

**CELEBRATING ETHNICITY: THE ICELANDERS OF MANITOBA**

CELEBRATING ETHNICITY:  
THE ICELANDERS OF MANITOBA

By

ANNE BRYDON, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Anne Brydon, B.A. (University of Western Ontario)

SUPERVISOR: Professor H. Feit

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## Abstract

Using data collected in the Icelandic community of Manitoba in the summer of 1985, this thesis outlines an alternative approach to the understanding of ethnicity in North America through analysis of the Icelandic Festival held each summer in Gimli, Manitoba. The Festival provides an *entrée* through which the dynamics of the production, reproduction and transformation of West Icelandic identity are revealed.

It is argued that when ethnic identity is conceived as being resident in the possession of particular attributes or characteristics, change becomes a threat to the continued existence of the ethnic group. As defined in this thesis, ethnic identity is an ideological representation of social relations which is contextualized in a particular historic formation. It involves a constant negotiation of the symbolic representation of identity through social interaction, and is contingent upon the consequences of these actions. Change, therefore, is a normal process of ethnicity which does not necessarily end in assimilation. Though the content of identity changes according to changing circumstances, it must retain the appearance of an "authentic" representation of the past.

The Festival is a location of the political negotiation of Icelandic identity, as seen in the debates which exist in the community regarding the relevance of its Icelandic cultural content. It is argued that, while the Festival continues to address a public image of how the organizers believe the community should be perceived by the larger society, it is also a time when a private celebration takes place. This latter aspect of the Festival is where the perpetuation of the meaningfulness of Icelandic identity occurs. It is contained within the family reunions which take place during the Festival and the return to a sense of the past which is linked to a shared West Icelandic history.

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**For John**

## Introduction

This thesis seeks to establish a framework for the understanding of the dynamics of ethnicity and ethnic group change as they occur within the Icelandic community of Manitoba. It is based on fieldwork conducted within that community in the summer of 1985 and uses as its central focus the *Islendingadagurinn*, the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, in order to analyse the central issues facing the community today.

The Icelanders believe they now face the impending loss of their ethnic identity. They feel that the decline in knowledge of the Icelandic language which is now being experienced within the community represents the final stage to their assimilation into North American society. Their fears, I argue, are premised on certain sociological and commonsense understandings of ethnicity. In turn, these understandings are derived from the same Western conceptualization of culture as embedded in attributes or characteristics. A consequence of such a conceptualization is that change within the ethnic group is seen to lead to the loss of that which makes it authentic.

The alternate framework for explaining ethnic group change outlined in this thesis has as one of its goals the

description of ethnic identification as the process of the production and reproduction of cultural knowledge within a historical context. Ethnic culture is seen to arise from social action rather than as situated in the retention of traits and characteristics. There is no ultimate goal of assimilation to these actions. Rather, the ethnic group is continuously involved in the negotiation of its identity within its particular social, economic and historical circumstances. How this is accomplished in the case of the Icelanders is the subject matter of this thesis. The model, however, would be equally applicable to other North American ethnic groups.

This thesis contributes to knowledge and understanding of ethnic formations in two ways. First, it critiques the assumptions which underlie models of ethnic change and which posit such change as problematic. Second, it describes the process through which ethnic groups formulate their identity and render it meaningful and relevant to their lives.

In order to accomplish these aims, analysis must be approached in such a way that ethnicity itself is not used as an analytical category. Ethnicity is a description of how people organize themselves at the ideological level, and is a result rather than a cause of social action. To understand the processes of ethnic formation, analysis

should begin with those instances or events which manifest "the structuring of social action in time" (Abrams 1982: 191). The Icelandic Festival is one such event which provides in this thesis a particularly rich and complex text through which the Icelandic community can be understood.

#### *Description of Field Site*

The Icelandic community is an excellent site for a study of this kind. Many Icelanders have maintained a strong sense of their own identity, though by standards of traditional models of ethnicity they retain few distinctive attributes or practices. Language is playing less of a role in distinguishing the West Icelanders today. Further, neither religion nor occupation act as markers of ethnicity. Icelanders no longer dominate the Lake Winnipeg fishing industry as they once did, nor do they dominate the politics and business interests of Gimli—though they still retain a high profile in each. Icelanders are not ghettoized in any particular occupation but rather participate in all manner of economic activities. There are, however, several active cultural organizations and institutions within the community which have the express purpose of promoting and maintaining awareness of Icelandic identity.

The Icelanders first immigrated to Canada in 1874, and in 1875 they began to settle in Manitoba. Many people settled in Winnipeg. Others went to the west shore of Lake Winnipeg where a reserve had been established exclusively for the Icelandic settlers. The Republic of New Iceland--as it was then known--was established in 1877 with its own constitution and government. The Province of Manitoba assumed direct control of the reserve in the 1880s, and it was opened to other ethnic groups in 1897. However, the area is still referred to as "New Iceland" and has now taken on the symbolic quality of "spiritual" home for Icelanders in North America. Gimli is the central town of New Iceland and though it is no longer predominantly Icelandic, it is where the Festival takes place each year. Arborg and Riverton (earlier known as Icelandic River) are two other communities in New Iceland which have large Icelandic populations. Icelanders settled in rural areas beyond New Iceland as well, in the territory between Lakes Winnipeg and Manitoba known as the Interlake. This area shares some of the symbolic properties of New Iceland.

All Icelanders in North America are referred to as "West Icelanders" (by themselves and by Icelanders in Iceland), and this term will be used inter-changeably with "Icelander" throughout this thesis. Where necessary,

distinction is made between West Icelanders and born-in-Iceland Icelanders.

#### *Chapter Outline*

This thesis begins in Chapter One with a brief account of the history of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba. Following this is a description of the institutions which form the structure of the community. Chapter Two presents the theoretical framework of the thesis. It begins with a critique of specific models of ethnicity and ethnic group change. It continues with a description of Icelandic notions of identity, and a discussion of what the alternate framework being proposed entails. It concludes with an explanation of the role of celebration, and in particular of the Icelandic Festival, in analysis.

Chapter Three presents an ethnographic description of the 1985 Icelandic Festival. Chapters Four and Five present the analysis of the Festival. Chapter Four focuses on the political negotiations of identity which are expressed in the context of the Festival. Chapter Five examines the experience of identification and meaning, and how they are or can be linked to the Festival.

It would be impossible in a work of this length to provide a detailed description and analysis of the Icelandic community, nor is this attempted here. The intention of this thesis is to provide a general

introduction to what are critical issues in ethnic studies and within the Icelandic community, and to outline how these issues might be productively viewed from an anthropological perspective.



## Chapter One

### Social and Historical Context

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will outline a brief history of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, beginning with the emigration of the first settlers from Iceland, and ending with a description of the community as it is today. This is not intended to be definitive but rather to provide for the reader unfamiliar with the history of the Icelanders in Canada, a context within which to place the following description and analysis. Unless otherwise noted, historical information is from Kristjanson (1965).

The circumstances and forces which shape Icelandic identity today should be understood in two ways and the following text should be read with them in mind. First, identity is historically determined. That is, it emerges out of complex interactions between thought and social action, themselves formed and constrained by larger economic and political structures. The choices that the first Icelandic immigrants made, in combination with the unintended consequences of those choices and actions, as well as the limits imposed by society, together shape the

possibilities for defining Icelandic identity. As I will emphasize later in this thesis, there is expressed by West Icelanders a variety of ways of thinking and expressing Icelandicness: it is this flexibility which allows the notion of an ethnic identity to retain its viability in social discourse.

Second, the history of the ethnic community is a cognitive map for its members to view themselves. Group identity is a conceptualization in part formed out of memories which are collectively constructed and reconstructed, and individually experienced. History is not simply lived, but is also reflected upon, thereby providing a framework for experiencing the present. For example, knowledge of West Icelandic history, in particular of the first settlement years, defines for present-day Icelanders something essential to their character.

This text draws on histories produced by Icelanders and is not based on archival research. This is important to keep in mind: albeit that these histories are factually correct, there are nonetheless discernable mechanisms of selection occurring in their writing. I present the facts here as the standard histories of New Iceland present them, emphasizing what they consider the most salient features. But as in other written accounts, historical data are presented in a manner which makes them coincide with a

particular approach toward how the past should be perceived. This reconstruction of the past within contemporary understanding is not an unusual process--in fact, it is assumed to be the case generally with any historical account.

Not unlike histories compiled by members of other ethnic communities, there is a tendency to present the past both as a lost utopia (cf. Boon: 1982) and as a time of hardships being overcome by the strength and endurance of mythically capable ancestors. A justifiable pride in one's past underlies a group's understanding of itself, and this is not absent from Icelandic accounts. But contrasted to the official, public histories are alternative accounts of the past which do not necessarily appear in published accounts. These form the basis of informal conversations, being more personal anecdotes or speculations which do not fit, for a variety of reasons, with the public discourse on the past. There are always stories to be made public, and others to be kept as family secrets, or shared in private. It is not my intention to document private anecdotes here, but rather to acknowledge their existence and suggest that they, too, shape the Icelanders' understanding of themselves.

### *Historical Background to Emigration*

At the time of the first emigrations during the nineteenth century, Iceland was engaged in a political struggle with Denmark, in order to break that country's domination since 1380. As a colony, Iceland suffered from trade monopolies imposed by the Danish crown in the 17th century. The unequal exchange of goods resulting from exploitation of these monopolies combined with a marginal environment created a severely impoverished economy by the 19th century. The population was almost entirely rural and scattered along the arable coastal lands, leaving unoccupied the harsh interior country of glaciers and volcanoes. The economy was primarily subsistence based: sheep farming and the growing of fodder supplemented by limited fishing. (The growth of commercial fishing which was to eventually cause the rapid expansion of the Icelandic economy did not occur until the beginning of the twentieth century.) The population of Iceland in 1860 was 66,987. Despite its name and northern latitude, the country's climate is more moderate than that of prairie Canada, with mean temperatures ranging from 1C in January to 12C in June.

Not only was the Icelandic economy barely adequate for human survival, a series of natural disasters--volcanoes, epidemics, unusually harsh weather conditions--

further exasperated conditions, making emigration an appealing alternative. Conditions had begun to improve somewhat during the first half of the nineteenth century due to the gaining of economic and political concessions from Denmark, but:

(n)evertheless, at the beginning of the emigration period, in the [eighteen] sixties and seventies, the general condition was still one of hardship. An epidemic carried off 200,000 sheep in the years 1856-1860, and sheep raising was the main industry of the country. Arctic ice turned summer into virtual winter on more than one occasion. A disastrous volcanic eruption, in 1875, blanketed a large area with ashes. The door had been opened to commerce and industry, but the country was as yet too poor to avail itself, to any extent, of the opportunity. The country was denuded of its forests, and imported timber was both costly and scarce; the houses were still generally sod and stone. There were few roads, chiefly bridle-paths, no bridges across the swift streams, and transportation was by pack-horse. A large part of the soil of Iceland was the property of state and church. Around the coasts of Iceland were some of the richest fishing grounds in the world, but deep-sea fishing was carried on mainly in open rowboats (Kristjanson 1965: 9).

During the 1850s, about seventeen people departed for Utah where they joined the Mormon Church. Kristjanson, however, considers emigration to have first begun in 1863, when about forty persons left for Brazil with the intention of beginning an Icelandic community there. (Brazil was the focus of interest for Ukrainians as well during the late nineteenth century, prior to their migration into the Canadian Prairies [Lehr 1983].) After ten years, however,

transportation difficulties led to a shift in attention toward North America.

Kristjanson, in summarizing the character of the Icelanders of the nineteenth century, states that

they were people unfamiliar with grain-farming, industrial life, mining, and lumbering. They were not accustomed to machinery, for their haying implements were a scythe and a hand-rake. They were unused to war, and military life, for there was not a soldier in the land; unused to regimentation of any kind, for as late as the first decade of the twentieth century there was only one policeman in the country; unused to group employment, except for the fall sheep round-up and life on the small, open fishing boats (ibid.: 11).

#### *Early Settlement Period*

The first settlers to North America arrived in the early 1870s. Some settled on Washington Island, Wisconsin, while others went to Milwaukee (which, until the founding of New Iceland, was the centre of the Icelandic movement into North America), Nova Scotia or Kinmount, Ontario (in the Muskoka district).

It was the Kinmount group which formed the nucleus of the first party of settlers to go to Manitoba, a group which numbered about 270 individuals. Kristjanson recounts the difficulties faced by the Kinmount group during their sojourn in Ontario; the lack of employment, inadequate food and shelter, and the death of all children younger than two were a few of the major crises encountered.

Motivated by a desire to remain together in order to retain their language and customs, the Icelanders sought a block of land large enough to accommodate further emigration from Iceland, and situated in a region that would allow them to continue in those economic pursuits-- fishing and farming--with which they were familiar. Sites considered, and eventually rejected, were in Wisconsin, Alaska, Nebraska and Ontario.

In 1875, a reserve on the west shore of Lake Winnipeg was set aside for the Icelanders, an area approximately twelve miles wide and forty-eight miles long extending north from what was then the Manitoba boundary at Selkirk to include Hecla Island (see map in Appendix I). New Iceland, as it was called, was incorporated into Manitoba in 1881 when the northern boundary was extended to its present limit. Most of the Icelanders who came to the province went to the reserve, though some remained in Winnipeg to earn much needed cash.

As mentioned previously, the Icelanders lacked the proper skills, knowledge and equipment to be adept at farming and fishing upon arrival, and some errors of judgment were made (e.g., fishing nets were frozen in the ice, and potatoes were unsuccessfully planted in overly wet soil). Nutrition was a problem during the harsh winter and there were some deaths from scurvy that year, though the

exact number is not known. About half the population left for Winnipeg when spring arrived.

In 1876, approximately 1,200 Icelanders arrived in Canada, most of whom continued through to New Iceland. They were motivated to emigrate because of the disastrous effects of a volcanic eruption in the northeast of Iceland in 1875. Of these immigrants, about 30-40 died en route, or shortly after their arrival in Gimli. Again, lack of funds was a problem, but this time the Canadian government advanced the colonists a loan for the purchase of supplies, which was, present-day Icelanders always note, eventually paid back in full. A provisional constitution was written early in 1877 by the leaders of the settlement and was accepted by the other settlers in its final form in 1878. It outlined the division of New Iceland into governing districts and established the duties of the governing council. These duties included the building and maintenance of roads, care of the poor, supervision of health and the settlement of disputes.

Despite original enthusiasm for the establishment of New Iceland, however, problems and discontent grew. A smallpox epidemic in the winter of 1876-77 demoralized the already destitute population and the concomitant quarantine worsened economic conditions. As Gerrard describes:

(c)ontention over religious and political issues helped fuel the fires of discontent...



creating bitterness and alienation, and adverse weather which left roads and fields impassable and unworkable contributed greatly to the growing disillusionment. Then there was the glowing reports of progress other settlements were making, and finally there was the "Great Flood" [of 1880], which although it affected only those on the lowest lands, created a profound distrust in the lake and the future of the settlement. Talk of abandoning New Iceland, subdued and even considered seditious at first, therefore became more widespread and persistent as the years went by, and by 1881 a full scale "exodus" was underway (1985: 47).

The population of New Iceland was reduced to about 250 people from an 1879 population of 1,029. But by 1883 immigration into the reserve began again and by 1900 the population of New Iceland reached 2,500 (Kristjanson 1965).

Not all who came to Manitoba settled in New Iceland. Many chose to make their lives in Winnipeg, working in a variety of occupations. Mostly they worked as labourers, though some were able to start small businesses, and yet others profitted from involvement in the Manitoba real estate boom of the early 1880s. Icelanders dominated the construction industry, and were the first ethnic group to form their own carpenter's union (McKenna 1986).

