INTERVIEW WITH HALLDOR EGILSSON Munising, Michigan July 25, 2010

Birth date: May 15, 1952

Russell M. Magnaghi (RMM): The interview will focus on your Icelandic heritage. Could you tell us where you were born and your origins in Iceland?

Halldor Egilsson (HE): I grew up in Reykjavik we immigrated when I was ten years old. I lived in downtown Reykjavik.

RMM: When you were growing up did you learn English?

HE: No. I did not speak English as a child. Before my mother immigrated over here I took three or four months of English classes, but they did not amount to much. I had a hard time with that. I learned English from watching television over here. I would sit in front of the TV listened and watched and figured out what was going on. By the fall of the year that we came I was speaking pretty well. Also, when we got here I attended J.D. Pierce Training School at NMU.

RMM: Tell us why your mother immigrated.

HE: It had to do with a divorce. She wanted to get away from the social group in Iceland. She wanted to make a fresh break so we left. She had a sponsor in Marquette, so we moved to Marquette. And there is an Icelandic connection there. Actually our sponsors were Mr. and Mrs. Boynton. Dr. Boynton was a mathematician as NMU in the UP. And his wife was Beastrice Gislasson. She was actually from Vancouver, Bristish Columbia. She was Canadian Icelandic from Vancouver. There are a lot of Icelanders in Vancouver.

RMM: Did any brothers and sisters come along with you?

HE: Initially my mother had four boys. The two younger ones emigrated initially with me. We were in Marquette in 1963 and we stayed until the fall of that year and then we moved back to Iceland. Financially we could not handle it otherwise we would have stayed here.

RMM: What were your brother's names?

HE: Arnor. He stayed through that following year in high school. HE did not want to break up high school. Then the following year my younger brother, Olafur, and I moved back to Iceland. Then my mother got married again and the two of us came back here and moved in with them in Munising. Later he moved back to Iceland again too.

RMM: Was there a reason why the returned to Icleand?

HE: Arnor's reason was financial; at the time my mother could not handle it. Olafur, he went back to work and for the same reason that I wanted to return due to national pride and love of the country.

RMM: There was an out-migration from Iceland in the 1870's but that was, "forced," due to economic conditions and a volcanic eruption that covered the land with dust and made farming difficult.

HE: National pride plays an important role and it in only due to difficult conditions that the Icelanders were, "forced," to leave their homeland. National pride is extremely important.

RMM: Earlier you mentioned that you learned English from television. Could you comment?

HE: I learned English in the classes I took at Pierce School, in the fifth grade. But I give televisions, Channel 6, more credit than anybody. English is not a difficult language to learn. Icelandic is tough. I have trouble with Icelandic. [Speaks a few sentences in Icelandic.]

When I initially got married my wife and I moved back to Iceland. I think the reason why I am not over there now is that I am married and I am enrooted in a big family which I like. It is a huge family. Initially the reason back then when I first got married was the educational system. For a natural born resident it is free. You do not pay tuition. All you have to do is cover your books and the cost of living. So I went back to my national land. Having gone through what I went through when I first came and watching my wife suffer, just dealing with things around her. Unusual and different ways of doing things. She did not speak the language. I could not stand that. It was just tough. Everything was in Icelandic. I took a course in Danish and I do not speak a word of Danish. Physics in Danish and I don't speak the language. I did not pass the physic course!

RMM: Did you attend Northern Michigan University?

HE: I graduated from Northern and two years of graduate school at Northern. I majored in Biology and I worked for Thomas G. Froiland. That was in Biology. I graduated in 1976. I started initially in college at Michigan Tech in 1973 and then starting in 1974 I went to Northern.

RMM: Did you ever have me for a class?

HE: I don't think so. I don't think I took a history class. The only history class I took was the history of music, which I loved. It was a wonderful class. Although I enjoy history, I like it. It did not fall into what I was in, a lot of biology and a lot of medicine.

RMM: What occupation did you eventually get into?

HE: I'm a modern technologist. I took two years of graduate school and I was in pre-med and finally ended up with an internship at Spearon, Lansing, and right now I work at the medical center in Menominee. For 26 years.

RMM: Is your wife from Menominee?

He: Munising.

RMM: Oh from Munising? Oh, okay.

HE: She's and Anderson. Her father has a huge family in this town. He used to run that gas station across the street. People that were in here when we walked in, they are part of my family. (*laughs*)

RMM: So then you just to kind of get the larger background, and then you have come across any Icelandic people in the UP?

