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ESCAPE FROM THE GREAT PLAINS THE ICELANDERS IN NORTH DAKOTA AND ALBERTA

HOWARD PALMER

Immigration historians in Canada and the United States are becoming aware of the need to look at immigration history within the larger context of North American history. Canadian immigration patterns have been affected, indirectly, almost as much by American immigration policy as by Canadian policy. Within many ethnic groups in North America, there has been a significant exchange of people and cultural patterns between Canada and the United States. Marcus Lee Hansen and John Brebner first looked at the interchange of people between Canada and the United States in their pioneering work, *The Mingling of the Canadian and American Peoples*, but this study has not been followed up in any concerted way, despite the many gaps they left.

Hansen and Brebner discuss the movement of more than half a million Americans (mainly from the American Midwest) to the Canadian prairies at the turn of the twentieth century.

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One important feature of this movement that they do not highlight is the extent to which it included European immigrants and their children who had settled earlier in the United States but decided to move on as new opportunities opened up in Canada. The first sizable settlements of Hungarians, Slovaks, Lithuanians, Czechs, Danes, Finns, Norwegians, Swedes, Icelanders, Dutch, Welsh, and Hutterites on the Canadian prairies did not come directly from Europe but from communities in the United States where members of their ethnic groups were located.

Given the large number of ethnic groups involved and the primitive state of research on many of them, it is not yet possible to synthesize the history of these migrating people. One would like to know what motivated each of them to leave the United States, what their perceptions of Canada were, how they reconciled loyalties to three different countries (their homeland, Canada, and the United States), and the extent to which they maintained contact with their fellow countrymen in the United States once they arrived in Canada. To what extent did their previous residence in the United States precondition them for a successful adaptation in Canada? How many of these

twice-transplanted people became disillusioned with pioneering conditions on the Canadian prairies and returned to settlements of their countrymen in the United States?

This article focuses on one small group, the Icelanders who left the American Great Plains in the late 1880s to come to central Alberta. Migrating from Icelandic settlements in North Dakota that had been established in the early 1870s, these people selected a remote region in the parkbelt of Alberta, on the edge of the prairie, as their new home. Although it was ninety miles from the nearest railway, the area provided them with many geographical features that had been missing in North Dakota. There were lakes and rivers for fishing, hay to provide feed for livestock, and trees for fuel and shelter. The cool, moist climate of the parkbelt had its drawbacks, but with their background as mixed farmers, the Icelanders were ideally suited to adapt to it.

The Icelanders who came to Alberta provide a case study of a small, closely knit group who tenaciously preserved their ethnic identity but were nonetheless influenced by their brief sojourn in the United States. For example, one of the immigrants who came from North Dakota to Alberta was a farmer named Stephan Stephansson, who was later widely acclaimed as one of the best Icelandic poets in the twentieth century. Stephansson, like some other Icelanders in North Dakota, had been deeply influenced by American religious thought, particularly by the Unitarian and Ethical Culture movements, and he brought these beliefs with him to Alberta.

ICELANDIC SETTLEMENTS IN NORTH AMERICA

For many of the Icelanders who settled in central Alberta in the late 1880s and early 1890s, this pioneering experience was their third attempt, since most had first settled in Wisconsin or in "New Iceland," an Icelandic bloc settlement in the interlake area of Manitoba, before moving to the Icelandic settlements in North Dakota.

These initial settlements in Manitoba and Wisconsin had been established in the early 1870s by people fleeing deteriorating economic conditions in Iceland. Because of its geography, Iceland has been able to support only a small population; it has few natural resources, and only about 1 percent of the land can be used for farming. Icelanders traditionally combined fishing and farming. Most farmers grew only hay, which was used to feed sheep (for wool, meat, and skins) and cattle (for dairy products). In 1870, the total population of Iceland was just seventy thousand, but even this was too many people for the island to sustain.¹

The Icelanders who established settlements in North America left their homeland because they could no longer eke out a living there. Many were tired of their status as tenant farmers, renting their land from the Danish crown, which had gained control of their country in 1380. Epidemics of sheep diseases in the 1850s, a series of crop failures from 1865 to 1874, and volcanic activity that spread ash over the island combined to force Icelandic farmers to look elsewhere for a home. A few went to Brazil, but most looked to North America.

The first Icelandic settlement in North America was established in 1855-56 at Spanish Fork, Utah, by a group of Mormon converts from Iceland.² However, the first sizable migration from Iceland to North America was undertaken by a group that included Stephan G. Stephansson (then twenty years old), his parents and family, and 165 other Icelanders. Leaving Iceland on 5 August 1873, they went by ship to Scotland and then on to Quebec. Lord Dufferin, the governor general at the time, who had traveled in Iceland during the 1850s and was favorably impressed by its people, influenced the Canadian government's decision to encourage the Icelandic immigrants to settle in Canada.³

The Canadian government offered the group free passage from Quebec City to their destination and two hundred acres of free land. Attracted by this offer, 115 people who had originally intended to go to the United States decided to settle in the Muskoka region of central Ontario, while 50, including Stephan

Stephansson and his family, proceeded to Wisconsin. But the Icelanders who remained in Ontario experienced severe hardship. Government promises went unfilled; the immigrants had almost no money and very little food. Illness was widespread and many persons died. Ultimately, the Ontario settlement did not succeed, and in 1875, with government help, a group of approximately two hundred people moved to the interlake area of Manitoba, just north of the province's existing boundary. There they founded a settlement that they called New Iceland.⁴

The new settlement soon became the largest rural Icelandic community in North America. Although New Iceland was placed under the jurisdiction of the lieutenant governor of Manitoba, the settlement at first was given the authority to manage its own local affairs. Most of the Icelanders who came to Canada between 1876 and 1887 settled in New Iceland, where they hoped to combine fishing and farming. The area also offered wood that could be used for fuel and shelter—a particularly attractive feature for Icelandic immigrants, who were used to depending on driftwood because trees were scarce in their homeland. The Icelanders believed that the large reserve of land set aside for them would enable them to maintain a cohesive Icelandic community where they could retain their traditions and language.⁵

Conditions in New Iceland were, however, far from ideal. In 1876, one-third to one-half of the fourteen or fifteen hundred settlers contracted smallpox, and approximately one hundred persons died. One hundred more died from other causes—mainly malnutrition. The community suffered a perennial food shortage because of poor crops and limited success in fishing.

