Walls cannot speak, but the Veblen farmstead reveals a great deal about the Veblen family, one of the most prominent Norwegian immigrant families of the nineteenth century, and its most famous member, Thorstein Veblen.¹ In addition, the many memoirs and letters left by family members—the existence of which for years has been largely forgotten or ignored—portray in great detail the family’s trials and triumphs. A variety of other sources, mostly unexploited until recently, fill out the picture. The result is an account quite different from the standard view of the Veblens, and Thorstein emerges as a more sympathetic figure than has generally been recognized.

MOVING TO MINNESOTA

In July, 1865, the Veblen family left their farm in Manitowoc county, Wisconsin, where they had lived for ten years, and traveled in wagons to the port of Manitowoc, by boat to Milwaukee, by rail to La Crosse, and by steamship up the Mississippi to Hastings. There they were met by relatives who transported them and their effects in wagons the thirty miles to their new home amid a largely Norwegian settlement (subsequently named Nerstrand) in Wheeling township, on the eastern border of Rice county, Minnesota.² The relocation was
the Veblens' fourth since Thomas and Kari had arrived in Wisconsin in 1847, joined by Thomas' brother Haldor a year later. Three considerations seem to have compelled them to part with their Manitowoc county farm—by far the best they had ever had up to that time—and to start over again in Minnesota.

First, the wells on the farm were a constant frustration because granite bedrock was encountered at a moderate depth. Various efforts were made to deal with the problem, including blasting and drilling, but in the end water could be obtained only through the expenditure of great effort and "a lot of ill-spared time." Andrew Veblen, the oldest child in the Veblen family to survive to adulthood, recalled that this was the "chief cause of dissatisfaction" with the farm. In contrast, the water table in the Nerstrand area is generally only about fifteen feet below the surface, and there is no granite anywhere.

Second, the land that the Veblens could buy around Nerstrand was much more fertile than the glacial soils in Manitowoc county, and it was prairie. Substantial effort was required to break prairie sod and create a tillable field, but to Thomas and Haldor it must have seemed like a relief compared to the agony of converting a primeval forest into productive fields. Indeed, after ten years of intense labor on the original eighty acres of the Manitowoc county farm, only portions of it were free of stumps, and no farmer in the area had been able to introduce mowing or reaping machines. Instead they still were harvesting grain with hand cradles. Of course the stumps would have disappeared over the years, but even then the fact that the three parcels the Veblens owned were not contiguous would have made efficient farming difficult.

Third, Kari's mother, stepfather, and three brothers had settled in the Nerstrand area several years earlier, and their proximity also added to its allure.

It must have been traumatic to sell the farm on which so much labor had been expended. Kari, who by that time had eight children to tend, was understandably reluctant to leave their comfortable home. The decision to move grew out of a visit that Thomas and Kari paid to her mother and other rela-
Thorstein Veblen and the Veblens

tives in Rice and Goodhue counties in 1863. The land made a
great impression on Thomas. Emily Veblen Olsen (the fourth
oldest surviving child) recalled that “My father had never seen
the prairies before, and fell in love with them at once when he
saw the Minnesota prairies.” After seeing the area, Thomas
“would not rest” until he could sell the Manitowoc county
farm. His disquiet was understandable. Most of the area had
already been settled. He had to move fast to have a chance of
acquiring good land at a good price.

The following year Thomas returned to Minnesota and
bought 200 contiguous acres of unimproved land east of Ne­
strand for $1,800, putting down $712.50 and financing the re­
mainning $1,087.50 with a mortgage from the seller bearing
ten percent interest. The property included about 80 acres of
hazel brush, cherry, and poplar; 80 acres of prairie grass; and
40 acres of marsh. The parcel was almost the last piece of
unimproved land remaining in the area. It had great poten­
tial, but it was no bargain in the sense that the price paid—$9
per acre—was over seven times the $1.25 per acre that the
original homsteader had paid for it a few years prior to the
Civil War.

Unimproved land could not be made to support a family
for some time to come. Accordingly Thomas arranged for Ole
Tostenson Bonde, Kari’s brother, to purchase a ninety-acre
farm that already had about twelve acres of land under cultiva­
tion, a house, a stable, and substantial standing timber that
comprised about half of the total acreage. On April 5, 1865,
Bonde, acting as Thomas’ agent, purchased the farm for
$1,000, financing $450 with a mortgage from the seller, which
was paid off a year later. He probably also planted crops prior
to the Veblens’ arrival in July. In addition he and Thomas ap­
parently cooperated in exploiting the timber on the farm, and
Bonde retained rights to some of it for several months after
Thomas purchased it from him for $1,000 on July 8, 1867.
Initially the Veblens referred to the ninety-acre farm as the
“Slaatten farm” after its previous owner; later they simply
called it their “west farm.”

The Veblens’ first winter in Minnesota, the winter of
1865–1866, was spent in the house on the ninety-acre farm. It must have been a severe trial for the family. No complaints were recorded in any of the source materials, but the youngest of their children, John Edward, died during the ordeal.\textsuperscript{12}

**A YEAR IN THE BASEMENT**

During the fall of 1865, limestone for the foundations of a new house and probably also a stable had been quarried nearby, and during the winter it was hauled to the building site on the 200-acre farm. In the spring more land was broken, and crops were planted. In the summer Thomas built the foundation walls for the basement and covered them with a temporary roof (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{13} The attic space was used for storage.\textsuperscript{14} Temporary partitions were erected within the basement area to create small rooms. Almost certainly the basement well had been completed at an early stage of the construction. The fireplace was probably also completed. In addition the iron cooking stove would have provided heat. The family moved in late in 1866.

Living in a hole in the ground, even a capacious hole comprising about 725 square feet, might seem to have been an ordeal. However, the basement must have been a distinct improvement over the house on the ninety-acre farm. Andrew recalled that, “It was as good living quarters as could be found for many miles around on the prairie.”\textsuperscript{15} For one thing, nobody died during the winter they spent in it. That was all the more remarkable because the family now included another infant, born only a few weeks before they moved in. Despite the crowding, the family seems to have felt sufficiently well off that they took in an elderly Norwegian woman who had just arrived in Minnesota.\textsuperscript{16}

**COMPLETION OF THE HOUSE**

During 1867, probably after the crops had been planted, the shell of the house was erected (Figure 2). In appearance it was very much in the Greek Revival style popular at the time in the United States, with white clapboard siding and a largely symmetric arrangement of windows and doors. Undoubtedly
The basement was entered from the west side. Temporary partitions were erected inside the basement to provide rooms. The foundation walls were covered by a temporary roof, and the attic space was used for storage. Heated by a large fireplace and kitchen stove, the accommodations were modest but snug against the Minnesota winter. Sketch by Spencer Jones of SMSQ Architects, Inc.

this design reflected the Veblens' exposure to new styles in the new country.

