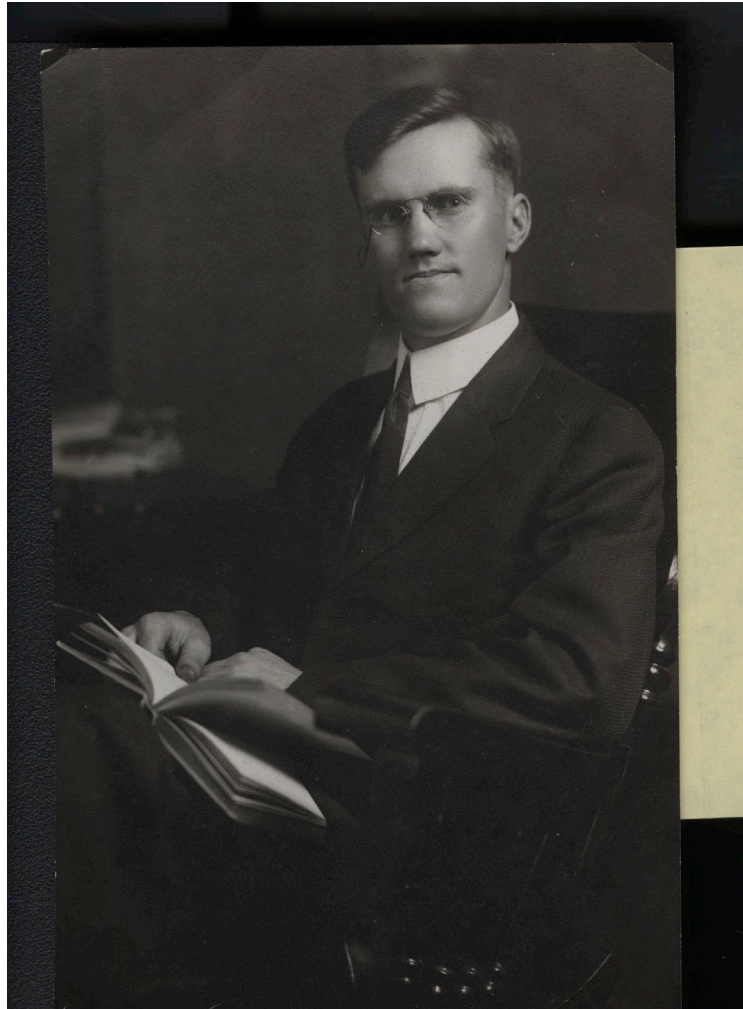


Ralph E. Halldorson and the Great War

Victoria, 8 October 2023



Icelanders in the Great War

- A publication commemorating Icelanders who did military service 1914–1918, published in 1923 by the Jón Sigurðsson Society in Winnipeg, states that information has been gathered that 1,245 Canadians and Americans of Icelandic descent (“Western Icelanders”) had served in the military forces of those countries during World War I: 989 for Canada, 256 for the USA.
- Of these, 144 appear to have died during the war: 94 died in action, two in accidents, two missing in action, 19 died of wounds and 17 of diseases.

Hrólfur's family

- One of those who died of a disease was Hrólfur Jónsson or Ralph E. Halldorson, who was born at Long Pine, Nebraska, on 15 January 1888. His parents were
- Jón Halldórsson (1838–1919) from Stóruvellir in Bárðardalur, north Iceland, and his wife Þórvör Sveinsdóttir (1849–1912) of Garður in Aðaldalur, also in the north. Jón was one of the first Icelandic emigrants to the New World, leaving Iceland in 1872. Þórvör emigrated in 1873. They married in 1875 and lived in Nebraska for the rest of their married life. They had five children who lived to adulthood.

Hrólfur (Ralph), b. 15 Jan. 1888



Topic

- My paper in the book Icelandic Heritage in North America takes as its subject the last letters the family received from Ralph before he died and letters his brother Thomas had written to him via his regiment, which were returned after his death. All the letters are in English. This may of course have been necessary for reasons of censorship, but all indications are that Jón and Þórvör's children had abandoned speaking Icelandic, let alone writing it, at an early age.
- Ralph's war service and his brothers' views on the war, as described by their father and Thomas in the letters, together with the use of English and the desire to have mastery of the English language, are indications of the family's integration with American culture and values.

Acculturation

- Hrólfur was an example of the acculturation of a child of immigrants. Although immigrants in the Midwestern United States were shaped by a vision of two worlds—their heritage from the home country and the culture of their New World—their children could share that world view only to a limited extent. This was manifested *inter alia* in the fact that Hrólfur started to call himself Ralph E. Halldorson.