Dissatisfaction grew, and by 1878, although a sizable number of settlers remained in New Iceland, some began to leave. These migrants went on to establish new settlements in southwestern Manitoba and in the Wynyard area of the North-West Territories (in what was later to become Saskatchewan), or to live and work in Winnipeg. Winnipeg soon became the unofficial Icelandic-Canadian capital—the main center for Icelandic newspapers, churches, and cultural

organizations in North America. Several families of settlers followed Pall Thorlaksson, a Lutheran minister, to establish a new Icelandic settlement in Pembina County, North Dakota, in 1878. They were soon joined by several more families, including that of Stephan Stephansson, from the Icelandic settlement in Wisconsin.⁶

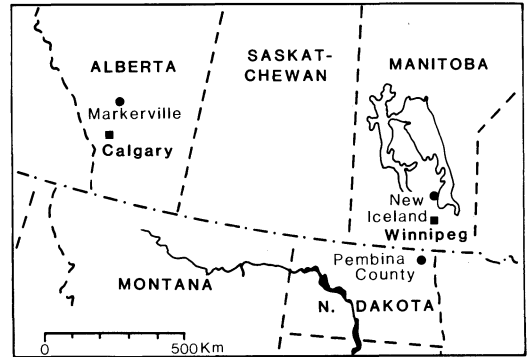


FIG. 1. *Selected Icelandic settlements in North America.*

PIONEERING IN NORTH DAKOTA

The early years in the Dakota settlement were not easy. Because of the lack of transportation, most of the Icelanders were compelled to walk 160 miles from New Iceland to their new home. The men who came from Wisconsin herded their cattle 850 miles to reach the new settlement. The pioneers faced the familiar problems of little outside employment, scarce food, and intense winter cold. However, the initial difficulties were gradually overcome, and by the 1880s the North Dakota communities were fairly well established; they had their own Lutheran churches, post offices, schools, ladies' aid societies, and literary societies. One of the reading and debating clubs was the Icelandic Cultural Society, founded on 4 February 1888, at the home of Stephan Stephansson.⁷

Stephansson's background provides an insight into the origins of the Icelandic community in Alberta. As a boy, he received no formal education, but learned to read at the nightly reading sessions that were common in Icelandic families. Stephansson absorbed his family's love of

books and poetry. Before leaving Iceland, he had begun composing poetry, and he continued to do so in Wisconsin, despite the time-consuming hardships of pioneering. He had learned some English from his church minister in Iceland. In Wisconsin, where there were many Scandinavians, Stephansson taught himself to read and write both Danish and Norwegian.

The Wisconsin settlers, including Stephansson, had to cope with several serious problems. The land they had acquired was covered with giant hardwood trees and the soil was sandy; thus clearing was difficult and yields disappointing. After five years of work establishing himself in the area, Stephansson married his young cousin, Helga Jonsson. Soon the combined pressures of poor economic conditions and a growing family led the Stephanssons, along with all the other Icelanders in the Wisconsin community, to pull up stakes and move to the North Dakota settlement that had been founded by their former pastor, Pall Thorlaks-son.⁸

The Icelandic Cultural Society of North Dakota, which Stephansson established, gave evidence not only of the Icelanders' love of books but also of the strong religious ferment in the settlements. During the 1880s and 1890s, the Icelandic communities in North America split into three religious factions—liberal and conservative Lutherans and the more liberal Unitarians. In Iceland, most of the people belonged to the Lutheran church, which was the state church, and they retained this attachment in North America. But Unitarian influences had reached Iceland from Great Britain, and some of the Icelanders in North Dakota became interested in American Unitarianism. Through the influence and energetic work of Bjorn Petursson, an Icelandic farmer in North Dakota who became a Unitarian minister, Unitarianism gradually began to make inroads into almost all the Icelandic settlements.⁹

Stephansson had joined the Lutheran church in his community in North Dakota when it was formed, but he objected to both its theological conservatism and its exclusion of women from

church government. By the late 1880s he had dropped his Lutheran affiliation. Stephansson was attracted to liberal religious thinking in the United States; the Icelandic Cultural Society was composed of a group of like-minded Icelanders who shared his quest for truth, his love of knowledge, and his independence. Stephansson's record of the objectives of the literary society indicates the extent to which the liberal and rationalist religious thought of Unitarianism and the Ethical Culture movement of the late nineteenth century had influenced his thinking:

Humanity, Research, Freedom. The objectives of this organization are to support and promote culture and ethics, that ethics and that faith which is based upon experience, knowledge and science. In place of ecclesiastical sectarianism it seeks humanitarianism and fellowship; in place of unexamined confessions of faith, sensible and unfettered research; in place of blind faith, independent convictions; and in place of ignorance and superstition, spiritual freedom and progress on which no fetters are placed.¹⁰

The activities of the cultural society reflect the religious and cultural concerns of the Icelanders who eventually came to Alberta. The thirty-four male members of the association, all impoverished immigrant farmers, took turns giving talks to each other on such topics as natural history, comparative religion, and the history of religion. The society was attacked in the pages of a Lutheran magazine as godless and dangerous. The religious differences within the North Dakota community were typical of the conflicts between liberals and conservatives that occurred in almost all the Icelandic settlements in the United States. The Icelandic Cultural Society disbanded in the early 1890s, not because of outside criticism or wrangling within the community but simply because some of the leading members moved away, including Stephansson and several others who went to Alberta.¹¹

