

Article for the Icelandic Genealogy Society quarterly magazine called "Fréttgabréf Ættfræðifélagsins." Guðfinna Ragnarsdóttir, Editor.

Cousins Across The Ocean

Meet two people in North Dakota, USA that are dedicated to genealogy with a special enthusiasm for the history and links to Iceland. Pride in their heritage and the significance of family history followed the Icelanders that moved to North America and these two descendants of Icelanders are passionate and keeping it alive! Both are published authors and are involved in various genealogical and historical organizations.

Pam (Olafson) Furstenau and George Freeman are devoted to genealogy but they are partners in a unique quest to discover and restore relationships between Icelandic visitors and their "Western cousins." Pam and George are both retired and work full-time on genealogical activities.

Each year, we volunteer at a wonderful three-day celebration called "The Deuce of August." This Icelandic Heritage Festival takes place the weekend before the first Monday in August at Mountain, North Dakota.

This year, we celebrated the 109th annual celebration. It is the oldest ethnic festival in the state of North Dakota and the largest Icelandic ethnic event in the United States. Dignitaries, choirs, tour groups, and visitors from Iceland attend the celebration each year. It is indeed a great honor for our community to have them take part in and attend the celebration. Their presence clearly demonstrates interest and camaraderie towards the Western Icelanders and we appreciate this connection.

In the past years, many reunions and relationships have developed when the Icelandic visitors just talk to people on the street and at the various activities throughout the weekend. Other relatives are connected because of the work we do at the Genealogy Center and our new "Cousin Across the Ocean" project.

George Freeman officially initiated the project just this year. We had great success in the previous years, but thought that we could have increased success if we received information in advance. He contacted the tour guides for the three buses of Icelanders planning to attend the celebration. George offered our assistance to the visiting Icelanders to help them find cousins in the United States and hopefully in the Mountain area.

One of our earlier successes came unexpectedly. In 2006, Sigþór Guðmundsson was a visitor to Mountain with a tour group from Iceland. He entered the Genealogy Center and waited patiently for an available volunteer. Pam had been

helping two American sisters from the Laxdal family named Norma Thompson and Laura Bowles. These two sisters were searching for information on their grandmother, Sigríður Jónatansdóttir. Sigríður had left Iceland in 1888 and her family ties in Iceland had vanished. Well, Pam found the names of Sigríður's parents (Jónatan Jónatansson and Kristbjörg Bjarnadóttir) including facts about their wedding records in Myrká, Eyjafjörður, Iceland. Information on how to order the microfilm was given to the Laxdal sisters. Additional information was provided to the sisters using a wonderful database in Iceland maintained by Hálfðan Helgason. Seeing the growing line of people waiting for help, the Laxdal sisters thanked Pam and got up to leave with their treasure.

Sigþór then took their spot at the table and he said, "I am searching for information on my grandfather's family that left Iceland in the late 1880s." Pam scanned the first page of his handwritten notes and recognized the same names - Jónatan Jónatansson and Kristbjörg Bjarnadóttir. With much excitement, Pam cried out to the Laxdal sisters as they were leaving the Genealogy Center, "Come back! COME BACK! You are cousins!"

The sisters and Sigþór were so surprised and overcome with emotion. They exchanged names, addresses, and phone numbers and spent the rest of the day discussing their family history.

One of the difficulties that confronted Sigþór and many other Icelanders in their quest to find family members are name changes. Sigríður's husband was named Sigmundur Sigurðsson in Iceland. When the family moved to North Dakota, they found that many families had taken the surname Sigurdsson. The family agreed to change their name to Laxdal because they emigrated from the Laxárdalur area in Iceland.

Not only did many of the Icelandic pioneers change their surnames, the women no longer kept the Icelandic tradition of patronymic (or sometimes matronymic) naming instead of the patrilineal naming patterns in North America.

Trying to connect cousins from Iceland to their cousins in "Western Iceland" has been one of the purposes of the Genealogy Center. This year, it became an official project and we were able to connect many cousins. This service is on a first-come first-serve basis. We must also limit the amount of requests due to time constraints. We volunteer our time and resources for this project. Many people want to show appreciation for our work. Donations for the Genealogy Center are accepted at the Icelandic Communities Association in Mountain, ND.

A few of our 2008 successes follow.

