

Cousins Across the Ocean

by Pam Olafson Furstenau

Pride in their heritage and significance of family history followed the Icelanders that moved to North America. A team of researchers have developed a unique project that helps visiting Icelanders connect with their Western Cousins. George Freeman and Pam Olafson Furstenau from North Dakota, and Hálfdan Helgason of Iceland are partners in this exciting project that is enriching the lives of many people. The joy and excitement surrounding the Cousins Project is very rewarding. Finding a “lost cousin“ is a great opportunity to share photos, stories, and information that is not available anywhere else. These connections have increased the tourism to Iceland when the North American cousins are invited for a visit to the “Homeland.“

One of the difficulties that confront the visiting Icelanders when searching for family in North America is name changes. When the families immigrated to America, they did not always keep their same name. A few examples are Sigurdsson became Laxdal, Sveinsson became Swanson or Swearson, Samsonarsson became Samson.

In 2003, at the Deuce of August Icelandic Celebration in North Dakota, George organized a Genealogy Center. Pam volunteered to help him and that was the beginning of a great partnership. Hálfdan has a wonderful database headquartered in Iceland. George and Pam contribute their North American research to Hálfdan and he assists them with information from Iceland. This collaboration makes the project very fun and very successful. A highlight at the Deuce is when Hálfdan is available over a video and audio link through Skype.

By 2007, the Genealogy Center was becoming a well known and active place. Tim and Susan Sigurdson Powers provided their home in Mountain as a dedicated space for the Genealogy Center. Many cousins were meeting each other and the “Cousins Across the Ocean“ project was given an official name. Tour group leaders in Iceland, such as Jónas Þór, inform their tour groups about this program and the visitors contact George and Pam with their requests and information. It is now a year-round project but it is highlighted during the Deuce of August Celebration.

George, Pam, and Hálfdan are passionate about keeping the stories and the information alive. The Cousins project is a volunteer effort. Each of them has an extensive Genealogy Resource Library to research the information in addition to online subscriptions and their own databases. The team also works with Nelson Gerrard from Manitoba, Valgeir Þórvaldsson from Hófsos, and Magnús Haraldsson from the Iceland Genealogy Forum.

This year marks the 111th annual Icelandic Celebration on July 30, 31, and August 1. Many fun activities will be held during the weekend. Come to North Dakota! Explore the area where many Icelandic pioneers settled. Find more information on our website: www.august2nd.com or join us on Facebook at “August the Deuce.“