Although by the mid-1880s the Icelanders in North Dakota believed they were well on the way to being established, they soon found

themselves on the downward edge of one of the boom-bust cycles that have plagued prairie farmers for decades. Population growth in the area led to rising land prices and inflated prices for farm machinery and other goods. Many of the Icelanders went heavily into debt. When livestock and wheat prices slipped significantly, they found that the only way they could pay their debts was to sell their land. Beginning in the mid-eighties, poor financial conditions were exacerbated by dust storms, drought, and prairie fires. When they came to Alberta, the Icelanders brought with them an intense dislike of loan companies, banks, railway companies, and grain companies, because all of these institutions had seemed to conspire with the weather to force them off the land. In addition, they brought experience in American farm protest movements. Before deciding to emigrate, some of the Icelanders had participated in the Dakota Farmers Alliance, a populist, anti-big-business organization.¹²

By the 1880s, yet another problem plagued the Icelanders in North Dakota—land pressure. The continued influx of families from Iceland and the desire of some second-generation Icelanders to establish their own farms meant that the best land was soon taken up; thus it became apparent that those who wanted land would have to look elsewhere.

ICELANDIC SETTLEMENT IN ALBERTA

The decision to settle in Alberta was accidental. In March 1888, the North Dakota Icelanders held a meeting to discuss prospects for resettlement elsewhere. Three leading advocates of the movement were Olofur Olafson Espiholi, Einar Jonasson, and Sigurdur J. Bjornson. The settlers were convinced that they should move, but they were not sure where to go. Some wanted to move to the Pacific Coast, envisioning a scenic panorama, a temperate climate, and abundant fishing and agricultural opportunities. At the meeting, Sigurdur Bjornson was chosen as a scout to find a site and make preliminary preparations for a group settlement. He traveled to British

Columbia and scouted Vancouver Island, but was unable to locate a suitable place.¹³

Bjornson returned on the Canadian Pacific Railway, which had been completed through Calgary five years earlier. In Calgary he met Oliver Goodman, an Icelander who had arrived the previous year. Goodman and his father had filed on land near the Red Deer River. Bjornson decided to look at the land and traveled there in the company of Oliver Goodman's brother, Sigfus. Bjornson liked the land and decided to reserve two townships for the Icelandic immigrants in North Dakota. In a letter to one of the prospective immigrants, Bjornson explained his choice:

I like the country north of the Red Deer River, the soil is good and lots of grass alternatively plow land and hay meadows with clumps of trees here and there. Good fishing in the lakes and rivers, the winters are said to be shorter and milder than in Manitoba and North Dakota.¹⁴

Three main factors in this choice of land related to previous experience in Iceland. The area was chosen not primarily for its grain-growing potential but because water and fish were readily available and there was feed for livestock, which would in turn provide food and dairy products. The presence of wood, which could be used for homes and fuel, also helps explain why the Icelanders chose this area on the southern edge of the parkbelt instead of the plentiful unsettled prairie land that they encountered on their trek north from Calgary.

Bjornson convinced some of the Icelanders in North Dakota to sell their farms and livestock and to come north. On 24 May 1888 a group of fifty, comprising eleven families and four single men, began their journey to Alberta. The group traveled by wagon to the border and then by train to Winnipeg, where they were joined by two more families. After making some purchases of cookstoves and utensils, the group left by train for Calgary.¹⁵

When they arrived in Calgary in June, Oliver Goodman advised them to work in the city

temporarily to accumulate cash, but they decided to push on. The group was delayed by rain, but in the middle of June, after purchasing four teams of horses in Calgary, the cavalcade set off for their new home, approximately eighty miles to the north.

When the Icelanders arrived in the territory that later became Alberta, the central portion was still almost completely uninhabited, and there was no railway north from Calgary. Indeed, there were only five stopping houses along the way from Calgary to what is now Innisfail. Settlement in this part of the North-West Territories had been slow during the 1880s for a variety of reasons. The idea was still prevalent that the area of the prairies known as the Palliser Triangle, which included south-central Alberta, was not fit for agricultural settlement. Other factors discouraging the area's colonization included the 1885 Riel Rebellion, which aroused fears of an Indian uprising, the absence of a Canadian Pacific branch line between Edmonton and Calgary, the lack of suitable farming techniques, and the predominance of unfavorable markets and low prices. The extensive land holdings of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Canadian Pacific Railway, and colonization companies also discouraged potential homesteaders.¹⁶

The group's journey north from Calgary was slow and difficult because rain had made the trail north almost impassable. Finally, on the sixth day, they reached the Red Deer River. Crossing the river was the most challenging problem they had encountered, because it was in flood. The river was a continual source of difficulty for the Icelandic settlers, isolating them from the main north-south lines of transportation and communication in the province until a bridge was built across it at the turn of the century.

After further delay, while they tried to solve the problem and made a nearly fatal attempt to cross the swollen waters on foot, the group built a flat boat to use as a ferry. Finally, on 27 June, people, luggage, and wagons were loaded aboard and taken across. The settlers then moved on to take up their homesteads

along the banks of the Medicine River, which flowed into the Red Deer. Several more families from North Dakota, including that of Stephan Stephansson, arrived the following year.¹⁷ Given the scarcity of settlers in Alberta and the Canadian preference for northern Europeans over eastern or southern Europeans, it is not surprising that the local press welcomed the Icelanders.¹⁸

For most of the settlers this was the third and last pioneering venture in North America. The experience at Markerville was not an easy one, but conditions proved to be more suitable than they had been in New Iceland, Wisconsin, or North Dakota. Most of the settlers made Alberta their permanent home, where they lived out their lives and raised their families.

