

# Once Upon a Time in Iceland

*Revisiting the legacy and traditions of Iceland's rural past.*

Text and Photographs by Randall Hyman

**F**EW COUNTRIES HAVE LEAPT AS dramatically from rural to urban as Iceland did in the latter half of the 20th century. With the introduction of trawlers and large hydroelectric dams, the nation's fish factories and manufacturing plants flourished while remote fishing villages and farms waned. The century that began with rural residents outnumbering urban nine to one, closed with 95 percent of the population concentrated in cities—nearly two-thirds in metro Reykjavík.

These photos highlight a time of rapid change in the 1970s and early 1980s when I lived in Iceland, and many older Icelanders still hailed from farms or tiny coastal villages while most city teenagers eagerly spent summers “*upp í sveit*” helping relatives to hay fields, corral sheep and milk cows. That same decade, Iceland unplugged its last hand-operated farmhouse telephone switchboard and bridged the final gap in its ring road, forging a nation where all roads and communications led to the capital.

While more connected than ever before, remote landscapes were no less mysterious and awesome. Many Icelanders believed that ghosts and other beings stalked the brooding volcanoes, lava fields, glaciers and farmsteads. Living there, I came to appreciate their ardent embrace of the spirit world. Most of the individuals pictured in these pages now inhabit that mystical realm, and their portraits gently remind us of a fading yesteryear, an Iceland once upon a time.

**As Reykjavík modernized**, downtown residents clung to their historic homes, which they often moved by rolling the house down narrow streets to a new location; a mother and child gaze in quiet reverie here as a three-story house inches around a tight corner.