There was a decision on the part of many Icelanders, fostered by the two local newspapers *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla*, to learn to speak English. This was done primarily for economic reasons, especially for those working as farm help since the ability to speak English brought higher wages (Gerrard 1985).

Those individuals who stayed in Winnipeg were less able to meet on a regular basis, due to work schedules. Different social organisations were founded, though, to encourage more interaction amongst the Icelanders, with the direct purpose of retaining certain aspects of their culture. Though the west end of Winnipeg along Sargent Avenue was at one time the focus of Icelandic settlement in the city, the Icelanders did not remain together geographically to the extent that other ethnic groups did (McKenna 1986).

By the end of the 19th century, the major foundations had been laid both for the development of the province as a whole, and for the Icelandic community. The next few decades saw the rise and fall of various organisations which related to the issues then facing the Icelanders. For example, the Icelandic Labour Association and the Jon Bjarnason Academy at one time provided social services and education for the community.

#### *Community Issues*

Matthiasson (1979) argues that dualism is a theme running throughout Icelandic history, such that the

theme of contrast in the Icelandic landscape [between volcanoes and glaciers] is reflected in the personalities of the people who inhabit it, and the social and cultural forms they have evolved (203).

This dualism has manifested itself in a "two-sidedness" in social and cultural forms. In Iceland, instances of factionalism and dispute frequently could be traced to the animosity which developed between closed corporate kin groups, fostered by geographical isolation and the structure of farmstead units. These kin groups formed the basis of residence patterns in the early settlement of Manitoba, and the quality of relations amongst families are at the basis of some West Icelandic disputes (ibid.).

Matthiasson further argues that this theme of dualism is perpetuated by the West Icelanders. The demise of *Fraðfari* (the first Icelandic newspaper) was caused by such battling, as was the exodus from New Iceland. In another instance, Matthiasson describes how, when Icelanders established a temperance organization in 1887, "...a second association was soon formed, and the two worked in opposition to each other while striving for the same aims" (ibid.: 204).

There are two major debates which are frequently described as important events in the history of the West Icelanders. The first involved the selection of a pastor for New Iceland, although the ensuing public furour soon enveloped other disputes extant in the community.

Kristjanson (1965) presents it as a theological debate between the two pastors: Thorlaksson was from the strict

Norwegian Synod whereas Bjarnason was from the more liberal Theological Seminary in Iceland. Thor (1980), however, argues that more fundamental issues were at stake in the debate, and not all participants were actually concerned about religious doctrine. Economics was a factor, since many in New Iceland were poor and Thorlaksson had offered his services for free. Thorlaksson also favoured closer association with Norwegian settlements in the U.S., and this appealed to those who believed the New Iceland settlement was doomed to failure. As well, some felt that in order to succeed, Icelanders should be willing to adapt to new ways and become good citizens of their new country. On the other hand, Bjarnason's ties with Iceland were considered beneficial to those interested in maintaining their language and culture. Thus the dispute was fundamentally about attitudes to New Iceland, approaches to issues of cultural survival and economic viability and the quality of leadership these men offered.

The public meetings on the issue lasted throughout the winter of 1877-78, and finally ended when Thorlaksson left for Dakota with about half a dozen families from Gimli. Kristjanson describes the demoralizing effects this debate had on those who remained. This event represents for present West Icelanders the most pivotal moment in their history, when they came closest to dispersal and

disappearance. Bessason (1967) corroborates the veracity of this belief, stating that it was the isolation of New Iceland which fostered language retention and allowed the West Icelanders to maintain a stronger sense of identity than if they had dispersed amongst other Scandinavian groups.

The second debate again divided the Icelandic community, though not with the same degree of threat to its survival. It was not an isolated event as much as a continuing competition between the editors of the two newspapers published in Winnipeg since the 1880s, *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla*, over whatever were the issues of the day. These papers were widely read by West Icelanders and they provided the basis for discourse within the community. The former paper represented the views of the Liberal party and the Lutheran Church, and the latter represented the Conservative party and the Unitarian Church (Icelandic involvement with Unitarianism began during the 1880s). The editors of both papers were both eloquent and combative, and their positions on many issues became progressively more adversarial in the community. Informants recounted instances of the tenacity with which these positions were held in the community during the early decades of this century: Icelanders from opposing camps would sooner cross the street than pass each other on a sidewalk, or loyalties

occasionally influenced choice of marriage partners. The controversies passed with the retirement of the editors in the 1950s, and with a shift within the community toward more involvement with the larger society. Most informants refer to this debate with humour, recounting the extremes to which Icelanders expressed their views.

A third debate that occurred in Winnipeg, though is less discussed, was between the two chapters of the Icelandic National League: *Frón* and the Icelandic-Canadian Club. The former was established first, and emphasized the speaking of the Icelandic language: those who could not speak it were unable to participate in its meetings. The latter club was founded in 1938 as more English-speaking Icelanders sought a forum for themselves, and the emphasis of this club was placed upon socializing. Until their amalgamation in the 1970s, there was a degree of animosity between the two, the former accused of not serving the needs of most Icelanders, and the latter for putting too much emphasis on socializing and not enough on the preservation of traditions.

#### *Contemporary Situation*

Before continuing to describe the contemporary West Icelandic community in Manitoba, it is useful to situate it within a general socio-historical and geographical context. Beginning in the 1890s, western Canada was rapidly settled

after the federal government instituted a programme to encourage settlers into the region. Almost half of the resulting population of the Prairies is neither British nor French--the two founding ethnic groups of Canada. Rather it is a mixture of Scandinavians, Germans, Dutch, Ukrainians, Poles and others. The Prairies thus constitute the most ethnically diverse region of Canada, yet they now have a lower percentage of foreign-born residents than either Ontario or Quebec, indicating little immigration into the area. Thus "...the major problem is the maintenance of ethnic identity among established groups rather than the assimilation of newcomers" (Mackie 1981: 195). There is also more stability of residence patterns in the Prairies compared to other regions of Canada, and a greater percentage of rural farm dwellers (13% in Manitoba compared to a national average of 6.6% in 1971 [ibid.]).

Mackie argues that geographical isolation shapes the nature of ethnicity in the Prairies. Separation from the east by wilderness, the west by mountains and the south by an international boundary, has led to what she describes as a sense of psychological separation from the centres of Ontario and Quebec. For Manitoba in particular, this psychological separation has roots in its lack of a strong economic base or federal political clout.

Within Manitoba, the Icelanders form a visible part of the Interlake population along with Ukrainians and Germans, and are also present in large numbers in Winnipeg. No informants knew the distribution of Icelanders in Manitoba, but census data for 1971 give a figure of 27,905 persons of Icelandic origin for all of Canada (more recent data is unavailable, since later statistics include all Scandinavians in one category). In Manitoba there were 13,070 Icelanders, comprising 46% of the Canadian Icelandic population. In comparison, Manitoba Icelanders formed 70% of the national Icelandic population in 1931. Icelandic communities are spread across the Prairies and British Columbia, as can be seen by the various local chapters of the Icelandic National League (described below). Nonetheless, Gimli and Winnipeg retain the status of the "spiritual" capitals for West Icelanders. As well, these communities are the centres for the institutions still active within the Icelandic community.

Over the century, various organizations intended to foster Icelandic identity and unity were founded, and also have disappeared as their impetus waned. Currently, there are several such groups that form the institutional structure of the West Icelandic community. These include the aforementioned Icelandic National League, as well as the Icelandic-Canadian Foundation, the Icelandic Department



at the University of Manitoba, the *Icelandic-Canadian Magazine*, *Lögberg-Heimskringla* (an amalgamation of the two earlier newspapers), and the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba. These organizations and publications will be described below, however it should be noted that they do not represent an exhaustive list of all organizations operating within the Icelandic community today. For example, the Icelandic Language Camp was founded in the early 1970s, and in 1984 a July First Heritage Day for West Icelanders was started in Gimli. An Icelandair charter flight has operated between Winnipeg and Reykjavik each summer since 1975. Although not an organization *per se*, the latter has provided increased contact with and awareness of Iceland for West Icelanders. There is also the Scandinavian Centre, which is a meeting place and small restaurant for the use of all Scandinavian groups, but again, it is not *per se* an institutional support for the community.

The National League is a central organization with local chapters throughout North America and with links to groups in Iceland. Each chapter organizes activities such as socials and film nights, or invites speakers to discuss aspects of Icelandic heritage. Occasionally the League will sponsor larger events, such as the tour in 1985 by the scholar Magnus Magnusson, or specific projects such as the

translation of the first Icelandic newspaper in North America, *Fraðfari*. Informants agree that in Manitoba, League membership shows greater participation of younger people in the urban rather than in the rural chapters.

The Icelandic-Canadian Foundation does not organize any social activities, but rather raises and allocates funds for research into Icelandic culture, and provides scholarships for students of Icelandic descent.

The Icelandic Department at the University of Manitoba was established in 1951 with funds raised within the North American Icelandic community. Not only does it foster the study of Icelandic language and literature, it continues to introduce many West Icelanders to their own heritage, as well as attracting students from Iceland. I was told by several people of how their interest and involvement in their Icelandic past began during their university years, when they became part of informal Icelandic student networks.

There are two publications produced by the Icelandic community in Winnipeg. First, the *Icelandic-Canadian* is an English language quarterly established in 1942 which is devoted to the promotion of the literary work of West Icelanders and publication of research into a variety of aspects of Icelandic history and culture. Second, *Lögberg-Heimskringla* is a weekly newspaper

published in Winnipeg. The result of an amalgamation in 1959 of *Lögberg* (founded 1888) and *Heimskringla* (founded 1886), it publishes, amongst other items, news from the various League chapters, articles about events within the community, life histories and reminiscences, Icelandic language lessons and articles from the English language monthly, *News from Iceland*. Though originally written entirely in Icelandic, since the 1970s English has become the dominant language--with an editorial and occasional article providing material for readers to practise their Icelandic. The decline of written Icelandic in the newspaper was criticized by a few people, but it reflects the disappearance of spoken Icelandic in the community.

The last institution to be described, the *Islendingadagurinn*--the Icelandic Festival of Manitoba--has since 1890 been a time of public celebration for West Icelanders. Description and analysis of its history and present form comprise the remainder of this thesis.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, this chapter has outlined the course of Icelandic settlement in Manitoba, describing specific events which have not only shaped the historic context of the community today, but as well form underlying perceptions that Icelanders hold of themselves. The early hardships overcome with hard work and intelligence, the

debates which either threatened the existence of the community or enlivened its discourse, and the various organizations and publications which promote the continued awareness of heritage against the threat of disappearance are all examples of how Icelanders represent themselves to themselves and others.

## Chapter Two

### Approaches to Ethnicity

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will examine how particular models of ethnic change are structured, and how these models are reflected in West Icelandic understanding of their ethnicity. This is not intended as an exhaustive survey of the literature on models of ethnic change, nor is it representative of anthropological approaches to social change in general. Rather, these models are presented here, in part to structure the argument, but primarily because a fear of the disappearance of Icelandic culture in Canada expressed by many of the Icelanders with whom I talked is premised on a conceptualization of ethnicity similar to these models. Thus, in order to reveal the actual dynamics of the West Icelandic community, one must first dismantle those particular forms of understanding which presuppose particular patterns and outcomes of ethnic change.

West Icelandic notions of ethnic identity (as in the case of most, if not all, North American ethnic groups) and sociological models of ethnicity are both derived from

the same European or Western understanding of what constitutes a cultural group. That is, ethnicity is seen as consisting of particular types of distinctive traits, behaviours and practices: language and religion, biological origins and physical characteristics are the major variables in ethnic categorization. This is not the only way to perceive ethnicity (as will be discussed below); however, it is the framework most frequently encountered in North American ethnic studies.

Following this, I will suggest an alternate approach to ethnicity and ethnic group change, one based on a more processual notion of the formulation of the ethnic self: one that sees ethnicity as an ideological construct imbedded in particular social actions and historical structures. This approach to analysis of the ethnic group allows for a clearer grasp of particular phenomena without reification of the cultural unit. As well, it acknowledges the possibility of various understandings of identity within the group, which in turn allows for change to be considered as not necessarily a threat to the continued existence of the community.

#### *Models of Ethnicity and Ethnic Group Change*

Assimilationism is the predominant paradigm informing much of the sociological literature on ethnicity, particularly as it applies to the North American context.

Even in those frameworks which posit a pluralist or multi-culturalist viewpoint, there is an implicit reference to assimilation as the ground against which they are structured. Authors such as Postiglione (1983) and Palmer (1977) have described how pre-World War II studies of ethnic groups contained strong ideological biases premised on an ideal of Anglo-conformity. Despite successful efforts to rid analyses of such ethnocentrism, and thereby make them less subservient to the political motivations of the day, vestiges of a social ideal or normative state still underlie much of the current work.

This is *not* a statement implying that current researchers are somehow misguided, or are harbouring illicit, implicit prejudices against those they study. Rather, I see such a situation as arising from the nature of the paradigms being used. By focussing on the structural aspects of ethnicity, its social institutions and its boundary-maintenance mechanisms, there is a tendency to reify the ethnic group. This is exacerbated when ethnicity is seen as a collection of linguistic, religious or politico-economic attributes or characteristics. Reification freezes the ethnic group in time, and posits that there is a specific and unchanging "way of being" that constitutes the particular ethnic group. Further, posing the question of ethnic identity in

terms of persistence or assimilation objectifies these traits and fails to examine those processes which determine their use as ethnic markers.

It is not just a problem stemming from reification, but as well from an attitude that correlates, or reduces, ideational aspects of ethnicity directly to material determinants, and that sees techno-economic homogeneity between the ethnic group and the macro-society as leading necessarily to the adaptation by the ethnic group of similar behaviours or attitudes. Thus, whereas the larger social group is able to undergo change yet still remain somehow distinct and autonomous, the ethnic group is allowed no such privilege, without being seen as losing that which makes it "authentic."

Assimilation is a problem of analysis only when that analysis takes into account neither the dynamics of human action, nor its historical context. Seeing ethnic identity as arising out of group interaction, shaping rather than determined by a psychological state or institutional structure, allows change to become a part of social life, rather than seen as a loss of culture. I will elaborate upon this formulation later in this chapter, but first I will discuss its implications for the study of ethnic groups.



Hansen's (1937) third generation model was one of the earliest models used for understanding ethnic group behaviour in North America. His notion of the rejection of ethnic culture by the children of immigrants and the subsequent return of *their* children to an acceptance and appreciation of their past while simultaneously being assimilated into the larger society, has had considerable impact on later paradigms of ethnicity. It suffers, however, from being too general in its outline, and from its correlating of stages of development to specific generations. It is likely that what Hansen described was more likely associated with particular historical contexts (i.e., the Depression and World War II) than with universal stages. The following two models seek to expand upon Hansen's work by refining the process of change into more specific stages--which are seen in social psychological terms--while incorporating into them the effects of the ghettoization process many immigrant groups encountered.

Glaser (1958) proposes a model of assimilation or ethnic change that is applicable at either the individual or group level which does not necessarily correspond to specific generations. It constitutes a series of stages to be viewed as a continuum along which movement can be bi-directional. Initial *segregation* of the immigrant, suggests Glaser, is the result of a primary reliance upon

other members for security and leads to ethnocentrism and a maintenance of identity even when potentially deleterious to the individual. *Marginality* occurs next when the individual has gained minimal facility in language and/or social behaviour, a stage characterised by uncertainty and inconsistent relations with the macrosociety. There is a tendency to match behaviour to the social situation, in order to be accepted in both the ethnic group and the macrosociety.

The ethnic person next acts to disassociate or *desegregate* himself from his ethnic group, while seeking acceptance in the larger society. This generally occurs after the individual has lost those stigmatizing characteristics which can prohibit the assimilation process. Often, this stage will be characterised by self-hate and prejudice against one's own ethnic group. Eventually the final stage of *assimilation* is reached, when one does not categorize others according to ascribed features of ethnicity but rather is more likely to react to others on the basis of their individual qualities. This latter stage is more ideal than typical, since all groups fall short of this level of integration.

