

## ***English translation of the texts in the exhibition „The countryside and the village“ in The East Iceland Heritage Museum in Egilsstaðir.***

We thank you for visiting us and hope you enjoy the exhibition.

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### ***The East Iceland Heritage Museum***

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2006 a new main-exhibition was opened in *The East Iceland Heritage Museum* here in Egilsstaðir. The new exhibition is called „The countryside and the village“ (Sveitin og þorpið). It is divided into three parts. The first one gives an insight into the everyday-life in rural Iceland in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The second part is dedicated to the growth of the village in Egilsstaðir and how the community changed from being farming based to depending more and more on commerce, service and industry. In the third part objects that have been found in archaeological excavations in East Iceland are on display as well as objects used in sheep-farming.

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#### **1. Self-sufficiency**

Each home had to be as self-sufficient as possible. Products from livestock and cultivation were used thoroughly. In general, people worked hard and didn't sleep much. The working day could be up to be sixteen to eighteen hours (or even more) each day if much had to be done. The sheep and its products were the backbone in making an income for each home. When a sheep was slaughtered almost everything from it was used. Surplus products were sold in the nearest village to pay for unavoidable purchases. The goods that the farmers sold in the village came from livestock, mostly dairy- and wool products. Instead the farmers bought flour, coffee, timber and iron.

## **2. Each season's work**

In communities with long working-hours the jobs moulds the people's lives. The working year in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Icelandic farming society was divided into two parts. The spring, the summer and the early autumn were used to gather supplies and prepare for the winter. The late autumn and the winter were used for processing products.

In the spring lambs were born. In that time of the year farmers also spread the manure over the hayfield and sheared the sheep. The lambs were taken from the ewes in the end of June and the ewes were milked all summer. The toughest of the summer jobs was hay-making for the livestock. Hay-making was hard labor because hand tools (scythe and rake) were the only implements people had access to. In the autumn the farmers had to round up the sheep and it was also the time to slaughter sheep.

In the late autumn and in the winter the farmers had to take daily care of the livestock and also make goods out of the wool. The sheep were kept outside in the meadow as long as the weather allowed. The wool work was time-consuming and could mean people staying awake at nights. The sheep wool was combed and spun and the thread was used for knitting and weaving.

## **3. Farmstead buildings**

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the following houses were to be found on Icelandic farms: living-room, pantry, kitchen, porch, lodge and storehouse. A passage led from the porch to the living-room. Out of the passage, on either side, came the pantry and the kitchen. The passage was narrow and without windows. It was common to have access to the cowshed from the pantry or the kitchen. Lodge or store-house were attached to the passage near the porch. It was also common to have a workshop attached to the house or near it.

The house walls were stacked with stones and turf. They were four feet thick at ground level but tapered to three feet thick above. Timber was needed for the structural frame, roof and furnishing. But timber was expensive and hard to get so driftwood was frequently used. The shortage of wood often made the houses weaker than they should have been. Air circulation was bad which led to damp air in the houses. The bad air caused illness.

## **4. Homemade food**

Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century almost all food that Icelanders ate were produced here. Flour and rye to make bread were imported but little else was. Often people were forced to use food sparingly

and eat less to prevent food shortage and famine. Food was produced in every home. Dairy-products and fish were the stable diet. Meat was smoked or salted for storage. Pickling was used very much to store food and pickled food was therefore often for lunch or dinner. Vegetables were not customary until the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the growth of it was rare.

The lion's share of peoples diet were products from the livestock (mainly milk but also meat), but fish and game were also common food. Iceland moss was used both in thick soups and in bread instead of flour or rye. Icelandic farmers who lived by the sea usually traded fish for dairy-products with farmers from the countryside. Peoples struggle for existence was often very hard. When hunger was close people tried to make more of their food-supplies by adding reindeer moss, scurvywort, garden dock, sheep sorrel and roots to it. The diet varied between homes and between seasons. Most food-containers were made of wood.

## **5. Farm animals**

Iceland was an agricultural-society through centuries. People's lives and lifestyles were marked by customs and conditions that were developed around their livestock, which most of the people based their life upon. The health and well-being of the livestock was based on the fertility of the soil, both for grazing and hay. If this was lacking, death was near. In rough years the livestock died from starvation and hardship (especially sheep and horses) because of lack of hay and houses.

