

Iceland--The First Land of the Western Immigrant

By E. M. Newman, in the Mentor

LYING JUST UNDER the Arctic Circle and known by a forbidding name, Iceland is a land of beautiful scenery, mild climate, and interesting people. Contrary to general belief, it is not a remote island; actually it is nearer to North America than Southampton or Le Havre. A moderately speedy steamer can make the trip from New York in six days. Unfortunately there is no regular service from America. Saving only an occasional freighter or an especially chartered excursion steamer, the only way of reaching the island is by steamer from Norway or Denmark. During summer a weekly steamer service is maintained from these countries.

Iceland is not a land of snow and ice. There are large uninhabitable parts of it, due to soil and climatic conditions, but in the habitable parts, thanks to the Gulf Stream, the climate is milder than that of New York. There are many rainy days, mist, and fogs during the summer, and deep snows in winter, but it is rarely, if ever severely cold.

The island is about two hundred miles wide and three hundred miles long. There are no railways and but few wagon roads. The island pony, a sturdy little beast capable of doing twenty miles a day, is the only means of inland travel.

Nowhere more than in Iceland have the telegraph and telephone abolished distance. The island is webbed with telephone lines, and the farmers are in constant touch with all parts.

About eighty thousand people inhabit Iceland. Other than Reykjavik, the capital, a town of 14,000 population and Aukreyri, on the northern coast, there are no larger towns. The people live on farms and in small communities. These are maintained by an extensive commerce, chiefly in fish, cattle, sheep, hides, wool, and eiderdown.

Reykjavik is a thoroughly modern city. It has its own gas plant, sewers, running water in the houses, streets, gutters, and curbing such as one would find in any American city. Its library contains 80,000 volumes, among which are well-thumbed copies of Webster's unabridged dictionary and Ralph Waldo Emerson's works. The classics and the best literature of all lands are in demand. "Light reading" as we know it, is little desired. At the capital, also, is a university, a school for music, public schools, opera house, and the inevitable motion picture theater.

The impression that Iceland is semi-civilized is ridiculous. Twenty-five newspapers and fifteen periodicals—one ninety years old—are published there. There is an Icelandic Salvation Army "War Cry" and a woman suffrage organ, "The Suffragette," besides religious journals, scientific, farm and miscellaneous publications. Cable connection and the weekly steamer service keep Iceland in contact with the outside world. There is an active social life—balls and banquets are frequent. European manners regulate social life at the island capital.

Reykjavik has two good hotels. In the early

morning coffee is brought to one's room. Then comes breakfast of cereals, eggs, bacon, ham, fish, coffee, tea, or cocoa. The main meal is at two in the afternoon, at which soup, fish, two kinds of meat, vegetables, dessert, and coffee are served. In the evening one has coffee again, and, usually, rusks.

In the interior there are no hotels. Travelers are always welcome at farm houses. It is customary to thank the host after each meal, to which he responds, "May it do you good." Inland, women do not dine with the men, unless the woman is an honored guest. The Icelandic woman never loses her maiden name; she is always the daughter of her father, just as a son is always the son of his father. The son may marry and his son in turn chooses whatever Christian name he pleases, but his surname always indicates that he is the son of his father, and thus the family goes on.

Physicians have said that Icelanders are affected with a curious malady, Icelandic morbitus, a form of melancholy due to the depressing climate. In the early days the desire for strong drink threatened to undermine the people, and strong prohibitory liquor laws were passed. If the average Icelandic suffers from morbitus, I failed to see it. They are typically Scandinavian in appearance, most of the men and women have bright blue eyes, blond hair and a peaches-and-cream complexion. The unmarried women wear gayly colored clothes similar to those worn in the interior of Norway and Sweden. The older women wear severely plain clothing.

The interior is a land of contrasts, resembling in many ways the mountainous regions of the western United States. Years ago, Mt. Hekla and other volcanoes buried much of the interior under lava, and today one sees a fertile valley, carpeted with nutritious grass upon which thousands of sheep and cattle are grazing, along side a lava field. Mt. Hekla is still smoking, but has not erupted for nearly two hundred years. There are hot springs near the capital, in which the people wash their clothes, and in the interior there is a region of geysers and boiling lakes similar to Yellowstone National Park. Numerous waterfalls and rushing streams add to the natural beauty. The Gullfoss, the largest fall, has a power probably in excess of Niagara.

The dwellings in the interior are mostly frame or log dwellings with sod roofs. There is little left of the splendid workmanship in wood that marked the manor houses of the vikings and their retainers.

The west coast of the North Atlantic had for unnumbered centuries beaten against the basalt cliffs of Iceland before it was known to man. In 860 A. D., a viking from the Faroe Islands was driven by adverse winds into its latitudes. He landed, but Avon left in disgust, naming the place Snaeland, the Norse for Snowland. Four years later a Swedish viking landed and built the first house. By 874 A. D. other vikings had come, and Reykjavik, "Smoking Creek," was established. In 880 A. D., King Harold of Norway swept the pirate vikings from the islands around