

ECHOES FROM THE PAST

The saga of two Point Roberts pioneers, Dagbjort and Helgi Thorsteinson. Compiled, translated and written by Runa Thordarson, in loving memory of her parents and dedicated to their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren so that they might know them a little better.

Our story begins in Iceland, an island republic near the arctic circle in the North Atlantic Ocean. The center of the island is mostly glaciers. That is why the Vikings named it Iceland. However it is warmed by the Gulf Stream and has a fairly moderate climate. Iceland is 39,800 square miles, as compared to the state of Washington, which is 68, 162.

--Printed in 1975

24 when she
came to U.S.
38 when my father
was born

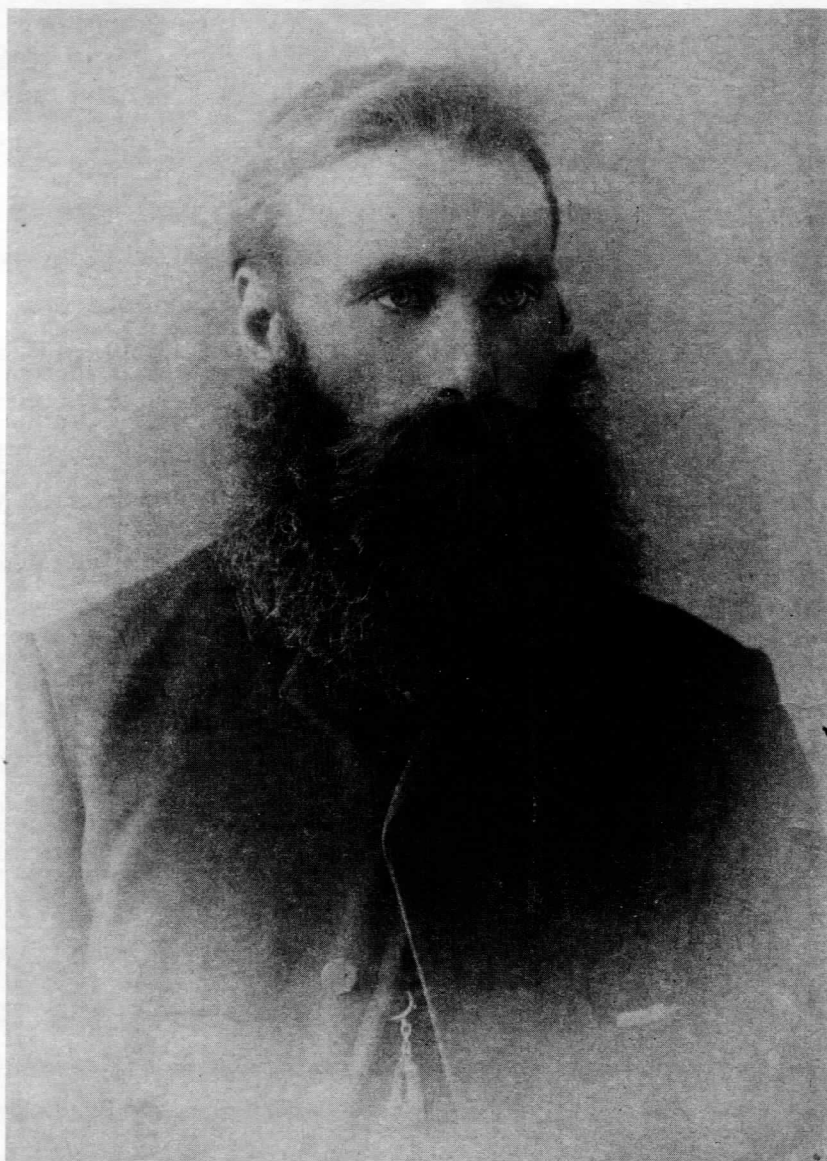


DAGBJORT THORSTEINSON

1862 - 1941

Taken in Victoria 1888

27 Who he
Came to U.S.



HELGI THORSTEINSON

1859 - 1945

Taken in Victoria 1888

On the south coast of Iceland, in the county of Myrdal, where the ocean breakers roll up on the sand, lies a little valley. Meadows extend from the shore to rolling grassy hills. Mountains on both sides form the valley and end in huge rocks out in the ocean. Some are partly submerged and have been the cause of many shipwrecks. One of them has a hole in it large enough to row a boat through. These rocks are nesting places for the many sea birds and help to form a small bay, or "vik". Myrdal's glacier, beautiful but cold-looking, forms the background.

In this little valley named Vik were two large estates, each employing many men and women. A little brook separated the two estates. The homes were built with wooden gables and partitions, mostly salvaged from shipwrecks, but the walls were made of stones and peat and the roofs were of sod. There were North Vik and South Vik. South Vik also owned a store near the waterfront. Freighters from Reykjavik would come occasionally with supplies.

To North Vik came Groa Magnusdottir with her young daughter Dagbjort Dagbjartsdottir to live and work. Little girls were taught to read, but it was not considered necessary for them to learn to write. Dagbjort had ideas of her own. She made friends and did errands for a kindly old man who worked in the barn. He promised to teach her to write. Pen and ink were not available as this was their secret. She found a large feather from one of the many birds along the seashore, and the old man made a quill pen for her. Now, what to use for ink? It being butchering season, the old man saved a bottle of calves blood, and this was the beginning of Dagbjort's very fine handwriting.

In the spring of 1871 a twelve year old boy named Helgi Thorsteinson came to live at North Vik. This was the year of a near famine in Iceland, and Helgi was the oldest of a large family. He was born at Hofdabrekka in Myrdal, but moved with his parents to Skammadal and lived there until he came to North Vik to be a shepherd boy. Most of his summers were spent in the mountains watching the sheep. At once he was attracted to Dagbjort, the little girl with the dark brown eyes and they became good friends and playmates.

As he grew older and stronger Helgi learned to work with the other men at building the rock fences and making hay. The hay was cut by hand, and made into bundles and hauled to the barn on the backs of the sure-footed Icelandic ponies. He also worked in a crew of eight men that pushed their

boat out into the open ocean to catch fish. It was a very dangerous occupation and many boats and men were lost. In the long winter evenings he learned to read and write and help work the wool that all their clothing was made from.

Dagbjort, called Daga for short, learned to cook and sew, spin, knit, and weave, and to make shoes from sheepskin. Their employers were like foster parents to both of them. They were Gunnlaugur Arnoddson and Elsa Dorothea Thordardottir, very fine people and much loved by both Helgi and Dagbjort and all who knew them.

