

# Vatnabyggð

Icelandic Club Newsletter



## SPRING 2009

DON'T MISS...

# THORRABLOT 2009

## MARCH 28

## FOAM LAKE COMMUNITY HALL

6 p.m. Cocktails

7 p.m. Catered Dinner

(Canadian and Icelandic food)

8 p.m. Entertainment

\*Dancing to the Fiddling Farmers  
and late lunch\*

TICKET  
PRICES:

Adult \$20

Student not living  
at home \$15

Family \$40

**ADVANCE TICKETS ONLY - NO TICKET SALES AT THE DOOR**

Tickets available at:

Foam Lake Review, Wynyard Pharmacy, Elfros and Mozart Credit  
Unions.

SPECIAL VISITORS INCLUDE:

The Icelandic Ambassador to Canada, Sigríður Anna Þórðardóttir and her husband,  
Rev. Jón Þorsteinsson, The Icelandic Consul General stationed in Winnipeg, Atli  
Ásmundsson and his wife, Þrúður Helgadóttir, The Icelandic Consul to  
Saskatchewan, Jón Örn Jónsson and his wife, Úlú

For more information, contact Joan 272-4994, or Karen 554-2927

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Welcome everyone, to a new year!

We have held our AGM and our first meeting of 2009. Foam Lake members have everything under control for another successful Thorrablot, March 28 at the Foam Lake Community Hall. We'd love to see a huge turnout to socialize, dine and meet with all the Icelandic dignitaries who will be attending.

Complete information can be found elsewhere in this newsletter.

Audrey Shepherd,  
President

The members and executive of the Vatnabyggd Icelandic Club extend their sincerest sympathy to the families of Frances Blyth and Lillian Thorlacius. They will be deeply missed.

### VATNABYGGD EXECUTIVE MEMBERS

President: Audrey Shepherd  
Past President: Shirley-Ann Laxdal  
Vice-President: Christie Dalman  
Secretary: Stella Stephanson  
Treasurer: Karen Olafson  
Other Board Members: Gunni Goodman, Bill Paulson

### COMMITTEES:

Membership: Gary Jonsson and Christie Dalman  
Newsletter: Joan Eyolfson Cadham  
Publicity: Audrey Shepherd  
Phone: Shirley-Ann Laxdal, Kristine Goodman and Stella Stephanson  
Lunch: Malla Jeroski

## SUMMER EVENTS

**Month of March** - dedicated by the provincial government to the Rural Women of Saskatchewan. Take a moment to reflect on the enormous contribution the Icelandic pioneer women made to our social, cultural and political fabric.

**March 21** - International Day for the Elimination of Racism - the Club will distribute multicoloured bows and Club members will be involved in various activities to promote unity and understanding.

**Date to be announced** - combined Vatnabyggd Icelandic Independence Day picnic and Bertdale Recreational Co-op Association end of year country school picnic. In 2008, we were in Elfros. For 2009, we are slated to meet at the Bertdale School. Potluck lunch with the addition of ice cream cones, the traditional Bertdale school days treat.

**July 4** - The Great Icelandic Open Golf Tournament, Wynyard Golf Course. Even if you don't golf, come out for supper and visiting at the Club House. If you do golf, sign up early. This tournament has become one of the biggest annual events held at the Wynyard Golf Course.

## HISTORY OF THE KANDAHAR CURTAIN



A fortuitous meeting in 2005 between Peter Hjalmarsson of B.C. and Karen Olafson of Kandahar was the spark that led to the rescue of the Kandahar Hall curtain. It was through an unrelated article in Logberg-Heimskringla, the Icelandic newspaper published in Winnipeg, that Olafson discovered the identity of the painter of the curtain, Fred Swanson, a house and sign painter and designer of stained glass windows, scion of a famous family with a remarkable career of his own.

Hjalmarsson's family roots are in Kandahar. He came to Saskatchewan to see what connections he could make. During his visit, he and Olafson spent some time examining the stage curtain that hung in the Kandahar Hall. The subject was obviously Icelandic. At the top was an Icelandic flag and a Union Jack, the flag of Canada when the curtain was painted in 1921.

There was no information available about the painter, but Olafson and Hjalmarsson began to feel that the curtain should be preserved as a piece of local history. "In trying to find some place that the curtain could be better looked after than hanging in a hall that has not been heated or cooled for more than 20 years, it became very important to have it rescued before it was destroyed," said Olafson. The situation became more acute when Kandahar was chosen as the location for army exercises. Was there a chance the curtain could be damaged?

