

# A visit to Kaldakinn and Ölvaldsstaðir: May 1945

The late **Carl J. Freeman** served in the U.S. Navy in Iceland during the Second World War. This excerpt of his account comes to *L-H* thanks to his cousin **George Freeman**

**Carl J. Freeman**

While stationed at U.S. Naval Operating Base as Communications Officer, I had the opportunity of visiting the birthplaces of my parents Mr. and Mrs. George Freeman, and upon my return to base the following was sent to them at their home in Bottineau, North Dakota. I travelled by Jeep, made available to me by the Commander of the Base. With me as friend and guide was Lárus Bjarnson, of Reykjavík, now deceased with whom I had become acquainted with while we were both in Fargo, ND while he was attending NDSU.

He by this time had returned to Iceland having come in early 1945, by the ship *Goðafoss* that was one of three ships torpedoed and sunk by the Nazi not many miles from its Reykjavík destination. He was, with other survivors, picked up at sea by escort vessels. The incident generated possibly, the most exciting period in my service. Submarine search, attack and rescue was directed by our base Commander and his Operations officer, Lt. Leonard Dalsted with the messages to subchasers and ships at sea being dispatched through our communications office.

This is the story of my visits to the birthplaces of my father and mother. It is addressed primarily to them and it is my

sincere hope that some of the observations and descriptions that I set forth will recall some pleasant memories to them of their childhood homes. Where we live as children is never forgotten, especially so if fortune declares that we should leave that place whereas a child, we built our first castles and dreamed of what the future would bring our way. Memories are inclined to appear as a mirage. Sometimes things are not just as we remembered them. On my visits therefore I tried to look for those things that might best be remembered and I might well describe. Many pictures were taken which I hope will turn out well and better describe what I saw.

Kaldakinn (“Cold Cheek”) is the name of the farm on which Jón and Sigurður lived and Father was born. Its location you will note on the map. Although its name may well describe it on a wintry day, I felt that it was misnamed as I walked up the “dale” to reach it. It is built on the south slope, about a third down from the top of the mountain. It was *sólríkt* (“rich with sun”) this day and warm. From its location, Sigurður and Jón could look towards the snow-capped mountains across the dale; or to the left into the beautiful Haukadalur for Kaldakinn is located at the mouth of this valley, one of the most beautiful of the dales, with the river running through it widening into Haukadal Vatn (Lake) in its center. The view to the right is Hvammfjörður; the ocean bordered on the west by high mountains. This was the fjord into Eirík the Red sailed to find retreat and build his home Eiríksstaðir, in Haukadalur, where his son Leifur was born. The ruins of his home are about three miles from Kaldakinn on the same mountain slope.

Kaldakinn as a farm I would estimate to be about 480 to 600 acres in size. Some of the land is rocky and not useful for pasture. Only one sod building remains of the buildings present during Jón’s time. This is the horse barn. The buildings, which have replaced the old, are built on the same sites as the old. The house is about 75 yards from the barns that is the sheep barns. Jón kept the cows in another barn, which was a part of the house buildings. Haukadalsá (Haukadals River) marks the boundaries of the farm on the south. The east boundary is marked by Þverá (Transverse River), which has carved a large gorge in its way down the mountain. On its bank, down in tie shelter of the gorge is a corral built of rock which has been there from at least the last fifty years. It may well have been there when George Freeman might have helped drive the sheep there at which time they would be marked. Down in the flat near the larger river were the corrals used for the *rétir* (Roundup). These are now gone.

Jón Óli Árnason is now owner of Kaldakinn. He has lived there for forty years and has done much work on the farm. The *tún* (meadow) is larger being about 30 *dagssláttur* (days cutting with scythe) about 12 acres. He keeps about 190 sheep and some cows, the number of which I did not ask. Horses they have, for it is their only mode of transportation. There is no road to the farm so this makes them doubly important. He and his wife were more than hospitable to us, bringing us milk, hot chocolate, coffee, vinaterta, rye bread, white bread, boiled eggs and cookies for our lunch. He pointed out many interesting things to us, among which was the hill north of the house where he said that the sheep

used to be brought at night to bed down, then milked very early in the morning. He said that there used to be four or five sheep barns on the farm when he first came, indicating that a flock of 110 to 150 sheep had been kept.

