

Mina-Skan: When Friendships and Work Began with a Fish Box

The Life and Times of Leifi Hallgrimson and Walter Nanowin

Copyright December 2018 Glenn Sigurdson

Scene 1 – Big Black River Station, June 1936

He awoke to a rattling sound. "What the hell is that?" he thought, opening his eyes. He looked across the room to the window over his desk. Damn window pane. Most men, after realizing it was a window pane, would have pulled the eiderdown over their head and snored on. Leifi was not that kind of man. He ran a tight ship.

The wind had shifted to the northwest

overnight, blowing cold air across the long expanse of the Artic and over the still-frigid waters of Lake Winnipeg. The barometer had been right. The dial had dropped all day, which he knew from experience signalled the south wind would likely shift to the northwest. Luckily, the freighter had pulled in at eleven that night. From then until 1 a.m., when she pulled out of the station, the shed and dock had bustled with activity as the boat crew, shore crew and many fishermen



A classic picture of a Lake Winnipeg Fish Station taken in 1954 at The Sigurdson Fisheries Station in Berens River 1954. The Black River Station, while different, would have looked similar in many ways with the ice houses, the docks, the boats and the fish boxes.

helped get supplies from the south off the boat, then loaded seven hundred boxes of fish into the hold.

Leifi looked at his watch. It was now 5:30 a.m., and the boat would be in the lee of Georges Island, soon pulling into Georges Harbour to pick up another five hundred boxes, after which she would be fully loaded for the trip south to Selkirk. It was a good start to the 1936 season.

He pulled down the zipper of his eiderdown, shifted, slipped out of his down cocoon, buttoned his shirt and pulled his sweater over his broad shoulders. He pulled his pants and woolen socks up and put his feet into his heavy shoes, all in a familiar rhythm. He felt currents of cold air forcing their way into the camp, through every crack, knothole and that damn pane. The ice had only melted off Lake Winnipeg in mid-May, and here, almost at the top of the lake, ice had still been floating when they travelled to Big Black River Station on May 29 on the Grand Rapids. The season opened on June 1.

Leifi pulled open the hinged cover on the space heater and saw a few cinders till smoldering. He stuffed in some newspaper, kindling and wood pieces split last fall and dried over winter. Given the heavy draft that would come over the pipe to take the smoke outside, he knew there would be a roaring fire in no time. He opened the draft to its full position. Soon its tin belly and the long pipe stretching up through the ceiling would radiate heat across the small shack.

He walked past the stove, leaned over his desk and wedged a couple pencils between the frame and window pane to stop the vibration. He needed some putty to put in there. He looked out the window. The north sky had an ugly look, with heavy, dark grey clouds hovering over the land and water as if ready to jump on some prey. He had endless tasks to do to bring the station back to life after nine months of

sitting lonely and unattended.

Everything needed to make the station operational for another season had been unloaded from the Grand Rapids. At the end of each season everything was packed in cartons, boxes and trunks – tools, pots, pans, cutlery, ledgers, everything other than the mounted equipment and buildings – and moved to the next station for the next season. Leifi's fall station was located on the west shore of the lake at Kenowa Bay, much further south. During the winter season he operated out of his home base in Riverton where he bought and packed fish out of a huge warehouse for shipment by rail to Winnipeg, and beyond. Now he was back once again to the Big Black River Station for the summer season.

When the nets first hit the water on June 1, fishing was heavy from the start. The crew had worked hard over the last two days. It had been a short night. He told his shore crew that breakfast would be delayed until 7 a.m. from the usual 6 a.m.

Breakfast for the fishermen, on the other hand, was usually 4:30 a.m. They wanted to get to their nets as soon as possible after first light, especially since the barometer was dropping quickly signalling the likelihood of a sudden change in weather, not unexpected on Lake Winnipeg at this time of year. They watched their barometers closely. If it dropped much further, they would try to get their nets pulled up before the storm had a chance to twist the nets into a roll of twine, corks and leads, leading to endless hours of untangling and spreading.

Along one wall at the back of the Big Black River Station store was Leifi's spring bunk, on the opposite wall his desk and toward the front a counter with shelves behind. There was no shortage of things to get done, but his mind quickly focused on priority number one. He sat at his plywood desk, perched on a fish box with a pillow,



This would be the kind of scene that would have presented at the Black River Station daily as the “whitefish boats” returned to the stations loaded with the prized hump back whitefish known in the markets of Chicago and New York as “Selkirk Whites.”

and began working through the fish receipts sent by the weighman after receiving, sorting and weighing each fisherman’s catch. The receipts needed to be tabulated and inserted into individual ledger sheets, which also documented every item purchased in the store and other transactions.

Leifi concluded his paperwork, as he called it, and heard the clanging of a bell, which was a signal from the cooks that breakfast was ready. He got up from his desk. As he walked out into the fresh air, he made a mental note that he would need to finish stocking the shelves with supplies right after breakfast as the fishermen would be coming in soon and making their way up to the store looking for everything from flour to lard, oilers to rubber boots. This small humble building serving simultaneously as his bedroom and office, store and the social center was grand central station at the Hallgrimson Fisheries station at Big Black River and Leifi’s home for the next two months.

