
ICELANDIC NATIONAL LEAGUE OF NORTH AMERICA

100 YEARS STRONG





In 2019 the Icelandic National League of North America, Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi, proudly celebrates 100 years since its establishment in Winnipeg, Manitoba in March of 1919. Records show that discussions regarding an Icelandic organization that would promote and maintain the Icelandic culture started in early 1917. It was of vital importance to the newly arrived Icelanders and their communities that their Icelandic heritage be preserved in the New World and at a meeting in January of 1919, a committee was chosen to “seek the co-operation of Icelandic communities in North America to maintain the Icelandic language and heritage”.

The first annual Convention of Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi was held in Winnipeg from February 25 to 27, 1919 and one hundred years later, Icelandic Canadians, Icelandic Americans and Icelanders continue to gather to celebrate their shared Icelandic heritage and culture. The sustained existence of the INLNA is a tribute to every individual who has put their mark on the League; each and every INLNA member, convention attendee, volunteer, board member, supporter, past and present, has contributed to the INLNA and made it what it is today.

The INLNA Coat of Arms was granted by the Canadian Heraldic Authority (CHA) on January 2, 2000. The Coat of Arms was developed jointly by the INLNA and the CHA from 1994 to 2000. It proudly displays the phrase *Römm Er Sú Taug*, Strong Is The Bond, which is a phrase that was made familiar in New Iceland by the poet Friðrik Sigurðsson. It is a fitting sentiment for the INLNA as there is no greater show of strength and affiliation than what is in evidence in the INLNA today. Strong is the bond? Most definitely!



Icelandic National
League of North
America Coat of
Arms

WHY 1919?

The origins of the Icelandic National League of North America

Stefan Jonasson

Not long after Iceland became a sovereign country, the Icelandic communities in North America established the Icelandic National League of North America. More than four decades had passed since the major wave of immigration had begun – and that wave had already come to an end – so the Icelandic community was already well established in Canada and the United States.

In *The Icelanders in Canada*, written on the occasion of the centennial of Canadian Confederation, Judge Walter J. Lindal asked why the INLNA came to be organized when it was. “Why so soon after the war? Why such an apparent withdrawal from Canadian objectives? ... Why the sudden outburst?” At the same time, he noted that the two individuals at the centre of the initiative, Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson and Jón J. Bíldfell, had been strong supporters of the war effort and that the Icelandic community had shown itself to be fiercely loyal to their new homeland.

Lindal concluded that it was “natural, almost inevitable” that the INLNA came into existence, coming as it did in the immediate aftermath of the end of the First World War. He speculated about the “general disappointment in the victory” of the Allies, the realization that “democracy was far from being safe,” and the post-war isolationism of the United States. But it’s difficult to believe that any of these factors could have been so apparent to have influenced the creation of a new organization little more than three months after the war’s end. While the development may have been “natural, almost inevitable,” surely other factors were at play.

Stefan J. Stefanson pointed out that the seeds for the INLNA were sown long before the First World War. “In the early years of the 20th century, the settlers and their descendants expressed a desire to establish an organization to represent the Icelandic community at large in order to preserve their language and culture,” he wrote. “Their intention was to form an umbrella organization to promote programs beneficial to all groups as well as act as a liaison with Iceland.” If the end of the war may have given the Icelanders an occasion to organize, some believed that the war had delayed initiatives already underway. That said, the community had already established a pattern of discussing things at length and then taking a long time to organize around what they had discussed. We do know that informal meetings began some two years before the INLNA was formally established. In the early months of 1919, everything fell into place and the INLNA was born.

It seems significant to me that, in the years leading up to the INLNA’s organization, the community had successfully established the Jón Bjarnason Academy and its women, having succeeded in helping to win the vote, organized the Jon Sigurdsson Chapter IODE in 1916. There also seemed to be a growing awareness that the Icelandic community needed an organization that would bridge the

divides of politics and religion. Add to this the impact of the war, which led many to both a deeper sense of the duties of citizenship, whether Canadian or American, and a deeper sense of pride in how Icelanders had risen to the occasion, and Judge Lindal may be correct in concluding that the establishment of the INLNA was “natural, almost inevitable.”