We drove up the valley; past the first farm, which is called Vatn (Water or Lake) to the place, called Vatn's Horn, (Water's Angle). This is where Grandfather Jón and probably many other of our relatives are buried. This is located at the far end of the lake and possibly 2 3/4 miles from Kaldakinn. The old church has been replaced by another which is about 50 years old at this time. It is a beautiful location at the foot of the mountain. The *kirkjugarður* (cemetery) is around the church and we may be sure that Jón is happy to rest there, for it is a quiet place in the shelter of the mountain overlooking the lake and the valley. All along the mountain are small streams trickling down to feed the lake and river. Farther up the valley about 1/2 mile are the ruins of Eiríksstaðir. This, like Vatn's Horn, is in the shelter of the mountain with a small stream running by it. It had a strategic location, for Eirík could look from his home down the valley should anyone be approaching his home.

Jón was born at Þorsteinsstaðir which is located on the same slope the mountain, but towards the sea from Kaldakinn. It is the neighbouring farm and 1/2 mile away. The mountain has dropped away there to a very gentle slope and it does not have the protection of the farms in the inner valley. Jón's father lived there, called another Jón who in turn was born at Höskuldsstaðir. This, you will recall, was the home of Höskuldur who in one of his Viking voyages to Ireland stole the beautiful princess to be his wife. Believing that she was deaf and dumb, he never heard her speak until their son was about three years old. At that time, he found her talking with the lad on the other side of a knoll. She was not deaf and dumb, but had only been somewhat upset at having been taken from her homeland to become the bride of Höskuldur.

Sigríður and Jón no doubt did their trading at Búðardalur ("Store Dale"). We spent a night there. Coming there at five in the afternoon, we saw the men that had been buying provisions. Of the seven that were there, four had two ponies each, one to ride, the other carrying a wooden saddle frame with wooden

pins sticking out of the saddle to which they tied their bags of provisions for their journey home. The other three were driving two wheel carts, with one horse pulling the cart. No cars were seen except for the two trucks owned by the *bilstjóri* which were used to hauling supplies to the little store.

In Búðardalur the store is the center of activity. It is a cooperative enterprise, but cannot be called modern in its arrangement or stock of goods. Other buildings in the *þorp* (village) are the home of the *kaupmaður* (storekeeper), the telephone and post office, the *gestahús* (guesthouse or small hotel), the young peoples meeting house and about four small homes. In the evening about 9:30, the doctor assigned to this community (Guðmundur Guðmundsson) and his riding partner, a young man, came riding by the hotel on their way home. He stopped for a few minutes to visit. It was a disappointment to him, for he had seen a jeep at the hotel, and thought it was one being delivered to him for his use, as he was expecting one. There is a lot of well-deserved praise for the American jeep from the Icelanders; all are looking forward to the time that they can buy one to drive through the mountains. At present, the doctor uses his pony and I can well understand, has many long and tiresome trips.

The *gestahús* is new. It is of concrete construction and we were well entertained. We were truly guests rather than simply travellers. The lady in charge, Elísabet wife of Magnús Rögnvaldsson was trained in hotel management and cooking in Denmark, and fed us well, while Magnús, born in the locality, told us about the country and helped us fix one of our tires that had gone flat. It is a small place, probably room for 16 travellers. Everything was very clean. The small beds had eider-down mattresses and comforters. Elizabeth was having trouble with one of her hens that wanted to set instead of laying eggs. I suggested that she pen it up. Búðardalur is at the end of Hvammfjörður and from there you look out on the sea into the sunset.