Scene 2 – Big Black River Station, 1936

Walter could feel the wind slapping the wall of the tent. He lay quietly with his eyes closed, waiting. Finally, he heard the sound of his dad awakening. He heard the flap of the tent flap pulled open. That was his signal to get up quickly before his mom and the other kids awoke.

He watched his dad walk across the field and into the big building everyone called the cookhouse. He ran over and waited for him to come out after eating breakfast with all the men who worked on shore, sorting, weighing, packing, and icing the fish as it came into the station, tagged as to the species and held in the freezer room until the next boat south. The shed was always bustling with activity. Some men were up in the big ice house cutting out chunks to be sent into the noisy machine that chipped the ice into smaller pieces. Walter’s dad was the shed boss, sorting and weighing in each individual’s catch and giving him a slip tabulating the catch for the day, one copy for

the fishermen, and one up to Leifi to enter into each fisherman's individual accounts to be settled up at the end of the season.

Walter loved being around all the action, especially being at the shed as the men came in after a day of lifting. They would talk and clean fish while standing in groups of three or four around plywood sheets placed over gas drums with the tops cut off. There was a hole cut through the plywood so the guts scraped from the fish could slide into the barrel. As the men stood around the dressing table, he heard familiar sounds together with a strange language he came to know as Icelandic, interspersed with the conversational English he was just starting to understand. Some men spoke better than others.

He saw Mina-Skan – as he was called by the community – come out of the store. Walter saw him look in his direction and walk toward him. Walter stared at his shoes, hoping he was not in trouble.

"Last night when the boat came in, I saw you work hard pushing the fish boxes down the rollers from the cooler room to be loaded onto the tug." Leifi knelt down and looked Walter in the eye. With a smile, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Walter."

"You are a Nanowin, aren't you?" asked Leifi. "Yes, good men, all the Nanowins. I saw you sitting beside your cousin Willie yesterday, watching him nail the fish boxes together. Do you think you could do that work, Walter?"

Shyly, Walter responded, "Yes, I could. I watched Willie the last two days and saw how he put together the ends and bottoms and sides and nailed them into a box."

"Would you like to do that?" asked Leifi. "I need another man like you working on the boxes. Without men nailing the boxes together there's no way we can ship the fish. It's a very important job. Walter, do you think you can do that job?"

Walter looked upward and felt his face glow with excitement. "Yes, I can."

Leifi put his hand on Walter's shoulder. "I am sure you can. Would you like a job this summer? You go tell your mother that if it's okay with her, you have a job working for Leifi on the station starting right away. The fishing is very heavy, and without boxes, this outfit will shut down. I will be counting on you to work with Willie. After you check with your mom, come see me." Leifi smiled.

Walter ran in a turmoil of arms and legs. He flew headlong into his mother. She was emerging from the tent on her way to cook breakfast on the open fire. He shouted in Saulteaux, "Mom, Mom, Mina-Skan needs me. I am starting work in the morning nailing boxes. If I don't get them done, how will the fish get sent south? That's what he said, Mom. I need to get right back there."

His mom looked where Leifi stood beside the berry bushes. In a few weeks the berries would ripen, and Leifi would often wander from the store for a few minutes to pick berries. It was his favorite place to stand quietly, lost in thoughts. That's why Leifi was known as Mina-Skan: the man who stands beside the berry bushes.

Through his frenzied excitement, Walter heard his mom saying, "Walter, Walter, slow down. Mina-Skan is a good man, always so good to you kids on the station. You are a lucky boy. Having that job will be good for you, but first you must eat your breakfast."

Walter knew now was not the time to argue. He wolfed down his mother's eggs and fresh bannock. Then he ran like the wind.

Scene 3 – Big Black River Station, 1936

This was Leifi's world. Here, at the mouth of Big Black River, where the river meets Lake Winnipeg and the north end of the lake is twenty miles away. He established his fish station ten years ago.

Leifi glanced toward the tent. Walter was in animated conversation with his mother. Leifi chuckled to himself. He turned to walk toward the little camp, which served as his office, bedroom and store and was home for the next two months. He walked past the berry bushes, thinking about the lush berries that would adorn the bushes in a month.

His mind wandered to his boyhood growing up at Mikley and Hecla and the journey his life had taken to bring him to this place with these people. Born in Western Iceland in 1886, he was christened Thorleifur Hallgrímson. His mother Thuridur was 39-years-old, daughter of Thorleifur Thorleifsson and Malafrídur Jónsdóttir from Mjóaból in Dalasýsla. When Leifi was two, his mother left Iceland for Hecla, where they settled. Thuridur was a courageous lady, determined to provide a better life for her son. She left Iceland alone, saying goodbye to her parents and Leifi's father, Hallgrímur Gíslason.

As he grew from a boy to a man, Leifi would, like all the men in Hecla, become a fisherman. Like Walter, his first job had been nailing boxes for Johannes Grimólfson. In 1916, he married his niece, Elingborg "Borga" Jónsdóttir Hoffman whose grandparents Grimólfur Ólafsson and Steinun had come to Hecla from Iceland in 1893. Their daughter, Solveig Grimólfsdóttir, (born in 1894 at Mafahlid in the Snaesfellness Peninsula) and her husband Jon Jonsson Hoffman of Selvellir, followed her parents to Hecla in 1900 with their three infant daughters, Borga, Steinunn Sigrídir (known as Sigga) and Vilborg (known as Villa) and a son Petur, who died shortly after World War I as a result of tuberculosis contracted during his time of service in the Royal Canadian Navy.

