

Public Spectacles, Private Narratives: Canadian Heritage Campaigns, Maternal Trauma and the Rise of the *Koffort* (trunk) in Icelandic-Canadian Popular Memory

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Article abstract

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LAURIE K. BERTRAM

Public Spectacles, Private Narratives: Canadian Heritage Campaigns, Maternal Trauma and the Rise of the *Koffort* (trunk) in Icelandic-Canadian Popular Memory

Résumé

L'engouement tardif pour ce qui était autrefois un objet dévalorisé, la malle de bois des migrants, ou « koffort », au sein de la culture populaire des Islandais du Canada peut se lier aisément à la prolifération des campagnes en faveur du patrimoine visuel centré sur la migration au Canada depuis 1967. Le fait que cet objet ait réapparu, de manière correspondante, dans les musées et les arts locaux, ainsi que dans les familles, laisse penser que les Islandais du Canada n'ont fait qu'adopter l'image commémorative statique de l'histoire telle qu'elle a été instaurée par l'État. Cependant, en se basant sur des entrevues et des photographies qui détaillent les usages mnémoniques de ces objets en privé, cet article permet au contraire d'avancer que la malle est un objet hybride qui présente des archives familiales et des points de contact pour des histoires traumatiques qui s'inspirent également des notions islandaises traditionnelles de fatalité et de systèmes d'identification matrilineaires. Malgré son image publique rédemptrice, la malle est souvent le véhicule par lequel se révèlent les récits, centrés sur les femmes, des traumatismes vécus par les migrants – abus commis par le conjoint, veuvage et mortalité infantile. Plutôt que de donner aux Canadiens une image de cohésion nationale des colons, la malle des migrants est apparue comme un élément d'archive puissant mais dérangeant dans la pratique populaire.

Abstract

The late rise of the previously undervalued migrant trunk, or “koffort” within Icelandic-Canadian popular culture is easily linked to the proliferation of migration-focused visual heritage campaigns in Canada from 1967 onwards. This corresponding re-emergence in local art and museums, as well as in family homes, suggests that Icelandic-Canadians have simply adopted the static, celebratory image of migration history set forth by the state. However, by using interviews and photographs detailing the mnemonic uses of these objects in private, this article contends that the trunk is a hybrid object that offers families archives and points of contact for histories of trauma that also draw from traditional Icelandic notions of fatalism and matrilineal systems of identification. Despite its redemptive public image, the trunk is often the vehicle through which are revealed female-centred narratives of migrant trauma—spousal abuse, widowhood and infant mortality. Rather than delivering a cohesive vision of settler nationalism to Canadians, the migrant trunk has emerged as a powerful, but unsettling archive in popular practice.

As common fixtures in garage sales, attics, and museum galleries alike, 19th- and early-20th-century immigrant trunks are some of the most familiar relics of Canadian immigration history. This article explores the complex history of these relatively common objects in relation to private and public depictions of tragedy in one immigrant community. With its strong oral tradition mythologizing genealogy as it relates to migration and settlement, the Icelandic-Canadian community offers a compelling case for exploring popular ethnic commemoration in Canada. During the last quarter of the 19th century, dire climatic and economic conditions, including a large volcanic eruption, motivated one-fourth to one-third of the island nation's population to leave for North America. Though Icelanders eventually moved across the continent, many initially settled in the 1554 km² (600 square miles) Icelandic land reserve the Canadian government created in Manitoba during 1875. "New Iceland," as it was known, was located in Manitoba's Interlake district, between the shores of Lake Winnipeg and parts of Lake Manitoba. Here, migrants began to establish farms, fisheries and a semi-autonomous district government that would provide them with a degree of self-governance, including the ability to maintain their own language and the administration of their own public school system. The settlement struggled through several early catastrophes, including a smallpox epidemic, starvation, poverty and harsh winters. These adversities prompted many migrants to depart and join or form other Icelandic settlements in North Dakota, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia. Yet Manitoba remains home to more than 30,000 Icelandic-Canadians, or more than one-third of Canada's self-identifying Icelandic population (Statistics Canada 2006).

To both the provincial and federal governments, Icelanders appeared a desirable ethnic group who would help occupy and establish Euro-settler dominance in newly redistributed territories, including those still populated by several Aboriginal communities. In this regard, Icelandic-Canadian settlers were entangled in the Anglo-Canadian campaign to remove and relocate Aboriginal Manitobans, but the community's larger relationship to the Anglo-Canadian state is more complex. The provincial government and proponents of migration touted Icelanders as "racially compatible" cousins to Anglo-Saxons and offered them preferential status through subsidies and land grants. Notwithstanding initial assurances of autonomy and provisions for cultural retention, almost immediately following

arrival, the assimilative pressure of Anglo-Canadian society began to shape Icelandic cultural expression and life. Although language was the cornerstone of 19th-century Icelandic identity, migrant community leaders and members eagerly adopted English for economic reasons. Domestic servants who could speak English earned more than two dollars per month more than those who could not and Icelandic businessmen such as Fredrick Fredrickson (Friðjón Friðriksson) found that English names, habits and language promoted good relations with their Anglo-Canadian counterparts (AM: MG 8 A 6-7, 1874-85, Letter 23, 2). The demise of the colony's semi-autonomous municipal government, also sometimes erroneously referred to as the "Republic of New Iceland" coincided with the decline of the Icelandic language in the community by 1897.

In addition to language, Anglo social pressure and climate conditions in Canada also dramatically shaped migrant material culture. In a letter from 1874, Friðrika Baldvinsdóttir advised family members considering migration to pack clothing that would blend in with the preference for women's black clothing in late-Victorian Canada, noting that "it is good to bring dark coloured cloth and dresses which are very much customary here" (Guðmundsson 2006: 60). While simple dark dresses could pass as Anglo-Victorian, Icelandic women quickly learned that this did not extend to the traditional black, tasselled skullcap known as the *skotthúfa*. An essential part of everyday dress in Iceland, women were photographed wearing the *skotthúfa* on board ships heading to North America, but seldom were seen wearing it following their arrival in Canada. Thorstina (Jackson) Walters recalls that her mother's decision to stop wearing the *skotthúfa* was a direct result of an encounter with North American women who made their disdain obvious:

Her Icelandic costume of black wool, with its tight fitting, skilfully embroidered bodice, full skirt and multi-coloured silk apron was greatly admired, but the small tasselled cap under which she turned up her heavy braids of brown hair did not find favour. In fact she was advised to keep the costume but send the cap back to Iceland. (Walters 1953:11)

Similarly, T. Auróra Stinson reported to historian Nelson Gerrard that homemade *skinnskór*, or Icelandic shoes, attracted unwanted attention from Anglo children and image-conscious Icelanders around the turn of the 20th century. "The village children were inclined to look down upon (*skinnskór*) with the greatest of scorn," she recalled,

adding: “While I wasn’t so keen about them myself, I just pretended that I was, and declared that the ‘stuck-ups’ were just jealous because they had to stomp around in those heavy store-bought ‘clompers’” (Gerrard 1985: 164).