Obviously, there are problems with this model: the second and final stages could be interpreted in interactionist terms as factors of social distance (cf.

Berger and Luckmann 1966) rather than as differing temporal stages. However, the model does consider the ethnic individual in relation to the out-group, as a conscious actor negotiating changes when confronted by attitudes of acceptance or rejection. The notion of the ethnic individual as "stigmatized" fits with Goffman's (1963) description of identity as created through the management of information about one's self, and through the social control of images of desirable and undesirable attributes.

The third and more complex model of ethnic change is given by Greeley (1971). The first phase is an immediate period of *culture shock*, when the immigrant must deal with the immediate needs of survival. Next comes *organization and emerging self-consciousness*, when leaders emerge in a newly formed ethnic group, language of the macrosociety is learned, and there is upward social and economic mobility. *Assimilation of the elite* follows: the elites first, because it is they who have engaged in the most interaction with the new society, providing more opportunities for success. During this phase the struggle to win acceptance takes place, when the leaders help to raise the fortunes of other group members, allowing them the opportunity to gain entry into the lower middle class.

In the fourth phase of *militancy*, the ethnic group is fully middle class, and now begins to establish its own

legitimacy through creation of organizations and institutions modeled after those of the larger society. Through this exercising of newly-won power, the ethnic group will likely enter into conflict with other proximate ethnic groups competing for the same resources. *Self-hatred and anti-militancy* occur as the more assimilated members of the group come to reject the stridency of the others. The former enter into a period of alienation, distancing themselves from the actions of the militants in order to be more acceptable to the macrosociety. But this criticism and demand for social change is juxtaposed to continuing ties with the ethnic culture. This leads ultimately to a final period of *emerging adjustment* when the ethnic individual is appreciative of his own ethnicity while remaining an active participant in mainstream society.

Greeley's model provides an outline of the internal dynamics of ethnic group change, without any ultimate end of assimilation. Rather than use this model as a temporal sequence, the individual stages can be seen as reflective of different manifestations of social action. That is, the individual or group could be seen to be engaged in more than one stage at a time, and which stage is expressed is dependent upon the situation. Further, seeing these stages as existing simultaneously acknowledges

that the ethnic group is not an indivisible whole. The model's limitations, and the limitations of others like it, stem from its basis in the abstraction of repeated patterns from historical events, and is thus descriptive rather than explanatory. The sequence it presents does have heuristic possibilities in certain circumstances, but this cannot be known *a priori*. The notion of militancy, for example, is going to be variable from group to group, depending on how political and social rights are recognized in the larger society, and the degree of access to economic opportunity. What the model fails to provide is a sense of what motivates particular sorts of actions, except generally in terms of intergroup relations. What it requires is a contextualization in specific socio-economic practices, since ethnicity itself is a result rather than a cause of historical processes.

#### *Alternative Approach to Ethnicity*

The previous models have been presented in detail in order to juxtapose them to the following discussion of an alternative approach to ethnicity. What follows is intended to be an outline of a possible reformulation, and is reliant upon contemporary anthropological theory being developed in other contexts.

In Chapter One a reference was made to how the history of the West Icelanders should be read; this point

is relevant as well to the interpretation of ethnicity in general. Ethnicity is created in time, first as the cumulative product of interactions between social forces and historical circumstances, and second as a conceptual field on which historical events (or material and non-material representations of them) are selected, interpreted, and negotiated in group interaction, to become the symbolic mediators of ethnic identity. Roughly, this could be seen as a distinction between material circumstances and ideology, but care must be taken so as not to reify this distinction. That is, the interaction between the two levels is continuous and mutually influencing, since historical action in material terms is in part motivated by ideological constructions. The advantage of separating them in analysis, however, is to show that one level is not reducible to the other, and in particular that ideology is not directly determined by material forces.

My operational definition of ethnicity is a subjective one (following the criteria of Isajiw 1974). I agree with Isajiw that ethnicity is neither a temporary phenomenon nor is its persistence reliant on the perpetuation of traditional culture. I also agree with Barth, that "ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves, and thus have the

characteristic of organizing interaction between people" (1969: 10). As well, I would emphasize, as would Barth, that it is the interaction which also acts to form the ethnic group.

The apparently paradoxical nature of the statement--that structure creates action which creates structure--has, justifiably or not, been made a problem of human inquiry for centuries. Abrams (1982) presents an approach to sociological analysis which attempts to dissolve this paradox by viewing the relationship between structure and action, termed *structuration*, as a historical process. Abrams suggests that to resolve this dilemma of structure and action "...is to insist on the need to conceive of that dilemma historically: to insist on the ways in which and the extent to which the relationship of action and structure is to be understood as a matter of process in time" (ibid.: xv).

Introducing the dimension of time to the study of the processes of ethnic identification may help us clarify the interaction amongst historical events, social structures and group action. That is, the passage of time does not bring an inevitable merging of the ethnic group into the larger society. Social structures are created historically, through human agency, in reaction to particular situations and to fulfil specific functions.

They can persist or change, depending on how members of the ethnic group continue to interpret their value or use.

Intra-ethnic group action is one type of social interaction, which is contextualized in a shared history, and uses shared knowledge as symbols to conceptualize ethnic identity.

I am not arguing that shared symbolic knowledge in and of itself can bind any group without some underlying motivations and structures, but these latter do not pre-exist, or determine, symbolization. They do, however, provide the necessary context and continuity at certain levels of experience in which symbolically-mediated social action can occur. As previously stated: in an historical, or temporally organized analysis, structure and action resolve themselves as aspects of the same process. Survival of the ethnic group is always contingent on historical circumstance and the possibilities inherent within ideology.

The need to avoid giving primacy to either ideology or material conditions raises the question of where analysis should begin, and this will be addressed in the final section of this chapter. Where it should *not* begin is either with the presumption of the existence of the group, or with the description of individually-possessed traits. The former approach renders problematic the



existence of boundaries around the ethnic group. This can lead to complications especially in North America where ethnic groups are dispersed to a greater or lesser extent throughout the larger society and manifest many continuities with that society which do not necessarily undermine the persistence of ethnicity. The latter approach, beginning with the individual, creates a related problem by assuming possession of traits and dispositions without accounting for how they are achieved, or how they come to represent ethnic identity. In both cases, emphasis is placed on distinctive features rather than on the forces which shape ethnicity, thereby rendering change as a rupture in the definition of the ethnic group.

At this point I will describe how West Icelanders perceive their identity, although further comments about ethnicity and how it is best understood will be made in the discussion regarding the Festival.

#### *Icelandic Descriptions of Ethnic Identity*

What follows is an outline of how West Icelanders describe themselves. It must be remembered however that this is a general description, and it is not my intention to claim that all Icelanders would consider it fully accurate. That is, there are people within the community who would argue that though the description fits how Icelanders *like* to see themselves, it is not a fully

accurate portrayal of who they *actually* are. For instance, the fictional writings of Arnason (1980; 1982) and Valgardson (1975) present an alternate image of Icelanders and Interlake life which have in the past caused either controversy or discomfort for some people in the community. There are those who consider that these writers do not uphold the successful or positive image of West Icelanders, which is how, as will be seen in Chapter Four, some in the community wish to be perceived. But their writings are not necessarily intended as criticism or cynicism, and instead underline an important point: there are various ways in which members of the community perceive their ethnicity, and it may not always agree with what can be termed the dominant ideology. Nonetheless the characteristics described below do represent the primary categories around which issues and symbols of identity are formed. Such a circumstance of a variety of "signifieds" behind a limited set of "signifiers" is not unusual. As Nagata (1979) argues, the use of the descriptive category "ethnic group" implies a sense of group solidarity and uniformity that in fact rarely occurs. That people define themselves as Icelanders does not necessarily entail agreement on what Icelandicness is.

There is a tendency amongst Icelanders to describe what is Icelandic in terms of attitudes or dispositions.

This is not unusual in the case of a group which has very few traditional practices by which to define itself. Traditional crafts are non-existent, attempts at reviving traditional dance have relied heavily on borrowings from other Scandinavian groups, and knowledge of Icelandic folksongs is waning with time.

What the Icelanders did bring to Canada, and continue to maintain here, is knowledge of and appreciation for their literary heritage manifest in the Eddas and Sagas. It would be impossible at this time to do more than suggest the effects this heroic literature has had on West Icelandic self-perception. West Icelanders were no mere peasants barely surviving in an inhospitable land (the comparison with neighbouring Ukrainians was sometimes implicit in this self-characterization): Icelanders were as well great poets and authors. Universal literacy in Iceland dates back to the 18th century, and currently Iceland publishes the greatest number of books per capita per year in the world. West Icelanders believe that the appreciation of literature and of learning is as well characteristic of themselves. They point to their writers, the Icelandic Department at the University of Manitoba and the number of Icelanders who seek higher education as examples of this. Further, they state that story telling is still a valued tradition within the community, and the

art of relating a good anecdote can become a competitive enterprise. A symbol of Icelandic achievement in this regard is the poet Stephan G. Stephansson, who homesteaded in Alberta and wrote volumes of poetry which have gained considerable recognition in Iceland. Though not as many West Icelanders seem to read the sagas today, they refer with pride to the tradition of reading aloud Icelandic stories that was practised in the homesteads. They refer as well to how Lord Dufferin, Governor-General of Canada during the 1870s and active supporter of the Icelanders in Canada, commented during a tour of New Iceland on the presence of a small library in even the poorest homes of the colony. One informant told me that it wasn't so much reading the sagas, but an awareness of what they represented to being an Icelander that was important.

Dinesen described the Icelanders of saga times as "attitudinizers" characterized by a "ravenous ambition to distinguish themselves before all others and at any cost to immortalize themselves through a word or gesture" (1960: 10). This is not far from descriptions I heard West Icelanders make of themselves. What is of note here, however, is how Icelandicness is not something visual or objectified, but is something experienced. A few informants suggested to me that it was this perception of Icelandicness as something internal and fixed that allowed

the first settlers to assimilate quickly upon arrival in Manitoba without fear of losing a sense of who they were.

West Icelanders see certain traits of their own as being continuous with those of native Icelanders. These in turn are perceived to have derived from both the environment of the island, and the traditions of the saga literature. Matthiasson (1979) elaborates on the environmental theme, how the dualism represented by volcanoes and glaciers is echoed in the "typically" Icelandic tendency to polarize over specific issues. The debate over a suitable pastor and the battle between the editors of the two newspapers (described in Chapter One) are just two better known incidents within the community. This tendency in itself, however, is seen to contrast with the theme of *samvinna* ("working together") which forms the basis for cooperation amongst kin and larger groups.

The environment has also determined, in their eyes, an Icelandic personality which is proud, stubborn, hardworking and highly insular and inward-looking. Because survival in pre-twentieth century Iceland was marginal and uncertain--susceptible as it was to climactic fluctuations and economic exploitation--necessity favoured the individual who recognized and overcame the hardships of survival. This concept of survival against insurmountable odds underlies the pride that present-day West Icelanders

feel for their pioneering forefathers. More than one informant told me that the attitude held by Icelanders who remained in Iceland towards those who emigrated was one of disdain for those who deserted the country out of weakness. It was not until improved communications with Iceland after World War II that Icelanders softened their opinion of the emigrants when confronted with knowledge of the hardships they faced when homesteading in the Canadian Prairies.

Another aspect of the economically-determined need to cooperate is found in contemporary attitudes toward family relations. West Icelanders consider family loyalties extremely important, and believe that it is the responsibility of the family to care for all its members. Particularly in rural areas where extended families are still closely associated, it is considered preferable to care for family members who suffer any kind of problem rather than utilize government social services. As well, Icelanders prefer to depend on their own resources than on government assistance. It is frequently recounted how, when Lake Winnipeg fishing was discontinued between 1970 and 1972 due to mercury pollution, more than 90% of the Icelanders refused welfare and instead found employment elsewhere.

*Perceptions of Change in Identity*

Another key point which was reiterated in many conversations, and is a consistent theme in articles written for the newspaper and the *Icelandic-Canadian*, is the idea that whatever distinguishes Icelanders in North America is on the verge of being lost. It is in this context that the connection between the sociological models and West Icelandic self-perception becomes apparent. I was told that the "real" Icelandic culture was to be found in Betel (the Icelandic old age home in Gimli), and on the farms in the Interlake, away from dominating urban influences. What was authentically Icelandic was always disappearing as the older people died. A corollary of this attitude is expressed in a generational difference which, though not pronounced, is still evident in certain circumstances. There is a feeling amongst some older members of the various organizations that they must maintain the established practices which have come to represent Icelandic authenticity, and which they fear younger members do not sufficiently respect and will thereby change. Conflict arises between, on the one hand a perception of overly conservative attitudes, and on the other hand, a too willing desire to change that which has proved to have meaning.

There is another sense in which West Icelanders expressed a sense of the apparent inevitable processes of

ethnic change. Frequently, people would tell me to which generation they belonged as a form of self-interpretation. For example, some individuals who had taken courses at the University in Icelandic literature during the 1970s and had at that time developed an interest in their heritage, saw this reclamation of the past as being related to their status as third generation immigrants. In their experience, knowledge of West Icelandic history and language had not been fostered at home, due to a parental desire to be good Canadians (i.e., not visibly ethnic). This was considered a typical pattern, even when these same people had knowledge of other families where there had been no corresponding loss of culture in the second generation. Further to this, the decline in interest in Icelandic culture, and its resurgence in the early 1970s (a pattern recognized as being consistent with the experience of other ethnic groups) was linked to the generational model, whereby it was seen to reflect the differing preoccupations of the second generation and the personal rediscoveries of the third.

#### *The Festival and Ethnicity*

I will now return to the elaboration of the framework for analysis of ethnicity although further descriptions of West Icelandic self-perception will arise in later chapters, as relevant.



It is necessary to choose an appropriate *entrée* into the ethnic group which can best be seen to represent or express the various aspects of ethnicity. Ethnic identification is an example of structuration: it is an ongoing process of the production and reproduction of cultural knowledge within a historical context. For Abrams, it is events--"...our principal points of access to the structuring of social action in time" (1982: 191)-- which provide a suitable focus. In this sense, the Icelandic Festival can act in analysis as such an *entrée*.

Focus on cultural celebrations, festivals and rituals has frequently provided anthropologists with rich and complex texts through which to view social groups. Manning (1983) outlines four different themes which can inform our analysis of these texts. First, celebrations play a role in socio-political processes; they are "symbolic battlefields for waging competitive struggles for power, prestige and material objectives" (7). Second, celebration acts as a socio-cultural text, that "reflexively depicts, interprets and informs its social context" (6). Third, through its embrace of both ritual and play celebration expresses an ambiguity which "affects both its textual portrayal of society and its active role in the social process" (7). Play in celebration is seen to invert those aspects of ritual which reaffirm the

established social order, through its tendency toward licentious behaviour. And fourth, celebration maintains a "complex relationship to modernity and hierarchy" (ibid.). As Manning argues, community celebrations have taken on a particular role in the transition from producer to consumer capitalism, wherein

[they] have superceded traditional social relations as a basis of shared values and sensitivities. Cultural productions have become the generative basis of myths, lifestyles and even worldviews. Instead of social formations giving rise to symbolic expressions...it is now symbols that are creating social groups. (6)

These four themes underlie the analysis of the Festival presented in Chapters Four and Five. The *Islendingadagurinn* is the one time of year in which West Icelanders are able to gather together and become aware of themselves as a whole, and to enact the social dramas which in turn reaffirm and reinterpret cultural knowledge. The Festival functions as a major arena for the expression, production, reproduction and transformation of Icelandic ethnic identity. It is both a social institution and a ritual enactment of group awareness. Focussing on how individuals interpret and improvise action using the shared symbolic resources of the ethnic group during the Festival is a way to see the processes of identity change and continuity. It is the use of both public and private symbols, and the subtle changes that this use brings about,

that is significant to an understanding of the dynamics of ethnicity.

