Placing Vilhjalmur Stefansson

By Mike Jacobs

Vilhjalmur Stefansson is a hard man to place.

He was born in Canada to immigrant Icelanders. The year was 1879. Stefansson came to the United States as an infant in arms. He was raised in an Icelandic community, Mountain, North Dakota. He attended the University of North Dakota, first as a preparatory student and then as an enrolled freshman. His hijinks remain legendary on campus. He didn’t graduate. Instead, Stefansson enrolled at the University of Iowa, then at Harvard.

Stefansson gained great fame as an explorer of the Canadian Arctic. He was the last person to find new land on Planet Earth. This was Meighan Island at the far north edge of the Arctic Archipelago. In all, Stefansson made three trips to the Arctic, spending a total of about 10 years. Perhaps for a change of climate, he undertook a survey of Central Australia, one of the hottest and driest places on Earth.

When he gave up exploration, he settled in New York’s Greenwich Village, where he was a habitué of Romany Marie’s, a famous meeting place for the city’s Bohemian population and a center of intellectual ferment, much of it involving leftist politics. He also owned a country place in Vermont. He prepared a manual on living and working in the Arctic for the U.S. Army, and he secured a contract to prepare a 20-volume Arctic encyclopedia for the Navy. When that project failed, he joined Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. He died there in 1962.

Iceland was an important part of Stefansson’s life. He learned Icelandic as a child listening to his father repeat the Sagas and read the Bible. He spoke at Icelandic events. Icelandic language newspapers in Winnipeg printed his essays about Icelandic literature. These were among his first published works. Fresh out of Harvard, he went to Iceland and did ethnographic research there. In the 1930s, he acted as a kind of commercial diplomat in Iceland.

Stefansson’s formative years were spent in North Dakota. The family homestead was in a coulee leading off the Pembina Escarpment a few miles southwest of Mountain. The family lost the homestead when Stefansson’s father died in 1891. Vilhjalmur – called William then, or Willi for short – was short of 12 years old. Although he lived with an older sister, he was pretty much on his own. He didn’t lack gumption, though. He took to herding the neighborhood cattle, even agreeing to keep them on the prairie through the winter. He spent the season pretty much alone with the cattle and the climate. Later he wrote that the scenery on Banks Island in the Arctic reminded him of the open prairies of North Dakota. An Arctic blizzard, he said, wasn’t any more fearsome than the North Dakota variety.

In 1898, wearing a $7 suit and carrying $53 in cash, Stefansson boarded a train and set off for Grand Forks and the University of North Dakota. The institution was 15 years old that year and had an enrollment of 300 students. Stefansson’s schooling had been intermittent at best, and he was academically not prepared for college-level work, but he was clearly intelligent – brilliant, one of his teachers said – and he made rapid progress, soon finishing the preparatory course.

So gifted was he, in fact, that he answered for other students in a German class, changing his voice and intonation slightly. This may have been the most serious of his misdeeds – and it’s one he owns up to. Others are legendary: Did he steal the president’s carriage and tie it up in front of a brothel? Did the president catch him drinking beer? Did he offer the president a bottle? Maybe. The myth says so.
Stefansson himself admits that he was truant much of the time, pursuing an income from jobs as varied as school teaching and cow herding.

The university cited his frequent absences when officials asked him to leave.

One thing is certain. He changed his name. Stefansson had been baptized William Stephenson because his father thought a Scottish-sounding name would be an advantage. This step, taken while he was at UND, indicates that Stefansson had embraced his Icelandic heritage and saw the more exotic-sounding name as an advantage.

Leaving North Dakota

The University of Iowa accepted him and promised him credit for any material he mastered, whether he attended classes or not. He crammed three years into one and earned an undergraduate degree in 1903.

His Harvard career began with a scholarship. The Unitarian Community of Winnipeg—largely Icelandic—hoped he’d become a minister. So did his mother, although she had another denomination in mind. The Stefanssons were Lutheran.

Young Vilhjalmur himself was a free thinker. He was once overheard criticizing the Lutheran Church and suggesting that Charles Darwin was right about evolution. His Lutheran landlady, a Mrs. Johnson, kicked him out of her rooming house on North Fourth Street in Grand Forks.

