



**Address by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at an Icelandic family gathering in Utah
July 27th 1997**

Distinguished guests
Ladies and Gentlemen
Dear friends

Guðrún Katrín and I thank you all for the wonderful reception you have given us today and during our stay in Utah.

The visit has brought us precious memories and provided deep insights into the Icelandic heritage in Utah and the cultural, educational and religious strengths of the people of your state.

We admire your loyalty to the people who in the previous century endured difficult journeys from the valleys of Iceland to their new homes in Utah.

We salute you all, your families, your parents and grandparents, the entire Icelandic community that for a century now has gathered every year to celebrate in this majestic state the Icelanders' Day.

During my first year of office I have emphasised the need to forge active bonds between all those who share the unique heritage that over the centuries has enriched the Icelandic people. My message is to give new emphasis to the relationship and the co-operation between the modern Icelandic nation and the descendants of the Icelanders who became settlers in America.

I have used the concept “the Icelandic community” to indicate the broad association of all people of Icelandic decent wherever they live. Our common sense of belonging to one community is indeed stronger than any formalities that determine where we pay taxes or how we go through passport control at international airports. To strengthen the sense of family among all people of Icelandic descent is

indeed a part of my mandate, to offer the service of the Icelandic Presidency to you all.

There is now in Iceland a new awareness of the need to give priority to the relationship with our relatives in America and Canada, to build on our shared history an extensive modern co-operation which could provide new generations with a deep sense of personal roots.

Let me mention a few ideas and projects that now influence our plans in Iceland, not only to inform you but mainly to encourage you to put forward your own ideas, proposals and projects.

First, the Museum Centre in Hofsvós in Northern Iceland, dedicated to showing the lives and journeys of those who travelled from Iceland to America, has now during its first year of operation become an effective nexus for all those of Icelandic descent who desire to strengthen their contacts with the old country.

Second, the Government of Iceland has decided to create an interdepartmental co-ordination of the work done by different government departments to enhance the relationship between us in Iceland and your communities here in America. Our distinguished Ambassador Einar Benediktsson who has served so ably here on the American Continent will, when he returns to Iceland later this year, be entrusted with the task of managing this project.

Third, the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service has formally agreed to invite you all to become partners in an extensive environmental network dedicated to rebuilding the ecological health of Iceland. It could indeed be a splendid way to visit the old country if at the same time you could see how the woods and the fields which you have sponsored are gradually creating a new Iceland. By formally joining this program, you can help in regaining the soils and vegetation in the valleys and fjords where your great-grandfathers and grandmothers were born and bred.

Fourth, to develop in different regions in Iceland, especially in those areas from which most of the immigration to America and Canada originated, a new and effective system of welcoming those of you who want to discover your relatives in Iceland and visit with your families the birthplaces of your forefathers and foremothers, to stay at farms or villages where they lived more than a century ago, to pray in the small churches in their home valleys, surrounded by the beautiful

mountains which are bathed in the symphony of the summer sun. Such family re-unions in your ancestral communities, made unforgettable by your Icelandic hosts, could become unique events, especially for the younger generation who want to experience at first hand how it all began.

Fifth, the evolution of special programs called “Youth and Heritage”, dedicated to giving young people of Icelandic-American origin a deeper understanding and knowledge of Icelandic culture as well as introducing them to modern Icelandic society and the unique beauty of Icelandic nature.

Sixth, the Icelandic Sagas, the very foundation of our culture and identity, have now only this month been published for the first time in a complete English edition. The sagas have for centuries been the source of ancient wisdom for every Icelandic home. Together with the Bible they have accompanied us wherever we have travelled. Now they are available in English to every home in America where people of Icelandic descent want to enjoy the old stories.

Seventh, to use modern technology, the Internet, video and films, to bring the richness of the Icelandic-American culture, the letters, the life stories, the poems, the literature, the pictures and the paintings to everyone who desires to strengthen his or her roots in a world dominated by dramatic forces of change.

In all these efforts that I have now listed we will furthermore be helped by the approaching anniversary of a milestone event.

When mankind welcomes a new millennium, evaluates the past 1000 years and envisages what lies ahead, what could be more fitting than to celebrate the most important discovery made in the very year when mankind last passed such a milestone? Nothing that happened in the year 1000 is of such value and inspiration for us today as Leifur Eiríksson’s journey to America, an event that invokes the daring human spirit, the courage and the determination that has led mankind from the ancient village to the seas, across the ocean to new continents, from earth to the moon and farther into space.

