

Icelandic Heritage
Based on the life stories
of Henry and Ellis Stoneson
and Andy Oddstad Jr.



Written by Caroline Cartwright
circa 1980

Retyped by Deanne M. Powell
Great-grand daughter of Henry Stoneson

2nd revision with photos
by Roy Einar Christopherson

Preface

This paper was written by Caroline Cartwright while attending College of San Mateo. Her cousin, Roy Christopherson happened upon it while researching the Stonesons at the library there in 1981. It is not my intent to alter anything written by Caroline. I kept the faded copies for 30 years and scanned them. Unsure if a cover, preface or other content went missing. In my possession are 7 pages of text.



It is my goal to complete the eight main branches of my family tree, which includes both the Stonesons and Oddstads. Caroline's report is of great historical value, giving detail to our relatives monumental lives. Very little about either the Stonesons or the Oddstads are posted on the internet. The exception being; The Western Neighborhoods Project and Sandy Nathans Blogs.

Adding to the original report are photos recently found and some from Deanne Powell. It is a shame that people do not mark names, places and dates of events, on Post-Its, on the back of photos. Even worse are when family albums are tossed out. One never knows when a future family member, who may not even have been born yet, gets bitten by the Genealogy Bug and does something with them.

Roy E. Christopherson
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To view the original report,
Check with the College of San Mateo Historical Library

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.¹

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 henceforth with this man's company.²

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 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.

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

² Ibid.

They built homes there and sold them. They also built their own private homes on this tract.³

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.⁴



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 Stoneson's 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 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 the 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 Stoneson's quickly recognized the advantages of building in that area. As a result they and several other major sub-dividers soon exhausted the availability of land.⁵



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 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 Leavitt towns along the Atlantic seaboard.” The project provided thousands with living quarters, homes and apartments, and service facilities

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.



3 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 of 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.⁶

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.⁷



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 Ingibjor Thordarson. Bertha was born in Iceland. She came to Canada with her parents when she was small child and they settled in Selkirk, then later moved to Point Roberts on the west coast where Bertha met Ellis. Bertha

and Ellis had three children: Donald Henry Stoneson; Mildred Elaine Baktiari; and Louise Detweiler.⁸



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.⁹

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 Gudrun (Rooney) Kristopherson (Christopherson²⁰), wife of Kjartan Kristopherson, formerly of Argyle, son of Sigurdur Kristopherson (Kristófersson ²⁰)

⁶ Ibid., p. 35

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

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and Caroline Taylor, the first couple to be married at Gimli in 1877. Carline Taylor was of Scottish (correction: English ²⁰) descent, but she learned to speak Icelandic.¹⁰ 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 Cartwright's 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.

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, Stepha-

nie 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 90.¹¹

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 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

10 Ibid., p. 36
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.



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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 American family to settle in the area which was later to be named Hillsborough. Donald, being a builder, could really appreciate its architectural beauty. He lived at "Treehaven" until December, 1976 and now resides in Stonestown.¹³



Andy Oddstad was also a very prominent Icelander. He too was a builder. He grew up and attended school in San Francisco, then graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with his degree in Civil Engineering. He was born June 24, 1918 and died January 22, 1964. His name at birth was Andres Fjeldsted Oddstad, Jr. When he left the Navy after World War II he started a business called the Sterling Building Company. He proceeded to build Sterling Terrace in South San Francis-

co, Sterling Manor in South San Francisco near Buri Buri, Sterling Highlands in Redwood City, Sterling Downs in Belmont and Sterling Gardens in Palo Alto. In 1955 the name of the company was changed to Oddstad Homes Corporation. They continued building on the peninsula. They built Rollingwood in San Bruno, Carlmont in Belmont, Crestmont in Oakland, Farmhill in Redwood City, and Linda Mar in Pacifica which was originally San Pedro Valley. In Linda Mar the Sanchez Adobe was restored for tourists by the Historical Society.



Andy donated a park (Oddstad Park). A school in Park Pacifica was named Oddstad School in his honor, by the school district. Pacifica was incorporated in the 1950's and was originally part of San Mateo.



Andy built the Eureka Square Shopping Center in Linda Mar, about 30 or 40 apartment buildings and 12,000 homes. Andy had several revolutionary ideas. He built the Industrial Park in Redwood City. His revolutionary procedure consisted of using prefabricated concrete for floors and walls. The prefabricated pieces already had structural steel in them which they would connect with each section. It was a complicated procedure to plan ahead in order for everything to work out just right. They have 5 or 6 stacks on either side of the building, then hoist them into place. It was an economical but complicated way of building.¹⁴



President Eisenhower had established a People to People Program so that people from various countries could meet each other on their own level. The Connossieur of Housing and the Head of the Delegation and others were involved in building housing in Russia. The San Francisco peninsula was similar to the hilly terrain in Moscow. Andy tried out a revolutionary idea of his