The Western Development Museum in Saskatoon agreed to take the curtain. Local authorities agreed that this plan was a good one. When the curtain was sent to the museum in 2007, nobody knew why a man named Fred Swanson would paint an Icelandic scene in a small prairie town.

Last December, Olafson spotted the name Fred Swanson in an article in Logberg Heimskringla. She immediately contacted the writer. "I realize Fred Swanson is not your area of expertise but if you have any more information about him, I would be thrilled to have it," she said. "The signature on the painting meant nothing to anyone here and this is the first indication of who it could be."

Olafson received a quick response from the author, Ryan

C. Eyford, a PhD candidate in the Department of History, University of Manitoba. "Fred Swanson, or Fridrik Sveinsson, was born on Nov. 4, 1864 in Mödruvellir, Eyjafjörður, Iceland and died on May 25, 1942 in Winnipeg," Eyford said. "He came to North America in 1873 with his foster-father Ólafur Ólafsson and was among the first settlers of New Iceland in October 1875. In later years Fred wrote an account of the early interactions between the Icelanders and Aboriginal people in New Iceland which is one of our best and only sources on the subject. Fred moved to Dakota with his foster family in 1879, and later moved to Winnipeg, where he married Sigrudur Laxdal and had five daughters: Aurora, Olafia, Rannveig, Elin, and Norma (Nanna). He worked as a sign painter, and was obviously a very accomplished artist. Fred Swanson is a well known person in Icelandic Winnipeg circles; he designed a series of stained glass windows for the Unitarian Church in Winnipeg and they survive to this day."

There was another clue on a website, The Icelandic Emigration, which Eyford recommended to Olafson. The author nicknamed Nonni, the Reverend Jón Sveinsson, who is an internationally known, widely-translated children's book author from the early 20th century, was Friðrik's brother. While Fred moved to Canada with his stepfather and became Fred Swanson, Nonni stayed in Iceland. The brothers lost contact when Nonni went to Denmark and then to France, but 60 years later, they met again, in 1930. Nonni visited his brother in Winnipeg in 1936.

Nonni is memorialized at Nonnahus, a museum that was his childhood home in Akureyri, in the northern part of Iceland. His brother's memory lives on in the Kandahar curtain and in a series of striking stained glass windows designed in 1905 for the First Icelandic Unitarian Church in Winnipeg. Most of the windows were moved when the congregation built a newer church and, in 2001, they were transferred to their present location in the Unitarian Universalist Church in Winnipeg.

Swanson has another historic connection. "Cartoon Charlie," Charles Thorson, an Icelander from Winnipeg, is best known as the creator of Walt Disney's Snow White. Charlie's first cartoon appeared in Heimskringla in 1909. The main character was Fred Swanson who was likely Charlie's artistic mentor. He also became his father-in-law. Cartoon Charlie married Swanson's daughter Rannveig, also known as Ranka.

"I was extremely excited to discover that Fred Swanson was the brother of 'Nonni'," said Olafson. During her trip to Iceland last August, she visited the museum dedicated to Nonni's writing. But, after all this time, she says, it is also immensely satisfying to have solved the mystery of the curtain. And yes, she says, she has sent all the information to the Western Development Museum.

### **IS YOUR VATNABYGGD CLUB MEMBERSHIP UP FOR RENEWAL?**

Why not take care of it during Thorrablot? The Membership Committee will be delighted to issue your new card.

## **BE PREPARED FOR CHANGE**

Rather than holding the Icelandic foods for the late lunch, this year's Thorrablot will see some of our favourite Icelandic delicacies incorporated into the buffet dinner, with more goodies available for lunch.

## **COMING BACK IN THE SUMMER**



*Helgi Helgason became Helgi Halldorson in the Logberg-Heimskrinla article, but the stories he shared with Caelum are authentic.*

"The landscape is familiar to me and I like that. It reminds me of the North Interlake area of Manitoba, but it's more interconnected. It's unique," said Caelum Vatnsdal, managing editor of Logberg-Heimskringla. Caelum visited Vatnabyggd for two days, gathering interviews for L-H articles.

But why would anyone come to Vatnabyggd in the middle of a deep freeze? "It's a good question," said Caelum. "I had planned other dates but they didn't pan out. I admit it's an unconventional approach to come in the middle of winter, but, on the other hand, perhaps I am seeing the place in a purer form. And, having come now, I want to come again, in the summer, so it's probably for the best. I will come twice." On the other hand, said Caelum, he grew up in Winnipeg, knows how to dress for the weather, owns boots designed for snow, and travels with two thick sleeping bags for just in case.

He interviewed Bob Johnson, third generation newspaperman and mayor, Helgi Helgason, farmer and storyteller, whom he unfortunately called Helgi Halldorson in the L-H article, Audrey Shepherd, Lillian Thorlacius



*Over coffee and vinarterta, Caelum interviewed Lillian Thorlacius who shared stories of her years as a "lady farmer" and as an organic grower.*

## FULL MARKS FOR A SUCCESS STORY



*Caelum interviewed Audrey, discussing the long Vatnabyggd traditon of music*

During a recent series of seminars organized by the Saskatchewan Minister of Culture, Tourism and Recreation, delegates were asked to bring a success story from their area.

Joan attended the Yorkton seminar and took, as her example, the Vatnabyggd Club - and a scrapbook of photos and captions for "show-and-tell." The exercise wasn't just a matter of talking about the organization or activity. The speaker had to be prepared to define how the activities provided benefits to local residents and to tourists.

The Vatnabyggd Club received high marks from the other delegates and the facilitator of the working group, because the Club has all the bases covered - heritage, history, tradition, culture, recreation and, with the quality of out-of-province and Icelandic visitors we have, we are a tourist draw for the area.

Incidentally, all three working groups at the seminar complained bitterly about grant application forms, calling for an editorial review board composed of the victims who are faced with decoding the information on the forms.

The Vatnabyggd Icelandic Club recognizes the contribution from the Multicultural Council of Saskatchewan which allows us to continue with our activities, including our regular newsletters.

If you have any information for upcoming newsletters, please contact:

Editor - Joan Eyolfson Cadham

Graphic Designer - Audrey Shepherd

and Stella Stephanson. He had a tour of the Vatnabyggd area, including, of course, a stop at the memorial statue.

Before he came, Caelum said, he knew very little about the area. "I knew that the Vatnabyggd area was made up of all sorts of different communities, and I checked maps so I would understand the size and shape. I started looking through the book, "Strands of the Canadian Fabric" to learn more. There's a certain attraction because Vatnabyggd suggests my own last name and the little I do know about my Icelandic forebearers is that they came to Saskatchewan first and only by chance ended up in Manitoba." Caelum was born and raised in Winnipeg.

"Everyone I've met has been fantastically nice," said Caelum. "They are extraordinarily friendly people. There is none of the solemnity I see with people who are trying to maintain their heritage." He also didn't know what the topography would be. "I didn't know if it would be flat," he said. He likes the gently rolling hills.

He also likes the Icelandic statue. "I thought it was very handsome. It's well executed but, more than that, it was a great idea to take it away from the sweating farmer staring into the middle distance. Using local models and a real chair makes it more authentic. It's well positioned. It brings you into the town (into Elfros) and it's a nice park."

He was surprised to see the enthusiasm people had for maintaining their Icelandic heritage. "It's in their own way - there's individualism to it - you have Thorrablot and other tent poles but it's more naturally woven into daily life rather than forced."

He said the area reminded him strongly of the old "New Republic of Iceland," the area around Lake Winnipeg settled by the first Icelanders in western Canada. "It's the same area, with the communities running up and down. You've got the strongest recreation of that idea," he said.

Being editor of L-H, he said, carries a certain danger. "It would be easy to train your gaze on Gimli if you weren't careful," he said. "It's well worth the effort to find other Icelandic hot spots on the continent. This is an important one."

## FEELING COLD?

Check out the new sweatshirts while you are at Thorrablot

New colours - navy and burgundy  
New design with smaller shield.

Also, check out the other souvenirs.  
They make great gifts.

### IS YOUR CLUB MEMBERSHIP UP TO DATE?

The Club newsletter is your source of information regarding Icelandic activities in the Vatnabyggd area. Stay in touch for \$8 for a single membership or \$15 for a family.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

SINGLE \_\_\_\_\_ FAMILY \_\_\_\_\_ (check one)

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