The structure also reflects Thomas' personal transition from old-world building techniques to those of the new world. The sill beams were fashioned with a broadaxe; the joists were cut by a sawmill; and the floorboards on the first floor were shaped by hand, so that each has a unique, trapezoidal shape. The upper structure is balloon framing; the wall studs run the full length from the sill beam on the bottom to the attic joists above, and they are all mortised into the sill beam.

At this stage the house included only the north chimney, which vents the basement fireplace. This chimney was of crit-
Fig. 2. The Veblen farmhouse, c. 1867–1869
The shell of the house was erected in 1867, but interior and exterior improvements were minimal. Smoke from the kitchen stove was vented out the south side of the house. Sketch by Spencer Jones of SMSQ Architects, Inc.

ical importance, for the basement fireplace was used for heating wash water as well as warming the basement area. Smoke from the kitchen stove initially was vented through a stove pipe in the south wall. The house probably had only temporary partition walls, with the studs of the exterior walls still exposed. The major interior improvement at this stage may have been the digging of the cistern in the basement. The immense effort required to carve out a new farm clearly left little time for embellishments.¹⁷ Similarly refinements to the exterior must have been minimal at this stage. The porch and balcony probably had not been added, though some such structure clearly had been anticipated.¹⁸

By 1870 the house had assumed its final configuration (Figure 3)—predominantly Yankee on the outside and thoroughly Norwegian on the inside.¹⁹ The front (east side) of the house, however, has an appearance quite different from the
By about 1870, the house assumed its final form, and included a modified Valdres-style porch and balcony with exterior stairs, a second chimney to vent smoke from the kitchen stove, and a small annex on the south side of the house probably used principally for storing firewood. The roof boasted a lightning rod and chimneys. The interior incorporated a dining room, upstairs and downstairs parlors, and six bedrooms, as well as an additional room in the basement. Sketch by Spencer Jones of SMSQ Architects, Inc.

Greek Revival norm. Most strikingly, Greek Revival incorporates a symmetric arrangement of doors and windows, but the facade of the Veblen house has a door and window that are far out of alignment. More precisely, they are misplaced with respect to the exterior; they are in approximately symmetric alignment with respect to the interior of the first floor parlor.  

The porch and balcony running the full length of the house are another significant departure from a conventional Yankee exterior. The posts, which include deceptively simple-looking crossties within the supporting members, have no counterpart in the norms of the Greek Revival. An even more conspicuous deviation is the exterior stairway. This is a vestige
This photo was taken by Andrew Veblen at about midday sometime in the late spring or summer of 1890. Clearly visible are vines growing on the porch (possibly clematis), some sort of shrub next to the south side of the house (possibly a rose bush), as well as several potted plants by the porch. The outhouse (not visible in the photo) was about thirty yards west of the house. The structure partly visible to the left of the annex is unidentified; it may have been a summer kitchen. Thorstein Veblen had a photo similar to this one in his cabin on Washington Island.

of a building style common in the inland valleys of Norway, especially the Valdres district from which the Veblens emigrated. (Figure 4) In houses of that region, stairs from the porch to the balcony generally were the sole means of access to the second floor. Since the Veblen house included interior stairs, the exterior stairs would appear to be redundant. However, Thomas Veblen went to considerable trouble to build them. Part of his motivation may have been aesthetic, but in addition, until the middle window on the east side of the second floor was replaced with a doorway, the stairs were the only means of access to the balcony. Afterward they probably were mainly a minor convenience.
INTERIOR DESIGN AND FUNCTION

The interior layout follows the conventional Norwegian practice of the time. Rooms are grouped around a parlor, one below and another upstairs. Norwegian women traditionally did weaving and sewing for their families in the upstairs parlor. On important occasions such as a wedding, the weaving equipment would be put away, and the room would serve as the family’s social area. It could also serve as an extra sleeping room.

The downstairs bedrooms, like the bedrooms above, had plaster walls covered with wallpaper, but overall the embellishment of the second floor is more refined than that of the first floor. While both the upstairs and downstairs parlors have striking wainscoting, and both have wood surfaces graced by elaborate faux graining, the walls above the wainscoting in the downstairs parlor are planks, while similar surfaces of the upstairs parlor walls are plaster covered with wallpaper. The kitchen and dining room also have plank walls. This was in keeping with traditional Norwegian farmhouses, in which the second floor parlor was the most embellished room.

The task of mating a traditional Norwegian interior with a pre-existing Yankee exterior was formidable, and Thomas had to make numerous adjustments. Five window openings—out of an original total of twenty-six on the first and second floors—had to be closed in to accommodate stairs and interior walls. Also the second chimney, added on the south to vent the kitchen stove, had to follow a highly devious course from the kitchen stove on the first floor to a closet on the second floor and finally to the proper location on the south end of the roof. The wall between the dining room and the first-floor parlor curves so that it can avoid the stairs to the second floor; the interior wall in the basement also curves in order to avoid colliding with the fireplace.

Throughout the house, the standard of carpentry and cabinetmaking skill is extremely high. Beyond a doubt Thomas Veblen could make walls straight when he wanted to. But he clearly did not much mind violating the norms of straight lines and ninety-degree angles when practical considerations
William C. Melton

required it. Characteristically, the problem of covering the filled-in window openings and the unused wall opening for the kitchen stovepipe was solved by applying another layer of siding on top of the original one all over the exterior walls. Again the result was a practical solution rather than a conventional one.

Despite these curious aspects, the house had tremendous functionality. The walk-out basement was not only convenient, but the light entering from the windows in the west wall provided illumination for the work done there, which certainly included washing and probably Thomas’ cabinetmaking activities as well. Both the basement and the kitchen were outfitted with pumps for ease of access to drinking water from the basement well. A cistern for wash water was located close by the fireplace, where the wash water would be heated, and the cistern had its own pump. The pass-through cabinet separating the dining room from the kitchen—a common feature in the better American houses of the period—was also a time-saver. Another unusual innovation was walk-in closets, of which there were two on the second floor, each with its own window for light. Last but not least, the balcony and porch on the east side were a pleasant place to relax in the shade during hot summer evenings.

