

Early Discoveries

The following story of the discovery of America in the eleventh century by Leif Ericsson, the Norseman, will be read with interest, because it is probably part of our own earlier history, and because of the recent attention made by the three plucky adventurers, William Washburn, Nutting and Arthur Hilderbrand, writers, and Eric Todahl, a painter, to sail over the same course in a small yacht. Unfortunately all trace of them has been lost and the search undertaken by the U. S. Cruiser Trenton has been abandoned.

The narrative is written by H. Rolf Wisby for the New York Tribune and is as follows:—

THE NORSEMEN DISCOVERED AMERICA IN THE YEAR 1,000 A.D.

The annual festival under the auspices of the American-Scandinavian Foundation and the Norwegian National League of New York should go a long way to teach the average American that the Norse Vikings, under the chieftainship of Leif (pronounced Lief) Ericsson, are the true historic discoverers of the American continent on September 29, A. D. 1,000 almost five centuries before Columbus reached the West Indies.

The ultimate object of these annual Leif Ericsson festivals, which were fathered and sponsored by the American-Scandinavian Foundation and its several chapters, is to establish a national Leif Ericsson Day, to be legally observed by the American people as a holiday in commemoration of the discovery. The Scandinavians are not at all disposed to belittle the enormously important voyages of

Columbus, who never made the high-sounding claims of continental discovery which were made for him, and in his name, after his death by the Church and crown of Spain as a matter of state policy. The Scandinavians here and at home are merely interested in correcting a ruthless error as far as I can gather. The landing of Leif Ericsson on the American continent is only an incident in their history at a period when the Vikings were making tremendous voyages of discovery and conquest, braving the open oceans at a time when other races crept timorously along the shore line. To the American people, on the other hand, what figures as an incident in Scandinavian annals, in this case, becomes a matter of paramount importance when we consider that the facts supporting this incident are the very roots and beginning of historic America.

In our vast archives of pre-Columbian literature the voyages of the Norsemen, initiated by the landfall of Leif Ericsson, is the one outstanding achievement of documentary historic caliber that the scholars of the entire civilized world has not been able to twist into a question-mark. The more the scholars dig and delve the clearer stands forth the truth as it rises from the ancient parchments and the mouldy finds.

The average man is at sea in the matter, however. He has a hazy recollection of having read something or other about "Norsemen" in his school days, and then, again, he may not have read even that little, for some school-readers omit the landfall entirely and for rather transparent reasons! The disputes of the scholar—assuming that he was listening—have only tended to confuse him.

Put into a thimble, what are the facts, what is history and what is not?

How did it happen that Leif Ericsson made the landfall and not some more renowned explorer of his day?

Let me tell you. Leif was the son of a mighty chief, Eric Thorvaldson, a Norseman, better known as Eric the Red. He had to flee Norway for Iceland, which was already then a free Commonwealth, peopled mainly by fighting Norwegian Vikings, who did not like the idea of being ruled by the kings of Norway. Eric waxed redder and redder with the slayings and duels until Iceland ceased to be a safe shelter for him. He rigged up his dragon vessel and set out with his companions, one Herjulf, Bardson, to discover a new land of his own where he could stay red and die red. He found a tremendous land of snow and ice under the Northern Lights, and carefully named it Greenland, hoping by this ruse to draw emigrants. Gradually Eric the Red became the lord-chief of a clan of outlawed Norsemen, the Greenland Vikings of history. From Herjulf's son, Bjarni Herjulfsson, Leif learned about a great land still farther west than Greenland. Bjarni and his men had seen it on one of their voyages, but they had failed to make landfall. This exploit stuck in the craw of Leif Ericsson. Later on, when he came to the Court of Olaf Trygvasson, who was then King of Norway, he acquired a dragon ship and a crew of some thirty odd Vikings. He let go his moorings from a small "vik" or inlet near Bergen in Norway and hoisted his broadsail for the long voyage.

His craft was about the size of the Gokstad dragon of archaeological fame,

or 77 feet keel and 16 feet beam. It was an open boat, an expanded model of a rowboat, with no fire aboard, and hence no cooked rations, and there was no shelter for the crew except inside their sleeping bags of dried seal hide. The running gear of the rigging was made out of walrus hide, and the sail was probably woven out of wool.