HE: Other than Jeanie Paul and Beatrice Boynton, no. And I have searched; I've tried to find them. And Washington Island was a find. But there was no contact; I couldn't find a true Icelandic name anywhere that I could talk to somebody. The name of the boat is Icelandic, *InisFilantiri.* I think that closest you can get to somebody with Icelandic contact would be Vancouver and North Dakota. There's some big, quite a few in those areas.

RMM: In the Northeastern part of the state. Okay. And do you ever make contact with anyone in Winnipeg?

HE: Winnipeg, oh no not really.

RMM: You were here by yourself, is your mother still living in Munising?

HE: She remarried a man here in Munising and we have that family all through High School. My younger brother and I went through High School here, we both graduated in Munising. That's some years.

RMM: Did you carry on any Icelandic traditions? Could you talk about some of those?

HE: Sure. I try and enforce them. Christmas is probably the biggest, where you have some traditions. Like the shoe in the window, that has to do with people want to call it elves, but they are actually Santas, but then you get them confused with Santa Claus. There's more to that, the Santa, it's a thing where if kids are good, they get something given in the shoe in the window, a treat r something. So we kept that through the twelve days of Christmas, beginning halfway through December. Then all the way through the 6th of January. Probably the most popular tradition is the Icelandic Pancake. It's actually a crepe, it's a technique and almost every time

we have a get together, people say, "Are you going to make crepes?" It's a very tedious thing, but it's fun, very good stuff.

RMM: So that would be a traditional food?

HE: Oh yeah. Traditional for a get together. But traditional for Christmas would be *hungikut* which we've had up until the last few years because of the expensive, it's gotten so ridiculously expensive. And also, there's been an import freeze on meats from Europe. This is actually a cured lamb, it's specialized smoke. I can't really describe it; you'd have to try it. Hungikut it's called.

RMM: How do you spell that?

HE: (*writes*) You'll run into some Icelandic letters, that an "uh" in there. And what else? Oh, then we'd make decorations for the tree, little paper bags. There are songs, what other traditions? On Easter week there's a tradition where you with, what's called (Icelandic work sounded like bulledard), where kids make a wand, and it keeps them busy. They make a really neat want from a stick and paper. And they get to hit you; they get to get a treat, a *puffin* or something like that. Or a donut, it's a kind of donut.

RMM: Again, an Icelandic Donut?

HE: No. I didn't say Icelandic Donut before, you brought that up.

RMM: I saw it in the cook book.

HE: Okay, it's a *kleanmer* and that's an Icelandic Donut, and that I've kept up. It's made similar to a donut but it's cut different, cut at angles and flipped in on itself. So it's unique. Very unique, and I've done that. Unique tradition. But I've become Americanized. "Codfish." I haven't served it too much but I like it myself.

RMM: Like a cod?

HE: It's a cured fish, usually cod, yeah. You can find it over here, usually in a little box.

RMM: Italians eat that, and also dry it.

HE: Right, right, the drying. It's got to be prepped correctly.

RMM: Now that would (words inaudible)

HE: Because of the curing, it's curing the food over the summer; you have to have the same thing with the hungikut. The hungikut is a curing way of dealing with food. What's another kind of food? I did a massive search thorughtout the whole UP for the Icelandic blackberry. I never found them; I don't think they exist over here. That was last fall. Traditions with my mother. By the time we were over here, and I was probably 12 or so, and by the time we moved to Munising and had a family going, and married into a Finnish family, it's name was *Inlonin*, so we also recognized a lot of the Finnish tradition because there wasa pretty strong family with that. And they had relations in Marquette, and Blossom Road, all extended family. And we were imports, so we kind of wnet with them, but we recognized some of our own traditions too.

RMM: Did you maintain your religious affiliation? Did you have a religious affiliation with the Lutheran Church?

HE: I am, I was baptized Lutheran, but since I've been married, I attend a Catholic church because my wife is Catholic, and all my kids are Catholic. So I broke the rule, it's all right.

RMM: Pre-reformation.

HE: Well my mother was always very friendly with the Catholic church. In grade school I was in a Catholic school.

RMM: In Iceland?

HE: In Iceland.

RMM: Because up in the hill there above the city is the cathedral.

HE: The big black cathedral? There's another big cathedral on the other side.