Little is known about the furnishings of the house. The corner hutch in the first-floor parlor is simple and functional, with outstanding joinery. It is probably the only surviving complete piece of furniture made by Thomas. Several bed rails skillfully shaped in a Scandinavian style but otherwise unadorned were found in the attic, and they may have been made by Thomas. An 1890 photograph of Haldor sitting on the porch of the house shows several pieces of bentwood furniture—which presumably had been purchased (Figure 5). Other than the parlor hutch, only one piece of furniture known to have been in the house has survived—a beautiful secretary that belonged to Kari. Finally the north chimney had a hole to accept a stove pipe from the second-floor parlor—presumably to vent a pot-bellied stove—but no other
Andrew Veblen took this photograph, the only one of Haldor Veblen known to exist, probably on the same occasion as those of the farmhouse and barn in Figures 4–5. He is on the porch of the farmhouse, and the stairs to the balcony are visible in the background. He is sitting on a bentwood two-seater, and a chair is visible behind him. He must have been working the day the photograph was made—the knee of his trousers is patched. Thorstein Veblen had a copy of this photo in his cabin on Washington Island.
details are certain. The kind of stove in the kitchen is also unknown, though its general configuration can be surmised. Overall, the house was a tremendous social statement, especially by the standards of the time. Moreover, shortly after its completion, the Veblen farms at last were owned free and clear. As noted earlier, the west farm had been paid for in 1865-1866. The mortgage taken on in 1864 to finance the purchase of the 200-acre farm was paid off on June 1, 1871.

Unfortunately a few words cannot convey the tremendous effort that went into creating the house. Not all of the stress was born by Thomas and Haldor. Kari lost another infant during this period. She was then about forty-five years old and thus at greater risk, but the stress of the constant building and remodeling must have taken its toll as well.

THE OUTBUILDINGS

The equipment shed probably was the first outbuilding to be erected on the site (Figure 6). The 1870 agricultural census recorded only two horses and two cows on the Veblen farm, and the lower level of the shed would have accommodated them perfectly. Most likely it was erected simultaneously with the house. Following the erection of the barn, the lower level of the shed seems to have been used as a chicken coop, while the upper level was used as storage for wagons and other equipment.

The date of construction of the barn is known to a fair approximation. Andrew recalled that the barn was built in the early 1870s. In addition the property records indicate that Thomas borrowed $1,000 on June 1, 1872, and paid the loan off a year later. This transaction appears to have been a construction loan. Finally a contemporary historian of Rice county noted in a brief biographical sketch of Thomas that “In 1872, he built a barn 48x62.” Thus it appears that the construction of the upper levels got under way in June of 1872, after crops would have been planted, and was completed after several months of intensive effort. Probably the stone foundation had been put in place the previous year, and preparation of the heavy timbers may well have proceeded during
Andrew Veblen took this photograph in 1890, probably on the same occasion as the one in Figure 4. The barn and equipment shed were painted red with white trim. Sometime after its construction, the barn evidently was equipped with a hoist for loading hay in the loft—which presumably necessitated boarding over the windows directly below in order to avoid damage. A substantial number of milk cans cooling in a pool at the far right of the photo suggests that the scale of dairy activity had increased substantially by this time.

In configuration the barn is distinctly American. Its construction is traditional post-and-beam framing. The beams were hewed with a broadaxe from trees growing on the west farm. The rafters and siding came from a sawmill. Like many barns in the Midwest, it was painted red with white trim.

The barn and the equipment shed contain some interesting innovations. One is sliding doors—a major advantage over hinged doors when snow was on the ground. In addition, at some point after its construction, the barn clearly was modified to include a hoist for raising hay from a wagon up to the upper loft—a huge improvement over the traditional practice of throwing hay up to the lofts with pitchforks. Lifting the hay this way put some of the barn windows at risk, and Thomas
seems to have responded in his characteristically functional way by nailing boards over them!

THE ECONOMICS OF THE VEBLEN FARMSTEAD

Prices soared during the Civil War and then declined rapidly after the end of hostilities. Wheat prices, however, were an exception; they remained at lofty levels for three more years. Thus, if one could muster the requisite labor, animals, implements, and land—as the Veblens could—farming was unusually profitable during most of the decade. This was when Thomas greatly increased the size of his farms, borrowed money to finance the purchase, bought horses and equipment, and built a fine new house.

However, after 1868 grain prices began to decline sharply as most other prices had been doing since the end of the war. This was traumatic for numerous farmers who had borrowed to finance their purchases of land and equipment, as the principal amount of their indebtedness did not decline in line with the prices of their products. On the contrary the real burden of such debt increased significantly. Andrew recalled that his father experienced hard times following the Civil War. Fortunately Thomas' indebtedness was relatively modest, and he was able to expand production sufficiently rapidly to offset the impact of falling prices on his income. After 1873 all the debt had been paid off, so that the Veblens probably were largely unaffected by the ongoing deflation.

Would the farms have been so large, and the ornamentation of the house so elaborate, if the boom years had never occurred? There is no way to know, but it certainly seems plausible that to some degree they reflected the ephemeral economic conditions that existed at the time the Veblens moved to Nerstrand and created their farm.

The scale and mix of activities on the Veblen farms also changed significantly over the years. At the time of the 1870 agricultural census, the Veblens owned only two horses and two cows, collectively valued at $300. The gross value of their annual production was $900. By 1880 their output had become much greater and considerably more diverse. They
owned eleven horses, nine cattle (of which three were milk cows), twelve sheep, four pigs, and ninety chickens, collectively valued at $1,000. Most of their crops—including hay, oats, wheat, and potatoes—were about three times as large as in 1870. They also produced substantial quantities of corn and eggs, neither of which had been enumerated in 1870. Thus, despite a twenty-three percent decline in wheat prices during the previous ten years, the annual value of production had risen to $1,200—a nominal gain of one-third, and a much larger increase in real purchasing power.\textsuperscript{38} No agricultural census was conducted for later years, but an 1890 photo of the barn, the only one known from the period when the Veblens were living on the farm, shows a number of milk cans cooling in a tank of water in the shade of the barn—obviously awaiting delivery to town or to the train station, which arrived in Nerstrand in 1885.\textsuperscript{39} The size and number of the cans suggests that the Veblens must have increased their herd of milk cows substantially by that time—which would make sense in view of the expanded market for perishable products that the railroad created.