Stefansson may have been sincere in accepting the Unitarian’s scholarship. In any case, it was a short step from religion to ethnology, and Stefansson soon took it. In this field, he was a pioneer, becoming one of the first to actually live with a population and adopt their life ways. Certainly Stefansson’s relationships among the Inuit were very close. He fathered a son, named Alex. The boy’s mother was Pannigabluk, an Inuit woman who worked as a seamstress, the best he ever encountered, Stefansson said. It’s unclear whether they were ever married. One of Stefansson’s recent biographers refers to Pan—as Stefansson called her—as “his sexual companion in the North.”

Yet an apparent sense of decorum kept Stefansson from acknowledging his Inuit family until late in his own life, and in his son’s life as well. Alex Stefansson, who gave Vilhjalmur six grandchildren, died in 1966, outliving his father by less than four years. He was 56 years old.

Pan was not the only woman with whom Stefansson was involved. He was engaged to a Canadian woman, Cecil Orpha Smith, whom he met while he was a student at Harvard. In 1922, he met Fannie Hurst, a novelist, in Italy. They carried on a 17-year-long affair, ending in 1939. Pan died in 1940. Only then did Stefansson marry. His bride was Evelyn Schwartz-Baird. They met at Romany Marie’s. With her, he bought a farm in southeastern Vermont, near the town of Bethel.

Romany Marie was Moldavian and she became a close friend of Stefansson, who spent much time in her establishment. Ostensibly an eating place, Romany Marie’s functioned as a kind of salon attracting the brightest New Yorkers. Stefansson was valued there for his keen intellect and his sharp wit.

Lecturing, writing and promoting

While living in New York, Stefansson pursued a vigorous schedule of lecturing, writing and promotion. His literary output was prodigious, running to more than 40 books and more than 400 magazine articles. Among other products, he endorsed Parker pens and several airlines. This involvement in commercial aviation led to a brief stint at diplomacy. He and fellow Icelander and UND student Gudmundur Grimson negotiated for landing rights in Iceland. Grimson, a lawyer who would become chief justice of the North Dakota Supreme Court, was well suited to the task. Iceland’s capital and largest city, Reykjavik, remained a stop on trans-Atlantic flights for many decades.

Stefansson’s second New York haunt was the Explorers’ Club, and he often invited its members to join him at Romany Marie’s. Thus scientists and artists rubbed shoulders. Stefansson was both a patron of the arts and an inspiration for artists. He sponsored Emile Walters for membership in the Explorers’ Club. Like Stefansson, Walters was of Icelandic heritage. A few years younger than Stefansson, Walters also grew up in Mountain. Stefansson encouraged Walters to join Paul Barr, who chaired UND’s Art Department, to tour North Dakota. This produced a number of landscape paintings. Walters also painted the Icelandic landscape. Stefansson was acquainted...
with Halldor Laxness, an Icelandic novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1955. Laxness frequently quoted Stefansson both in his novels and literary essays.

Some of Stefansson’s associations brought him to the attention of the militant anti-Communist movement of the early 1950s. Stefansson himself believed that the Navy ended the Arctic encyclopedia project because it feared Stefansson was helping the Soviet Union. In 1950, New Hampshire’s public prosecutor launched an investigation of Stefansson’s activities.

Stefansson admired what he called “the simple communism” of Inuit society. He also supported the Soviet Union’s northern development, and often said so. The Soviets, he believed, were well ahead of Canadians and Americans in developing their Arctic lands. The real issue, however, may have been Stefansson’s involvement in a committee that promoted a Jewish homeland in the Soviet Far East. He allowed his name to be used to promote this idea, and he spoke approvingly about the prospects for European Jews in the Autonomous Republic of Birobidzhan.

Another of Stefansson’s schemes also attracted attention. He promoted the settlement of Wrangel Island off the northern coast of Siberia. He claimed he intended to make the desolate, uninhabited place a part of the British Commonwealth. Colonists were actually placed there, but the experiment ended in tragedy. Humans, it turned out, couldn’t readily adapt to a climate so harsh as that of this Arctic island.

**Another misjudgement**

It was the second of Stefansson’s misjudgements about the Arctic. At the beginning of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, his flagship, the Karluk, became caught in the ice. Stefansson’s destination was the area along Canada’s northern coastline. Since ice drifts west in the Arctic, away from his destination, he left the ship and struck off across the Arctic icecap. This was an amazing feat in itself—but it left the Karluk’s crew leaderless. All of them suffered horribly and nearly half of them perished.

