

REMEMBRANCE

Leif Karlsen

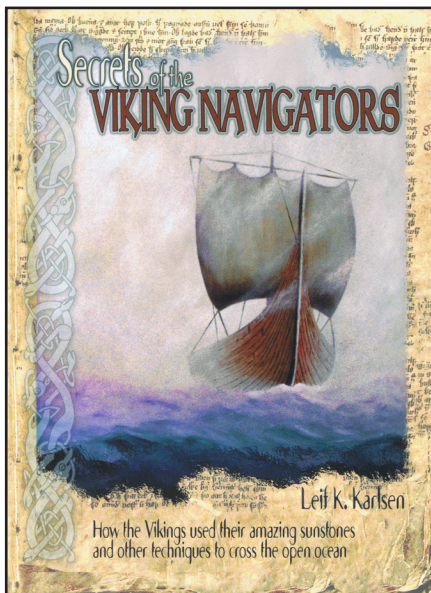
June 12, 1930 — Feb 1, 2008

I knew Leif for many years. During the days when he started work on the Viking navigation book we were neighbors in Seattle, and spent quite a bit of time discussing Viking navigation—as it is known they did it, and how they might have done it. This area was a key research area for him, and after years of study he became recognized as one of the world's experts on the subject. His book *Secrets of the Viking Navigators—How the Vikings used their amazing sunstones and other methods to cross the open ocean* is a wonderful story, not only of the navigation but of Viking life and voyaging as well.

He single-handedly devised the most likely way they used these sun stones (crystals of Icelandic spar, about 2 inches on a side) to get the sun's bearing when obscured by clouds or fog, or just below the horizon. And then he tested it, over and over, in various modifications, and expanded on existing ideas on how they could combine these observations with azimuth rings and other primitive aids that have been recovered.

Quite miraculously, just as his book was going to press, he got word from the UK that within the wreckage of a late 1500's vessel in the Channel Islands divers had found a large piece of Icelandic spar within the shards of a pot clearly used to store it. This was the first ever finding of an actual sunstone on board a vessel, though this vessel was way later than the active Viking period of some 1000 AD. We do not know what its use was in 1500, but the plausibility of it being a navigation aid is very tempting. The presses were stopped, and this story with photographs is in the Appendix to his book.

Leif was born in Asker Norway and grew up there. As a youngster he served in the Norwegian underground during Nazi occupation. Kids were used a lot to carry messages. His father was taken by the Germans to a work camp, but returned safely after the war.



After the war Leif went to sea as a deck boy at age 15. His first ship was an old sailing cargo vessel, one of the last still in use. He sailed on Norwegian and Swedish ships. After a few years at sea, he returned to Norway and attended navigation school. He became an officer, and sailed as Third Mate on the *Stavangerfjord*, a famous passenger ship. Soon after, he went to radio school and became a radio officer. He sailed all over the world in this capacity for the rest of his career at sea.

Leif immigrated to America in 1962. He settled in Seattle in 1984. He met June Garrett-Groshong in 1984 at sea onboard his ship when she joined the crew as officer's messman. He married her in 1986. They purchased rural land in Kitsap County, WA in 2001, where he lived until his death.

While Leif was living in Seattle Washington, he was a member of the Center for Wooden Boats where he restored classic boats. He was a member of the Nordic Heritage Museum and of the Icelandic Club. He was active at the Sons of Norway Lodges. He had a small replica of a Viking boat built in Norway and had it shipped to Seattle. He constructed a red and white square Viking sail for the boat. He sailed the boat on Lake Union and later in the Sinclair inlet by Bremerton.

Leif's fascination with the sea and navigation and the old Viking sagas led him to research and publish his book, *Secrets of the Viking Navigators*. His research took him to Iceland several times. He came to know and love that country and the people.

Before his death, Leif completed a manuscript for another Viking book set in Iceland. Leif was also a noted artist. His painting of Leif Eriksson's ship approaching America is on display in the Icelandic Room at the Nordic Heritage Museum in Seattle. It also appears on the cover of his book.

When Leif and June moved out of Seattle, we saw less of them, but the Starpath office is near the Nordic Heritage Museum, so we were often treated to a visit by Leif on his way to meetings there. These were engaging, laugh-filled times that we will miss.

David Burch,
with a special thanks to June Garrett-Groshong
for providing notes on Leif's background