

STORY OF ASMUNDUR ASMUNDSON

Man without feet

A pioneer in the Baldur district of Manitoba

Asmundur's story was written up by Jonas Porbergson, and appeared in the Icelandic weekly Logberg, October 11th, 1917. In November of 1973 Caroline Gunnarson, present editor of Logberg- Heimskringla, translated the story of "Asmundar Saga Fotalausa" into English. The following is the English translation of Jonas' original story.

PREAMBLE

THE STORY OF ASMUNDUR

There are countless tales of courage about Western Canada's early pioneers. The town of Baldur in the Rural Municipality of Argyle in Southwestern Manitoba has its share of these sagas.

The most notable perhaps, is that of Asmundur Asmundsson, who migrated with his wife from Iceland in the summer of 1883.

Mr. and Mrs. Asmundsson took up a homestead northeast of Baldur on the North East Quarter of Section 6-6-13 W 1.

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THE HEROIC PIONEER of ARGYLE MUNICIPALITY

Asmundur Assmundsson was born at Baegisstaoir in Pistilfjorour. Iceland. April 26, 1845. His parents were Asmundur Jonsson. who once famed at Holi in Kaupangasveit in Eyjafjordur and Kristfin Ingveldur Asmundsdottir from Fjoll in Kelduhverfi. When he was twelve years old Asmundur moved with his parents to Mana at Tjornnesi in S. Pingeyjasysla, and lived there with them until he was twenty years of age. At this time he went to work at Kelduhverfi for three years, then returned to them again, where they farmed at Porunnarsel in Kelduhverfi. The following year he met with an occurrence which greatly affected his life from then on.

He had decided to support his parents to the end of their lives and share their fate, whatever it might be. It was decided to obtain a small house in the area, and his father sent him to Pistilfjord to make arrangements with the man concerned with the place. That journey will now be reviewed.

He set out in the morning from Skogar in Axarfjordur to Nupur, and thought of going by the Axarfjord: moors, but was warned against this. for that route was difficult and very seldom travelled. He then set out for Sandfellshagi, which is the next farm beneath the moors on a well travelled road. It was late in the day when he reached the moors and the weather was not promising. He had hoped to meet

another man who had set out that morning to guide a traveller and was expected to return. He kept going but could not see the man's trail anywhere, which was not strange, as he had only covered about a quarter of his journey when a blizzard blew up from the northeast, with sharply drifting snow under foot and high banks soon forming to the north. It was viciously cold, for the northern coast was covered with icebergs. Soon the darkening clouds cut out visibility, the frost became more severe and the storm rose to brutal force. Never before or after in his life did Asmundur experience such violence of the elements. He felt that he would drift from the right direction if he did not push into the storm and that is what he did. When he found himself on a hill in the open, the storm was so overpowering that he found it impossible to continue further for the time being. He decided to turn back the way he came, find shelter and wait until the storm abated. He started to retrace his trail but had gone only a short distance when he slid off a cliff. He hardly knew what happened but felt contact with the cliff some some pain.

He did not know how long he lay there unconscious, but when he came to he felt intense pain in his left shoulder and was weak and shivering with cold. His skis, staff and lunch bag lay in the snow, and a good deal of gravel which he had loosened and taken with him as he fell. He managed with great effort to get to his feet and find shelter, for the wind followed the ravine into which he had fallen. But the drifted snow had closed every shelter there, so he stopped beside a boulder where he had shelter on one side. His left arm now felt paralyzed and the pain in his shoulder was nearly unbearable. He expected his death at any moment, felt drowsy, but the moment he surrendered to sleep the pain roused him. There he lay all night.

The next morning the storm had stopped, the sun shone and his hope of winning the struggle for life was revived. His feet were stiff and numb; he searched for the way out of the ravine. It led north and the way out was easy. He changed directions and went eastward to Pistilfjord, wandered all that day and lost the right path. The trek was difficult, as his left arm was out of joint, hung limp by his side. much farther than normally, so that the hand struck his body when he lifted his left foot, causing him excruciating pain.

