

Evolving opportunity v



BY MICHAEL PAUL REVEAL

There is something quite indomitable about the Faroes. Born of fire from the very center of the earth, sculpted by ice and wind and wave, at once a refuge and a stepping-stone for intrepid explorers, often ignored and more often plundered, it has endured, even flourished, and the people of the Faroes evince a most remarkable spirit of forbearance and determination.

I did not know any of this, of course, when I first arrived with my wife some eleven years ago. Friends offered only that the archipelago was remote and gloriously peaceful with a pleasant, maritime climate, not too cold and not too hot, which suited me just fine after the hustle and bustle and continuous meltdown of tropical Hawaii.

Shortly after our arrival, I set up my international law practice and business consultancy and began the rounds of introducing myself to anyone and everyone who could spare the time for a cup of coffee. In those early days, the economy was flat, even melancholy, and there were many who welcomed the diversion of a chat, even though most were somewhat mystified, to put it gently, that someone from Hawaii could be so enthusiastic about their rain-soaked country with its sodden economy.

But I was indeed and the more I went about the country, and the more cups of coffee and sweet cakes I savored, the more I began to notice and appreciate that remarkable indomitable spirit of the Faroese bubbling and oozing about. I remember sitting in a remote farmhouse one evening enjoying the pleasant company of a farmer and his artist wife, as they graciously listened to my endless tales of growing up on a Colorado ranch. The talk, however, thankfully soon turned to wool, the Faroese gold of old, and how it could and should be better exploited. They had a dream. They wanted to gather in the wool from most of the 70,000 Faroese sheep and turn it into first-class woolen products, not just simple sweaters mind you, but real designer fashions. They

began small, and success followed success.

Their profitable endeavor came as no surprise to me. The Faroese have been pulling off this sort of thing for centuries. Take Jónas Bronck, for example. Born in Copenhagen, the son of a Danish Lutheran minister, he was raised in the Faroes. As one could well imagine, growing up in the Faroes Jónas was quite at home on the sea and eventually acquired a sailing vessel from Holland, aptly named De Brand van Trogen, or essentially the Fire of Troy. Perhaps a history refresher would be helpful here. As you may remember, survivors of the fall of Troy sailed westward across the Mediterranean – and proceeded to found Rome.

A few odd centuries later in 1639, Jónas Bronck sailed westward across the Atlantic in his sturdy Fire of Troy and settled a bit of land in the new world that would later be known as The Bronx. Jónas was, however, not as ill-prepared as his Trojan predecessors. He is reputed to have brought along with him a small library of some fifty volumes, which included the Bible, of course, as well as books in various languages on agriculture and navigation and, given his connection to Holland, not surprisingly, a book on how to build a windmill. Apparently for years it was the largest collection of books in America. Now Jónas knew the realities of living in a harsh environment and he brought along good quantities of building supplies (scarcity at even the best of times in the Faroes) and skilled builders. He even arranged for the services of a practiced chimneysweep. Very practical.

Which points to another trait of the Faroese that I have found most intriguing. Surrounded by not much of anything except what their wits could claim from the sea, they have managed to produce a most remarkable society and at the very heart of that society is a streak of practicality that the world would do well to adopt. A case in point involves that remarkable bit of technology known as digital terrestrial television (DTT). After analogue TV was shut down in the Faroes, a local company launched what is reputedly the world's first commercially viable DTT system. The company does not boast a staff of hundreds, nor even dozens. On the contrary, it has but three multi-talented folk. Practical as ever, there is no billing department. Billing is computerized and the sophisticated software system developed by local Faroese software engineers knows when you don't pay and shuts off your access to signal. You pay, you watch.



Tindhólmur, Faroe Islands

Simple, efficient, and oh so practical.

The United States as well is well known for its practical nature and everyone knows that teamwork and practical collaboration is the spirit of the age these days, but the Faroese and the Americans long ago exhibited a rather unique talent for practical collaboration. During that chaotic bit of history known as the American Revolution, the Americans and the Faroese teamed up in a quite remarkable demonstration of their combined practical resourcefulness.

As everyone knows, the British and the American colonies were having their ups and downs at this particular time in the late 18th century and trade between the two countries was complicated to say the least with all sorts of trade tariffs in place. Thus entereth a smart Danish businessman resident in the Faroes who

wangled a Royal remit in 1766 to transport goods from America for „temporary“ storage in the Faroes. The goods were then later transshipped in Tórshavn harbor and brought into British ports duty free.

This was a time of unprecedented prosperity in the Faroes. Tórshavn harbor was alive with activity and the lingua franca of the harbor was English, and for good reason. It is recorded that at times upwards of fourteen ships sporting American flags lay alongside each other waiting a turn to discharge their cargo.

In the midst of all this, the Faroese national hero, Nólsoyar Páll, emerged and began to carve out his destiny. Born on the small slip of an island across the sound from Tórshavn, he ventured to sea in 1786, undoubtedly on board one of the ships sailing between the Faroes and America. Soon he was a captain in his own

right, sailing his own vessel for an American trading company.

Eventually, in 1800, Nólsoyar Páll settled down in the Faroes nearby the statue later commemorating his life and his struggle for the people of the Faroes. He had been greatly influenced by his association with America and its newfound freedom and championed the rights of the Faroese at every opportunity. Sadly, he was lost at sea in 1808, bound for the Faroes from Britain with desperately needed grain and supplies.

Now I have no doubt that the British tradesmen of the time were a bit surprised to discover loads of rum, tobacco and other trade goods emanating from the wind-swept archipelago to their north known only for its woolly stockings, but the price was right and the trade continued for some thirty years. Why not, it was a very practical solution to a very