From the earliest days in Wisconsin, Thomas was actively interested in innovations to produce better and more abundant crops, and after moving to Minnesota, he promptly purchased new farm machinery—including a reaper and the first harvester successfully operated in the Nerstrand area.\textsuperscript{40} Thus it is not surprising that a fragment of a Norwegian-language newspaper found in the wall of the house—thought to be \textit{Nordisk Folkeblad}—is jammed with advertisements for new agricultural implements.\textsuperscript{41}

Despite the many innovations, the farm depended on hard, manual labor. Most of the labor came from the Veblens themselves. Thomas and Haldor were virtual dynamos until late in their lives, and so was Kari. The children all worked around the farm as well. They also had help. The Veblens were extremely generous in opening their doors to newly arrived immigrants (including relatives) who needed a place to stay while recovering from the long trip from Norway. In exchange for room and board, they helped out around the farm.\textsuperscript{42}
In addition seasonal laborers were hired during the summer months. Presumably some of these people slept in the basement of the house. Others were sheltered in the house on the west farm.

In the early years in Minnesota, the Veblens had plenty of manpower to operate the farm. In 1870, for example, they could field two senior men, plus three young males ranging in age from twelve (Thorstein, the fifth oldest surviving child) to twenty-one (Andrew), and the census for that year indicated that they did not hire any help. However, this changed as the children reached adulthood and moved away. By 1880 only a thirteen-year-old (Ed, the eighth oldest surviving child) and a hired farmhand were available to help the two older men. Shortly afterward, Thorstein returned to the farm from Yale, but he was convalescing and not able to help with the heavy work. The stress must have increased as the number of milk cows increased during the 1880s. By 1893 all the children had moved away, leaving only the old folks—Thomas, aged seventy-four, Haldor, aged seventy-six, and Kari, aged sixty-seven. No doubt they were deeply reluctant to leave the farm where they had lived for almost three decades, but they surely realized that they could not operate it by themselves. It was time to retire. They sold the 200-acre farm on March 23 of that year for $7,500.

Thorstein Veblen was nine or ten years old when most of the work on the house was being done, so the odds are that he was mostly in the way. Nevertheless he alone among the family managed to leave his initials on the house! With a lath nail and a hammer he formed his initials “T.B.V.” in a stud that subsequently was incorporated in an interior wall.

Of course the farmstead had immense significance for Thorstein. In the first place it was home, and he undoubtedly remembered it fondly to the end of his life. Which of the six bedrooms in the house was his is unknown—in fact virtually nothing is known about who slept where. However, one room holds a special significance for Thorstein—the attic.
Fig. 7. Thorstein Bunde Veblen, c. 1880
This photo, by an unknown photographer, shows Thorstein Veblen at twenty-three years of age, about the time he graduated from Carleton College. The Veblen family had then lived in their Nerstrand farmhouse for over a decade. This photo was included in his older brother Orson’s collection.
His younger brother Ed recalled this vividly. “He would sneak off and get a book or a paper and read when the old folks thought he was working. In those early days there was not much literature around the house and what little there was mostly Norwegian. A few almanacs, some old novels that had been acquired as premiums with the newspapers, and then the papers themselves. The folks were too thrifty to destroy the papers but let them accumulate in the attic. And then Tosten could be found reading these old papers when he should be hoeing corn or potatoes. I can remember once. He must have been about 13 or 14. He made a very hasty and precipitate exit from his attic study. He came down the stairs very fast. The reason being that Mother was after him with a switch.”

In addition, when Thorstein returned from Yale in 1884, he not only had a Ph.D. in philosophy, he had what seems to have been a case of malaria. (Figure 7) He required several years to recover, and during this time, when not helping out around the farm with light jobs, he read in the attic by the window.

Second, the building of the farmstead required skill and hard work. This surely made a deep impression on Thorstein, who subsequently erected two cabins for his own family and made a number of pieces of furniture. In addition Thorstein must have been impressed by his father’s penchant for making continual modifications when these seemed desirable as well as his evident lack of commitment to conventional construction norms—including straight lines, ninety-degree angles, and such things.

Finally Thorstein must have pondered the purpose of it all. Why expend an immense amount of labor to construct the deceptively simple-looking posts under the balcony, and the many other embellishments? He must have recalled nostalgically the many evenings the Veblens gathered around the fire in Wisconsin and in the early, rudimentary quarters in Minnesota. They did not have much then—at least not much to show off with. But beyond a doubt the family was never closer than it was then.
MYTHS ABOUT THORSTEIN VEBLEN

A variety of myths about Thorstein Veblen are widespread, thanks chiefly to the Dorfman biography.

One such myth is that poverty and the cultural isolation of immigrants made Thorstein Veblen the kind of person he was. As an explanation for the distinctly critical strain in his thinking, this would seem to be highly implausible, because his ideas differed from those of his family and the Norwegian-American community in which he grew up about as much as they differed from those of the population at large.

In addition, the Veblens obviously were not poor, and they certainly did not regard themselves as either economically or socially deprived. Indeed, of Dorfman's many errors, none seems to have outraged the Veblen family more than the suggestion that they had been underprivileged. Of course Thomas, Kari, and Haldor had scant financial resources when they arrived in North America, but they rose rapidly. The rapidity of the family's rise might have affected Thorstein's perspective on the artificiality of many social customs. As he contrasted the familial togetherness he experienced in the old days with the display of fine clothes and other possessions that came as the family rose, he might well have felt nostalgic.

Another trait that made the Veblen family remarkable was their emphasis on literacy, culture, and educational achievement. Of the nine children who lived until adulthood, eight—including all but one of the girls—attended Carleton College, the Carleton preparatory academy, or the Northfield schools. Three of these—Andrew, Thorstein, and Emily—graduated from Carleton. Emily was reputedly the first Norwegian girl to graduate from a college in the United States, and Andrew and Thorstein were respectively the first and second students ever to complete the Carleton curriculum in three years rather than the prescribed four. There is no question that their accomplishments would have been impossible in the absence of a family that esteemed such achievements.

Finally the Veblens were peculiarly open to new ideas and quite tolerant of dissent. Thomas repeatedly adopted new
farming and construction techniques. And the parents tolerated the young Thorstein's many off-beat ideas. They may have disagreed with them, but they did not suppress them. 58

All of that, needless to say, is a far cry from poverty and cultural isolation.