Helgi's father, who lived at nearby Skammadal, was noted for his mountain rescue work. Many lambs were saved by him. They had fallen over the cliff and landed on a ledge. Thorstein learned to bleat like the mother sheep, and carrying some of the mother's wool was able to approach the lamb without frightening it. He was lowered over the edge on a rope, and he and the lamb were hauled up again by several men. He also supplied the home with eggs which were taken from the thousands of birds nesting on ledges in the rocks. The birds also supplied down for all the bedding. The mattresses, quilts, and pillows were all down-filled; the eider down being mostly used for pillows. Helgi learned the mountain rescue work from his father.

The Canadian Government sent agents of Icelandic ancestry to Iceland to offer people help if they would emigrate to Canada. One of Helgi's best friends, who lived at Giljum in Myrdal, decided to join the group with his wife and children. He was Sigurd Sigurdson, who later changed his name to Myrdal. Helgi was interested in going, too; but shortly before the group left Iceland Helgi was cutting wood when the axe slipped and cut his leg. It was a deep wound and took a long time to heal. Sigurd promised to write to Helgi from his new home, which he did. After a few years in Canada, where he lost several of his children from scarlet fever and smallpox, Sigurd and his wife and children moved to Pembina, North Dakota. In the meantime Helgi's wound became infected and he was bedridden for a long time and nearly lost his life. All this time he corresponded with his friend Sigurd, and hoped to join him someday.

In 1886 Helgi heard there was a group leaving for America and he decided

to get ready and go with them. He and Dagbjort were now engaged, and she planned to go too. Shortly before they were to leave, a letter came from Sigurd. It was now ten years since he had left Iceland. He had moved from Pembina to Victoria, B. C. He described it as a very beautiful place with a much milder climate than Pembina, and recommended that Helgi and Dagbjort come direct to Victoria. Sigurd and his wife Valgerdur were the only people they knew in America, so even if it was so very far they decided to take Sigurd's advice and go all the way to Victoria, B.C.

Preparing for the journey was a very exciting time. Many of Dagbjort's girl friends envied her and a few thought she was very foolish. Some gave her gifts and money. Dagbjort's mother, Groa, looked on with mixed feelings; she knew that there was very little to look forward to in Iceland at that time, and hoped the young couple would find happiness and a bright future in the new land. Dagbjort found it very hard to think of leaving her mother. She was an only child, her father having left them when she was very young.

Groa owned a trunk dated 1854 that she offered to her daughter, but it was much too large to carry on horseback, the only means of transportation. A carpenter friend took it apart and made two small trunks out of it. In one Dagbjort packed all her belongings. The other half of the trunk came to America with Dagbjort's mother in 1891.

Helgi made a trip to the nearest town, Eyrarbakka, and bought a watch and some clothes. He sold all his small flock of sheep. So, in 1887 they were ready to leave. Farewells were said to friends, families, and foster parents, and Dagbjort promised to send for her mother as soon as possible.

They traveled by horseback. Some of the horses were ridden, and some were used to pack the luggage. There were no roads and no bridges over the rivers. The shallowest places were chosen by the guide so that people and luggage stayed dry. At certain times of the year when the rivers were high the only way to cross was for the horses to swim. Several people joined the group, some going only part way to Reykjavik, others going all the way; but Helgi and Dagbjort were the only ones headed for America.

The trip to Reykjavik was tiring but uneventful, and in the big city they met with groups of people from all parts of Iceland, all going as immigrants

to America, mostly to Canada. Many of Daga's and Helgi's friends hoped some day to come to America and join them, so Dagbjort promised to keep a diary of the trip, hoping it might help the ones that were to come later.

On July 11, 1887, all was in readiness to board their ship which took them on the first leg of their journey.

Quoted from Dagbjort's diary:

"July 11, 1887. At 6:30 this morning we boarded the "Camoens". There is much to see which I cannot fully describe, but will try. We are in a fairly large room or cabin forward on the ship and on the middle deck. There is room for thirty bunks on one side and twenty-six on the other, two bunks high. We are all bedded down in this same cabin. It is quite light and open on both ends so the sun shines in. There are two canvas ventilators, one at each end, so we have good ventilation. At one end of our cabin are stairs that lead from our deck and the deck below us to the upper deck. There is much traffic in these stairs as everyone is getting settled and preparing their bunks. There is so much noise one can hardly hear their own voices. I don't know how many rooms there are but there must be many. Hot water is available two or three times a day in a large kettle forward on the ship. There is a tap on it and each person must bring their own container. Cold water is on tap at all times. Six rest rooms are on the ship, three for men and three for women and there is no mistaking them as they are marked with big white letters. One of the men is playing an accordion in our cabin and soon the whistle will be blowing and we are on our way. Now the whistle has blown and they are hauling in the anchor and I have never in my life heard such a racket. The whole ship quivers and shakes. I'm sure it must be hard on the nerves for anyone who isn't very well. Now it is five o'clock and "Camoens" is starting to move. Lovely calm weather and almost feels like the ship is standing still. Now the ship is beginning to roll a little and I am getting a headache. Some of the women are knitting and some sewing, but it doesn't look very peaceful. I am going up on deck as I am afraid I am getting seasick. Now it is eight o'clock and everyone has to go to their own bunk.

July 12th. I slept quite well last night and feel well as long as I lie still but everyone has to go on deck for fresh air and exercise. Our

dear fatherland has disappeared.

There is much seasickness and some of the women are quarreling. Many of them are sick. I vomit very little but am so weak I can hardly write even if I am trying to do it. The man is playing his accordion again and another a violin, some are singing hymns and it would be good entertainment if one were feeling well. There is an English minister on board and also an English doctor and two Icelandic nurses. The minister was very kind and gave each child under twelve years old that could make it up on deck, bread and raisins. He sent milk to those below and also to the women who were sick. The milk is thick and real sweet. When thinned with water it is real good. This evening it is blowing and raining, they say the ship is only going half speed even if all sails are up. Very much sea sickness.

July 13th. About midnight last night we were in a thick fog. So thick that one could hardly see across the deck. Bright lights were placed on each side of the ship and the whistle blew every four or five minutes to warn other ships that might be near us. This morning at four A.M. a baby was born in our cabin. All went well. I was so sick yesterday I could not even comb my hair, let alone anything else. But I staggered up on deck twice as the doctor recommends we get up on deck occasionally to fill our lungs with fresh air.

