a lifelong friend to the Icelanders, moved the settlers to the Keewatin District north of Manitoba, along the shore of Lake Winnipeg. Here they established the "State of New Iceland" with its own constitution, laws and government, although in all except local matters, it remained under the authority of the Canadian Government.

Hardships continued - the first winter set in unusually early and was extremely cold; there was a scarcity of food, warm clothing, and housing. Added to these problems, scurvy and other diseases took their toll of life. In 1876, a smallpox epidemic swept through the settlement and New Iceland was put under quarantine until 1877. The next three winters were so wet that hay crops were ruined and cattle were starving.

Everett Parsonage, who had worked for John Taylor in Ontario, had settled at Pilot Mound and wrote to his friends in New Iceland, encouraging them to come west and settle. In August, 1880, Sigurdur Kristofersson and Kristjan Jonsson set out to visit their friend, travelling by rowboat to Winnipeg, by steamer to Emerson, then walking by way of Nelsonville, camping at night on this three-day trek. Parsonage guided them in a northwesterly direction to an area where there were as yet, no settlers except two men, A.A. Esplin and G.J. Parry, who were living in a tent. Sigurdur and Kristjan were impressed with the land - much of it in rolling prairie grass with small lakes and wooded areas. It would be easy to break and there would be plenty of hay for cattle. When Parsonage rode to the crest of the hill overlooking the land near the present sight of Frelsis Church, he galloped back and shouted "I have found Paradise!"

In the Nelsonville land office Sigurdur filed entry for the first homestead in the Icelandic settlement of what was to be Argyle - SE 10-6-14. He named his farm "Grund", an Icelandic word meaning grassy plain. At Nelsonville he also bought a scythe and walked back to his homestead to put up stacks of hay for the cattle in the spring. Parry and Esplin helped him. They were just out from England and had no experience in putting up log buildings. Sigurdur had some experience in this and he helped them build a cabin.

A few weeks later Parsonage guided Sigurdur's father-in-law, William Taylor, along with Skafti Arason to the same area where they also took up homesteads.

Meanwhile, John Taylor had arranged that Fridbjorn Fridriksson and Halldor Arnason, accompanied by several younger men, drive 30 head of cattle from new Iceland to Parsonage's for winter feeding. This was a long and difficult task, taking them several days just to get the cattle across the Assiniboine River. They ran out of food near Portage la Prairie. Stopping at a settler's cabin, they asked if he could let them have something to eat, but he was a very unfriendly fellow and gruffly told them to be on their way. It was getting dark, so they bedded down in a haystack not far down the road. They suspected it belonged to the mean farmer so at least they would get a cozy night's lodging out of him; if not food! After a time the stack began to rumble and move. Their first thought was of a volcanic eruption, but then an old sow ran out of the stack, frightened, no doubt, by their voices. They concluded that even the old sow must have been trying to get a good night's lodging from the mean fellow! Parsonage gave Fridbjorn and Halldor directions to Argyle and they also filed for homesteads. These then were the first six men to come from New Iceland to homestead in Argyle: Sigurdur, Kristjan, William, Skafti, Fridbjorn, and Halldor. The following spring, on March 15, 1881, the trek

began with four men and their families: *Skajti Arason*: with his wife Anna and two children; one, two and one-half years, and a baby almost one year. He brought with him three work oxen and one pony hitched to four sleighs. On one sleigh, he had built out of lumber a small frame house 6' x 10'. He also had 10 cattle.

Gudmundur Nordman: came alone with two work oxen pulling two sleighs and all his belongings.

Sigurdur Kristojersson: left his wife Caroline and two small children in Winnipeg with friends, to come out later. He brought his belongings in two sleighs and a few head of cattle.

Skuli Arnason: brought all his belongings in two sleighs pulled by two oxen, and he had a few head of cattle. One sleigh was covered and he brought his wife Sigridur and four children - Lara just four years, Hannes nearly three, Gudny nearly two and a baby in its first year.

It was a long, hard journey. They had one sleigh for hay which they bought when available. There were days when they had to do without and this was hard on the cattle. They travelled to Winnipeg, on to Portage la Prairie, then in a southwesterly direction. After 17 days they arrived on March 31, in the east end of the settlement near Skuli and Gudmundur's homesteads.

The last day was a miserably stormy one. Late in the day it turned bitterly cold and snowed all night. When they arrived, some of the oxen were exhausted - during the last days they had to lighten their loads by leaving some of their belongings along the way (precious keepsakes in boxes).

When night came, they camped together at a bluff near Skuli's land. The cattle were suffering from extreme cold and hunger, and in the morning one of Skafti's cows was dead. That day they reached the haystacks near Grund, and the small shanty of Parry and Esplin. These men became good friends to the Icelanders. The weary settlers camped near the shanty until April 15, Good Friday, when each went to their own land. The day was beautiful and mild, and in a few days the snow was gone. They camped and helped one another until their cabins were built.



Sigurdur Christopherson (1848-1921).

By the winter of 1881, there were eight families in the settlement, and by the next year there were 17. Within 10 years the district was settled. Sigurdur made several trips back to Iceland as an immigration agent, and was successful in encouraging many of his fellow Icelanders to immigrate to his newly-adopted homeland. On one of these trips he was nearly thrown into jail - the Icelandic Government had begun to realize that they were losing many of their citizens to America, and did not take kindly to immigration agents luring their people away. Sigurdur persisted and in 1893, he brought back the largest group of Icelanders to come to Argyle at one time.

