

In this paper I'm going to tell you about my Icelandic heritage and the contributions we've made to the peninsula. Other racial groups have been written about but not much has been known about the Icelanders' contributions to the welfare of the land and our history in San Mateo County. We are a small population but we of the Icelandic descent are proud when our own kind made worthy contributions which help society to grow and survive.

I'll begin by telling you about the Stoneson Brothers and the city they built. Henry and Ellis Stoneson were considered to be the building tycoons of San Francisco, in spite of limited educational opportunities in early life. They made a greater impact upon the construction business in California than most others whose beginnings were more auspicious. They combined a skillful use of hammer and saw with a natural talent for planning and design. It is said that Ellis could see a barren, worthless acre of land and in his mind's eye spread it with beautiful, stately buildings.

In their early twenties they became contractors on a small scale in Alaska, British Columbia and finally in the State of Washington. They weren't satisfied with the opportunities afforded them there. After considering several locations, they decided to move to San Francisco where opportunities were waiting for them to exercise their varied talents. So with their tool kits as their sole possession they took their first odd jobs, such as home

repairs and alterations in order to get acquainted with the building trade in this area. Subsequently, they ventured into the building of the family dwellings.<sup>1</sup>

Fred Thorarinson, a friend of theirs who had come with them to San Francisco, shared their interest in the building trade. The initial capital of the partnership which the three formed was a mere seven hundred dollars. Fortunately, the owner of a building supply concern was sympathetic. Upon approaching him for a loan of materials with which to build a house to be put up for sale, their small capital to be their down payment, the man looked him in the eye and said, "You look honest to me. I'll take a chance on you." This resulted in a lifelong tie between supplier and contractor, for the Stoneson Brothers and Thorinson (as he spells it now) never forgot that magnanimous show of faith, and dealt henceforwith with this man's company.<sup>2</sup>

The Stoneson Brothers and Thorinson were partners for several years until Thorinson decided to go into business for himself. He too was very successful in the building trade.

They built the house and sold it, then built more houses and sold them until finally the time was right

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<sup>1</sup>The Stoneson Brothers and the City They Built, The Icelandic Canadian, Spring, 1960, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

to move ahead into mass production of housing units. They purchased a tract of building sites for residential homes in St. Mary's Park of the Mission District near the Crocker-Amazon Park. They built homes there and sold them. They also built their own private homes on this tract.<sup>3</sup>

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They bought more sites and tracts, built more houses, sold them, and directed their profits into further undertakings. This procedure continued with such success that firms like Equitable Life Insurance Company, which didn't even bet on horse races, became partners in their projects.<sup>4</sup>

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The firm later activated its interest in the Lake Merced area, buying many acres of land and constructing houses at the approximate rate of one a day. In 1937, the Stonesons were building up the Lakeside District, which had previously consisted of a number of small truck farms (here in the West a truck farm is a small vegetable farm - anywhere from one to several acres in size - each owner trucking his vegetables to market). This site was selected by them because the trend of growth was toward the west of the Twin Peaks section. The section west of Twin Peaks was an isolated area with the appearance of an abandoned countryside, interspersed with a few struggling cabbage patches and vegetable plots. It was in effect cut off from

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

the San Francisco city proper by hills and inadequate roads. Eventually, the Municipal Railway constructed the Twin Peaks Tunnel (three miles long) and extended miles of track through this desolate area of sand dunes. This was "winning the West" on a small scale. The building of the transcontinental railroad was of more fundamental importance to the Nation than the discovery of gold in California, for the population was transported by rails, thereby expediting the settlement of the West. The construction of the streetcar tracks through the tunnel and the wastelands meant future opportunities for builders, home owners and businesses of all kinds. Soon the Lakeside area was settled as was the West, and the Stoneson Brothers moved their families to Lakeside. The Stonesons quickly recognized the advantages of building in that area. As a result they and several other major subdividers soon exhausted the availability of land.<sup>5</sup>

The Lakeside development took up their time and effort from 1937 to the beginning of World War II, when building activities were restrained. After these restraints were removed, the Stoneson Brothers were prepared for their greatest enterprise. They built a city within a city - a city within the boundaries of San Francisco. This city, known as Stonestown, was opened in 1952, but with one tragic note - the older brother Ellis passed away suddenly from a heart attack, one week

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

before the official opening. It is said that, "During the planning stage, the project developed into the most modern undertaking of its kind in the United States - surpassing such well-publicized projects as the <sup>5</sup>Leavitt towns along the Atlantic seaboard." The project provided thousand with living quarters, homes and apartments, and service facilities for comfortable living. There were over seventy-five business establishments, eliminating the necessity of trips to the older shopping and business sections of San Francisco. Stonestown is a completely self-contained community center. With Stonestown Shopping Center representing various firms long established in the metropolitan area of San Francisco, the problem of decentralization was solved. The firms were offered the opportunity to lease quarters at a minimum rental fee and to pay extra rental through a percentage assessment based on gross receipts. After the various factors of profit and loss were considered, the conclusion was that Stonestown Shopping Center would have to do a \$40 million a year business to be profitable. It was agreed that such a gross income could not be expected in the beginning and that a reasonable time would have to be allowed to pass before that amount of business could be expected. However, the first month's income topped the 25 million dollar mark.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 35