PIONEERING, ICELANDIC STYLE

For the Icelanders the process of settlement was similar to the pioneering experience of other immigrants in Alberta, but their response to the challenges of the frontier had a uniquely Icelandic flavor. Their first task, of course, was to build shelters for themselves and their animals. Most of the settlers made homes of logs chinked with moss and clay with a roof of prairie sod, although a few who came too late in the season to build took shelter in caves dug out of the hillsides.¹⁹

Food was not a serious problem because the Icelanders knew how to live off the land. The Medicine River was full of fish; prairie chickens, partridges, and rabbits were plentiful in the surrounding area. Burnt Lake and Sylvan Lake, which are about ten and sixteen miles north of Markerville, also provided fish. Fish were not eaten fresh, but were dried according to the Icelandic custom, thus providing protein throughout the lean winters. The settlers tried to grow gardens, but some of the soil around Markerville was like gumbo and even potatoes and turnips were hard to grow. However, in season, wild berries were an important food resource. As the settlers established themselves and built up their herds, they were able to add pork, beef, mutton, and poultry to their diet.²⁰

Because they were familiar with sheep raising in Iceland and since sheep had so many uses, the Icelanders established flocks as soon as they could in Canada. Mutton was a food staple, tallow was used for candles, and the wool was a source of fiber for warm clothing. A number of the women had been able to bring spinning wheels with them. As they had done in Iceland, the women washed the wool and spun it into yarn, which they used to knit woolen blankets and garments, including underwear, sweaters, stockings, and mittens. Extra garments were used as barter for groceries and other necessary goods, and some of the women sold woolen products outside of the settlement.²¹

Besides raising sheep, the Icelanders also concentrated on dairying, just as they had in Iceland. Grain crops were not attempted successfully until the early 1900s; early frosts in the area were a continual problem, particularly in an era when early-maturing grains were still being developed and transportation of grain out of the settlement was extremely difficult. There was no railway until 1891, and when it was built, it bypassed the area where the Icelanders had settled and went through Innisfail, fifteen miles away.²²

Dairying was the major industry of the region prior to World War I. During the 1890s, Icelanders established three cheese factories in the Markerville area. However, the economic mainstay of the community was the creamery, which bought out the cheese factories in 1899. The federal government played a role in the development of the creamery by financing and supervising its initial operation. On 23 September 1899, a government-appointed manager and the producers formed a joint stock company, incorporated as "The Tindastoll Butter and Cheese Manufacturing Association," to run the creamery. All but two of the thirty-five members of the new company were Icelanders. The creamery soon became known for its high-quality product, and it helped put the Icelanders on their feet financially. The Markerville Icelanders helped to establish the Innisfail area as one of the earliest and most important

dairying centers in the province. The creamery continued production until the early 1970s and became a landmark in the hamlet of Markerville.²³

The development of dairying was a gradual process, however, and in the early years the Icelandic men had to leave their wives and families for periods of time to find work in order to get enough cash to buy food, machinery, and livestock. They trapped and helped with harvesting; some sheered sheep on southern Alberta ranches for three cents per head.²⁴

Transportation and communication presented difficulties for the Markerville pioneers throughout the early years of settlement. The Icelanders were extremely disappointed when the railway bypassed their community because they had expected that it would come nearer the settlement. In addition, they had to contend with the perpetual struggle of fording the Red Deer and Medicine rivers until bridges were built in 1901 and 1902. Almost all the settlers experienced dunkings, and some narrowly escaped drowning during the times of spring runoff.²⁵

Once a post office was established in 1890, the Icelanders were able to maintain contact with friends and family in Manitoba, North Dakota, and Iceland. The post office—the first west of the Red Deer River—was named "Tindastoll," an Icelandic name suggesting the new geographic setting. "Tinda" is a ridge of mountains and "stoll," a chair. The settlement was located on rolling land within sight of the mountains. The Icelandic community as a whole was also known as Tindastoll until 1899, when the townsite was renamed in honor of C. P. Marker, a Danish immigrant and the dairy commissioner of the North-West Territories who had been responsible for the establishment of the government-supported creamery.²⁶

The early adjustment of the Icelanders to the area was conditioned by the interplay of local economic and geographic conditions and the Icelanders' own traditions. Their experiences in Iceland had particularly suited them to survive the pioneering struggle for existence; they

were highly self-sufficient and willing to work together for common goals.

COMMUNITY INSTITUTIONS

The Icelanders established a number of institutions that helped them to adjust to the new land and to maintain their language and cultural traditions. Community cooperation was essential for meeting the awesome challenges of pioneering and overcoming their almost overwhelming isolation. Many of the Icelanders who came to Alberta had experience in trying to establish bloc settlements in Manitoba, North Dakota, or Wisconsin. They now called themselves "West Icelanders"—not because they were from western Iceland (most came from the northern part of the country) but because they felt themselves to be Icelanders living in the West. The fact that they named their Manitoba settlement "New Iceland" suggests their intention to preserve their cultural heritage.²⁷

Among the first community institutions to be established were the rural schools, which served not only as educational agencies for the young, but as social centers for the districts they included. During the early 1890s, the settlers built the Tindastoll and Hola schools, the latter on Stephan Stephansson's farmland. Stephansson was the first chairman of the Hola school board. The first teacher was Jon Gumundson; like most of the Icelandic immigrants, he had little formal schooling, but was strongly devoted to education. The two schools did not function as an agency for the quick assimilation of the immigrants' children; not only were some of the first teachers Icelanders, but the school year was short, there was a high turnover of teachers, and almost all the children were of Icelandic descent.²⁸

The Markerville settlers formed a literary society called *Ithunn* in 1892, sixteen years before they opened a church. Money from memberships bought books, and eventually a substantial library of Icelandic books was housed in Markerville. The founders of the society included several of the people who had been associated with Stephansson in the Ice-

landic Cultural Society of North Dakota. Controversy surrounding the political and religious beliefs of those involved in the reading society eventually led to the disbanding of the discussion groups connected with it, but the library that the society had established continued to play an important role in the community.

