

The Wayfinder



by Larrie
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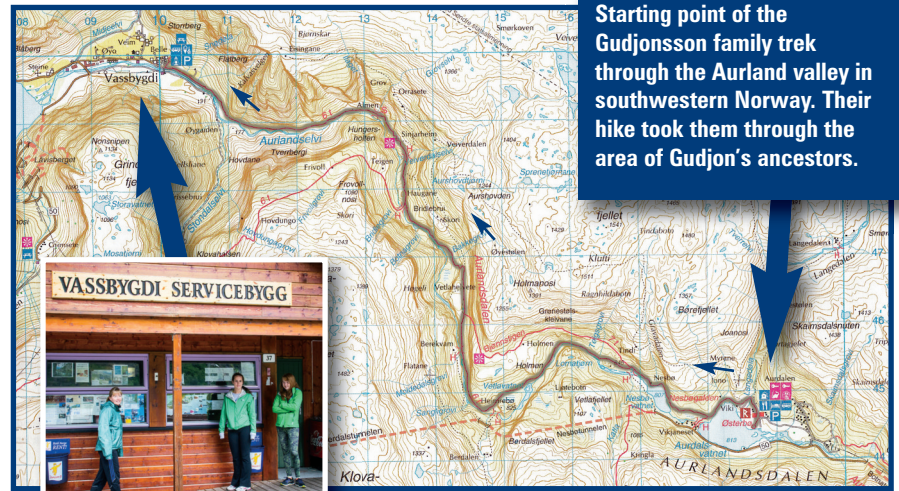
One family this past summer—an Icelandic father, a Norwegian-American mother and their 20-year-old college student daughter—traced some of their direct ancestral connection to 28 generations ago in Aurland, Norway.

For one week during July 1-8, 2013, Gudjon Gudjonsson, his wife, Kari Brekke, and their daughter, Anna Gudjonsdottir, a student at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, traveled through many parts of Aurland, Norway, on foot, by bicycle, car, train and boat.

Their purpose: to spend family time together and enjoy the spectacular scenery western Norway has to



Gudjon perches on a rocky ledge overlooking Aurland. Inset photo: Anna, his daughter, who turned 20 on the trip.



Family follows in footsteps of Icelandic-Norse ROOTS

offer. This trip of heritage was also a celebration of Anna's 20th birthday.

"Taking this trip with my parents in Aurland was magical," Anna said, describing the day they hiked six-and-a-half-hours down the spectacular upper Aurland Valley, along part of an old trail across the mountains connecting Aurland to Hallingdal and eastern Norway.

Accompanying the family on their journey was Anna's college roommate Dani Basche of Madison, Wisconsin.

Anna's father, Gudjon, was born in Iceland. The progenitor at the tap root of his "family tree" was one of the most colorful Vikings, who was famous for rising up against the tyranny of Norway's King Harald the Fairhaired in the 900s to subjugate feudal Viking kings under one rule.

Egil's wife, Åsgerd Bjarnardottir, was the daughter of landholder/chieftain Björn Brynjulfson Buna, who had holdings in Aurland, Norway. Egil had fought persistently to protect his wife's Norwegian claim of inheritance of some family land holdings. Eventually, Egil was driven out and escaped back to Iceland, a frequent sailing route for him. His stories became one of the most fascinating and colorful of the Icelandic family sagas.

"Being in this most beautiful place, it is hard to understand why anyone would leave here," said Gudjon on the recent family hike, as he reflected on abandoned farms and the ruggedness of the surroundings.

He noted the tradition of an oldest son inheriting the home place, and that many resettled in Iceland to escape tyranny and the appeal of land. As Vikings were seafaring people, Iceland became the crossroads for settlement, despite the harshness of climate, because of available timber for building, fields for grazing of animals and ample wildlife for food.

In Iceland, almost everyone is "related," Gudjon said, providing a reference to his genealogy (see Descendants box on opposite page). As the national database has registered everyone since the first census in 1703 (and about half of those since initial settlement in 870-930 as referred to in the sagas), therefore about 98 percent can find common names in a national "family tree."

"Iceland is probably the only country in the world," he said "where people



Panoramic view of Aurland, a municipality in the fylke of Sogn og Fjordane, Norway. It is located in the traditional district of Sogn. Photos are courtesy of the Gudjonsson family; Gudjon, with few exceptions, was the journey's official photographer.



Above: Anna, Dani and Kari hike a precipitous trail in Norway's back country. Below: Gudjon weilds his hiking poles on rocks along the river bank.



can trace their families that far back.” Gudjon capped the interview by referring to his native Iceland by its frequent ranking in the world: friendliest nation, happiest peoples, and for the past five years, best global nation in equality for women. Gudjon's wife, Kari, also has an in-

dependent lineage of heritage going back to Viking times through her father, Dr. Arne G Brekke, retired language professor at the University of North Dakota (UND) and founder of Brekke Tours in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and the Brekke Bygdebok Collection at UND's Chester Fritz Library.

Despite the fact she is a fitness instructor, Kari found it difficult to keep a steady pace on the trail. “At times, you had to hang onto a chain for support along the way or when crossing bridges without railings, and then you came out of a canyon to see a panoramic view of a valley—wild and natural,” she said.

“It was an epic experience, walking through history, meeting people at trail's end who have lived here for centuries,” Anna said.

“Even though I felt ‘small’ when everything around me was so big,” she added, “I also felt connected—that my genetic history had a place here, and I had a sense of belonging.”

DESCENDANTS of Egil the Viking

Egil Skallagrimsson	910
m. Asgerdur Bjarnardottir	915
Thorgerdur Egilsdottir	939
Thorbjorg “digra” Olafsdottir	960
Ingveldur Vermundardottir	1000
Thorgerdur Yngvildardottir	1020
Yngveldur Hauksdottir	1060
Snorri Hunbogason	1100-1170
Narfi Snorrason	1135-1202
Snorri Narfason	1175-1260
Narfi Snorrason	1210-1284
Snorri Narfason	1260-1332
Ormur Snorrason	1320-1401
Gurrotmur Ormsson	1345-1381
Lofur “riki” Guttormsson	1375-1432
Olof Loftsdottir	1410-1479
Solveig Bjornsdottir	1450-1495
Thorliefur Palsson	1485-1558
Bjorn Thorleifsson	1510-
Guttormur Bjornsson	1570-
Bergsteinn Guttormsson	1630-1694
Katrin Bergsteinsdottir	1675-1740
Gudmundur Hallvardsson	1712-1762
Oddur Gudmundsson	1757-1816
Hannes Oddsson	1783-1848
Hafliði Hannesson	1823-1867
Páll Hafliðthason	1857-1937
Bergthor Pálsson	1901-1968
Helga Bergthorsdottir	1925-
Gudjon Thor Gudjonsson	1963-

Editor's note: “The Wayfinder,” authored by Dr. Larrie Wanberg of Grand Forks and Stanton, North Dakota, features Nordic heritage places across North America. His “real” home, though, is on the World Wide Web, where he promotes preservation of family and community heritage through Web-based historical vignettes.