

# Axel Vopnfjord: A Tribute

*by Stefan M. Jonasson*

Axel Vopnfjord was a man of uncommon character whose life spoke more loudly than words can echo. Through most of this century, he lived and worked on several fronts, seeking to embody the vision and ideals that warmed his soul. A loyal Canadian of Icelandic heritage, he promoted the values of citizenship, ethnic pride and tolerance. A trustworthy relative and friend, he was a comfort and fit companion to those around him. A gentle teacher and civic leader, he touched the lives of thousands with his wit, charm and compassion.

Axel passed away peacefully on May 13, 1993, at the age of 91. He was born on January 8th, 1902, in Husavik, Manitoba, the oldest child of Jakob Vopnfjord and Dagbjort Kjernested. His parents moved several times, so Axel lived as a child in Husavik, Gimli, Selkirk and St. James. He graduated from the Jon Bjarnason Academy in 1918 and, five years later, he was awarded the bachelor of arts degree by United College (now the University of Winnipeg). Then a year after that, he graduated from the Winnipeg Normal School and began his teaching career.

He taught for nearly two decades throughout southern Manitoba, at places like Belmont, Manson, Sanford and Pilot Mound. He often said that the happiest times of his teaching career were spent as principal of the school at Pilot Mound. While serving as principal there he was elected president of the Western Manitoba Teachers' Association in 1941. The following year, he moved to Winnipeg, where he began teaching at Isaac Brock School. While there, he completed his bachelor of education degree at the University of Manitoba. In Winnipeg, he was once again elected to represent his peers, becoming president of the Winnipeg Teachers' Association in 1954.

In 1950, Axel was assigned to help establish the Technical-Vocational School of Winnipeg, a school which became the envy of educational circles across the continent. Axel taught math and science there. From 1956 until 1961, he was principal of the evening school—at a time when the evening school accounted for 1900 of the 3000 students enrolled at Tec-Voc. In 1961, he became an instructor at the Manitoba Teachers' College. Four years later, he was appointed assistant professor of education at the University of Manitoba, retiring in 1968.

Axel was an advocate of liberal educational methods intended to broaden people's sense of perspective, not merely equip them with the skills necessary to earn a living. He argued that the school system needed to make the curriculum conform to the child,

rather than the child to the curriculum. I've often imagined that Axel must have been something like the fictional John Keating, in Tom Schulman's *Dead Poets Society*—that kind of teacher who could draw out the best from his students, who could point them toward a world of possibilities. "Carpe diem, lads!" John Keating says. "Seize the day. Make your lives extraordinary!"

Axel was committed to a rather lofty notion of citizenship, believing that Icelandic Canadians, in particular, had something to contribute to this vast multicultural society of ours. "There can be no doubt," he wrote, "that the ideals and traditions that sustained the Icelandic immigrants in their time of trial and tribulation, and led them to victory over unfavorable and undesirable conditions, must have been built on solid foundations. We, their descendants, can still draw the living waters of inspiration from the heritage they cherished." He sought to draw those living waters of inspiration in his own life and to draw them out in the lives of others. But he also cautioned that "it is not desirable that we consider ourselves hyphenated Canadians" but rather Canadians first, who seek to build the paradise that is within our grasp—right here, right now. But he also said that "our patriotism must transcend national boundaries. To be good Canadians we must be good World Citizens. Upon the development of that concept throughout the world depends the welfare, and perhaps, the very existence of the human race."

From 1944 until 1946, Axel was president of the Icelandic Canadian Club, a group which sought to pass on the Icelandic heritage in the English language, since they feared it would otherwise decline. He was the editor-in-chief of *The Icelandic Canadian* more than once, but most recently from 1978 until 1989, when he was named editor emeritus. He was a member of the magazine board from its earliest years until the time of his death.