The second myth is that Thorstein Veblen did not know English prior to entering Carleton. Despite unanimous denials on the part of the Veblen family, Dorfman simply printed as fact this claim, supposedly made by Ellen Rolfe, Thorstein’s first wife. 59 If it were so, then Thorstein must have been a truly extraordinary genius—to graduate a year early while simultaneously learning the language of instruction!

In fact the Veblen children could not avoid being multilingual because their playmates had different mother tongues, and they attended grade school in English. In addition the many immigrant workers in their home often spoke Norwegian dialects considerably different from the Valdres dialect spoken by the Veblens. Finally the parents helped to set the example by learning English themselves. Of course they never learned English as well as the children, but Thomas and Kari could speak it, and they could read it with some difficulty, though they apparently could not write it.60

Even within this context, Thorstein was clearly gifted. Prior to entering Carleton, he was familiar with several distinct Norwegian dialects, English, and German, and he had some knowledge of Old Norse, Greek, and Latin. 61 It was still a remarkable performance to graduate in three years—but he did not have to learn English too!

Let the house have the final word. Together with the fragment of a Norwegian-language newspaper found in a wall of the house were a couple of pages from an English-language publication named Sunday School World. They were from the June 1861 issue. The Veblens must have brought the issue with them from Wisconsin—which would not make sense unless they wanted to read the devotionals it contained. Last but not least, pasted to the original wall of the kitchen—inside the later, plank wall—were pictures of ladies in elegant Victorian dresses—evidently part of Kari’s fashion gallery. The prove-
nance of the pictures still has not been determined, but it definitely was an English-language publication, probably *Harper's Weekly*. Thus the house confirms the Veblens' claims—they were multilingual.

The third myth is that Thorstein Veblen *was a womanizer*, and by extension something of a social nihilist. Quite a few of Thorstein's contemporaries held this view, and it was passed along uncritically by Dorfman and Duffus. So far as can be determined, no one ever suggested that Thorstein was "fooling around" with anyone prior to his marriage to Ellen Rolfe in 1888. Similarly no one ever suggested that he was unfaithful while he was married to his second wife, Ann Bradley Bevans, familiarly referred to as "Babe." Instead he acquired his notoriety while he was married to Ellen. Indeed she took an active role in making such accusations—to university administrators in particular. Ellen and Thorstein died long ago, and it is impossible to know very much about their relationship. But recently some key facts have come to light of which most of their contemporaries were unaware.

Ellen Veblen's autopsy report—to which Dorfman alluded only in passing—was recently interpreted by an internist, who noted several severe afflictions. First and foremost, her pelvic area never developed normally, so that for her any attempt at a normal sex life would have been extremely painful. The medical opinion was that Thorstein and Ellen's relationship had to have been platonic. Second, Ellen suffered from hyperthyroidism. This condition could have developed relatively early, when she was a young adult, but there is no way to know. However, contemporary descriptions of her extremely volatile personality suggest that the affliction was well advanced by the time Thorstein was on the faculty of the University of Chicago. Finally, by the time she died in 1926, Ellen also suffered from cirrhosis of the liver. The onset and etiology of this condition are unclear. Despite many unanswered questions, it requires little effort to understand why Thorstein must have been extremely unhappy in his marriage with Ellen.

Indeed, in the light of this new information, it seems only human that Thorstein tried to find relationships outside of the
marriage, which was mostly a formality, involving numerous long separations, almost from the start. The remarkable thing is that during the twenty-three years they were married he appears to have refused to criticize her publicly, even on the two occasions in which she took an active role in having him dismissed from important academic appointments. Nor does an annulment appear to have been considered; instead their divorce decree deemed him guilty of failure to support his wife.

What about the notion that women were attracted to Thorstein? Undoubtedly some women must have been. In particular those who were frustrated by their relatively low social, economic, and legal status must have found something to admire in an erudite critic of the subjugation of women and their use for mere wasteful display. That said, there can be little doubt that Thorstein must have encouraged their affections—under the circumstances it was only human to do so.

Shortly after he obtained a divorce from Ellen, he married Babe, and they tried to do what most married couples do—have children. Unfortunately, their one child miscarried, to the grief of both. Thorstein still had two stepdaughters, with whom he had a very affectionate relationship. In fact, sixty-four years after his death, his last surviving stepdaughter still recalled him fondly. (Figure 8) Thus, contrary to the popular view, Thorstein was not a philanderer in the normal sense of the word. Instead his was the tragic case of a person who wanted a real family life, and who had to struggle to achieve one.

The fourth myth is that Thorstein Veblen was a social outcast. The idea here is that a cold, withdrawn individual, forever on the outside looking in, sharpened his social criticism in proportion to the social ostracism he experienced.

There is no question that Thorstein had little patience with fools, and his critical views of a number of social conventions irritated many. But that is not the same as being a social outcast. On the contrary, Thorstein maintained extremely close family relationships and had numerous friends among his professional colleagues, his former students, neighbors, and other acquaintances. He was hardly aloof. Numerous anecdotes testify to his well developed sense of humor.
Fig. 8. Thorstein Bunde Veblen, c. 1900
This photograph, by an unknown photographer, appears to have been made on the same occasion as the recumbent one that appears in the Dorfman biography. It shows Thorstein Veblen, the author of *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, about a year after the book’s publication, arrayed in a wing collar and double-breasted suit. He was about forty-three years old at the time. This was his stepdaughter Becky’s favorite portrait of him.
Particularly evocative are the recollections of children who knew him. To cite only one example among many, his
grand-niece Colette Sims Van Fleet recalled that Thorstein
and his brothers enjoyed sitting around singing old Norwegian
songs. None of them could sing on proper pitch, and she
remembered vividly the awful sound they made. Other
anecdotes recall his unfailing respect for, and kindness toward,
children; he was fond of them, and they were fond of him.

In sum Thorstein was not a social outcast in the normal
sense of the word.

**WHY WAS THORSTEIN SO DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHER VEBLENS?**
The differences between Thorstein and the rest of his family
are striking. To mention only a few: They stayed Lutheran—he
did not; they all pursued conventional careers—he did not;
and they all married ethnic Norwegians—he did not. Three
main factors seem to have distinguished Thorstein from the
rest of the Veblens.