This morning I felt so much better I got up at nine. I'm sure all of you at home got up much earlier than that. On deck one of the ships crew brought me a slice of bread with a piece of hot meat on it. I didn't have much appetite but was able to eat some of it with hot water. It was the most I have eaten since I came on the sea. Mostly I have just had cold water. The doctor tells us who are sick to eat dry hardtack and drink water even if we don't feel like eating anything so that the vomiting will be easier on us. The weather is good now and a calm sea and to my surprise I saw a flock of fulmar fly by. It was like seeing old friends and almost made me homesick. Most everyone is feeling well today and up on deck. Imba is a little worse than I am, still she is able to be up today. There is much entertainment for those who can feel happy and enjoy it. There are two playing all sorts of music, one on the accordion and one on a violin. They harmonize real well, according to what people are saying, and a crowd has gathered around them. Somehow I cannot

enjoy it and am sitting to one side with my little book and writing, whether it ever gets to you, my dear friends, or not. This afternoon we really are in trouble. The engine broke down and it ^{is} so calm that the sails just hang. This could be very bad for us travelers because if the ship does not reach Scotland tomorrow we will miss the train and would have to wait in Scotland for two weeks. At 7:45 this evening they got the ship going again. This was the worst part of the trip so far. When the ship stood still it waltzed around so much that we all got sick again and in our bunks we could hardly tell which end was up.

July 14th. At two this morning someone reported seeing land. The weather is now good and everyone is feeling better. We are sailing along the coast and too far away to see the lowland but we see lots of mountains. It is a lot more interesting than to see only the heavens and the ocean. The mountains are beautiful but somehow not as bright and friendly as the dear mountains at home. They only awake in us memories of the past. Scotland is to the right and the Orkney Islands on the left.

At 12:30 today the ship stopped and blew the whistle several times. A boat came out from shore with three men on board. Our captain gave them some papers and they left and went back to shore. "Camoens" started up again. We are now closer to shore and it is beautiful. In some places there are rocks on the shore, something like the rocks in front of Vik. Up on the bluffs there are green fields and houses that look so high against the blue sky. Many of them are snow white with white fences around them. Large grain fields are at the back. They tell us that the name of this place is Thors Island.

It is now eight o'clock and we are still along the coast of Scotland. The scenery is beautiful and lovely weather. All around us are fish boats, both large and small and many steam boats have passed us today. Very little sea sickness today and I am feeling quite well again, but have no appetite. People are happy today, some playing instruments and others singing. Some are playing chess and a few are gambling with real money. Two Englishmen are playing accordions and singing English songs and toward the back two Icelanders with their violins are playing and six or eight couples are dancing. We are enjoying it.

July 18th. At two P.M. we arrived at Clyde, Scotland. By seven we were all on the train with our baggage and left at once. The train had fifteen or sixteen cars in it and most of them baggage and freight. The passenger cars were last and all this was an impressive sight.

Scotland is a beautiful place to see. Woods, farmland, and pastureland. The trees are so big they are much higher than the houses. Many homes have hedges. The trees are so close to the track that some of the branches touch the train windows. And if I (and God lets me live) should see more natural beauty than here in Scotland I lack the ability to describe it as I should, but I want so much to tell you about something you would enjoy hearing about. I stare with wide-eyed wonder at the beauty of nature and feel bad that poor little Iceland was not given any of this.

The train seats are very comfortable. I am sure that even a weakling would not find it hard to take. The benches are polished wood with a comfortable back. The ceiling is painted white and the windows are so close together that we can sit back and enjoy the scenery. I assure you there is no danger of losing your breath even if the speed is so great. The worst is that we go by so fast we don't have time to get a good look. I would have liked to stop the train when I saw a herd of cows right near the track. They were so fat and contented-looking and I would have been real happy to milk one of them to get a good drink of milk.

Our trip across Scotland was a three-hour trip and six times the train went underground. It gets pitch dark and you can't distinguish black from white and the noise is terrific. Especially if they meet another train. They pass so close that there is only about a foot of space between.

At ten P.M. we arrived in Glasgow. It was dark but the streets and houses were all bright with many, many lights like the starlit heavens. All the people were told to stay in a group and hurry because this part of the city was not a very safe place to be at this time of night. The streets were paved with stone and very smooth but it looked like place where one could very easily get into trouble. I'm afraid some of the people will long remember this night because when we reached the ship at two A.M. there were several people missing, mostly tired women and children who had gotten separated from the

group in the crowded street. All have been found except one woman and her child. I kept a close hold on Helgi's arm. It is very important to stay with the group so as not to get lost. Please remember this, my dear friends, when you come.

Glasgow is hard to describe. The buildings are so large and overpowering, and even if the city is well lighted we couldn't see much except this one street. There were many side streets and in several places we walked under high arches. There was much traffic in the street and many tough looking characters motioning us to come and follow them. Crossing the side streets was where we had to be careful not to get separated from our group. This is what probably happened to the ones that got lost. It is hoped that friendly hands helped them.

When we arrived at the waterfront, we entered a huge building which looked quite empty, until we arrived, nearly nine hundred people. Between this big building and the dock where our ship lay were huge metal gates, that were locked. Three policemen came and drove off several characters that tried to hide among the people in our group. In this building all the women and children were given milk to drink, and the men a drink of water. After that the policemen opened the gates and very orderly let each family aboard where others took over until all were settled, each one in their own little compartment. Here it was not as crowded as on "Camoens". The bunks were painted inside and out and there were long white painted tables in the cabin with red painted benches. The ship is seventy fathoms and eight feet and carries 1400 people including the crew. It travels forty-eight Danish miles in twenty-four hours.

July 18th Monday.

July 19th. Tuesday. Clear skies and good weather. The English people are having a good time playing and dancing.

July 20th, and a change in the weather. We are heading into a real storm so that the waves washed up on the deck.

July 21st. Real bad storm and rough sea. The ship is only moving at half speed. Much sea sickness. In the night a three-year old child died from (barnaveiki) diphtheria. The crew built a small coffin and then it was thrown over board.

July 22nd. Still stormy but improved a little this afternoon. We were all vaccinated today. Most of the seasick people are getting better. At six o'clock this evening we got into a thick fog and the ship's whistle blew every few minutes so we didn't sleep much this night.

July 24th. At seven o'clock this morning we could see land in the far distance. We were told this was a group of islands north of Newfoundland. It turned so cold that the fog froze on everything.