Together Leifi and Borga were a powerful team and built a successful life together. Leifi was an ambitious man. He

moved to the mainland establishing his home in Riverton where they soon became prominent citizens active in the life of the growing community. Leifi made the transition from fishing to the business of fishing, operating as a middleman between the fishermen and the big companies who were in the business of buying and selling the Lake Winnipeg freshwater fish prized in the markets of Chicago and New York.

Leifi walked toward the camp and passed a building called the icehouse. The paint had started to peel. He made a mental note to get the men working with paintbrushes in the next few days. Leifi ran a shipshape operation and nothing was too small or too big to be kept up all the time, especially given the long periods these buildings sat alone and unmaintained in harsh weather conditions.

The icehouse was the heart of a fishing operation. In the summer heat, to maintain quality, fish had to be kept on ice from the moment they were taken out of water to when they were packed, held in boxes and ultimately shipped to Selkirk. Each winter, crews were dispatched after Christmas to go north on ice five-feet thick to the stations. The crews penetrated the ice with chisels and picks, then cut blocks with huge saws. They hauled these blocks along a wooden slide to the top of the icehouse – using a pulley system once powered by horses and now by tractors – and dropped the huge chunks into the building. Up to 800-tonnes of ice could be held in the icehouse, insulated by walls that were two-feet thick and filled with sawdust. When the ice reached the top of the building, it was covered with hay to protect it until summer.

Before he could dwell in thought any further, Leifi sensed Walter running fast behind him. Walter yelled, "Mom says I can have the job."

"When can you start, Walter?"

"This morning. Now!"

Leifi's heart smiled. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Let's walk over to Willie. I will tell him you guys will be partners this summer. The pay is five cents for every box you nail. At the end of every day, you come to the store to tell me how many boxes you put together, and I will pay you. Have we got a deal?"

Walter beamed. They walked across the station's rocky outcropping to where Willie was busy nailing.

"Do you see how Willie is cutting the wire around that bundle. Each bundle is all the parts you need for one box. We call the bundle "knock downs". It takes too much room on the boats to send empty boxes, so it is better to ship the box parts up to be nailed here. That's why this is such an important job." Walter listened intently.

"Willie, you've been so busy that I thought it was time to get you a partner," said Leifi. "You're an old hand now from working last summer, so I hope you can show Walter the ropes. How does that sound?"

"He will be a good partner," Willie smiled and looked at Walter. "I'll teach him as long as he promises not to get faster than me and nail more boxes."

Leifi thanked Willie, then turned to Walter. "Every man on my box crew gets to pick his own hammer. When I finish breakfast, we will walk to the office together."

A few minutes later, Leifi and Walter stood at the store counter. Leifi put three hammers in front of Walter. The boy picked up each hammer, checked it over, then chose one with black tape wrapped around the handle.

"This one," he said.

Walter had picked the biggest and heaviest one. Leifi chuckled. He probably would have done the same thing.

"That's a good hammer. My best one. You will do a good job with this. Now, here is a bag of nails to get started. Willie has lots over there in a pail."

"Do you think this hammer will help me become as fast as Willie?"

Leifi said, "This is my best hammer, and I am sure you'll get as fast or faster than Willie in no time."

As Walter turned, Leifi called after him. "Walter, every man starting gets an advance. Here is an O'Henry Bar and a coin to buy more chocolate bars in the store."

Walter was out the door like a flash, waving his hammer and calling excitedly to Willie.

As Walter ran off, Leifi chuckled. It was good to have young boys around. In the next few days, he decided he would get Walter and Willie to pick fish livers at the dressing tables for Maria to cook up one night as a real delicacy.

Leifi turned his mind back to the busy day ahead. A big order of supplies and groceries had arrived last night. Leifi had to go into the warehouse to check the shipment against the bills of lading. Several timbers on the roughhewn deck of the dock had sprung loose. The dock had not weathered well over winter. Leifi would have to work with the crew to fix that soon. It had not been a good situation last night when they were loading the boat with the deck in such rough shape. The shelves of the store had to be stocked. And fish had to be received, sorted, weighed and packed on ice. The fish would be placed in a big holding shed that was kept cool by the 45-gallon drums in each corner filled with ice and a chemical called "dry ice".

The station would be buzzing with activity for the next few days. Several Indian fishermen from Poplar River to the south had moved to the station for the season. Quite a few tents were already set up. The activity would pick up every day with the approaching summer and long hours of daylight. The station would soon be alive with people and action most of the day, including young kids with their

parents coming for jawbreaker candies and chocolate bars.

Most of the fishermen had been with him for years and were from Helca. When school finished, their families would come to spend two months at the station. Leifi's son Peter would be on the first boat north after his exams ended, and his wife Borga and younger son Leifur would follow. When they arrived, he moved into a small bunkhouse reserved for the family's annual visit.