First, even by Veblen family standards, Thorstein was ex-
tremely precocious. His older brother Andrew had an impres-
sive intellect, as did his older sister Emily, but everyone in the
family seems to have agreed, apparently from a very early age,
that Thorstein was the star. Preciosity can lead to brat-like be-
havior as well as a certain arrogance, and Thorstein seems to
have developed precisely these traits. As his younger brother
Ed recalled the young Thorstein: "He fought and licked all the
boys and teased all the girls and pestered the old folks, shot
their dogs, etc. and played all kinds of pranks mostly rather
mean tricks on all and sundry. But everyone had to admit that
he was smart. At that early childhood age he seemed to be bet-
ter posted on almost any subject than grownups including the
old preacher and the school masters. But he was always differ-
ent, queer." In addition, once Thorstein realized that he was
smarter and better read than most of his teachers, he seems to
have been led, like many precocious young people, to chal-
lenge anything and everything.

Second, Thorstein's first marriage was an unqualified dis-
Fig. 9. Kari Veblen, c. 1890s
This photograph was taken by Andrew Veblen, probably in the parlor of his home in Iowa City. It appears to have been taken on the same occasion as that of Thomas and Kari Veblen reproduced in Erling Ylvisaker’s Eminent Pioneers: Norwegian-American Pioneer Sketches. Clearly visible is Kari’s traditional Norwegian cap.

aster, and it is easy—now—to understand why. What seems unfathomable is that Thorstein could have resolutely refrained from criticizing Ellen in public, even when she caused him to lose important academic appointments. His reward was to be
Fig. 10. Thomas Veblen, c. 1890s
This photograph was taken by Andrew Veblen, probably in the yard of his house in Iowa City. It is the finest portrait of Thomas Veblen ever made. Thorstein Veblen had a copy of it in his cabin on Washington Island.

cast as a “womanizer” by many persons who were ignorant of facts that he must have been too proud to reveal. This experience cannot but have intensified his sensitivity to conventional hypocrisy.
Third, Thorstein was exposed to new ethnological studies at the University of Chicago, such as Franz Boas’s study of the Kwakiutl Indians, in a way that none of the others was, and he maintained this interest all his life.\(^{74}\)

When one considers that the Veblens all remained very close to each other despite Thorstein’s sharp criticism of many of the conventions maintained by the rest of the family, one gains an appreciation for just how close-knit the family was.\(^{75}\) The other Veblens were very proud of Thorstein despite his iconoclasm, and Thorstein returned their affection. He sent frequent letters and characteristically practical gifts.\(^{76}\) In addition, though he spent little on himself, he dipped into his financial resources to help out relatives through business loans and other forms of assistance.\(^{77}\) Not least, he visited them frequently as he traveled around the country.

The other Veblens also visited him frequently at his house and cabin. In fact, when Thorstein died on August 3, 1929, one group of relatives was staying in his house with him and his stepdaughter Becky, while another group had departed the previous week. Thus he died as he had lived—surrounded by his family.

Among his personal effects were his large library and his photograph collection, most of which remained in his summer cabin on Washington Island. Included were photos of his dear wife Babe, his stepdaughters, and many other friends and relatives. There was also a photo of the old farmhouse. And there were photos of the old folks—his mother (Figure 9), his father (Figure 10), and his uncle Haldor sitting on the porch of the old farm house on a summer day long past (Figure 5).

Notes

1 This paper is a revision of a lecture delivered on September 24, 1994, at a symposium titled “Veblen in Perspective” and sponsored by St. Olaf College and Carleton College. It builds in large part on my experiences in restoring the Veblen farmstead in Nerstrand, Minnesota.

The success of the restoration reflects the skills and efforts of many individuals; space does not permit naming them all, but a few must be acknowledged. The hard work of Ruthmary Penick and other members of
the Veblen Preservation Project to save the farmstead years ago made my own efforts possible. Steve Edwins, Ed Durand, and Spencer Jones of SMSQ Architects managed to solve many apparently unsolvable design problems. The extraordinary carpentry skills of Peter McKinnon and his colleagues at River City Builders were critical to the whole project. The skilled masons of Macpherson-Towne Company relaid almost every stone and brick in the house and outbuildings. Peter Johnson and his colleagues at Johnson Construction Company saved the barn when its collapse was imminent. And Alex Wilson and his colleagues at Wilson-McLaren Restorations restored the faux graining on the interior of the house to its former elegance. Archivists at Carleton College, Columbia University, and the Minnesota Historical Society's Historic Preservation Department also assisted in numerous ways. Many Veblen family members cheerfully answered my endless questions, helped to find old records, and encouraged my enthusiasm with their own. Last but definitely not least, my wife Jane supported—and endured—the whole thing.

I have relied heavily on accounts written by the Veblens themselves in preparing this narrative—chiefly those of Andrew, Emily, and Ed. For simplicity I have abbreviated these sources as follows. Andrew Veblen's unpublished manuscript, "The Veblen Family: Immigrant Pioneers from Valdris" (undated but probably c. 1930), is cited as AAV. Andrew's letters to Joseph Dorfman are cited as AAVL, together with the date of the letter. Emily Veblen Olsen's "Memoirs of Mrs. Sigurd Olsen (Emily Veblen)" is cited as EVO. Original copies of all these items are in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. John Edward Veblen's letters to Joseph Dorfman are cited as JEV, together with the date of the letter, if any; these letters are in the Columbia University Library. For over sixty years the standard biography of Thorstein Veblen has been Joseph Dorfman, Thorstein Veblen and His America (New York, 1934); it is cited as "Dorfman." My interviews with Emily Veblen Kauppi, Emily Veblen Olsen's granddaughter, are cited as EVK; copies are in the Carleton College archives.

Professor Marion Nelson of the University of Minnesota and Steve Edwins of SMSQ Architects, Inc. made a number of helpful comments on an earlier draft; naturally I alone am responsible for any remaining errors.

2AAV, 78; and EVO, 7.
3AAV, 28-30.
4AAV, 82-83.
5EVO, 6.
6The land was sold to benefit a minor child and her mother. The interest of the minor child, valued at $1,450, was paid with a 25 percent downpayment and the balance financed by the child's estate on September 10, 1864. Two months later $350 was paid to the mother for her interest in the property. Thus the total downpayment was $712.50.
7AAVL, January 26, 1932.
8EVO, 7.
Thorstein Veblen and the Veblens

9AAVL, November 9, 1929. These structures have long since disappeared. Andrew described the house as a one and a half story house and emphasized that it was “not at all a cabin.” AAVL, May 19, 1931. Emily recalled it as a large, two-story log house. EVO, 7. The farm was just east of what is now Nerstrand Woods State Park.