Sources

- Sophia Halldorson. Archive of letters and pictures. Own by Carolyn Hinds.
- Elmer Halldorson. Collection of manuscripts. Own by John Halldorson.
- Jón Halldórsson. A diary. Own by Carolyn Hinds.
- Sigfús Magnússon. Letters to Ingibjörg Magnúsdóttir. From the archive of Björn Sigfússon, Lbs.

Hrólfur (Ralph) and Sofía (Sophia)



Letters and languages

- All but one of Jón Halldórsson's extant letters are in Icelandic, but his sons' letters are all in English. This may of course have been necessary for reasons of censorship, but (as I said earlier) all indications are that Jón and Þórvör's children had abandoned speaking Icelandic, let alone writing it, at an early age.
- Jón Halldórsson himself had set off in search of freedom, progress, and education in the New World, and had no intention of living in some closed-off Icelandic "colony". Thereby, English became the principal language of interaction outside the home, with the exception of the few Icelandic friends and relatives living nearby. Icelandic became the language of the home.

Icelandic vs. English

- With their passion for ensuring that their children received a good education, Jón and Þórvör must surely have taught them to read Icelandic.
- While their schooling was in English, it is unlikely that the children made a conscious decision to switch languages until they reached high school. It was not until after the First World War that U.S. authorities started to make any real progress in the monolingual ideology.
- But the Halldórsson children surely wanted to get on in U.S. society; and as their parents spoke English, they might have seen no reason to maintain their Icelandic, when they had limited contact with Icelanders.

„Þar sem yðar auður er,
þar er yðar hjarta“



The name of Hrólfur

- Hrólfs saga Sturlaugssonar (from 14th century): kolbítur (an underdog) who gets the daughter of the king and the power.
- Hrólfur Rögnvaldsson Mærajarls (Rollo the Walker) and the origin of democracy.
- Ralph Waldo Emerson, „Future of the Republic“, a lecture delivered in Boston 25 February 1878 – partly trans. into Icelandic and publized in *Framfari* same year.
- „Here is practical democracy. Here is the human race poured out over the continent to do itself justice. Here is all mankind in its shirt-sleeves [...] here that great body has arrived at sudden plenty. [...] It is rare to find a born American who cannot read or write.“

Ralph's life in short

- Ralph went to school in Long Pine and Lincoln NE
- Went to University of Nebraska in 1908–12.
- Thereafter he work in photography together with his siblings or at other studios.
- Morall-Hoole Studios in Rochester and Syracuse in New York State,
- Drafted at the end of July 1918.

Died for Liberty and Democracy

- Ralph E. Halldorson was drafted in the war against Emperor Wilhelm II of Germany, the namesake of one of Göngu-Hrólfur's enemy
- Ralph died in Brest, Bretagne, of **pneumonia** or the Spanish flu on the 18 of September 1918
- Rasmus B. Andersson, *America not Discovered by Columbus*
- Hrólfur Rögnvaldsson Mærajarls (Rollo the Walker) established the democracy in France

Ralph's concerns while leaving

- The only concerns of Ralph while leaving is that his father and sister will be short of money if also his older brothers will be drafted.
- He promised to send them money from France if he can.

Sophia, Ralph and Jón Halldórsson



What significance had the war to Western Icelanders?

- En það er víst, að þátttaka Vestur-Íslendinga í stríðinu hefir í för með sér stórkostlegar afleiðingar fyrir þá sjálfa. **Útlendingar** verða þeir ekki framar í landi hér. Dýru verði hafa þeir heimilisréttinn keyptan. Sagan segir, að þjóðunum hafi sjaldan orðið ættjörðin kær fyr en þær höfðu vökvað hana blóði sínu. Nú hefir svo farið, að íslenzku blóði hefir úthelt verið fyrir ættjörðina nýju, og nú elskum vér hana ekki með orðagjálfri, heldur **blóði**, – blóði, jafn heitu og því, er bunaði úr hjarta hermannsins, sem fyrir oss dó. Hörmungar stríðsins, sárin og tárin, hafa keypt oss einlæga **ættjarðarást** í landi hér. Og fyrir það, að vér gengum undir jarðarmen stríðsins með hinum þjóðflokkunum í landi voru, blönduðum blóði við þá, drukkum eiðsmjöldinn með þeim, höfum vér gengið í fóstbræðralag við samþegna vora hér, og leggjum við drengskap vorn, að það aldrei slitni. (Björn B. Jónsson 1923, 45)

