

the SETTLERS' LAKE

Right: For decades, trains of sled barges brought tonnes of frozen fish from the winter fishing camps.

Centre: Hecla Village, the centre of a robust, if isolated, community for decades, has been rejuvenated as the 21st century opens.

Below: The first Icelanders arrived on open barges in late fall, the first indication that they were unprepared for a Lake Winnipeg winter.



Hecla village, by Ian Ward
Illustrations by Barbara Endres

The Icelandic Saga

*They set out in these
perilous vessels, trusting
to God's protection, but warned
by Winnipeggers that if a storm
came up on Lake Winnipeg,
they would all be drowned.*

– The Gimli Saga



The Icelandic Saga

ON OCTOBER 17, 1875, the 285 Icelanders who were to build Lake Winnipeg's first permanent European community set sail from Notre Dame Avenue's East Wharf in Winnipeg. Unable to afford passage on the Hudson's Bay Company's lake steamer, the S.S. *Colville*, they purchased one York boat and several flat bottomed scows steered by giant paddles. Normally used to transport lumber and fuel, one was of such questionable seaworthiness that the settlers dubbed it *Vitfiring*, or "Maniac".

The voyage was slow and difficult and the scows often ran aground. Arriving at the St. Andrew's Rapids (now Lockport) on a Sunday, the boats were moored and a sermon was preached to the flock. Their prayers said, the company commenced the tricky and dangerous task of traversing the rapids, where their baggage was damaged but no lives were lost.

Farther downstream, at the crossing below Selkirk, the boats became entangled in the nets of some Ojibwe fishers, causing one of the women to scream and gesticulate at the newcomers. The incident would prove an aberration. In the years to come, relations between the Icelanders and their North American neighbours were generally as warm and mutually supportive as one might expect among people thrown together in a harsh and often dangerous environment. In one instance, they became the stuff of legend.

Entering Lake Winnipeg, the colonists met the HBC's *Colville*. It is unclear whether a prior arrangement had been made for the ship to tow the train of boats, or whether the

steamer provided the service as a matter of courtesy. Historians believe it was more likely the latter as the colonists had apparently planned to pole their flat-bottomed boats all the way themselves. They had no idea how perilous that was, a reality subsequent travellers found out, often tragically. During the next 20 years, many people drowned trying to get to Gimli on similar craft.

The Icelanders' original destination was the Whitemud (Icelandic) River, but an unfavourable wind and a ruffled lake changed all that. At about 5 p.m. on October 21st, the *Colville* cast anchor off what is now called Willow Point, a kilometre south of the present Gimli harbour. The ship's captain said it would be insane to try for the river and equally dangerous for him to bring his ship closer to shore.

As a result, on the first day of winter according to the Icelandic calendar, the York boat manned by eight oarsmen pulled the improbable fleet into a little bay. The settlers walked up and down the sand bar that evening and spent their first night in the boats. During the hours of darkness, their number grew to 286. The birth of a baby boy, Jon Johannsson, was taken by the colonists as a sign that they had staked their claim to New Iceland.

Though the settlers passed that first winter huddled in the scows or in buffalo-hide tents borrowed from the HBC, a warehouse and a store were built and the men embarked on what would be the colony's main industry, fishing. Early attempts proved fruitless, for the nets they had brought from Iceland proved too large-skeined for the lake fish. Cash was added to hunger as an incentive for the first Lake Winnipeg catch. The \$5 prize went to Kristmundur Benjaminsson, who landed a goldeye. Contemporary accounts report that "a crowd rushed to inspect this unfamiliar species of fish that later became prized as a delicacy".¹

Adversity was nothing new to the colonists; it was what had driven them to seek a new beginning in the New World. Icelanders are descendants of Norsemen who left Norway in the ninth century to escape the rule of King Harold Fairhair (Haarfaager) of Norway and of Celts who came later from the British Isles. With this ancestry, the sea was in their blood and ships were their second home. Nor was North America unfamiliar; a group of would-be colonists, led by Leifr Eiriksson (or Leif Ericsson, as we know him today) had landed on the shores of today's Newfoundland about 1000 AD.

Iceland is stunningly beautiful, with its snow-topped peaks, blue fjords, fast rivers and brilliant green meadows, but the earth's crust is very thin and volcanic activity is an ever-present threat. The last third of the 19th century was a dismal period in Iceland. Under Danish rule, the country was mired in poverty.

