



**Speech by
Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
President of Iceland
at the Heritage Program
Mountain North Dakota
31st July 1999**

Distinguished Icelandic-Americans.
Dear relatives and friends.
Honoured guests.

I have come to honour the journey made by your ancestors who continued to love and respect Iceland, enrich our culture and broaden our vision while gradually becoming energetic and productive Americans. They showed by the examples of their lives how it is possible to be rooted in two national traditions and enrich the new homeland with the heritage from the old country.

I have come to tell you how the people of modern Iceland desire to strengthen our bonds with the Icelandic-North American communities; how we wish to seek jointly with you new ways towards maintaining our common heritage in the new millennium; how we want to allow new generations of Icelandic descent to proudly celebrate their roots by learning about the achievements of the Icelanders during the twentieth century, our modern contributions to global progress, our music, our literature, our arts, our scientific achievements, and the way that the Icelandic nation has grown from being a community of poor farmers and fisherman to become one of the most technologically advanced and prosperous open democratic societies in the entire world.

I am indeed deeply touched by the strength of the Icelandic heritage in North Dakota and the dedication shown by young and old alike to preserving the richness of the Icelandic-American culture.

The essence of that kinship has certainly been in evidence wherever I have been. We all clearly belong to the same extended Icelandic family and my time among you has reinforced my dedication to serve all the members of the Icelandic community wherever their formal place of residence might be.

By so kindly inviting me to participate in the 100th Íslendingadagur, you have given me the opportunity to explore the history of the Icelandic settlements in North Dakota, how Páll Þorláksson and his followers arrived in the region, a spiritual leader who led his flock from pestilence and floods to the promised land, the Moses of your community.

The pioneers headed for Cavalier and proceeded westwards up Tongue River. Impressed by the dramatic mountain scenery, they decided to make here their homes. The first house was built by Jóhann Hallsson on what is now the site of the village which bears his name. In that log cabin his son Hallur was born, the first child of Icelandic descent in the community.

The achievement of the early settlers has been so splendidly described:

“It is as if a magic wand has been waved over the land. From wild forests, swamps, prairies and sand hills it has been transformed into beautiful farmland, cultivated woodlands, smart and well-constructed villages with railways, telephone lines and electric light.”

The Icelandic community in North Dakota quickly gained a reputation for the way it fostered culture and learning, the skills of hand and mind. Many poor country boys and girls determinedly fought their way to higher education, becoming doctors, lawyers and teachers.

I have often used the concept “the Icelandic community” to indicate the broad association of all people of Icelandic descent. Our common sense of belonging to one community is certainly 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.

The history of the Icelanders from the days of the medieval democratic commonwealth – which produced the oldest national parliament in the world – through eleven centuries to modern times,

and likewise the adventure of the American experience, both bear witness to the enduring success of a true democratic society.

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 this continent, 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.

In my Inaugural address as President of Iceland on August 1st 1996 I called for co-operation between Canada, the United States of America and Iceland to celebrate in the year 2000, at the dawn of the new millennium, the momentous discovery of the American continent by the Vikings exactly 1000 years before.

In my meetings with President Clinton and Vice-President Gore in July 1997 I outlined the basic ideas that could lead to joint American-Icelandic celebrations and the President and the Vice-President welcomed those proposals. Since then, formal frameworks have been created for co-operation on the millennium festivities between Iceland and the United States, embracing exhibitions, artistic events, television programmes, filmmaking, conferences and forums for discussions and explorations of how to interpret our heritage in the new century.

It is fortunate that in our approach to the celebrations in the year 2000 we will be helped by the new English edition of the Complete Sagas of Icelanders. Now for the first time the descendants of the Icelandic settlers in North America can contribute to their country the magnificent heritage which is their birthright no less than that of the people of Iceland today, thus weaving new richly coloured threads into the history and culture of the United States.

The opening volume of a new saga series gives pride of place to the accounts of Guðríður Þorbjarnardóttir, the extraordinary Icelandic woman who after being brought up in Iceland married Leifur Eiríksson's brother and then after his death another explorer, Þorfinnur karlsefni. With him she travelled to the North American continent where she had a baby boy, Snorri, the first child of European origin to be born in America. Guðríður

Þorbjarnardóttir later travelled back to Iceland and being a devoted Christian, she decided late in life to make a pilgrimage and journeyed to Rome, thereby becoming the first woman in world history to visit both America and Rome and in fact the only person to do so 500 years before Christopher Columbus even thought about his voyage.

Guðríður occupies such a unique position in world history that she is clearly the greatest woman explorer of all times. She embraces and symbolises the independence, the talents, the daring, the culture and also the beauty of Icelandic women who, from the early decades of the settlement in the 9th century and throughout the dramatic history of the Icelandic people all the way to modern times, have played a unique and inspiring role in the evolution of Icelandic society and are indeed largely responsible for the respect that the Icelandic nation has earned in the world.

During my visit to the US and Canada two years ago I described a number of projects and proposals dedicated to enhancing and modernising the ties between the Icelandic community in North America and the people of Iceland. It is with great satisfaction that I can now report to you about their successful implementation.

The Icelandic and American Governments have now established an extensive and continuous dialogue on strengthening the Icelandic-American millenium co-operation.

We have decided on a number of joint events and celebrations in the year 2000: exhibitions, theatre productions, festivals of Viking ocean voyages, memorials, concerts and gala performances, film festivals, conferences and forums for examining our joint heritage.

The Heritage Center in Northern Iceland, dedicated to depicting the lives and journeys of those who travelled from Iceland to North-America, has now become an effective nexus for all people of Icelandic descent who desire to strengthen their contacts with the old country.

A special youth programme has been created in order to give 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.

It certainly gives me great pleasure and satisfaction to see how much has been established since my earlier visit.

During my present journey I want to encourage you all – as I do my own people in Iceland – to build upon these successes and aim for even greater progress and achievements.

My message is also to extend an invitation to you all, to the Icelandic families in the US, to return my visit by coming to Iceland, to visit the land of our ancestors where the magnificent creation of the Earth is still going on, where the spectacle of fire and ice, the horizon adorned with volcanoes and glaciers, the green valleys and the crystal-clear water of rivers and lakes, are an unparalleled demonstration of nature at its most glorious.

We are told in the Bible that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Whether or not we believe in this literally, Iceland seems to have been an afterthought, or maybe the Almighty forgot to rest when it came to Iceland.

The Mid-Atlantic rift, separating the European and the American continental plates, is nowhere visible above sea level except in Iceland. The 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, we 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 in the land of our ancestors is indeed a humbling but also an exciting experience.

The soul of the Icelanders who settled in North America was certainly shaped by those forces. Those farmers and fishermen survived in their new home country because the discipline from the old land was the backbone of the Icelandic heritage.

I pay tribute to those pioneers and salute all their families who for so long have been true to the Icelandic tradition. I honour them and you all with the closing verse of a poem by Stephan G. Stephansson who lived here for almost a decade. This patriotic poem has in modern times become the unifying symbol of all people of Icelandic descent.

Það er óskaland Íslenzkt,
sem að yfir þú býr,
aðeins blómgróin björgin,
sérhver baldjökull hlýr,
frænka eldfjalls og íshafs!
sifji árfoss og hvers!
dóttir langholts og lyngmós!
sonur landvers og skers!