

King's Love-Child was the Forefather of a Western Iclander

Valur Gunnarson "Launsonur kóngrs sem varð ættfaðir Vestur-Íslendinga" in Fréttaskýring 06.03.2016: Translation by Natalie Guttormsson 09.01.2016

Western Icelanders raise monument about Friðrika Björnsdóttir, who they say is a woman of Danish Royalty. Did Friðrik VI's son move to Reyðarfjörður?

That was the story that reached all the way to Canada, but many there consider themselves Royal through Friðrika Björnsdóttir. Friðrika was with the first Icelanders that moved to Canada in the year 1876 together with her husband, Pétur Árnason, and they had problems with smallpox in Sandy Bar where they lost all three of their children. But what is the truth in the Danish Royal Family story?

Friðrik VI was the last King to have an official lover, as well as his wife. His lover, [Frederikke Benedichte Dannemand], had an official title and lived in the palace, but did not have the same respect, and the custom was soon abandoned.

Friðrik's mother also had a lover; his father was the insane Kristján VII. Her lover was the doctor Johann Struensee, who ruled the estate due to the King's illness. Struensee abolished the death penalty and censorship, but also brought innovative ideas. The cold was considered therapeutic and so the King often walked barefoot in the winter until his feet and legs were frostbit.

King's son and carpenter.

The Prince was crowned as King Friðrik VI when his father died in 1808, while Denmark was immersed in the Napoleonic wars with the French, which would lead to the dog days of King Jörund [Sweden] of Iceland a year later. Among the accomplishments of Friðrik VI was the construction of the Thorvaldsen Museum, the first collection in Denmark of the works of the half-Icelandic sculptor [Bertel Thorvaldsen - sculptor whose father was from Iceland]. It was likely that he got together with a woman named Soffía María when he was 25 years old and not yet the King.

Little is known about Soffia but the rumour says that she had a child with the Prince. She is quoted as saying "it was with no piece of trash, with whom I had Samúel" and then Samúel was born in 1792 and his name was certainly Friðriksson. And then, strangely, he was brought up at Royal Expense.

Samúel was later a carpenter and moved to the East Fjörds, there he married Jórunn Tómasdóttir. They had a daughter Lovísa, who married Björn Jónsson. The couple settled at Seljarteisghjáleiga in Reyðarfjörður, they then had Friðrika Björnsdóttir. Friðrika moved to Canada and died there in 1884.

Many Western-Icelandic Royal Descendents

Western Icelanders have recently shown more interest in Friðrika. When she died the church cemetery was full and so she was buried on the farm at Árskógar. Her grave has no marker, only a fence in disrepair. The intent of a group calling themselves “Friðrika: The Royal Daughter Memorial Project” has plans to improve the site and install a monument this summer.

Western-Icelandic filmmaker Angela Chalmers is making a documentary about her, and Friðrika has her own Facebook page, where she posts pictures of her children, who are all long dead, like herself [.] A family tree has been made where you can count yourself as a descendent if you bare the last names of Magnússon, Guttormsson, Vídalín, or Jónsson, then you have a good chance of being descended from royalty. It might not be just Icelanders here at home in Iceland, that are eager to show their ancestry is from Kings.

In the footprints of her ancestor

Natalie Guttormsson is a Western-Icelander from Ontario and is one of those who can trace her ancestry from Friðrika. How did she first hear about about the connection with the Crown Prince? “I first heard about Friðrika Björnsdóttir in 2014 when I was in the Snorri Program, which offers Western-Icelanders each a summer in Iceland and Icelanders a summer in Canada. She is my great-great-great grandmother. I knew very little about her except a few lines from the census, that she had was born on a farm in Reyðarfjörður, lived in Eskifjörður, when she was born, when she died, and who her parents were.”

Natalie came to Iceland again, later, to the Icelandic Emigration Centre in Hófsós and studied her ancestry. But why this great interest in Friðrika now, with plans to build monuments?

“The monument has been in the works for six years, but family members are spread out across the country with long distances between them, and because of this, the organizing has taken time. Some also questioned the truth of the story. It appears in records from Ólafur Snóksdalín 200 years ago, but until I went to the National Library, no one in the family had seen the source, and some thought it was just rumour or gossip.” ***It has since been explained that Ólafur Snóksdalín, the genealogist may have lived 200 years ago, but the 3 book volume which mentions Samúel was printed in 1985, and the account of Samúel’s parents and descendants was written down in 1915 by the Rev. Guttormur Vigfusson in Eskifjörður. He gathered his information from Lovísa’s younger siblings who never left Iceland. This shows that other descendants knew the story too and it was not just a tale in New Iceland. NF*

Natalie is the editor of the Icelandic Canadian Club of Toronto’s newsletter [Fálkinn] and has now moved to Saskatchewan where she intends to join the Vatnabyggð Icelandic Club in the Quill Lakes.

“Most Western Icelanders are proud of their Icelandic heritage, from their love of all things viking to listening to the band Of Monsters and Men. But I find it most interesting to learn the stories of ordinary people. Icelanders here took family names, so if your lineage is through your mother, you will likely lose your “Icelandic” surname. But knowing our Icelandic heritage is what

connects Western Icelanders together and helps us understand our community. We have a website on Tindra Tales that tried to connect together all the descendants of Friðrika.”