The crippling impact of Danish trade restrictions was made worse by harsh winters and an epidemic that killed 200,000 sheep. In the early 1870s, the land was wracked by volcanic eruptions, which reached their peak in 1873. The following year, the weather inflicted hardships of another kind. The winter of 1874 was one of the most severe on record, lasting well into summer. In September, the island was devastated by a violent week-long windstorm, which destroyed many homes, ships, crops and livestock. Little wonder many were open to the prospect of emigration.

The Icelanders who founded Gimli were part of a group of 375 who left the homeland in 1874 to come to Canada, settling first in Kinmount, Ontario. There, they

were housed in four hastily constructed log sheds where conditions were so bad that almost all children under the age of two as well as a number of elderly people died.

The next year, 1875, was as mild as 1874 had been cold in Iceland. However, just two years after the island had been wracked by volcanic activity, Iceland's numerous volcanoes all seemed to awaken at once. There was a tremendous eruption of Mount Askja and the neighbouring Dyngja Mountains, devastating a 6,475-square-kilometre area. At the end of their tethers, large numbers of people decided to emigrate and embarked for Brazil and various parts of the U.S. and Canada.

With the blessing of the Canadian government, an expedition led by John Taylor, a lay missionary, and Sigtryggur Jonasson, the leader of the Kinmount settlers, went to Red River in the early summer of 1875 to explore the possibility of a colony. Arriving in Winnipeg, they encountered a severe grasshopper infestation. It was so bad, reports of the time claimed, the insects blackened the sky and "were swept up in truckloads on Main Street and piled in mounds up to five feet high on the riverbanks".²

Dismayed, the colonists' advance guard bypassed the river valley's rich agricultural land and explored instead the Keewatin district along the west shore of Lake Winnipeg. At that time, Manitoba was the Postage Stamp province, extending north just to Boundary Creek in today's Winnipeg Beach. The Icelanders were granted exclusive rights of colonization to an 812-square kilometre area running 58 kilometres north of Boundary Creek and inland an average 14 kilometres. Included in it were two islands, Mikley (Mickle



Sigtryggur Jonasson, left, died just four years after leading the original group of Icelanders to the shores of Lake Winnipeg.



The tiny "postage stamp" province that entered Confederation in 1870 was expanded in 1881 to include roughly a third of Manitoba's current mass and enlarged yet again in 1912 to its present size and shape.

GIMLI

The name “Gimli” arises from an Icelandic legend.

According to the ancient Voluspa (Sibyl's Prophecy), found in the *Elder Edda*, the earth is destined to vanish, destroyed in the flames of war. Thereafter will arise a new and better world, inhabited by just and good people, who will live forever at peace in their heavenly abode of Gimli.⁴

While Manitoba lacks Iceland's mountains and glaciers, Lake Winnipeg's ever-changing, ever-challenging waterscapes must have made the newcomers feel at home.

Isle, or Big Island) now called Hecla Island, and Engey (Meadow Island) now called Goose Island. A later enlargement, bringing the colony's length to 67 kilometres, added the Isafold community.

Jonasson and Taylor enthusiastically recommended the site to the Kinmount colonists. But they were financially destitute and there was no provision in Canadian law for assistance to settlers moving within the country. Fortunately for the Icelanders, Governor General Lord Dufferin had visited Iceland and come away a great admirer of the Icelandic people. In his book, *Letters from High Latitudes*, he described them as sincere, honest and peaceful and noted approvingly that in Iceland, crimes, police, prisons and armies were not to be found.³ Lord Dufferin pledged his personal word that the Icelanders would prove desirable colonists and the Canadian government made a grant enabling the settlers to move west.

They received a warm welcome when they arrived in Winnipeg on October 11th. The next day, the *Manitoba Free Press* commented in an editorial: “They are a smart-looking, intelligent and excellent people and a most valuable acquisition to the population ...”

When the colonists disembarked from their boats that October evening, they were landing in more than a colony. For 12 years, from 1875 to 1887, New Iceland was an independent republic with its own constitution, its own official language, its own civil law and a unique and very elaborate system of social welfare for widows and the indigent.

The republic, called Vatnsthing or “Lake Country”, was divided into four districts like the ancient quarter-sections of 10th-century Iceland: Vidinesbyggd (Willow Point District); Arnesbyggd (Arnes District); Fljotsbyggd (River District) and Mikleyjarbyggd (Big Island District). Each

district elected its own council of five members. A regional council of six, called the Thingrad, administered the colony's general affairs. The president (Thingradsgtjori) and vice-president (Vara Thingradsgtjori) were elected annually by all eligible electors. The regional council met once a year on March 11th at Gimli to discuss major issues and changes to the constitution. Records for the republic were kept in five books. Book One contained the minutes of meetings; Book Two, the census figures; Book Three, road-building records; Book Four, vital statistics including births, deaths and marriages and Book Five, records of land transactions and values.