The parking survey disclosed that the free parking space for 2,600 cars was occupied not only by cars of San Francisco shoppers, but by cars of shoppers from other Bay Area communities as far away as 50 to 100 miles. A unique feature of the shopping center of Stonestown is an underground network of tunnels for the use of commercial and service trucks so they would not interfere with the shoppers. The Stoneson Development Corporation (as the firm is now known) continues to build on both sides of the Bay.<sup>7</sup>

Ellis Leo Stoneson was born July 15, 1893 in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. He died August 23, 1952 in San Francisco. His widow is Kritbjorg (Bertha), daughter of Sigurdur and Ingibjorg Thordarson. Bertha was born in Iceland. She came to Canada with her parents when she was a small child and they settled in Selkirk, then later moved to Points Roberts on the west coast where Bertha met Ellis. Bertha and Ellis had three children: Donald Henry Stoneson; Mildred Elaine Baktiari; and Louise Detweiler.<sup>8</sup>

Henry Stoneson was born May 17, 1895 and died December 30, 1958. His widow is Willette. Henry was married twice. His first wife was Hazel Chresson (of Norwegian descent) who died some years ago leaving him with two daughters, Eloise Preston and Helen Schumacher.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

Ellis and Henry had two sisters, Stephanie Ingibjorg Maria Oddstad, widow of Dr. Andres Fjeldsted Oddstad (who was decorated with the Order of the Falcon for promoting the culture of Iceland). Dr. Oddstad was instrumental in organizing the Icelandic Society of Northern California and was its first president. Dr. and Mrs. Oddstad's home was Open House to all Icelanders where they received a warm welcome. Their other sister is Guðrun (Rooney) Kristopherson, wife of Kjartan Kristopherson, formerly of Argyle, son of Sigurdur Kristopherson and Caroline Taylor, the first couple to be married at Gimli in 1877. Caroline Taylor was of Scottish descent, but she learned to speak Icelandic.<sup>10</sup> Rooney had nine children who now are living on the peninsula. They changed the spelling of their name to Christopherson. Her sons are involved in real estate and building also. Her daughter Eileen became a famous Broadway musical star and movie star in Hollywood who now resides in Hillsborough with her family. Their daughter Dorothy is talented as well. She married the famous attorney Robert E. Cartwright and has two children, Caroline and Rob Cartwright. Caroline was Miss Burlingame in 1975. The Cartwrights live in the beautiful estate in Hillsborough, "Villa Des Arbes", on Hayne Road which was the second Decorators Showhouse: It was previously owned by the Scripps - of the Scripps Howard Publishing Company.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 36

The parents of Ellis and Henry were the late Thorsteinn Thorsteinsson (Stone Stoneson) and Ingibjorg Einarsdottir. Thorsteinn was born in 1860 at Hraunkoy, in Borgarfjordur, Iceland. He was 76 when he died in Blaine, Washington. Ingibjorg was born August 2, 1862 at Jolheimstunga, in Borgarfjordur, Iceland. When she was three years old she was adopted by Stefan Profastur (Archdeacon) and his wife Ingibjorg, at Stafholt, Borgarfjordur. She was married at that home. In 1887 she and her husband came to Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. A daughter was born to them the following year in Winnipeg, Stephanie Ingibjorg Maria (Mrs. Oddstad), whom they named after the Archdeacon Stefan and his wife, Ingibjorg. Then they moved to the west coast where their other children were born. They lost one 8 year-old boy, Baldwin, in Blaine, Washington, and their son, Johann Thordur, died in Vancouver, B.C., in January, 1927, at the age of 34. He left a widow of Scottish descent and three children. Grandma Stoneson (as she was lovingly called) died in Blaine, Washington at the age of 90.<sup>11</sup>

The first to make a monetary contribution towards the construction of an Icelandic Old Folks Home at Blaine, Washington, in 1945 were Ellis and Henry Stoneson. The amount was an exceedingly generous one with yet a larger pledge to follow, thus starting the successful drive which

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<sup>11</sup>  
Ibid.

followed. The home was named "Stafholt" in honor of the place where their mother was raised. Ellis and Henry Stoneson also contributed \$1,000.00 each to the endowment fund for the Chair in Icelandic Language and Literature in the University of Manitoba. In poverty and prosperity alike, Ellis and Henry were ever solicitous of the welfare of their parents and other relatives. Their generosity towards humanity never ended.

12

After the death of Henry Stoneson, his nephew, Donald Henry Stoneson, son of Ellis and Bertha, was made Vice-President of the Stoneson Development Corporation at 36 years of age. Donald has been married twice. His present wife is Gloria. He has two children by his first wife and one by the second. Don Stoneson was appointed Chairman of the Commission on Housing and Community Development by Governor Reagan in May, 1968 and he served for eight years, prescribing into law regulations governing housing in the State of California. Don is now the consul of Iceland and works in San Francisco. He moved to Hillsborough in 1959 and lived on Craig Road until November, 1966 when he moved into the famous estate known as "Treehaven" on Hayne Road, an English cotswold country estate. They first saw the estate when it was the 1966 Decorators Showhouse and fell in love with it. It was built in the mid-1920's by George Howard, Jr., a member of the first

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Ibid.