The Viking voyages to America can give us a platform for examining the importance of discovery, the spirit of pioneers in our civilisation and the forces that drive us to explore the unknown, to reach for new heights.

In my Inaugural address as President of Iceland last year I called for co-operation between the United States of America, Canada and Iceland to celebrate in the year 2000 the momentous discovery of the American continent by the Vikings exactly 1000 years before.

And it was with great pleasure that I received last month, on our National Day, the 17th of June, a message from President Clinton in which he declared his willingness to join us in celebrating in the year 2000 the 1000th anniversary of Leifur Eiríksson's discovery of America.

The modern spirit, the public imagination and the world of the media could be inspired by a series of events.

Let me offer you some ideas.

- A big event with global media involvement to be staged at Leifur Eiríksson's birthplace, Eiríksstaðir in West Iceland. It was on that beautiful spot that last month I reported President Clinton's declaration to the Icelandic nation, thus bringing the message of the President of the United States home to Leifur Eiríksson's birthplace.
- Voyages on Viking ships along the known Viking route from Iceland through Greenland and on to America.
- A film in the Pocahontas style about the first European boy born in America, the boy Snorri, the son of Leifur Eiríksson's sister-in-law. Snorri was the first child of European origin to begin life, walk, run and play in America, the new unknown continent. The life of the Viking boy Snorri in America could complement the film about the Indian girl Pocahontas as a source of fascination to children the world over.
- Furthermore, a series of events such as adventure travel and visits organised from America to the known birthplaces of Vikings in Iceland, exhibitions on Viking civilisation and documentaries for television, schools and other educational institutions, conferences and forums for scholars and researchers.

The celebrations at the millennium cross-roads of the discovery of America by our fellow countryman Leifur Eiríksson and the strengthening of co-operation between the Icelandic communities on both sides of the Atlantic are certainly major undertakings in themselves but not the only content of my message.

I have also undertaken this journey to emphasise the scope for economic co-operation between the modern Icelandic nation and the people of Icelandic descent in America, to point out the opportunities for joint enterprises in the fields of high technology, finance, industry and commerce. Maybe the descendents of the Icelandic settlers in America could become the pioneers of this new economic co-operation, thus demonstrating how we can explore together the sources of wealth available in the new century.

My journey to your beautiful state, this visit to the majestic Utah mountains and canyons, is also intended as an invitation to you all to return our visit by coming home to Iceland, to worship in the land of your ancestors where the magnificent creation of the Earth is still going on, where the display of fire and ice, the horizon of volcanoes and glaciers, the green valleys and the crystal clear water of rivers and lakes are an unparalleled demonstration of the glory of the Almighty's creation.

The Mid-Atlantic rift, separating the European and the American continents, is nowhere visible above sea level except in Iceland. These two continents are moving apart, by an inch every two years, and Iceland spreads across the rift as they do so, providing an ongoing demonstration of the forces that are still transforming Mother Earth. At the site of our ancient parliament, Thingvellir, you can literally walk from the American continent to the European continent in less than one hour.

With growing interest in the environment and the future fate of the Earth, Iceland is proud to provide a "live show" of those forces that are much greater than us all. To witness the creation of the Earth at first hand is an exciting experience, but also a humbling one.

The soul of the Icelanders who came to Utah had been transformed by those forces. The farmers and fishermen were able to survive in their new homeland because the discipline from the old country was the backbone of the Icelandic heritage.

I pay tribute to those pioneers and I salute all their families who for so long have been true to the Icelandic tradition.

Guðrún Katrín and I thank you all for the warmth and friendship that has greeted us everywhere.

Your reception has reminded me of a text in Halldór Laxness' epic novel *Paradísarheimt, Paradise Reclaimed*. In his masterpiece our Nobel Prize winner has immortalised the lives of the Icelandic settlers in Utah:

“Þegar þú kemur á leiðarenda í Saltsjódal, þá skaltu ekki skipta þér af neinu, utan spyrja hvar liggi þjóðvegur til Spánka Forks, sem stundum er nefndur Spánskforkur, og segjast vera af Íslandi. Munu þá allir menn kyssa þig”.

In my humble translation: “When you finally arrive in the Salt Lake valley, you should not interfere in anything, except to ask for directions for Spanish Fork and remember to say that you are from Iceland. Then everyone will great you with a kiss.”

Those words from the epic novel have indeed been a prophetic prediction of the welcome you have given us here in Utah. We thank you all.