Leifi walked out and saw the cash register sitting on a fish box. He picked up the register and positioned it at the end of the counter. He lifted a heavy metal box and put it beside the register. He opened the box, pulled out a handful of coins –



and carefully placed Hallgrimson Fisheries currency in the separate trays for 10, 50 and 100 cents in the till. The coins were good for in trade only. After a few more handfuls, he put the lock in the clasp of the metal box and secured it on the shelf below.

The coins were the local currency and a product of Leifi's always shrewd eye to keep every buck made at Big Black River circulating back into the local economy – and particularly back to this till.

Leifi opened the door and took another look at the barometer. The dial had not dropped anymore. He detected a small patch of white on the horizon emerging under the grey blanket. Perhaps the wind would stay steady at twenty knots and clearer weather would move in.

Scene 4 – Big Black River Station, 1936

The next morning Walter awoke to the breakfast bell. His dad was up and walking toward the cookhouse. Walter

ran to catch up.

“Walter, how was your first day on the job?” asked his dad.

“Good. Mina-Skan let me pick my own hammer. He told me I picked the best one, but I am not as fast as Willie. I will be soon.”

It was 5:45 a.m. Several other men were also headed to the long rectangular building that looked like a community hall. His dad opened the door and turned to Walter.

“You run back to the tent with your mother and sister. Your mother's cooking your breakfast now. She will be waiting for you.”

Walter dawdled and peered through the big screen door where men sat on benches in front of long tables. Several women brought out trays, and the room was alive with food passing between hands and talking. Walter could hardly wait until he got to sit with the men. He turned and started running toward the tent.

“Walter, where are you going?” Walter recognized Leifi's voice. Before he could respond, Leifi said, “You are a shore hand now at the station. You've got a lot of boxes to nail today. You go tell your mom and sister that you are eating in the cookhouse with the fishermen and other shore hands. We need you well fed. Willie is in there now. That's part of our deal.”

Walter's eyes lit up. A smile exploded on his face. Without a word, he turned and started running to the tent, blurting out, “Mom, Mom, Leifi tells me he expects me eating with the fishermen and other shore hands in the cookhouse.”

With that he darted back, not waiting for a “Yes” or a “No”.

Leifi stood quietly waiting for him to return. With his characteristic chuckle and thin smile, he said, “You are going to be a good man, like all the Nanowins. You will eat with me this morning.”

He put his arm around the boy, and they walked into the cookhouse. Leifi gave a quick smile in the direction of Maria Baldwinson.

“Walter, this is Maria,” said Leifi. “She is the boss in the cookhouse. I told her that you were joining the crew. She will have chores for you from time to time, so you help her with anything she asks, okay?”

“Yes,” said Walter. His eyes riveted on the beautiful, tall, young lady bending toward him.

With a warm smile, and in a soft but deep voice, Maria said, “Walter, Leifi tells me you are the new man on the station. My name is Maria. You sit down beside Leifi and help yourself to bacon and eggs. And some toast. I will bring you fresh tea. Coffee time is at nine-thirty in the morning, dinner at twelve, another coffee at three and supper at six. Last coffee is at nine in the evening. You need to be on time every day.”

After Walter finished his breakfast, still dazed at the turn of events, Maria walked back to him.

“Did you have a good day nailing boxes yesterday, Walter?” she asked.

He replied, “I didn’t nail as many as Willie, but I will soon be as fast as him.”

Maria called him to the counter. “You pick a nice, hot donut now.”

Walter’s eyes bulged. He saw an entire tin tub filled with donuts. On the counter, he saw two rows of pie shells, more than he had ever seen in his life.

“That’s a lot of pies,” he said.

“I make them every day, Walter, and each boat takes a fresh pie with them. Fishing is hard work, and the fishermen need to have full stomachs.”

She added: “You and Willie have two jobs for me. Today we are going to have fresh whitefish livers. I will take you to the shed to show you how to pick them from the guts of the fish. You can bring them to me in a pail for supper. And you guys will

take turns hitting the old propeller hanging out front that serves as the bell. Walter, you have breakfast, dinner, and supper duty. I will tell Willie he has coffee duty. I need you to strike the propeller with that steel rod five minutes before the meal.”

Scene 5 – Selkirk, 1979

A tall, distinguished man in a light brown suit walked through the front door of the Betel Icelandic senior citizens home. He went into the main lobby, turned right and walked down the hall. The sign on the door of the second room read: “Leifi Hallgrimson”.

The door was slightly ajar. The man knocked, opened the door and announced, “Dad, it’s Leifur.”

An elderly gentleman was resting on the bed. He moved, lifted himself and put his feet on the side of the bed.

Leifur pulled up a chair and said, “How are you today, Dad?”

Sitting up, the old man responded, “Fine. The same as yesterday.”

“I see the ladies are still putting away the dishes and tidying up from lunch,” said Leifur. “Sunday is usually a special lunch. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes. The ladies do a good job,” said Leifi. “It was pretty much the same as last Sunday.”

“Dad, why don’t you sit on the chair so we can have a good conversation,” said Leifur. “I left right after church to visit. Irene and Elin had an event this afternoon after the service. I said I’d pick them up around three, so it will have to be a shorter visit this time. We will all come down together next week. But I got an interesting call that I wanted to tell you about.”