By 1884, Skafti was able to report on behalf of the settlement: "We have 650 cultivated acres, 260 head of cattle, 62 oxen, 70 pigs, 60 sheep, 9 work horses, 2 ponies, 2 colts, 6 mowers, 6 harnesses, 3 reapers, 2 binders, 1 threshing machine, 13 wagons, 23 ploughs, and 12 harrows. "

The settlers lost no time in organizing community life. Six schools were built by 1900; two Lutheran congregations were established and a large church built to be used jointly by them until a second could be built. The Ladies' Aid was organized; a lending library established; a Good Morals Club, and later a Good Templars Society were begun; three community halls were built which were the scenes of picnics, plays, tombolas, and dances. The Argyle Brass Band played for many of these dances and celebrations. In 1909, the Icelandic Women's Suffrage Society was organized; and later a Young People's Club. There were ball games played between the "Bush Rabbits" and the "Kangaroos" at Bush Rabbit Point on the Gudnason farm near Little Baldur.

The Icelander's love of books is well known - in the evening in Icelandic homes someone would read aloud while others worked at mending, knitting, spinning and carding wool - so it was not unusual that they should have a community poet. This was Sigurbjorn Johansson, who would write poems for the many special occasions of those early years. His daughter Jakobina Johnson was to follow in his talented footsteps and have several books of poetry published.



Icelandic ponies owned by Kristjan Isjeld.

Two post offices were begun in the earliest days of settlement - one at Sigurdur Kristofersson's home - Grund; one at Jon Olafson's home which he called "Bru" (bridge). Eventually the settlement divided into two communities surrounding these homes - Grund and Bru. There was also a small store at Grund. Mail and supplies came from Millford, but when the railway reached Glenboro the store was no longer needed and only the mail came from Glenboro, then from Baldur.

There were no doctors in those early days. Hernit Kristofersson was much in demand with his homeopathic medicines and cures. Later when a doctor did settle in Baldur, many families would still prefer to call on Hernit's help. There were midwives, too. Peter Kristofersson's wife, Sigurveig Olafsdottir, was one of many of these ladies trained in Iceland. She carried a small needlepoint and leather satchel filled with medicines and necessary tools for delivering small babies into this world.

There was still sickness - measles, diphtheria, appendicitis - to take the lives of young and old. And there were still disasters - prairie fires, hail, and some flooding. In spite of these adversities, the Icelanders continued to work with an optimistic outlook, and to help each other. They counted themselves lucky to have good neighbours - the farmers from Ontario who gave them invaluable help and advice.



Herb Christopherson with Icelandic Ram.

One of their best remembered friends was Joe Cobb. In those early days before some of the Icelanders had learned fluent English, travelling salesmen would come to take advantage of them. When one unsuspecting settler signed a paper on an outrageous deal for pots and pans, Joe caught up with the salesman and told him to tear up the contract. The fellow refused until Joe lifted him off the ground by the collar and repeated "now tear it up". It was quickly done. Another story involving this huge Irishman took place on June 17, 1905, when the Icelanders were celebrating the 25th anniversary of the settlement. A special train brought visitors from Winnipeg. Upon reaching Skjaldbreid Hall at Grund, a tug of war was fought between Argyle Icelanders and the Winnipeg Icelanders. The visiting group had to their advantage a huge man who stood at the end of the line as anchor. But the Argyle team matched him with their equally powerful friend, Joe Cobb, who had also mastered the Icelandic language. When the strong man from Winnipeg looked down the ranks of the Argyle he asked suspiciously "Eru allir islendingar?" (Are all of you Icelandic), for it was a breach of rules to enlist "foreign" help. And Joe answered in fluent Icelandic profanity "Haltu kjafti, bolvathur kjaftaskuma!" (Hold your tongue, Big Mouth!).



Sesselia Anderson spinning wool, about 1930

When the Icelanders immigrated here they brought with them their customs and beliefs. They would be pleased to know that many of these have been woven into the fabric that makes up our country of Canada. There are not many left who can tell stories about "Hulda folk" (little elves). Some Icelanders did not believe in them, but many did. It should be recorded here that one Icelandic lady insisted hulda folk lived in a small hill one and one-half miles north of Baldur - so beware when you drive by! You no longer see anyone wearing "skoes", the soft slippers made from sheepskin, but it is not unusual to see a lady dressed in her best wearing a modern lacy Icelandic shawl, or on a cold day, an Icelandic sweater knit from the wool of the unique long-haired Icelandic sheep. Many of the pioneers had some of these sheep imported here, as well as the sturdy Icelandic ponies. Both have disappeared from the scene.

When you drop by some of the homes today you will still be invited in for "mola" coffee.

If you're lucky you may find ponnukukur on the table as well. Skyr is still made but in a much simpler method than the old way. At Christmas and special occasions visitors are often treated to open-faced sandwiches of rullupylsa on Icelandic brown bread, and of course vinarterta. The latter has become popular as wedding cake instead of the traditional fruit cake at the weddings of some of the young people. These young couples, many of them descendants of those early settlers, are returning to the farms. That would please the pioneers most of all.

There is a story of an Icelander and an Irishman (a very good neighbour and friend of the Icelanders), who were carrying bags of oats up a set of stairs into the loft of a granary, during threshing time. They usually carried one bag at a time, but each being strong fellows, they wanted to show the other they could carry more than one bag at a time. One of them started carrying two, one on each shoulder. So the other, who didn't want to be outdone, carried one on each shoulder and one under his arm. The first man, who didn't want to be outdone either, carried one on each shoulder and one under each arm. The Icelander, to prove he was stronger yet, carried one on each shoulder, one under each arm and one by the teeth. The Irishman then called it quits, knowing that he could not follow suit.