The republic was absorbed into Manitoba in 1881 when the provincial boundaries were extended north. Initial local resistance meant that the republic's constitution remained in force for another six years, after which New Iceland adopted local municipal government forms.



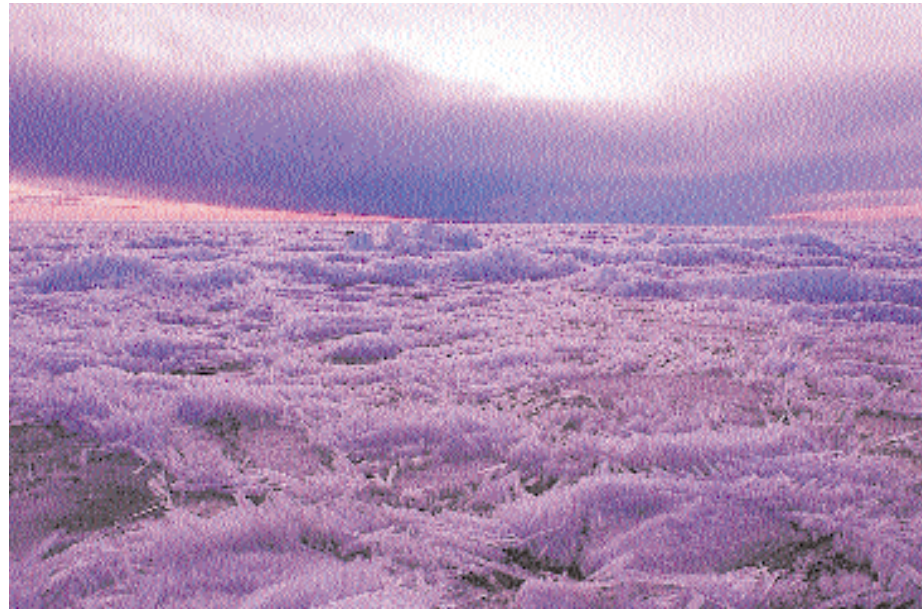
MIKE GRANDMAISON

The lava flows and choking ash of Iceland's volcanoes were hardly worse than the travails and grief awaiting the first colonists of the new republic. During the first winter, the settlers endured bitter cold, scurvy and starvation. One man lost seven of his nine children and many left the colony. Of the 100 or so who remained, about a third died. Nevertheless, three issues of a handwritten newspaper were published, a school was begun and a New Year's feast was held at John Taylor's home, the main course of which was a well-seasoned giant pike.

The next year, another 1,200 souls, the "large group", arrived, driven by the devastation of the ongoing volcanic eruptions. But in Canada, equally harsh fates awaited many. One died from eating a poisonous plant. Two were so severely frostbitten after losing their way and wandering three days on the lake that one of them was forced to clear his land on his knees for the next three years. An elderly widow died of exposure on the lake and two men drowned.

Still, the colonists persevered. Lots were laid out along the lake and named, for naming ceremonies are very important in Icelandic culture. Accustomed to stone and earth as building materials, the Icelanders struggled to learn how to construct log cabins that would keep out the snow, cold and wind. Farming, often on poor rocky soil, clearing the dense forest, they laboured largely with their bare hands. Still, reading and education were paramount. Even the most rudimentary dwellings boasted libraries of 30 or 40 books.

Hunger, cold and exposure soon paled before the little colony's most dreadful tragedy. In the fall of 1876, a small-pox epidemic broke out, brought, it was thought, by the so-called "large group" of immigrants. The Manitoba government put the colony under quarantine on November 27th, establishing the line at Netley Creek. A hospital was estab-



DENNIS FAST

lished in a Gimli storehouse and three doctors were sent in to treat the patients. Over one-third of the settlers contracted the disease and 100 people died. But in the hospital, all but one of the 64 patients survived.

Sandy Bar, an Ojibwe village just south of Lundi, present-day Riverton, was wiped out. During the winter, the pox was carried across the lake where it destroyed entire Anishinabe communities. The few survivors hung the corpses of their loved ones in the trees to keep them from the wolves until the ground thawed and they could be buried. The following spring government agents ordered the burning of what was left of the lake's tiny eastern shore settlements to kill off the disease.

The course of this disaster and graphic descriptions of the colonists' hardscrabble existence are captured for posterity in a document to be found in the Provincial Archives

The first settlers had scarcely erected their borrowed tents, when the first frosts turned Lake Winnipeg to a dazzling ice sculpture, forcing the newcomers to learn about ice fishing.