The room was small but comfortable, with a window looking onto the front garden. The bed was along one wall, a small desk and drawers with a closet was on the other wall and two armchairs were in front



Leifi, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, Glenn Sigurdson, his great nephew, (and son of Sylvia and Stefan Sigurdson, not in photo), Nancy Thordarson, wife of Roy Thordarson, his nephew, Vilborg (Villa) his sister in law, Leifur Hallgrimson, his son, and his wife Irene, and on the sofa, Laura Thordarson, his niece, and Elaine and Eric Sigurdson, younger sister and brother to Glenn.

of the window. Leifur was over six feet tall, with a thin and angular face. His father Leifi was 5 foot 10, with a stocky build, square face and firmly set jaw. Little connected father and son physically, but like his son, Leifi was nicely dressed in slacks, white shirt, tie and sweater. The suspenders he always wore showed around his shoulders.

"I got a call from Walter Nanowin this week," said Leifur. "He said he wasn't sure when he'd be getting to Winnipeg next but told me he was doing some writing these days about his life on Lake Winnipeg and especially Big Black River and his friendship with you. He wanted to know if we had some pictures to share of the Big Black River Station. I told him I was sure there were some we could send, and we could meet the next time he was in the city."

"Walter. How is he doing?" An energy suddenly came into the old man's voice. "Did you tell him where I am? You know he was with me since he was a boy nailing boxes. When he came to visit Winnipeg – he used to come quite often a few years ago – he told me that job helped him get his start as a carpenter. We had some good visits and often took the streetcar to the Leland Hotel for a few beers, where we met some of the old guys from Lake Winnipeg. Whenever we passed the CIBC branch on Main and Bannatyne, he laughed and said, 'There's Leifi's Bank.' He's quite a guy. He's done a lot of different things. He worked on boats for years as an engineer. I think he got his papers and worked in the mills, but I believe it was the years spent fishing on the lake he loved most. He and his wife have a



Another classic scene of a Lake Winnipeg fish station. Although not taken at Black River, it almost surely could have been as this captures the endless activities of the shore crew receiving, loading, and shipping fish, equipment, and supplies up and down the Lake.

big family now. All are doing really well.”

“I remember Walter well, Dad,” said Leifur. “I think I was a couple of years older but we got along well. It was good to hear from him. We had a long conversation. He has done a lot of different things. His family is all doing well. He’s working on becoming a writer. He does a lot of travelling in the communities all over the prairies it seems as well as an elder and storyteller.”

“He was a good man Walter,” said Leifi. “I remember one time when he was about 15 years old. There was just him and my longtime friend, caretaker and handyman Stjani Olafson at the station. We were getting things ready before the season started. After supper, I noticed a hell of a dark-looking cloud forming in the west and moving quickly across the lake. I did not like the look of it. I was worried if we got a really heavy squall pounding on the dock, we would lose it. That would put us in a mess at

the beginning of the season. A lot of repairs had to be done. Several of the big poles that framed the dock had been damaged and twisted by the ice during the breakup. A pile driver was scheduled to come on the *Grand Rapids* on the next trip north that would be used to drop a big weight on them to pound them into the mud below. But that would not do us any good if we lost the dock. I knew we had to do something.”

“I remember you telling me about this a long time ago,” said Leifur. “Something about filling the empty gas drums. The ones that had not made it on the last tug out in the fall - to hold down the dock in a big storm.”

“Yeah, that’s the time,” said Leifi. “We had a bunch of empties, about fifteen or twenty, on the shore. Walter and I rolled them to the end of the dock. We got a pump going, even though it was starting to blow really hard and the waves would soon come onto the shore. Walter got every one of them

filled to the brim. That put a lot of ballast on the end to hold the dock down. Stjani and I pulled out every second plank so that when the full force waves came they would move through and not build pressure underneath the planks and lift the dock. By the time Walter was finished, he was soaking. The waves were pounding. It was about nine o'clock when we finished: pitch black and wind blowing like hell. It was a dirty night, but I knew we did everything we could. We went into the bunkhouses to wait. It was too dangerous to stay in front of the station or on dock.

"I thought everything would be gone the next morning, but when I woke up and walked outside, it was a bright, sunny day. Lake Winnipeg is always like that. The weather can change in a moment. Walter was already walking toward the dock, and he yelled, 'Leifi, everything is fine.'

"Leifur, we have lots of pictures of the station and people in the community. Those were good years. The best years. I think of them often. When you next speak to Walter, tell him where I am. Maybe he could visit, and I could get Jimmy Page, who is here from Canadian Fish Producers, and we could go to Merchant's Hotel and have a few beers."

"Don't worry, Dad. I will," said Leifur, but the look on his face suggested he was uneasy at the prospect of visiting Merchant's, the legendary hotel in Selkirk that was a second home to many fishermen over the years. His dad, like many businessmen of his day, almost always wore a suit, white shirt and tie, no matter the setting, and having donned his Fedora, Leifur could imagine the scene when Walter, Jimmy and him entered



Taken at Black River around 1936 - 37. Back row right to left: Borga Hallgrímson, (Leifi's wife) her sister, Villa (Brynjólfson) and her daughter, Sylvia (later Sigurdson) a local boy working at the station. Front left to right: young boy, likely Leifur, their son, Villa's young daughter Solveig, and Helen Sigurdson (Sylvia's friend, later Ekberg).