As we left the "*dalurs*," I had two regrets, one that I had not read enough of the Icelandic sagas, particularly *Laxdala Saga*, to better orient myself in this region of Iceland. The other was that I was confused on the relationship of Jón and Jónas Jónsson. Jónas Jónsson lived on Kaldakinn some time after Jón, grand-

father, and present occupant Jón Árnason knew of him and wondered of the relationship. At the time, I did not have my notes with me to the effect that he was brother of Grandfather Jón Árnason showed me some of the old land deeds and statements as were signed by Jón Jónsson, *krepstjóri* (area commissioner) and his father. These were dated 1813 and later.

We drove south over the mountains on our way to Borgarnes. Many waterfalls are along the way. Baula, the name of one of the peaks marked out way, being about midway and in sight from both the *dalur* and Borgarnes. We saw swans, wild geese, *rjúpa* (ptarmigan) and other birds.

Borgarfjörður is almost entirely an agricultural area as far as income of its residents is concerned. The harbour is not good, as the rivers emptying into the fjord carry with them a lot of deposits, making a shallow harbour. There naturally is some fishing, but it is more or less limited to supplying the community, rather than a large industry. It is particularly important for its dairy industry. At Hvanneyri there is a *búnaðarskóli* (agricultural school). At the school some 70 cows are kept and breeding studies are being carried out. There is a modern creamery at Borgarnes and dairy trucks operate out of there, picking up the milk, which is left along the roads. The cheese that is made there is rich in butterfat and of excellent quality.

In making mention of fishing in this area, it should be said that the rivers emptying into Borgarfjörður contain a lot of salmon, which is fished for sport, and the catches sold. The owner of the land along the river owns fishing rights in most cases and it is only upon payment of certain fees to the owners of the fishing rights that permission may be had to fish.

Mother Guðbjörg was born at Ölvaldsstaðir (Place of Ölvaldur). It is a farm about five miles from Borgarnes. Her father Helgi was born at Ferjubakki (Ferry Bank) the next adjoining farm along Hvitá (White River). There also was Guðmundur Fraendi born. Him, we remember well. The grandmothers Helga and Sigríður were born at Gerðubergi (Gerda's Rock) a farm in central Snæfellsnes. This was a considerable distance and I did not visit there. Running through Ölvaldsstaðir is Gufá. This

is a small river which is a tributary of the larger Hvítá. Hvítá bounds Óivaldsstaðir on the east (really now the fjord itself, rather than the river). It is not a single farm as is Kaldakinn as there have always been three or four homes there. There are now three. The livestock is kept in a single barn while the families are housed separately. The larger portion of the farm is on higher ground, gently rolling with very large rocks or boulders spotting the pasture. These boulders are of various sizes from small to 15 to 20 feet in diameter and eight to 14 feet high. The balance of the farm lies on the slope down towards the fjord. The buildings are on the break of the slope and overlook the fjord. The *tún* (meadow) is on the lower ground. Part of it is drained by drainage ditches making it an excellent *tún*. The undrained portion is very rough and in need of drainage to improve it.

As at Kaldakinn, only one building retains the original buildings and this is now used to store wood. It may have been a horse barn or a barn for sheep when Guðbjörg was there. The old buildings have been replaced by new concrete structures, rather modern in appearance. The original site of the *suðurbær* (south farmhouse) can be seen and part of the foundation. From those I have talked with, I believe this was the house in which my mother was born in. It is at the top of a slight rise of ground.

Now to look about us from the site of the house. Across the fjord, the Hafnarfjall, a very high mountain, to its left, another, Brekkufjall, really part of the same range of mountain. These mountains, on the day we were there were capped with snow. Below the snow they were of varying colours. To the left of the range they were of the lighter colours, while to the right towards the sea they were dark. A geologist no doubt could tell you the difference in the rock composition. The name of one of the peaks far to the right and a little to the back is Svartitindur (Black Peak). It is smooth down the sides as if it were a pile of ashes carefully poured out of a pail. As we stood at the farmstead, looking to the mountains, we could see the change in colours as it was late afternoon and the red of the setting sun was being spread over the white snow and making the rock of the mountain itself pink to purple. That Mother should remember these mountains for over 60 years is no surprise.

