

3962 Brighton Ave., Los Angeles,
February 25 , 1930.

My dear Dorfman:

In my last, a couple of days ago, I told briefly of my correspondence with the editor of the Carleton Circle in my efforts to keep out the Rolfe remonstrance. Then I took up your MS to read.


The first paragraph did not strike me favorably. Reading on I saw that you make an error in your (foot)note to bonder, and I made a marginal note, and in the second footnote was another questionable statement. On going on to the next page I found more and more misstatements; and it did not take long to realize that writing comments and making corrections would be futile. If I should make adequate comments and explanations and corrections, I should have to write a lot of notes that would be as great in volume as the 56 pages you sent me.

You do not know the difference between a husman and a lessee. Many of the bonder farmed leased farms. Such a one was my grandfather Veblen. He was the "landlord" of two husmen, if not three, who rendered him rent in the form of labor, as did other husmen

to the owners and lessees of other farms. Later you call him a husman, evidently under the mistaken impression that he was in fact a cotter. I do not say that you strain a point to convey this impression in order to support a general scheme to make out that the lot of the family war "hardship and misfortune." But perhaps that is your aim. As to the status of a lessee, Tore By, in Vang og Shire, complains that the lessees of farms owned by the Church or military establishment were accorded privileges and advantages above the land-owning bonder. You are wrong about the rating of a lessee. He is not just a tenant.

Another misleading remark, apparently intended to strengthen the hardship and misfortune notion is your saying "He occupied seven different farms during his lifetime. Why do you not point out that he farmed Veblen for some 35 years--a length of time such as the average length farmers ran farms before retiring? You know such tactics are unfair, it made wonder that you should do it.


Another matter, which you may say is trivial, but which looks significant to me, is that in regard to father's name. It would take a disquisition to state adequately the scheme of nomenclature of the Norwegians of the time when my parents emigrated. My explanation in my Veblen Genealogy is correct, but is perhaps too brief.



There is nothing very hard and fast about the system. Recent legislation in Norway establishes some sort of rule. What occurs in Giants in The Earth may, and, it may not, state a custom somewhere. When emigrants, such as the Valdrises, came here they usually brought documents such as passports or credentials from the parish or the commune. These papers contained given name, patronymic, and place-name. In the case of husman people the place-name indicated the name of the farm with the addition of the ending-eie, which literally means ownership or being owned by. Thus, Kviereie, Bundeie, Kjoseie, etc. When the immigrant came to have any legal writing done in which his name appeared, he would show such documents as he had, in order to have his name properly written, as in declaring his intention for naturalization, in pre-empting land, in having deeds made out, and the like. But clerks of courts and of government land offices, generally stopped with the patronymic and left out the farm-name as being something they did not understand, or considered descriptive and not strictly belonging. Perhaps sometimes they did not wish to bother about this foreign thing which was unusual and hard to copy. I have seen many documents thus made out, in which the immigrant has insisted

on having his name in full, and has had the farm-name written in, getting it crowded into the blank space often running into the print in the blank following the dotted line. Oftenest the person probably not realize that he was in the process becoming a Larson, Olson, Thompson, etc. legally, and could not later use his old farm-name rightfully. He did not know the law. Generally the immigrant had to have a struggle with such clerks, if he wished to get it correct.

In father's documents, such as his formal release from further military duty in the Norwegian army reserve, his name was written out in full, Thomas Andersen Veblen. I believe you will grant that his name was that, notwithstanding your statement to the contrary. All his acquaintances called him Thomas Veblen (in dialect speech, Tommos Vovle) as far back as I can remember, and this goes back to Sheboygan County. Now then-- when he bought land in Manitowoc Co. it was deeded to Thomas Andersen. It went on the records that way. Taxes were at that time collected by the Town treasurer. He got his rolls from the county records, of course. And the poll tax list probably was made out partly from the tax list. So the town organization, the school districts, all would have connection with these records. If a mortgage had to be given, it necessarily had to



be in the name of the “party of the second part” of the deed. Now can you see how his name is given as Thomas Anderson in Manitowoc County? Obviously you are writing fiction in your footnote 2 on your page 13, where you tell that the name Veblen was added after he had become successful land-owner.