July 27th. At seven AM sunshine and calm. We are now entering a narrow fjord with wooded shores on both sides, St. Lawrence. They say we will soon reach our destination. Two children died last night. At one o'clock today we landed at Quebec. Here is much to see, both natural beauty and the work of men. It is quite impossible for me to describe it all, but you will see it all, dear friends, when you come later. After the ship landed all the people walked down the gangplank, followed by all their luggage and into a big house on the dock. There our agent, Baldwin Baldwinson, met us. He had been waiting five days for our arrival. In this house I bought two quarts of milk at twenty ~~our~~ a quart. That was the first money I spent since leaving home. There is a good sized store here, but I don't intend to buy anything else. After sometime we were all invited to dinner. It was the finest dining room I have ever been in. Baldwin had arranged this for us. Here we turned in what was left of our tickets and received new ones instead. Our luggage was marked with metal tags and we were given other metal tags with the same number on them. We were to keep them until we claimed our baggage when we left the train. Everything was in order and we had not lost anything.

July 28th. We were up most of the night and had to wait until everyone else was taken care of because they were totally unprepared to make out papers for anyone going so far. We two were the only ones of all this crowd going to Victoria.

At two AM we finally got on the train and left at once. We had made friends with Kristofer and his fiancée, and Thorstein Thorsteinson and his wife Ingebjorg on the way and were very sorry to have to leave them at Quebec as they were put on another train.

(Kristofer and his fiancée, Johanna, went to Washington Island in Wisconsin. They corresponded with Helgi and Dagbjort for many years. Ingebjorg and Thorstein Thorsteinson, who later changed his name to Stoneson, settled in Winnipeg, but later came to Victoria and then Point Roberts, where they lived for several years before moving to Bellingham, Vancouver, Crescent, and Blaine, where both died at an advanced age. Two of their sons, Ellis and Henry, became building contractors in California, and planned and built Stonestown, a suburb of San Francisco. They also financed the beginning of the Icelandic Old Folk's Home in Blaine in memory of their parents, and named it "Stafholt" for their mother's home in Iceland.)

"Now it is six o'clock and we have arrived in Ottawa, here we left thirty-five people who were to go to Winnipeg. Baldwin promised to see to it that they all found employment.

July 29th. Friday. July 30th. Saturday. July 31st. Sunday.

August 1st. Monday. August 2nd. Tuesday. We boarded the train that is to take us all the way to Victoria. After we left the city we saw many beautiful farms, large fields, and acres of ripening grain. There were also large herds of cows and flocks of sheep. We have gone through many small towns, but the further we go west the less we see of any habitation. We have seen many Indians. They are very strange looking people.

August 4th. Everlasting mountains and forests and many rivers and lakes to cross. We are getting very tired.

August 5th. Friday - August 6th. Saturday "

This is the end of Dagbjort's diary.

The travelers reached New Westminster, where they had been told in a letter from Sigurdur Myrdal to leave the train and board a boat for Victoria. Things had changed since that letter was written and now the railroad had been completed all the way to Vancouver and there was no longer a boat from New Westminster. Because of the delay in Quebec and not knowing the exact day Helgi and Dagbjort would arrive, Sigurdur had been meeting this boat until he was told it was no longer running. In the meantime, it was explained to Helgi Dagbjort that they must take the train to Vancouver and board the Victoria

boat there. So they were on one of the very first trains to come to Vancouver. On arriving there, they hoped Victoria would be a nicer place, as Vancouver was just recovering from the bad fire of 1886, and there were only a few buildings near the waterfront and acres of huge burned tree stumps. They enjoyed the boat trip across the Gulf, and were pleased to see the beauty of Victoria, but wondered what awaited them there.

When the boat landed, no one was there to meet them and they looked in vain for a familiar face, but all were strangers. While they stood there with their luggage, a hack or horse drawn taxicab pulled up and the driver offered his assistance. They were overjoyed to find that he spoke Icelandic, the first Icelandic they had heard since leaving the group in eastern Canada.

The driver was Oliver Johnson who, with his wife and family, later became very good friends of Helgi and Daga, and were a part of the Icelandic colony in Victoria. Gudrun and Oliver Johnson had a large family, and their oldest son became Premier of B. C. Oliver drove them and their luggage to Spring Ridge where the Myrdals lived and they were welcomed by Sigurdur and Valgerdur, his wife. They were invited to stay with them.

Both soon found employment. Helgi lived with the Myrdals and in his spare moments taught their son, Arni, to read Icelandic. He in turn taught Helgi some English.

Helgi's first job was in a lumber mill, but Sigurd was a carpenter and later was able to get Helgi in the construction crew. They worked on large and small buildings, among them Dunsmuir Castle.

Dagbjort did housework where she received room and board and \$1.25 a day. While there she helped with the wedding reception of one of the family. She felt a wedding should be dignified and serious, and was very disgusted when she saw some of the guests tying old shoes to the bridal couple's buggy; and throwing rice at them was a terrible waste of good food.

This family was kind to Daga, and she worked for them for several months. In the spring of 1888 she cut her finger and it became infected. The family doctor gave her medicine to heal it, but the infection spread all over her body (blood poisoning). She was taken to Jubilee Hospital in serious condition. The hospital room cost \$10.00 a week.

After she recovered she stayed for a while with an Icelandic family that lived near the hospital where she had to go for treatments. Later, she started working for the nuns at the hospital. They tried to get her to join the Catholic church, and one day a nun lifted the lid on the stove, pointed to the fire, and said, "This is where Lutherans will go."

She lived with ^{the} nuns and they were good to Daga, but very strict. She learned some cooking from them while working in the kitchen; "you scrape the carrots, but peel the parsnips." After her day's work was done, Daga was very lonesome for her Icelandic friends and especially Helgi, who was so terribly homesick. So she found a way to get out through the pantry and was AWOL for a little while. This didn't happen often and she was never caught.

Quote from a letter from Helgi to his parents and brothers:

"January 1, 1888. Last night, New Year's eve the Icelanders here all got together. Sigurdur Myrdal read scripture and we all sang hymns and other songs. It was ^avery enjoyable ~~an~~ evening for both of us. They did the same thing on Christmas eve, and plan to meet each Sunday evening. I feel well but am still very homesick. I think I would get over it if I could get steady work. Last summer I worked in a lumber mill. This winter only off and on with Sigurdur Myrdal at construction work. Daga is a maid in a large house. The weather is very good here, no snow and very little frost. My pay was raised 25¢ a day."

On December 22, 1888 Helgi and Dagbjort were married in a large church, attended by all their Icelandic friends who treated them like brother and sister. Then they moved into the little house Helgi had built on a lot next to his friends, the Myrdals. There were sixteen Icelanders in Victoria at this time.