Tom og Ralph



Tom writes to Ralph

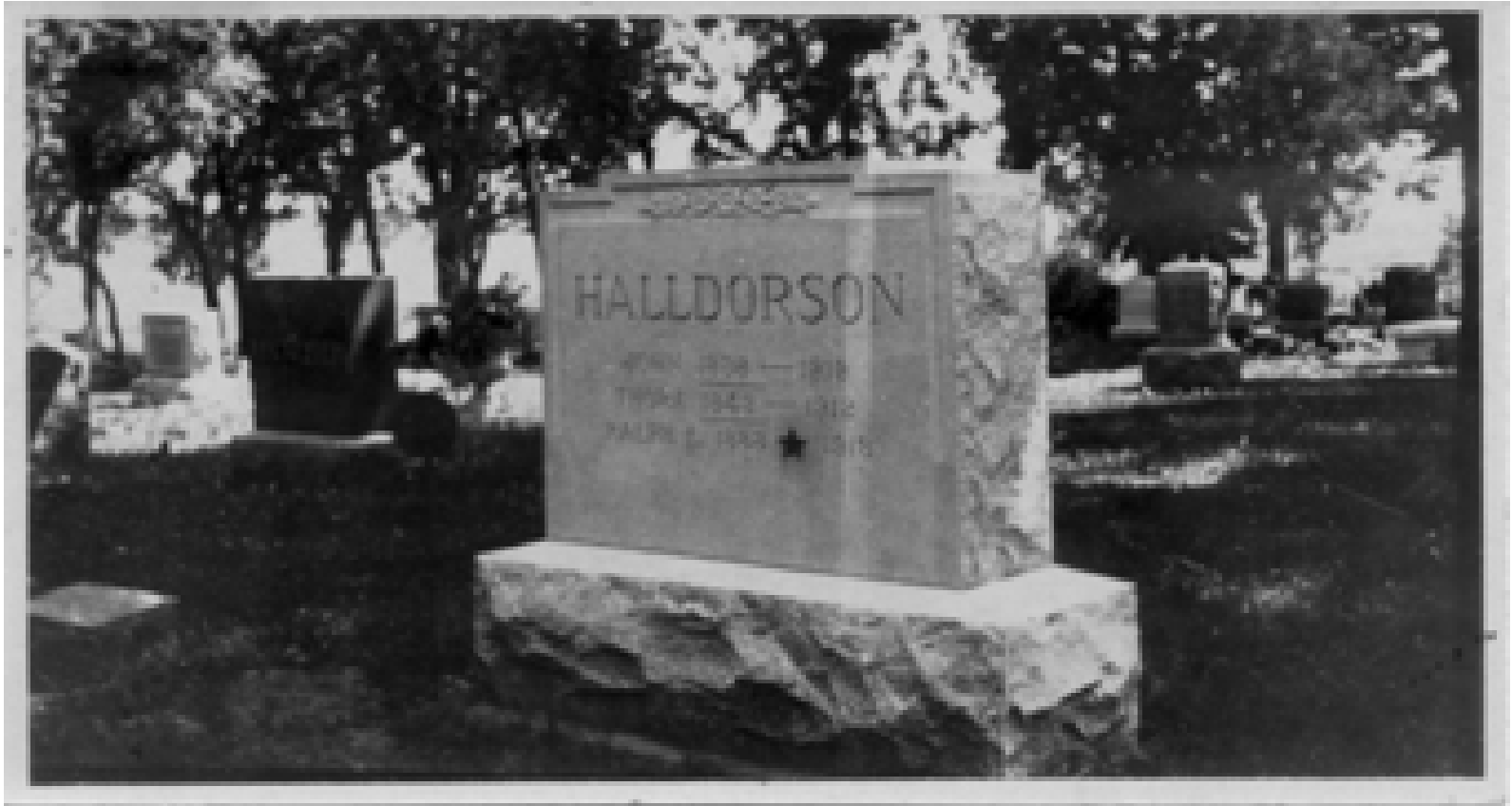
- „Really now the one at rifle salute is the best and it is simply fine and we will probably have a 11x7 made up from it as the negative are strong enough to stand enlarging.“



Sigfús Magnússon' memory of Ralph

- Photography was Ralph's greatest passion, and he believed that with good photographs it was possible to show all the qualities (true interpretation) of men, women and children. His greatest desire was thus to continue his experiments in that direction on his return.
- And there was another thing which characterised this young man, and that was his talent for verse; this first emerged when he was studying at the University in Lincoln, where some of his work was published in a student paper. At the university Ralph was also a member of a dramatic society and plays written by him were performed there—and perhaps they still are today. The plays demonstrated that Ralph had sufficient talent to become a playwright—but he lacked practice, and they were also written in his free time, alongside his studies.
- But that is a common fate for young men who must give priority to the necessities of life, so that desires and talents go to waste.

At the Halldorson's grave in Lincoln. The military star at Ralph's name





The Richard and Margaret Beck Lectures on Icelandic Literature