RMM: Yes, that's Lutheran.

HE: Yes, everything else is Lutheran, very little Catholic around, except that one section where they got the hospital.

RMM: You didn't get into anything like there's a ground called the Icelandic Civic League?

HE: No.

RMM: They're either Canadian or American organizations.

HE: I haven't. At one point when I was in Menominee, I thought about joining the groups through Canada because they seem to be the best organized, but I never followed through on it. Probably should have, it would have been nice. The closest thing to a League is one I established myself. I got my kids and one of my brothers-in-law for form our running group together and we're called the Scandinavian Blur, because he's Finnish, so that's as close to that we have.

RMM: This is kind of speculation, you would think if there were a small number of Icelandic people in Michigan they would first associate with Danes. And then with other Scandinavians.

HE: That's questionable, I don't know for sure.

RMM: What were your relationships in the group while you were growing up just in general of Icelandic people and the Danish people, were they friendly? Glad to see each other?

HE: That depends, being a historian. Depends a little on social, and the Icelanders would shoot me for saying this, on our social status. What income level you're at, if the people that were in the rule of things, they were friendlier with the Danes than the lower, bottom workers.

RMM: So merchants and what not, obviously had to have connections.

HE: Likely. Like the Klausson and Seemson, those are the merchants and they're obviously Danish and they come from the era when Mark Willis was in charge of it for awhile. Those people are still very friendly, and like I said, we were really close to Denmark because of our grandmother.

RMM: So you'd have those connections even if you weren't into politics or commercial activities, which would tie you into the Danish background. Now, while we are talking about backgrounds of people in Iceland and so on, I remember when you walk through the cemetery. We were staying in the Radisson to the south of downtown and we walked over and I usually run, I didn't run in Iceland because it was raining, usually in the morning, but we walked through the cemetery, my wife and I, and I noticed some Jewish graves.

HE: Very few.

RMM: Very few. I probably, I saw one of the very few there were there. Very rare.

HE: I don't know the connection there.

RMM: Yeah, just kind of curious.

HE: That's one of the oldest cemeteries in the country. It's very exclusive.

RMM: It went way back into the nineteenth century at the least. Could you explain how Icelanders, how they get their surname?

HE: Well, I am Halldor Egilsson, and from that you can be assured that my father's name is Egil, and my name is Egil's Son. And then my father is Egil Halldorsson, his father's name was Halldor. So what you do is you pick up your father's name with the additive of son or daughter. Little bit of repetition in my name, Halldor Egil Halldor. It can get a little confusing, but I can go way, way back on the family tree. My brother took us back all the way to the 900's.

RMM: Really?

HE: Yeah, their records are very good.

RMM: That's pretty much the founding of Iceland. So he was able to trace it way back? That's incredible.

He: Yes, it is. I can't read what he gave me, but I'll take his word for it. I can go back, I did it last week for my younger brother, and I went back to the other side at least five generations. He didn't know some of the names that he's related to. I've had my father over here a few times and the last time I had him over I pumped for family history because he doesn't talk about it too much. However there are some, because of the Danish influence in the 1800's, there are some recognized, established family names, for example, Klaussen, Seemsen, and Kulunsun. There's a limited number.

RMM: Just right them down so we have them.

HE: This is my grandfather's last name...Thorkon.

RMM: What I'm trying to do now is I'm trying to find the program that will allow me to use the Icelandic letters, because there are a few of them. There is also one for old English. A "d" with a little flip at the end of it.

HE: It's another "th" sound.

RMM: There's a number of them. Let's see, the food...

HE: Lost of fish.

RMM: What are the main foods from Iceland that have been brought over? Fish?

HE: I grew up with a lot of fish. It was a big deal to have chicken on the weekend, on a Sunday, it was fancy. Of course the meat over there was lamb; you don't get good beef, not when I was growing up in Iceland. Now you do. I didn't know what good beef was until I got here. But because of the fish...

END OF SIDE A

HE: Traditionally the way you eat it is with a little butter. If you put too much butter on it

START OF SIDE B

RMM: The heavy fish diet continues down into the present time?

HE: I think it's shifting now a lot, because there's a lot more fast food, we've become a lot more Americanized. So there is a lot of fast food, there's still more fish available there than there is here, and they know what to do with it and how to prepare it well. You get half a dozen girls or guys over here and give them a fish and they'll try it, deep try it most of the time. Friday night fish is fish fry.