Merchant's for a "get-together" to revisit the old days.

"Dad, I'm afraid I have to go. It's already after two, and I told the girls I would be there by three. I want to leave you with a picture for us to talk about next time. You remember the time Mom, Villa, Sylvia and her friend Helen, Solveig and Grimsi were staying at the station that summer. The cooks had to leave just before the season ended, and they took over! I found this picture. I think that's me, and maybe that's Walter behind me. Anyway, lots to talk about next time."

Leifi looked intensely at the picture. His son knew this would give him lots to think about over the week, and they would have a good visit next weekend. The best visits were when the conversation found its way to fish and the lake. That's where his dad's heart remained. Leifur often regretted that his Dad had perhaps retired too early.

"Okay, Dad. I've got to go now. I'll see you next week."



Elin and her afi Leifi. Always a suit, white shirt and tie.

Scene 6 – Winnipeg, 1991

Elin knew her Afi Leifi well. For the first five years of her life, he lived with the family. After he moved to the Betel Icelandic senior citizens home, the family was in close and continuous touch with regular visits and spent all significant holidays and events together. He died in 1980 at the age of 94.

She knew him as a very loving grandfather, gentle and kind, but she did not have any real understanding of the story wrapped inside him. Yes, she knew the basics. He was born in Iceland and came to Canada with his mother at age two. The family moved to Riverton in 1916. A highly respected man in the fishing business, he had fish stations on Lake Winnipeg, but she had no real appreciation what that meant. She understood there was a deep bond between her Afi and Dad. Her dad had endless patience engaging with him as they relived the past through Afi's stories of the lake. Her Afi always drew the humour out of situations and people with a chuckle. Her dad responded with a heartier laugh. As she grew older she came to understand that for all his successes in

life, forces beyond his control had left a trail of heartbreak for him and her Amma Borga. Of their four children, two died in infancy: a young son Jon and a daughter Sylvia.

She also learned of that her Dad's older brother, Peter an extraordinarily dynamic and handsome man with a charismatic personality, had been killed tragically by a booby-trapped rifle two days after the end of the Second World War. The impact of

his death on the family was profound. After the war, with her Dad entering the University of Manitoba, the decision was made to relocate to Winnipeg. In 1952 her Afi sold the business to Booth Fisheries in 1952, although he continued as manager of their stations until 1956 when he fully retired.

By then her dad was well on his way to becoming a very successful lawyer. working for several years in the Finance Department in Ottawa, then returned to Manitoba where he became the Director of Civil Litigation, then Associate Deputy Attorney General. He was subsequently appointed CEO of Manitoba Forest Resources Ltd. (Manor), a position he held for many years. He would conclude his career as Chairman of the Manitoba Municipal Board. Thankfully, Leifi did not live long enough to see his only surviving son Leifur die unexpectedly and prematurely at age 63 of a cruel neurological disease in 1991.

With the passing of her father, Elin became increasingly interested in

uncovering more of the past – a past of which she only had a surface understanding. Going through her dad’s belongings, she came upon a letter Walter had written to her dad that year. The letter read:

Dear Leifur,

Your father was a renowned champion of Indian Rights. I will write about him and honour him in my second book coming out called Indian Chiefs of Treaty 5. That there is my own personal story as grandpappy signed Treaty 5. Your father was instrumental in leading a way for the future of Indians, both for my people and the Cree of Fisher River. May God bless you all.

Love,

Walter

Elin’s curiosity was piqued. She tried to locate the books that Walter mentioned in his letter but could not find them.

She was very surprised to receive another letter from Walter in 2000 – this time addressed to her.

Dear Elin,

Your dad, Leifur, gave me black and white photos, which I have reproduced for my third book, Big Lake Waters. It is still in manuscript form, and it is quite possible that I may publish it. There are a couple of pictures of Leifi in my book. Leifi was my very best friend. So all the Icelanders that came north to Big Black River every summer for as long as I can remember were best friends also. Old Sigurdson from Riverton remembers my grandfather Cubby Nanowin. He used to call me Cubby’s Boy. But he was mixed up. My grandfather was Charlie Nanowin, Cubby’s brother.

Elin kept reading with great interest. The letter explained the slow process of publishing. Then it read:

Leifi Hallgrimson became my Indian best friend. They called him Mina-Skan, the man who stands by the berry bushes. Leifi loved his Indian folk and talked and laughed with them. They truly loved him. I mean love. He



Leifi at right with some of the men with whom he’s working

was one of their own. In my short story called “Return to Witches Island”, I featured another Indian lover, Captain Billy Simpson. So was Helgi Jones. I have never met an Icelander who hated Indians. They were truly friends. I remember Leifi when I was little. He gave us boys hammers to nail fish boxes together. What a nice job at first, but it was also basic training to become a carpenter. This was when chocolate bars were five cents.

Elin recalled trying to locate the books featuring her Afi mentioned in his letter. Unsuccessful in her efforts, she wrote to Walter Nanowin at some point. She was surprised to receive some time later a detailed response from Walter addressed to her. With it were several pages of background material including a letter of reference from his son-in-law, Walter Hudson of Fisher River written to support his father-in-law’s application to join Writers Guilds in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, as well as the Canadian Authors Association. He explained that his father-in-law was from the Black River-Poplar River area and the great grandson of Chief Pewanowinin, one

of the signatories to Treaty 5 on behalf of the Cree and Saulteaux people of Northern Manitoba. Also included with the letter

was a diverse assortment of other materials, including this remarkable poem, which told so much in a few stanzas.

