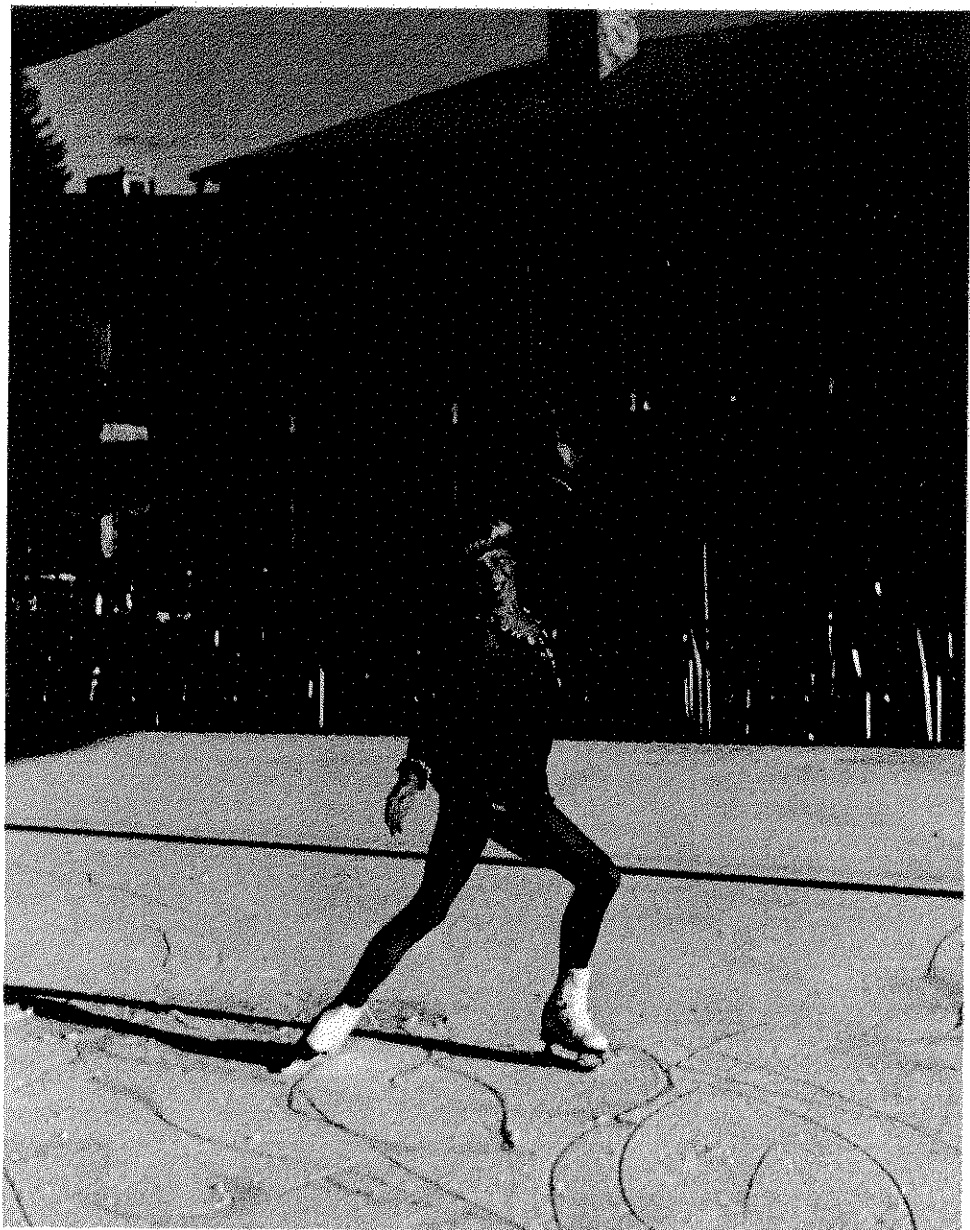


ISSN 0046 - 8452

WINTER, 1979

THE ICELANDIC CANADIAN



VIBRANT YOUTH IN THE YEAR OF THE CHILD

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I REMEMBER LONI

by Lillian Olson Lane

Mrs. Lane shared first prize — \$50 — in the Islendingadagurinn Reminiscentes Contest at Gimli, Manitoba, 1979 with Hallgerdur G. Schneider. Mrs. Schneider's story will be published in a later issue of the Icelandic Canadian.

In my memory of Loni, the old family homestead, the sun is always shining.

Granted, night must have fallen regularly, even in summer: I recall grandmotherly warnings of the dangers of the "night air", invoking visions of evil spirits which might attack the unwary child who ventured outside. I even remember rainy days spent among books and other treasures in the roomy attic. There were times, too, when the wind swept through the trees and churned up waves on the lake.

Nevertheless, like the constant sun in a child's drawing, whatever the scene depicted, an aura of warmth and light bathes the recollection of that early childhood period.

The Sveinsson farm was situated on the lakeshore north of Gimli, on the long shallow bay defined to the north by the rocky treed point which hid from sight the neighbouring farm of "Birkinesi". The name "Loni", meaning an inlet of the sea, would be far more relevant to the home our grandfather left in Iceland than to this lakeside property; however, as a child I always thought the "lon" was the stream which wound through the pastureland to the west, fed by artesian wells, passed behind the barn and widened into a deep pool when it reached the sandy beach. This pool, reedy, red with mineral deposits, full of tadpoles and frogs in season, emptied slowly — helped or hindered as dammed or redirected by childish hands — through the sand into the lake.

In the early twenties the hard pioneer years — though not the lifetime habits of hard work — were well in the past for our grandparents, Gisli and Margret Sveinsson. They had achieved a measure of prosperity, their property extending westward from the lake — beyond where a small child might ramble — over pastureland and grain fields, probably to the northern road, where they had donated land for the town cemetery. There were also haylands to the south of town, at Willow Point.