RMM: What is your point of view, and I remember when I got the Icelandic cook book, one of the immediate questions was does it have rotten shark? What id the status of that today?

HE: I think it's more something about curiosity and unique, for tourism and things like that. It was a way of curing the food, it was a necessity. Most of the Icelandic foods were grown form necessities. The air dried fish, the salted fish, the rotted shark, the sheep head, you've seen that?

RMM: Heard of it.

HE: Yeah, I've had that. Most of the foods were just necessity of survival. The one that people always come up with to gross people out with is ram's testicles. They needed food, so they figured out a way to use it.

RMM: So a lot of these are all kind of things that have fallen by the wayside as other foods have come in. The Icelandic groups have been more exotic, put it that way.

HE: Exotic ones have. Some of them have maintained, like the dried fish, it's very expensive now but still very good and very popular. I tried for a long time to get a way of importing it here. Did you have the dried fish when you were over there?

RMM: No.

HE: It's actually a dried fish and they eat it with, if you don't put anything on it, it's just pure protein. It's like beef jerky, it's just fish jerky, but it's not salty.

RMM: Like a codfish? Oh, that's salted.

HE: Yeah, that's cured.

RMM: Yeah, this you're saying this fish is just dry?

HE: Traditionally the way you eat it is with a little butter. If you put too much butter on it obviously it's not real healthy.

RMM: There is a drink, something like Benavin?

HE: Brenavin, Burning Wine, it's the closest relation to alkoveet. It's the Icelandic Schnapps. It's what it is.

RMM: It's vodka?

HE: I'm not sure what they make it from, a potato or what.

RMM: There was on recipe that had caraway flavoring and angelica flavoring in it?

HE: Hmm. In the brenavin?

RMM: Yeah. A flavoring to it.

HE: That I have not seen.

RMM: So you've just had the straight brenavin?

HE: Yes.

RMM: So that's like straight vodka?

HE: That's the tradition we've kept up a little bit. My brother would bring me a bottle of brenavin for Christmas when he visited. It was something unique to bring out when people were over.

RMM: Yeah. Does it taste like vodka?

HE: It's unique. It's closer to somewhere between alkoveet and schnapps. Have you ever had alkovet?

RMM: Yeah, that's Danish. Now what is the role of coffee in Iceland? Is it true that people, that Icelandic people are great lovers of coffee?

HE: Yes. That's the first ting they did when I walked in there, offer me a cup of coffee. It's very important; I drink a lot of coffee. It's the way to get people to settle down and visit.

RMM: I ran across a recipe before. They called it Icelandic Coffee. They put caraway seed in the coffee. Is that something that you know of?

HE: Caraway seed in the coffee?

RMM: Yup, grind up the caraway seed. When I made the coffee, pour it into a, well it sort of drips through and then you but in the caraway seed into the coffee, to get a really subtle flavoring of Caraway, it's not eating a mouthful of rye bread.

HM: Yeah, it's all albiekut. My grandmother used to do that, I remember that.

RMM: So this would be a traditional drink.

HE: Yeah, I forgot about that.

RMM: The ground caraway seed in the coffee.

HE: you just add it to the grounds before you pour it over.

RMM: Okay, are there any other things like that? Coffee flavorings and that?

HE: Other than a shot of brenavine, no.

RMM: Okay, is there anything I sort of, left out? In terms of things you might want to mention?

HE: I tend to go off in left field, so there may have been a lot of things. I think the ties to the country are very small, most Icelanders won't admit that. They become an American. It's also very strong love. The last Scandinavian festival, I ask the manager to use my version of the national anthem because I was really surprised at the version he had at the year before. I just went. Those kinds of things, the Icelanders are really proud of. It's a beautiful, beautiful song.

RMM: In terms of the nationalist pride...

HE: There's a lot of pride.

RMM: That also shows up in the All-Thing, the parliament, it's been around so long, it's such an important part of Iceland? And then in the sagas?

HE: The Sagas, yeah. They go way, way back.

RMM: But that's an important part of the Icelandic tradition? That's something the immigrants would have had a strong memory and connection too?

HE: Yes it is. And I love the country itself. Just it's landscape, and color. I'm sure you noticed when you were at Reykjavik; did you walk in the church tower?

RMM: There was a sort of water tower.

HE: Yeah, you went up there and looked at the colors of the roofs, it's amazing, just all kinds of color.