The decision of migrants to Anglicize their public image, through the adoption of English names, language and clothing meant that Icelandic material culture relating to private practices in domestic spaces endured longer than the material culture relating to more openly visible, public interactions with non-Icelanders. Outward markers of difference, including language, were gone or visibly fading fifty years following migration; however, private practices and cultural forms, such as food, knitting and dishes, were more likely to retain distinctive Icelandic characteristics. As Jón Karl Helgason (2006) illustrates in his work on the seven-layered dessert *vinarterta*, food endures as one of the most highly recognizable signifiers of Icelandic-Canadian culture. Similarly, Magnús Einarsson’s research reveals that mid- to late-20th-century popular oral narratives retained distinctive Icelandic traits, including the continued dedication to prophetic dreaming and references to superstitious figures such as *fylgjur* (fetches/spirit followers).

In a practice that reflected an enduring private Icelandic material culture despite the desire to project a public Anglo-image, Carol Hryhorchuk¹ recalls that as a girl, she wore Icelandic underwear underneath her store bought clothes. Though her father bought his family a large home in an all-English suburb of Winnipeg located far from the Icelandic neighbourhood in the West End, Agnes Bardal Comack² also remembered wearing Icelandic underwear. Similarly, Mrs. Bardal Comack owns an electric coffee maker, but still often uses a traditional Icelandic strainer style coffee maker or “coffee sock” in her home.

Once considered “a worthless box in Canada,” (Sivertz n.d.: 3) *kofforts*—Icelandic trunks used for migration to Canada—were, for the most part, stored away and neglected until they began to appear in public and private ethnic commemorative practices during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Visits to Icelandic-Canadian homes across the prairies suggest that the objects have become a popular feature in households, where they often serve in spaces dedicated to the identification and preservation of cultural beliefs and family memory. The changed location of the trunk in the home speaks to a developing attitude of cultural preserva-

tion within an ethnic community that otherwise has been Anglicized, relatively privileged and fully integrated since the mid 20th century. Importantly, this change must be understood within the context of migration-centric heritage movements beginning in 1967 and resulting from the Canadian government’s policy and program initiatives in support of multiculturalism. Following the development of a series of federally and provincially funded heritage campaigns designed to promote both the Canadian Centennial as well as the official adoption of multiculturalism,³ families, community groups and museums retrieved long-neglected *kofforts*. Using comparisons to the ethnic spectacles, or pageants, of the 1920s, this article argues that the rise of the *koffort* reveals a compelling shift within popular Icelandic-Canadian material culture whose form mimics the visions set forth in public heritage campaigns, but whose content reveals the development of more complex and challenging private narrative and mnemonic strategies.

This study shows that visual and material culture campaigns frequently treated the trunk as a metaphor for Canadian ethnic identity and immigrant experience—an association that migrants’ descendants eagerly adopted in private practice. It inquires whether the rise of the *koffort* in popular Icelandic-Canadian material culture can be understood simply as the enthusiastic Icelandic-Canadian embrace of state-issued images of identity and history. Can material and visual forms seamlessly transmit state messages and state-defined notions of history and heritage into private practice and ideas? In response, this paper consults oral testimony, museum displays, monuments, film, advertisements and photographs of *kofforts* in Icelandic-Canadian homes to trace the origins and explore the significance of the lowly immigrant trunk’s rise as a new popular cultural symbol for Icelandic-Canadians. By comparing the use of the trunk in private and public commemoration, it examines popular alterations to the visual campaigns set forth by Canadian heritage agencies. Ultimately, this study argues that material culture offers community members an effective and flexible medium for constructing family-based identities and intergenerational narratives of maternal trauma that undermine public, nationalist images of history, difference and redemptive suffering.

Aside from occasional accounts that refer to the shipment of carved bed boards, the *koffort* was the only piece of furniture that many migrants brought with them from Iceland. In an 1877 letter to his

father, Björn Andresson, a migrant to New Iceland, noted that although “there is little use in bringing wooden vessels as they dry out and become useless, with the exception of such indispensable items as trunks and chests” (Gerrard: 1985: 34). Images of domestic interiors in Iceland illustrate that *kofforts* served as both storage and seating, owing both to limited space in many Icelandic turf houses and the scarcity of wood on the largely treeless island. Migrant accounts and signs of wear on the lids of surviving pieces indicate that instead of acquiring chairs, Icelanders continued to use *kofforts* as both storage and seating in North America (Fig. 1). Thorstina Walters writes:

The colourful Icelandic travelling chests that lined the walls were much better risks (than chairs) for they could withstand even those individuals who leaned backward and forward, not to mention sideways. ... Containing the personal effects that had accompanied the family from the homeland and now they were the favourite resting place in the new home. Nevertheless, even they were becoming the worse for wear, not so much because of that long journey from Iceland, which they had stood fairly well, but because of the present wear and tear and the daily moving from the walls to the table and back at meal time, as well as when coffee was served. Such perpetual motion as they were subjected to in the pioneer’s homes took its toll of even their sturdy frames. (Walters 1953: 73)

Although it is tempting to study continuity in private material culture, my research invites consideration of the ways Anglo-Canadian culture and social pressure continually shaped the private and public cultural practices of Icelandic-Canadians. This is not that images of ethnic difference were banned from public displays in early-20th-century Canada. Rather, Icelandic-Canadian culture has almost always been defined by alternating demands for both assimilation and public performances of ethnicity. Even as the first migrants arrived in Manitoba, curious residents flocked to the docks demanding a display based on their own understanding of Icelanders’ place within established racial categories.