By this time, I believe, grandfather had long since stopped combining fishing with farming, and concentrated on his herd of dairy cattle, horses and poultry, with all the associated activities of mixed farming. Small sections of his land were sold from time to time to "city people" for summer cottages — a process now, it seems, complete — and these cottagers (or "campers", as they were called) became customers as well as friends, arriving on warm summer evenings with their jugs for fresh supplies of milk and perhaps some new-laid eggs, and stopping to chat.

The house "afi" had built a good many years before was a spacious frame structure, three storeys and a cement basement. There was a big screened-in porch at the front, with a sleeping balcony over it, overlooking the water. Downstairs there was a small parlour at the front, separated by sliding doors from the central dining-room. There was a winter kitchen and a big summer kitchen at the back, each with an adjoining pantry. A small bedroom opened off the dining room, but of course the main sleeping quarters were upstairs.

There was a wall telephone in the winter kitchen, and a sink with a pump to draw up water from the cistern in the basement. I

think the water drained directly outside from the sink, and this was the extent of our indoor plumbing. As for electricity, that was more than a decade away for the Gimli area. The cellar opening from the kitchen was dark and mysterious — and out of bounds.

Adjacent to the house at Loni was the well-house. Here the artesian water was piped, flowing constantly into a large wooden box and emptying out into the stream running to the lake. This was the family refrigerator, where milk, cream and butter was chilled and kept fresh in the cold, clear water.

Across the farmyard to the north was the big, red barn, with a lovely, big hayloft. On the south side was a carpentry shop, smelling fragrantly of sawdust and full of interesting tools. It was here that grandfather made a beautiful playhouse for my sister and me — large enough to walk about in and to hold child-size furniture and all our dolls' things.

The spacious kitchen at the back of the house was the family-room in summer: here was the big cook-stove, the work and play areas, and the table where we usually ate, under the row of windows overlooking the farmyard, the road and wooden sidewalk, and the cottages across the way. The front parlour and the dining room were used for formal callers, but the casual visitors who were the more numerous usually stopped in the kitchen.

There always seemed to be people coming and going at Loni. Besides the family there were campers, local friends and tradesmen, relatives and other visitors, some stopping only for coffee or a meal, others staying as house-guests, especially during the Icelandic Festival.

But most important to us, along with our parents, were our grandparents: Gisli, slight of frame but strong, skilled, quick in thought and action, public-spirited, devout and generous; Margret, dignified in carriage, with a straight back and warm, ma-

ternal bosom, well-read and house-proud, cook and poet, and an excellent story-teller. However, in the egocentricity of the young, we saw them simply as our "afi" and "amma", who, in the ageless way of grandparents, were wondrously indulgent and endlessly tolerant of such childish misdemeanours as tracking sand all through the house and leaving the doors ajar for flies. Following the working adults about, we were never told we were in the way: all they were firm about with us was that we should care for each other, and that we should cherish the language and traditions of our ancestors.

From whatever landlocked prairie town we came that year, our arrival at Loni seemed always the same. After the hugs and kisses all round, it was a happy scramble over the long grass of the yard, through the swinging gate, and on to the sandy beach to see the Lake, which we had been looking eagerly for, all the way from Winnipeg Beach. Next, to the well, for a drink of the matchless Gimli water. Only after that was it back to the house, a good meal, and the comfort of the kitchen.

What luxury to go to bed on the screened-in balcony, seeing the stars above and sometimes the moon making a path on the water; then in the morning to wake with the sunbeams sparkling on its surface, and grandma bringing in a tray of cookies and chocolate as a pre-breakfast treat! After breakfast, there was a tour of the farm, renewing friendship with the old dog, Coalie, and the cat, Kisa, visiting the barn and the chicken enclosure. Our favourite horse was an old mare, who, after many years of faithful service, was enjoying an honourable retirement — an early lesson in the humane treatment of animals.

Much of our holiday time at Loni was spent on the beach. Barefoot, dressed in light cotton frocks or play-suits, we built elaborate sand castles with ramparts and moats, and shells for windows. We wan-

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dered treasure-hunting along the beach, and waded among the minnows and water-weeds near shore. Afternoons we put on bathing suits — dark, long-skirted and of cotton which clung awkwardly when wet, but no matter: we paddled and splashed in the water, wading out to the sandbars and digging holes in the wet sand. After bathing it was wonderful to come back to the house for hot chocolate and fresh "kleinur" or rolled pancakes.

In the meantime the work of the farm went on — but it was all fun to us. Whatever troubles afflicted our elders did not touch us, and the days passed happily in and around the area, with an occasional excursion beyond. It was always with sadness — and a collection of stones and shells as souvenirs — that we left Loni in September.

1925 was the last of these carefree Loni summers. Death, financial distress, vandalism and eventually fire brought destruction. Time, and the proliferation of cottages, seems to have swallowed up every trace of the old homestead. The very name "Loni" has become Loney Beach, so that a visitor might casually wonder what unknown Irishman had left his mark on the resort area.

Yet the spirit survives physical destruction. The benefits of a happy childhood, insofar as it was in their power to provide it, the forebearing love — suggestive of the grace of God, yet human in its family pride — these were enduring gifts of an earlier generation. These, and the sense of a great heritage in language, religion, and culture.

So in memory the sun forever shines over the beloved scene of our childhood summers. The heat shimmers off the baking white sand beach, the light sparkles on the blue water, and in front of the big old house stand Margret and Gisli Sveinsson, with their warm smiles and outstretched arms, welcoming their grandchildren back for another summer at Loni.

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