When he bought land in Minnesota he saw to it that it was deeded to him in his proper name.

But at this rate I can not touch on any but an infinitesimal portion your misapprehensions, misstatements, and misleading notions.

Take now your saying that at 17 Thorstein came to Carleton. “Fresh and uncouth from the family farm...he spoke no English, an illustration of the effective cultural segregation of the Norwegian settlement.” (page 3) and “Thorstein knew no English when he entered Carleton,” (page 5) It is really incomprehensible that an advanced student in a high-standard institution could make such statements, awake and conscious. Evidently you are unsuspectingly and seriously accepting some practical joker’s jest.

Suppose we grant that you actually believe in your fantastic “cultural segregation” as constructed by you, how should a youth of 17 be

kept learning English, without being chained down? You remark elsewhere that at 8 he was a voracious reader. Say he was 9 or even 10, and was a voracious reader. The reading matter accessible at home was the “Emigranten” which came weekly, and the bible and church manuals, and catechism, and a small Bible history, besides a couple collections of sermons; and very little else. I don’t know whether so early as that we had begun to collect Norwegian stories. The libraries of the neighbors were even more scant. There were English books; first the full complement of text-books used in the Minnesota public schools, Andrew’s Latin Grammar and Latin Lessons, various story books in English. Access was had every few days to Jenkins’s Yankee Notions in Northfield, after we came to Minnesota with its supply of Beales Dime Novels. You bought ore at a time. When you had read it, you could trade it in, with 5 cents, for a new one. I don’t know but the series went as high as 250 issues. There were “Dime” manuals, on base etiquette, and various arts and handicrafts. Also Harper’s Weekly, and-- indeed I am getting tired of thinking and recalling the items of literature, in the culturally segregated Norwegian settlement of which Nerstrand is the present metropolis. Until 1865 when Thorstein was 8, Clarks Mills was a mile and a quarter from




the house, and that was a cultural center, largely peopled by Yankees. Do you begin to see how ridiculous a foundation you have built upon,

Thorstein had English-speaking playmates as early as he could toddle of a mile to the nearest neighbor and before that the neighbor's children were daily at our house or in the yard. His four older brothers and sister knew and spoke English, with these other children, and more and more between themselves. Thorstein was sent to school before he filled 5 years. He had a bilingual training in speech, from the start. When he came to Carleton he spoke as correct and idiomatic English as any of the young people he encountered, and his "rhetoricals" (not oratoricals) at once attracted attention for his facility in the use of idiomatic English.

I wonder whether it is the same practical joker that imposed on your innocence in regard to the "log cabin" that you say father built, and which "symbolized the isolation of the rustic children of Norwegian Lutheran farmers from the children of Congregational New Englanders with the manners that befit their station." Did your informant not say also, that father felled the timber on the land to build that cabin? We could hide behind the

stumps to avoid being seen if any students might stray that way?


You pay a nice tribute to me in the scheme of the education of Thorstein and the others. I wonder, now--Do you suppose I "knew no English" when came to Carleton? And by the way, I did not begin by teaching in my "own district." This injures your fiction about "isolation." You see, I went and taught a school in a district largely of Germans. The son of the Englishman on their board was at the time teaching our school. The next winter our home district officers begged me to take our own school, for the reason that I allowed nothing but English to be spoken in the school house or the yard about it. You say I began to teach without having been higher than district school. But I got a certificate on taking the examination, and was complimented by the superintendent on the showing I made. As a proof that "the cultural frontier was heavily guarded" in our community, you tell that I had never heard of Carleton College until I went to the Faribault school. It is another case of believing something suspiciously improbable with something someone has been "stringing" you with, or drawing an inference that looks like being born of the desire to have it so. There was Shattuck Hall in Faribault, at which a young man, cousin of Miss Hougen who



became my wife, had attended in '64-5. At Red Wing was Hamline University at that time, where another young man near us had attended two or three years before. About Northfield College everyone one knew, especially in Goodhue County, right near us, whence Carleton early drew student. We knew well about other high schools and academies. Carleton was small. The entire attendance in '71-2 was 80. The Co. supt. A. O. Whipple told me circumstantially about Northfield College during my attendance in Faribault, 1870. Hamline and Shattuck were older and better established in the knowledge of the people about us. I am taking time to say this in view of your conception of the "guarding the cultural frontier." I do not blame you for knowing so little about this exploited isolation. But I to blame you for making a big number of it and seriously building or it.