1. Fisherman Sam left Gimli in '32,
Went for the Booth on the Lake Winnipeg sea,
Left with Ted and other son Hannes too,
Sam was a mighty man in 1933.
2. Chorus:
Where the big waves are rollin'
Where it's scary and no fooli'
Sam Kristjanson was a mighty man in 1933!
3. With Sam, Barney Doll was there,
And Mully and Joe and Beggi we see.
The fish winds blowin' an' the weathers fair.
Oh look, there's that boat: "Follow Me."
4. The tugs have left Selkirk at two,
They should be at Georges tomorrow at three!
We hope to reach Big Black River by half past two.
When Sam was a mighty man in 1943!
5. We've been fishing an' Mully caught three fish,
He brought ashore two and ate one at sea.
We are using cotton and linen against our wish,
But it's time for nylon nets its 1953!
6. Now Ted thought it's wise to stay on shore,
And have a museum for artifacts to see.
Day dreams of past fishing adventures from before.
The sons of Sam were mighty men in 1963!

The old timers are never forgotten there,
When Collin Murray's ghost walks Eagle Island shores.
And Manny Thorsteinson's ghost appears Birch Island there.
Their spirits will sail Lake Winnipeg, FOREVER MORE!

The other materials were equally rich with information on the life and times of Leifi Hallgrimson and the Icelandic and indigenous men who lived and fished together on Lake Winnipeg. As she read them, she realized they were giving her a deeper insight into her Afi's life than she had ever had before.

She learned that even though Leifi had passed away many years ago, Walter was on a mission to bring him and those times

on Lake Winnipeg back to life. His son-in-law explained that Walter was widely travelled amongst the Saulteaux people of the prairies and was known as a passionate storyteller and writer. She sent him more pictures, as he had requested, but never heard back from him.

One item she found, prepared for the purpose of an aboriginal writer's group that Walter was applying to for membership, included this description: "They came in

hundreds, gallant men who dared the sea to fish for the great Selkirk White.”

Walter described that seeing the tugs coming north “set a boy’s heart on fire... to be her master.”

Walter continued: “But we settled for adventure the size of a fishing boat, with an outboard behind her. One of my buddies became captain. He worked in the Hay River area. I met several native skippers who became famous: Captain Ed Nelson, Captain J. Chas. Mason, Capt. Billy Flett, Capt. David Shares, and others.”

Of all the materials she found, it was the end of Walter’s letter to her that resonated with Elin the most.

There will never be another Leifi Hallgrimson or someone to take his place. There will never be another “incredible fishing days of Big Black River” of which I write. I have to publish these stories at all costs. Leifi has to live again. My Indians have to live again. Never will there be fish stations or tugs on Lake Winnipeg again.... It was incredible. So were the old-time square dances. I thank the Good Lord for keeping me alive all these years to write of these happenings. So, in closing this letter, God bless you, my dear Elin. I’ll send you more information. Please write again.

Love,

Walter

At some point, Elin tried to track down more information on Walter. A Google search rewarded her with a reference in the *Winnipeg Free Press* advising that he had received an award in Aboriginal literature. He was described as a “walking encyclopedia of the oral traditions of the Cree and Ojibwe people of Northern Manitoba” and that “his talent is now emerging in writing and television performance”.

Some years later, Elin learned of my efforts to bring back the life, times and people of Lake Winnipeg I had known since my boyhood on the lake. My efforts would ultimately result in the book *Vikings*

on a Prairie Ocean. Elin thought I might find these materials helpful and sent them to me.

Postscript

The Hallgrimson’s were a close family. My grandmother Amma Villa had two older sisters, Borga and Sigga. I knew Leifi all my life and understood the respect he enjoyed as a man and a businessman on Lake Winnipeg. After my Aunt Borga’s premature death in 1958, at the age of 64, Leifi and Leifur spent many Christmases with us. After Leifur’s marriage to Irene Morris, our families remained closely intertwined over the years. From the moment I first reviewed the materials from Elin, I knew that this was a story I must one day write.

This is a fictionalized account, but I am confident it closely tracks historical fact. When I read Walter’s words, I could see the soul of the story. Like Walter, as a boy at the Sigurdson Fisheries at Berens River Station, my first job was nailing boxes. My partner was Peter Boushie. We were paid five cents a box. My dad was paid the same wage 25 years earlier, and I expect Walter was paid the same amount as well. I was born in a time warp. Not much changed on Lake Winnipeg from the 1920s to the mid-1950s. With each word I wrote, the story took shape, in the same way that each nail helps form a new fish box.

As I wrote this piece, it turned into a personal journey. I realized the history of the lake and its people are part of my DNA. I always knew Leifi had a close relationship with the Indian people on the lake, but when I read Walter’s heartfelt and authentic words, I knew it was a very special story that I needed to capture. All these years later, when “reconciliation” has become the watchword of trying to build a better future between indigenous and nonindigenous Canadians, there are deep lessons to be learned in the story of Leifi and Walter’s friendship.