Further, through the use of symbols, celebration expresses ethnicity as part invention, and part retention of past practices and beliefs. As discussed earlier, ethnicity is a continuous dialogue between past and present. It is in this context of reference to the past that much invention of ethnic identity occurs. Hobsbawm refers to this process as *inventing tradition*: "...essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition" (1983: 4). By using "ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes" (ibid.: 6), a group is able to establish or symbolize social cohesion. Invented traditions are likely to occur "when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys the social patterns for which 'old' traditions had been designed...."(ibid.: 4).

These created traditions are more likely to be legitimized through negotiation rather than through force in the case of an ethnic group. They are subject to success or failure, because they rely on their being interpreted within the realm of already legitimated cultural symbols, and must not appear to be too new or radical within this context of cultural conservatism.

Frequently, these creations may be connected to structural changes, and thus can serve as articulators of ethnic group change. That is, they are conscious or unconscious responses to changing circumstances within the community which may have prompted changes of interpretation of cultural symbols.

### *Conclusion*

In summary, I have outlined the theoretical argument of the thesis. Assimilationist-premised (and related) models for describing ethnicity in North America were critiqued on the basis of their conceptualization of the cultural group. The definition of ethnic culture using particular attributes or characteristics has led to the reification of the group in analysis, and has rendered problematic the processes of ethnic change. Further, these models have shaped the West Icelanders' understanding of their identity as something existing with greater authenticity in the past, to the extent that they now fear the disappearance of their culture.

An alternative approach to explaining the processes of ethnicity and ethnic change was proposed which does not objectify meaning, but rather sees its creation as an act of continual production, reproduction and transformation in the course of daily life. It was then proposed that analysis of the annual Icelandic Festival would provide a

context for discussion of the various themes of the West  
Icelandic community.

## Chapter Three

### The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba

#### *Introduction*

There is no one account of the Festival--or, for that matter, of any social event--which can be considered final and complete on its own. People bring to the Festival a rich complex of associations and anticipations which contextualize and shape their experience of it. The anthropologist is no different in this regard: there is an interplay of the familiar and the unique which is particularly noticeable when she shares with the group being studied a common social--in this case, Canadian--background. There are patterns of sentiments and practices attached to the experience of community celebrations and parades, of holiday weekends at the lake, and of "partying" with family and friends that are well-established in Canadian society. They all represent times of release from the everyday routines of work and school, when people can relax into their "real" identities, escaping daily pressures and responsibilities, and "let off steam."

This shared sensibility in regard to such events allowed me to recognize the interplay of the familiar

elements of a small town celebration and the less familiar particularities of the West Icelandic community, and further, to interpret my experiences and perceptions as somewhat akin to that of any West Icelander.

In my two visits to the Festival, I employed alternate approaches toward attendance at the various events. In 1985, as ethnographer/tourist, it was my aim to attend virtually all events, even when it entailed leaving one halfway through in order to walk rapidly across town to attend another. The Gimli Kinsmen's Casino, and the drag races held at the old air base west of Gimli, were the only events I missed in their entirety, the latter because of its lack of association with the Festival proper, and the former because of budgetary restraints. As well, I served on work details for evening dances, and during the 1986 Festival, helped serve at one pancake breakfast.

This approach--attending everything--is not one that a local or a cottager would take (my use of the term "tourist" in the previous paragraph was not just a comment on the position of the ethnographer in her setting. It was also a description of my behaviour in the eyes of the West Icelanders). One drawback made it less desirable to repeat: serving on the clean-up committee for each evening's dance and rising early to attend the pancake breakfasts considerably reduced my sleeping time and gave

my Icelandic companions cause for derisive commentary on the intelligence of anthropologists. However, as I discovered the following year, "working" both the dances and the pancake breakfasts is a competitive ordeal in which some younger committee members participate, testing each other's abilities to fulfill commitments despite exhaustion or hangover. Part of the Festival, especially for younger participants, is to "party hard," to spend the maximum amount of time having fun, and the minimum time sleeping. This is relevant to understanding the Festival, and will be discussed in further detail later in the text.

Consequent to these considerations, in 1986 I followed more closely how my hosts attended the Festival: examining the programme booklet to select events, and spending time either making preparations in conjunction with the committees on which my friends served, sitting in the house conversing with visitors, or visiting other cottages.

In both years I allowed my experience of the Festival to be shaped by the people with whom I associated the most. Typically they were between twenty-five and thirty-five years of age, and were either involved with, or were friends of those involved with the Festival at the Committee or Members-at-Large level. There is no doubt that to a certain extent the following description is



influenced by their perspective, and this should be kept in mind by the reader.

Maps of Gimli and of the park where most of the Festival takes place are found in Appendix I. The schedule of Festival events is given in Appendix II.

*The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba*

I arrived in Gimli from Winnipeg on the Thursday prior to the Festival. It is a major cottage and tourist centre on Lake Winnipeg, and the summer months bring a considerable increase in population and traffic to the town. In 1981, the population of Gimli was 1,550 (a drop of 495 since 1971), and though there are no official statistics incorporating cottagers, a few informants placed the summertime population at about 4,000. In 1985, it was estimated that the attendance at the Festival was about 10,000, and this despite generally changeable, humid and overcast weather. In 1986, attendance was thought to be less, though no specific number was given to me. Since there is no gate regulating admission to the park during the Festival, there are no exact methods for determining attendance. Those who made estimates cited, when asked, such criteria as prior experience, the distance needed to travel away from the park to find an available parking spot, or the size of the crowd at the Monday afternoon programme as indicative of attendance. Overall, the

greatest attendance ever achieved at the Festival was during the 1975 centennial celebration of the settlement of New Iceland, when there were approximately 40,000 people in the town, including about 2,000 from Iceland.

Though preparations in the park and at the Festival headquarters by the harbour were beginning the night I arrived, the first Festival event of any sort occurs Friday evening, when the final meeting of the committees is held. At this time, the President confirms that all final preparations are completed, and enables organizers to seek volunteers for assisting at various events. The meeting usually lasts about an hour, and is a way of ensuring that everyone working for the Festival has arrived in town (a large number of those involved in the production of the Festival reside in Winnipeg, and have cottages in Gimli).

On Saturday the Festival officially begins. On this day only there are booths lining Centre Street between First Avenue and the dock. The Festival earns part of its income from renting these concessions, primarily to merchants not connected with the Icelandic community who make their living by visiting local fairs. Thus most of the merchandise for sale at these booths is not linked to any particular Icelandic cultural symbology, but rather is comprised of knickknacks and articles which can be described as kitsch. Situating the booths adjacent to

downtown rather than in the park as they are on Sunday and Monday prevents crowds from being drawn away from the downtown merchants. As well, it is where cottagers especially are likely to be, shopping for their weekend supplies.

There were booths selling dried flower arrangements, ceramic figurines, jewelry, raffle tickets, baked goods (including traditional Icelandic desserts), and souvenirs for children such as foil balloons illustrated with cartoon characters. The weather on this particular Saturday was cold and wet, and few people were strolling about the streets. Those people that were, stopped at the different tables, wandered to the dock to watch the boat races, or went into the adjacent Gimli Historical Museum. They also walked along Centre Street and First Avenue which is the commercial area. For tourists, the main attraction amongst the stores is Tergesen's Dry Goods, located at the corner of First Avenue and Centre Street, which specializes in Icelandic woollens, books and souvenirs of Gimli and Iceland.

I sat for a time beside a table laden with a local historical and genealogical text being sold by its West Icelandic author. He sat behind the table, answering questions posed by interested people. At one point a woman, perhaps in her late twenties, began to enquire into

her family's name, to learn if it was in the book. The author, without recourse to the text, was able to recall the family lineage of the woman, and between them they discussed connections until they discovered that they were "almost cousins." At the next table, a born-in-Iceland merchant now residing in Winnipeg was selling *harðfiskur* (Icelandic dried fish; see below) which he sells year-round in the city. He complained of how little sleep he had got the night before, due to a raucous late-night party in his neighbourhood.

This morning, as every morning of the Festival, a pancake breakfast was held adjacent to the Festival headquarters, located at the harbour. Men cooked pancakes and sausages over propane-fuelled outdoor griddles while the women served the food along with coffee and orange drink. Since it is held outdoors, weather conditions influence the attendance. The ticket seller told me that this year (1985) sales were down from the previous summer.

In the morning, boardsailing and Manitoba Sailing Association races began at the north beach. Though these events, as well as the road races held on Sunday morning, take place under the auspices of the Festival, they are organized by independent sporting associations based in Winnipeg. One informant told me that the races had been taking place in Gimli since prior to the switch to a three-

day Festival in 1969. The crowds that were attracted to Gimli by the races were one impetus to expand the Festival and incorporate them within its structure. The races attract people from outside the province as well, and thus people come to Gimli who would not know of or otherwise attend the Festival. For those I talked to, the Festival was a backdrop to their own reasons for being there, a distraction from time primarily spent at the beach. That is, their interest was in the races and the attendant socializing and drinking amongst their associates. They tended to stay near the beach, and were little interested in attending Festival events which would take them away from that area. The exceptions to this were the dances held Saturday and Sunday in the Gimli Park Pavilion, where the attraction was the entertainment and the opportunity to buy alcoholic beverages.

During the morning I was told to look forward to the arrival of *harðfiskur*, which was to go on sale at a booth by the dock at noon. Each year, packages of Icelandic dried fish are delivered on the Icelandair charter flight, and is eagerly feasted upon by many West Icelanders. Though it can be purchased year-round in Winnipeg, most people I talked with saw the Festival as the only time they were able to purchase and consume this food. For non-Icelanders, the potent smell of *harðfiskur*

represents a culinary boundary not liable to be crossed without persuasion, though once tasted (in the Icelandic manner, with butter) it proves to be surprisingly palatable. I overheard people remarking upon the odour of *harðfiskur*, and it was possible to distinguish tourist from Icelander by the degree of enthusiasm expressed. When I inquired into the existence of a fish-drying tradition in Manitoba, my informants reflected with sadness upon the gradual decline and eventual disappearance of the practice in the region. No longer were outdoor drying racks visible when driving past Icelandic farms in the Interlake. However, there still is practised locally another Icelandic tradition: during the summer months, roadside signs adjacent to farmhouses advertise the sale of smoked fish (smoked Winnipeg goldeye and pickerel are considered to be West Icelandic foods, though I was informed by a non-Icelander that their commercial production is now dominated by Manitoban native groups).

Early Saturday afternoon, the Junior Raft Races took place at the harbour. In 1985 there was only one entry: a contingent of Girl Guides pushed their raft to a buoy and back amidst enthusiastic cheers from onlookers. Following this event was the Whiterock Challenge, in which homebuilt, oar-driven boats, each guided by a team of three men, raced from the north beach to the white rock located

on Willow Point, about two miles to the south of Gimli. The rock marks the location where in 1875 the first Icelanders arrived in New Iceland. There were three entrants in the race this year, and the participants were either locals or cottagers, though not necessarily of Icelandic descent.

During the Whiterock Challenge, the New Iceland Music and Poetry Program began at the high school. Since Festival-organized events are not scheduled for Saturday and Sunday mornings, events with an arts emphasis are run simultaneous to events with more popular appeal (such as the Challenge), making it difficult for anyone to attend both. About forty people were in the audience for the informal programme, considered by the organizer to be a good size for what was a new event at the 1985 Festival. It was created with the intention of adding more Icelandic content to the Festival. The audience was small compared to that of other Festival events, and was primarily composed of friends of participants and older individuals. The programme was a varied assemblage of literary readings by Icelandic writers, folk and classical music, and a skit presented in English and Icelandic.

As the arts programme continued, the Islendingadunk, also known as the Viking Challenge, began at the harbour. Recently introduced to the Festival, it

is, according to the advertising, widely played in Iceland. For this game, a greased pole is extended horizontally from the dock above the water. The large and enthusiastic crowd watched as the two opponents (always male, and always cottagers or locals), faced each other with legs locked around the log, and tried to knock each other into the water with alternating blows of a pillow.

Immediately following the Islendingadunk are held the preliminaries for Fris-nok. These took place in a sheltered area adjacent to the beach, not far from the harbour. Fris-nok involves two teams of two people each. Each team stands behind one of two posts three and a half feet high situated about thirty feet apart, and on top of each post is an empty beer bottle. The object of the game is to knock the opposing team's bottle off the post with the toss of a Frisbee. Men and women participated equally, and since it is a game requiring no prior preparation (unlike the Whiterock Challenge), nor a soaking in the lake (unlike the Islendingadunk), some tourists (including the anthropologist) also competed. It does not attract a large crowd, perhaps because of its less obvious location, and most people playing and watching looked to be in their twenties and thirties.

Many of the activities and games taking place during the Festival are familiar to North Americans, and



are not representative of anything peculiarly Icelandic. The same could be said for Fris-nok since it is a variant of many of the widespread games played using Frisbees. There is a slight difference, however, and that is that Fris-nok is patented by a West Icelander residing in Gimli. When I asked my companions if this meant to them that the game was therefore Icelandic, they said no. Who owned the patent, or who played the game was irrelevant to determining Icelandicness: rather, the patentee was considered simply to have shrewdly recognized a business opportunity.

While Fris-nok was being played, the feature film *Gentle Sinners*, based on the book of the same name by West Icelandic writer W.D. Valgardson, was shown at the high school. This was a one-time screening of the 1985 CBC drama set in the Manitoba Interlake.

There were no scheduled events until later that night. At 8 p.m. in the high school auditorium/gymnasium the Celebrity Concert was held. It was recently introduced to the Festival to showcase Icelandic musical talent, and to provide more cultural (in the everyday sense) content to the Festival programme. This year, three siblings of a West Icelandic family, accompanied by two spouses and a child, performed a varied repertoire of classical music. The concert was recorded by the CBC--the large recording

van outside the building and the cables and microphones in the auditorium gave to the concert an aura of importance and significance. The performance was sold out, with perhaps three or four hundred people in attendance (not enough tickets were printed and old ones had to be reused, so that it was impossible before counting receipts to know the exact attendance). Members of the audience were primarily adults, over thirty years of age; many men wore suits and women wore dresses or dress slacks, an unusual formality for the Festival.

The concert started ten minutes late as people moved about the auditorium, greeting and talking with friends and relatives not frequently seen. Many of these people were not frequent classical concert goers, evidenced by the clapping between movements and the taking of photographs during the performance. But the enthusiasm and enjoyment was perceptible. There was a sense of familiarity with the performers, since many people knew and felt close to the family who had lived a few miles outside of Gimli. Afterwards, a reception was held to allow the audience the opportunity to talk with the performers and with each other. Many people stayed to crowd into a small room and have coffee and *vínarterta*--the West Icelandic foods of celebration.

Afterwards I went with some friends to the dance being held at the Gimli Park pavilion. The dance had already started, and all the admission tickets had been sold, but since my companions were dance committee members we were able to slip in free through a rear door. The dances on Saturday and Sunday nights attracted locals, cottagers and tourists ranging in age from the legal drinking limit of eighteen to about thirty. There were more people wishing to attend than the space permitted: both dances were licensed, making them important sources of alcohol when the local bars were filled to capacity. As well, and perhaps more importantly, the dances are the only organized, public events where a party atmosphere reigns. The layout of the pavilion is such that there was constant circulation of people as they moved from where liquor tickets were being sold to where drinks were being served. Benches lined the outer passageway, and people sat, leaned against the dividing walls, or walked through the crowds, everyone engaged in watching, talking and meeting people. Dancing took place in the central area, and on Saturday night people crowded into this area to dance to music played by a disc jockey. In 1985 the Festival hired three or four people with guard dogs to patrol the pavilion and maintain order, the main problem being the handling of the occasional intoxicated person who

refused to leave the premises. In 1986 this practice was eliminated, apparently for economic reasons.