Mind you! There was neither compass nor chart in those frigid days. Even the astrolabe had not been invented. There were no pilot charts, either, nor any form of marine intelligence or instrument that Leif and his "roughnecks" could draw on in battling their course across an unknown, angry ocean. There were miles of milling fogbanks, however, and icebergs lurking in the thick of this menace. There were rats of driftwood timber, also, floating under the lash of the storm. A collision with a single stick might have sunk the dragon. There were starvation and scurvy staring every man in the face if the "sail horse" provisions and the water cask should give out before landfall could be made.

These are the inboard facts of that famous voyage. Summarize them and you will have a fair idea of what the voyage really meant. If undertaken to-day, under the same conditions, and despite the fact that we know the distance and direction that must be travelled to reach the American shore, no marine insurance would be obtainable, and I venture to say, no captain and crew, either.

Leif Ericsson and his men had one guide at night, the pole star, and one guide at day, the sun, both of them world-famous for instability.

The first land Leif saw was a barren, rocky waste of large, flat stones. He named it Helluland, from "hella," a flat stone. Whether this was Labrador or Newfoundland certain scholars cannot agree, but that it was the continent of America they all agree. The next land he found was covered with dense forests extending down to the beaches, which were flat and shining with white sand as far as eye could reach. Leif named it Markland, from "markr," a forest. We call it Nova Scotia. The third landfall was made after they had "sailed out on the open sea with a northwesterly wind and were on the sea two days. They went ashore on an island to the north of the land. Returning to their ship, they sailed into the sound between the island and the coast, it reached northward from the coast, they made up their mind to remain there for the winter, and they built them large booths. In the spring they made ready and sailed away, and Leif gave the land a name in memory of its product and called it Vinland."

In this highly compressed saga except we have the main outlines of Leif's cruise southward down the American seaboard, past Cape Cod, which he named Kjalarness, or Nose-of-the-Keel, passing the north shore of Martha's Vineyard into Vineyard Sound, and thence, finally, to his winter moorings at a spot somewhere in New England. The exact spot is not known any more than we can point to the exact spot where Columbus landed in the Antilles. Personally I have always been inclined to think that the Norse men's winter-quarters in Vinland, or Land-of-Wine, might easily have been much further south than scholars have been disposed to seek, for the sagas are explicit in quoting the fact that the Norsemen spent the winter of 999-1000 A.D. in a region "where no snow fell, and they found wheat and grapes growing wild."

These are the facts stripped to the bone. How can we be certain that the facts are historically valid? Because they are vouched for by three of the best authenticated sagas on record, namely, the Islendingabok, the Landnamabok and the Flateyrbok. Are these sagas true? There are sagas that are chiefly romance and legend woven around a core of truth, but the earlier sagas of Icelandic scholars, to which this group belongs, are not only reliable and veracious, but modern research has discovered that few histories of ancient times can compare with them in this respect.

Whether did Leif Ericsson sail after leaving Vinland? He did not go back to Norway, because he was afraid that King Olaf might take the new land away from him. Leif laid his course to Brattahlid, his father's seat in Greenland, and showed the wampum he had traded with the Indians for red cloth, and his samples of "masur," or hardwood timber. Leif had two brothers—Thorstein and Thorwald. The latter made up his mind also to explore Vinland. He fitted out a ship, and after spending nearly six weeks on the stormy ocean found himself under the shores of Iceland. He had sailed in a circle! Some years later, in 1006-7 A.D., a great scholar and chieftain Thorfinn Karlsefni by name, who had married Gudrid, the widow of Thorstein, fitted out a big expedition of three vessels, with a crew of 160 men. Karlsefni not only did make landfall on the American shore, but he spent nearly three years here in almost continuous exploration and skirmishing with the "alraenig," or Indians. Gudrid bore him a boy here, who was named Snorri, the first white child born in America!

Summarizing all the authentic accounts of these various Vinland explorations, we arrive at a point of

comparison where there is no room for doubting that they are genuinely true and historically valid. Modern scientific research has checked up every step and turn in these voyages. The topography of the American mainland, where the landings are assumed to have been made, has been carefully scrutinized to find the exact spot where the Norsemen wintered, a spot which they named Hop. Certain scholars who have made a study of the Canadian shore lines insist that the saga accounts apply to Newfoundland and Labrador exclusively, and that Hop was on the southeastern shore of the St. Lawrence River, not far from Quebec. Certain other scholars can prove that Norsemen made landfall in Newfoundland and Nova Scotia only; that Hop was in a cove at the southeastern horn of the latter island, on the seaward side of the Bay of Fundy. We have at least one professor who stands up for the theory that Hop was on Bedlow's Island, where the Statue of Liberty now stands in New York Harbor!