The most common farm animals were cows, sheep, dogs and horses. All these animals were necessary for the farm, each in their own way. The cows were most important because of the milk that they gave, which often saved people from starvation during the springtime when other food had been finished. Almost everything from the sheep was used, though the wool and the meat were most important. Dogs were needed to round up the sheep. For centuries horses were the only transportation Icelandic homes had and therefore were used for all types of transport.

## **6. Wool for clothes**

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century the clothing that the common-man in Iceland dressed in were made from homemade fabrics. Only wealthy people had foreign clothes. The common people dressed in homemade clothes in traditional colours (black, grey and brown). The fabric was often woollen cloth, but occasionally the fabric was foreign. When clothes were dyed, natural products were used, mostly herbs.

It was hard to preserve clothes in damp houses. The clothes were therefore put in chests when they were not being used. Such chests varied, regarding both look and size. Most of them were made in Norway. It didn't matter so much if Sunday-clothes were expensive when they were bought because if they were carefully preserved the owner could use them all his life. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century European fashion came more into effect upon how the common people in Iceland dressed.

## **7. Mind and body**

Icelanders have always been bookish. Evening entertainments with proper reading from a book or chanting rhymes were a big factor in the culture of Icelandic homes. Before reading became common many people who couldn't read memorised a great deal of psalms and rhymes. The literature people read mostly Christian. Priests were responsible for children's education. This resulted in the education being marked by the priest's interests and his knowledge. This changed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the education of children became more formal. Children-toys were simple and drear. The games that children played were influenced by life. Ankle-bones, leg-bones, jaw-bones, horns and shells were the children's „livestock“. Hygiene among people in Iceland was not better nor worse than that of common people in Europe at the same time. Bad housing caused uncleanness. The damp was worst. When it rained hard, or for many days, the roofs started to leak, so it became necessary to put bowls under the leak. Clothes were washed once or twice each month, but bed linen once or twice each year. Bathing was rare and many people even thought it was better to stay dirty than wash themselves. Lice and fleas were in most homes. Some people believed that it was healthy to have them.

## **8. Centre of home life**

The farmhouse living-room was the centre of every home. There people slept, ate, worked and entertained themselves. They also stored their clothes, their chests and other things there. The types of living-rooms were different. “Loftbaðstofur” (loft-living-room) were the style on many of the larger farms. “Fjósbaðstofur” (cowshed-living-room) were also known, especially among common people. In that kind of living-room the cowshed was either in a part of the room or under it. That way the heat from the cows could be used for heating. People's bed linen was simple. Some had thin mattresses to lie on but others had mattresses filled with hay. People had bedspreads over them and also thick blankets made of woven or

knitted wool. Wealthy people had duvets. Pillows were made of the same materials as the mattresses. Two people usually shared a bed. The beds and the furniture in the living-rooms were often nailed fast, but furniture was sparse and simple.

The living-room from Brekka in Hróarstunga, which here is exhibited, was built in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. People lived in it until 1964, but it was taken down in 1969. The house, which the living-room was a part of, was on two floors. The living-room was the upper floor but the kitchen, pantry and cowshed were downstairs. The roof was made of turf and the walls of turf and stones, both were panelled.

## **9. Family and faith**

Marriage was necessary before people could set-up their own home. Men asked women to marry them, but it was also known for fathers to come to an agreement about their children marriage. In these cases viability often came first, not the brides and grooms feelings. Birth of a child usually brought happiness to the parents. Icelandic couples had many children (from six to sixteen), but rarely half of them managed to grow up. The high child mortality in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was considered natural by many people. Some people used faith to help them cope with this, believing that the child was better off with God.

Going to church was not just a way to maintain and strengthen Christian faith. Travelling from their home to the church, and then back home, people met, talked and entertained themselves. They dressed up in their Sunday-clothes and rode to the church. After arriving there they walked slowly and quietly into the church. After mass this changed. People talked loudly and on the way home they visited their neighbours, and maybe had a few drinks. When weather prevented people from going to church verses from the Bible were read at home. Pagan culture (for example belief in the existence of elves, hidden-people and trolls) has lived on in faith and customs in Iceland. It has merged partly with Christianity.

