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Chapter One

Leif Ericsson and the Vikings

"Captains of the waves we are --
Kings of the seething foam --
Warriors bold from the Norseland cold --
Far o'er the sea we roam."

Some voyages of the Vikings to North America. Far away in the cold northern countries that we know as Norway and Sweden and Denmark, lived a race of men who called themselves Vikings. They are often called Northmen or Norsemen, but I like best their own name for themselves. Viking means "son of the bay," or "raiding sailor" and the name helps us to know what kind of people they were -- bold and hardy, fond of adventure, and full of love for the great blue ocean that surged into the thousands of bays along their shores. They built many ships, and often made daring voyages to almost every part of Europe, where they often brutalized people who opposed their raids.

If we could have followed these Viking sailors, we would have found some of them going to England and to France, some to Ireland and the smaller islands nearby; but perhaps more than to any other place, they went to build up a Viking colony in Iceland. Their settlements there grew rapidly, and we may read about their farms and hay crops, their sheep and cattle, and as we should expect, about their ships and trade with all the countries nearby.

Would you like to see a Viking ship? It would not look much like one of our ships today, nor would it travel as fast as

Leif Ericsson and the Vikings

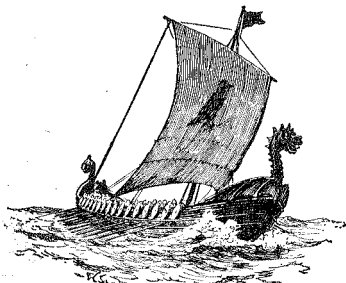
ships do now. The bow and the stern rose high out of the water, but the middle was lower and had no deck. Each vessel carried from thirty to sixty oarsmen who used oars twenty feet long. A single mast and only one sail, both of which could be taken down when not in use, completed what would seem to us a strange ship. But they were well-built, and in them the Vikings traveled many weeks at a time upon the sea.

Only two years after Iceland was settled, one of these ships was driven westward by a storm, until it reached the land we now call Greenland, and many years later a Viking colony was made there. A few years later, a Viking ship sailed even farther into the unknown west than this. The vessel had started on a voyage from Iceland to Greenland, and the captain had set out, steering by the sun and stars, Viking fashion. But a thick fog came, and neither sun nor stars could be seen. Still, on and on sailed the Viking ship, and after a time welcome land was seen. It was not snow-bound Greenland the ship had reached, however, but a low woody shore that looked very strange to the captain. So he turned back, and it was left for another man to land on the new-found shore.

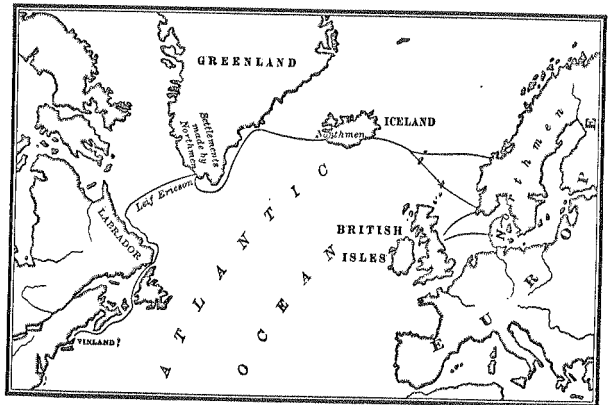
This man was Leif, son of Eric, or Leif Ericsson, as he is often called. In about the year 1000, Leif set out to search for the new land. After a short voyage Leif and his thirty-five followers saw the shore, and sailed along beside it for some distance. They called one place they saw Slateland, because of its large flat rocks. Another they called Woodland, and another Vinland, because of the wild grapes they found there. In Vinland they spent the winter, and after going home in the spring, told fine stories of the pleasant land they had found.

Exploring American History

Where was Vinland? It was in America somewhere, probably in Newfoundland, but just where we cannot tell. That no lasting settlements were made in Vinland by the Vikings we are sure. Some voyages were made to its shores to get wood, but battles with the Indian natives kept the Vikings from making homes in the land they had found. In time they stopped sailing to Vinland, and deserted even the Greenland colonies and the New World was left once more to the Indians. The New World that the Vikings called Vinland was forgotten for over four hundred years. Finally, in the year 1492, a brave explorer named Christopher Columbus rediscovered the land we call America.



A Viking Ship



VOYAGES OF THE NORTHMEN

Comprehension Questions

1. Where did the Viking people live in Europe?
2. Did the Vikings make colonies in Iceland and Greenland?
3. In the year 1000, Leif Ericsson, a Norseman, landed and stayed at a place he called _____, which was probably in Newfoundland.
4. Did the Vikings establish any lasting settlements in America?
5. Who was Leif Ericsson?