In 1889 their good friend and foster brother Paul Thorsteinson and his wife Oddny, and Sigurd Scheving and a few other friends from Vik arrived in Victoria, and were welcomed by Helgi and Dagbjort and the other Icelanders.

Dagbjort did house cleaning and took in washing to supplement their income. Both she and Helgi worked real hard. Once a week a Chinese vegetable peddler would come by with two huge baskets of vegetables suspended from a

pole across his back and shoulders. He would sing out "Yella con and Cabbageeee--" as he came down the street, or whatever vegetable was then in season. They soon had their own little garden.

On August 15, 1889 Dagbjort gave birth to a baby boy after having been ill most of the summer. He was three months premature and died the following day, not named or baptized. The doctors blamed this tragedy on the infection she had and all the medication she had to take for it. This was a great shock for the young couple, but being good Christians they accepted the fact that this was God's will and they firmly believed all would be united again some day in a better world. Sigurd Myrdal conducted the funeral service which was attended by most of their Icelandic friends. The little boy was buried in Ross Bay Cemetery.

August 4, 1890 their second child was born. They named her Groa, for Dagbort's mother. Helgi was hoping for a son, but said he enjoyed the baby even if it was a girl, and was thankful it was healthy.

In the spring of 1891 they were able to send for Dagbjort's mother. She came alone from Iceland with only letters and an English-Icelandic dictionary to help her as she spoke no English. It was a happy day when she arrived in Victoria. She lived with Helgi and Dagbjort until her death June 13, 1906 at Point Roberts.

There were sixteen Icelanders in Victoria in 1888. They kept coming from Iceland and from the East until in 1892 there were two hundred people.

In 1892 an epidemic of smallpox spread through Victoria and many people died. None of the Icelandic group got it. It was also a bad year in other ways, depression and unemployment. Helgi was having a hard time finding a job. Dagbjort decided to go to work and did housework from eight to five for \$1.25 a day. She also took in sewing and washing. Grandma Groa took care of little Groa while she worked. They bought an eight day mantle clock for \$7.00 and a bookcase for \$5.00.

Helgi and Daga both belonged to the Icelandic Literary Society. They exchanged books they had brought from Iceland with other Icelanders. The group also pooled their resources and ordered new books from Iceland. They also joined a congregation started by Sigurd Myrdal, who also served as their minister.

He preached in private houses, mostly his own, until in 1892 the group grew larger and was able to build a little church of their own. This was the first Lutheran church on the Pacific coast.

In the spring of 1893 another child was born, a son which they named Gunnlaugur for their foster father in Vik. That summer, a terrible children's disease called Infant's cholera spread all through Victoria, and at least every other baby died from it, thirty-six in one week. Despite every precaution, Gunnlaugur caught it and died on September 2, 1893, and was buried with his brother in Ross Bay Cemetery. Other families lost children too, so this was a sad year for the Icelandic group and others. Little Groa was sickly for sometime but survived. (Gunnlaugur was born on a Saturday evening, baptized on Saturday evening, and he died on a Saturday evening.)

In 1893 there was a depression in Canada. Construction work was at a standstill, and the only work Helgi could get was digging ditches for sewers that averaged eight feet deep and in some places were twenty-seven feet deep and only three feet wide. Platforms were built and the men shoveled the mud and rock up on the first platform, where another moved it to the next platform until they reached the top. This was very hard and dangerous work and no one liked doing it, but Helgi felt fortunate to have any kind of work to do.

Helgi and Daga corresponded with their friends and relatives in Vik, and at that time it took two and a half months for a letter to arrive from Iceland.

Early in 1894 Kristian Benson came to Victoria to visit his daughters who were learning sewing and other handwork from a friend of the Bensons. Kristian had moved his family to Point Roberts and worked in a fish saltery. He told of a cannery being built there and said many workers would be needed. He also said that the land on Point Roberts was not for sale but was a military reserve. Squatters had settled there and built log houses, and many of them would be willing to sell their improvements. Helgi and Paul Thorsteinson, and Arni Myrdal and his father Sigurd, and Ben Sivertz decided to go to Point Roberts and investigate the possibility of making their homes there. This they did and were so impressed with the Point that they each bought a squatter's cabin or house. Helgi and Paul bought a log house on a bank overlooking the sea. The beach reminded them of their Vik in Iceland.

So they went back to Victoria and on June 15, 1894 brought their families. They rented their house in Victoria for \$4.00 a month. The boat they came on landed by the river bank at Ladner's landing. They were able to hire a team of horses and wagon to haul their possessions the ten miles to Point Roberts.

There was no road to their log cabin so they had to walk on a narrow winding trail through the woods, carrying their children and most needed possessions quite some distance. They got caught in a June rain shower so when they reached the house they were wet and tired, but happy. The first thing to do was to brew a cup of coffee so they built a fire in the old rusty stove and put water on to boil. Then they discovered they had no coffee grinder and at that time all coffee was sold in the whole beans and ground at home. Daga found an old kettle and put some coffee beans in it and broke them up as best she could. They all agreed it was the best coffee they had ever had. After much scrubbing and cleaning the two families moved into the log house, Paul and Oddny with their son John, and Helgi and Dagbjort with their daughter Groa and Dagbjort's mother Groa. The house was 20x16 feet, had a kitchen and living room downstairs, and bedrooms upstairs. There was a clearing around the house where the former owner had a garden. They bought a cow. About this time the Alaska Packers Association of California bought the saltery at Point Roberts and built a large cannery.

Quote from a letter to Helgi's parents:

March 14, 1895 --"We live a quiet life here, which is a relief after all the noise of the city. I didn't mind the noise much when I had steady work. I guess we left Victoria just in time as unemployment is getting worse instead of better. Many Icelandic families have moved here from Victoria which makes it nice for us.

We built a small skiff and bought twine and made our own little beach seine. We have been able to catch fish both for ourselves and other neighbors who have no beach or boat. The families gather on the beach on warm summer evenings and visit while the men "fish" (this probably was one of the first beach parties in Point Roberts.)

"Paul and I have cleared, fenced and seeded about three acres and are now clearing for pasture in hopes that some day the land will be ours. We plan to plant a big garden next month, then work at the new cannery during the summer."