13 Donald Henry Stoneson, Person Interview

14 Elma Mendola, Sister of Andy Oddstad, Personal interview

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in the Rollingwood Development. Since it was a hilly area he used retaining walls and a roof truss which holds the roof up. Boards go up to form a peak, but you need support underneath. He used his prefabricated idea of building on the ground, then lifting it up. The Russians like these prefabricated ideas and ordered a house to be sent to Russia through the Amtorg Corporation who does its purchasing and housing. Andy sold a house to them in 1955. They built the foundation, then the rest was brought in and put up. Five crates were shipped by boat (one house took five crates). The people of Rollingwood had a house warming party. Everyone brought an American household item to be shipped with the house. The working class living in America is equivalent to Russia's upper class. Other countries became very interested in the idea and wrote letters to Andy, but he wasn't interested in going into that business.¹⁵

At his Farmhill development two boys who were rockhands found cinnabar, which is the ore from which you get mercury. Andy opened a mercury mine in Redwood City. The two boys were given a finder's fee which covered their college education. The mercury was sold on the open market for mirrors, thermometers and various compounds. They closed the mine after a year and they sold the equipment to a smelting plant in Mexico.¹⁶

Andy's sister, Elma was also a prominent Icelander. Their family had come down to San Francisco from Canada in 1927. She worked with Andy throughout his career. Andy was killed at age 45. He was on Highway 99 going to a Physical Fitness meeting in Fresno when a man came at him head on, entering on an exit. He survived four days, then died. Andy had done more than any other builder for his early age. He took very good care of his health and wrestling was his way of escaping from the pressure and monotony of making money. The wrestling mat was his country club where as other men enjoyed golf, he enjoyed wrestling.



Andy was blonde and muscular Viking type. He felt wrestling should become more generally taught in the schools. He felt that the boy trained for wrestling could defend himself better than the boy coached to fight. Also you gain a lesson in good sportsmanship because it's never dirty or mean and skill rather than brutality is what it takes to be a winner. He was a member of the Olympic Club and represented them in the National Amateur Wrestling Competition. His sister, Elma, ran the NAWC in 1962 at the Olympic Club in San Francisco. It was televised. Even a team from Japan came over for it. Wrestling is very big over there.

In some parts of the United States wrestling was very popular and had crowds comparable to football games. Andy made it popular out here and got the trend going in the Bay Area. They got high schools interested and amateur wrestling has been growing ever since.¹⁷

¹⁵ ibid.

¹⁶ ibid.

¹⁷ ibid.

Andy's sister, Elma, was quite a trendsetter on the peninsula. She worked at the National Broadcasting Company in San Francisco on Taylor and O'Farrell Streets where Channel 44 is now located. She was the only girl trained to be a broadcast engineer and she was only ²¹ years old. This was because during World War II there was a lack of trained men. When the war ended she left NBC and got her real estate broker's license which was rare for women in those days. She became a novelty in San Francisco. Then she worked for her brother, Andy, as a one girl office. Being a trendsetter, at 35 years of age she was the first woman to run for the position of San Mateo County Congresswoman while working for Andy in 1958. She first became active in politics in 1956 when her 14 page project master plan was presented to Redwood City. In 1958 she was asked to be a candidate. There were only 8 women out of 500 in Congress at that time. Younger was the incum-

bent running against her. She lost the election, but was remembered as being the first woman to run in San Mateo County for such a position. When she married Tony Mendola she retired for six months and then went into the restaurant business in San Mateo. She ran the Fork & Cork Restaurant on El Camino and her husband ran the Turf & Paddock bar in San Mateo where the Greyhound Station is now located.

She now works 70 hours a week full-time at both the Airfresh Trucking and the Wilsey Bennet Co. as office manager. They truck the flowers from San Mateo County in refrigerated trucks all over the country.¹⁸

Their sister, Pearl Farkas, is a registered nurse working as a hospital administrator at Devonshire-Oaks Convalescent Home in Redwood City. Pearl lives in Redwood City. Their other sister, Leona Gordon, was a famous opera star who toured all over the world giving concerts, but died at the age of 49 from cancer. Their other sister, Silvia Haskins, works as a substitute teacher in San Mateo County, and is a very fine artist.¹⁹

We who are of Icelandic descent are especially proud and pleased when our own kind make worthy contributions to the great mosaic of this land of opportunities. It is a satisfying feeling to know that I am a part of the racial group whose contributions to the welfare of the land of its adoption are above average in proportion to its small membership. The memory of the Stoneson Brothers will long live in the hearts of all who knew them. Stonestown and a vast area of San Francisco will long reap the benefit of the monumental achievements of these two men whose manner and saw were symbolic of vision, aspiration and courage.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid (corrections by Roy Christopherson)