To the left in the distance the new house at Ferjabakki may be seen. To the right one looks down the fjord towards the open sea and Borgarnes at the point five miles away.

In the *tún* below the buildings and toward the fjord is a large rock, probably eight to 10 feet high and about 14 feet wide. In it is a hole about two feet deep but not through the rock. It makes kind of a shelf in the rock and may be the hole which Mother and the other children called a window, naming the rock "Gluggi."

Gufá at this time is rather small being probably 15 feet across. It winds its way thru the *tún* with many bends in it.

We were guests of Jón Björnsson while at Óivaldsstaðir. He is a young and enterprising farmer. He has seven cows and cuts his hay with a mower in contrast to Jón at Kaldakinn where all the hay is still cut by hand. He was anxious to learn what he could about ditching machines to improve his *tún*. At present digging of the ditches by hand is very hard work. He follows findings of the *bínaðarskóli* (agricultural school) carefully. This school can be seen right across the fjord.

When we came into the house, his wife left her knitting machine to make coffee for us and he called to his father and mother to come and visit with us. His father, Björn Jónsson, lived at Óvaldsstaðir 40 years and is now over 90 years old. His mother, Ragnhildur Erlendsdóttir, is over 70 and has borne 12 children, 10 of which are now living. They were very interesting to talk to.

Jón Ólafsson, a big good-looking "Western Iclander" from America stayed overnight with them quite a number of years ago. Would that be our Jón Ólafsson? From her description and the fact that he knew Guðmundur Guðmundsson leads me to believe it was. She wanted me to extend her regards to him if he could be reached for she enjoyed his visit very much. Both she and Björn knew grandfather Helgi's brother Guðmundur Frændi very well. She said that he had told them some glowing stories of America and of the people there. Of the people he had mentioned, none were more highly spoken of than Guðmundur Goodman and his wife. He brought back to her a handkerchief bag of flowered silk with crocheted ends made by Anna. This she showed me and I took a picture of her holding it. It seems that Anna Good-

man and Ragnhildur were especially well thought of by Guðmundur.

Guðmundur's children live in Borgarnes. He called his daughters Guðrún and Guðfinna. Guðrún I liked very much as she was bright and was suggested by Ragnhildur, knew the family the best. Guðmundur, the son, also lives in Borgarnes but at this time I did not have time to see him. He has not had any definite occupation but has made his living at various kinds of work. He is unmarried, as is Guðrún. They are 70 and 62 years old respectively. As if to make up for her brother and sister, their half sister (Guðmundsdóttir as well) was married twice and has three children by her first husband and I think two by her second. We had coffee at her house and were offered cigars which we declined, offering in turn cigarettes which were accepted by all including Guðrún, Guðfinna, and Guðfinna's son and daughter. I would like to visit there again and meet Guðmundur and talk to them more than I did.

Guðrún brought pictures to show us. Included were some she did not know other than they were given to her father in America. These I named for her as being: Ellenborg and Ellen in their white dresses, Joe Swanson, Gwain Goodman, and others I don't now remember. Guðrún said that, had her father lived, he would have returned to America for he loved it there. He was born at Ferjabakki and there he died.

Borgarnes is a rather nice village. It is located at the extreme end of the point. To the north it seems to be standing out into the sea for there are so many small rock islands about the point. The hotel in which we stayed was more of the commercial type and the hospitality was not as pronounced as at Búðardal.

A single visit to Iceland should be made only in summer. I would have liked to make this trip a little later in the season, but under the circumstances was fortunate to make it at all. Lárus Bjarnason, my guide, and good friend told me much about the country as we passed thru the many historic places. More may be added to this story but further than this, I do not have time for, at this time. These words have been set down at one sitting and have not been re-written so many errors will be found — these my friends will overlook — and only for them was this written.