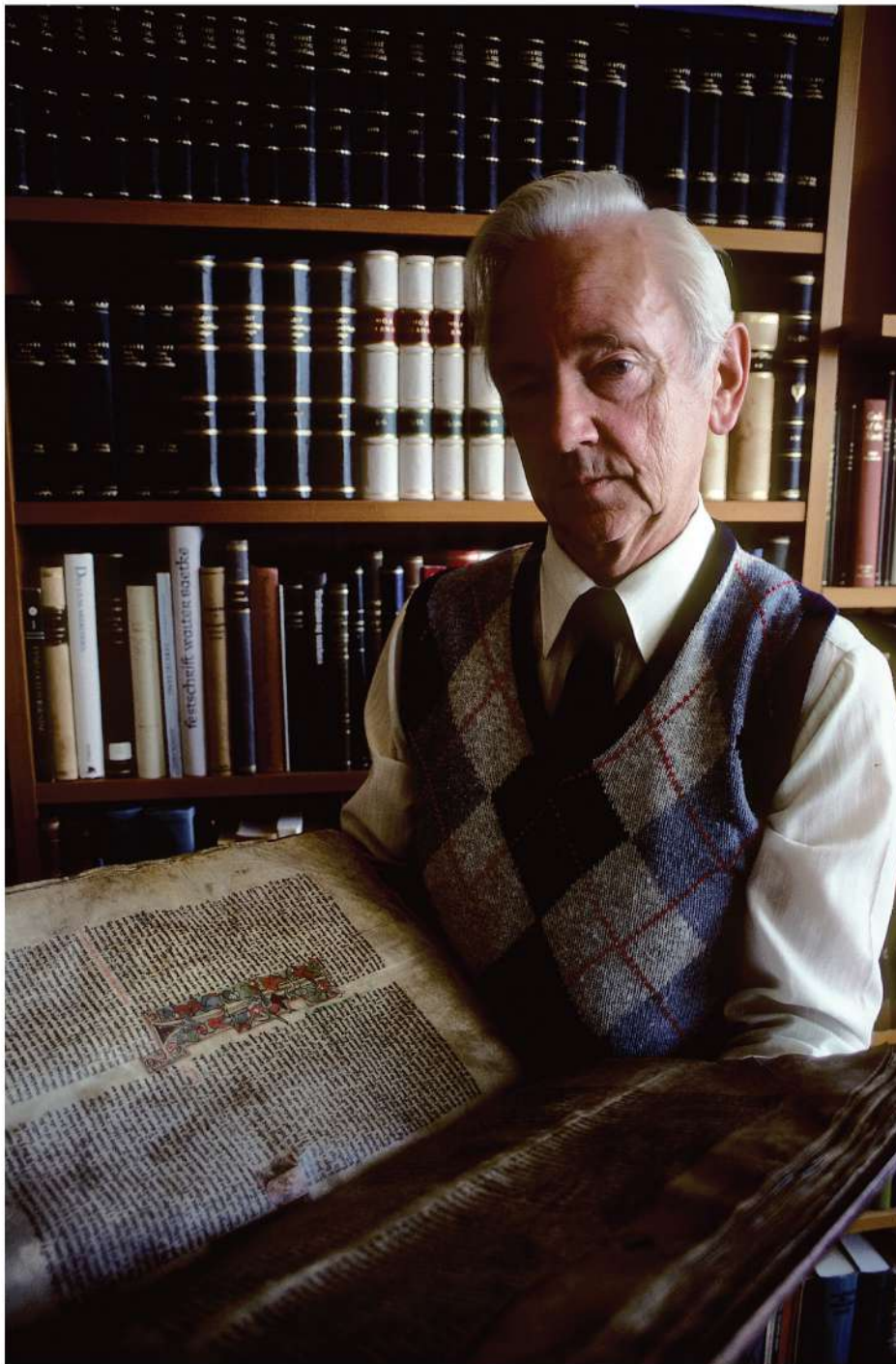




**B**OOKS ARE ICELAND'S GREATEST CULTURAL legacy; volumes have been carefully preserved and cared for throughout centuries, and the nation has long been admired for its near-universal literacy rate. No farmhouse was complete without its collection of Icelandic sagas; Helgi Kristjánsson, a farmer I met in the remote plains of northeast Iceland's Leirhöfn district, meticulously bound 10,000 volumes on a simple loom, page by page. In the 1950s, Nobel Laureate Halldór Laxness vernacularized first-edition copies of the sagas, creating controversy but giving the works new life for contemporary readers. Other editions of the sagas have traveled throughout the Nordic countries, such as the richly illustrated *Flateyjarbók*, scribed on vellum in the late 1300s, which was repatriated in 1971 after surviving historic fires and battles over centuries in Denmark.

**Helgi Kristjánsson**  
binds one of  
thousands of books  
in his attic library.






**Jónas Kristjánsson**, former director of the Árni Magnússon Institute, shares a view of the *Flateyjarbók* (above).

**Halldór Laxness** reads aloud from a first-edition copy of the Icelandic sagas that he contemporized in the 1950s, scandalizing traditionalists (right).





A photograph of an elderly man with white hair, wearing a grey sweater, sitting on a wooden bench in a rustic, dimly lit room. He is using a large, dark wooden comb to card a pile of white wool. To his left is a wooden chest with intricate carvings. The room has wooden walls and a blue-painted wooden frame in the foreground. The lighting is warm and focused on the man and his work.

**H**ALF A CENTURY AGO, CERTAIN FEATURES WERE COMMON in many Icelandic farmhouses: wooden beds, paneled walls, sitting rooms (replete with ancestor photos) and even the occasional country telephone switchboard connecting calls from farmsteads. At the rural Skógar Folk Museum, director Þórður Tómasson loved to play the resident organ and demonstrate traditional skills, such as carding wool, as he's pictured doing here in the late 1970s. Many of these objects had traveled down over generations, as did farming methods and cultural practices. At homes such as Vigur Farm in the West Fjords, which I visited to cover the family's long tradition of harvesting eider down from the island's plentiful nests, photos of ancestors in the sitting room gazed approvingly upon a lively parade of children and grandchildren. But others foreshadowed their coming erosion from the rural landscape. Shortly after the Hekla eruption of 1980, I stumbled across a farmstead covered in volcanic cinder; its elderly inhabitant was the last of four siblings and had resided there for decades with no water or electricity. That winter, he passed away, leaving his farm silently vanishing beneath shifting volcanic sands.