The dance continued until about two o'clock, after which the dance committee remained to clean the pavilion for the next day's activities. For some people, there were still parties to attend after the dance: at cottages, at houses or at nearby camp grounds.

On Sunday morning there was another pancake breakfast at the dock, with a larger turnout than the day previous. After this, I went to the park to watch the end of the road races. Though it was not then raining, the morning was cool and wet. There was a small crowd of about seventy people cheering the competitors as they crossed the finish line. Many in the crowd seemed to be acquainted with them--clapping for particular individuals or calling out their names as they passed. As mentioned previously, these races are staged by groups in Winnipeg, and thus are more likely to attract people associated with the groups rather than locals or cottagers.

The booths which were at the dock on Saturday had been moved to the park. In the morning, the park was quiet: few people wandered past the booths or visited the midway. At one booth people were having their photograph taken dressed in Viking costume. At the north beach a crowd gathered to watch the arrival of "The Great Heritage

Canoe Pageant." This event was part of a project celebrating the 100th anniversary of Canada's national parks, and involved students from St. John's Boys' Schools in a canoe trip down the Saskatchewan River, a historic trade route. A viewing stand was erected on the beach for local government dignitaries, Festival and school officials and the Lieutenant-Governor. Speeches were made, and the canoeists performed an assemblage of song and dance intended to evoke the life of the early French fur traders. Meanwhile, the sailing races continued from the day before.

The weather was getting warmer, though it remained humid and overcast. At the main stage in Gimli Park an ecumenical service was held at noon, attracting about one hundred, mostly older, people who sat in lawn chairs or on the grass. There was little to do but walk around during midday: to look at the booths, go to the museum, or go to the fine arts display at the elementary school. This latter was a display of work by entrants to a juried competition for amateur artists of Icelandic descent. Beside a few paintings of fishing boats, there was little technically or in subject matter to distinguish the art as Icelandic.

For lunch I went to *Amma's* (Icelandic for "grandmother") *Kitchen*, located in the annex attached to the park pavilion. Whereas the outdoor booths served

perogies, hot dogs and steamed corn, here one could purchase Icelandic specialties. An assortment of baked goods--*kleinur* (a small deepfried ball of dough), *pönnukokur* (small, thin crepes sprinkled with sugar), *vínarterta* (the pride of desserts, used as a symbol of Icelandic hospitality: a layered cake flavoured with almond)--and main dishes--*rúllupylsa* (rolled, spiced lamb), and *hangikjöt* (smoked lamb)--were served throughout the day.

At the north end of the park were staged track and field events. Turn-out was sparse, since (according to one informant) sporting events are associated with Monday afternoon, when the "kiddies" races take place. Immediately to the east, the midway was attracting crowds, and the recorded sounds of "It's A Small World After All" played on a chord organ with a "boom-chick" bass drifted from the merry-go-round and across the park. The midway is staged by Wonder Shows, a touring company which packages together rides (ferris wheel, merry-go-round, giant slide, revolving swings) and gaming booths. Ice cream and candy floss were sold here.

In the opposite corner of the park at the main stage, a country and western band composed of West Icelanders from Riverton performed prior to the New Iceland Variety Concert. Most of their songs were traditional

country, but one number they sang in Icelandic, at the beginning of which the audience clapped in recognition. An Icelandic folksong, it was performed in the same country style as the songs from the Grand Ole' Opry. Simultaneous to this performance, a craft programme for children-- "Kidstuff"--was run in the pavilion. This was a new event involving such activities as magic, juggling, face painting, clay modeling and a sing-a-long. It was run by a group from Winnipeg and funded by a provincial government grant.

The variety concert began about two o'clock at the main stage. This event was intended to showcase the musical talents of local, primarily Icelandic, musicians. In contrast to the musicians who performed at the Celebrity Concert, or would perform later on Sunday, these musicians were amateurs who performed locally. The audience which had stretched out on the grass in front of the stage gradually dispersed, however, as rain began to fall, and the concert was ended early. The shower did not last long, and people remained in the park. Walking down the road to the dock, I passed by houses where groups of people were relaxing in back yards, drinking beer and talking. The road alongside the beach was lined with parked cars all weekend, this being where the sailors and windsurfers stayed, and as I walked past here too, people were drinking

pop and beer while watching the races and socializing. Just north of the dock, the horseshoe tourney began at four o'clock. A few people walking past would stop and watch awhile, though this was primarily a quiet and private game for those local men who participated.

At the dock I stopped for a meal of smoked Winnipeg goldeye. A fish fry was held each afternoon of the Festival at dockside. Afterwards, I went to the beer garden that was held this one afternoon. Prior to the Festival, several informants told me of the controversy surrounding the beer garden. Many felt it to be inappropriate to the Festival, and cited the rowdiness it engendered when it had been held in the park at previous Festivals. According to them, the beer garden had been moved to the dockside so that it would be more obscure, though the capacity turnout suggested that as a strategy it had failed. While I was there, an Icelandic men's choir which had been touring the Midwest prior to coming to the Festival returned from a boat tour and congregated at the garden. Beers in hand, they broke into spontaneous song, and soon people were lining the dock to enjoy the impromptu revelry.

At six o'clock the Gimli Folk Concert began at the main stage. Soon after it started it began to rain, forcing the performance into the pavilion, and cancelling



the fireworks scheduled for later that evening. It took some time to move the banks of speakers, but eventually the music began for the hundreds of people who crammed into the building. There were some Icelanders on the programme, but the focus of the concert was not on ethnicity so much as staging a popular performance. Many of the musicians were known to Manitoba audiences through their performances at the Winnipeg Folk Festival.

Because the concert began late, the dance that followed was delayed as well while the stage was disassembled. The ticketholders grew angry while waiting outside in the rain, and dance organizers were nervous about the tensions which were growing. To make matters worse, the dance had been oversold and alcohol allotments were insufficient, causing more complaints. People were reminded of problems that had occurred a few years previous, when a motorcycle gang made an appearance at the Festival. There was an implicit fear of possible violence and disruption of the easy-going atmosphere. To accomodate these problems, the dance ran later into the night, with only minor incidents of drunken behaviour. For those of us on clean-up committee the later hour meant it was approaching dawn before we finished our work. After returning exhausted to the cottage, my hosts and I sat on the porch overlooking the lake, and talked.

Monday morning began with another pancake breakfast, where attendance was the highest for the three days. For the first time I had a sense of the number of people in the town as I looked at the crowds lining the long parade route. It was not unusual for people to arrive in Gimli on Monday morning specifically for the parade and traditional programme, and it was generally conceded that attendance was always highest on this day. The Monday programme represents a continuation of the first incarnation of the Festival (see Chapter Four).

The parade left the hospital parking lot at ten o'clock (see map for parade route). The parade was divided into two parts, each taking about 20-25 minutes to pass by a single point. It began with a pipe band, followed by a series of convertible cars carrying those dignitaries of the Festival who would later sit on the main stage during the traditional programme. These included municipal, provincial and federal politicians, The Icelandic Consul from Winnipeg, the Festival President, the *Fjallkona*, the parade marshall, and visitors who would give the various speeches. At the end of this procession there was towed a replica of a Viking longship which usually was displayed at the museum. There was a short gap separating the preceding section from the presentation by the Shriners. This section is a standardized format which they use in all

their parades, consisting of (among other things) clowns, men on motorcycles and in antique cars, a kazoo band, a drum and fife band, and floats advertising Shriner involvement with community services. There was no display of the Icelandic flag in any of their presentation--only of various Canadian flags.

The next section of the parade was a medley of floats representing Gimli and Manitoba associations and businesses. With the exception of Manitoba Telephone, Manitoba Hydro, a major bank and a credit union, the businesses were all local. These latter included real estate firms, restaurants, a grocery store and a car wash. Associations had a greater representation in the parade. There included cadets and a cadet band, fire trucks, the rescue squad for Lake Winnipeg, Girl Guides, Kiwanis, Order of the Eastern Star, a pipe band, Sons of Scotland, the Lutheran Sunday School, the Icelandic Language Camp, the Gimli hockey team, and a float from a local community celebrating its centennial. The themes varied from humour to community social concern, to the occasional representation of the pioneer past.

The entrants were not necessarily representing Icelandic people and groups, and only occasionally were Icelandic flags displayed. There was one clown dressed as a Viking, who "terrorized" children in the audience, and

the centennial float was from an Icelandic community. Further, in the 1986 parade, an Icelandic family who were celebrating a family reunion, entered a float in the parade (there have been past instances of this practice as well). Overall, though, the parade reflected more the economic and social groups of the area than any explicit Icelandic symbols or themes as would be considered definitive of an ethnic celebration.

The parade travelled the length of the town, making a U-turn in front of Betel for the residents there to view it. The crowds dispersed throughout the town as the parade passed, some following it to the park. For the Shriners and for the dignitaries, there was a luncheon sponsored by the Festival. At noon, the pipe band from the parade performed a concert at the main stage in the park. At 12:30, the family sports began at the north side of the park, and continued throughout the afternoon. There were races for children, set according to age group, followed by wheelbarrow races, a piggy back race, three-legged races, a tug-o-war, and the finals of the Fris-nok competition. Meanwhile, at the main stage, the parade float winners were announced prior to a concert by a Gimli-based vocal quintet and the men's choir from Reykjavík.

The traditional Festival programme began at two

o'clock. The audience filled the grounds in front of the stage, extending along the south and west sides of the pavilion. A second, smaller stage had been erected adjacent to the main stage, its backdrop a painting of three famous landscapes in Iceland. It was to this stage that the *Fjallkona* was led, along with her two maids of honour. The figure of the *Fjallkona* (meaning "Maid of the Mountain") was introduced to the Festival in 1924. She is derived from a nineteenth century Icelandic poem depicting that country as a woman. She is Mother Iceland come to talk to her children in North America. Each year the Festival Board selects a new *Fjallkona* from amongst those women who have worked within the Icelandic community. With her two attendants at each side, she sits on the smaller stage in front of the painted backdrop. The other dignitaries--those who had led the parade--sit on the other stage.

The programme followed essentially the same format as was established at the first Festival in 1890. It began with the singing of *O Canada*, and the Icelandic national anthem, *O Guð Vars Land*. The Festival President made a speech, remarking that the success of the West Icelanders was attested to by the presence of important people on the stage. The *Fjallkona* spoke next, referring to how successfully the first Icelandic settlers were able to

adapt to Canada while maintaining their sense of heritage. In the past, the *Fjallkona's* speech was given all or in part in Icelandic, though this year it was entirely in English.

There was a toast to Canada given in Icelandic by a lawyer from Iceland, who discussed the importance of the fishing industry in Iceland, and the effects that fishing subsidies in other countries such as Canada have on Iceland's ability to compete in world trade. This speech was followed by a musical performance by the artists featured in the Saturday night Celebrity Concert, and then by a toast to Iceland given by a scholar from California. He spoke in Icelandic of the experiences of his family when they settled in Utah during the nineteenth century. Greetings were then given from the Lieutenant-Governor, the Mayor of Gimli, from the President of Iceland (read by the Icelandic Consul of Winnipeg), the local Reeve, and the American Consul. The programme was closed by the singing of *God Save the Queen*, and further choral music by the Reykjavík men's chorus.

The entire programme lasted about two hours. During this time, the audience responded in various ways. Those sitting on benches or in lawn chairs directly in front of the stage were more likely to attend to what transpired on the stage. In contrast, those who stood

around the perimeter were more involved with strolling around and greeting people they knew. These people were as likely to stand with their back to the stage, to move in and out of earshot, or even (more so in 1986 when the weather was hot and sunny) to stretch out on the grass. They would listen to the speeches, but only partially: more important was to be in the park at that time, and perhaps having the opportunity to see old friends and relatives.

The crowds dispersed soon after the speeches. For many cottagers it was time to return to the city. For those who were Board and Committee members of the Festival, as well as invited guests, there was a reception held by the Festival President, at the Festival headquarters by the dock. As one informant put it, it was the time for "people to go home, dress up and behave civilly to one another", in effect, to smoothe over any tensions or hostilities which may have accrued during the weekend. And finally, for the operators of the midway and the booths, it was time to close down operations.

The community sing-song began at 7:30 at the main stage. The audience consisted of many residents of Betel-- this event was an opportunity for older members of the community to share a quieter moment as the Festival wound down. They sang songs in Icelandic which date back to the

first half of the century. Interspersed were songs in English, songs such as "It's a Long Way to Tipperary", "We Ain't Got a Barrel of Money" and "This Land is Your Land"-- all popular songs from the 'twenties and 'thirties.

The family dance followed this in the pavilion. The music was provided by the country and western band from Riverton, and people danced to waltzes, polkas and country dances. There were fewer people than at the earlier dances, and again, they were predominantly older, married people. The dance was not licensed to sell alcohol. The mood which prevailed at the dance, and at the earlier sing-song, was one of relaxation and of familiarity, which in part stemmed from the fact that they were not events which attracted tourists.

#### *Conclusion*

In the following two chapters I will take examples from the Festival and expand upon other experiences in order to analyze certain structures and behaviours which are articulated in the Icelandic community. As a brief summary of the preceding description, however, I will point out certain overall patterns to the Festival's structure. In terms of spatial arrangement, there is, over the three days, a movement from a dispersal of events across the town, to an increasing focus of activities within the park. This is in part dictated by the desire to attract people



downtown when stores are open, and by the availability of facilities within the town.

Another clear pattern, and to a certain extent a deliberate strategy of Festival organizers, is seen in which events attract what audiences. These differences can be distinguished by various criteria, including: age, category of status (i.e., local, cottager, tourist), and by a loose distinction between those interested in "cultural" events as opposed to entertainment.

## Chapter Four

### Political Negotiation of Icelandic Identity: The Festival as Arena

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will discuss the implications of the first and second of Manning's themes as outlined in Chapter Two. That is, the Festival is both an arena where groups and individuals struggle to control the public representation of the West Icelandic community, and a depiction and interpretation of its social context. A brief outline of its history and structure will describe how the Festival has transformed, since its appearance in 1890, in response to changes within the community. Following this will be discussion of some of the debates within the community regarding the Festival, and an analysis of the public face which the Festival symbolizes.

#### *History and Structure of the Festival*

The *Islendingadagurinn* was first celebrated in Winnipeg in 1890. This was not the first Icelandic Festival to take place in North America; that honour belongs to Milwaukee where a celebration was held in 1874. The Winnipeg Festival took place on the same day as the

American one: 2 August. The 1874 Festival commemorated the Millennial celebration held in Iceland on that day, as well as the granting of a new constitution by the Danish King to Iceland (Thor 1983).

The first Winnipeg Festival was a remarkable event in what was at that time a small town. Three thousand Icelanders formed a parade marching through the streets to Victoria Park east of Main Street where they then held speeches and recited poetry expressing support for Iceland's struggle for independence. It was this programme of speeches which formed the basis for the Monday programme of the current Festival.

Icelandic festivals were taking place in many Icelandic communities in western North America and particularly in other regions of Manitoba by the end of the nineteenth century. Not long after the beginning of the Winnipeg Festival, a debate arose between the two newspapers as to the appropriate date and name for the Festival. Each side promoted its interests, with the beginning of August eventually confirmed as the appropriate time.

Though the early impetus for the Festival was in part to provide a sense of unity with Iceland and in part an opportunity for the early immigrants to experience a sense of group solidarity, this content gradually began to

change as a new generation took over who were aware that they were more a part of Canadian society. The focus in the 1920s and 30s was more on the values of their parents-- expressed through poetry in terms of love for the land (Thor, personal communication). As mentioned previously, the *Fjallkona* was introduced to the Festival in 1924, and this can be seen as a move to idealize or symbolize the positive qualities of Iceland.