Monday was "cream and library day" in Markerville—the day when settlers took their cream to the creamery and picked up books at the library. Discussions were sometimes heated when participants clashed over religious questions. The library housed copies of the two major Icelandic-Canadian newspapers, the Conservative weekly *Heimskringla* and the Liberal *Logberg*. Both published in Winnipeg, they kept the Icelanders in touch with events and debates in Manitoba and in Iceland. Stephansson was a frequent contributor to both papers.

During the cold winter evenings, the settlers kept alive their love for literature. Following the Icelandic tradition, the typical family would gather around the stove and the father would read books aloud while the children would card the wool and the mother would spin and knit it into mittens and sweaters. Thus, though Stephansson was the only poet in the community, he was not alone in his passion for books.²⁹

One of the oldest organizations in the community was the Icelandic Ladies' Aid, first established in 1891 by Icelandic women who were living in Calgary while their husbands built homes for them in the new settlement. The pioneer women called their group *Vonin*, meaning hope. The group has continued to the present day, and until 1978, its records were kept in the Icelandic language. The organization sponsored social events, such as the annual *Tombola*, or bazaar, which helped to unite the community. In 1903, the ladies' aid played an important part in the building of the Markerville Community Hall, named *Fensala* (a name from Icelandic mythology), and in organizing social events connected with the Lutheran church.³⁰

The Icelandic picnic, held in Markerville each year on 2 August, an Icelandic national

holiday, was the most important social event in the community; eventually it attracted many people, including non-Icelanders, who traveled considerable distances to attend. At its peak in the years after World War I and the 1920s, the annual picnic was attended by eight hundred to one thousand people. The program regularly included speakers, sports events, ball games, and a tug of war, and ended with a dance. Icelandic meat dishes, sweet cheese, and pastries were also featured at this and other social events.³¹

Unlike the pattern in many other ethnic settlements in Alberta, social life in Markerville did not revolve around the church. The vast majority of the Icelanders were Lutherans and they did establish a church, but they were not regular churchgoers. After the first few years, attendance at the church gradually dwindled until it was used only at Christmas and Easter and for weddings and funerals.

The Lutheran church was the only one in the settlement. Icelandic student ministers from Manitoba began visiting the settlement in 1898, and in February 1900 some of the settlers established a Lutheran congregation. The first minister, the Rev. Petur Hjalmsón, was hired in 1902, but his career was short and controversial. He was dismissed in 1909, partly because of lack of funds and partly because of the settlement's divided religious opinion. Hjalmsón continued to serve the needs of the settlement at major ceremonial occasions, but devoted most of his life while in Markerville to farming. Although the church building itself is now little used, it remains a handsome landmark.³²

Undoubtedly the free-thinking and Unitarian influences that were present among the Icelanders in North Dakota and were brought with them to Alberta played a role in limiting the success of the Lutheran church in the settlement. The Icelanders of Unitarian persuasion were never numerous enough or committed enough to the idea of institutional, organized religion to establish a Unitarian church, but their presence meant that the Lutheran church could enjoy only partial

support, even though the majority of the settlers were Lutherans.

While the Icelanders may have been divided on religious and political questions, they nonetheless formed a close-knit community. Paradoxically, conflict probably served to unite them, since it delineated community boundaries and heightened their awareness of each other. Despite the group's small numbers (there were about thirty-five Icelandic families in the Markerville community at the turn of the century), bloc settlement made it possible for them to develop distinctive Icelandic institutions. Because they were among the first settlers of central Alberta, their pioneering experience was more difficult than it was for many later arrivals; but at the same time their isolation fostered the development of one homogeneous bloc settlement, since few other settlers came into the area until the turn of the century.³³

The Icelanders were a proud and independent people who had shared a common poverty that led to their migration to Alberta, a common pioneering experience, and a common culture. They possessed the ability and the will to work together to improve their lot and soon gained a reputation as honest and progressive farmers.

THE SETTLEMENT BOOM

The settlement boom from 1900 to 1914 brought many changes to the Markerville area. New districts were opened up as newcomers from Icelandic settlements in the United States, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba and from Iceland arrived and established homesteads. The Burnt Lake area northeast of Markerville had first attracted individual Icelanders in 1891. The road from Red Deer west (known as the Burnt Lake trail) at that time passed through both Burnt Lake and Markerville, and when the Burnt Lake area opened up at the turn of the century, several Icelandic families settled there. Other rural areas near Markerville that opened up at this time included the school districts of Happy Hill, New Hill, and Heckla.



FIG. 2. *Village of Markerville, ca. 1910. J. H. Johannson, Markerville, Alberta.*

A few Icelandic families from either Iceland or Manitoba settled in each of these places.³⁴

The Icelanders were a minority in all of these new regions. The immigration boom at the turn of the century brought in large numbers of Americans, Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians who rapidly transformed west-central Alberta from a frontier into a settled area. For a time, Markerville preserved its Icelandic character, but the area's Icelanders were quickly being outnumbered by other settlers. Their overall proportion diminished steadily as newcomers of other backgrounds continued to come into the area, as the children of the original Icelandic settlers moved away, and as people of Icelandic origin ceased to come there after the immigration boom ended around 1910. At the time of the 1916 census, the first census in which persons of Icelandic background were enumerated separately from other Scandinavians, there were seven hundred people of Icelandic descent in Alberta, approximately one-third of whom had been born in Iceland. Four hundred of them lived in the Markerville and Burnt Lake areas.³⁵

The first decade of the twentieth century was a period of significant and dramatic change in the area. With the influx of settlers came increased contacts with the outside world. The introduction of early-maturing grain made grain growing feasible, and the building of a better system of roads and bridges made it much

easier to market the grain. The Icelanders were becoming commercial rather than self-sufficient farmers. While the new settlers still had to endure at least some of the difficulties of the pioneering stage, the older settlers entered a phase of consolidation and expansion. The hamlet of Markerville itself reached the height of its activity between 1910 and 1925; it was the outpost for the "west country" of west-central Alberta, and its creamery attracted commerce from farmers for miles around. Livery stables, hotels, general stores, and blacksmith shops were built to accommodate the needs of the small but bustling settlement.