Stefansson’s decision to leave the Karluk has been debated ever since. It is the subject of at least three books, all of them harshly critical. Stefansson defended the decision as “bold.” Surviving members of the crew criticized his apparent lack of remorse.

Stefansson was controversial for other reasons. He reported finding a band of “Copper Eskimos” on his first expedition. He was greeted with derision when he suggested these might be descendants of Europeans, perhaps even progeny of the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin. Modern DNA testing has shown that these people have no European ancestry.

He did prove that he could live off the land in the Arctic, one of his favorite theories. Hard experience proved that not every traveler could do the same.

Stefansson famously championed an all-meat diet. As an experiment, he eschewed all vegetable food. After the year-long test, doctors attending him pronounced him remarkably fit.

These and other contrarian notions brought Stefansson notoriety. For much of his life, he was an intellectual celebrity welcomed by lecture audiences and heads of governments and sought after for endorsements of products and ideas.

The expedition that included the Karluk was launched in 1913 and lasted for five years—an incredible length of time for non-native people to spend in Arctic conditions. It was initially to be sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History, which had helped fund Stefansson’s earlier expeditions, but the Canadian government underwrote it, helping insure that Stefansson would ever afterward be regarded as a Canadian explorer rather than an explorer of Canada. Hubert Wilkins—later knighted for his accomplishments—was among the notable explorers who were part of this expedition. Later Stefansson introduced Wilkins to Carl Ben Eielson, a North Dakotan. Together Eielson and Wilkins achieved fame as polar aviators.
Remembered in Manitoba and North Dakota

Despite controversy about the expedition, the Canadian government honored Stefansson with an Order in Council, among the highest honors it bestows. His birthplace at Arnes, Manitoba, about 45 miles north of Winnipeg, is a Canadian national historic park. The park’s chief attraction is a modernistic statue of the explorer striding across the landscape. At about three feet tall, the statue is dwarfed by other features of the monument, lending a sense of scale to the installation.

The Stefansson family left Manitoba in disappointment and sorrow. Their efforts to farm were dogged by bad weather. Catastrophic flooding and an epidemic took the lives of two of their children in 1880. That’s when the family headed south. They took a steamboat to Pembina, just south of the international boundary, and then trekked southwestward until they reached ground high enough to guarantee they wouldn’t be flooded and timber enough to build houses. This place the Icelanders named Mountain, despite the fact that it is little more than 70 feet above the Red River Valley.

Here Stefansson grew up. There is keen interest in Stefansson in Mountain to this day, and many of the descendants of its Icelandic pioneers claim kinship with Stefansson, a man who belongs to that place as much as any other.

For Stefansson was a man of the north.

To him goes the credit for proving that the Arctic, despite its challenges, can be a friendly place. His example has inspired other explorers. UND and the Canadian Consul General in Minneapolis held a symposium at UND in November 2013 to mark the centennial of the Canadian Arctic Expedition. There, Will Steger credited Stefansson for inspiring his own Arctic travels. Steger adopted many of Stefansson’s methods and became the first person to reach the North Pole without resupply. He also crossed the Arctic Ocean from Russia to Canada via dogsled. Such a feat is no longer possible, he pointed out, because the ice has melted away from the Arctic coastlines.

Thus Stefansson’s legacy includes a vivid picture of the Arctic as it was. His major books, *The Friendly Arctic* and *My Life with the Eskimos*, are packed with ethnographic and geographic information but also with the tales of a man of vision and determination.

Stefansson remained loyal to North Dakota, visiting family and friends at Mountain. He remained close to Grimson and Walter through their lifetimes. He helped North Dakotans Walter and Eielson in their careers. He often returned to the UND as a lecturer. In 1930, he received an honorary doctorate and in 1958, he took part in the university’s 75th anniversary celebration.

His achievements, his notoriety and his loyalty surely earn him a place in the first rank of extraordinary North Dakotans.

Mike Jacobs was born in Mountrail County, went to school in Stanley and attended the University of North Dakota. He’s been with the Grand Forks Herald for 35 years, the last 10 as publisher. History is one of his hobbies. Reach him at mjacobsgfherald.com.