

OCTOBER 9 - Day of Remembrance for Leif Eriksson

Leif Eriksson Day an Official Holiday

However, lots of people don't know that President Johnson established this observance back in 1965 - so you'll have to tell them. Inform several of your acquaintances, and write a letter to your local newspaper boasting of our Viking heritage.

Leif Erikson was the first European to set foot in the New World, opening a new land rich with resources for the Vikings to explore. But for some unknown reason, the Vikings only made a few voyages to the New World after Leif. Unfortunately, this caused his discovery to remain unknown to nearly all of Europe, which was in the midst of the Crusades.

Leif was born in Iceland in about 960 AD, son of Eric the Red. As was tradition with the Vikings, Leif did not grow up with his family. Instead, when he was eight he moved in with a man named Thyrker. Thyrker was from Germany where Eric the Red had captured him, had taken him to Iceland, but had not enslaved him. Thyrker taught Leif everything he needed to know, including reading and writing runes, the Celtic and Russian tongue, and the ways of trade. Leif was also taught the old sagas, plant studies, and the use of weapons. When Leif was not learning he and his friends would watch the ships come into the harbor; then he would listen to the tales of the sailors.

At 12, Leif was considered a man and traveled back to his father's house. Eric's house had grown since Leif had left. The herds had multiplied and there were new houses and more slaves. The spring after Leif arrived, Eric was summoned to a Thingvellir or lawmaking assembly. Eric took Leif along with him to the Thing. The next day, among the crowds, Eric met a man with whom he was feuding. They started to fight and Eric killed the other man.

Because of this, the Thing council banished Eric from Iceland for three years.

Eric, not being able to go to Norway (he had previously banished from there too) decided to investigate rumors of lands to the west. So, Eric took his wife and kids, some slaves, and ample supplies and traveled west. A few days later they landed on a new land, which he named Greenland and started to build a camp. It was on this voyage that Leif is believed to have learned how to be a good deep-sea sailor.

Discovery of Greenland

For the years Eric spent on Greenland during his banishment, he explored the new land and taught Leif many things. After three years, Eric traveled back to Iceland and told the people about Greenland. Many people decided to return to Greenland with Eric and his family because times had not been good in Iceland. There had been a famine, the lands were overgrazed, and there were almost no trees left.

Leif was probably 15 to 17 when he was out and saw a young polar bear on an ice flow. He decided to capture the bear but there was a strong current between the ice flow and land. So using his knowledge of the sea, he went "upstream" from the polar bear and let the current carry his boat into the ice flow. After capturing the bear he used the same tactic to get back to

land, impressing the people on shore.

One day, when Leif was watching the boats, he saw an old tattered ship rowing very slowly. Leif became very excited because he recognized this ship as belonging to Bjarni Hergelfson, who had been gone over a year. After the ship landed, Leif followed Bjarni into a hall where Bjarni told the story of how mist had covered the North Star so they couldn't navigate. They sailed for many days and finally spotted land, but it wasn't Greenland, where they had been heading. Glaciers did not cover the coast they had seen, but instead it was green with trees.

They did not go ashore though, because they wanted to get to Greenland. They kept sailing and found another land. This one was flat and forest covered, but they did not land there either. They had to get back to Greenland.

First Voyage

At the age of 24, Leif was asked to captain his first voyage. This was to bring gifts to King Olaf in Norway. Many preparations were made and Leif was very excited. Leif took along a crew of 14 and Thyrker.

The wind Leif was sailing on was fair at the beginning, but after their first day it slowed only to a gentle breeze. It was five days before they sighted Iceland. Most voyages make it in two.

The crew wanted to go ashore but Leif would not let them, so they kept sailing. They sailed for many days and Leif thought they would run out of food. Finally they sighted some small islands, the Hebrides, they realized they had sailed farther south than they had intended.

The day they arrived, a storm came in and didn't allow them to leave for a month. During this time Leif stayed in the house of the lord of the island. There lived the lord's daughter who was named Thorgunna. She was known to embroider tapestries and was believed to be learned in witchcraft.

Before Leif left for Norway, Thorgunna told him she was going to have his baby and she foresaw that it would be a boy. She had her child and named him Thorgils. Later he traveled to Greenland and Leif accepted him as his son. This is the only child known to be Leif's.

When the storm had cleared, Leif set off for Norway. The wind was good and they got there in a few days.

Meets With King

When he arrived, many people came to greet him and a messenger came to take him to King Olav's court. When the messenger told the king who he was he replied, "Leif Erikson, I knew your father well!"

The king was so impressed with Leif that he invited Leif to stay in Norway. Leif decided there was no reason to rush back home to Greenland, so he accepted the offer. While in Norway, he marveled at all the wonderful things and rested in the lap of luxury.

One day, while playing chess with Leif, King Olaf told him of how he used to also worship the gods Leif did. He also told him of how a plague had struck Norway and how many people had died. Then he told Leif of how he turned away

from those gods and began to worship the living Christ. He was baptized along with thousands of Norwegians, and then the plague stopped.

Leif, not being very faithful to the Viking gods, became very interested in Christianity. He finally agreed to be baptized and accept this new faith. On his return voyage, he brought along a priest to spread the Christian faith to Greenland.

Discovering the New World

Sometime after Leif had returned to Greenland, he became restless. He decided to find the lands to the west of which Bjarni had spoke. So he bought Bjarni's boat and set off with Thyrker and some men towards the north, following Bjarni's course. After sailing up the western coast of Greenland, he sailed west for 600 miles and found a land with high glaciers and rock.

They landed, but were disappointed because the land seemed to be one huge slab of rock. Because of this he named it Helluland (Slab Land or Flat Rock Land), which is now believed to be Baffin Island. Leif then sailed south and found another land. When he went ashore he found it to be flat with white beaches and some trees. He named this land Markland (Woodland) which today is believed to be the eastern coast of Canada.

Then Leif sailed southeast for two days and came to an island with a mainland behind it. On this land the dew on the grasses seemed as sweet as honey. Here Leif had some booths or temporary shelters built. But, the land here was so rich that he decided to build at least one large house for the winter. On this land there were salmon bigger than any the Vikings had ever seen before, there were also very rich pastures there for their cattle (they had brought a few), and there were rich forests covering this land.

After the houses were built, Leif sent out an exploration group to explore the land. After one of these expeditions, Thyrker didn't return. The men searched for him all day and finally found him the next morning. When they found him he was very excited and blabbering in German. After he calmed down he explained to the men that he had found grapes on this land.

Leif ordered his men to load grapes and timber onto the boat, and then they settled in for the winter. But the winter here was very peculiar. No frost came to the grasses. They also noticed that the days and nights were of more equal length here.

When spring came and the men were ready to go, Leif gave this land a name, Vinland, which either means Wineland or Pastureland. We now know Leif's Vinland to be L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland.

Surprisingly, few people ever returned to Vinland, only Leif's sister and a small group of settlers who were killed by Indians. Because of this, Europe remained almost totally in the dark about the discovery of this new world. The only references to it are in the Norse sagas where most of the information concerning Leif Erikson is recorded.

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