Ethnic relations in the area were never a significant problem, despite the influx of new settlers; the Icelanders had something in common not only with the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, all of whom formed sizable groups in the area, but also with the Americans, because of the experience of many of the Icelanders in North Dakota. The large group of Danes who settled in nearby Dickson, beginning in 1902, were staunchly Lutheran and therefore not always compatible with the Icelanders. The Danes thought the Icelanders were much too liberal and lax in their religious beliefs and social practices, while the Icelanders felt that the Dickson Danes were too strict and conservative. However, since they recognized that as newcomers to Canada they were all in need of helpful and friendly neighbors, the two

groups gradually accepted each other and were able to live together harmoniously.³⁶

Markerville was undergoing gradual changes that made it more and more similar to other rural hamlets in Alberta. Perhaps the most basic change was the diminishing use of Icelandic for commerce in the community, as the Icelanders accommodated themselves to the realities of living in a multi-ethnic region. Social and cultural patterns were also shifting. Although the soccer and baseball teams, the fraternal lodges, and the regionally famous Markerville brass band—all of which were an important part of the community's social life—were composed primarily of persons of Icelandic origin, these activities were shared with non-Icelanders and provided important links between Markerville and the larger rural society of west-central Alberta.³⁷

World War I brought a growing commercialization of agriculture in the Markerville area, a continuing shift to grain farming, and more evidence of the integration of Icelanders into western Canadian society. Many of the sons of the Icelandic settlers served in World War I; a total of 964 Icelanders from western Canada served in the armed forces. At that time there were approximately 16,000 people of Icelandic descent in Canada, including 12,000 in Manitoba, 3,200 in Saskatchewan, and 700 in Alberta.³⁸

Although the war effort received the support of the majority of the Canadian-born, most of the Icelandic press in Winnipeg, and the churches (all of whom wanted to prove the loyalty of Icelanders to Canada), it had its critics within the Icelandic community. Stephan Stephansson was a pacifist and a political radical, closely akin to the socialists, though he never joined a political party. Like socialists across Canada, he was bitterly critical of the war, which he saw as another imperialistic British adventure (he had also denounced Canada's involvement in the Boer War in South Africa in 1899). He lashed out at World War I in his series of poems *Vigslodi* (*The Trail of War*). For example, his poem "In War Time" read:

In Europe's reeking slaughter-pen
They mince the flesh of murdered men,
While swinish merchants, snout in trough,
Drink all the bloody profits off!

In a similar tone, he mocked the sentimental tributes to the Unknown Soldier:

In Paris was my burial Number One;
My Second was in London; and now vex'd
By vaunting hands,
I'm lugg'd to Washington
—Where next, O Lord, where next?

Stephansson's pacifist views did not win him many friends during a period of extreme patriotism, particularly when some of his neighbors had lost sons during the war.³⁹

THE WORK OF STEPHAN STEPHANSSON

Stephansson played an active part in community affairs, but he is most famous for his creative talent, unique among the Icelandic immigrants to North America. Stephansson was

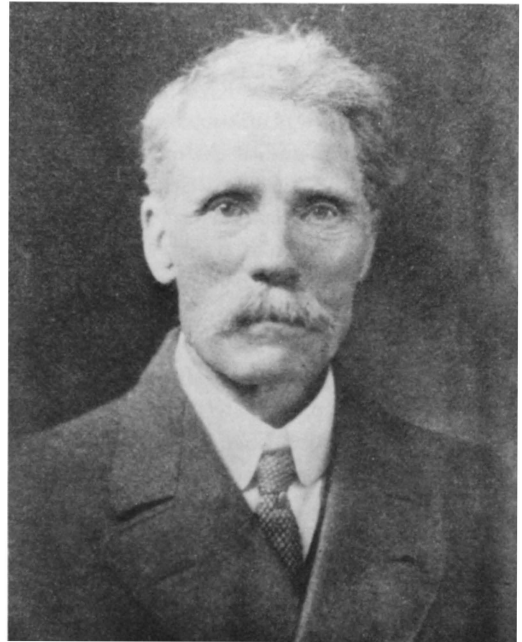


FIG. 3. Stephan G. Stephansson at 70 years of age, 1923. Glenbow-Alberta Institute.

a prolific poet; his published work comprises six volumes. Eventually he was heralded in Iceland as one of its foremost poets. The noted literary critic Watson Kirkconnell has given an assessment of his significance:

His breadth of literary knowledge, his historical sense, and his philosophical wisdom, all give him an assured place in modern Scandinavian literature and a permanent claim on the regard of Canadians. . . . it is quite possible that he will some day be acknowledged as the earliest poet of the first rank, writing in any language, to emerge in the national life of Canada.

