



EDITOR'S NOTE: While Horace Sutton is on vacation, this space is being occupied by guest columnists. The following article is by Ted Olson, an old Iceland hand whose acquaintance with the island goes back to 1941. He served with the American Embassy in Reykjavik from 1957 to 1959.

IT WAS Iceland's bad luck that Erik the Red got there a century too late. Erik was a promoter, with a precocious understanding of the importance of brand labeling in establishing a beguiling image. If he had dedicated himself to building up his homeland instead of luring settlers to his frigid real estate development farther west, Iceland would probably have been called Greenland, and Greenland, much more accurately, Iceland. But Floki Vilgerdsson had been there first, and Floki was a literal and irascible man. When, impatient to be off to Norway in the spring after over-wintering on the newfound island (the first Norseman to do so) he found the fjord sealed by floes, he uttered some crisp Viking oaths and dubbed the place Iceland.

The damage over the years has been considerable. Diplomats have been known to threaten resignation rather

than accept an assignment in Reykjavik. G.I.s posted to the Iceland Defense Force at Keflavik used to speed their year's incarceration with sardonic whimsies. One of them set up a temporary vogue by purchasing a deck of cards and ostentatiously tearing up one card a week. Others trudged down to the coast and threw rocks into the North Atlantic, on the theory that if enough of them did the same thing there would be a causeway over which they could march home. Lumps of lava were secreted in the barracks bags of men about to depart—a long-term demolition project.

Icelanders find this incomprehensible. They like their island and tend to pine when transplanted. They return from vacations in the Tyrol or the Schwarzwald grumbling about the landscape: it's all cluttered with trees so you can't see anything.

ICELAND is a cyclopean fistful of volcanic slag thrust up out of the North Atlantic. The planet's hide thins there to an easily puncturable membrane, under which one can sense, and occasionally feel, the subterranean cauldrons bubbling. They have been known to break through, cooking away the glaciers and sending torrents of superheated water down to the sea. Two years ago the ocean off the south coast began to boil and belch fire, and shortly a brand-new volcano emerged. It has grown to a sizable island.

For several years volcanologists have been keeping an eye on Katla, under the impacted ice of a glacier in southern Iceland. They figure she is overdue to blow her top. The residents of Vik, a village tucked under the glacier's brink, go unconcernedly about their business. They may be counting on a repetition of the legendary miracle that saved Pastor Jon Steingrímsson and his flock at Kirkjubæjarklaustur in 1783. They had taken refuge in the church as an Amazon of fire swept down from a thirty-mile-long rift in the earth's crust. You can still see where the lava flow forked, just short of the church.

This subterranean ferment—potentially an economic resource of some importance—has been harnessed only on a modest scale. Much of Reykjavik is heated by natural hot water. Some thirty miles away, at Hveragerði, a flourishing greenhouse community has grown up around another cluster of hot springs. The open-air swimming-pool in Reykjavik is a favorite resort on winter mornings for Icelandic politicians. They

steam comfortably into the icy air while they lay out tactics for the day's debate in the Althing. The ducks frequenting the lake in the center of the city are similarly pampered; hot water is piped in to keep one corner of the pond ice-free.

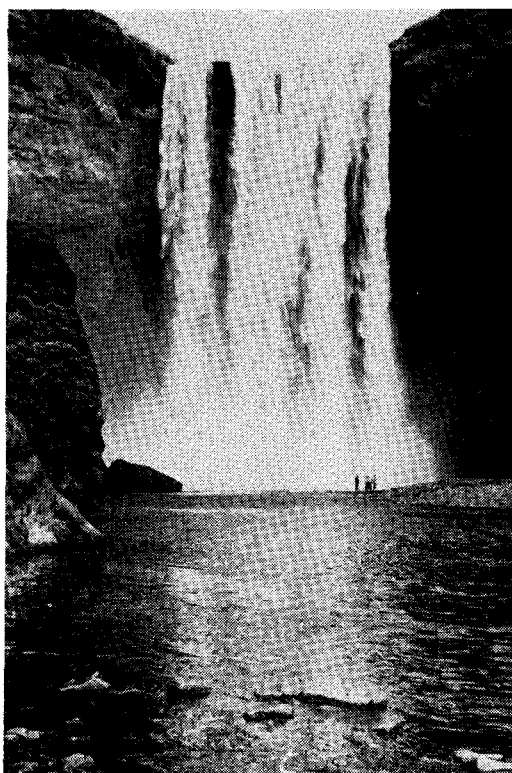
Icelanders are in fact a relatively pampered people. No nation has embraced the material benefits of our time with more enthusiasm. The great stark cubes of apartment buildings sprouting all over Reykjavik are fitted with a wealth of gadgetry that many an American housewife would envy. Icelandic farms are largely mechanized. Everybody seems to own an automobile, although prices are three to four times those in America.