RMM: Then we went east, out where the All Thing first met. We ere out there quite a ways, waterfalls and what not. The whole place was spectacular. You got to a lot of places, and that's one place my wire and I would like to go back to. What are the winters like in contrast to the Upper Peninsula?

HE: Miniscule. Winter here is much, much harsher. Iceland was at least in the south. Northern Iceland is different atmosphere completely; they are facing the Arctic Circle. Winter in the Upper Michigan is very tough compared to Iceland. Iceland is kept warm by the Gulf Stream, much closer to England, not nearly the snow you have here.

RMM: Even in the northern part of Iceland?

HE: In the North, it gets quite bad, but not as bas as here. That's something we didn't talk about was the weather, that was one of the hardest things I had to deal with when I came over here, I hated the summer, I hated it. It was so humid and hot I could not stand it. I was dying. It was cooler but not cold, kind of like this morning. I was out picking raspberries with my wife, should have mentioned that, because now I have become more acclimated to the temperatures here. And the other thing she was asking about was the Boytons. I remember when we opened up a camp that spring on Middle Island Point there, for my little brother and I, he had his truck and shovel, and he was complaining he got so upset because, "no matter where I dig I get ants." We had never seen ants; we didn't know what they were. The bugs over here were just horrendous; there were way too many bugs. Except for mosquitoes, we knew what a mosquito was. That was another shocker. The heat and the insects.

RMM: So that would affect any Icelander?

HE: For sure. It'd make sense why there are a lot of them in Canada, although there are a lot of them in Canada.

RMM: Could you do me a favor, for the tape?

HE: The national anthem is (Speaks in Icelandic)

RMM: IF you know Icelandic, how do you interact with other Scandinavians? Can you understand Norwegian? Swede? Danish?

HE: Icelandic is a root language; it's actually a root to all the Scandinavian languages and to English actually. So it is easier for Icelanders to learn the other Scandinavians languages rather than vice versa.

RMM: Like learning Latin, then French or Italian, so on?

HE: Yes. I took Danish in high school, I understand a few words, but never used to. Danish is much harder. I'm sure you noticed everyone there speaks three languages. Icelandic and English for sure, and then at least one other language, usually Danish or German.

RMM: Knowing multiple languages?

HE: Yes, it's very important. My mother spoke English, Icelandic, and Danish. My father spoke English, Icelandic, Danish, and German. So there's a lot of languages in the house.

RMM: It's sort of like the rest of Europe. You have an interaction with other countries around you, you could speak another language or two or three. So it's not a chore, it's learning. Where here in the United States with such a large country, you learn a foreign language, Spanish, rather common, but you don't have an opportunity to speak it. Or you're learning book learning, what comes out of a book isn't always what you're speaking.

HE: At least two or three of my kids have shown a lot of interests in learning Icelandic, and they've ordered some programs, but it's vey difficult. You have to hear it. And you have to speak it, fluently. The only way you'll really learn the language is to move there for a year and interact.

RMM: That's why you're saying with Icelandic you have to be there to speak it and get it down more than other languages.

HE: Yeah, I have to make an exception here because I married into a Finnish family and they spoke Finnish regularly at the table, and I did not learn Finnish. Finnish is tough. And it is a little bit different than the other Scandinavian languages, there is more of a Russian influence there, more Slavic that people realize.

RMM: But the other languages are Estonian and Hungarian. They come from a whole different root.

HE: There is a lot of mix there.

RMM: But then you're saying with the Russian coming in.

HE: It's fun though.

RMM: Okay.

HE: I'll send you a picture. When was that? I talked to an exchange student...

RMM: So there have been Icelandic exchange students at Northern?

HE: Yes, but I don't think there's ever been an Icelandic student there that's graduated per se from NMU that I know. I don't know when that was; I think it was after I graduated. Somebody called me and said, "did you know that's an Icelander up there?" So I went up there and walked in and greeted him in Icelandic, I caught him off guard.

RMM: I don't know, the alumni office might be interested in what I'm doing and putting your picture on the *Horizon*. If you want.

HE: Okay, I get the Horizon. I do get it. I like Northern, I did. It's a good place.

RMM: Well okay, that kind of ends the interview, thank you. You're the first Icelander I've interviewed, and maybe the only native Icelander in the UP, because you said you did look for some.

HE: Yeah, I think so. Kinda lonely. (laughs) END INTERVIEW