Quote from a letter to Helgi's parents in Iceland:

December 22, 1895--"Our first winter here was exceptionally mild and the summer warm and dry. The pasture dried up, but the vegetable garden did real well, especially the potatoes. I am going to tell you, just for fun what our first garden produced. We raised 60 pounds beans, 50 pounds of onions, some corn and other small vegetables, nine big sacks of potatoes and four sacks of rhutabagas. There is no market for anything, but we were able to sell one sack of potatoes and some butter. We used the surplus vegetables to feed the pigs. We also raised five tons of hay from the old clearing and from around the stumps. We have cleared two additional acres which we will seed, so we should have more hay next year. Paul and I work together, we own thirty chickens and seven pigs. We butchered one this fall and also a steer we bought from Brewster for \$17.00. He dressed at 550 pounds and the pig at 160 pounds. I own two cows and two calves and Paul owned two but unfortunately one of his cows fell over the bank and was killed.

We built a barn 30x16 feet and a storehouse 16x12. We also built a small chicken house, pig house and a smoke house. We are real pleased and proud that we can now have smoked meat for Christmas just like we always had back home in Vik. Our buildings are made from driftwood salvaged from the beach and split cedar from the woods. Mostly we have worked at home but we each made \$19.00 working at a nearby fish cannery. We also worked in the hay for an Englishman and got 1½ tons of hay for our work. Last summer we worked two weeks at road building and were paid \$1.50 a day. We have no taxes to pay but each man has to build roads for 2½ days without pay. This is done in the spring and summer.

We decided to try our luck at salmon fishing. We bought a net for \$200.00. It is 100 fathoms long and 7 fathoms wide. We had intended making it ourselves but through some misunderstanding it was sent all made up. Therefore costing more than we had expected. There are three of us in partnership, Siggi Scheving, Paul, and myself. We hope to do well. There is an abundance

of salmon here and the cannery last year paid 16¢ apiece for them and we hear the price will be 20¢ next summer.

We had quite a scare the other day when someone read in a newspaper that all the settlers on Point Roberts were to be driven off without receiving any compensation for their homes or their work. It happened in a place not far from here and the place was taken for a fort. We settlers on Point Roberts got together and signed a petition which was sent to Washington, D.C. asking that Point Roberts be opened for homesteads. I would feel terrible if we had to leave this place. I feel so well here, better than anywhere since I came to America. Our children are healthy and I have never been homesick since I left Victoria. We look forward to a good future here. I have no idea where we would go if we have to leave. I am sending a picture of your two granddaughters. Daga took them to Victoria last summer. Groa has had tonsillitis for quite some time but the doctor said she was too young to have them removed before we left Victoria. All went well and Daga was real happy to have this over with. Groa is five years old and the picture is good of her, but your namesake Gudrun (Runa) is a little too happy. She is five months old.

Greet all my brothers for me.

Your loving son, Helgi"

In October 1897, a son was born. This made Helgi very happy and he named him Gunnlaugur (Laugi) for his foster father in Vik and also for the son they lost in Victoria.

Quote from a letter from Helgi to his brother in Iceland:

March 22, 1898. --"We now have three children living. Groa will be eight in August. She is now going to school. Gudrun was three in March and Gunnlaugur was five months old on the ninth of this month. They are all in good health which we are very thankful for.

Paul built a house nearby but we still share the barn, garden, and hayfield and work together. They have two boys, seven and three years old.

Siggi Scheving lives with us and works for his board and room. He also does carpenter work in the community and in Victoria. He owns a share in our boat. We now have a postoffice on Pt. Roberts. I am sending you our new

address which I hope will not have to be changed. I will not leave here unless I have to. When we first came here our mail came to Ladner, B. C. in Canada. We men here took turns walking the ten miles to bring the mail and buy much needed supplies. Later one of our Icelandic friends bought a horse and made deliveries.

There is a store here now and the postoffice is in it. They buy from us butter at 20¢ a pound and egg 15¢ to 25¢ a dozen.

Like I told you in my last letter we three, Paul, Siggi and I built a boat. We used it last summer and were very pleased with it. We bought canvas and Daga sewed sails for us on her little hand-sewing machine. We added eighty fathoms to our net. Bought the twine and made it ourselves so we now have 280 fathoms. We caught 1200 salmon but due to the low price, 10¢, later 8¢ apiece, we only shared \$33.00 each. Then we had to quit in the middle of the season because the cannery had more fish than they could handle.

We also built a shed 32x13 on a ledge at the beach to keep our boat in. We have a padlock on the door and hope it will be safe. Our little skiff was stolen.

I now own four cows and two heifers and a steer and pig to butcher this fall. I find it better to have just one pig at a time and buy a young one when I butcher the old one.

We raised a lot of potatoes and as there is very little sale for them we feed them to the pigs and cows. With lots of milk it does not cost much to raise a pig.

We built a new barn 53x42 feet. Hay storage in the middle and room for thirteen stalls on each side.

Last fall three men were sent here to appraise all the homes and farms on Pt. Roberts. Then they were to be sold to the highest bidder. This was a big worry to all of us here on the Point. We hired a lawyer for the second time. This time to contact the State Legislature which was in session and try to get them to allow each settler to buy his land for the assessed valuation. We also sent a petition to Washington, D.C. We are waiting to hear.

Our land, mine and Paul's was valued at \$6.00 an acre for the front forty acres, but \$3.00 for the back. If it ever becomes ours we will divide it so that each of us has twenty acres in front next to the beach and twenty at the back. It will come hard on us to pay for it, but harder still if we have to leave.

You have, no doubt, heard about the Klondike gold rush in Alaska. Don't worry, I am not tempted to try my luck there. I would rather live here in peace and quiet with my small income. Many have gone there and a few have come back rich, but many more have come back worse off than when they left and very many never come back at all. I can't imagine anything worse than to die of cold and hunger with a bag of gold on your back. Some of the men here would go if they had the means. It costs at least \$500.00 to buy the tools, grubstake and travel expense to Alaska. Then a long dangerous trip over mountains and glaciers where hundreds have died of cold and exposure. You will read more about this in the papers I am sure.

Greetings to all my relatives.

Your loving brother, Helgi"

Another fish cannery and company store were built on the west side of Point Roberts. The George and Barker Company from Astoria, Oregon. Most of the settlers and some of their wives worked in either one of the canneries. Even children ten to twelve years old were employed during the canning season. Their wages were 10¢ an hour.

Both canneries had many fish traps which were made by driving piles into the bottom of the bay and nailing 2x12 inch planks on them like a long fence, to hold the wire netting. The sound of the big pile drivers in the spring was almost as welcome as the croaking of the first frogs, and could be heard all over the Point.

In the fall all traps were pulled out and only the piling saved. The planks floated to shore and were salvaged by the settlers who made good use of them to build their houses and other buildings.

Helgi and his partners used some of them to build stairs up ~~to~~ the bank.