## **10. From the cradle to the grave**

Death was always close. Bad weathers, epidemics and natural catastrophes could result in the death of a high porpotion of the population in a short time in the earlier ages.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century these factors were no longer a cause of many deaths but child mortality was still severe. More than 20% of children died before their first birthday.

The grief was often overwhelming and the struggle for existence uncompromising. Breastfeeding was not common among the majority of Icelandic women and that was a major factor in the high child-mortality rate.

After 1850, health authorities campaigned for breastfeeding and that, as well as improved health service and better hygiene, led to decrease in child-mortality and increased the population.

## **11. New opportunities**

Icelandic society changed greatly around the year 1900. The fishing industry, trade and service industries grew stronger and the society became more diverse. The role of the home as a production-unit decreased. With development of new industries the separation between home and workplace became clearer than before. Men worked in workplaces away from home while the women worked at home and took care of the children. Villages grew and became social, economic and commercial centres for the villagers and the rural communities around.

## **12. Formation of a village**

Egilsstaðir stands on a crossroads, in middle of Fljótsdalshérað. Even though Egilsstaðir did not become a village until 1947, the development of this area as a commercial-centre goes back to 1900. When the bridge over Lagarfljót was built in 1905 it not only changed transportation in Fljótsdalshérað, but it also caused the formation of a village in Egilsstaðir. The proximity of the fjords also effected Egilsstaðir's development.

After 1940 many kinds of service-industries were moved to Egilsstaðir. Some were new but other had been developed elsewhere in Fljótsdalshérað before. New companies and institutions, as well as many kinds of industry and service-industry, sprang up in the village. Most companies in Egilsstaðir focused on clients in the large countryside around the village. The local cooperative (Kaupfélag Héraðsbúa) was chosen a home in Egilsstaðir when it was founded in 1909. But it was not until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the main activity of the cooperative was moved from Reyðarfjörður to Egilsstaðir. There the cooperative built a store, slaughterhouse, creamery and garage in the 1940's. The district doctor moved to Egilsstaðir in 1944 and the same year a hospital was built here.

### **13. Transportation and communication**

The central position of Egilsstaðir was the reason why the village evolved there and it is also a key factor in its growth and development. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century people in Fljótshérað, like other people in the country, travelled only by foot, on horseback or by boat. The appearance of cars, and later aeroplanes, caused a revolution in transportation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The bridge across Lagarfljót in 1905 and the start up of the ferry Lagarfljótsormur the same year was a giant leap in transportations in Fljótshérað. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century roads became better and more widespread. The car, instead of the horse, became the number one method of transportation.

In the 1920's and 1930's a road was built between Egilsstaðir and Reyðarfjörður and also between Egilsstaðir and Seyðisfjörður. The postal centre for Fljótshérað was moved to Egilsstaðir in 1889. A new post- and telephone-exchange was built in the 1960's. The first air-transport in this area occurred when aeroplanes and seaplanes, owned by the British army, landed on the Lagarfljót lake or on the hayfields of the Egilsstaðir-farm. Seaplanes were used in the first scheduled flight to Egilsstaðir. Egilsstaðir airport was completed in 1953 and regular scheduled flight began two years later.

### **14. Lagarfljót water course**

Lagarfljót is one of the longest and largest watercourses in Iceland. It is 92 kilometres long and is both wider and deeper than any other watercourse in the country. At its deepest it has been measured at 111, 5 meters. Lagarfljót is both lake and river, actually a chain of lakes, where the first and the biggest of them is called Lögur. For more than fifty years the bridge across Lagarfljót was the longest in Iceland.

In Lagarfljót there is a very diverse ecosystem. Its most famous inhabitant is the Lagarfljótsormur, monster mentioned in tales dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Most of Lagarfljót is navigable. Sometimes in the wintertime the river/lake ices up and then it is possible to cross it on foot. Earlier drag-ferries were used to cross the river. Crossing it can be very dangerous and has cost many lives through the centuries. For a long time Lagarfljót was a huge barrier when it was neither under ice nor any boats were available.

