

Interlake Parks

Hecla / Grindstone Provincial Park

Hecla Village Self-guiding Trail



Introduction

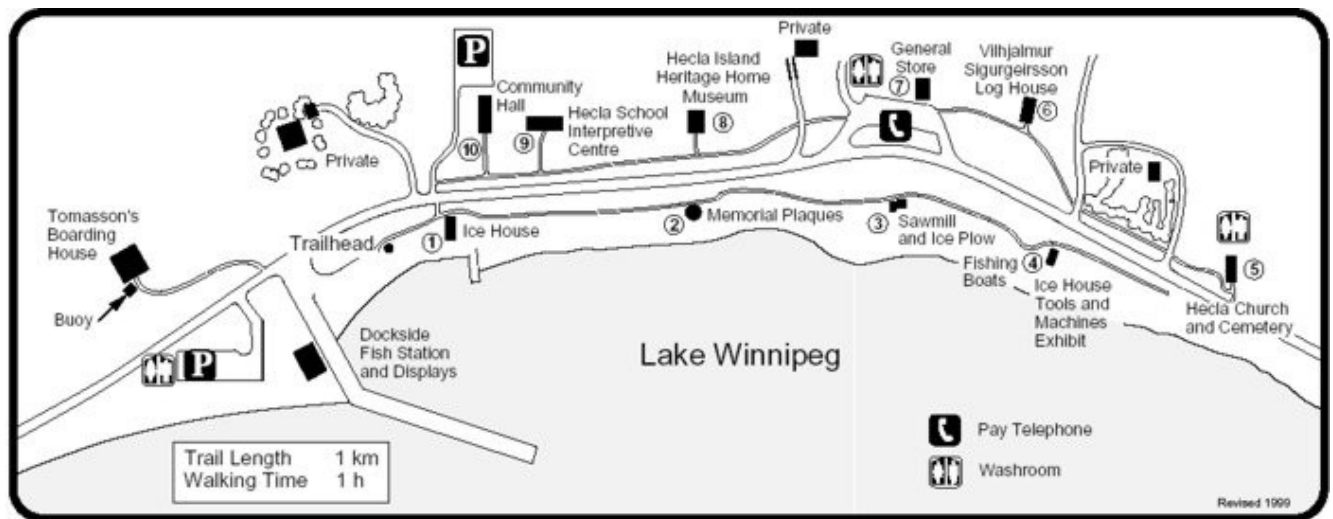
Hecla Village Self-guiding Trail provides a glimpse of the island's past. Parking is provided next to the village wharf and behind the community hall, so you can visit the Tomasson's Boarding House and the Dockside Fish Station before starting out on the trail. It begins near the ice house north of the dock, follows the lakeshore as far as the church, and then returns past the store and school.

An exhibit of day-to-day tools used by the people of Hecla Island from the 1870s to the present day is located inside the second ice house. Parks and Protected Spaces Branch is grateful to Mr. Binnie Sigurgeirson who obtained the artifacts and prepared the display. The tools exhibit and the interiors of the historic buildings are accessible during guided tours. Please check interpretive event posters or ask a park interpreter for tour times.



Hecla Church, restoration complete. 1973-1975

Hecla Village Map



1. Ice House

The 12-Year Republic

Life in their homeland had not been easy for the Icelandic settlers of Hecla Island. For many, the prospects for a better life



in North America outweighed the hazards of the journey and the reluctance to leave family and friends behind.

For while it is not the climate that compels them to seek other habitations, there are other and not less urgent reasons. The frequent failure of the cod, that lately has become an alarming evil, the volcanic action, and the impossibility of ever even acquiring an independence, no matter how much energy and labour is employed has ripened them completely for a heavy emigration.

- Wm. C. Krieger, *Report of the Icelandic Immigration Agent*. (March 25, 1976)

The Republic of New Iceland was established by the Canadian Government for exclusive settlement of Icelanders in 1875. It offered hope for a better life and enabled them to fish and farm part-time as most of them had done in Iceland.

Life in New Iceland was different in many ways. Ice houses had to be built because North Americans preferred fresh fish to the traditional dried fish popular in Iceland. Since the ocean around Iceland seldom froze over, people also had to learn how to fish through the thick winter ice on Lake Winnipeg.



2. Memorial Plaques

Hecla Settlement

We have come to the conclusion that it will be to our advantage to settle so closely to the lakeshore as to leave each lot only 20 chains wide, and we do therefore apply to you to arrange that the lots fronting on the lake on the east side of the island be laid out to 20 chains wide extending so far back from the shore as is required to have them contain 160 acres each.

- Letter from the settlers of Hecla Island to the Canadian Government, January 30, 1877.

The marshy western side of Hecla Island was a poor place to homestead because of frequent floods. Therefore, most settled on the higher ground along the eastern side of the island.

Each homestead was named by its owner, who soon became better known by the name of the homestead than his last name. Helgi Tomasson, for example, was most often referred to as Helgi at Reynistad.

Communication in the settlement was remarkably good considering the difficulties of travel. In September 1877 the first Icelandic newspaper was published in Riverton, then known as Lundi, and distributed throughout the settlement.

