



PHOTOS: DECLAN O' DRISCOLL

Riders from the Path to Gimli pass through the town of Rosseau in Muskoka, ON.

THE PATH TO GIMLI PART TWO: Ontario

Declan O'Driscoll

The riders from Iceland arrived at Pearson airport on the evening of July 11th in high spirits. As we exited the air-conditioned airport, the humid Toronto summer night hit us like a freight train. “What’s this?” Kalli asked me. “Is this how hot it is?” That was just the beginning of the heat that was to come.

We spent three days in humid, Toronto; historical geographer Don Gislason gave us a tour and brought us to the site where the immigration shanties had been. He spoke to us about the tribula-

tions the Icelanders went through while waiting to be located.

On July 13 we headed to Clear Lake Farm in Magnetawan where our horses were. We spent a peaceful night amongst the chirping crickets and the twinkling stars, but were up bright and early at 5 a.m. to load the horses and drive to Kinmount.

In Kinmount, Ian Tate, Guðrún S. Girgis, Diane Austin and her daughter Janet met us at the agricultural fair grounds. Diane generously invited our group to dinner at any restaurant in town, Ian invited us up to his “shack in the swamp” for a drink — it turned

out to be a beautiful cabin in the woods on the edge of a pond. He graciously offered his home as our base of operations during our stay in Kinmount.

We had a day to relax and settle in. It was spent on the bank of the Burnt River, where most of us jumped off a thirty-foot bridge into the river. I must say it was pressure from Herdis and Lauren that got us onto upper rail of the bridge to jump into the dark, murky waters. It doesn’t look so bad looking from the bottom, but once you’re up there looking down... At that point it’s too late. The only way down is to jump.

Herdis, Lauren and Elin had no trouble and off they went. Valur, on the other hand, stood up then sat back down, psyched himself up; he stood up again, he sat back down, he psyched himself up again. Then he stood up and proclaimed, “I’m turning forty, I’m too old for this!” Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid off he leapt. After swimming ashore, he went right back



Valur Gíslason takes the plunge from the bridge in Kinmount, ON into the murky Burnt River, 30 feet below.

up and leapt off again.

The next day, local historian Guy Scott escorted us down the old railway track along the Burnt River to where the Icelanders had their shanties in 1874. Twenty-three Icelanders, mostly children, were buried there in unmarked graves. No one knows exactly where the children are buried.

I reached into the cooler, took out a bottle of water and then asked everyone to gather in a circle.

I said a few words about the children who died there, and asked all present to recognize that they had left their homeland with hopes of reaching “the promised land.” Instead they settled very unforgiving territory and never reached Gimli. I said a prayer, poured the bottle of water onto the ground and asked everyone to take a moment of silence.

After a moment, the silence was broken by Sveinn’s cell phone. The

message he received from the ethers at that moment was a poem:

*Vatnsbað
Í dag
vökvaði ég krónu
fegursta trésins
í garðinum mínum.
Blóm hennar eru
fallgustu blóm
sem ég hef augum litið
og í dag
sýndu þau mér
hreinan kjarna sinn.*

The rough translation:

Water-bath
Today
I watered the crown
of the most beautiful tree
in my garden.
Its flowers are
the most beautiful flowers
I have ever seen
and today
they showed me
their pure core.

I had just poured pure spring water onto the ground when this poem came through. To add to this uncanny event, Sveinn had attempted to use his phone many times that day but could not get reception. That moment was the only time it worked while we were in Kinmount.

I will not go into the details of IceFest and the Icelandic settlement of 1874 as they have been covered extensively in previous issues of Loberg. I thank Gudrun Girgis, Don Gíslason and the town of Kinmount for their work and generosity.

From Kinmount we journeyed on to Muskoka.

En route to Free Land grants in the Muskoka District, settlers traveled from Toronto by train and horse drawn wagon to Gravenhurst, at the southern end of Lake Muskoka. As a transit stop for points northward, they boarded steamships here for destinations along the lake. Icelanders passed through here, during the early 1870s on their way to Rosseau and Hekkle. More recently, Oscar Finnson served as mayor for many years, as well as being a Ma-

son grand master. In 1912, he and his immediate family arrived from Iceland in the Muskoka District.