Some rushed aboard the ship and the barges and impatiently asked: “Where are the Icelanders? Show us some Icelanders.” John Taylor (the immigrant agent) obviously was the man to reply ... “These are Icelanders. There you can see them.” But people didn’t believe him. They had expected to see people totally different. “We know what Icelanders look like,” they said, “they are short



of stature, about four feet high, rather short and sturdy, long jet-black hair, a good deal like Eskimos! These are not Icelanders, they are white people.” (Bergmann qtd. in Lindal 1967: 116)

The desire for public spectacles of ethnic difference continued into the 20th century. Icelandic-themed floats and booths became regular fixtures at Manitoba celebrations. Tempered by years of economic development, Anglicization and the establishment of an influential Icelandic middle class by the 1920s, Icelanders had clearly begun to shed the lowly image of “immigrants” from the era of mass migration. This persona was replaced with a new image as rustic “pioneers” who could claim a place within the picturesque process of nation building. Icelandic participants often pursued recognition for their role in the colonization of the West through references to Vikings and the Leifur Eiriksson’s voyage to Newfoundland around 1000 CE. The public spectacles offered an accessible and sometimes playful challenge to British claims to authority in North America. After all, they asked, “didn’t we first discover this country?” (Woodsworth 1909: 93). For the city of Winnipeg’s 50th anniversary celebrations in 1924, a group of Icelanders constructed a large float in the shape of a Viking ship to “sail” down the main street in town. Lined with numerous Icelandic flags and the occasional Union Jack, the float ferried costumed Icelandic pioneers and their descendants through Portage and Main.⁴ A prominent sign proclaimed in English that: “Leifur Eiríksson, An Icelandic (Man) Discovered America” (Fig. 2). In 1927, a massive, horse drawn diorama featuring sixty men wearing

Fig. 1
Koffort with signs of wear on the lid, Canadian Museum of Civilization; artifact number 89-95.1-2. Photo by author.



Fig. 2
*Icelandic float at
Winnipeg's 50th
Anniversary parade,
1924. Courtesy of
Eyrarbakki Icelandic
Heritage Centre in
Hnausa, Manitoba.*

Norse costumes, wigs and false beards in a depiction of the first meeting of the Icelandic parliament in 930 won first place at Winnipeg's celebration of Canada's Diamond Jubilee. The float informed spectators that Icelanders had not only discovered North America, but had also created the world's first representative parliament.

Icelandic-Canadian pageantry frequently referenced the arrival of 19th century migrants as a continuation of Leifur Eiriksson's legacy and blended these motifs with the images of settlement set forth by state heritage agencies. Local float designers and community groups appropriated "pioneer" motifs by recreating settler log cabins and small boats carrying costumed "settlers" arriving in New Iceland. These visions of the past complemented the depiction of other migrant groups, notably the British. Such celebrations created an image of settlement as "rustic" and "charming." In their instructional booklet for parade planners, the federal government's Diamond Jubilee pageant guidebook noted that public spectacles should focus in particular on "those in the West who took up land in the picturesque manner of the ox-train and the prairie-schooner."⁵ This generalized image of migration was part of a larger strategy to foster a sense of national identity and mediate regional differences. As Robert Cupido (1998) notes in his history of the Diamond Jubilee, organizers felt that "a 'vigorous, virile patriotism' could only be founded on a common stock of memories and traditions" (159). The image of the past suggested by the pageant guidebook was free from some of the spectres that alarmed the established order in

contemporary Anglo-Canada, including radicalism, rapid industrialization and a large population of unassimilated immigrants who stubbornly clung to their languages, cultures and national loyalties. Consequently, in pursuit of a "unified historical consciousness" (160) celebrated "in the most positive, complacent terms" (164), depictions of picturesque forms of transport and life were eagerly reproduced in float and tableaux form, while signs of mass migration and international steamships loaded with the "foreign-born" were omitted from Jubilee celebrations. As such, the immigrant trunk, with its steamship affiliations, seldom appeared in those years between Canada's Diamond Jubilee and pre-Centennial festivities and was infrequently associated with cultural or communal historic value.

In addition to the desire for compatibility with, and expressions of loyalty to, Anglo-Canada through parades and pageants, Icelandic-Canadians began cataloguing and collecting cultural treasures during the 1930s.⁶ Their archival urge coincided with the deaths of many of the original migrants during this period, as well as the continual decline of the Icelandic language. Institutions and researchers such as the Manitoba Handicrafts Guild and Dr. Richard Beck sought items that reflected their own understanding of "cultural treasures." Migration itself had shaped early material culture in the community. Typically, objects not intended for labour were physically smaller, reflecting premiums on space during migration, the poverty of migrants and the relative scarcity of certain materials, including wood, in the homeland. Migrants brought homemade dishes and family heirlooms from the homeland including small carved wooden dishes and boxes, jewellery and textiles. Physically, traditional Icelandic spinning wheels and women's national costumes were the largest popular symbols of Icelandic culture brought by migrants and, as such, frequently were used in public displays and celebrations. Regardless of class divisions, migrants also seldom left home without a good supply of books, including volumes of the Icelandic sagas, plays, poetry and novels. As Lord Dufferin noted at the end of his visit to New Iceland in 1877, "I scarcely entered a hovel in Gimli which did not contain a library" (Stewart 1878: 553). Despite growing Anglicization in the community, new initiatives to preserve Icelandic-language literature also emerged during this first quarter of the 20th century, including the opening of the Icelandic-language Jón Bjarnason Academy in 1913 and the beginning of the movement to create a department

of Icelandic Studies at the University of Manitoba (finally achieved in 1951).

While trunks may have contained the important cultural icons that Icelanders transplanted into the new world, they did not constitute cultural icons in and of themselves. Instead, migrants defined the family of *kofforts* according to utility and as embodiments of social and family ties. As the story of Elinborg Samueldottir's *koffort* suggests, both function and emotional significance defined the value of this object.

All her possessions were in a wooden trunk about 70cm long by 50 by 40. ... She treasured it and kept it all her life. It sat in the kitchen beside the sewing machine where it served as a seat and to store things to be sewn. ... It was made of boards about a centimetre in thickness, but wide, and it was painted grey. Though an almost worthless box in Canada it had been a truly great going-away present. It had been made for her by a kindly old man in Burstafell. She knew and appreciated how valuable the wood had been and what labour had gone into shaping it and shaping the hinge and hasp. (Sivertz n.d.: 3)

Although *kofforts* and other functional objects from Iceland may have helped to reinforce and remind their original owners of friends, family and home, successive generations who never travelled to Iceland or never met their kin there, did not necessarily inherit these social ties. As a result, family members who inherited *kofforts* often either disposed of them or continued to use them as storage. Despite that, collectors had begun to seek Icelandic antiques during this period. The aesthetic simplicity and often primary relationship of *kofforts* to migration, rather than to cultural traditions also meant that the antique markets and museum collectors seldom invested significant time or money into attempting to separate these objects from their owners. For example, in his 1967 report to the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Kenneth Peacock photographed two family *kofforts* that John Kjartanson of Hecla, Manitoba, was offering for sale. Although both trunks bore Icelandic folk motifs, Peacock was annoyed at the high price that Kjartanson had set for their sale, exclaiming that "\$500 seems like an exorbitant price for either trunk" (CMCA: Icelandic Artifacts, Peacock Collection, Box 76 F.10). Icelandic-Canadian historian Nelson Gerrard similarly recalled the disproportionately high price of a simple *koffort* in a Winnipeg antique store. "Over the years I stopped by the same shop a few times, and each time I saw the old 'koffort' still in its place, obviously not a



hot collector item as far as the ordinary antique collector was concerned" he recalled, in a June 7, 1991, article for *Lögberg-Heimskringla*.

Undoubtedly, uninterested family members destroyed or discarded many *kofforts*. Yet, thanks to their sturdy construction and continued usefulness as storage containers, *kofforts* were more likely to survive across generations than smaller objects, such as the *skotthúfa* or Icelandic-language Bibles. Beyond domestic storage, *kofforts* served a useful purpose on Icelandic-Canadian farms. Until around 2003, Charlie Ostertag of Riverton, Manitoba, used a family *koffort* as a tool chest in his farm machine shed (Fig 3). Logan Bjarnason's family similarly used theirs as a tool chest that they attached to the back of a threshing machine. They repainted another one and tipped it on one end for use as a cupboard and well-worn stand for their drinking water pail. The *koffort* was remarkably sturdy, "considering we ten children, in turn, carried and plunked pails of water on it and rummaged inside for whatever was needed, it has weathered very well" Bjarnason recalled in a *Lögberg-Heimskringla* article on May 10, 1991.⁷

The rural background of many *koffort* owners suggests that the objects were perhaps more likely to stay in the possession of farm families because of the plentiful storage space available in rural homes. Many Icelandic families who remained in the Interlake region stored *kofforts* in unfinished basements and in outbuildings on farms. In some cases they remained virtually forgotten for long periods until later generations took interest. Lynne Bazilewich⁸ recalls that before she decided to reclaim an old family *koffort*, it remained untouched in an outbuilding on the farm.

Fig. 3
Charlie Ostertag with a family *koffort* that was reused as a tool chest; Riverton, Manitoba.
Photo by author.

Fig. 4
Lynne Bazilewich with
a refurbished family
koffort in the heart
of her living room in
Arborg, Manitoba.
Photo by author.



This one I found in the granary and I asked my aunt what this was and she told me it was her grandmother's. So then of course I said, "Well if nobody wants it can I have it?" Then I took it from the granary and put it in that little shed there—an old chicken coop—and it actually sat there for several years. I didn't know what to do with it because it was such a mess.

Eventually Bazilewich began to strip away at the many layers of paint in an attempt to return the *koffort* to its original appearance. "It had been painted several times," she recalled, "and it was a real mess—the paint was all falling apart and chipping off like so I scraped it down." Upon discovering what was likely the original red iron-oxide paint beneath the many layers, she painted it that colour because she "wanted it to look like it maybe was when it came over." Once the project was complete, she placed the refurbished *koffort* in the centre of her living room where it is now stores books related to Iceland and her family history (Fig. 4). The prominence of the *koffort* in Bazilewich's home, as well as the many hours she dedicated to its refurbishment, speaks to the significance invested in its preservation and her desire to recreate an aspect of the migration experience. The process and the object itself, she comments, offers a venue for both preserving the stories of, and showing

respect for, the difficulties her family experienced during migration. "It's important to remember the hardships that people went through, and who they were," she said. "I think they would appreciate that. I think that they (*kofforts*) were one of the most important things for them."

Although much of the original social context and significance of *kofforts* was lost to third, fourth and fifth generation Icelandic-Canadians, subsequent generations began to take interest in the "almost worthless boxes" (Silvertz n.d.: 3). From the 1970s onward, migrants' descendants began to retrieve family *kofforts* from barns, basements and garages and bring them into the house, as Lynne Bazilewich had. Margret Wishnowski⁹ found a small family *koffort* in her garage, placed there by a family member after the death of her uncle Bjössi. She refinished it, and put it in her living room. She recalled the surprise she felt in learning that the object had received so little attention. "It was sitting in my garage for a long time and then I started thinking: 'don't tell me this is the trunk he brought from Iceland!'" While visiting family in Iceland she noticed a matching *koffort* in her cousin's house, which had clearly been made by the same person during the same time period. Wishnowski now uses her own small *koffort* to display and store gifts from her family, including a hand-woven woolen cloth from Iceland and Icelandic-language books and older family mementoes, including a small collection of family photographs.

Other community members carefully refurbished old *kofforts* at the urging of younger generations, as did Charlie Ostertag who was persuaded by his daughter to retire his toolbox and to strip and refinish it. Some community members have stubbornly retrieved *kofforts* despite their advanced states of decay. In the above mentioned newspaper article, Logan Bjarnason tells of collecting what was left of a family *koffort* in a pasture before bringing the old hewn boards into the house to protect them. "I first remember seeing it, sitting out in the pasture, near where my father had dismantled the threshing machine" he recalled. When he learned of its origin, he "rescued the pieces from the relentless rubbing of the cattle." He painted it green because his brother, Rae, told him it had been the original colour.

The resurfacing of the *koffort* in Icelandic-Canadian domestic space and private commemoration speaks to the community's continual mediation between Anglo and Icelandic notions of history and heritage. Community members employ objects

from Iceland to discuss their families' origins there, but, as in the 1920s, popular notions of history and historically significant objects are still shaped by state-sponsored heritage campaigns. The reinstatement of previously neglected *kofforts* into Icelandic-Canadian homes approximately one hundred years following migration is clearly related to the onslaught of images of migration funded and broadcast by the Canadian Centennial celebrations and by multicultural agencies. From 1967 onward, heritage campaigns and displays employed trunks from a variety of migrant groups as symbols of migration, identity and nation building in museum galleries, television programs and movies, advertisements, school curricula and monuments.

In contrast to the celebrations surrounding Canada's Diamond Jubilee in 1927, non-Anglo migrants and culture occupied a more important place within the images of history set forth during the celebration of the Canadian Centennial in 1967. The identification, collection and re-dissemination of Euro-Canadian folk traditions were an important part of the initial festivities, which were further fostered by the declaration of Canada's official adoption of multiculturalism in 1971. Both campaigns fuelled continued interest into the 1970s, evident in the growth of new initiatives and agencies such as the National Museum of Man's Canadian Centre for Folklore Studies in 1970 and smaller scale local initiatives in Manitoba, such as the Ukrainian Catholic Women's League's St. Volodymyr Museum and the founding of the Mennonite Heritage Village.

Canada was not alone in shifting its focus towards migration and ethnic cultures during the 1960s and 1970s. In his work on ethnic revivals, or reveries, Matthew Frye Jacobson (2006) notes that mass-migration became an important component of American commemorative campaigns and popular culture during this period. Films such as *Roots* and *The Godfather* speak to this phenomenon. The origins of this shift, he writes, were motivated by the desire of white Americans who hoped to deflect the civil rights movement's critique of white privilege by reimagining themselves as equally oppressed "newcomers" (2006: 194-95). Canada's new desire to commemorate its diverse ethnic roots similarly coincided with the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) crisis, the intensification of the Quebec separatist movement as well as the growth of First Nations organizations such as the National Indian Brotherhood and their demands for the acknowledgement and defence of treaty

rights. As Jacobson's work and Canadian heritage campaigns suggest, national creation narratives in both the United States and Canada were shifting away from claims to privilege and status through tributes to Plymouth Rock pilgrims or Loyalist pioneers. Instead, new heritage campaigns focused on constructing and broadcasting competing white European claims to distinction and oppression by promoting histories of migrant hardship.

Once shunned from the picturesque displays of the 1920s, trunks became a popular symbol of settlement history from the 1970s onwards. Centennial museum exhibits such as the Manitoba Museum's *Mass Migration to Manitoba After 1870* used groupings of trunks as central motifs, as well as educational tools for exploring the role of mass migration as part of a larger chronology of nation building. Upon entering the gallery, visitors met the sole figure of a young immigrant woman seated on a trunk (Fig. 5). Her generic clothing concealed the mannequin's potential ethnic affiliations, since her shirt, shawl and headscarf were made from plain, un-hemmed, pieces of fabric pinned to her body. The display conveys a sense of isolation, poverty and anonymity while providing a generalized vision of arriving migrants. The personal hardship of migrants during transit was also an important component of the Canadian Museum of Civilization's *Everyman's Heritage* permanent



Fig. 5
Mass Migration to
Manitoba gallery,
Manitoba Museum.
Photo by author.

exhibit and corresponding coffee table book, which were launched in 1978. The museum created a full-scale diorama of the hold of an immigrant ship, featuring sleeping and seasick mannequins. The diorama even rocked side to side to convey the experience of motion sickness to visitors.

Larger national and provincial museums continue to use the trunk to emphasize migration as part of a continuous and relatively generic process. In Manitoba, smaller ethnic museums employ trunks to identify the time and the space of community histories of migration. On a 2008 visit to the Oseredok Museum at the Ukrainian Cultural and Education Centre in Winnipeg, for example, I found a grouping of trunks and luggage as the starting point for museum guests. This permanent exhibit sits beneath pictures of early Ukrainian settlers and the words “The Promise of Freedom. The Promise of Land. The Promise of a New Beginning.” Despite the emphasis on the details of their own group, however, few of the museums focus on history and life in the home country. Instead, migration appears as the point of origin in most displays and the arrival of migrants and their luggage in Canada serves as the defining moment in the history of the community.

The trunk was not simply a prop in multiple post-1967 depictions of migration. It was a central motif and symbol through which heritage agencies connected the personal experiences and trials of migrants to the larger process of nation building. One woman’s trunk was the central focus of the film *1911*, which aired on CBC in 1979 as part of an Imperial Oil television miniseries. It was also featured in a coffee table book (Findlay 1979) and a school curriculum package called *The Newcomers*. The film uses the image of packing and unpacking a trunk to discuss assimilation, oppression and cultural retention. It depicts the arrival of a Danish migrant couple in an exploitative lumber company town in the Canadian province of New Brunswick. The film treats the woman’s initial refusal to unpack her trunk, filled with china and linens from Denmark, as a symbol of her resistance to settling in Canada and her angry rejection of assimilation. Her eventual decision to stay in Canada following the birth of her two children coincides with the eventual unpacking of the trunk’s contents. In the final scene, the woman’s thoroughly Canadian daughter returns to the family home in the 1940s dressed in a military uniform. Upon seeing her mother’s trunk at the foot of the stairs, she decides to leave it behind. The film’s depiction of personal encounters with cultural

loss and assimilation reflected the popularity and effectiveness of immigrant trunk symbolism in broadcasting the emotive aspects of migration. Such images encouraged viewers to personally identify and sympathize with prescribed images of the hardship of migration, including alienation, poverty and adaptation.

Migration itself was recast as a traumatic and difficult, but ultimately fruitful process in promotional campaigns that saw the Museum of Civilization’s advertisement in the October issue of MacLeans Magazine (1980) announcing the opening of the “*Everyman’s Heritage*” and “*A Few Acres of Snow*” exhibition halls. Using a drawing of an Icelandic *koffort* filled with artifacts from the homeland, the advertisement asked viewers: “Could you pack your life in one trunk and come to Canada?” The *koffort* used in the ad is highly ornate and was painted by renowned folk artist Solvi Helgasson in the 1830s before being brought to Canada in 1920. Filled with richly coloured textiles, a folk costume and a *langspil* (an obscure Icelandic musical instrument), the trunk is depicted as a cultural treasure chest, offering Canadian viewers a rich and colourful vision of Icelandic culture. Yet, though the *koffort* and the contents are Icelandic, the advertisement stresses their symbolic, unifying power as part of “the common heritage of all Canadians.” It reads:

Most of the immigrants didn’t really know what to expect when they packed their meagre belongings, sometimes into a single trunk, and came to this rich and harsh new land. They were pulled here by the promise of land, the possibility of work, the promise of religious and political freedom; a chance to share in the building of this country.

This ultimately redemptive image of migrant hardship and isolation fostered by national heritage agencies also informed the creation of smaller, local heritage displays. In Gimli, Manitoba, the migration exhibition in the New Iceland Heritage Museum encourages visitors to engage with the emotional and psychological experience of migration. It uses several *kofforts* as display cases on the beach of a faux Icelandic harbour as mannequins dressed as migrants prepare to depart (Fig. 6). The first of three *kofforts* is a simple, unadorned black chest which sits beside a panel bearing the emotional poem about family separation by Matthías Jochumsson¹⁰ entitled “*Vertu sæl til móður minnar*” (Farewell to my mother).

Farewell to thee mother,
To far distant places destiny calls me away

from thy side.
 Keep me no longer.
 Thy parting embraces fondly detain,
 when I must not abide.

The second, opened to reveal women's sewing and spinning implements sits beside a panel entitled "Setting Sail" which includes written testaments about the dangers of the voyage to Canada, including the premature deaths of group members. A third simple *koffort* sits propped open to reveal a selection of horn spoons, china, ornamental textiles and carvings beside a panel reading "Difficult Choices." The panel encourages visitors to imagine what they would pack for life in the new world and includes a translated letter from an emigrant who recommended certain items. A postscript by museum staff emphasizes the importance of books to emigrants, noting "every family brought as many books as possible—to keep the Icelandic language alive and to teach the children their heritage."

Assertions that literacy, language and books constitute the heart of Icelandic culture in Canada seem strange considering the generally low value that many migrants' descendants attach to Icelandic-language books. Anglicization has dramatically affected the cultural relevance of these objects and their limited decorative value makes them less popular as either a marker of ethnicity or as educational tools. Although Icelandic books appear occasionally in depictions of Icelandic-Canadian material culture (such as, for example, the 1999 "Heritage Treasures" calendar produced for the Icelandic National League), they are often strictly ornamental. The calendar's depiction of people with family heirlooms from Iceland shows only older community members reading family books, while younger members stare straight at the camera while holding or standing near closed books (Fig. 7). In 2003, the New Iceland Heritage Museum in Gimli carefully partitioned their displays of *kofforts* and other cultural treasures from less-valued Icelandic-language books. The museum, which receives regular inquiries about the donation and/or value of Icelandic-language books, previously stacked dozens of books on the carpeted floor of their gallery without any protection, while its carvings, dishes and textiles lay carefully protected by glass (Fig. 8).

The low cultural value of the objects may be attributed to the decline of religiosity in the community. Migrants brought many religious books that would be of limited interest to more recent generations. More likely, however, Icelandic-language



Fig. 6
 New Iceland Heritage
 Museum Gallery in
 Gimli, Manitoba.
 Photo by author.

books have been rendered inaccessible by years of Anglicization and offer unpleasant reminders of cultural loss, rather than continuity and retention. In contrast, family *kofforts* and other non-literary mementos of migration create accessible, familiar images of the past that reflect the cultural changes that Icelandic-Canadians have faced in the past hundred years. They provide an oral narrative framework and point of contact between the past and the present for the telling of foundational histories across languages and generations.

At first glance, the decline of the Icelandic language and the corresponding rise of contained, public displays of Icelandic-ness that reflect the images of culture and history set forth by state heritage agencies suggests a static self-perception of

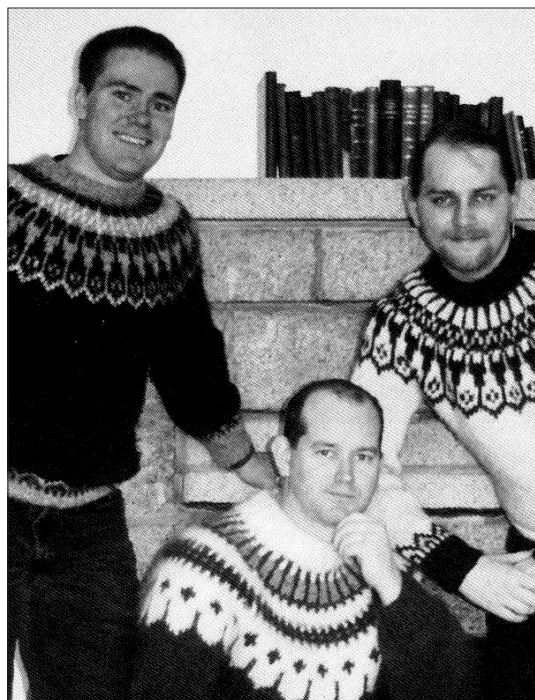


Fig. 7
 Young men in front of
 closed books. Photo by
 Linda Bjarnason.

the community's past and dim future for a continued sense of identity in Canada. Multicultural Canadian visual campaigns have undoubtedly influenced the rise of the migrant trunk, helping to transform it into a subtle but widespread symbol of the migrant past. This influence has been a source of concern for scholars who study the community. Daisy Neijmann cautions that multicultural depictions of the Icelandic-Canadian past reinforce the idea of inevitable assimilation by creating an image of Icelandic culture as having "existed with greater authenticity in the past" (Neijmann 1997: 373). As non-community members impose their own definition of "distinctive" cultural traditions on the community, the private practices and beliefs of Icelandic-Canadians appear insignificant, or "not Icelandic enough." The demand for visual and material representations of ethnic identity in multicultural celebrations creates a form of pressure on Icelandic-Canadians to produce what Neijmann sees as anachronistic and artificial symbols of Icelandic-ness.

That which is experienced as being Icelandic is private, largely invisible to outsiders, and not what is publicly expected to be authentically Icelandic. ...Yet it is exactly the visual and the objectified that multiculturalism expects, as it relies on an ossified view of culture, stuck in the time of immigration and does not take into consideration

that cultures and identities change with time and circumstances. (Neijmann 1997: 373)

Certainly heritage agencies have used the migrant trunk to encourage certain emotional responses that ultimately emphasize the positive, unifying and often generic experience of migration. As the reclaiming of multiple family *kofforts* from barns, attics and basements suggests, Icelandic-Canadians have adopted the practice of using the trunk to represent migration and otherness as well as containing memories of the past. In her work on the relationship between Icelandic-Canadians and their First Nations neighbours, Anne Brydon discusses the construction of foundational Icelandic-Canadian narratives in "breeding amnesias"; that is, omissions that are part of a strategy "to suppress, displace and transmute pain" (Brydon 2001: 164). Such omissions are certainly characteristic of early, tense interactions with the neighbouring Sandy Bar Band, but stand in stark contrast to accounts of trauma that characterize family narratives.

Although heritage agencies hoped to harness the image of migrant hardship to an ultimately positive image, the role of family migration mementos suggests that in popular practice the material world functions as both a container and a conveyer of uncomfortable, unsettling pasts that illuminates loyalty to familial, rather than national systems of identification. Community members do not use family objects to discuss their origins in terms of a redemptive story of nations. Instead, they often address female bodies that endured trauma in significant, highly memorable and unresolved ways. The tendency to identify and commemorate familial bodies, rather than nations, as points of origin is evident first in the absence of references to living in Iceland. Older interviewees whose parents and grandparents migrated often note that they "never really talked about Iceland." Margret Wishnowski recalls that "coming from Iceland" was sometimes a very abstract concept for those who had never been, particularly when parents did not feel the need to talk about the home country to their children. She remembers her dad "telling me stories about Winnipeg, but not stories about Iceland. We didn't ask and they didn't tell. I guess it was just like this foreign place that they've come from and nobody will ever go there again...."

This loss of memory regarding life in Iceland illustrates that although *kofforts* continue to serve as a mnemonic tool, later generations have constructed new narratives to help identify their roots outside of Canada. *Kofforts* still offer an

Fig. 8
New Iceland Heritage
Museum Gallery
display of Icelandic
books. Photo by author.



accessible reference point for an otherwise abstract point of national origin, but they act first as an embodiment of lineage. Far from accessorizing a simple genealogical chart, these objects help to express and engage with family history through the creation of dynamic and multi-faceted historical landscapes. Icelandic-Canadians envision lineage through multiple, complementary spaces of origin including maternal and paternal migrant bodies, the settler house, the prairie landscape, the country of origin and the heirloom, to name a few. The spaces are essential to creating and maintaining a sense of memory of otherwise absent and abstract family members and experiences.

Due to its role in the commemoration of long-deceased family members, *kofforts* and other mementoes of migrant experience and trauma often evoke a wide range of emotions. Intergenerational memories of accidents and premature death differ significantly from first-hand traumatic memory. As Ruth Leys argues, first-hand traumatic experience leaves a mental “reality imprint” in which “the experience of trauma appears fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented *as* past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, disassociated traumatic present” (Leys 2000: 2). In contrast, a range of forces shape historical and intergenerational observance of past traumas in addition to the more intensely memorable nature of traumatic narrative. Commemoration reflects the contemporary needs, cultural values and the temporal distance of those who commemorate, including their ability to place the traumatic incident into a larger historical context and narrative. Kenneth Foote illustrates that the commemoration of individual and mass-trauma may be used to construct and reinforce nationalist narratives of pride, sacrifice and service. Yet, he asserts, negative emotions also shape the observance of violence and tragedy in historical landscapes, including feelings of ambiguity and shame. As a result, Foote (1997: 322) argues that the meaning of many traumatic episodes remain unresolved and present contradictory visions of history that may also “stand in the way of sanctification and tradition building” that reinforce entrenched hierarchies.

In her analysis of Icelandic-Canadian authors, Daisy Neijmann argues that the fatalism characterizing literature from the community stems from *ragnarök*, or a cyclical, apocalyptic, pre-Christian view of the universe. She attributes the continuation of this tradition and the popularity of black humour to the cultural weight of Norse literature as well as the poor living conditions in Iceland prior to the

20th century (Neijmann 1997: 140). Premature death in any context is also a popular subject in Icelandic-Canadian family lore; however, those connected to migration carry considerable weight. Oral narratives often discuss early death related to the trans-Atlantic passage, settlement and the community’s smallpox epidemic as a way of asserting status and constructing the family’s foundational story. The narratives use the notion of sacrifice to express a conflicted relationship to migration that carefully acknowledges the shortcomings of life in Canada. Ken Melsted¹¹ of Wynyard, Saskatchewan, used his grandfather’s smallpox vaccination certificate from 1871 to commemorate the tumultuous circumstances of life in Iceland, but he carefully acknowledged the experience of suffering and tragedy on both sides of the Atlantic.

I may remember the past, the 19th century in northern Iceland with its poverty and near starvation, but that is not “special,” nor is it a fond memory. ... My great-grandmother had six small children when her husband was lost in a fishing accident in the North Atlantic. They virtually starved in Iceland, (before) they were moved to a farm about three miles out of Gimli which was rock, gravel and bush. Again they virtually starved until they were moved to the Mountain district of North Dakota where everyone began to prosper. (2003)

As Melsted’s account illustrates, popular Icelandic-Canadian migration narratives, that is, intergenerational stories about migration told in private between family or friends, frequently reference instances of trauma involving female family members. Often, the narratives focus on the maternal body and discuss trauma as it related to childbirth and infant mortality. The theme of child mortality is pronounced in Icelandic-Canadian literature and film including Laura Goodman Salverson’s (1981) *Confessions of an Immigrant’s Daughter*, Kristjana Gunnars’ (1981) *Wake Pick Poems*, Guy Maddin’s (1988) film, *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*. The tendency to reconstruct and emphasize accounts of maternal trauma may be related to what Richard M. Rice (1971)¹² observes as the matrilineal bias in the community. Through a survey of family ties separated according to maternal and paternal lines, Rice contends that in the Icelandic-Canadian community, family bonds tend to be gynocentric, or stronger through the maternal line. It is unclear whether Icelandic-Canadians are less likely to commemorate female relatives on their paternal sides, since representations of migrant maternal bodies from both sides are important sites of both

commemoration and contest in the community. One Icelandic-Canadian woman in Winnipeg commemorated the 19th-century death of her paternal grandmother in Iceland by travelling there to visit the ornate tombstone, which the family had commissioned in Canada and shipped overseas. Though she kept a mounted photograph of herself standing at the tombstone in Iceland in her living room, she noted that the grave of her grandfather, whose alcoholism had reportedly hastened his wife's death, remained unmarked (until recently) in a Winnipeg cemetery.

Frequent allusions to the mistreatment or abuse of women in intergenerational family accounts of migration suggest the gravity with which many Icelandic-Canadians viewed gendered violence and/or forms of trauma endured by female family members in the past. Lynne Bazilewich's account of her maternal and paternal families' arrivals in the West alludes to stories of both child death and wife abuse as factors in the decision to migrate more than 120 years prior.

(My family) didn't come straight to Canada, they came to North Dakota first. Now I don't remember the year (but) when they were first coming they had four sons but by the time they got to North Dakota there was only two sons left. (On the other side of the family) my grandfather's mother—her name was Ragnheidar Davidsdóttir—she came when her son (her son came down here first) he was getting married and he sent for her. She was in a marriage that was ... was with a man ... a man who was a drunk (or something) ... so he sent for her.

Although Icelandic-Canadians have borrowed the form of the migrant trunk made popular in state-funded campaigns, these objects are also employed in the construction of a vision of the migrant past that reflect the needs and experiences of their owners. The experiences of migrant women also appear in privately and publically funded depictions of migration intended for public display, but discrepancies between private and public depictions of migration often arise around the issue of trauma. For some community members, the ultimately redemptive image of migrant "hardship" set forth by these agencies conflicts with familial memories of trauma in relation to migration. The tendency of heritage agencies to downplay or ignore stories that offer unsettling images of migration is evident in Gimli's White Rock Monument to Jón Jóhannsson. The beach upon which Icelandic migrants first arrived in the Gimli area, Willow Point, has been the subject of

several commemorative campaigns. In 1950, Árni Sigurðsson commemorated the 75th anniversary of the arrival of migrants in his painting, *The Landing at Willow Point*. His work was later reissued as a print and postcard and eventually a stamp for the Icelandic postal service in 2000. In the painting, migrants busily unpack cultural symbols onto the beach, including spinning wheels and *kofforts* filled with migrant's possessions. In the foreground, a woman wearing a *skotthúfa* and an Icelandic lace pin shawl cradles a baby. While private accounts of migration often emphasize the difficulty with which family members faced infant mortality, this public image is most likely a direct reference to the story of the birth of a baby on the beach shortly following the landing. Since migration, community leaders and historians have invoked the narrative of this birth as a symbol of new beginnings for the migrants. All his life, Jóhannsson enjoyed a certain degree of status as this first Iclander born in Western Canada, including special mention in local history books and a monument dedicated to the landing and to him by name. Also known as the White Rock Monument, the marker was created in the 1950s using a large white rock resembling the one beside which Jóhannsson's mother reportedly gave birth (Fig. 9). The rock has now become an annual site of pilgrimage for Icelandic-Canadians during the Icelandic National League's Gimli chapter's "Walk to the Rock" where participants contemplate "the hardships that the first pioneers overcame in establishing the community of Gimli and how they persevered to ensure the New Iceland settlement would survive and flourish" (Icelandic National League, Gimli Chapter: 2009).¹³

As Nelson Gerrard notes, however, Jóhannsson, was actually born in November, not October. Moreover, he was not the first, but the third child born in the settlement. The use of the October birth date is a reference to a different male baby born shortly following the arrival by the name of Jónas Friðrik Bjarnason. A second female child named Steinvör Wilhelmina Pálsdóttir was born after Bjarnason. Unfortunately, both children died before their first birthdays from complications arising from the poor living conditions in early New Iceland—Bjarnason of smallpox and Pálsdóttir of "cramps."¹⁴ These children died young, but they lived well past their birth dates and their deaths should not be confused with miscarriages or stillbirths. While the lives and deaths of both Bjarnason and Pálsdóttir would be important components of a

popular family narrative of migration, these stories offer a critical vision of migration and settlement as an unsuccessful venture. In contrast, Jóhannsson's survival into adulthood marked his birth as the only legitimate and memorable of the three.

The public disavowal of incidents that occupy a central part of private Icelandic-Canadian identity and family narratives illustrates the community's continual navigation of the demands set forth by Canadian heritage agencies. As in the usage of Norse and Viking imagery in the 1920s, the rise of the trunk and public spectacles of mass-migration since 1967 create a palatable, recognizable image of the community that reinforces the image desired by (often) state-funded heritage agencies. The visual campaigns of these heritage agencies, including films and museum displays have clearly influenced popular Icelandic-Canadian material culture. By recasting migration as a universal creation narrative for all Canadians, such campaigns invested cultural value and historical significance into trunks, objects that often lost much of their value following the deaths of their original owners.

At first glance, the decision of community members to retrieve previously "useless boxes" from barns, attics and basements following the creation of multiple visual campaigns celebrating the historical significance and emotional power of these objects, suggests a straightforward appropriation of the new images of the past set forth by heritage agencies. Yet, in this case, prescriptive images of the past and popular material cultural practice are divided on the issue of trauma. In keeping with the spectacles of migration set forth by agencies such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Canadian Museum of Civilization, public representations of the history of Icelandic communities encourage the identification and commemoration of hardship as a significant, but ultimately redemptive



Fig. 9
Girl in Icelandic costume beside White Rock Monument. Photo by Nelson Gerrard, Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre.

experience. Though Icelandic-Canadians may have re-appropriated the form of the trunk as a result of these campaigns, they did not simply accept the accompanying narrative. Rather, the rise of the *koffort* in modern Icelandic-Canadian popular culture reveals the importance of the object in the construction of familial, rather than national identities. In popular practice *kofforts* help to construct images of the past that actually critique and confront narratives of redemptive trauma. As in public heritage campaigns, Icelandic-Canadians continue to identify migration and settlement as the point of origin: however, this process is made memorable not because of its affiliation with nation-building, but because of its relationship to unredeemed trauma, that is, instances of loss that offer a critical image of migration.

Notes

1. Interviewed by author, July 9, 2009.
2. Interviewed by author, July 10, 2009.
3. Such campaigns resulted in the development of community museums, museum exhibits, films and advertisements.
4. Located in downtown Winnipeg, the intersection of Portage and Main is widely known across Canada.
5. The forty-eight page booklet was published in 1927 by the National Committee for the Celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, Ottawa.
6. As noted in the article "*Seytjándá ársþing þjóðræknisfelagsins*" that appeared in the Icelandic-Canadian newspaper *Lögberg* on April 16, 1936.
7. The article is titled "Trunks From Iceland."
8. Interviewed by author, January 18, 2003.
9. Interviewed by author, February 8, 2003.
10. Translation courtesy of staff at the New Iceland Heritage Museum in Gimli, Manitoba.
11. Personal correspondence with author on February 4, 2003.
12. Rice, Richard M. 1971. "Mothers, Daughters, and Granddaughters: An examination of the Matrilineal Bias and Related Variables in Jews and Icelanders in Canada" (masters thesis, University of Manitoba).
13. Please see <http://www.inlofna.org/Gimli/index.html> (accessed July 20, 2009).
14. This information is from S. J. Björnsson's "*Skýrsla yfir dána árið*" (Report of Deaths before 1876). Translation courtesy of Nelson Gerrard, archivist of the Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre, Hnaua, Manitoba.

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