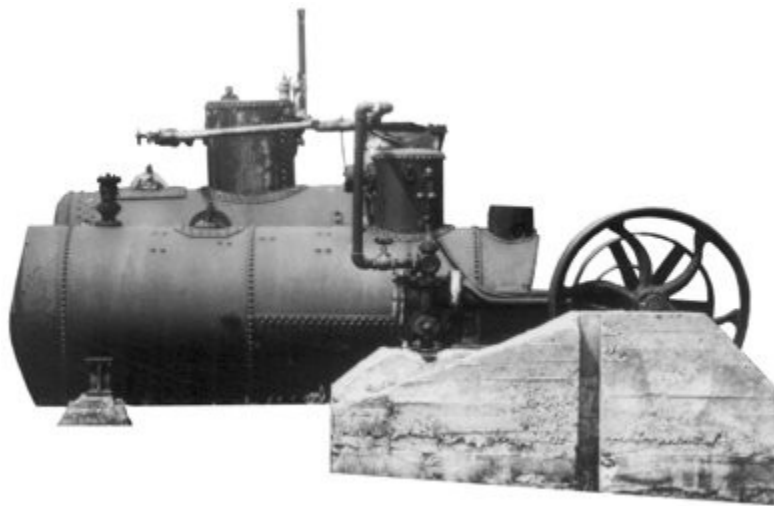
3. Sawmill

Forestry

The rusting boilers and steam engine lying in the centre of the village once powered a sawmill. The sawmill operating here in 1876 was a major reason why many Icelanders decided to settle on Hecla. By working at the mill or by cutting trees they hoped to earn money for the much-needed fishing and farming equipment.

However, the sawmill was initially a disappointment because its ownership changed frequently and it often lay unused for long periods. By 1881 all the readily available timber near Hecla Village had been used, so the original equipment was moved to Gull Harbour. The move was unsuccessful, though, and the equipment was sold and taken off the island.

In 1913, this sawmill was established in Hecla Village. It operated until 1947 when it was destroyed by fire.



4. Fishing Boats

Lake Winnipeg Fishery



Commercial fishing on Lake Winnipeg was pioneered by Icelandic fishermen like those on Hecla Island. Whitefish, goldeye and, later, walleye (pickerel) were the most sought-after fish. Catches were initially good but the stocks became depleted as more and more fishermen worked the lake. By 1969 catches of these species were alarmingly poor and, when the lake was closed to fishing between 1970 and 1972 due to mercury pollution, many left the industry for good.

Fishing fleet in tow, c. 1907. (Transportation collection: Boat - Manitou 2) *Manitoba Archives*

5. Hecla Church

Religion played an important role in the community. When the Icelanders first arrived the island was served by two ministers who travelled throughout New Iceland and held services in homes until the churches were built. However, the two ministers, Reverend Thorlakson and Reverend Bjarnson, disagreed strongly on church doctrine and the potential of the colony. In 1878, convinced that the colony would eventually fail, Reverend Thorlakson led a large number of settlers to the area around what is now Icelandic State Park near Cavalier North Dakota. Only eight of the original 26 homesteads on Hecla remained occupied after the exodus, but new arrivals from Iceland took the place of those who had left and the church became a vital force in helping the community overcome the hardships of pioneer life.



Hecla's original church, n.d.
New Iceland collection 53
Manitoba Archives

6. Vilhjalmur Sigurgeirsson House

Life on the Homestead

Once the initial hardship of establishing a homestead was overcome, many were able to build comfortable log homes. The cultivation of wheat and barley in the settlement was not successful due to floods and early frosts, but by raising livestock and by fishing they managed to get by.

Families were often separated for several months. The women looked after the homestead since the men were away fishing most of the year. The men lived for months at a time in fishing camps at the northern end of the lake where whitefish were more plentiful.



Ploughing with Oxen, c. 1915
(New Iceland Collection 312)
Manitoba Archives

7. General Store

Commerce

Apart from the few necessities the islanders obtained from the store, the community was largely self-sufficient. The store supplied items that were not made on the homestead, such as sugar, flour, coffee, cloth and dishes. Many bartered their garden produce or fish for these goods as few had cash in the early days of the settlement. One of the first stores was located next to Tomasson's boarding house. Both the store and boarding house were important attractions, serving travellers and residents alike.



8. Hecla Island Heritage Home Museum

Community Life

Hecla Village was at the peak of its prosperity in the 1920s when homes like that of Sigurgeir Sigurgeirson were built. The museum is operated by Hecla Island Heritage Society, a not-for-profit organization, which assists Manitoba Conservation to interpret Hecla's Icelandic heritage.

New Iceland ceased to be a self-governing colony in 1887 when it became part of Manitoba, but the Icelandic community continued to thrive. The settlement was still isolated from the mainland, however, which occasionally proved to be a considerable disadvantage. When islanders were seriously ill they had to be taken to the hospital in Gimli as there was no doctor at Hecla. This was a difficult and dangerous journey over thin ice in the fall or uncertain ice in the spring.



Hecla Island, c. 1920 (New Iceland Collection 52) - *Manitoba Archives*

9. Hecla School

Decline of the Settlement

Although Hecla did prosper for many years the settlement slowly declined. Logging ceased because the best timber along the shores of Lake Winnipeg had been used up. Commercial fishing, the main source of income for the islanders, became unprofitable due to competition and low prices, and the farmland never proved very productive. When Hecla School was closed in June 1970, as part of the school consolidation program, most remaining families with school-age children also left the island.



Children leave Hecla school, 1954 (#1291-38645)

Western Canada Pictorial Index

10. Community Hall

Hecla/Grindstone Provincial Park



In order to save their community and provide employment, the residents approached the provincial government in the late 1960s to have Hecla Island developed as a provincial park. The park was officially designated in 1969, and developed under the joint federal and provincial governments' Fund for Rural Economic Development (FRED). Hecla Village has now been revitalized to demonstrate what it was like in New Iceland, from 1876 until today.

As part of changes in designation under the new Provincial Parks Act, Hecla and Grindstone parks were combined as the new Hecla/Grindstone Provincial Park, in 1997.

Helgi Tomasson (1916-2000) whose family was among the first settlers on Hecla Island, provided many commercial fishing demonstrations for park visitors

