



The Hockey Icelanders of Winnipeg's Sargent Avenue

- Researched and written by J Jameson

Icelanders were the first foreign nationality to establish a settlement in an area that would become part of Manitoba. They established 'New Iceland' along the west coast of Lake Winnipeg between Winnipeg Beach and Hecla Island in 1875. A steady stream of Icelandic immigration would follow with a yearly average from 700 to 2,000 settlers.

By 1881, hardship and disease had taken its toll and many families would leave for the south including opportunities in Winnipeg. A small Icelandic presence already existed in Winnipeg and helped the newcomers settle in. As the rapidly growing city expanded, the 'Little Iceland' enclave was established in the city's West End around Victor Street and Sargent Avenue.

Soon, second generation Icelanders were attending Winnipeg schools and participating in sports. Many of them had started playing ice hockey in Winnipeg as early as 1896.



This was a golden era for Winnipeg hockey. The Stanley Cup winning Winnipeg Victorias were at the forefront of hockey supremacy, with Dan Bain, Tony Gingras, and the Flett brothers thrilling fans with their exploits on the ice.

Hockey's popularity would mushroom and by the 1898/99 season there were well over a hundred teams in Winnipeg alone. In addition to highly competitive "senior", "intermediate" and "junior" teams—there was a Bankers League, Commercial Leagues and two teams composed of lacrosse

players. There were teams formed by public school students, by newspaper carriers, and by residents of boarding houses.

The Icelanders of Winnipeg were sharply divided into two rival sporting camps; the Icelandic Athletic Club (I.A.C.) and the Vikings.

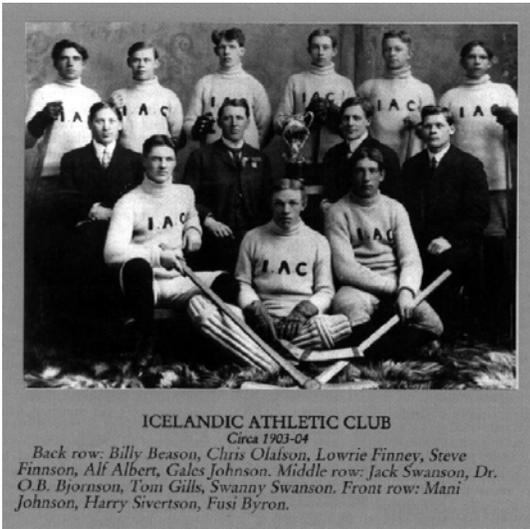
The IAC North-enders resided in the neighbourhood of Jemima Street (Elgin Avenue) while the Vikings were from the wide open prairie to the west of Sherbrook Street south of Sargent Avenue.

In 1897, these two teams formed the Manitoba Icelandic League. Games were played at the old Brydon and McIntyre rinks downtown. The Vikings played in red jerseys with large white V's





and white pants while the IAC had dark blue sweaters and black pants. It was in this two-team Icelandic league that Manitoba Hockey Hall of Fame member 'Cully' Wilson began his hockey career.



ICELANDIC ATHLETIC CLUB
Circa 1903-04

Back row: Billy Beason, Chris Olafson, Lowrie Finney, Steve Finson, Alf Albert, Gales Johnson. Middle row: Jack Swanson, Dr. O.B. Bjornson, Tom Gills, Swanny Swanson. Front row: Mani Johnson, Harry Sivertson, Fusi Byron.

Where the John M. King School now stands was the site of the Vikings skating rink. Water was hauled in barrels on small sleighs from the corner of Ellice and Sherbrook. IAC would practice at a rink at Notre Dame Park between Notre Dame and Wellington Avenue.

Their battles were legendary and many times the ice was blood-stained. The Vikings won the Icelandic League championship every year between 1897-1902. After the 1902 season interest had lagged and the league folded.

The Icelandic teams would continue to engage in games and a yearly competition for the Hansson Cup, which included bragging rights for the top Icelandic team in the

city. The IAC would compete in the City junior ranks for the 1906/07/08 seasons.

In 1908, the Icelandic boys decided to end their animosity and combine their talents to take on the other leagues and teams in the city. Taking residence at the International Order of Good Templars (IOGT) building at 635 Sargent Avenue, a combination of both older clubs formed the Winnipeg Falcons.

Like other Winnipeg immigrant communities, the 'white-haired' Icelanders were victims of blatant bigotry and prejudice. Winnipeg's top Anglo teams were composed of players from well-to-do families and refused to play them.