**Skógar Folk Museum**  
director, Þórður  
Tómasson cards wool.  
Now 100 years old,  
Þórður recently retired.

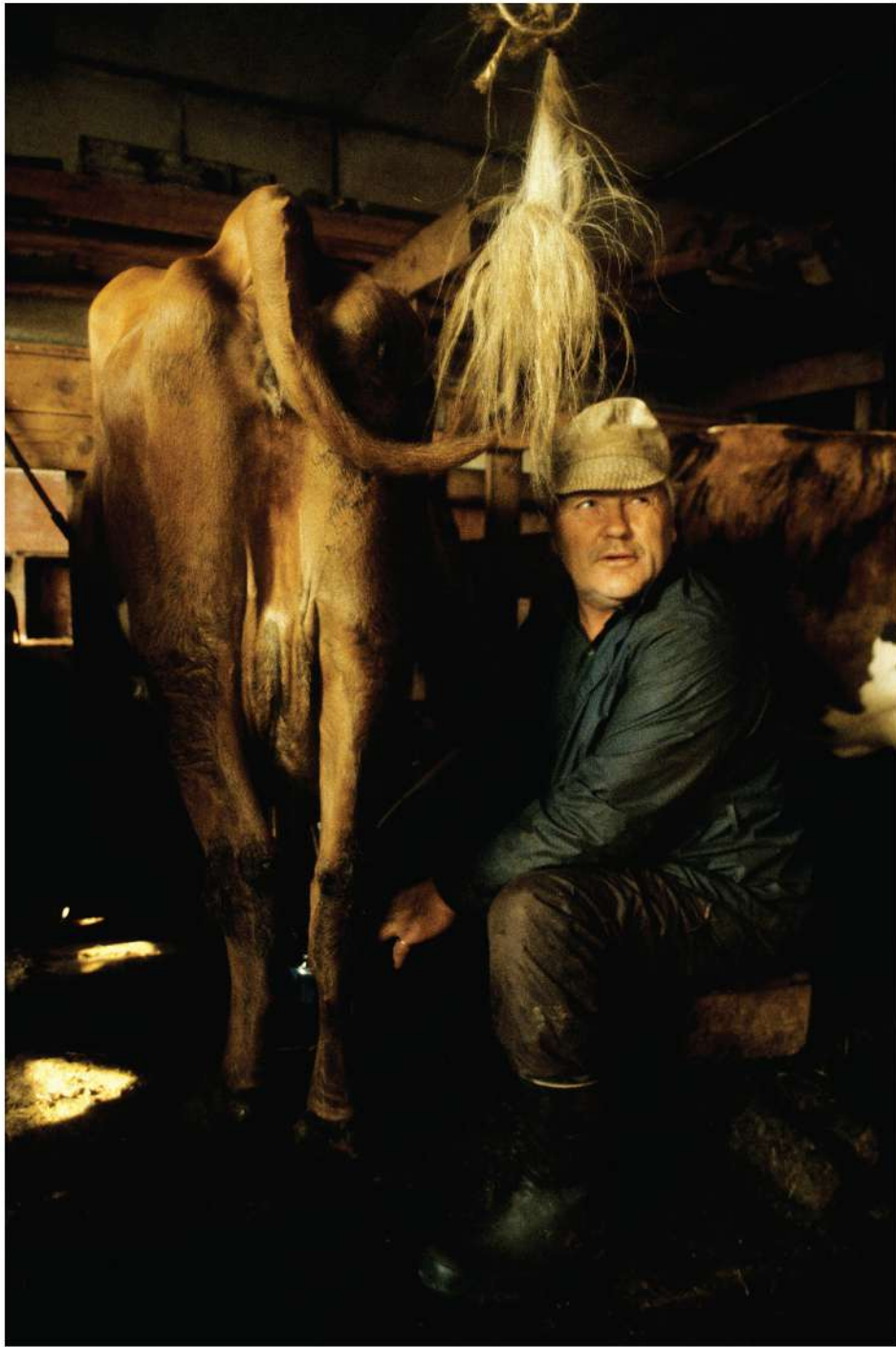




**A farmer below Hekla** curls up on his bed beneath a broken clock and outdated calendar (top). **In 1977, a country telephone operator** connects calls from her farmhouse office, a soon-vanishing practice (bottom). **Sigga Salvardsdóttir** shows off her organ, transported by boat to Vigur Island (right).