By nightfall it seemed to him that he was nearing human habitation and he tried to call for help without success. After dark he thought he had come to a broken marker in the road, but felt unable to continue the journey, and stayed where he was all that night. The sky was clear, but the weather was cold and frosty.

At dawn the following morning he tried to go on, travelling eastward, but got nowhere because of gravel and loose ice, so he turned around and went in a westerly direction, where he thought he saw a pile of something, but not clearly. Then when he reached the spot where he had spent the night. his vision seemed to clear, and he observed the traces of a scythe and piles of fertilizer

around him. He was standing in a field, and faced a fan house at a short distance. He then realized that the broken marker he had struck the night before had been no such thing, but one of the piles of frozen fertilizer.

The farm was Sjoaland, and the people there were still not out of bed. He climbed to the window and said "God be here." When they responded, he asked them to open up for him and let him in for he had been lost. He was well received and everything was done to help him. Both his feet and his left hand were frozen to the bone. The limbs were thawed in snow water for ten days, but could not be saved. Physicians have said since, that it would have been impossible to save his limbs, because they had frozen the first day of his exposure, partly thawed out the day after, while he was on the move, and then been refrozen the second night he was out. The flesh caved in and separated from the bone. He was confined to bed for a month at the farm home Sjoaland, tortured with pains and spasms of contracting muscles and nerves.

At the end of the month he was taken to Porunarsel, where a physician, Pordur Saemundsson from Akureyri awaited him. The following day the doctor removed Asmundur's left hand at the middle of the forearm, and one foot at the ankle, at the same time instructing his assistant as to the method. The assistant removed the other foot some time later. His right hand was also frozen but was saved from amputation. The dislocated shoulder could not be corrected due to swelling. Later it happened when he moved in bed that the arm snapped upward but stopped short of the joint and stayed there.

He was confined to bed for another year, but was taken to his parents at Mana in the spring, for they had moved there. The following summer, when he still suffered acute pain and discomfort, the loss of his mother was added to his misery. Her death left him sorely bereft, for she took his misfortune to heart and attended to his needs with great devotion and self sacrifice.

He started to crawl on his knees a little more than a year after his mishap, and kept it up for a year and a half. For the last six months of that period, he got hay for twelve horses together, working in a wet marsh. Then he had wooden stubs made, lined them with padding and wollen socks and fitted his stumps in. The tightness and harsh impact were intolerable to the tender stumps, but could not be avoided. They never healed due to chips of dead bone at the end of each stump.

The following year he earned his living on land and sea. During that time he met Kristbjorg Jonsdottir, and married her in 1875. After that he lived two years at Tjornes and moved from there to Pistilfjord, where he lived for six years with Olafur Mikael Jonsson, who in every way proved so staunch a friend to him, that he considered himself more indebted to him than any other man outside his family. There Asmundur became, fairly well to do, considering the circumstances, and there he lived happily.

In the summer of 1883, he moved with his wife to Canada and settled in the Baldur district in Manitoba. Shortly after he filed on a homestead and farmed therefor thirteen years. Four years after he moved to Canada the pain in his stumps increased, with swelling and bleeding, so that he was unable to leave bed. Then he made the acquaintance of a physician. Dr. Gunn, who proved a friend in need. He admitted him to a hospital in Winnipeg, where further operations were made on both legs.

The stumps healed better than before. New stubs were made. designed with a round wooden plate fastened to a strong iron frame. From the frame four metal braces extended up the thighs; leather straps fastened to the braces. Circled the thighs and were laced together with leather thongs. These were joined to a strap that went around the waist. He needed no fewer than 10 to 20 knitted socks (open at the ends), of differing lengths to fill up the leather circles or tubes and protect the tender stumps from sores. The total weight of all this equipment, which he wore all the time, was 26 pounds and by the time he got dressed he often was all in.