There were 99 steps with railing on both sides. There was also a track on each side for a sled with wooden wheels to run on. Attached was a strong rope and this was used to pull the planks up the bank. A hand-powered drum winch was operated by two men at the top.

One day while the men were working on the planks one of the little boys who had been playing around and watching, fell down the stairs. He rolled head over heels clear to the bottom. The man at the top called to the man at bottom, "Isn't he all broken?" The little boy, Arnie, son of Paul, yelled back between sobs, "I'm not broken!" He was right, his father carried him back up the stairs and home, suffering only a few bumps and bruises.

The partners made several trips to Blaine on their sail boat to buy supplies, cow and chicken feed, etc. Groa went along on one trip to buy dry goods for her mother. She shopped at the City of Paris store and bought six yards of ticking at 20¢ a yard, 15 yards of outing flannel at 10¢ a yard, and 15 yards of calico at 5¢ a yard. They also bought shoes for the family at A.B. Barrett's shoe store averaging \$2.25 a pair. Groceries and other supplies were purchased at the Blaine Trading Company.

The fish canneries had so many fish from their traps that they no longer bought fish. So Helgi, Paul and Siggie sold their boat and fishing gear. They worked in the cannery instead and found it more profitable.

A motor launch named "Ella" operated by Jim Dabney brought mail and freight and passengers from Blaine to Point Roberts regularly three times a week. There were also large steamboats that brought freight and supplies for the G and B cannery from Bellingham and Seattle and picked up canned salmon in the fall. One of the first of these was a side wheeler named "George E. Starr". They also carried passengers, but this was not a regular run.

In 1899, Helgi started building a new house, not far from the old log house. It was built of planks from the beach with tar paper and shingles on the outside. Wall paper over cheese cloth on the inside walls made a very comfortable home. It was finished early in 1900 at the cost of \$8000~~00~~ which was mostly for shingles, nails, finished lumber, windows and doors, etc.

Before moving from the log house to the new house, Daga boiled every piece of clothing and washed all the furniture with hot soap suds. There were bed bugs in the old log house when they moved in and as they are unheard of in Iceland she was horrified and did her best to get rid of them. Sometimes she succeeded for awhile but they always came back out of the cracks in the logs. After they moved into the new house and burned the old log house the bugs were never seen again.

March 3, 1900, a baby boy was born. They named him Jonas for Helgi's favorite brother in Iceland. Nineteen hundred was also the year that Helgi and Paul became U. S. citizens, and with them, their wives and children.

Helgi and Daga were very happy in their new home and it was always open to friends, and even strangers who happened to stop by. They were welcomed and soon the kettle was on for a friendly visit and cup of coffee.

Paul and his family always spent Christmas eve with Helgi and his family, and then they would spend New Year's Eve with Paul and Oddny. This custom was continued even after the families had grown to between 30 and 40 members. The friendship that began as children in Vik lasted as long as they lived.

Dagbjort seemed to have a natural ability for nursing. Without any training, except that which she learned from a doctor book from Iceland, she delivered many of the first babies born on Point Roberts. She also was the nurse when a doctor from Ladner came and performed tonsilleotomies on her dining-room table. There were never any complications. She nursed her son, Laugi through a serious case of pneumonia. Many of the pioneers came to her for help and advice when in trouble. Some of her descendants seem to have inherited her nursing ability.

Daga was very fond of animals and often was able to help them, especially cows that were having a difficult time at calving. She never worked in the canneries as she had small children and an ailing mother to look after. She also helped with the milking. In those days, there was no such thing as a milking machine. Helgi was busy with his farming so he very seldom worked away from home.

There were fish traps on the south side of Point Roberts and camps on shore owned by a Bellingham Cannery. Helgi sold eggs and butter to them,

delivered by Groa and Runa, the two oldest children. This was about 1902.

Paul and Helgi each had several cows and calves so they built a barn for Paul near his house. Helgi also acquired a few sheep. He made pets of them and the children loved to play with the little lambs. But one of his rams got mean and butted anyone that came near him. One day little Jonas, barely able to walk, wandered out into the pasture. His mother went to look for him, saw the ram approaching and hurried as much as she could, but the ram got there first. Jonas took off his cap and slapped the ram in the face and he walked away without harming the child. This ram got butchered in the fall.

Dagbjort used the sheep's wool to make quilts and to make yarn on her spinning wheel to knit socks and sweaters for her family. Grandma Groa was able to help her with that kind of work. She suffered with arthritis for many years and was bedridden the last years of her life.

Both Daga and Helgi were very fond of books. They had brought a Bible and a book of sermons with them from Iceland. Helgi would read aloud from these sermons on a Sunday morning.

Sometimes those first years they would take baby Runa and tie her on Helgi's back with a big Icelandic shawl and the family would walk through the woods on a narrow winding trail to the Benson home. There they would visit and borrow books from Kristian. He had brought a trunk full of old books to Point Roberts.

Later as the Icelandic population grew, they formed a literary society and ordered books from Iceland. They called their society "Hafstjarnan" which means "Ocean Star". The books were kept in a centrally located home and soon they had quite a nice library. Dagbjort was secretary for many years.

In January 1903, a little girl was born to Helgi and Dagbjort. They named her Elsa Dorothea for their foster mother in Vik.

A new schoolhouse was built about this time, near the west side of Point Roberts. It was a much larger and better building than the little old one, but it was quite a lot farther for the children to walk to school. There were no

roads, only trails cut through the woods and marked by blazes in the trees. In the fall when the ground was covered with dry leaves it was very easy to lose the trail without these markers.

Many huge old logs lay across the trail, windfalls from many years past. No one had a saw long enough to cut through them so they cut steps in them for the children to climb over.

Helgi was the oldest of six brothers. The youngest was Thordur. They had been corresponding for several years and Thordur was very anxious to come to America. So in the spring of 1903, he and his wife Steinun arrived. He soon got work at the APA cannery pitching fish at 35¢ an hour. In the fall their first child, Gisli was born. So there were twelve in Helgi's family in 1904.

Thordur was a hard worker and very ambitious. He was soon able to buy 20 acres of land with a small house on it for \$200.00. This was their first home. Later he added more land and built a new house where they raised a large family.

Helgi bought several cows from his old friend Thorstein Stoneson who was moving away from Point Roberts. He also took over the business of delivering milk to the cook house at the APA cannery. At first he hauled the milk cans in a two-wheeled hand cart, then carried them on his back down the big hill. He usually had one in each hand too.

Later he owned a horse-drawn cart and used that. His children helped him when they became old enough.