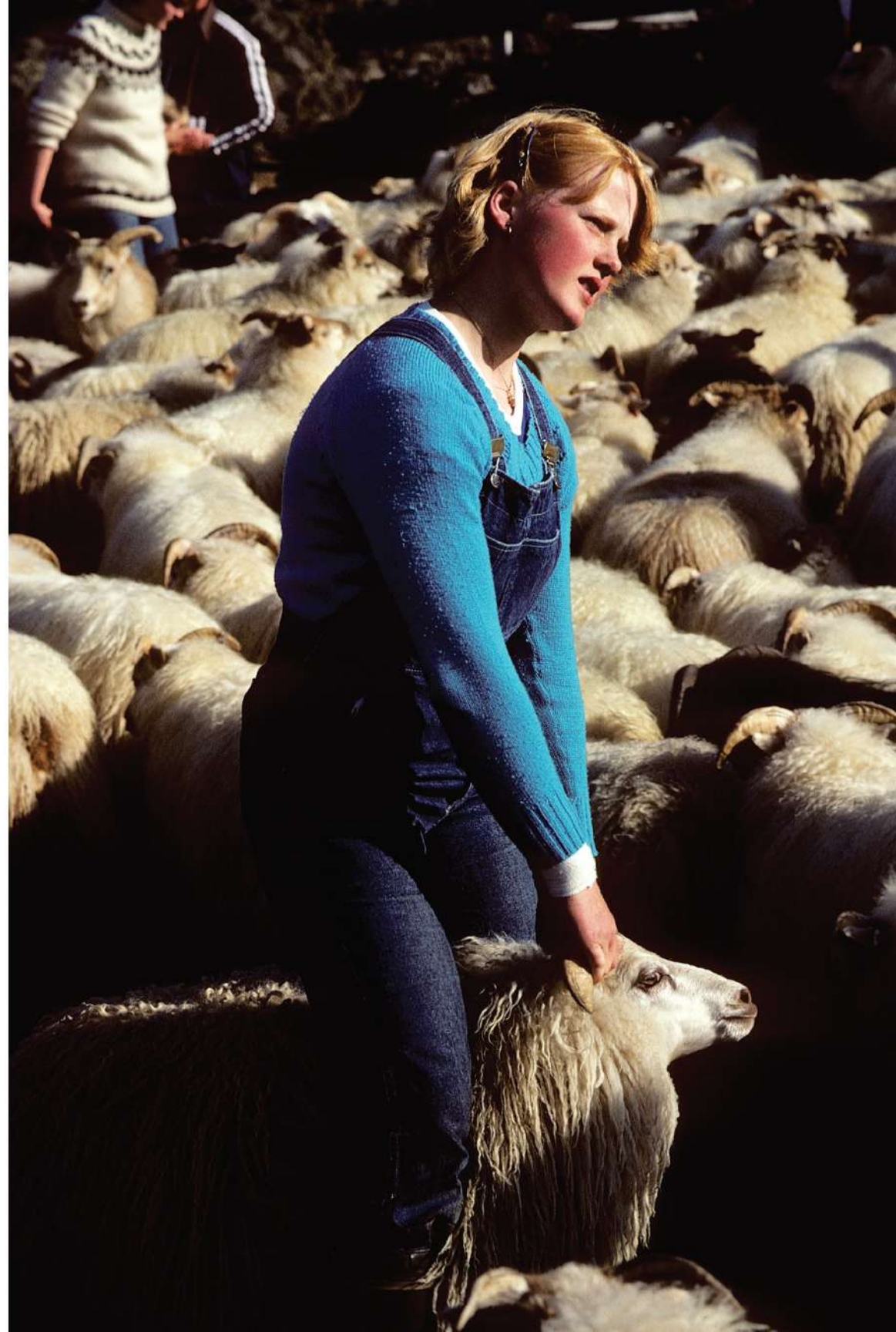






**Baldur Baldursson** of Vigur Farm rigs a simple solution to milking to prevent being slapped in the face by his cow's pesky tail (above).