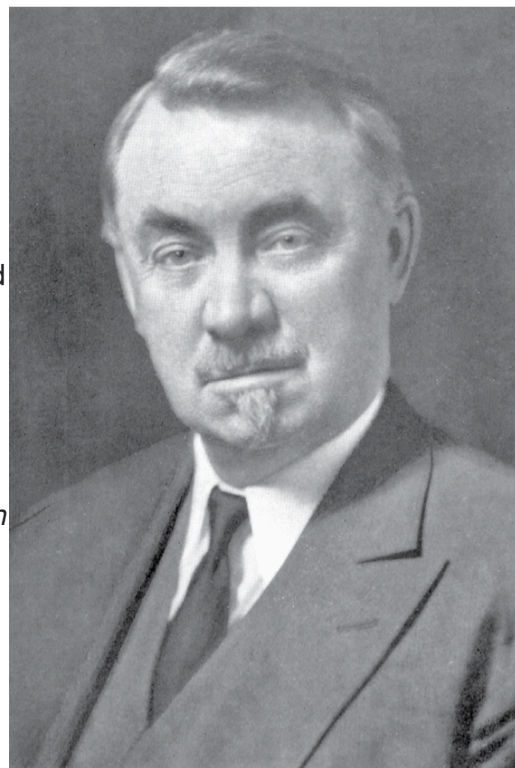
“Among some of the leading Icelanders in Winnipeg there was an awakening, a reassessment of values,” Lindal wrote. “That did not mean that there was a withdrawal from Canadian loyalties.”

At the time of its founding, three primary purposes were established for the INLNA:

- *To encourage people of Icelandic descent to become the best possible citizens of their new homeland.*
- *To maintain and strengthen the Icelandic language and literature in North America.*
- *To work in cooperation with all Icelanders on both sides of the Atlantic.*

Formal statements of purpose tell us one thing about the motives of the INLNA’s founders, and speculation about how contemporary events affected them may help to expand the story, but an even deeper understanding of the founders’ aspirations was offered by the first president, Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson, who wrote in *Tímarit*: “For the best citizenship it is not sufficient to develop physically, or to be a good employee, a good farmer, or even wealthy, and to be law-abiding, and to adapt oneself to the customs and way of life of the country. One must also grow mentally and spiritually. The first step is to know oneself, and this he cannot do who knows nothing of the story of the people from whom he is descended. In every civilized country, history and literature are the basis of higher education. To be fully developed as individuals and the best possible citizens of this, their country, the people of Icelandic origin must study their own language and literature at the same time as the official course of studies.” (Translated by Wilhelm Kristjanson.)

The Icelandic name chosen for the new organization was Þjóðræknisfélag Íslendinga í Vesturheimi. “The name of the organization was misleading,” according to Lindal. “The word þjóðerni would have been much closer to what was intended than the word þjóðrækni. The connotation of the latter is similar to that of ‘patriotic’ and the connotation of the former closer to the word ‘ethnic’ as commonly used at the present time.” The significance of Lindal’s distinction became readily apparent to me a few years ago when reading a book that mentioned the activities of the INLNA, which had been translated from Icelandic into English. The American translator, who had a fluent



**Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson,
founding president of the Icelandic
National League of North America**

command of modern Icelandic but no real familiarity with the history of the Icelandic diaspora, rendered the name as the “Icelandic Patriotic Society” throughout his translation. Not knowing there was an official English version of the name, this translator used the closest literal English approximation of the Icelandic name, but the result could easily lead to confusion about the purposes of the organization. “If the word ‘patriotism’ is used it should be limited to the sentiment of Canadians to Canada,” Lindal went on to observe, ignoring the American component of the INLNA, although it is reasonable to assume that he would have added “or the sentiment of Americans to the United States” if he had been addressing a larger audience than Canadians.

Judge Lindal went further, expressing his dissatisfaction with use of the word *national* in the official English name, saying, “the translation is even more misleading. In order to prevent misunderstanding, the ethnic groups of Canada should avoid the use of the word ‘national’ in the names of their organizations.”

The founding president of the INLNA was Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson and the vice president was Jón J. Bíldfell. The original officers were rounded out with Dr. Sigurður Júlíus Jóhannesson as secretary and Ásmundur P. Jóhannsson as treasurer.