How is it possible, you will wonder, that there can be so many different interpretations of the same identical facts, assuming that the facts are facts? If the Norsemen had had charts and sextants and compasses with them they would undoubtedly have left a set of records that would put our scientific mind at ease in the matter, but they had nothing of the sort. They expressed themselves in seagoing terms that were plain and final to the understanding of their people. Further than that they could not go. Columbus had charts and compasses and instruments, but his exact landing place is still a matter of dispute!

Another point that seems to worry a lot of investigators is the total absence of Norse memorials in this country. In their eagerness to discover something they have dragged in such utterly worthless "evidence" as the Norumbega tower in Newport and the Dwight's Stone at Taunton, Mass., to mention a few. It would, indeed, be strange if any memorials set up by the Norsemen on these shores were left for us to gaze upon to-day. The Norsemen were busy people and constantly on the go during their sojourns here. When they were not exploring the wilderness they were chasing Indians or being chased by them. They had neither the leisure nor the means at hand for erecting memorials of enduring calibre. The booths they built for winter quarters were made of logs, and the crosses they put up over their slain comrades were also made of wood. At Garnet Point, near Plymouth, Mass., two crosses were planted in view of the sea.

Leif Ericsson was twenty-nine years old in 1000 A.D., when he discovered America. After his return to Greenland the Vikings of his father's clan named him Leifur Hinn Heppni, or Leif the Lucky. This "honor name" referred not only to the Vinland landfall, but also to an incident that showed him to be not only a man of iron but a man with the heart in the right place. On the return voyage from America Leif's ship was wrecked on a small island, and although his rations were almost exhausted and Greenland had not been sighted as yet, he rescued the shipwrecked and brought them ashore. There was a young woman among them with long golden hair. Her name was Gudrid, and she it was who married Thorstein, the brother of Leif, and after his death became the wife of Karlsefni and as such the first white mother to give birth to a child in America.

Leif Ericsson took over Brattahlid after his father's death in 1012 and stayed there among the Greenland Vikings hunting walrus, whale and polar bear till the end of his days.

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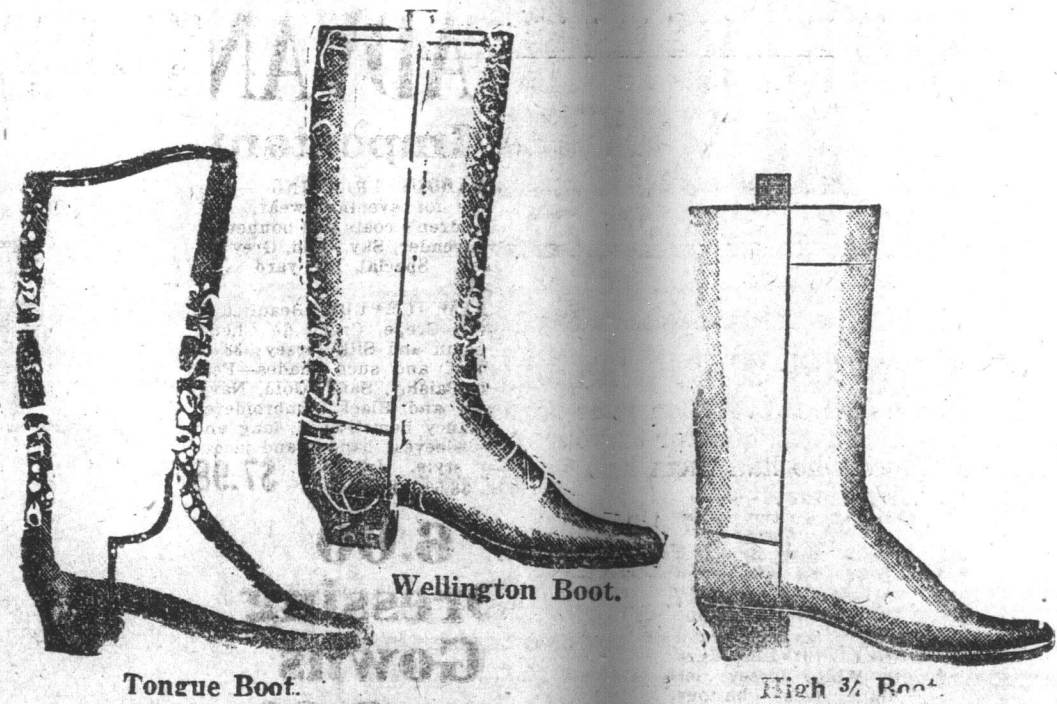
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