By the 1930s, the Festival was having logistical problems in Winnipeg regarding its location. As well, it was thought that the Winnipeg Festival had run its course, and it was decided in 1933 to amalgamate it with the one held in Gimli. Cottages had begun to be built in Gimli in the previous decade, and more Winnipeg people were being attracted to the lakeside for recreational purposes. Gradually, other festivals in Manitoba and elsewhere died out or merged with the one in Gimli.

Beside the speeches, various sporting events, originally held exclusively for Icelanders, have always been an integral part of the Festival. Eventually, a programme was established of a parade, sporting competitions, speeches and an evening singsong and dance that is now defined as being traditional. Until 1969, when the Festival was expanded to a three day event, there was little change in this format. Informants said that prior

to 1969, attendance at the Festival was gradually declining.

With the change to the three day format there was also a change in the structure of the Festival Committee, necessitated by the greater complexity of the event being staged. All members serve on a voluntary basis. At the top is the President who is appointed for a maximum of two years. He (the position has in the past always been held by a male) is assisted by two Vice-Presidents. The Presidents work with a Board of Directors, which consists of ten voting members and other non-voting members. As well, there is the Althing on which only past presidents serve and from which two people are appointed to the Board every other year. The final component is the Members-at-Large who form a large group of workers for the Festival. It is from this group and the Board that chairpersons for the various sub-committees are selected to organize different activities. Meetings of the Festival Committee as a whole are alternated with meetings held exclusively for Board members and the President. These meetings are held throughout the year, either in Gimli or in Winnipeg. The financial stability of the Festival is not assured, despite these reorganizations, and currently money is being raised to help stage the Festival Centennial Celebration in 1989.

Because the economic basis of the Festival is not firm, the Board tends to be conservative in what it includes in the programme. The board structure does not allow for one person to radically alter the given format, since the President serves only two years at a time, and needs to work within a democratic format where decisions are usually made by consensus. And since many of the Board members are businessmen and professionals, and are members of various business associations, there is already an accepted format within which they work. It is unlikely, however, that the President would ever wish to enact sweeping changes, for two reasons. First, if he has moved up the hierarchy to that position, then it is unlikely he is motivated by "revolutionary" feelings. He has accepted the structure within which he must work. Second, limited funds and a mandate of continuance prevent risk-taking. Moreover, since the President will continue on in the community, the likelihood of wishing to create scandal are minimal. The model for the presidency is to work hard, organize well and ensure that the Festival proceeds smoothly. Though the President may look for innovations, this is not a priority.

The Festival is also an institution which mirrors the hierarchical structures of a business where, ideally, community members can climb, by virtue of their

achievement, to a measure of respectability. Members listed as "Members-at-Large" are between about 20 and 30 years of age. They are involved with much of the physical labour of running the Festival: policing the dances, selling beer at the receptions or overseeing the track and field events. Much of this level of organization is performed at the last minute. Recruitment of volunteers is done hastily, through networks of friends and acquaintances. This level is considered by these participants as a stepping stone to movement up the ranks to Committee and Board participation. There is thus a conflict between the desire to complain about how decisions and actions are made, and the desire not to rock the boat, so as to better advance. More than once, a complaint made to me (or I overheard) about a particular aspect of how the Festival was run would be tempered by a statement regarding the difficulties in running the Festival. Frequently, too, these criticisms would be made during the Festival itself when people were overworked and tired, and would be forgotten when the Festival was over. Participation or exclusion operate as censures of radically different interpretations of Icelandicness within the context of Festival Committee membership.

*Symbolic Capital and the Representation of Icelandicness*

Since the changes to the Festival were begun in 1969, criticism has grown of how the Festival portrays the Icelandic community. Much of this criticism comes from outside the Festival structure, from those who either are active in other Icelandic associations, or are simply interested in their ethnic identity. This opposition is not uniform, but varies both in its intensity and in its content. In this sense, Greeley's model presented in Chapter Two needs to be further amended, in that even the elite of the group (those running all the organizations) must not necessarily be viewed as being unified in their strategies and attitudes toward ethnic identity.

In this sense, it would be useful to elaborate upon Manning's argument regarding the negotiation of control of community celebrations, by using Bourdieu's definition of symbolic capital (1977) as a way of articulating how the representation of the ethnic group becomes part of a general notion of economic practice.

To briefly summarize Bourdieu's argument: as part of the move to understand the structuring of ideology on materialist terms, he argues that economic calculation is not limited to that which is labelled as such in everyday discourse:



the theory of strictly economic practice is simply a particular case of a general theory of the economics of practice (1977: 177).

The economic is the defining model of capitalist formations in which case it is necessary to

...extend economic calculation to *all* the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation... (ibid.: 178).

It must be recognized that implicit in ideology are structures of power relations, and that the definition of the group--in this case the ethnic group--is constantly being negotiated within these, and negotiation itself occurs on a continuum between explicit opposition and the subtle shifts of interpretation which can occur in everyday discourse.

In the case of the West Icelanders, there is a central group who work together on the Festival Board and it is these people--themselves guided by their own experience and socialization--who define how Icelandic identity is to be presented within the context of the Festival. The Board, however, is not a monolithic body. Rather, it is constituted by individuals who, though sharing a common general reality (Bourdieu's *doxa*), nonetheless differ in specifics over particular issues. In this case, conflict is likely to be less explicit and divergent, since discussion is centred around the belief

that the primary responsibility of the Festival is to remain financially solvent.

The critics of the Festival respond in various ways. Some are sharply critical of the emphasis on finance which they see as contrary to the need for more cultural content and as alienating a segment of the community. They desire more representation of theatre, dance and music, and more emphasis on honouring not only the pioneer past, but also the history of Iceland. Others were less concerned with what the Festival did not present, than with what it *did* present. They disliked the romanticized image of the settlement period presented in the speeches and in the short articles published in the programme: their stance was summarized for me as the "inspirational vs. warts-and-all" approach. Their perception was that Festival organizers benefitted by presenting themselves publicly as having struggled against adversity in order to achieve success. These latter critics were more likely to present their arguments in a humorous or satirical manner, and not necessarily in overt social action.

The distinction was presented to me by West Icelanders as a dual opposition, as a fairly standard argument about the presentation of the Festival between those who wished for more cultural content, and those who saw the Festival's task as maintaining a balanced budget.

I have presented these positions as being very clear cut, but in practice there is considerable overlap in opinion. It is worth noting that on my first visit to Manitoba many people stated their opinions categorically and with little prompting on my part. Yet the next year I was made aware of how these attitudes governed their actions only in part. There was a far greater concern with doing one's share either through work or through attendance, to ensure that the Festival succeeded. In part, this is because the critics recognize that concession must be made to the necessity of economics, and that the Festival is nonetheless an important aspect of the West Icelandic community. In turn, those with financial experience recognize that they require cultural knowledge in order to legitimate and give meaning to their own position within the community.

Those on the economic side see no discontinuity between how they define the Icelandic Festival and economic concerns; but those with cultural interests see a contradiction, where that which makes an Icelander distinctive from the rest of North American culture is minimalized behind a façade of middle class symbolism. They are at a loss to be able to devise more cultural alternatives, since there is very little that is traditional, and even less which would be of interest to

the tourist trade, especially when what is defined as traditionally Icelandic is conservative or tied with the past. An attempt to have a fish-filleting contest was unsuccessful ostensibly for reasons of hygiene, though considering the number of regulations which are broken during the course of the Festival weekend, one is left wondering about other, possibly unconscious, motivations. What they are is not important here--I am certainly not suggesting a conspiracy preventing Icelanders from displaying their skills--but it does indicate that there are boundaries, based on habit, which limit the types of activities which are incorporated within the Festival.

I must make another qualification here: I am not arguing that those who serve on the Festival Committee do so only for added prestige or the enhancement of their business image. On the contrary, there is considerable commitment on their part to what they do which indicates that community involvement holds for them as much personal meaning and significance as it does for others. Where the difference occurs is in how that meaning is expressed.

It is possible to view the differences over definition of the Festival as just another debate which the Icelanders use to define themselves. This, however, would be an outsider's view. For West Icelanders there is a distinction between past and present disputes. Whereas

past events make good stories, contemporary ones are experienced as emotionally and intellectually immediate. If they comment at all on recent issues as examples of Icelandic love of debate, it is not done with any lessening of partisanship.

Interestingly, the split between economic and cultural interests seems to be a recent one. Earlier in this century, those who were economically successful-- primarily as doctors and lawyers (Matthiasson 1979)--were also the ones instrumental in starting cultural organizations in Winnipeg, or in some manner encouraging the cohesiveness of the Icelandic community. Cultural and economic interests were not separated. But the Icelandic community has diversified greatly in its sphere of activities, expanding more into small business where earlier they had less experience, and the split has become more noticeable.

One favourite target of attack by those interested in cultural content is the participation of the Shriners in the parade. Offended by what they see as the middle class conventionality and lack of Icelandicness portrayed by this highly structured event, there is criticism of the cost that the Shriners bring to the Festival. After their participation in the parade, they are provided with a free lunch with beer, a gratuity not extended to other parade

entrants. Board members and others in support of Shriner participation put forth two arguments: one, that the parade would be boring without them and they put on a good show for children; and two, that there is economic benefit to the town in the presence of so many Shriners with their wives. No one pointed out the contradiction when they also stated that most Shriners were in town only for that day since they perform at the Ukrainian Festival in Dauphin on the same weekend, and therefore were not staying at local hotels nor doing much shopping (not all stores are open on the holiday Monday). It is likely, though, that the size and spectacle of the parade attracts more tourists, and this in turn benefits the Festival and Gimli.

The point is not whether the Shriners are or are not a benefit to the Festival, but rather how their presence articulates differences of opinion. The arguments both pro and con are premised on two issues: one, whether the event is suitable to the Icelandic community, and two, whether or not it is economically viable. These two issues are frequently mobilized to justify any action. In turn, they can be traced to a more mythical level by the West Icelanders, where present action can be justified through the use of a historical-mythical past. This is done either through the aforementioned technique of terming any sort of conflict between individuals or groups as being typically

Icelandic, or to see economic necessity as part of Icelandic pragmatism when faced with adversity.

*The Festival as Representation*

This domination of economic interests in the Festival Committee structure is represented symbolically in the Festival in a variety of ways. These revolve around first, an attempt to fit with the multicultural framework of Canadian society, and second, attempts to attract tourists to the Festival. A few examples will be given below, though these do not exhaust the ways in which the Festival can be interpreted in this regard.

The Monday programme has become a display for the public of how successful the Icelanders have been since coming to Canada, and thereby signifies how the Icelanders fulfill the ideal of the immigrant: to achieve recognition within the larger society while maintaining a sense of one's heritage. Whereas the parade was once composed of Icelanders displaying their numbers to the Anglo-Saxon majority, it is now the Icelanders who watch and organize as others come to New Iceland to participate in the performance. As the President remarked in his address, attracting important people to the Festival, and placing them in the parade and on the stage, symbolizes the ability of the West Icelanders to fulfill the immigrant's dream. They can, in the face of fiscal uncertainty, stage a

complex celebration through hard work and linkages with what is successful in Canadian society. This is further seen in the programme book, where the opening pages list the corporate sponsors of specific events, and also in the proud remarks of the President at the final Committee meeting (in 1986) regarding the increased media coverage the Festival was going to receive.

In another sense the representation of success can be seen to cross-cut divisions within the community as to what the Festival should contain. Icelanders see themselves as motivated by a desire to distinguish themselves, to succeed in life, and to be seen to stand apart from the crowd, to be unique. In the Festival (and elsewhere) success becomes defined by outer group perception. What defines success outside the group is seen as compatible with, rather than contradictory to, success within the group. For those who want more cultural content, there is, for example, the Celebrity Concerts, recorded by the CBC and performed by musicians who are from the community but who have achieved success outside it. It is also expressed for those who see a more economic motivation by the dignitaries on the stage, and the demonstration of the community's ability to mount a large and complex celebration. Further, it is noteworthy that one can look at the names and faces of some of the Shriners



in the parade, and see Icelanders in amongst them, their Icelandicness submerged in the symbology of the Shriners. What is significant about this public representation of Icelandicness is that it defines itself in terms of the outside. Conceptions of what represents success do differ within the community, yet the notion of recognition by others underlies them both.

One of the expectations of multiculturalism as policy is that ethnic groups will display traditional arts and crafts. As previously mentioned, there is little that the West Icelanders have which readily fall into this category. When asked, West Icelanders will describe as the Icelandic content the Monday programme--including the parade, the speeches, the children's races, the sing-song and the "old timers'" dance.

For an outsider this is not obvious. I talked with one non-Icelander who had recently moved to Gimli. He had asked Icelanders what was so Icelandic about the Festival. They replied, the Monday programme. He attended, but was at a loss to see the connection. When he commented on this, the Icelanders replied "you wouldn't understand." Unconvinced, he could not see the point of the Festival except as an opportunity to walk around the town.

Considering that no dances were brought by Icelanders, it is ironic that a dance should be seen as

traditionally Icelandic. The singing of familiar popular songs from the past is also a case in point, as is the recitation of speeches or a parade largely indistinguishable from any other North American parade. This says more about how in the everyday sense culture is defined rather than any confusion regarding Icelandicness.

As argued in Chapter Two, it is not the practices themselves but the uses made of them which come to be symbolic for any group. Further, ethnicity is premised on this constant referral to the past to establish cultural legitimacy and meaning. Ethnicity in this sense is conservative by definition, where the present refers to the past, and the past is made to fit the present. Thus, though there are few practices which fit multiculturalism's definition of ethnic celebration, the Icelanders are nonetheless able to define for themselves what is traditional and authentic about the Festival.

However, this definition again is not without its different interpretants. This is particularly acute regarding the Monday afternoon speeches. Various people, not all representing one perspective, commented that the Monday programme was boring, and some further suggested that it should either be dropped or radically altered. The Board is against any move to change the programme. For the non-Icelander I referred to above, the boringness was an

effective boundary which he was unlikely to cross again. He had missed the point that it is *being* in the park which is the Icelandic content. In that sense, the content of the speeches is irrelevant; it is the stability of the form, of the ritual, which is important. Someone (another non-Icelandic observer) compared the speeches to the effectivity of the old Latin Mass in the Catholic Church-- content was irrelevant: the message was carried in the form.

Attracting tourists is a priority for the Board of Directors. Many of the events--the breakfasts, the various boat races, the parade--are directed at audience appeal. For some individuals, this catering to tourists is given too much emphasis to the detriment of Icelandic content. Indeed, at one level some of the events can be seen as contradicting Icelandicness. A non-Icelander commented that no Icelander (meaning fisherman) would play in the water: boats mean work. This was reiterated by a Gimli Icelander who derisively commented that only tourists (for a local, cottagers get included in the classification of tourist) go swimming and sailing.

As much as the Festival conveys the message put forth by those dominating it, it also reflects in its structure the varieties of opinion within the Icelandic community as to what constitutes Icelandic identity. What

events are included, and how they are scheduled takes into account that different types of events appeal to different groups. This is how the Board attempts to create a broad-based appeal, to accommodate everyone within its scope. Thus people can choose what they will attend, and thereby construct their own definition of the Festival. The divergence of types of events, however, creates a sense of lack of focus.

#### *Conclusion*

This chapter has included a discussion of how the Festival is a forum for the negotiation of the public representation of Icelandic identity. It was concluded that its current representation is shaped by those who serve on the Festival Committee, as they seek to define what they believe to be significant for the interests of the West Icelandic community. It was also noted that the definition of the Festival has throughout its history undergone changes in relation to changes occurring within the community and within Canadian society, and that how the Festival is defined today is subject to controversy within the West Icelandic community.

Further, the Festival can be seen to represent current issues within the community. The fear of the loss of Icelandic identity is expressed in a debate over the cultural content of the Festival. The desire for success

which Icelanders see as part of themselves is expressed in various ways within the Festival, and crosscuts the content dispute. The Festival has changed over its history from being an event exclusively for Icelanders, to one being staged by Icelanders for outsiders. The motivation to attract tourists was linked to an attempt to conceptualize Icelandic identity in the terms of multiculturalism (i.e., an outsider's view).

## Chapter Five

### Public Symbols and Private Experience

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter the final two themes which Manning discusses are applied to analysis of the Festival. These are: the embrace of ritual and play within celebration, and the role celebration has in the formation of social groups.

As will be outlined below, a distinction arises during the weekend celebration between what I term the public Festival and the private Festival, which I will argue can be articulated by what Manning terms the tension between ritual and play. Whereas the public aspect is negotiated and debated, the private is experienced emotionally and personally. Although personal, it is linked to the community through use of a shared set of symbolic resources. However, these symbols move beyond those which are considered typically representative of ethnic identity (i.e., traits and attributes). In conclusion, it will be argued that the Icelandic Festival is an important example of a socially constructed event

which has become a central focus around and through which many West Icelanders seek to symbolize their identity.

*The Public and The Private*

There are two Festivals which take place on the August First weekend. There is a public Festival which is the officially organized and recognized one which was described in Chapter Four. Then there is what I term a private Festival surrounding the public, behind the scenes, where the actual perpetuation of Icelandic identity occurs. This private Festival has no fixed location or definition, nor is it a single bounded event as such. It is created in the interactions of family and friends as they come together for the weekend, and at one level is an inversion of that which the public Festival symbolizes.

Ethnic groups are supposed to have colourful costumes, exotic foods, interesting customs and crafts. Icelanders display what they can, but judging by what people say, its effect decidedly lacks the otherness that ethnic festivals are intended to evoke. For some West Icelanders, this absence is not significant. But for other West Icelanders, many born-in-Iceland Icelanders, and all non-Icelanders with whom I talked, there was a sense of pretense, of sham, of the inauthenticity these supposedly authentic artifacts represented. The traditional women's costume, for example, is worn only by a handful of women,

since its heavy, black material makes it unbearable in the summer heat. And though there are some traditional songs in Icelandic, I was told that these will lose some of their significance as the language gradually disappears. Most of the content of the Festival does not make any attempt to be "ethnic."

Further to this perception that the Festival does not represent anything "authentically" Icelandic, one informant commented that there was no "Victor Turner-style transformation" during the Festival, and that "nothing actually happens." He was suggesting what Manning states, that

when those who control celebration are also those who dominate the social order, there is a tendency to ritualize that dominance in order to sustain and legitimize it (1983: 7).

The ritualization lends a solemnity and sense of restraint to most of the public, scheduled aspects of the Festival. What is public is defined through ritual, but for those who do not agree with the public representation the ritual is empty.

In distinction to the public, the private is defined through play. The notion of play as used here entails that which opposes itself to public definition of ethnic identity. The inversion of the public does not necessarily mean a move toward licentious behaviour, though there are examples of this being the case. Enforcement of



liquor laws, in particular regarding drinking in public, is not strict throughout the weekend. The Saturday and Sunday night dances are times when the intensity of sound and of interaction increase and public drunkenness is tolerated. The parties and staying up all night are also a rupture of normal decorum and a relaxation of social constraints.

A second aspect of play and inversion involves a notion of something beyond the outsider's perception that only those with special inside knowledge can perceive. The aforementioned informant, and others as well, pointed at various aspects of the celebration and claimed that here was where the "real" Festival could be found. It was always expressed as something hidden from view, apart from what they believed the Board was promoting. These aspects ranged from events which were part of the programme but were considered to be overlooked by Festival organizers-- these included the latter half of the parade, the children's races, the old timer's dance, the talking with people at the Monday speeches--to the events which occurred spontaneously outside the official Festival, such as the innumerable parties. Frequently these aspects were presented as something threatened by loss, especially if they involved older members of the community. The retired farmers and fishermen, those who remember earlier times in

the Interlake, are seen as the holders of an authenticity threatened by time and change.

The final aspect of play correlates with the discussion of ethnicity in Chapter Two. It is found in the interplay of memory and experience, and the evocation of the past, though a past more broadly based than is found in the official histories. It is about returning home, and re-affirming and renewing ties with family and friends. In the sense about to be described, this inversion is experienced as something which remains outside the publicly defined Icelandic identity, yet is where people are able to establish or re-establish the sense of belonging to the community.

#### *The Past in The Present*

The private Festival escapes self-conscious attempts to define objectively what is or is not Icelandic. A few Icelanders can point at it specifically and say "this is the real Icelandic content," but for most it is unrecognized as being something of significance to themselves as *Icelanders*. There is a separation between that which is made artifactual, museumized and put on display, and that which is still vital, implicit and not fully defined. There are the public markers like the *Fjallkona* and the traditional programme, or the flying of Icelandic flags, which address a public image of the ethnic

group. In contrast, there are the private markers: the ones of personal significance, where personal dramas are linked to the time bounded by the Festival. When I asked people about what significant memories they had of the Festival, their answers frequently invoked these private experiences. One woman recalled that as a child, she was given a new dress and a dollar bill each year at Festival time. Another person recounted the childhood sensation of standing before an audience and reciting poetry in Icelandic. For yet another, the Festival marked the anniversary of the death of her son. The meaningful aspect of ethnicity is constructed of these memories. By not labelling things specifically as representative of Icelandicness, the Icelanders can keep them private, personal and meaningful, without making them part of a public discourse. The experienced past is or can be transformed into symbols which represent identity not to the outside, but to the individual.

Going to the Festival is associated with family reunions. Attendance at the celebration is higher for those living in Winnipeg than for rural dwellers (Rice 1971), and the association of return with reunions makes the former particularly relevant. One possible explanation of why the family is linked with the experience of ethnic identity, is that though the publicly acknowledged ties

with the out group are in the areas where the Icelanders had to, or chose to, assimilate, the family is seen to remain private and intact, because it is less affected by dominant socio-economic forces. The importance of the family unit crosscuts urban North America, as is evident from the extensive travel undertaken to maintain family relations (Feit: personal communication), and in this regard the West Icelanders are not unique. However, kin ties have particular symbolic value amongst Icelanders on the one hand because of the tradition of tracing genealogies, and on the other hand because of the importance of the family as an economic unit in Iceland and North America during the settlement period. Rice (ibid.) points out that since the Icelanders, in distinction from other Prairie settlers, were not under the regulations of the Homestead Act which required that houses be built on certain sections of land, they were able to situate their houses closer together and maintain family units. Further, he notes that there persists a close tie between mothers and daughters wherein mothers will frequently help in the rearing of grandchildren. Informants, particularly those raised in rural areas or in small towns, spoke of the great degree of interaction they had with extended kin, and some spoke of how as children they were able to temporarily escape their parental home to be welcomed into that of a

relative. The Gimli area remains a focus for large extended families, and the Festival is an opportunity to return to the area.

Certainly this provides the conditions for experiencing identity, but returning home has a greater significance to Icelandic ethnicity. Fischer (1986) likens the operation of ethnic identity to that of dreaming. Fragments of stories, of customs and myths are passed on from the older generation and are incorporated into the individual's own life experience. Thus memory and experience intermingle, and in the process produce a transformed notion of ethnicity. There are constraints, albeit flexible ones, on what experiences and memories can be thus labelled. For Icelanders generally, this relates to experiences related to the family, or to events occurring through Icelandic associations, or through experiences associated with the Interlake region.

Though it does not pertain to the Festival, the following anecdote nevertheless illustrates the effectivity of the interplay of memory and experience, and its transformative power:

It's hard for a child, and not much easier for an adult, to separate the myth from the reality, one kind of story from another, and that's why the landscape of the Interlake is forever charged for me with the unseen presence of heroes. My grandfather used to tell me stories from the Icelandic sagas but he didn't tell me that those stories were literature....[W]hen he told me the

story of Grettir Asmundson, Grettir the strong, who swam the half mile from the mainland to the island carrying fire and it didn't go out, I assumed Grettir lived on Hekla Island, and that he had swum from Riverton...That's the way stories get rooted in a new land (Arnason and Olito 1981: 110).

Part of ethnicity is this reinvention of the past in the context of present knowledge or experience. It is when the present is seen to deny the past that a sense of rupture or loss is felt. Some people who do not feel that the public Festival is relevant to their identity are experiencing this rupture and have stopped attending it altogether. Others are able to use the public Festival as a backdrop to reunite with their personal past in the context of family and friends.

Returning home, if it is a positive experience--or even if it is not--is rich with meanings and significance. There is a conjunction between the Festival and the act of returning, because the Festival supplies the reason or excuse for this sort of inner celebration. Obviously Icelanders will experience this impact in differing degrees, and some not at all. But the Festival provides the context for the possibility, and remains a marker of significant events.

The Festival is possibly more important in this aspect for the Icelanders who live away from the Gimli area, especially those from Winnipeg who maintain connections with Gimli through family cottages. It takes

on more emotional aspects; of time spent apart from the everyday life of school and work, a return to what is deemed authentic in life. Someone told me that physically he was from Winnipeg, but spiritually he was from Gimli. For him, and for others, Gimli (or New Iceland, or the Interlake) represents that which is felt as essential to the self, rather than apart or exterior to it.

I want to relate two brief examples that I think capture this sense of personal relevance, as it is expressed through, on the one hand, the current debate within the community, and on the other hand, the blending of returning home with renewing the past.

The first deals with an incident which occurred at one of the dances which take place each night of the Festival. Two people, in their mid-twenties, and who are both involved with Icelandic organizations and Festival committees, were talking to me about what they thought important about the Festival. They began to disagree: one person felt that it was most important that the Festival succeed financially, and that this should be the basis for decisions regarding content. The other individual believed that it was important to get more genuine cultural content, so that people would be reminded of that for which their heritage stands.

They quickly became conscious of their disagreement, and aware that they were enacting a very usual discussion from within the community. They then turned it into a performance for the anthropologist who sat watching and listening, thus pointing at their disagreement as something significant about themselves. And while they argued, they laughed, enjoying the fact that even by arguing, they were arguing about something they shared in common and cared about deeply. This is essential, this focus on the same central issues and symbols, albeit from differing perspectives within the community. At the same time, this incident illustrates how the public discourse and the private experience can become linked in social action, in an act of sharing.

The other incident involves an Icelander born and raised in Gimli, but who is now an executive living outside of Manitoba. He had returned to Gimli for the Festival weekend. One evening, he went to the local movie theatre, where some forgettable teen movie was playing, and stood in line with all the teenagers in order to watch this movie. At the Gimli movie theatre, the floors are made of wood and slope down toward the front. Before each show, the patrons are asked not to place pop cans or bottles on the floor, since they make too much noise rolling the length of the theatre. This man went to the movie, alone, expressly to



re-experience the illicit pleasures of his youth, of rolling a pop bottle noisily down the sloping floors.

This private act had nothing to do with the public face of the Festival. Yet for him, this personal ritual of reenactment, of doing something in his everyday life he otherwise would not do, gave him a sense of return to something deeply felt about place, but neglected in his day to day life. What is significant here is that the act was contained in, and gained meaning from, the time marked and set apart by the Festival.

Further to this example: when I used the above story in a paper I gave at a conference in Winnipeg, an Icelander in the audience talked to me about it afterwards. She said that going to the Gimli movie theatre, to roll bottles or not, was an annual ritual for many people she knew, even for those who did not normally go to the movies. Clearly, what is at one level experienced as a private act is nonetheless linked to a shared notion of identification with the past and with place.

#### *Conclusion*

Manning's fourth criteria, that "instead of social formations giving rise to symbolic expressions...it is now symbols that are creating social groups" (1983: 6), is especially relevant to the issues confronting many North American ethnic groups. For those who seek to perpetuate

the sense of their ethnicity, there is a crisis of meaning when that which is intended to represent their identity loses relevance in their everyday lives. There are no guidelines for being an ethnic when the symbols "run out," and it is at that point that the contingent and inventive aspects of culture are exposed. New symbols must constantly be generated to link the present with the past so that they are experienced as vital to those who order their lives around them.

The Festival is two things: publicly, it is a time where Icelanders tell others about themselves, for public consumption, about what they think they ought to be saying. Then there is the time when they get together, and tell themselves other stories about themselves. These are the anecdotes of everyday life, the private dramas and comedies they experience, that people piece together throughout their lives to build a picture of the community that they contain within themselves.

## Conclusions

This thesis has presented an argument in favour of re-evaluation of our frameworks for understanding North American ethnicity. It was argued that an assimilationist logic underlies the multicultural perspective which in turn dominates commonsense knowledge of ethnic groups. This is apparent in how culture is perceived: authentic or traditional ethnic culture is seen to exist in attributes or characteristics which are or were particular to the group upon its arrival in North America. This perspective has the effect of reifying culture and separating it from the experience of identification as it arises in everyday action.

Further, the processes of change which normally occur in any society and are generally considered to be necessary to it, are seen in the case of the ethnic group as threatening to its continued existence. Sociological models for understanding ethnic change in North American society are based on this Western commonsense definition of culture as embedded in traits. Since the third generation hypothesis and its variants are based on these preconceptions, they posit change as problematic, and as something which moves the ethnic group toward loss of

cultural definition. However, it was argued that these models are descriptions of particular occurrences contextualized in specific social and historical formations in North America during the twentieth century. Though the models may have some heuristic use in social analysis, their predictive value regarding the outcome of ethnic change is dubious.

Ridding analysis of this trait-biased construction becomes particularly relevant when it is realized that individuals use its criteria in the definition of their own ethnicity. This problem exists within the Icelandic community in Manitoba. Members of the community still have a strong sense of themselves as Icelanders yet they have retained little of that which can be considered in the multiculturalist view as "authentically" Icelandic. They frequently express a fear, however, that their identity is threatened by the passage of time. What renders identity authentic in this case is its relationship with the past.

In Chapter Two, an alternative approach to understanding ethnicity was outlined. It begins by seeing any culture as existing in and arising from social relations. Ethnicity is created in time, first as the cumulative product of interactions between social forces and historical circumstances, and second as a conceptual field on which historical events are selected, interpreted,

and negotiated in group interaction, to become the symbolic mediators of ethnic identity. Ethnicity in this sense is not an analytical category, but is rather the result of particular historical circumstances and social actions. It is necessary, therefore, not to reify the notion of the ethnic group in analysis. Further, analysis cannot begin with a definition of the ethnic individual, since this too is contingent on pre-existing forms of socialization.

The approach used in this analysis focuses on cultural productions, since they provide a unique opportunity to view the processes of social action in a delimited time and space. The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba held each summer in Gimli, is a particularly rich and complex example of such a production, and has served as the focus for the analysis of Icelandic ethnicity in this thesis.

The Festival is an event of considerable significance for the West Icelanders and reflects the concerns which are now experienced within the community. This thesis has revealed some of the dynamics which underlie the production, reproduction and transformation of West Icelandic identity as they occur in the context of the Festival.

