

Deuce of August

Families, friends come together at the Deuce

Thingvalla Church ceremony starts weekend on a high note

David Jón Fuller

MOUNTAIN, ND — It was a bittersweet August the Deuce for many this year, as the cherished Thingvalla Church in Eyford, destroyed by fire in 2003, was honoured with a new memorial display and special ceremony.

Hundreds attended the unveiling on Friday evening of a replica statue of the Christus, created by Utah sculptor Dee Jay Bawden in the image of the original that had been in the church. Dignitaries including Icelandic Ambassador to the US Albert Jónsson and President of the Icelandic National League of Iceland Almar Grímsson were among those who spoke at the ceremony.

Pam Furstenuau worked with Arlan Steinolfson on the information panels that are part of the memorial. She says that when the statue was unveiled, “many, many people in the audience were crying.”

She adds that her children Cody (20) and Macey (25), who were both baptized at the Thingvalla Church, were struck by the reaction at the ceremony. “They said, ‘Everyone is so passionate about their Icelandic descent, Mom — it was so cool. It made me proud to be Icelan-

dic.’”

Magnus “Mike” Olafson of Gardar, ND, says he was “very impressed with the memorial... it is really, really well done. That was my impression from other people on Friday night — people were very pleased with it.”

Susan Sigurdson Powers made a presentation at the ceremony about the native prairie grasses and flowers which now grow on the foundation of the Thingvalla Church. When the church burned down, she, like many others, felt the loss deeply. The memorial is important to the community and those who lived there.

“To me, it was taking something that was such a great loss and turning it into something that was a very positive thing,” Susan says, adding that visitors will be able to learn about the impact that Icelandic settlers had on the region. “The story will live on in the hearts of those who have had a direct connection [to the church] but now it will also live on for the people who come there and learn about it.”

The Thingvalla Church, which could hold up to 90 people, had a large presence in the community. During the ceremony on Friday, lay pastor Bruce Fagerholt, who who had conducted a service in the



PHOTOS: SHIRLEY J. OLGEIRSON

Pam Furstenuau and sculptor Dee Jay Bawden unveil the Christus statue during the Thingvalla Memorial ceremony on August 3.



Below: hundreds of people from across the US as well as Iceland and Canada attended the ceremony.



church, said, "I know the foundation can't lie, but in my memory, the church was much bigger than that."

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The weekend continued on Saturday with a colourful parade, multiple family reunions (including the Kristjansons, Kraksons, Matthiassons, Olafsons, Sigurdsons and Gestssons), street dances other activities.

Special guests at the Heritage Program on Saturday included Prime Minister of Iceland Geir H. Haarde, North Dakota Governor John Hoeven, Ambassador Albert Jónsson, former North Dakota Lieutenant Governor Rosemarie Myrdal, Almar Grímsson, Director of the Emigration Centre at Hofsós Valgeir Þorvaldsson, and Icelandic National League President Garry Oddleifson. North Dakota State Senator Curtis Olafson was Master of Ceremonies, and entertainment was provided by two choirs from Iceland, Kór Húsavíkukirkju and Norðurljósa Kórinn.

Visitors came from all corners of the United States, and there were two separate tour groups from Iceland, led respectively by Jónas Thor and Kent Lárus Björnsson. Many took part in historical bus tours of the area, with stops at the Thingvalla Church site guided by Susan Sigurdson Powers; at the Olafson family farm in Gardar, by Magnus Olafson and his son Larry; at the Gardar Pioneer Church by Ingebjorg Johannesson; and at the Stephan G. Stephansson site by John H. Johnson.

The Genealogy Center, run by George Freeman and Pam Furstenau, was busy as always, with many visitors searching for ancestors. Many Iceland-



President of INL-Iceland Almar Grímsson (left) and Director of Vesturfarasetrið, the Emigration Centre in Hofsós, Valgeir Þorvaldsson.



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Iceland's Prime Minister Geir H. Haarde (centre) and his wife Inga Jóna Þórðardóttir took part in the parade on Saturday morning.



The Icelandic Club of Greater Seattle was represented by Amanda Kristjanson.



At the Heritage Program. From left: North Dakota Governor John Hoeven, North Dakota State Senator Curtis Olafson, Magnus Olafson, Iceland's Ambassador Albert Jónsson and Iceland's Prime Minister Geir H. Haarde.



Bruce and Doreen Marston came from Florida to take part in the Kristjanson family reunion; they and many relatives were in the parade.



Kór Húsavíkukirkju gave an impromptu performance in the historic Gardar Pioneer Church.

ers attending the Deuce also connected with US relatives, leading to impromptu reunions. This year the Center featured a live webcam link with Hálfðan Helgason in Iceland, who has a large database of genealogical information.