10Andrew noted that the ninety acres “could not be fixed up until the money was paid over.” AAVL, March 13, 1930. He probably meant that the family could not move onto the property and plant crops until the purchase price had been paid—which Bonde did. Putting Bonde’s name on the deed was “convenient” since Thomas could not be present at the time the property was purchased. The subsequent transfer to Thomas thus appears to have been mostly a formality, with no money changing hands. AAVL, April 21, 1931.

11EVO, 7. The property records show Ole Oleson and his wife Salvir as the sellers, but it seems likely that “Slaatten” was his Norwegian farm-name. Andrew referred to him as Ole Slaatten, “as they called him.” AAVL, January 26, 1932.

12The same name was given to the son born the following autumn.

13AAVL, May 10, 1931.

14This early function may explain one of the most curious features of the house. The first floor slopes very gradually from east to west, while the second floor and the attic floor are perfectly horizontal. It is not inconceivable that the first floor was pitched in order to shed water while the temporary roof was in place.

15AAVL, May 10, 1931.

16EVO, 9. Of course it seems equally plausible that Kari needed help with the household—which at this point comprised three adults and eight children, of whom one was a newborn—fully as much as this unfortunate woman needed shelter.

17Andrew noted that the family had only a few acres of wheat to harvest in the fall of 1865, when the family moved to Minnesota. In the fall of 1866, 30 acres were harvested, and in the fall of 1867, about 70 acres of grain were harvested. AAVL, February 4, 1930. Thus large tracts of land were being broken and cultivated simultaneously with the construction of the farm house.

18The studs in the east wall of the house are thicker than those in the other walls. The only plausible reason for this is that it was expected that this wall would support not only the house but a balcony as well.

19AAVL, February 25, 1930; AAVL, April 12, 1930; and JEV, March 16, 1930.

20I am indebted to Steve Edwins for this observation.

21AAVL, 14. According to Andrew, the house that Thomas built in 1849 in Sheboygan county, Wisconsin, followed the traditional Valdres design, except that the exterior porch was not “enclosed.” Apparently the
original intention had been to enclose the porch, but for some reason this never was done. Andrew’s meaning is not completely clear. Professor Marion Nelson has pointed out that at least some houses in the Valdres area had porches that were roofed over but otherwise unenclosed. Since Andrew visited the Valdres area as an adult and presumably was familiar with traditional building styles, he probably meant merely that the porches had roofs.

The graining work in the dining room is much simpler than that in the parlors and appears to have been done by a different craftsman.

I am indebted to Professor Marion Nelson for this information.

There is no clear evidence that Thomas’ woodworking bench and tools were located in the basement. However, on the Wisconsin farm the enclosure containing a fireplace and a well was also the site of Thomas’ shop, and it seems plausible that he continued this arrangement in Minnesota. AAV, 34 and diagram (unnumbered).

In the Nerstrand area well water is hard, so collecting rain water in a cistern was of some importance for washing.

The pass-through cabinet between the kitchen and the dining room has been reproduced accurately thanks to outline marks on the floor, wall, and ceiling as well as descriptions from former occupants of the house. The original was undoubtedly Thomas’ work. Unfortunately nothing is known about its painting.

This was rescued and restored by Wilbert Radtke, grandson of Mary Veblen Hougen (the sixth oldest child). According to Radtke, Kari was midwife to a woman who died while giving birth. Kari then raised the child herself until it was old enough to rejoin its family. The father, a cabinetmaker, made the secretary for Kari as an expression of gratitude. Unfortunately the name of the cabinetmaker is unknown. The date of the secretary’s construction is also unknown, but the 1870s is a good guess.

Andrew provided a very detailed description of the kitchen stove in the house in Manitowoc county. AAV, 17–18. It seems likely that the Veblens took it with them to Nerstrand, but this is not certain.

Oscar William, in 1870. This was the twelfth and last child Kari gave birth to.

During the course of restoration of the equipment shed, one of the roof boards was found to contain the initials TAV and the date 1847. These apparently refer to Thomas Anderson Veblen and the date of his arrival in America.

AAVL, February 8, 1932.

Edward D. Neill, History of Rice County (Minneapolis, 1882), 464. The indicated dimensions contain about one-third more square feet than the existing structure does, but it is possible that they included pens or other exterior structures that are no longer present. On the other hand, Neill made several errors in his biographical sketch of Thomas, so the discrepancy may be merely another error. Whatever the case, there is no doubt that
he was referring to the existing structure, and the date given is quite consistent with the other information.

32AAVL, January 26, 1932.

33The Veblens' barns in Sheboygan county and Manitowoc county both had hinged doors. For a description of the former, see AAV, 15; for the latter, see the accompanying diagram (unnumbered).

34AAVL, February 17, 1926.

35There is a minor exception. According to Ed, Thorstein's studies at Yale were financed by Thomas from the farm's cash flow and by Orson, a store owner at the time, who raised funds by borrowing at a Northfield bank. Thomas signed Orson's note as additional security. JEV, March 16, 1930. In that limited sense Thomas was indebted after 1873.

36The census return actually listed the value of production as $9,000, which is clearly impossible. Taking the indicated quantities of commodities produced and multiplying by plausible prices yields a result quite close to $900, so it appears that the enumerator accidentally added a zero.


38NERstrand Women's Club, History of the Nerstrand Community, 1949.

39AAVL, February 4, 1930, and February 8, 1932.

40The issue, of which only about half of one page was found, apparently dates from about June, 1868. This suggests strongly that the interior surfaces of the walls of the second floor were not finished before that time, as indeed one would suspect on the basis of other evidence as well.

41EVO, 4. It is interesting to note that some of the Veblen children continued this practice. On their farm in South Dakota, the family of Hannah Veblen Hanson (the youngest surviving child) took in newly arrived immigrants. Letter from Eliza Akre Jacobson to the author, January 15, 1993. Also, while he was on the faculty at Stanford, Thorstein did the same for the Duffus boys and their father. He termed the exchange of room and board for housekeeping services "no cash nexus." Robert L. Duffus, The Innocents at Cedro: A Memoir of Thorstein Véblen and Some Others (New York, 1944), 18.