What is remarkable about Stephansson is not only his creative output but the fact that he produced it while raising a family of eight children and struggling with all the difficulties of pioneering in Markerville.⁴⁰

Stephansson worked hard on his farm and participated in community projects (as chairman of the Hola School Board, secretary-treasurer of the Creamery Association, and the initiator of grain growing in the Markerville area), but he spent his nights writing and composing poetry by the light of a coal-oil lamp. Stephansson's house, which he built on a knoll overlooking the Medicine River and facing the majestic Rockies, was unusual among prairie farm homes in that one of the main rooms was a study, where he did his writing. Lacking a formal education, Stephansson was an avid reader and he built up a large personal library of books on Scandinavian literature, language, and history, as well as general works in philosophy, history, and economics. Although he had very few English-Canadian friends and no English-speaking contacts with whom he corresponded, he subscribed to free-thought American religious publications and read contemporary left-wing Canadian political works. Some of his poetry draws its inspiration from Norse sagas, but much of it arose as a response to the natural landscape of Alberta and to the community and family life that were so important to him. His six volumes of collected verse are aptly titled *Andvokur* (*Sleepless Nights*),

indicating when he found time for his prodigious writing. This self-trained poet was acclaimed in Iceland, and in 1917 the Icelandic government invited him to Iceland to give readings from his work. Stephansson continued to write until his death in 1927 at the age of seventy-four. Posthumously, he was declared poet laureate of Iceland.⁴¹

THE INTERWAR YEARS: 1920-1940

The Icelanders experienced all the vicissitudes of Alberta's boom-bust economy during the 1920s and 1930s. The effects of the economy's crests and peaks were buffered marginally by the Icelanders' mixed farming practices, which prevented them from becoming as dependent as most prairie farmers on one crop—wheat. Their location in the parkbelt, which did not experience the severe ravages of drought during the Depression, also made their life relatively easier than it was in many other parts of Alberta, although there was no real escape from the depressed economy of the thirties.

In the late 1920s and the 1930s, Markerville gradually lost both its economic viability and its distinctively Icelandic character. As the major transportation routes bypassed the hamlet and as better roads and the use of cars and trucks became almost universal, thus extending mobility, the town's businesses gradually declined. With farm mechanization, farms had to become bigger to remain economically viable. The rural population peaked and in some areas declined. The hamlet of Markerville itself maintained its population of about fifty persons, but commerce diminished markedly.

The increased economic and geographic mobility also contributed to the growing assimilation of Icelanders in central Alberta. As the pioneer generation passed away, Icelandic was spoken by fewer and fewer people, the activities of the Icelandic organizations dropped off, the annual Icelandic day festivities came to an end (during the 1930s), and intermarriage gradually became the rule rather than the exception. The establishment of the Good Neighbor Club in 1935, a women's

organization that drew its membership from the entire community, was a strong indication of shifting social patterns in the area—it was established because of the need for a ladies' group other than the Icelandic club, *Vonin*. By the end of the 1930s, the Markerville area was almost indistinguishable from other districts in rural central Alberta.

Increased geographic mobility promoted assimilation, but there were also other causes. By the 1930s, most of the original generation of pioneers had passed away. Unlike many other ethnic groups in the province, the Icelanders did not receive a new wave of immigrants during the 1920s. Assimilation was also facilitated by the esteem in which Icelanders were held in the area. Since the majority of the settlers were Scandinavian and Lutheran, there were few cultural or religious barriers to intermarriage. Given generally weak ties to Lutheranism, marriages outside the faith were seen as neither disastrous nor regrettable, and such unions became common. The Canadian-born felt some outside pressure to identify themselves as Canadians, rather than Icelandic-Canadians, and this encouraged their assimilation. But these assimilative pressures were certainly not felt as strongly by Icelanders as by central and eastern European immigrant groups. Nor did the Icelanders generally experience the personal traumas that led to name changing in order to hide their origins.⁴²

The Icelanders have played their part in the pioneer development of Alberta: they survived the arduous pioneering experience, they helped to demonstrate how mixed farming and dairying could provide a strong economic base for central Alberta, and their descendants have contributed to Alberta in a variety of ways. The Icelanders' previous background of self-sufficiency in Iceland, their experience with homesteading elsewhere in North America, the relative absence of prejudice toward them, and the similarity of their political and religious background to the prevailing English-Canadian culture enabled them to adjust to Alberta society with less difficulty than many other ethnocultural groups experienced. With the

passage of time since the pioneer generation first settled in Markerville and with intermarriage, fewer than thirty-five people who can speak Icelandic are left in the community. However, a strong sense of pride in the contribution Icelanders have made to the area remains. The tangible reminders of the past—the Markerville creamery, the Fensala Hall, the Lutheran church, the Hola school, the Stephan Stephansson home, and the Tindastoll Cemetery—all suggest images and echoes of a bygone era, an era of struggle, challenge, cooperation, and creativity that deserves to be remembered.

NOTES

1. Jakob Benediktsson, "Icelandic Emigration to America," *Le Nord* (Copenhagen) 5 (1942): 40–50; W. J. Lindal, *The Icelanders in Canada*, book 2 (Winnipeg: Viking Printers, 1967); Jane McCracken, *Stephan G. Stephansson: The Poet of the Rocky Mountains* (Edmonton: Alberta Culture, 1982), chap. 1.

2. *Ibid.*

3. For a detailed account of the trip, see the English version of Stephansson's memoirs, "Westward Ho," translated by Axel Vopnfjord, *Icelandic Canadian* 32 (Winter 1973): 18–21; on the Canadian government response, see Norman Macdonald, *Canada: Emigration and Colonization, 1841–1903* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 207–8.

4. Lindal, *The Icelanders*, pp. 102–3; Jean Elford, "The Icelanders—Their Ontario Year," *Beaver*, outfit 304, no. 4 (Spring 1974): 53–58.

5. Lindal, *The Icelanders*, pp. 111–12; Elford, "The Icelanders," p. 56.

6. McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 3; Lindal, "The Icelanders"; W. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba* (Winnipeg: Wallingford Press, 1965), part 4.

7. McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 3; "The Icelandic Community in Pembina County, North Dakota," *Icelandic Canadian* 33, no. 1 (Autumn 1974): 42–50; "Icelandic Settlements in Dakota," *Icelandic Canadian* 35, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 18–24.

8. McCracken, *Stephansson*, chaps. 2, 3; interview with Rosa Benediktson (daughter of Stephan Stephansson), Red Deer, Alberta, 18 October 1979.

9. Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People*, chaps. 20, 21; V. Emil Gudmundson, "North American Influences on the Beginnings of Unitarianism among Icelanders in the United States and Canada" (Paper delivered to Collegium Conference on Unitarian History, Collegeville, Mass., September 1979); Phillip Hewett, *Unitarians in Canada* (Don Mills, Ont.: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1978), pp. 130-34.
10. For extended discussions of Stephansson's religious thought, see Gudmundson, "North American Influences," and McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 4. The statement of objectives is quoted in Gudmundson, "North American Influences," pp. 13-14.
11. Gudmundson, "North American Influences"; McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 4.
12. McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 5.
13. Sadie Lee, "Pioneering in Alberta: A History of Markerville," *Lur* (Summer 1974): 3.
14. Quoted in Lee, "Pioneering in Alberta," pp. 3-4.
15. Ibid.
16. Bruce Batchelor, "The Agrarian Frontier Near Red Deer and Lacombe, Alberta, 1882-1914" (Ph.D. diss., Simon Fraser University, 1978); H. Palmer, "Nativism in Alberta, 1880-1920" (M.A. thesis, University of Alberta, 1971), p. 4.
17. Lee, "Pioneering in Alberta," pp. 4-5; E. L. Meeres, *The Homesteads That Nurtured a City* (Red Deer, Alta.: 1978), pp. 97-99.
18. *Calgary Herald*, 27 January 1892, 4 December 1889. For a more detailed account of press reaction, see Meeres, *The Homesteads*, pp. 101-2. For a general discussion of attitudes toward immigration in general and Scandinavians in particular, see H. Palmer, *Patterns of Prejudice: A History of Nativism in Alberta* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982), pp. 26-27.
19. Carl Morkeberg, *Markerville Story* (Innisfail, Alta.: Innisfail Province, 1980); interviews, Markerville, October 1979; personal communication, Rosa Benediktson, 29 December 1979.
20. Spruce View School Area Historical Society, *Grub-Axe to Grain* (Calgary: Friesen, 1973), p. 109.
21. Ibid., pp. 148-63; interview, Rosa Benediktson, December 1979.
22. Interviews, Carl Morkeberg and Joe Johannson, Markerville, October 1979.
23. Morkeberg, *Markerville Story*, pp. 16-18, 75-77, 84-86; Carl Morkeberg, "Markerville," and "The History of the Morkeberg Family of Markerville," in Spruce View Area Historical Society, *Grub-Axe to Grain*, pp. 132, 151-52; J. A. Ruddick et al., *Dairying in Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1937), pp. 40, 104-5.
24. Morkeberg, *Markerville Story*, pp. 9-11.
25. Morkeberg, *Markerville Story*, pp. 7-9, 208-9.
26. *Grub-Axe to Grain*, pp. 107, 132.
27. See discussion of the term "West Icelanders" in Magnus Einarsson, "Oral Tradition and Ethnic Boundaries: West Icelandic Verses and Anecdotes," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 7 (1975): 19-32; for comment on the original intentions of the Icelandic settlers, see Lindal, *The Icelanders*, pp. 100-02.
28. *Grub-Axe to Grain*, p. 139.
29. Morkeberg, *Markerville Story*, pp. 7-9; *Grub-Axe to Grain*, pp. 107, 163; McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 6.
30. *Grub-Axe to Grain*, p. 107; Lee, "Pioneering in Alberta," p. 6.
31. *Grub-Axe to Grain*, p. 107; *Innisfail Free Lance*, 7 August 1902, p. 4, 8 August 1907, p. 4; *Innisfail Province*, 2 August 1906.
32. Lindal, *The Icelanders*, p. 195; *Grub-Axe to Grain*, p. 146.
33. Interview, Carl Morkeberg, Markerville, October 1979. In 1901, before the arrival of a new wave of Icelandic settlers to Markerville, there were only 153 people who had been born in Iceland in all of Alberta, and not all of them lived in the Markerville area. This number did not include the children of the settlers, most of whom had been born either in the United States or in Canada rather than in Iceland (*Census of Canada*, 1901).
34. Burnt Lake Historical Society, *Along the Burnt Lake Trail* (Calgary: Friesen, 1977), pp. 172-74, 269-78; Provincial Archives of Alberta, 73.523, Icelandic pioneers at Burnt Lake: Memoirs of Johan Sveinson, Samuel Anderson, Ofeigier Sigurdson, Sam Johnson, Sigurdur Grimson, and Chris Johnson; *Grub-Axe to Grain*, pp. 69-105, 159-76; Morkeberg, *Markerville Story*, pp. 54-55; Personal

communication, Rosa Benediktson, 29 December 1979; McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 6.

35. Carl Morkeberg, "Markerville," in *Grub-Axe to Grain*, p. 133; *Census of Canada*, 1916.

36. Interviews, Markerville, October 1979; Morkeberg, *Markerville Story*, pp. 21–23. For mention of the conflict between Danes and Icelanders, see *Innisfail Province*, 28 April 1924.

37. Ibid.

38. Lindal, *Icelanders in Canada*, pp. 224–30; *Census of Canada*, 1916.

39. Jakob Benediktsson, "Icelandic Emigration to America," *Le Nord* 5 (1942): 49; Watson Kirkconnell, "Canada's Leading Poet: Stephan G. Stephansson, 1853–1927," *Univer-*

sity of Toronto Quarterly 5 (January 1936): 274–76; McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 8.

40. Kirkconnell, "Stephansson."

41. Kirkconnell, "Stephansson"; Sharleen M. Chevaux, "Stephan G. Stephansson," *Heritage* 3 (1974): 5–7; Rosa Benediktson, "Stephan G. Stephansson," *Lur* (Summer 1974): 7; McCracken, *Stephansson*, chap. 9.

42. Interviews, Markerville, October 1979; *Grub-Axe to Grain*, p. 134; Priscilla Popilchak, "Markerville: A Village of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow" (History paper, University of Calgary, 1978).

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