At one level the various definitions of Icelandic identity extant in the community are expressed through the

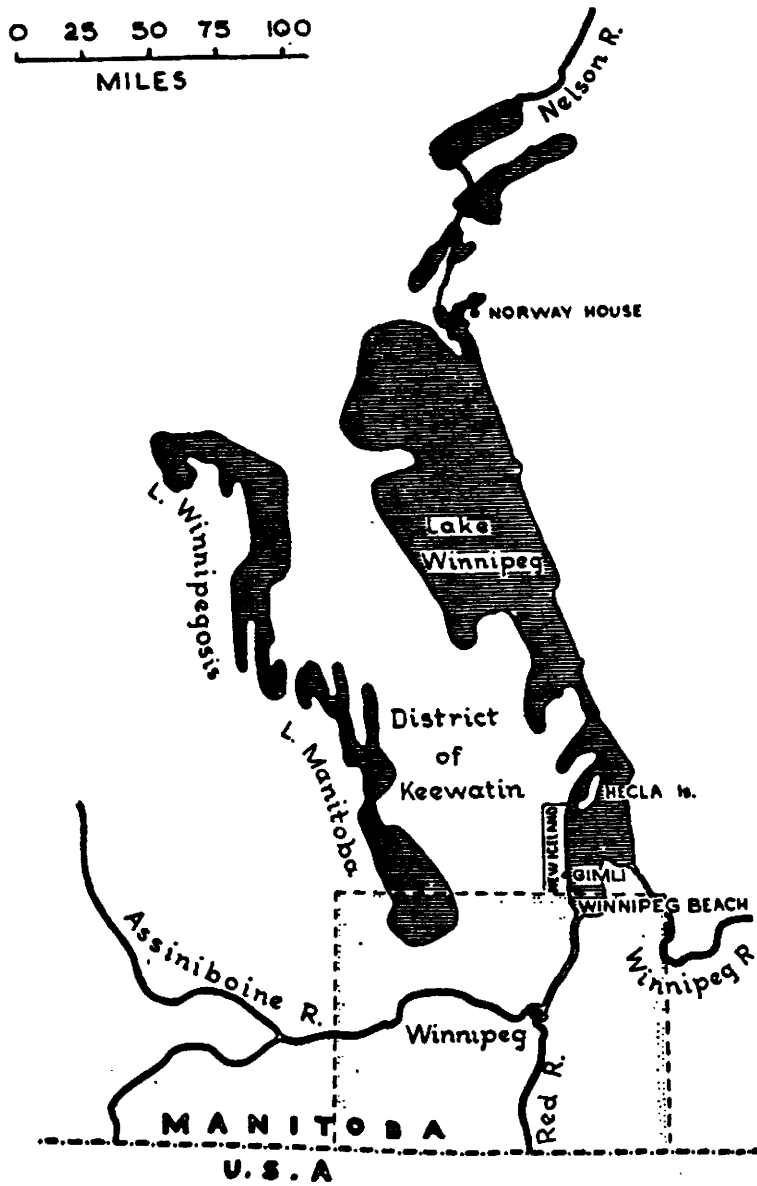
political negotiations surrounding the content of the Festival. Control of the Festival by the Board, though not absolute, leads to a particular representation of the Icelandic community which is expressed through a discourse directed at outside group perceptions. This is accomplished in two ways: one, through presenting an image of success-in-adversity which fits with the dominant multicultural ideology, and two, through attempts to attract tourists to the Festival by commercialization of its content. What currently defines the debate for Icelanders is a distinction between economic stability and cultural content, though it is suggested that the content of debates within the community have changed over the years. For some members of the community, the emphasis on financial considerations and the concomitant effects on the content of the Festival, has rendered the celebration meaningless to themselves as Icelanders. For others, there is a belief that the Festival, in order to survive, must change to reflect changes occurring within the community.

At another level, what occurs at the Festival is or can be an emotional experience of return and an evocation of a personal past. This is a private experience--private both in the sense that it is not part of the public programme, and that it is personally felt and not necessarily labelled as Icelandic. This is the level at

which identity is felt to be meaningful. The Festival provides a marked context in which this occurs because of its association with family reunions and summers spent at cottages. In the process of this evocation of the past, identity is renewed and transformed as it is redefined in terms of present understanding. Icelandic identity is not simply knowledge of historical facts preserved in books. Rather, it is memories of stories and anecdotes, of experiences associated with other Icelanders, and of events in the Interlake. The Festival provides a context which links these memories with celebration, family reunion, and relaxation at the cottage, and with the emotions connected with return to and evocation of a personally experienced past.

Dismantling the multicultural framework exposes culture's contingent side. Through the acts of negotiation and the actions of memory ethnicity is renewed for the individual and for the group. There is no ultimate end of assimilation. Yet neither is there a promise of continual perpetuation. Ethnicity is contingent upon social and historical forces, and on the decisions made to negotiate the effects of those forces. Ethnicity is meaningful only as long as the symbols it evokes remain relevant for those they are intended to represent.

Appendix I

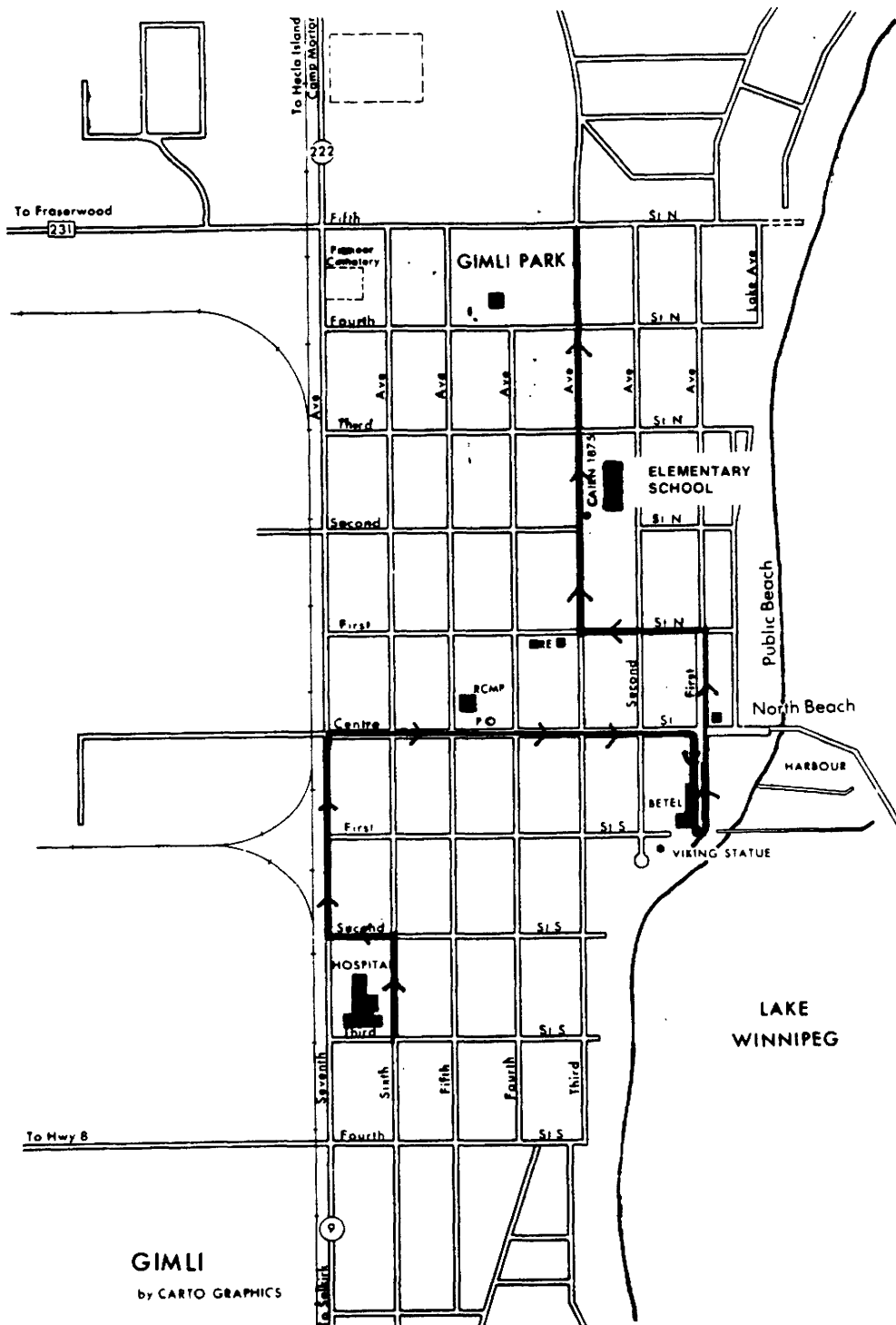


*Manitoba and New Iceland (1875)*

from: Kristjanson (1965: 40)

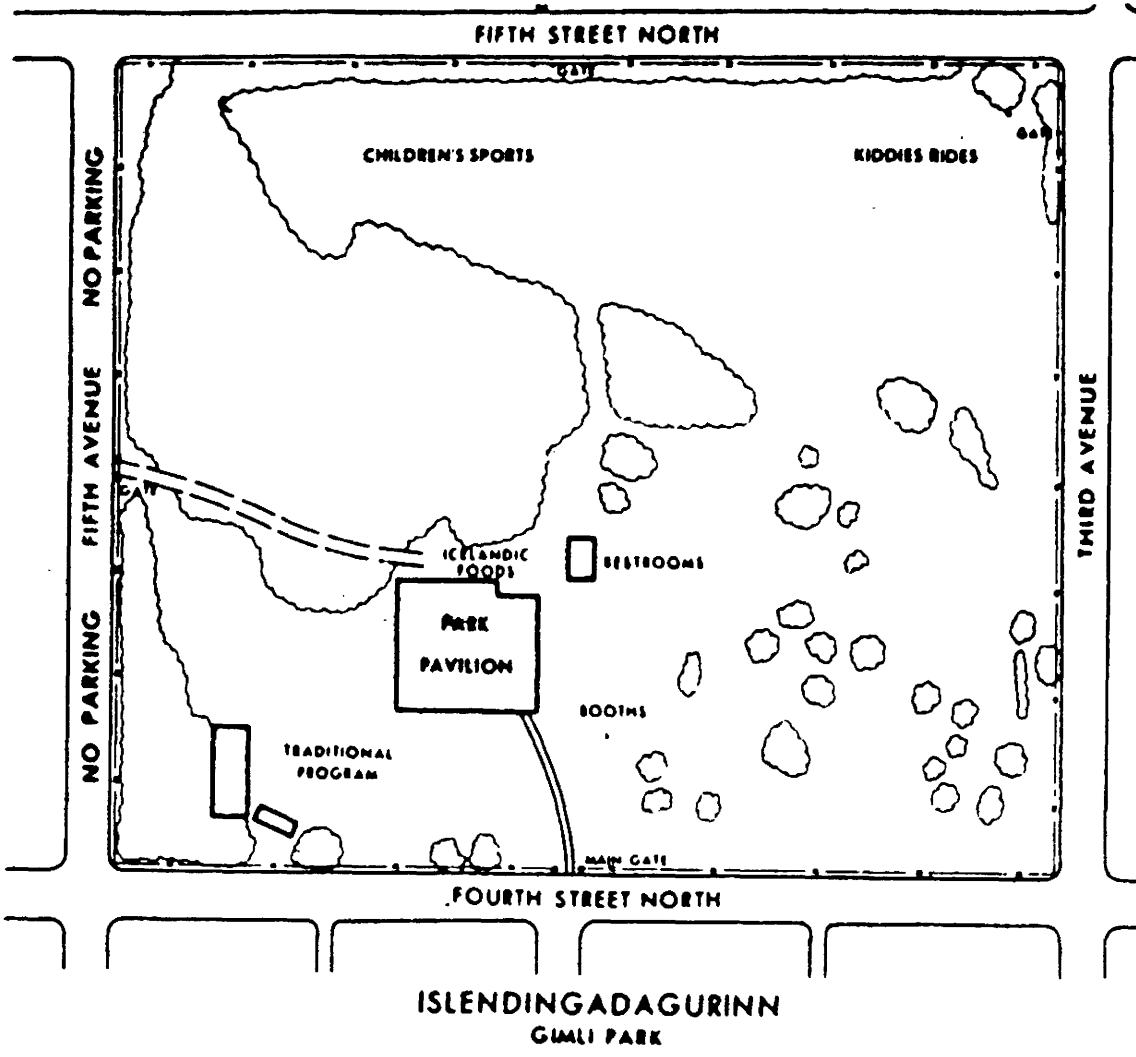


# PARADE ROUTE



Town of Gimli

from: *Islendingadagurinn* Official  
Souvenir Programme (1986)



ISLENDINGADAGURINN  
GIMLI PARK

*Gimli Park*

from *Islandingadagurinn* Official  
Souvenir Programme (1986)

## Appendix II

The following text is a schedule of events for the  
1985 *Islendingadagurinn*, taken from the Official Souvenir  
Programme.

## Saturday

8:00 a.m. Pancake Breakfast at Harbourside  
11:00 a.m. Boardsailing Race Heats -off North Beach  
11:00 a.m. Manitoba Sailing Association Races  
1:00 p.m. Junior Raft Races -Gimli Harbour  
2:00 p.m. The Whiterock Challenge -Gimli Harbour  
2:30 p.m. New Iceland Music and Poetry Programme  
-Gimli High School, Hwy. 9  
3:00 p.m. Islendingadunk -The Viking Challenge  
-Gimli Harbour  
4:00 p.m. Fris-nok Preliminary Contests -North Beach  
4:30 p.m. *Gentle Sinners*, W.D. Valgardson's feature  
film -Gimli High School  
8:00 p.m. Celebrity Concert -Gimli High School  
9:00 p.m. Dance-Gimli Park Pavilion

## Sunday

8:00 a.m. Pancake Breakfast at Harbourside  
8:40 a.m. 10 Mile Road Race -Wheelchair start  
8:50 a.m. -Roller Ski start  
9:00 a.m. -Runners start  
10:00 a.m. Arrival of The Great Heritage Canoe Pageant  
-North Beach  
10:00 a.m. Boardsailing Race Heats -off North Beach  
10:00 a.m. Manitoba Sailing Assoc. Races  
12:00 noon Ecumenical Service -Main Stage at Gimli Park  
1:00 p.m. *Islendingadagurinn* Bicycle Racing  
1:00 p.m. Fine Arts Display -Gymnasium of the  
elementary school  
1:00 p.m. Track and Field Events -North Side, Gimli  
Park  
1:30 p.m. Kidstuff at *Islendingadagurinn* -the Pavilion  
in Gimli Park

1:30 p.m. Fine Country Folk -Main Stage, Gimli Park  
 2:00 p.m. New Iceland Variety Concert -Main Stage in  
 Gimli Park  
 4:00 p.m. Horseshoe Tourney -North Beach just off Main  
 Dock  
 6:00 p.m. Gimli Folk Concert -Main Stage in Gimli Park  
 10:00 p.m. Fireworks -Harbour area (weather  
 permitting).  
 11:00 p.m. Dance -Gimli Park Pavilion

### Monday

8:00 a.m. Pancake Breakfast at Harbourside  
 10:00 a.m. Parade start  
 10:00 a.m. Manitoba Sailing Assoc. Races  
 10:00 a.m. Boardsailing Races -off North Beach  
 11:00 a.m. Fine Arts Display -Gymnasium of the  
 elementary school  
 12:00 noon Selkirk & District Pipe Band in Concert,  
 Main Stage Gimli Park  
 12:30 p.m. Family Sports (kiddie races, special events)  
 -North side Gimli Park  
 12:30 p.m. Announcement of Parade Float Winners  
 -Main Stage Gimli Park  
 12:45 p.m. Blue Sky Quintet in Concert -Main Stage  
 Gimli Park  
 1:15 p.m. Tug-O-War -North Side Gimli Park  
 1:15 p.m. Stefnir Male Voice Choir, Reykjavík, Iceland  
 -Main Stage Gimli Park  
 2:00 p.m. Traditional Festival Programme -Main Stage  
 Gimli Park  
 2:00 p.m. Fris-nok Finals -North Side Gimli Park  
 4:00 p.m. Stefnir Male Voice Choir, Reykjavík, Iceland  
 -Main Stage Gimli Park  
 5:00 p.m. Variety Concert -Main Stage Gimli Park  
 7:30 p.m. Community Sing Song -Main Stage Gimli Park  
 9:00 p.m. Family Dance -Gimli Park Pavilion

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