The INLNA published an annual magazine, *Tímarit*, from 1919 until 1968. The first editor was Rev. Rögnvaldur Pétursson, who filled the role from the time of its founding until his death in 1940. Gísli Jónsson took over following his death and served for twenty years before being joined as editor by Haraldur Bessason. It also published a children’s magazine, *Baldursbrá*, from 1934 to 1940, which was edited by Dr. Sigurður Júlíus Jóhannesson.

In assessing the importance of the INLNA, Walter J. Lindal argued that it “has rendered useful service.” He noted that it had helped to slow assimilation, which he viewed as a positive thing despite his own outspoken Canadian patriotism. It facilitated visits to North America by distinguished Icelanders to speak at conventions or tour the Icelandic communities here, sometimes both. And he described the INLNA’s conventions as “a pause, a reawakening to the worth of what Icelanders have felt to be within themselves as they venture on in their chosen Canadian callings,” which aroused “a sense of duty” among participants.

Will Kristjanson echoed Lindal’s assessment, although he offered a more extensive and specific list of activities and initiatives that the INLNA had undertaken before concluding, “It has promoted closer contact between the various Icelandic settlements; sponsored or promoted publications; supported two very promising musicians in their studies abroad; encouraged sports, and promoted the visits of distinguished musicians, authors, poets, actresses, and leaders in religious and political life from Iceland to the Icelandic communities in America.”

Reflecting on the INLNA’s accomplishments in 1995, three decades after Lindal and Kristjanson, Stefan J. Stefanson wrote: “The INL to this day continues to deliver on the fundamental building block set out in the first constitution – to promote and preserve the Icelandic heritage in North America and foster ongoing interaction with Iceland. This has helped to foster better citizenship

among those of us in the United States and Canada, and to create a stronger relationship with the ancestral homeland.”

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the establishment of the Icelandic National League of North America, it is obvious that much has changed since its founding. Many of us are three or four generations further removed from the first immigrants, even as we continue to enjoy the presence of members who were born in Iceland and welcome those whom we affectionately refer to as IBMs – Icelanders by marriage. The transition from Icelandic to English in our proceedings is all but complete, even as some of us continue to learn the ancestral language. As citizens, there’s little question that our loyalties are owed to Canada or the United States, however much we continue to love Iceland. We still seem to take a long time to get things done and delight in quarreling along the way, sometimes discussing things until we have forgotten what the original question was. Yet, through it all, the INLNA has been a organization – a treasure, really – that brings us together, encourages good citizenship, and enriches our cultural understanding.

Today, we may wonder how the INLNA came to be and why events unfolded as they did. I wonder if the founders could have imagined what their organization would look like a century down the road, what accomplishments it would have made, and how faithful we have remained to the purposes they envisioned.

This article first appeared in the February 19, 2019, edition of the Lögberg-Heimskringla. During the course of 2019, Lögberg-Heimskringla plans to cover the centennial of the Icelandic National League of North America as fully as possible with vignettes from the INLNA’s history and coverage of INLNA events. We also invite contributions from individuals about their experiences in the INLNA, the work of their local chapters, and their aspirations for the future. Submissions should be sent to the editor at stefan@lh-inc.ca.

References

Wilhelm Kristjanson, The Icelandic People in Manitoba, 1965.

Walter J. Lindal, The Icelanders in Canada, 1967.

Gwen Mann, ed. History of the Icelandic National League of North America 1919-2009.