Certain values, traditionalists will tell you, have been lost in the process. People no longer while away the long winter nights by reciting the sagas. But Icelanders still regard the profession of *skáld* (pronounced *scowled*) with reverence, and the ancient art of poetic improvisation is still practiced. Once a year members of the Althing and high government officials meet at a dinner where all conversation is supposed to be in verse.

And Icelanders remain one of the writingest races on earth. It may not be literally true, as some travelers have reported, that every fisherman or crofter has a book manuscript in preparation or in being, but the per capita output of books must be the world's largest. Collections of poetry have been known to run into printings of 10,000. The per capita equivalent in our country would be roughly 10,000,000.

Unfortunately the impenetrability of the language makes most of this output impenetrable to foreigners. The 1955 Nobel Prize-winner, Halldor Kiljan Laxness, is the only author who has been widely translated. (Some have chosen to write in Danish or Norwegian to reach a wider audience.) Even a dedicated linguist may be discouraged on learning that there are forty-eight ways to count to four. Alone among the languages of Western Europe, Icelandic rejects loanwords, even those that have become internationalized, like *electricity* and *telephone*. This keeps philologists happily occupied devising indigenous equivalents for the vocabulary of modern technology. Electricity, for example, becomes *rafnmagn*. This has its own peculiar logic: *rafn* means amber, and if you look up *electricity* you will find that it comes from the Latin *electrum*, also meaning amber. *Sími*, the Icelandic for telephone, literally means thread.

Even if he has learned the word for it, the foreigner may find the *simi* frustrating if he has to look up somebody in the directory. Subscribers are listed by their first names, because in Iceland



Icelandic countryside—For fishermen and philologists.

that is the name that counts: the patronymic is added only to help identify one particular Haraldur or Erlingur among all the others.

The visitor, having located his particular Haraldur Gudmundsson among the column or more listed in the directory, will be further confused when he meets the family and discovers that the lady of the house is not Mrs. Gudmundsson but Sigridur Ingolfssdóttir, that their son is Thorleifur Haraldsson and their daughter Svanhildur Haraldsdóttir.

This works pretty well in a country where everybody seems to know everybody else, or at least knows who he is and who were his forebears. Most Icelanders seem to carry elaborate genealogical tables in their heads.

Those Icelanders who are not writing books are likely to be splashing on canvas. Most houses are encrusted with art, largely indigenous, and much of it good. While the younger painters have enthusiastically embraced nonobjectivity, Icelandic taste still favors the kind of painting you can understand and identify. The visitor admiring his host's prized Kjarval or Asgrimur is likely to be told: "Yes, that's my native valley. The family farm is just up the river." For many patrons of art, a picture is a slice of Iceland scissored out of the landscape and packaged for indoor contemplation.

Strangely enough, there exists alongside this universal literacy and prodigious cultural productivity a stubborn inheritance of medieval superstition. An American woman, making conversation at a state dinner, remarked that the government's guest house, a fine old mansion transplanted to the capital from northwestern Iceland, must have a few ghosts. "Oh, no," replied the Cabinet Minister alongside her, "it was brought from Flateyri by ship, and of course you know ghosts can't cross water." She vows he was deadly serious.

I myself never had the fortune or misfortune to pick up the hitchhiker on the Keflavik road who dissolves just as the hospitable motorist is about to let him off at his indicated destination. I have met several Icelanders, however, who swear they know him well. And there have been times when, driving through that labyrinth of contorted volcanic slag, with a black snow squall swooping in from the North Atlantic, I wouldn't have been surprised to see him step out of the twilight, one spectral thumb uplifted. There are places that insist on being populated with trolls and revenants. Icelandic nature is itself so full of prodigies that the supernatural seems no more than a normal extension of the landscape and the climate.