Aamundur began farming with only one cow, but ran a fair sized operation for a time. At its best the stock consisted of 3 horses, 15 to 20 cattle, 60 sheep, some hogs and about 50 fowl. At that time Olafur Mikael Jonsson, the good friend mentioned earlier to this article, came to Canada. It was a happy reunion and Asmundur took the opportunity to repay him somewhat for his support and friendship in the past, by allowing him the use of half his land. Olattar has died long since.

Asmundur's farm was encumbered by debt. In the end he thought it wise to sell his land and stock and give up farming. After that he earned his living tending sheep and cattle for 15 years. At that time he moved to the Village of Baldur in the Municipality of Argyle, bought a basement foundation and moved a small house onto it. This was his home for 10 years, and there his wife Kristbjorg died in November 1910, at the age of 83. (born November 1827). They had been married 35 years, but had no children. She had given generously of her energy, for she was a tireless and hardy worker. Asmundur counts her support and devotion his greatest blessing, and her example must be unique, considering the state of his fortunes when they married.

After her death he sold his home and lived thereafter with the following:

Andres Helgason, his nephew (brother's son) at Baldur; Stefan Petursson, who was one of those who drove him over Axarfjardarheidi after his stay at Sjoarland; Andres Andreson, Bjorn Andreson, Johann Sigurdson, Jonas Helgason and Stefan Jonsson, all farmers in Argyle, who have all done well by him and striven to see that he was as comfortable as possible, always made him welcome in their homes. Many other unnamed people has much to thank for their

kindness and support, from the beginning to the end of his struggle for a livelihood. He has asked this writer to express his sincere gratitude to them all.

During the last few years he has occupied himself largely sawing fire-wood where he stayed and doing odd jobs. He has been appreciated as a useful man wherever he has made his home. Recently a double hernia has been added to his other disabilities.

I have recorded this because I feel that Asmundur's story has few parallels.. It is a story of tragedy and triumph. His fitness for survival was exceptional, his toughness and courage indestructible. This example of a man with both feet and one hand missing as well as a dislocated shoulder, earning his living so dauntlessly deserves to be kept alive. He did not venture into the forest in perfect health, still he cut down trees, and tackled jobs that men with both feet and hands, and able in every way consider hard work. He has cut hay with a scythe. He has fished in open boats, tended sheep, shoveled, mowed hay and raked with horsedrawn movers and rakes, stacked hay and grain, operated a binder. Much more he has accomplished, which will not be mentioned here. It is common in Canada for men to go around begging if they have lost a hand, and it has happened that Canadians have sent them to Asmundur to acquaint them with his example. Iceland's cruel elements worked hardship on him. But they also hardened the steel in him. His suffering failed to break his spirit and left untouched his bright outlook on life. He is a religious, serious, quiet man, but spontaneously merry, and carries well his advancing years. He is a credit to his people.

Eimreidin Written December 19, 1916. Jonas Porbergsson

Epilogue

From the year 1918 Asmundur made his home with Andres Andressen until the year 1922, when Andres moved into the town of Glenboro. Andres' two sons, Sigurdur (Siggi Anderson) and Eirikur (Eiki Anderson) took over their father's farm in the Grund district when he retired. Asmundur lived with them until his death, January 24th, 1924 at the age of 79. The funeral service was held at the home of the Anderson brothers (Siggi and Eiki) and from the Grund Church. (Frelsis kirkju) on Sunday, February 3rd, 1924 with Rev. Fridrik Hallgrimsson officiating. Asmundur was laid to rest in the Grund Cemetery north of Baldur in the majestic Tiger Hills. Surrounding the final resting place are the beautiful woods, lakes and hills of his adopted home land. Asmundur is well remembered by many present-day senior citizens of the Baldur district. They speak with pleasure and pride of having had the privilege of knowing him and for having him as a friend. Among those who remember him the best is Siggi's wife, Sena Anderson, in whose home he spent the twilight of his life of courage. As a young farm housewife, Sena recalls his final days - "For the last six months he was

bedridden, but he never complained. He was so appreciative of everything I could do for him. At the end he slipped quietly away with a trace of a smile around his lips."

Aaumdur Asmundsson died as he had lived a with determined courage. At peace with himself and all mankind.