Leifi was a remarkable man. But



A fish box

as remarkable, if not more so, was the courage it must have taken for his mother to strike out alone on a dangerous voyage to make a better life for her two-year-old child. When she died in 1933, she almost certainly looked back at that decision – and what Leifi had made of his life as well as the quality of her own life – with enormous satisfaction, almost disbelief. She lived with Leifi and Borga at their Riverton home until she passed away.

Leifi was in the fullest sense of the term a self-made man. He worked hard. He was determined. He had a knack for numbers. With his watchful eye, he turned pennies into more pennies. He was described as “shrewd” but always in a respectful way. He was ambitious. Above all he was personable. He was inclined to a constant chuckle rather than a hearty laugh. He saw the humour and the foibles of human nature – not in a critical way, but in a way that reflected his deep love for people. Not surprisingly, he had many friends in life, one of the closest being Gutti Guttormsson, a farmer and poet from Riverton who was born in Canada and honoured as a distinguished man of letters in Iceland as early as 1930. Gutti was a great raconteur and humorist, and together Leifi and he would regale each other in long energetic conversations.

Leifi built a remarkable career as a leader and entrepreneur, and many people were greatly loyal to him. Something about Leifi gave him gravitas as a man to be respected. Clearly, he watched some of the leading figures in the fishing industry as he grew from a boy to a man. He knew that was the path he wanted to follow. He would have watched men like the Sigurdson brothers, the Hannessons, the Kristjansons, the Stefansons, the Magnussons and many other family units who played a vital role building the economy of New Iceland. He built a long and strong partnership with Booth Fisheries out of Chicago, as some others had done, securing both financing and markets for his intermediary role carrying out the production operations on the lake to supply their ever-expanding markets for freshwater fish in Chicago and New York.

But while many of the other leaders and entrepreneurs worked as family units, Leifi was a one-man show. By the 1920s he had a fish station at the very north end of Lake Winnipeg at Big Black River, which he ran in the summer season. He had another station on the west shore of the lake on Kenowa Bay. Many of the men who fished with Hallgrimson Fisheries at Leifi’s stations were from Hecla, including my Afi Marus (Malli) Brynjolfson and his nephews Helgi and Beggi Jones. In the winter, he operated Booth Fisheries in Riverton, buying frozen and fresh fish from small camps around Lake Winnipeg, storing them in a large warehouse and readying them for shipment by rail to the United States.

I made many efforts to track more fully Walter Nanowin’s life and story. I recently learned he died a few years ago at a senior citizens home in Poplar River. When he was working on his manuscripts, I believe he was in touch with others from his days on the lake, including Ted Kristjanson, Helgi Jones, Geiri Johnson and more. In

his writing, he mentions many well-known names from those years. My efforts to learn more about Walter's life will continue, and hopefully at some point I can add a short sequel to this piece.

Leifi's story is a deep probe into the history of Icelanders in Canada. When the Icelanders first arrived in 1875, escaping desperate circumstances in their homeland, they had a vision to build a new Iceland in their new land. Here, on the Icelandic Reserve, along the west shore of Lake Winnipeg, north of Selkirk, they began the business of nation building. They faced overwhelming challenges in realizing their vision, the greatest of which was achieving self-sufficiency. Thank God for fish, first to ward off starvation, then by the early 1880s to build the foundation of their economy. Without fish and the business of fishing, this small immigrant population would have surely dwindled and folded into

the population at large. The New Iceland heritage, which would ultimately flourish on Lake Winnipeg and in Canada, would have been lost. Fishing gave these settlers self-sufficiency, an identity and a sense of place that has continued to build over many decades while maintaining strong and continuing relationships to the homeland. Leifi was an important player in building that future, and I am proud to have known Leifi in my lifetime and honoured to capture his story here.

Note: Pictures of the Black River station have been misplaced over the years and are unavailable for publication.

Glenn Sigurdson Q.C mediator, teacher, writer
Honorary Consul General of Iceland in BC
www.glennsigurdson.com;
www.vikingsonaprairieocean.com

Celebrating over 60 years of Caring for Seniors



Our modern two storey care facility is government approved and specifically designed to offer a homey atmosphere in a safe contemporary setting. We are located in Osborne Village convenient to all amenities and services.

The Registered Nurse and certified staff cater to the residents' personal care, comfort and supervision. Medications are administered, bath assist, meals, housekeeping and laundry are included.

Our goal over the years has been to provide a moderately sized, non-institutional environment with services to meet the needs of those in the later stages of life. We seek to maintain a quiet, comfortable atmosphere where our residents can feel cared for and safe in a home-like surrounding. We strive to maintain the health, vitality and quality of life of each of our residents.

Thorvaldson Care Center

AN INTERMEDIATE CARE FACILITY

- 24-HOUR SUPERVISION
- GOVERNMENT APPROVED FACILITY

Herman Thorvaldson
Herman O. Thorvaldson, President

THORVALDSON CARE CENTER

495 Stradbrook Avenue • Winnipeg • Manitoba • R3L 0K2
Phone: 204-452-4044 • www.thorcare.ca • E-mail: thorcare@shaw.ca