Of course I resent your picturing our home the way you do. It is unjust to mother the way you make out how she was. And you picture father unjustly. He was a man of few words, but (like Coolidge) he could talk and did talk readily and convincingly, and expressed himself with great facility. I wrote many a letter from his dictation, and I have all along marveled at the rich diction of those letters. When he talked

everyone "sat up and took notice." He was not slow as we knew well enough. His brain was nimble and precise, as many a man found out, it any one tried to get the better of him. It was father especially that was the driving force to get us schooled. He did not simply "allow" us to go, as you put it; but he could be aggressive about it. Mother seconded him, of course; she generally upheld him if we sometimes differed with him. You are wrong about his requiring days, weeks, years to solve his problems. I don't know of any important step in the affairs of our family, that did not start with his initiative. When he met the man he obtained as a tutor the winter '58-9, no one at our house knew of the man's existence; but he engaged him on the spot without waiting to ask the matriarch(?) mother. He knew well enough she would agree. Nor had the matter of a tutor been discussed between them, as I plainly remember their saying so many a time. As soon as the idea was broached he saw its value and made instant decision. Father usually led instead of following. He introduced Spanish Merinos in Manitowoc County soon after settling there. He sent to New York state for the first two horse power thresher that came into that part of the state, and made a great success of it; and I remember that mother did not at first approve.



He was the first in the community to put down drains on his farm. He operated the first harvester that proved successful. He planted the first orchard there. Was a successful bee-keeper; and I could go on at great length, to show he was not at all “slow” and was not led in anybody’s leas. Best of all, he was determined his children should have every possible chance to be educated.

As to mother, she was a wonderful woman; but you have largely missed it in your characterization; and we feel it is an injustice to her memory to let you draw the picture of her that you have drawn—as well as in the case of father. The truth is, they were a well-matched pair. Each took good care of his or her part of the family enterprise. Neither domineered the other; and both were really proud of the way the other discharged his or her share.

I wonder who, of Thorstein’s college school-mates, it can have been that described the Veblen home in the 70’s as “primitive”. You say in a footnote “For one thing it had a ladder and trapdoor access to the second floor.” This is about as fantastic as your log cabin yarn about our house beside the Carleton campus. Our home was built 1866-67 and had a full-size eight feet high basement with good, mortar-laid limestone walls. Two full storie

above, with high attic over the whole, 5 rooms on the first floor, 5 rooms above, with several closets. All along one side was a two story porch. The house still stands. I wonder whether the maple floor laid in that house does not antedate all hardwood floors in Rice County. Such is the “primitive” home of the Veblen family at the very beginning of the ‘70’s

I have filled a lot of space, and yet I have touched upon only a few of fantastic distortions of which these introductory sections are full. There is no use of going on. I am very sorry; but what else should one do but tell you how it strikes one? You know how I have responded to your calls for co-operation; and I can not tell you how disappointed I am. My sister Mrs. Olsen has also taken much interest in your project. Just now she has joined me in our efforts to minimize, if not to eliminate, the Rolfe remonstrance in the Carleton CIRCLE. I believe she might like to see this manuscript of yours, if you feel you could spare it for her perusal. I am not speaking for her and have no knowledge as to what she might wish. I shall mail it—the manuscript—to-morrow. J. B. has read it all he cares. My daughter, Mrs. Sims has looked into it. They feel no better over it than I do. I am going to let Agnes look it over to-night .

Very truly yours,