Axel was someone of immense character. "Character involves so many factors," he said. "... It involves faith in the inherent goodness of the human race and the faith, too, that Man is slowly but surely improving and heading towards a higher destiny." Through his gentle manner and respect for others, Axel showed that he believed in human goodness and destiny not merely as an abstract ideal, but as a living truth. I can honestly say—and I think there are very few people that anyone can say this about—that I never heard Axel utter an unkind or malicious word about anyone! Not once! That wasn't his style. That wasn't his spirit. That wasn't his faith, for he had faith in the fundamental goodness of all people and believed that most of the things that divide us are misunderstandings; that if we would only seek to talk to one another and to hear one another, somehow we would be able to overcome them. "The world," he lamented, unfortunately has too many mists that tend to obscure the essential goodness and kindness of the human heart and the basic soundness of human nature."

Axel married Karlotta (Lottie) Olafson in 1935 and they spent more than four decades together, until Lottie's death in 1976. Theirs was a rich and loving relationship. Together they raised two children: Lorraine, who married Henry Bjornson, and Leonard, who married Karen Thorlakson. Axel was immensely proud of his three grandchildren—Kristjan and Linden Vopnfjord and Dale Bjornson—and no visitor to his home could escape hearing about them! It would have brought him much joy to watch his great-granddaughter Berkley-Marie grow and mature. In recent years, Axel was buoyed by the companionship of his special friend, Jill Killeen.

I cherish many deep and fond memories of Axel, who was both my great-uncle and godfather. He was someone that you could always rely upon. Axel was always there for my immediate family, as he was available for most anyone who needed counsel or assistance. When my grandmother was widowed at a very young age and left to raise two boys and a daughter on her own, he opened his home to her, offering invaluable help in her time of need. He was there for her when her son was killed overseas, naming his own son in his honour. And he was there with us when we buried my father so many years ago now, when we needed a touchstone—someone we could rely on, someone we could hold, someone who represented continuity in our lives. He was *always* there! So it is very hard to imagine this world without him.

I recall that Axel was one of the few people I have known who sat in my father's favourite chair with impunity. My father's deference to his uncle impressed me early on that this was a man to be respected and admired. My brother Chuck recently observed that Axel could sit in a room abuzz with conversation, but when he started to speak in his soft, quiet way, people would stop to listen.

I'll always remember that sparkle in his eye—that sparkle like the stars. His eyes glistened and twinkled. One might have imagined that he was an angel. Axel peppered his conversation with poetry and literary allusions. I remember him quoting the oath that the young men of Athens took when they became citizens of that great city-state. Part of that oath was, "I will transmit my native commonwealth, not lessened, but larger and better than I received it. ... I will honour the ancestral faith." Well, Axel did honour the faith throughout his life and there can be no question but that he transmitted his native commonwealth, not lessened, but larger and better than he received it. We can be grateful for people such as him, who have enriched our lives and made our communities the kind of places that they are.

"At all times," he wrote, "we walk in the shadow of history. We are part of all that we have met, and all that our ancestors have met. The ghosts of former years and past events cast an illuminating light upon our forward march, and guide and assist whenever our footsteps falter or fail." Axel will continue to be for us, in the years ahead, that kind of illuminating light that will lead us in our forward march. And

though we can't speak to him in the flesh, we can yet speak to him in our hearts and remember his example, seeking to make real his dreams and vision in our own lives. It is difficult to say goodbye to a man such as him, but "there are times," he said, "when everything we hoped for, believed in, trusted, lies in ruins at our feet. ... At such times, like a beacon of light on a dark night, hope sustains us." So, as we take refuge in our memories of Axel and the procession of all who have gone before us, hope abides in our hearts. He was a wonderful man who made a deep impression in our lives and an enduring contribution to the world. He knew that he walked in the shadow of history. We know that history will judge him kindly.

This tribute is a condensed version of the eulogy delivered at Axel Vopnfjord's funeral service by his great-nephew, Stefan M. Jonasson, prepared for publication in *The Icelandic Canadian* (Summer 1993).