Shortly before the cannery was moved from Point Roberts, a cable and pulley were installed to haul things up or down the steep bank. He used that for the milk cans.

Due to diminishing salmon runs the cannery was closed and the salmon canned at their other plant at Semiahmoo near Blaine.

In June 1906, Daga's mother, Groa died and was buried on the farm, later moved to the new Point Roberts cemetery. Also in 1906, they sold their Victoria house at Spring Ridge for \$300.00.

Rumors were spreading once again that all the settlers on Point Roberts would have to leave. Letters and petitions were sent to the legislators and also to President Theodore Roosevelt asking that the settlers be allowed to homestead the land they had squatted on.

In 1904, a Colonel Ellett was sent from Washington, D. C. to examine the situation and make a report. About this same time a Geodetic survey ship spent a lot of time out in the gulf near the Point.

Colonel Ellett arrived on the mail boat. He said "I came to Point Roberts armed to the teeth, thinking the settlers were outlaws and renegades, but I soon found out I was mistaken." He was met at the boat dock and taken to every house on the Point. He was very favorably impressed and reported that the people were clearing the land, making homes and working hard as if they hoped to own the property some day.

The survey also showed that Point Roberts was not a suitable place to build a fort.

Finally in 1908, the long awaited dream came true. President Roosevelt opened Point Roberts for homesteaders. Each family was allowed the land they were living on.

All the men went to Seattle to the land office. It was a happy day for everyone when they came back on the mail boat, which arrived shortly before noon.

While the men were gone, the women planned a big community picnic to greet them. It was a beautiful sunny summer day at Tinkham's Grove. Daga and her girls baked, and fried chicken and helped with the picnic. This was one of the happiest gatherings ever held at Point Roberts.

Colonel Edward Tinkham, one of the early settlers who owned property on the west side of the Point suggested it would be appropriate to send a gift of some kind to President Roosevelt to show their appreciation. Helgi butchered his largest sheep and donated the skin. This was expertly tanned and a rug made from it by Mr. Elsner who had learned the trade in Germany. It was then sent to President Roosevelt.

A letter of thanks was received from the President saying the rug was being used in his bedroom in the White House.

In August 1908, a terrible forest fire raged over the south and east end of Point Roberts. Helgi and Paul's homes and barns were in danger, as were other neighbor's homes. With a strong northwest wind behind it, the fire spread, and all available men came to help. They worked all night and were able to save the barns, homes and out-buildings. The women and children worked too, and Daga made coffee and sandwiches for everyone after the danger was over, which was by early dawn.

It was a sorry looking sight, many of the fir trees still standing, but their beautiful green tops burned off. All the cedar posts and rail fences were gone and the ground was black.

In 1913, the Icelandic Synod in Winnipeg sent a Reverend H. Leo to the west coast to form new Lutheran congregations among the Icelandic people. He started one in Seattle, Blaine, Vancouver and Point Roberts.

Rev. S. Olafson was the first minister to serve Blaine, Vancouver, and Point Roberts. There were between thirty and forty members and their children in Trinity congregation of Point Roberts. Services and Sunday School were in Icelandic. Later they changed to English, with an occasional Icelandic service. Several new members were added at this time. Services were held in the community hall and later in the schoolhouse. The four oldest Thorsteinson children were all confirmed in the first confirmation class. Elsa was too young, and was confirmed later. Helgi and Dagbjort and their children were all very active in the church work and Helgi was treasurer for many years.

Every year Helgi donated wool for a big quilt that Daga and the other church women made, to be used as a special prize at the annual bazaar. They also put on other entertainments to raise money for a building fund.

In 1921, they were able to build a church. The lot was donated by the Solomon family and much of the carpenter work was donated. The rough lumber was cut from Point Robert's trees at Mr. Largaud's mill. He also made a generous donation.

Electricity came to Point Roberts in 1932 and everyone was required to buy an electric stove. Daga hated to part with her wood stove so she bought a combination range, both wood and electricity.

Shortly after that fish traps were outlawed and both canneries closed. Many people had to leave the Point and look for employment elsewhere. Most of the settlers, including Helgi built large poultry houses and went into the chicken business. They joined the Co-op Egg and Poultry Association and shipped the eggs to Bellingham. Helgi belonged to the Whatcom County Dairy-men's Association, too, and shipped cream to their plant in Bellingham. There was, at this time, a daily boat that carried mail and freight and passengers direct to and from Bellingham.

In 1913, Helgi and Daga built an addition to their house -- a living-room downstairs and a bedroom upstairs. In this new living-room, their oldest daughter Groa was married to Kolbeinn Simundson by Rev. Leo. The date was December 22, 1913, which ^{was} also the 25th anniversary of Helgi and Daga's wedding.

Twenty-five years later the whole community of Point Roberts helped them celebrate their Golden Wedding and also Groa and Kolbeinn's silver wedding.

Kolbeinn came to Point Roberts from Winnipeg. They later moved to Seattle where he became a minister. Their children are Leonard, Jonas K, Dorothy, Marjory, Luther and Daniel.

In 1917, their second daughter Runa married Ben Thordarson, who had come from Iceland at the age of eighteen. They were married in a little church in Bellingham by Rev. S. Olafson. Their children are Helgi, Hilda, and Margret.

In 1931, Laugi married Ella Thordarson, a Blaine girl who worked in a bank in Seattle. They were married by Rev. K. Simundson in his home in Seattle. Their children are twins, Robert and Sylvia.

Jonas married Bertha Olson, a local girl and a registered nurse, in 1928. They were married by Rev. Simundson in the church at Point Roberts. They have one daughter Joan. Bertha passed away in ~~1944~~¹⁹⁴⁴, and in 1950, Jonas married Asrun Jonasson from Winnipeg.

In 1941, Elsa was married to Finis Piper in a church in New Orleans. He was a chemist and they made their home in Webster Grove, a suburb of St. Louis. They have one child, Nancy.

In June 1941, Daga became very ill and was taken to the General Hospital in Vancouver. She passed away after five days in the hospital and surgery, at the age of 79. She was buried in Point Roberts Cemetery beside her mother.

Helgi was in fairly good health, but could not live alone so he came to live with Runa and Ben, until his death in March 1945. He was 85 years old and the last of the friends from Vik in Iceland. He was laid to rest beside his Daga.

Grant us Thy peace,
Upon our homeward way.
With Thee began,
With Thee shall end the day.
Then when Thy voice
Shall bid our conflict cease,
Call us O Lord,
To Thine eternal peace.