Some of the families that first settled at Hekkla and Rosseau fanned out across the district to larger places like Bracebridge. Today the town library has historic documents relating to early Icelandic settlement in the Muskoka District. In 1989 Ted Currie, editor of *The Muskokan* newspaper serialized a number of translated pioneer letters written during the 1890s from Bjarnastadir at Hekkla to relatives in Iceland. Descendants of the original Hekkla settlers have moved to Bracebridge and the surrounding area.

The weather in Muskoka was beautiful until arrived in Bracebridge ~ the heavens opened up and unleashed a furious thunderstorm. Patrick Boyer Q.C. referred to our arrival in his speech the next day:

“I now add my own welcome to you all – and especially to the team from Iceland. I met them last night, just as they arrived with Thor the god of lightning, which struck a bolt with flames and explosions to the power lines a few paces from my home on Kimberley Avenue and left much of the town in darkness. These Icelanders are not only handsome men and beautiful women and great riders, but they sure know how to make an entrance when they come to town.”

We were met by The Honourable Andy Mitchell, federal Minister of Agriculture on July 19th in Bracebridge. Mr. Mitchell presented a Canadian flag to carry with us to Gimli. In turn, we gave him an Icelandic flag that will be presented to Prime Minister Martin. Our post horse delivered a bound set of the Icelandic Sagas to Honourary Consul of Iceland in Toronto, Gail Einarson-McCleery, who on behalf of the Icelandic Government donated them to the town library.

From Bracebridge we journeyed on to Rosseau and Hekkla. Edith Smith, a descendant of the early Hekkla settlers put us up. We had a fantastic time staying with her.

When the Icelanders arrived in Rosseau (1873), it was a well-established lumbering community. The immigrants were coming from a treeless sub-Arc-



Otmar Reinhartz holds the finish line ribbon at Clear Lake Farm as it is cut by Canadian Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food Andy Mitchell and Magnetawan Mayor Sam Dunnet.

tic island and were not accustomed to thick brooding forests, teeming with wildlife and insects.

Hekkla, a pioneer hamlet in the bush along a river six miles inland east of the town of Rosseau was the first distinct Icelandic ‘settlement’ in Canada, founded by a small and hardy group of Icelandic immigrants who arrived

in 1873. During their first winter here they suffered great poverty, want and near starvation. However, unexpected help eventually came from Norwegian immigrants in Wisconsin.

The community gained a post office in 1887, and was named in deference to the famous Hekla volcano in Iceland. However, the franking stamp was issued in error with two “Ks” in



**In Loving Memory
Bless
Honouring the First Icelandic
Colony
and Early Settlers
in Hekkla 1873**

From Hekkla we rode onto Clear Lake Farm in Magnetawan. I must thank Edith Smith, Doreen Nowack, Marilyn White and Laurie Oats for taking such good care of us while we were in Rosseau.

Clear lake Farm is an Icelandic Horse farm in northern Muskoka, owned and run by Kordula and Otmar Reinhartz. Kordula was the Ontario Manager for The path to Gimli, our five horses were boarded and trained by her. There are over forty Icelandic horses at Clear Lake Farm, trail rides are offered to the public. On our ride from Hekkla to Magnetawan we were joined by close to twenty other horses and riders. All the horses were Icelandic. It took two days to ride to Magnetawan. When we rode up to the farm, Minister Andy Mitchell and Magnetawan mayor Sam Dunnet, cut the finish line ribbon. It sported Icelandic colours and was strung across the driveway at Clear Lake Farm. Thus ended the Ontario portion of The path to Gimli.

its name rather than one, and that spelling has remained ever since. The first postmaster was Asgeir V. Helgason, an Icelandic immigrant. In its heyday, the community hosted six contiguous farms worked by Icelanders, a church, cemetery, schoolhouse, community hall and post office. The historic cemetery contains the oldest headstones with Icelandic language inscriptions east of the Manitoba border.

As we rode up to the old church in Hekkla bearing the Canadian and Ice-

landic flags, we were met by hundreds of people waving flags and clapping. Edith organized the event, a highland piper played the pipes as we arrived and a memorial plaque dedicated to the early Icelandic settlers of Hekkla was unveiled. We were met by the local mayor and MPP and credited as doing important work along our pilgrimage through the various communities.

After several speeches, the cairn was unveiled – the plaque reads: