



THORSTEIN VEBLER:
REMINISCENCES OF HIS BROTHER ORSON

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On the second day of May, 1847, Thomas Veblen and his wife Kari Bunde Veblen left their home at Hurum, Vang parish, in the county of Valdris, Norway, to emigrate to America.


They went by way of Drammen, Hamburg, and Quebec, and arrived at Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 16, 1847, more than four and one half months later. There was little traveling in Norway in those days; these two young people had probably never been far from their native valley. They knew no English. They had little money; Norway had never been a country where the average man could become prosperous.

The voyage was indeed a trying one; sanitation on shipboard was so imperfect that the young husband contracted a fever; by the time they landed in Milwaukee he was almost too ill to stand. The burden of their immediate future fell upon the shoulders of his wife. Kari Veblen was a dauntless and spirited creature; she had been called the most beautiful girl in her native valley in Norway. She got a room for her sick husband and put him to bed, found work to support him and herself, and nursed him successfully through a long

and serious illness.

She was a notable woman with a keen and brilliant mind and an intensely sympathetic nature. She had a remarkable natural aptitude as a physician. For many during the pioneer times, she was practically the only available doctor within many miles of her home; she often performed various minor operations, such as setting broken bones and sewing up wounds. Her home was always a refuge for the needy and unfortunate, and her deeds of mercy and kindness were endless. She never kept any record of her "cases," as she never charged fees for her services, but she never forgot any of them. She knew the date and hour of birth, with all attendant circumstances, of every young person in the county who had arrived during her residence there, parents often appealed to her for vital statistics regarding their children.

Thomas Veblen was a master carpenter and builder; wherever he lived, evidence of his workmanship is still to be found. On the farms that he owned, the houses he built, practically with his own hands alone, are all occupied and in good condition today. A frame house on a farm in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin, which he built seventy five years ago, and which the present occupant says is always spoken of as the oldest house in that part of Wisconsin, is still in good repair, though the occupant is a renter. The barns on two of these places are of solid and enduring structure, their heavy timbers carefully squared and dressed by hand.



Thorstein Veblen said of his father that he had the finest mind he ever knew; this opinion was shared by all his brothers and sisters, and by others who knew him. Invincible poise characterized him in all his relations to life; his children say they cannot remember ever seeing him exhibit anger or excitement. Although they grew up in a time when the use of the rod in training children was regarded as a duty, not one of his nine children ever felt the weight of his hand in punishment. Demonstrative affection was not a tradition of the family, but his children never doubted their father's love for them.


He never learned to read English, although he spoke it well; but he was a great reader, and always had as much Norwegian literature in his home as lie could obtain. He was one of the initial subscribers to Skandinaven, a Norwegian daily published in Chicago; he took this paper so long that the publishers insisted on sending it to him as a gift the last few years of his life.

His relations with his neighbors wherever lie lived were cordial and fine. One of his sons tells of a tribute to his father of which all his descendants may well be proud. The son, traveling in Norway, went one Sunday to attend Lutheran services at the little church at Hurum, in Valdris, which his father and mother had attended in their youth, and in which they were married. A strange American was of course a conspicuous object in the little Norsk congregation. Everything American is of

interest to the dwellers there it will be remembered that there are more Norwegians in America than there are in Norway. After the services, when the people came to speak to him and learn who he was, an old man with white hair hobbled toward him, holding out a tremulous hand: "Are you really Thomas Veblen's son?" he asked eagerly. "Then I want to clasp your hand. He was my neighbor and friend, he was always spoken of in this valley as 'den rnille mand' (the kind man]," and tears of joy rolled down his venerable face. To be remembered, after sixty years of absence and silence in a foreign land, with such a tribute has not been the fortune of many men.

After Thomas Veblen had recovered from the illness he contracted on shipboard, he worked for some time as a carpenter. In the summer of 1848 he built a home in the village of Port Ulao, on the shore of Lake Michigan, seven miles south of Port Washington. Here, in September of that year, the oldest of the nine children who grew to maturity was born. This son, Andrew (Anders) A. Veblen, was for many years professor of physics at Iowa State University. Many teachers of physics in colleges all over the country were trained by him.

Dr. Oswald Veblen, of Princeton University, one of two or three foremost mathematicians in this country, is his son. Andrew Veblen has compiled, printed, and bound, himself, a "Veblen Genealogy." He was the father of the "bygdslag" movement an association which had for its objects the stimulating,




in Norwegian Americans, of interest in and knowledge of their fatherland, and is the author of the "Valdris Book" a history of this association and of Valdris County in Norway.

In 1849, when land in Wisconsin was opened for settlement soon after its admission to the Union, Thomas Veblen and his brother Haldor filed on land in Sheboygan County. Their homestead, which is now used as a dairy farm, overlooks Lake Michigan, and is within a mile of the present town of Oostburg. It was closely set with hard wood timber, and the brothers cleared it for cultivation. ". . . Much of what has happened to the stand of hardwood timber has happened as an episode by the way, a side issue of pioneer farming. The greater proportion of the original stand of hardwood, together with an appreciable fraction of the pine and hemlock, was got rid of in all haste in clearing the land to get at the soil," wrote Thorstein Veblen, in *The Freeman* for May 23, 1923. His father and uncle, unconscious of the condemnation of posterity, helped to make the economic history of our country. The land obtained with so much labor and economic waste, however, was poor and unproductive; and Thomas Veblen, who was a capable farmer, soon saw that he must have better land. He now had three children: a daughter, Beret, (translated Betsy), was born in 1850; and, on this hardwood timber farm, June 1, 1853, his second son was born; he was named Ostein (in English, Orson).

In 1854 Thomas Veblen sold his hard-won farm on the shore of Lake Michigan and moved to Manitowoc County, again settling on wild forest land in the township of Cato, twelve miles from Manitowoc, and one mile from the village of Clark's Mills. In the following year he built a good frame house on this place; it is still in a fair state of preservation; the barn behind is even better preserved. A gentle knoll crowned with trees rises to the North of the site. Below this hill on the north flows the Manitowoc river; and here Kari Veblen used to wash her linen according to the custom of her native land. This was the home and family scene, comfortable and harmonious, into which Thorstein Veblen was born, on Thursday, July 30, 1857, receiving the name of his mother's father.

Most of the memories we have of his childhood and early youth come to us from his brother Orson. From very early days he seems to have constituted himself the baby Thorstein's protector and champion. When Thorstein was about six years old he was one day caught in a whirlpool in the Manitowoc River, and went circling around till nearly exhausted. Orson, then ten years old, rescued him by slowly pushing him forward out of the whirl, and then dragging him to the bank.

Thomas Veblen and his family lived in the Manitowoc country from 1854 till 1865; he acquired a second farm, about two miles from the first, and was fairly prosperous. Thorstein was nearly eight years old before his father decided to move again in



search of better land. There were now seven children in the family. In 1864 a relative had visited Minnesota, and brought back a glowing account of the rich soil of the prairie. The Manitowoc farms were sold, and the family moved again. The older children preserve a vivid memory of this experience.


Mrs. Olson writes: "This vicinity was settled by Norwegians from Valdres, Norway, the county father and mother came from. Many of the people were friends or relatives of my parents. One of the farms father had bought was well timbered and a good sized log house provided a place to live the first year. The main farm was two miles from this place and consisted of two hundred acres of wild land."

These new farms in Minnesota were in the township of Wheeling, Rice County; the town of Nerstrand later grew up near by. The unbroken farm was not encumbered by any timber, but it was covered with hazel brush and small saplings, and this had to be plowed under. The breaking was done with oxen; at least three yoke were used at once on the big plows. Three of the boys were now big enough to work; Andrew, the oldest, held the plow; Orson, with a long ox whip, guided and drove the oxen; and little Thorstein walked, with what force and weight he could muster, on the overturned sod to keep the resilient hazel brush from turning it back into the furrow. In the dewy mornings the wet brush soaked

their homespun trousers and scratched their legs, sometimes to laceration; but they did their work well and faithfully.

Andrew, the oldest, was seventeen years old when the family left Wisconsin; they had been surrounded there by American people of the best traditions, and the schools had been good. Andrew had made a beginning in learning, and had developed a high ambition which he communicated to all his brothers and sisters; it was he who set the pace, and urged them all forward. It was, no doubt, due to his example and influence, as much as the interest of the father and mother, that they all went to school and to college, an unusual proceeding among Norwegians of that time. Thomas Veblen was the only Norwegian of his neighborhood who sent his children to college; it was so unusual, especially in the case of his daughters, that he was sharply criticized for it. It was believed that girls needed no education beyond learning to read the catechism, under the supervision of the pastor to whose congregation the parents belonged, preliminary to their confirmation. Thomas Veblen's daughter Emily (Mrs. Sigurd Olson) was the first, Norwegian girl to be graduated from college in America.

Thomas Veblen prospered on his Minnesota farms, as in Wisconsin. There has been some attempt to surround Thorstein Veblen's youth with the fashionable American decoration of hardship, privation, and struggle. There was never any ground whatever for this. His father was always "well to do;" he never




had any debts; and although his children all worked at home on the farm, as was the custom, none of them ever worked out or away from home. Thomas Veblen never needed or accepted any assistance from anyone in educating his children. He was always first in his community to have improvements. There was a great day when he bought a team of fine horses, the first ever in that countryside; his son remembers that he paid six hundred dollars for them. He acquired new machinery before any one else; he owned the first grain reaper in his neighborhood, a "platform binder."

It may be noted that Thorstein was the only one of Thomas Veblen's nine children who bore, unchanged throughout his life, a distinctively Norsk name. He was eight years old when the family moved to Minnesota; he had already begun to develop marked characteristics. At seven, or a little earlier, he made snares of horsehair, and trapped squirrels and gophers with them, not to torment the little creatures, but to get them in his hands to study them. He carried them about inside his shirt; he had no coat in summer and no garment under his shirt. His furry friends seemed not greatly disturbed by this unusual proceeding, which, one would imagine might be more agreeable to the squirrels than to the young naturalist. They were always released after he had satisfied his curiosity about them.

His interest in plants began about the same

time; when the children of the family went picking berries in the woods and fields, he always observed immediately any plant that was new to him, and thoroughly investigated it. At this time he had never seen a botany, nor known any one who was conversant with the subject to any great extent. We see in his writings evidence that an intense interest in the subject remained with him throughout his life.

Thorstein's sympathy with animals was apparent in his relations with the creatures on his father's farm. The family dog "Pössup" (Watchup) seems to have been regarded as Thorstein's property; or the dog may have so considered himself for he was the child's constant companion. So large and strong was the dog that he could and did carry Thorstein on his back, and also alternately, his sister Emily. When the men were working on the second farm, two miles away, it was Thorstein's duty to carry their noon meal to them. He was often, perhaps generally, accompanied by his sister; Pössup carried one or the other of the children and the lunch basket. Generally the provisions arrived in good time; but if Thorstein happened to find a new plant while on the way, the men were sometimes obliged to wait for their lunch till the plant had been carefully studied. Probably Pössup was not averse to an interval of rest on a journey of two miles carrying a boy of eight or nine with a basket of provisions for three or four men. On one occasion the boy had been sent for oil for the machinery. While he was gone a fierce storm came up. As he did not return when ex-




pected, one of his brothers went in search of him; he found him lying on his back beside the road, Pössup curled up close to him, watching the storm with absorbed interest.

Thorstein was a keen judge of character; to each of the old people of the neighborhood he gave a significant and descriptive name, which in many cases stuck. When a neighbor's dog was allowed to harry and torment his father's cattle, Thorstein deliberately shot the dog; the same dog had several times bitten and frightened his horse. This act of reprisal having produced further irritation and aggression, he next wrote anathemas in Greek on the neighbor's fence. Since nobody but the minister could read them, and that worthy man was himself greatly astonished, they created a sensation. It is amusing to note that the effect of the Greek anathemas was much more compelling than the sacrifice of the dog. There was no further trouble. "That brother of yours is a very remarkable boy," said the minister to Orson. Thorstein owed comparatively little to the schools he attended; the major part of his education he gained by constant reading. During his early years in Minnesota the country school near his home was in session only four months each year. He always attended whatever school was available, as did his brothers and sisters; but there was nothing distinctive about the teaching he received. He learned German from books he found in his uncle's library. He also made a good beginning in both Latin and

Greek in the same way, finding books in both his uncle's and the minister's library. In his own home the books he found were mostly, Norwegian. All the family were interested in Norway's scholars and literary men, and he was well acquainted with Norwegian literature before he went to college. The group that gathered about Thomas Veblen's dinner table, twelve of them when the roll was complete, discussed everything: books, politics, public affairs, the tariff, economics, current events. Thomas Veblen was generally the leader of this family forum. These dinner table discussions were carried on sometimes in Norwegian, sometimes in English, sometimes both.

All of Thomas Veblen's children attended Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. In those days the College owned a building which would accommodate twelve young men who wished to board themselves; the kitchen they used in common. Thorstein and his two older brothers all lived for a time in this dormitory; as they remembered it, their culinary operations in this dwelling were confined chiefly to the making of pancakes. On one occasion some of their fellow students purloined some batter from their kitchen in very cold weather, and painted a board with the legend "Pancake Hall." The batter froze as fast as applied, and they placed the decoration between the two chimneys, above the ridgepole of the building. The house was ever afterward known as "Pancake Hall" this building was still standing in 1926, though no longer in use.




Later, when the Veblen sisters were in school, Thomas Veblen bought a lot in Northfield and built a small house for his student children, the girls doing the housekeeping. Thorstein completed his course at Carleton in two years less than the usual time; he cut out one year in the Academy and finished the College course in three year. Here Thorstein came in contact with Professor J. B. Clark, the economist, and this association may have been a determining factor in the centering of his interest. They became close friends; Professor Clark greatly admired Thorstein, and freely expressed his admiration to others; but Thorstein's attitude toward his teachers and fellow students was never very clearly defined. He was not given to expressing his own opinions either about people or ideas. Although he was fond of debate, and was always willing to discuss any topic of interest to himself, it was by no means certain that his arguments were on the side of his convictions. He enjoyed argument for argument's sake, and he liked to draw out other people's opinions without revealing his own. He never became excited or angry; in this he resembled his father more than any of his brothers and sisters. Not one of them can remember ever seeing him show anger or excitement. He was not sociable in the sense of seeking company for company's sake. He preferred his books unless he could have stimulating companionship. Such a mind as his was of necessity lonely; there were never many travelers in his

altitude.

An amusing story is told of an experience he had during a later summer he spent in Norway. One of his objects was to attend the meeting of the International Geographic Society, of which he was a member and a delegate from the United States. The honorables of this society were given passes by King Oscar over all the railroads in both Norway and Sweden. He spent the whole of this summer in the Baltic region, traveling about a good deal on a bicycle in order to facilitate his studies and investigations. One day in Norway he had occasion to take a train out of Oslo while wearing his bicycle suit, which was probably somewhat travel worn; this was a circumstance to which he would never have attached much importance. Division of travelers into classes is strictly observed in Norway. Thorstein went into a first class carriage, as he was entitled to do, with his "king's pass." He sat down and began to read a newspaper. An official presently came through, the compartment. His eye rested on the dusty, bicycle suit; he approached with great dignity and remarked impressively: "Dette er forste classes coupe:" [This is a first class carriage.]

"Ja, tak, ja fostaar" [Yes, thanks; I understand] replied Thorstein, calmly resuming his reading. The official now retired and apparently reported his misgivings to a higher authority. This person hastened to the scene and beholding the bicycle suit, repeated the warning, with the utmost impressiveness. " Dette er forste classes coupe:




“Ja tak,” responded the imperturbable traveler, again casting an interested eye upon his paper. Doubtfully the second guardian of status retired. Presently the chief official came strutting in with enormous grandeur: “Billeter! billeter!” [ticks] he proclaimed, approaching the dubiously clad scholar with the air of one about to bestow needed chastisement. Thorstein now produced King Oscar’s pass and handed it to the distended official; whereupon he collapsed into ludicrous servility, bowing and scraping and offering profuse attentions. A little later the other two officials also came to offer their duty and service. Thorstein told this story himself with the greatest enjoyment. On one of his ocean voyages some one who knew him had put his name on the ship’s register as “Dr. Veblen.” He never used his doctoral title himself. An inquisitive fellow passenger having looked him up on the register, asked him what kind of doctor he was. “Well,” he replied gravely, “I am a horse doctor, but I would rather you wouldn’t mention it, as I don’t want it known.

During one of his journeys about Norway, he one day fell in company with an Englishman. They had considerable conversation; but Thorstein’s impenetrable personal reserve is revealed by the fact that the Englishman, who could speak a little Norwegian, offered to assist him with the Norwegian language, and afterwards remarked about him: “I have met a very queer man; I think he was French. “

It seems probable that his intimate personality will never be fully understood by anyone who is likely to write about him. He was not self revealing; he was, indeed, intensely opposed to any attempt to make him personally known to the public. He left instructions in his will that no one of his blood relatives should write anything about him for publication. It was only a short time before his death that he gave to his brother’s wife definite consent to write whatever she wished.

After Thorstein graduated from Carleton College, he went first to Johns Hopkins, where his oldest brother, Andrew, was doing post graduate work. Later he went to Yale; while there he suffered a severe attack of malarial fever, which so greatly broke down his health that he was unable for some years to undertake hard work of any kind. During most of this time he was at home with his parents, and for a short time one winter he was with his oldest brother Andrew, who was then teaching at Iowa State University. He did some literary work during this time. His first publication was entitled “Kant’s Critique of Judgment,” in the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* (1884).

In 1888 Thorstein and Ellen Rolfe were married. They had been engaged some years, and their marriage had been delayed for the restoration of Thorstein’s health. Ellen Rolfe was a handsome and brilliant girl, a niece of Dr. Strong, then President of Carleton College. She had been a classmate of Thorstein’s at Carleton. She had become a teacher;



but suffered a severe nervous breakdown, from which she never fully recovered. The tragic story of this marriage has never been told from Thorstein's side, save to one or two close friends. The marriage was ended in 1909, when Thorstein resigned from Stanford University, and left Ellen at Palo Alto, after turning over to her all the property he possessed. Veblen resigned his professorship at Palo Alto and left behind him his means of livelihood and everything he possessed in the world, following irreconcilable situations involving Ellen Rolfe. It was not till two years later, in 1911, that he went to the University of Missouri. Here he remained till 1918, when he was called by the government as expert economist for the food survey during the war. Although Thorstein never saw Ellen again after he left her in 1909, and never heard directly from her, it was known to his brother that he sent her money, when she needed it, as long as she lived. This was managed through friends. He had left her property enough to take care of her comfortably; but she was a poor manager, and more or less frequently needed subsidies. Years later, when she wished to dispose of the property that he had given her, he bought it from her.

It is known that she retained the greatest admiration for Thorstein as long as she lived. She occupied her mind with religious cults in later years. It seems certain that Thorstein held no bitterness against her, notwithstanding the tragedy of injustice and wrong she had brought upon him.

His younger brother once asked him if her strange behavior could be accounted for; he replied briefly that he understood she was abnormal physically, and not responsible. Thorstein's father once remarked in terse Valdris: "Ho e no gate" [But she is crazy]; and Thomas Veblen said nothing lightly.

In 1914, while he was at the University of Missouri, Thorstein was married to Ann Fessenden Bradley. Mrs. Bradley was a very intelligent and thoroughly educated woman; she had been one of Thorstein's students at Chicago University. She had two daughters who were a great source of pleasure to him. This marriage was a most happy one; a great part of Thorstein's best creative work was done during the years of his life with her. She died in 1920

Thorstein did not return to the University of Missouri after his war work for the government was done. In 1919 the New School for Social Research was incorporate in New York, with a list of great names on its organization committee. Thorstein became one of the teaching staff of this school.

In 1921 his health began to fail, and by 1925 he had to abandon all work. He retired to Palo Alto, where lie spent the remaining years of his life, faithfully attended by his stepdaughter, Becky Bradley.

On August 3, 1929, Thorstein Veblen died, four days after his seventy second birthday. It was found that lie had left the request that his body should be cremated, and the ashes strewn over the sea.