The rigors of travel need not terrify the enterprising tourist. They have been greatly alleviated since Auden and MacNeice wrote "Letters from Iceland," in



Lakes among the lava—Eric the Red got there late.

the late Thirties. New hotels are going up; the road into Reykjavik from the international airport at Keflavik, once a nightmarish thirty miles of mud-holes or lava dust, is being paved, although most of the other thoroughfares meandering along the coast or penetrating the river valleys are only graveled.

Those glacial rivers still have a disconcerting propensity for changing their courses, sometimes leaving handsome new bridges stranded. On a drive along the southern coast, from Reykjavik to Kirkjubæarklaustur, my wife and I had the unnerving experience of seeing the roadway disappear under a shallow sheet of water, which, so far as we could discern, merged not far ahead with the North Atlantic. We couldn't turn around; the road was a single track bulldozed out of the alluvial sands. So we kept on going, and after a couple of amphibian miles the coastline came out to rescue us. Our Icelandic friends couldn't understand why we had been worried.

Fishermen and bird watchers discovered Iceland a generation or more ago, and have been going there ever since, a small but dedicated pilgrimage. Icelanders believe firmly that their salmon rivers are the finest in the world. As in Scotland and Norway, the best water is privately owned, and usually is parceled out on the basis of so many rods per kilometer for each half-day of the season.

The scenery, though, is free, and far more rewarding than anyone would suspect if his only acquaintance with Iceland was overflying it. There are half a dozen major glaciers and a flock of minor ones, most of them approachable by road. There is the original Geysir, from which all the others take their generic name, an easy day's excursion from

Reykjavik. Wherever one of the innumerable rivers drops off the central plateau there is a waterfall. The skies, winter and summer, are spectacular. The dedicated skier can find usable snow any month of the year, although in July he may have a long, hot trek on foot getting to it and must be prepared to dodge lava outcrops at the end of a *schuss*.

Some visitors complain of insomnia during the summer months, when it is possible to read a newspaper at midnight without touching a light switch. This phenomenon has other disadvantages, as junior officers from an Italian cruiser discovered. They had met some attractive girls at a Reykjavik reception and arranged a rendezvous in the city park later in the evening. They were understandably disconcerted when they found the park treeless and the summer night remorselessly public.

—TED OLSON.