The weekend wrapped up with a church service on the Borg Home Lawn, and a tractor and pickup pull behind the Mountain Chalet.

This year's Deuce of August lived up to its reputation of being a packed weekend of fun and heritage. It was not lost on the visitors. "It is deeply appreciated in Iceland, that Americans keep their heritage alive," said Prime Minister Geir Haarde at the Heritage Program. "What happens in North Dakota matters in Iceland." And as Garry Oddleifson added later, "I don't know if friendliness was born here, but it sure lives here now — and I'll be back."



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Prime Minister Geir H. Haarde brandishes a copy of the *Pembina County Pioneer Daughters Biographies*, compiled by George Freeman.



Governor Hoen shakes hands with INL President Garry Oddleifson.



The K. N. Júlíus monument at the Thingvalla cemetery in Eyford.



Floodlights illuminate the new Christus statue at the Thingvalla Memorial.



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Above: The Matthiasson family reunion, held at the home of George Wright and Sandra Matthiasson Wright (top right photo).

Right: Magnus “Mike” Olafson shows where the historic Oxcart Trail ran through what is now his family’s property. Magnus delighted visitors from Iceland by holding forth in Icelandic for the entire tour of his property.

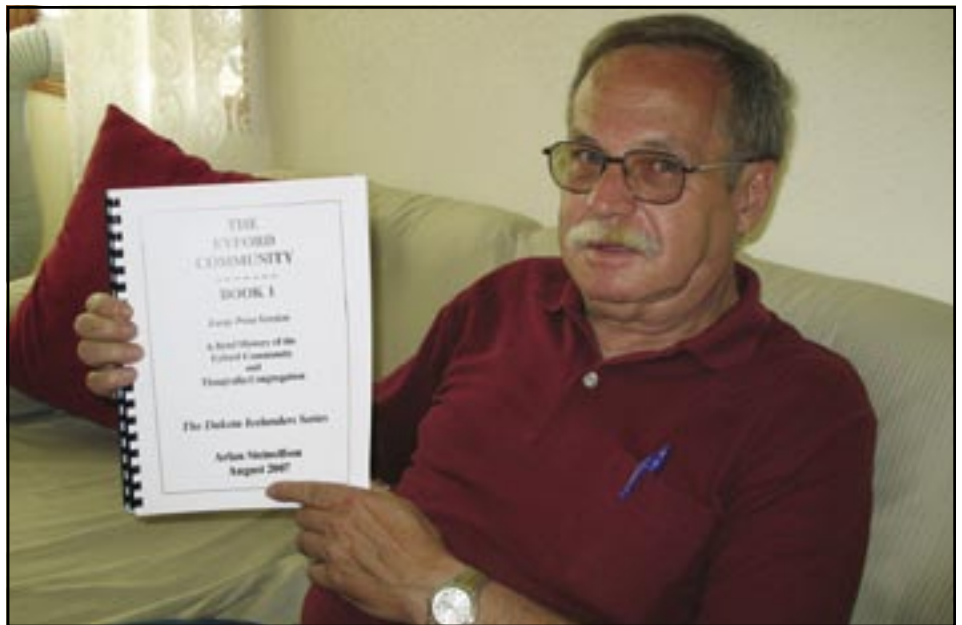


Both touring choirs taking part in the Deuce of August, Norðuljósa Kórin and Kór Húsavíkurkirkju (above), took the opportunity to sing in the forest on the Olafson family farm. Magnus Olafson (centre, in blue shirt) looks on.



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The pastor of the Húsavík Church (left) sprinkles the customary brennivín on the grave of K. N. Júlíus, after a piece by the poet was read.



Arlan Steinolfson of Fargo, ND holds a copy of a brief history of the Eyford community, the latest publication in his Dakota Icelanders Project. Eyford is the site of the Thingvalla Church Memorial, which Arlan also contributed to.



Left: An Iceland-North Dakota reunion. After 125 years, two branches reconnected. From left: Sigríður Ásta Olgeirsdóttir, Hanna Agústa Olgeirsdóttir, Olgeir Helgi Ragnarson, Stephanie Braunagel, Ragnar Sveinn Olgeirsson and Theodóra Þorsteinsdóttir. Ragnar Sveinn searched through genealogical information online and located Stephanie, who lives in Fargo, this spring. The relatives met in Fargo and travelled to Mountain for the Deuce of August.



Many young people took part in basketball competitions on Saturday during the Deuce.



At the Genealogy Center, in the home of Susan and Tim Powers. Sandra Hall-dorson (left) of Prescott, AZ and Sigrid Halldorson Higdon of Lakewood, CO get help from George Freeman (right) in tracing their ancestry.