Valgerður Jónsdóttir of Iceland, is the great granddaughter of Jón Benónýsson. She was searching for descendants of Valmundur Benónýsson Sveinsson Swearson. George was able to connect Valgerður with her cousins in the Swearson family of Towner, ND.

Guðriður Ása Jóhannsdóttir connected with her second cousins in the Samson family – Lorraine Johnston and Elaine Timke from Drayton. Gisli Friðbjörnsson Samson married Guðrun Ingibjörg Rafnsdóttir in America. Guðrun was a sister to Ása Jóhannsdóttir's grandmother. Other Samson family members came from Park River to meet Ása.

Guðný Margrét Ólafsdóttir met Lyman and Nancy Bertsch of Bossier City, Louisiana and Jack Long from Bismarck, ND. Jack and Lyman are first cousins. They are both second cousins to Guðný.

Grímkell Arnljótsson of Iceland met Edward T Bernhoft of Los Angeles, California and the Bernhoft family from the Mountain area.

Others met their cousins in Gimli, Manitoba and several were not able to meet their cousins at this time but were connected with phone numbers and e-mails.

Magnús Magnússon Norðahl came with the group from Bændaferðir and was unable to meet his cousins in Canada but we enjoyed meeting him very much! His ancestor was Gestný Gestsdóttir born in 1889. Gestný was his grandmother's (Guðný Gestsdóttir) sister. She married Friðrik Lúðvik Kristjánsson and they had at least 7 children in Canada.

We are very fortunate for the assistance of Hálfðan Helgason and his database in Iceland. Hálfðan has also been so kind to visit with us over a live audio-visual link during the Genealogy Center hours.

We use many other resources in the Genealogy Center. Other records include Pembina County Cemetery Records, Local Histories, Census Records, ND Death Index, Ancestry.com, Naturalization Records, BLM Records, Vesturfaraskrá, Vestur-Islenzkar Æviskrár, and our own personal databases.

We appreciate the assistance of Mágnus Haraldson from the Iceland Genealogy forum, Valgeir Þórvaldsson from Hófsos Emigration Center, and Nelson Gerrard, a noted Genealogist and author from Manitoba. We value the input of these fine gentlemen.

George Freeman has compiled all the biographies of the pioneer women in Pembina County into three volumes. These were hand written histories of over 1000 women pioneers, which were typed in 1940 to honor the memory and spirit of the women who pioneered in Pembina County. The hardships and events of

the pioneer women's biographies paint a vivid and colorful picture of the homestead era of Pembina County, North Dakota. You can order them or see the index of individuals at the website:

http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ndpembin/html/pioneer_daughters.html

Pam is the webmaster for several websites with a focus on Pembina County and her Icelandic Heritage.

www.august2nd.com – the website for “The Deuce of August” and the Icelandic Communities Association.

www.thingvalla.org – a website honoring a historic Icelandic Church and Memorial Site

<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~ndpembin/pembina.htm> - a free Genealogy website through US GenWeb. Site includes information about Cemeteries, Churches, Databases, Historic Places, Maps, People, Places, Pioneer Daughter Biographies, Local History, Links, and Query.

The Deuce of August is a time-honored tradition that continues to celebrate our Icelandic Heritage. Other activities during the weekend include dances, luncheons and dinners, a parade, a Heritage Program, Choir Concerts, and tours of area historic sites, farms, and cemeteries. There are activities for children and other events such as the North Dakota State Tractor and ATV pull, a car show, basketball tournaments, souvenir shop, family reunions, etc. Visitors can also attend the Islendingadagurinn in Gimli, Manitoba, Canada, which is held on the first Monday in August. Gimli is north of Winnipeg, Manitoba on the shores of Lake Winnipeg, which is about 180 miles north of Mountain, North Dakota.

This tiny town in Mountain, ND has just over 100 residents but it swells to about 5000 for the annual celebration.

To all our past and future visitors,, “Come to North Dakota! We want you to feel welcome and to come and see the area where many of the Icelandic pioneers settled.”

Bring your information to the celebration or contact us in advance if you will be attending the annual Icelandic Heritage Celebration in Mountain, ND. For more information, Pam can be contacted at pam@rootstotrees.com. George can be contacted at gfreeman@gra.midco.net.