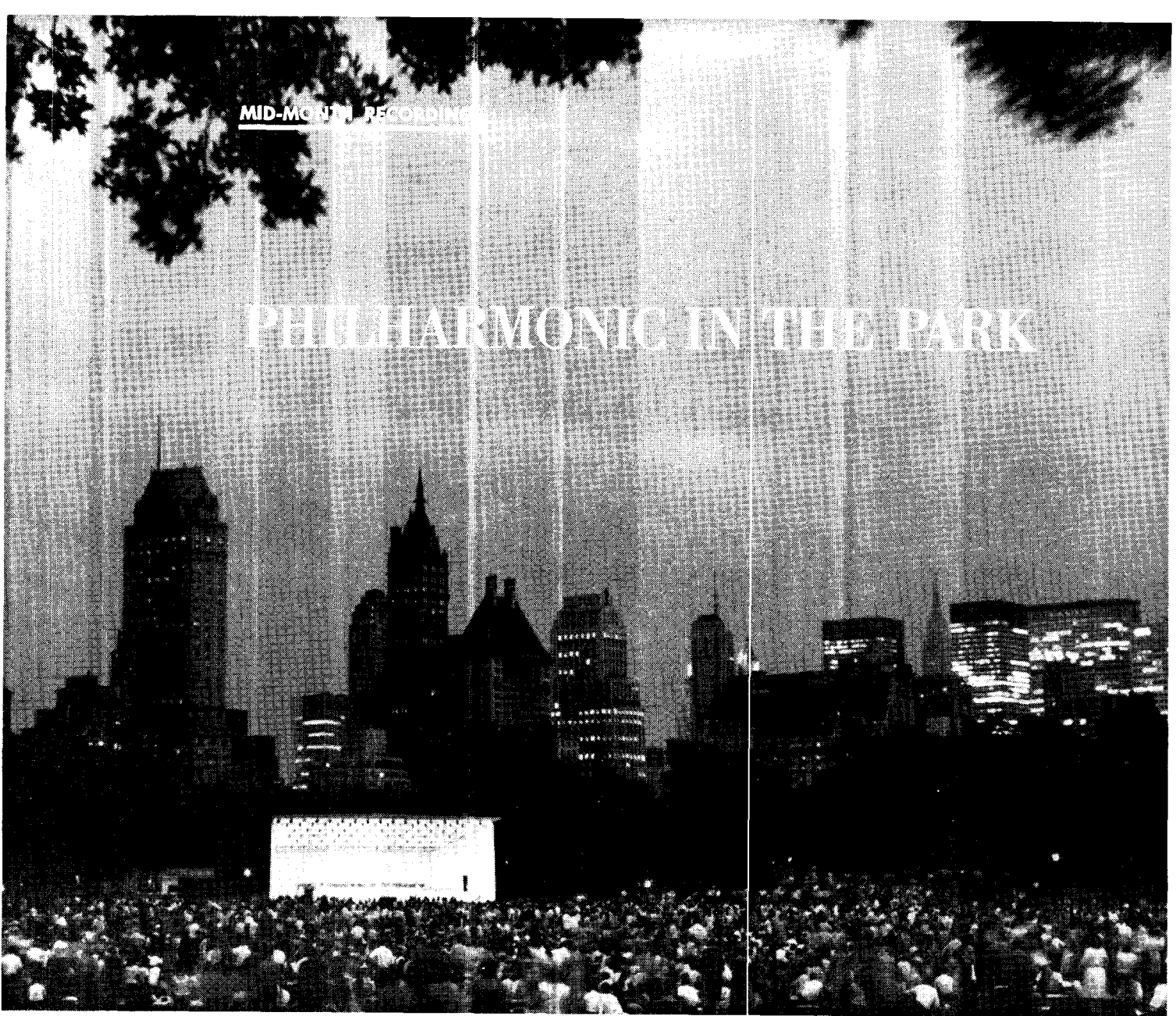


—Icelandic Airlines Photos.

Harbor at Reykjavik—Can ghosts cross the water?

MID-MONTH RECORDING

PHILHARMONIC IN THE PARK



Philharmonic Photos by Christian Steiner.

**Some of the 70,000 who heard Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Central Park—
“an audience so miscellaneous that it could only be described as—an audience.”**

THE FIRST night, when the police count said that there were 70,000 people on the Central Park Sheep Meadow to hear William Steinberg conduct a free concert by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, there were many things that could be said—“remarkable,” “unprecedented,” “unbelievable” among them. But it was the first night, a hot August night; it was free; and how often do you get to hear the Beethoven Ninth Symphony free, on a hot August night?

The second week, when the police count increased to 73,000 for a different program, the message began to sink in. The soloist this time was Benny Goodman, playing Mozart's clarinet concerto conducted by Seiji Ozawa. Maybe . . . ?

The third time, when Aaron Copland was the soloist in his own piano concerto conducted by Alfred Wallenstein,

and the audience again topped 70,000, there could be little doubt any longer. Somebody has been listening to all those LP records, and the music appreciation courses, and the programs on the FM radio. This was true not only in Manhattan, where these astounding figures were compiled, but also in three other boroughs of the city (Brooklyn, Richmond, and The Bronx), where each of the programs was repeated and comparable crowds assembled.

By the rough rule of police thumb (assigning so many square feet per person and then judging the number of square feet the crowd covered), something like half a million persons turned out for the twelve concerts in the four boroughs. This is more than the Philharmonic plays to in the course of a whole indoor season and, as composer Copland said, “revises our whole idea

of what kind of an audience there is for this kind of music.”

It was, moreover, an audience so miscellaneous that it could only be described as—an audience. It wasn't young and it wasn't old. It wasn't male and it wasn't female. It wasn't longhair, nor was it beatnik. It was something of each and a composite of all—sizes, shapes, and colors. English-speaking and foreign, sitting, standing, strolling, but mostly listening. On the fringes, where the shell receded into the distance and almost seemed to merge with the apartment houses on the far side of Fifth Avenue, some had radios tuned to the broadcast by the city station of the music they could see being performed, but could hear better from the box. It was an unprecedented, unbelievable, and remarkable sight—also unforgettable.

—IRVING KOLODIN.