**At the Aðaldalur** sheep roundup in autumn, a young woman drags a ewe to her family's pen in the community corral in northern Iceland (right).





WHILE ICELANDIC SHEEP FARMING CHANGED LITTLE last century, technology transformed fisheries. While sheep farming ruled the land, trawlers ruled the seas, producing unprecedented bounty; diesel engines, refrigeration and electronic navigation allowed ships to go farther and catch more than ever before. As factories multiplied, farms preserved traditions, such as using scythes where hummocky fields prevented mechanized haying. Urban palates still craved traditional foods, such as in one hut I stumbled upon in the capital where two men singed sheep heads for a delicacy called *svið*, sheep heads boiled in saltwater. During the month of *Þorri* (January-February), rotten shark meat (*bákurl*), pickled ram testes (*brútsþungar*) and other specialties were popular. Icelandic fish exports skyrocketed, although quality may have varied by destination in some cases. In one factory I walked into, I photographed young women deboning cod bound for Russia; after two supervisors spied me, they firmly escorted me upstairs to photograph the better fish bound for America. By that time, however, I had already hooked my catch.



A family rests together on a wagon in southern Iceland near Skálholt as one son playfully thrusts a hay bale over his head after a long day of work.



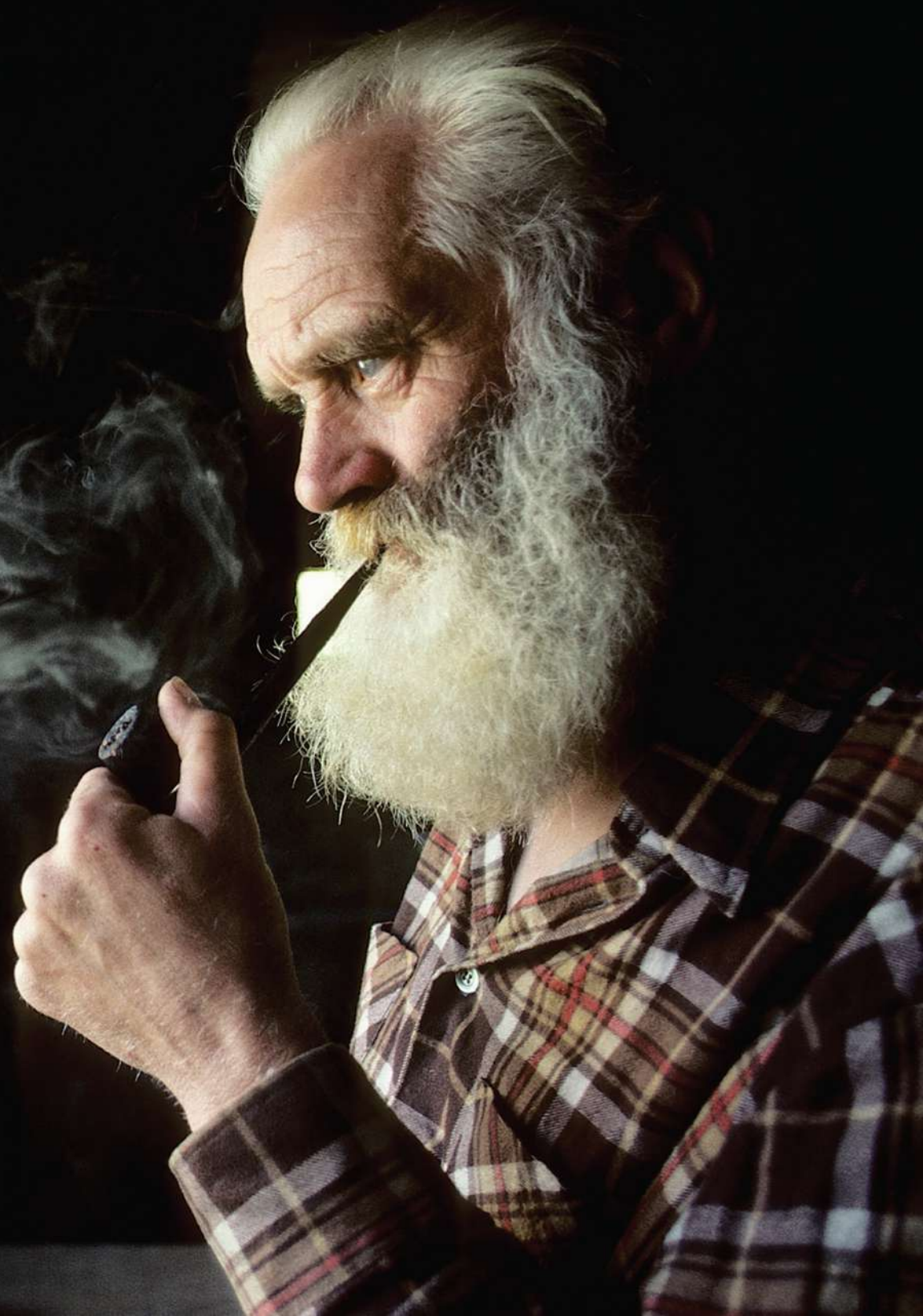


**Two men singe sheep heads** for svið, a traditional boiled delicacy (top).  
**Young women** process Russia-bound fish in a rustic Reykjavík factory (bottom).  
**A farmer at Skaftafell** sharpens his scythe overlooking the black sands and rivers of south-east Iceland recently bridged by the Ring Road (left).



**W**HEN ICELAND CHRISTIANIZED IN 1000 CE, it was not by unanimous consent. Worship of Norse gods secretly continued and had a revival nearly a millennium later with Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson's resurrection of the Æsir religion, which was officially recognized by the government in 1973. Culinary traditions were also reintroduced, such as favorite foods of Þorrablót, the midwinter festival first described in the medieval manuscript Flateyjarbók. Other practices were contemporized, such as the Christmas legend of the *jólasveinar*, 13 elves believed to have frequented farmhouses to