INLNA PRESIDENTS OF THE PAST 100 YEARS

1919-1921: Rev. Dr. Rögnvaldur Pétursson

1921-1923: Rev. Jónas A. Sigurdsson

1923-1925: Rev. Albert E. Kristjánsson

1925-1927: Rev. Jónas A. Sigurdsson

1927-1929: Rev. Ragnar E. Kvaran

1929-1931: Rev. Jónas A. Sigurdsson

1931-1933: Jón J. Bildfell

1933-1934: Rev. Jónas A. Sigurdsson

1934-1936: Jón J. Bildfell

1936-1940: Rev. Dr. Rögnvaldur Pétursson

1940-1945: Rev. Dr. Rögnvaldur Pétursson

1945-1947: Dr. Richard Beck

1947-1951: Rev. V. J. Eylands

1951-1956: Rev. Phillip M. Pétursson

1956-1962: Rev. V. J. Eylands

1962-1970: Rev. Phillip M. Pétursson

1970-1976: Mr. Skúli Jóhannsson

1976-1979: Mr. Stefan Stefanson

1979-1985: Mr. Jóhann Sigurdson

1985-1988: Mr. Oli Narfason

1988-1991: Mr. Neil Bardal

1991-1992: Mrs. Evelyn Thorvaldson

1992-1993: Mr. Oli Narfason

1993-1995: Mr. Helgi Austman

1995-1998: Mr. Laurence Johnson

1998-2000: Mr. G. Ray Johnson

2000-2003: Ms. Sigrid Johnson

2003-2004: Mr. Paul Westdal

2004-2006: Mr. Walter Sopher

2006-2008: Mr. Garry Oddleifson

2008-2010: Ms. Gerri McDonald

2010-2012: Ms. Gail Einarson-McCleery

2012-2014: Mr. Ron Goodman

2014-2016: Ms. Claire Eckley

2016-2018: Ms. Sunna Olafson Furstenau

2018-2020: Ms. Beverly Arason-Gaudet



STRONG IS THE BOND

RÖMM ER SÚ TAUG

INLNA CONVENTIONS

Since the first convention in 1919, the annual INLNA convention has been a time to reflect on the League's achievements of the past year, to plan for the future, to review finances and to elect the Executive and Directors. Additionally guest speakers provide a look back at our history or a glimpse towards our future.

Historically conventions were held in Winnipeg but in 1986, the first convention outside of Winnipeg was held in Vancouver, B.C., hosted by the Icelandic Canadian Club of British Columbia. Every year since then the convention has been hosted by a different member club of the INLNA and in 2002 the first convention was held outside of Canada. The Icelandic American Association of Minnesota hosted the 83rd annual convention in Minneapolis, Minnesota. With the convention changing location each year, from east to west, north to south, the audience has grown in diversity and enabled the League's message and mission to reach a greater number of individuals.

This is the history of the first 100 years of conventions:

| | | | |
|------------|------------------------------------|-------|-----------------------------|
| 1919-1985: | Winnipeg, Manitoba | 2002: | Minneapolis, Minnesota |
| 1986: | Vancouver, British Columbia | 2003: | Edmonton, Alberta |
| 1987: | Gimli, Manitoba | 2004: | Hecla, Manitoba |
| 1988: | Innisfail, Alberta | 2005: | Wynyard, Saskatchewan |
| 1989: | Wynyard, Saskatchewan | 2006: | Victoria, British Columbia |
| 1990: | Winnipeg, Manitoba | 2007: | Winnipeg, Manitoba |
| 1991: | New Westminister, British Columbia | 2008: | Calgary, Alberta |
| 1992: | Hecla, Manitoba | 2009: | Gimli, Manitoba |
| 1993: | Gimli, Manitoba | 2010: | Toronto, Ontario |
| 1994: | Selkirk, Manitoba | 2011: | Edmonton, Alberta |
| 1995: | Toronto, Ontario | 2012: | Brandon, Manitoba |
| 1996: | Winnipeg, Manitoba | 2013: | Seattle, Washington |
| 1997: | Calgary, Alberta | 2014: | Winnipeg, Manitoba |
| 1998: | Brandon, Manitoba | 2015: | Minneapolis, Minnesota |
| 1999: | Toronto, Ontario | 2016: | Vancouver, British Columbia |
| 2000: | Gimli, Manitoba | 2017: | Grand Forks, North Dakota |
| 2001: | New Westminister, British Columbia | 2018: | Edmonton, Alberta |
| | | 2019: | Winnipeg, Manitoba |

INLNA PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

The INLNA has launched a number of special projects over the years and the following are a sample:

- The Icelandic Heritage Calendar: introduced in 1991 by INL Historian Nelson Gerard; it continues today as the INLNA Calendar project
- Charter Flights to Iceland sponsored by INL: charter flights were first arranged in 1957 and then again in 1964, 1971 and 1974
- Heritage Sign Project: launched in 1994 by INL Historian Nelson Gerard; today more than 600 blue and white signs displaying a falcon crest are displayed across North America
- University of Manitoba Icelandic Department of Language and Literature: in 1920 a resolution was passed to establish a chair in Icelandic and Norse studies at the University of Manitoba and in 1951 the Chair in Icelandic Language and Literature was formally announced
- Going Home - 1000th Anniversary of the Alþing: in 1927 a committee was formed to plan a trip to Iceland for people of Icelandic descent living in North America to celebrate the millennium of the Alþing and in 1930 two groups of Icelanders left Montreal for the celebrations in Iceland
- Millennium Celebrations 2000: celebrations were planned to commemorate the 1000th anniversary of the visits to the shores of North America by the Viking seafarers and to mark the 125th Anniversary of the founding of the New Iceland colony; approximately 400 events were held in both Canada and the USA

The programs and projects currently being undertaken by the INLNA include a number of very successful long-running programs as well as newer projects:

- Snorri West: initially run by Wanda Anderson of Manitoba, it has been an INLNA project for number of years and is very successful in recruiting young persons from Iceland to visit Icelandic settlements and clubs in North America
- Snorri Deaf: a relatively new project in its second year, this program has been very well received in both Iceland and North America
- International Visits Program: this program which brings Icelanders of notable interest to North America and North Americans to Iceland has been successfully running since 1997
- Donald K. Johnson Film Series: through the generosity of Donald K. Johnson, member clubs have had the opportunity to host viewings of Icelandic films for their club members
- Communications: the INLNA website, Email list, Facebook page, quarterly Newsletter, bimonthly Presidents Meetings, and more have all been structured to further communications between the INLNA and its members

INLNA MEMBERS

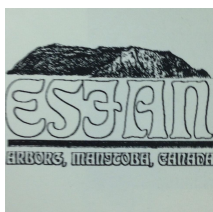
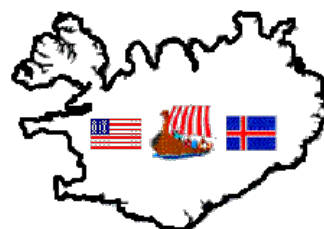
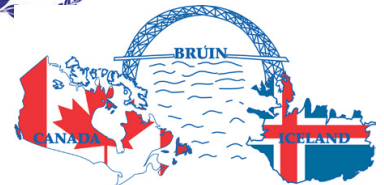
Member Clubs

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Arborg, Manitoba | Esjan Chapter |
| Blaine, Washington | Blaine Icelandic Heritage Society |
| Brandon, Manitoba | Icelandic Canadian Club of Western Manitoba |
| Calgary, Alberta | Leif Eiriksson Icelandic Club of Calgary |
| Edmonton, Alberta | Icelandic Canadian Club of Edmonton, Norðurljós |
| Gimli, Manitoba | Gimli Icelandic Canadian Society |
| Internet | Icelandic Online Club |
| Lundar, Manitoba | Lundar Chapter |
| Markerville, Alberta | Stephan G. Stephansson Icelandic Society |
| Minnesota | Icelandic American Association of Minnesota |
| Mountain, North Dakota | Icelandic Communities Association |
| Ottawa, Ontario | Friends of Iceland |
| Saskatchewan | Icelandic Club of Saskatchewan, Vatnabyggð |
| Seattle, Washington | Icelandic Club of Greater Seattle |
| Selkirk, Manitoba | Bruin Chapter |
| Toronto, Ontario | Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto |
| Vancouver, British Columbia | Icelandic Canadian Club of British Columbia |
| Victoria, British Columbia | Icelanders of Victoria |
| Washington, DC | Icelandic Association of Washington, DC |
| Winnipeg, Manitoba | Icelandic Canadian Frón |

Affiliate and Associate Members

| | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Fargo-Moorhead Icelandic Klub | Moorhead, Minnesota |
| Icelandic Care Home Höfn Society | Vancouver, British Columbia |
| Icelandic Festival of Manitoba | Gimli, Manitoba |
| Icelandic Hekla Club | Minnesota |
| Icelandic Memorial Society | Nova Scotia |
| Icelandic River Heritage Sites | Manitoba |
| Icelandic Roots | Fargo, North Dakota |
| Lestrarfélagið Gleym-mér- ei | Winnipeg, Manitoba |
| New Iceland Heritage Museum | Gimli, MB |
| Manassas Viking Festival | Manassas, Virginia |

The INLNA also has a number of individual members.



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