42The Minnesota population census enumerated relatively few of these people. The most likely explanation is that the census generally was taken in June, while hired hands were most likely to be needed later for the harvest. Similarly, most immigrants probably arrived late in the summer, as Thomas and Kari did, and departed in the spring in time to plant crops at a new farm.

43Emily recalled that more than half a dozen immigrant families stayed in the house on the west farm. EVO, 8.

44Ed was emphatic on this point; he understandably felt that Thorstein did not shoulder his share of the work. JEV, March 16, 1930.
Thomas reportedly encouraged his youngest daughter and her husband to move to South Dakota to engage in grain farming because dairy farming was too laborious. Letter from Eliza Akre Jacobson to the author, January 15, 1993.

Mary Veblen Hougen and her husband took over the west farm at about this time.

The initials have been preserved and are visible behind a small door in the wall of the southeast bedroom on the second floor of the house.

JEV, undated. "Tosten" was the original name; it was changed to Thorstein while he was a student at Carleton College.

Andrew described Thorstein as having "malarial fever" at this time.

AAVL, February 8, 1932.

This is mentioned by Dorfman, 57.

The Washington Island cabin has survived, although in modified form. A couple of chairs from the Washington Island cabin have survived and are in the possession of the Gunnerson family. Two tables have survived from Veblen's Menlo Park home; these are in the possession of Charles Sims, Thorstein's step-grandson, who resides with his family in Thorstein's old house.

Andrew described the kveldsete (evening sitting) fondly, and he thought it was a major factor that drew the family together. AAV, 69–70.

As Ed wrote, "it is the slander of our parents and their friends and neighbors which has made us mad." JEV, March 16, 1930.

Numerous photographs of the Veblen children have survived, and without exception they show them in full Victorian finery. The bulk of these photographs are contained in Andrew Veblen's personal collection, which was inherited by his granddaughter Colette Sims Van Fleet, who died in May, 1994.

Andrew credited his father with being "the driving force to get us schooled." AAVL, February 25, 1930.

Thomas (the seventh oldest child) was a junior at Carleton when he had a fatal accident.

JEV, August 4, 1930.

Dorfman, 35. For the Veblens' statements in regard to their early multilingual environment, see AAV, 43, 46; AAVL, February 25, 1930; especially AAVL, March 13, 1930; EVO, 2, and JEV, March 5, 1930. Ed was perhaps the bluntest: "Believe it or not, Dorfman: he knew more English then than you do now. He tutored me to some extent and told me to think in English 'that is what I do' he said."

AAVL, February 8, 1932.

Regarding the Norwegian dialects, English, and German, see AAVL, March 13, 1930. Andrew noted that Thorstein's English was considerably less accented than his own, due to the fact that Thorstein had learned the language at a much younger age. Also see AAVL, April 21, 1931.
Andrew specifically mentioned that Harper's Weekly was in the house. See AAVL, February 25, 1930.


I confirmed this with Becky Veblen Meyers, Thorstein's devoted stepdaughter. The record of her responses to my many questions has been deposited in the Carleton College archives.

Ed Veblen at least felt that there was nothing to these accusations: "... it does seem that he appeals to some women, mostly foolish ones, such as his second wife, his first wife too for that matter couldn't be much crazier but I am sure Thorstein got a great deal of blame and no benefit if you know what I mean." JEV, undated copy.

Letter from Richard Sturgeon, MD, to the author, February 1, 1994. A copy is in the Carleton College archives.

This probably explains another curious fact. Ellen directed that a copy of her autopsy report be sent to Thorstein. Considering the stress of their relationship, and the fact that they had been divorced for over a decade by the time of her death, this would seem impossible to understand except as an attempt to explain what neither of them most likely had been able to understand before. So far as is known, no record survives of Thorstein's reaction to the information in the autopsy.

Some members of the Veblen family seem to have been aware of the situation to some degree. On December 7, 1925, while both Ellen and Thorstein were still living, Florence Veblen (Orson's second wife) wrote to Dorfman of "the tragic story of injustice," but noted that revealing the details was Thorstein's exclusive right. Copy in AAVL. Florence made numerous errors in relating the Veblens' story, but it is hard to imagine that she could have forgotten Ellen and Thorstein's situation if she had known of it.


This anecdote was related orally to the author on November 16, 1993.

Thorstein's step-daughters and certain other children called him by the nickname "Toyse" (pronounced "toys"). Professor Marion Nelson pointed out that this appears to be an abbreviation of the Norwegian "toy-sekopp," which means clown or joker. This nickname may have been Thorstein's creation, or it may have been given to him as a youth.

For recollections of children who knew him well, see interview with Becky Veblen Meyers, August 8, 1993, and interview with Colette Sims Van Fleet, July 23, 1993, both conducted by Russell H. Bartley and Sylvia E. Yoneda; and EVK. Copies of all of these are in the Carleton College archives.

There is one minor exception. Orson's (the third oldest surviving child) second wife was of Yankee extraction.
73JEV, undated copy apparently prepared by Dorfman, 4.

74This has been made clear by the recent discovery of Thorstein’s personal library, which had reposed at his summer cabin on Washington Island, Wisconsin. Although many volumes were lost, the large number that survived contained many ethnological tracts. For an insightful interpretation of the collection, which is now housed in the Carleton College archives, see Russell H. Bartley and Sylvia E. Yoneda, “Thorstein Veblen on Washington Island: Of Books, Intellect, and Personality,” MS, 1994; copy in the Carleton archives.

75On at least one occasion the Veblens’ familial closeness seems to have assumed heroic proportions. Emily Veblen Kauppi recalls that her grandmother Emily Veblen Olsen used to have her husband, Lutheran minister Sigurd Olsen, read to her from Thorstein’s books while she did the dishes and attended to other kitchen chores. EVK. Sigurd’s marginal annotations in the first-edition copies that Thorstein presented to his sister Emily testify to the difficulty that the text occasionally presented. Even more difficult, however, must have been the passages regarding “devout observances” and other social conventions that Thorstein regarded as conspicuous waste.

76Emily Veblen Kauppi recalls that when she lived with her grandparents Sigurd and Emily Olsen, Thorstein presented them with a tool for prying open storm windows that had frozen shut, a potato peeler, and two discarded Chinese wine jugs that formed attractive vases. EVK.

77Financial and legal records currently in the possession of Charles Sims, Thorstein’s step-grandson, confirm that in his later years Thorstein was quite well off and that he extended a number of loans to relatives.