pilfer delicacies; today, the *jólasveinar* instead leave gifts for children. Tradition maintains that ghosts and trolls also abound in the darkness. During the 1980 Krafla eruption in northern Iceland, locals warned me it was too dangerous to hike alone in a snowstorm, as hidden fissures opened beneath deep snow. I did anyway and was accompanied most of the way by a phantom figure on a distant ridge. When I finally arrived at the remote eruption site, my companion had mysteriously disappeared, leading me to suspect that they may not have been of this realm.

**Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson**, acclaimed rímur singer (*kvæðamaður*) and leader of the Æsir religion, gazes from the window of his farmhouse near Borgarnes in western Iceland. He died in 1993, leaving behind an album of his readings of the Poetic Edda, writings on Norse spiritism, and a thriving congregation now building a temple outside Reykjavík.







**Burning methane** flares from the ground as the moon rises over scientists working during Krafla's 1980 eruption (above).  
**Ragnheiður Baldursdóttir** of Vigur Farm baptizes her infant son at a small district church in the West Fjords (left).

AS THE 1970S CLOSED, A SERIES OF LAVA ERUPTIONS NEAR Lake Mývatn in the north heralded the dawn of a new decade. During the Krafla Fires, Iceland widened several feet over a five-year period, literally increasing the gap between Europe and America. Living in Iceland then, I witnessed a similar growing gap between rural and urban societies.

Today, traditions survive, from an abiding love of books, to religious customs, to a reverence for the land and its magical spirit. The nation's most recent census revealed that, for the first time since the 1800s, the rural population actually grew—thanks in large part to a flourishing tourism industry based on the country's natural wonders. Time will tell what new practices emerge in rural Iceland as the land and its spirits continue to thrive.

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**Randall Hyman** has covered nature, science and culture worldwide for over four decades and is a frequent *Scandinavian Review* contributor. As a 2013 Fulbright Scholar in Norway and guest of the Norwegian Polar Institute, he has covered field science, resource development and climate change in the Arctic for a number of organizations and publications.