### **15. Woods at Hallormsstaður**

The forest in Hallormsstaður is the largest in Iceland. Originally it was a birch wood but more species were planted there after the forest was declared a reserve. The forest is mentioned in

sources from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. There is to be found both praise about its beauty and also a fear of its survival. Until the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Icelandic forests had been declining. In the year 1907 Skógrækt ríkisins (Iceland Forest Service) was founded. From that time on the authorities have cherished the woods in Iceland and in an organised way the forest in Hallormsstaður has grown and flourished.

The first foreign tree species that were planted in Iceland can be seen in Hallormsstaður forest. The forest has been protected from sheep-grazing since 1925 and the grazing of cows there was halted in 1940. Since the forest was preserved the birch trees have thrived and plants from the nursery in Hallormsstaður have been sold to garden owners, both in the countryside and in villages. The tree collection in Mörk is unique in Iceland and Guttormslundur (Guttorms grow) has the oldest larch-trees in Iceland, planted 1938. In the forest is Atlavík, a historic place with a great impact of natural beauty, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was frequently a place for large feasts and cultural events. Atlavík is therefore linked to good memories for many people.

## **16. Hunting and fishing**

From early times hunting and fishing have been important for the people in East Iceland. Fish have been pursued in lakes and rivers, both with fishing rod and with nets. Birds, especially ptarmigan, auk, ducks and geese, have been hunted and were a supplemental food source for many homes. Amongst the mammals, reindeer have been a popular prey as have seals at Héraðsflói (Héraðs bay).

In Lagarfljót and its tributary are most species of Icelandic fish are to be found. Trout is the most common fish. Reindeer remain on the fells and mountains during the summer and has the hunting of them often takes a long time over difficult terrain. The killing of pests and predators, especially foxes and minks, has always been necessary to protect livestock, birds and animals from their attacks.

## **17. Early Icelandic forester**

In the year 1907 the first forestry laws were passed. Two years later laws about forestation and the protection of forests were enacted. These laws were big steps towards better environmental management and led to the development of forestry as an occupation. In 1909 Guttormur Pálsson was put in charge of Hallormsstaður and the forest there. He remained head forester in Hallormsstaður until 1955. The forester's job was based on an European

blueprint and was more related to bourgeoisie jobs than it was to the traditional Icelandic farm jobs. Guttormur Pálsson owned the furniture that is shown here.

Guttormur Pálsson was both a forester and a farmer. This situation had pros and cons. Guttormur used slash wood as firewood and manure for the forestry. But the forestry took away arable land from cultivation and the livestock walked free in the forest. As time passed the farming was sidelined by the need to preserve the forest. In his time, the role of the forester was divided in two main-parts. He took care of the land belonging to the Iceland Forest Service and he supervised the birch forests in his own district. He also ran a plant nursery and took care of the birch forest in Hallormsstaður. The forester's job was also to cherish and preserve the Icelandic tree-species – birch, rowan and tea-leaved willow.

## **18. Further education**

Further education has been strong here in Fljótsdalshérað from the time it was first founded, in 1883. That year an agricultural school was established at Eiðar. This school was changed into a public school in 1918. There have been three centres of further education in Fljótsdalshérað. Apart from the school at Eiðar there has been domestic science school in Hallormsstaður from 1930 and a high school was founded in Egilsstaðir in 1979.

All the schools were established because of an urgent need for them. The domestic science school in Hallormsstaður (Húsmæðraskólinn á Hallormsstað) was set up because east-Icelandic women had fought for its establishment for years. The biggest role of the house-holding school was to build up usable knowledge regarding housekeeping. The public school at Eiðar (Alþýðuskólinn á Eiðum) offered academic study for teenagers. It operated until 1995, but that year it merged with the high school in Egilsstaðir (Menntaskólinn á Egilsstöðum). With the foundation of a high school in Egilsstaðir the village became the centre of academic studies in East Iceland. Dormitories have been operated beside all the schools. At a social level the schools have been very important for the area. People got their education there and there they also made friends and some even found a spouse.