

Isfeld Family of South Beach, Gimli

This speech was given by Lawrence Frantz, great grandson of Sigurjon Isfeld, at the launch of the book *Gimli Harbour & Fishery: An Illustrated History*, 2017

Sigurjon Eirksson Isfeld was born in 1874 on a farm called Fjaroarkot at the end of Mjoifjordur Inlet on the east coast of Iceland to Eirikur Palsson Isfeld and Ingibjorg Einarsdottir. In 1881 Eirikur drown while fishing leaving Ingibjorg with nine children. In 1884 Ingibjorg married Thorsteinn Jonsson, a farm hand she had hired to help out on the farm. We was 9 years younger than her. They had one son, Olafur (Oli) Thorsteinsson. In 1886 Sigurjon, his mother, step-father and most of his siblings left Iceland ending up in Akra (now Cavalier) North Dakota.

The family moved to Husavik, New Iceland (Manitoba) in 1889 settling on NW 20-18-4E. Sigurjon started to raise huskies at this time. He married Maria Tofhildur Jonasson in April 1903. He was 29, she was 18. They had 4 children; Aurora (1904), Stefan (Steve)(1906), John (my Avi)(1909) and Emily (1912). It was when Sigurjon and Maria married that they received three acres of land on South Colonization Road from Maria's parents Benedikt Jonasson and Anna Torfadottir who at the time owned a large portion of what is now South Beach. On this property (which is still in the family), Sigurjon continued to raise and train sled dogs. And he fished. But I don't think he did a lot of fishing with everything else he had going on. Using his dog teams he would transport other fishermen, prospectors, and fur traders all over the Interlake and beyond, even taking a prospector to Norway House.

I have not been able to find out how Sir Ernest Shackleton, the Antarctic explorer found out about my old Avi's ability to train sled dogs, but obviously he did. Because in 1914 Sigurjon, JB Johnson and Jack Castleman transported 100 dogs in individual crates on 3 cattle cars to Montreal, Quebec. Three days later they put the dogs on the ship Montcalm and 16 days later delivered them to Shackleton in London, England. After 10 days of luxurious living, paid for by Shackleton, and with Germany invading Belgium, they thought it best to head home. Before they left Shackleton asked Sigurjon to accompany him to the South Pole to handle the dogs. Sigurjon wired home to Maria for her thoughts. She wired

back, "Come home!" The three men received engraved pocket watches and expensive razors from Shackleton before they left Britain. They returned on the Empress of Britain. It took 6 days. Old Avi said that the Montcalm had nicer staterooms than the Empress.

Shackleton's intent was to walk across the South Pole, 'Antartica'. He knew he couldn't carry all his supplies from start to finish. So his plan was to take his ship Endurance and 70 dogs to one side and another ship, the Aurora with 30 dogs would be on the other side. A crew ventured inland and set up caches for him to find and use to complete the crossing. Unfortunately Shackleton and his men never made it on to Antartica. Endurance got trapped in ice. After 15 months with the crew of 27 men hoping for the ice to break apart the boat broke apart and sank. Now the crew and dogs were on the ice flow with a couple of 22 foot life boats. Unfortunately all the dogs perished. There was not enough food for both men and dogs. The men were able to use the lifeboat to get to Elephant Island. Then Shackleton and 5 men sailed one of the lifeboats 800 miles to South Georgia Island where there was a Norwegian whaling station. The station sent out a ship to Elephant Island to pick up all the rest of Shackleton's crew. The 30 dogs from the Aurora were dispersed, some in New Zealand, some in England. Three dogs ended up at London Zoo.

Sigurjon and his son John also supplied dogs for Admiral Richard Byrd's 1933 Antarctic expedition. How many of the 150 dogs that Byrd took with him came from Sigurjon I don't know. But Sigurjon had an in. Allen Innes-Taylor, a pilot and the chief of operations for the Antarctic expedition was the older brother of Ian Innes-Taylor who was married to Aurora, Sigurjon's daughter.

Sigurjon was always doing something with his dogs. I'm not sure of the year but Sigurjon, Captain Baldi Anderson and Gudjon Arnason took teams of dogs to Chicago, Illinois for use in the filming of a movie called "The Golden Goose Chase". The film was about a young girl in the Yukon during the Gold Rush. How they made Chicago look like the Yukon? Movie magic. Sigurjon and his son Steve would also take teams to Winnipeg during February bonspiels to give rides on the Red River for 25 cents. He would also go to The Pas, Manitoba to compete in the Trapper Festival.

When I was a young kid visiting Avi and Amma, Sigurjon "Old Avi" was there living with them. He was in his 80's and though he was going blind he moved about with stature. He was a big man. For about the last 10 years of his life he lived with his daughter Emily in Edmonton, Alberta. He died in 1973, 99 years old. Also when I was a youngster there were still sled dogs at the homestead. My mom's brothers, Bobbie and Allen, would harness the dogs and take us kids for sleigh rides up and down Colonization Road and out onto the lake.

The last husky, whose name was Glommer, was huge and passed away when I was 12. And so ended the relationship of Isfelds and huskies.