The Falcons would compete in Intermediate hockey between 1908 and 1910. Despite sharing the 1910 title with the Monarchs, the Falcons were dismayed at being denied entry to the City Senior loop the following season while the Monarchs were accepted.

Instead, the Falcons joined the rural Manitoba Amateur Hockey Association Senior ranks for the 1910/11 season.

In 1912, Kurt "Konnie" Johannesson, Bobby Benson and Frank Fredrickson joined the team in the Manitoba Independent League where the Falcons would win the Intermediate title.



Winnipeg's top Anglo Senior hockey clubs refused to compete with the 'immigrant squad' until the outbreak of the First World War. The Anglo teams relaxed their arrogance when the Icelandic-Canadians demonstrated their loyalty to the Empire by enlisting in a battalion comprised largely of Scandinavian-Canadians. Under the 223rd Battalion banner, the Falcon players would finally compete against the top Senior teams in the 1915/16 Patriot League season.

Despite finishing last, goalkeeper Wally Byron, led the league in least goals allowed, and Frank Fredrickson, scored the most goals with seventeen in eight games

The 223rd Battalion would sail for Europe in May, 1917. When war ended in November, 1918 two members of the Falcons would not return. Frank 'Buster' Thorsteinson and George Cumbers had been killed in action in France.

The Falcons would reorganize in August, 1919. Once again denied application to the City Senior loop they joined with Brandon and Selkirk to form the Manitoba Hockey League for the 1919/20 season.



Winning the Manitoba Hockey League title, the MHL champion Falcons met the Winnipeg Hockey League champion Winnipeggers for the right to represent Manitoba in pursuit of the Allan Cup. It was simply no contest as the speedier Falcons trounced the 'Pegs in a two-game total point affair, 15-1. Manitoba hockey officials were red-faced realizing their efforts to deny the Falcons could have resulted in the province's best team not representing the province.



Taking on the Thunder Bay champion Fort William Maple Leafs, the Falcons once again used their speed to breeze to victory with 7-2 and 9-1 wins.

Two weeks later, the Falcons thoroughly impressed Toronto hockey fans winning the prestigious Allan Cup easily by beating Toronto Varsity 8-3 and 3-2. As Dominion champions they would represent Canada at the 1920 Olympics, held in Antwerp, Belgium in April.

The Falcons had hoped to go home and celebrate with a parade. Instead, they were advised that there was no time to return home and pack. Days later, the team boarded a ship at St. John, New Brunswick



and headed overseas with literally the clothes on their back. While enroute, the team would exercise on-deck and develop strategies as they would be playing seven-man hockey in the Olympic tournament.

Arriving in Antwerp, the Falcons held open practices and exhibition matches dazzling the spectators with their skills. The team exemplified sportsmanship by helping their opponent's improve their training methods.

The Winnipeg Falcons easily claimed the first Olympic gold for hockey defeating Czechoslovakia 15-0, USA 2-0, and Sweden 12-1. The team that nobody wanted was now World Amateur Hockey champions.

The Falcons arrived home on Saturday, May 22, 1920 to a massive civic celebration and parade. Fred "Steamer" Maxwell (Manager & Coach), W.A. Hewitt, Olympic Team Manager, Gordon Sigurjonsson, Trainer, Haldor "Slim" Halderson, Frank Fredrickson, Kurt "Konnie" Johannesson, Christian "Chris" Fridfinnson, Mike Goodman, Robert "Bobby" Benson, Magnus "Mike" Goodman and goalie Wally Byron were all heroes in Winnipeg. Falcons that were not on the Olympic roster but contributed during the season were Harvey Benson, Ed Stephenson, Connie Neil, W. B. 'Babe' Elliott, Babs Dunlop and Sam Laxdal.

Honorary President, Hon. Thomas H. Johnson; President, Hebbie Axford; Vice-President, Col. H. Marino Hannesson; secretary, Bill Fridfinnson; and the executive committee consisted of Bob Forrest, John Davidson and Fred Thordarson.

Fredrickson, Halderson moved on to pro careers that fall, both would eventually play on Stanley Cup winners. American-born Bobby Benson also turned pro, playing briefly with the Boston Bruins. Mike Goodman turned pro in 1923 and was also a two time Canadian speed skating champion. Frank Fredrickson was inducted into the Hockey Hall of Fame in 1958.

