

# An Authentic Restoration

The Minnesota Home of Thorstein Veblen

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and why would anyone want to  
restore his childhood home?

Where is Nerstrand Minnesota?  
And how did Thorstein Veblen  
come to live there?

The Restoration gets New Energy

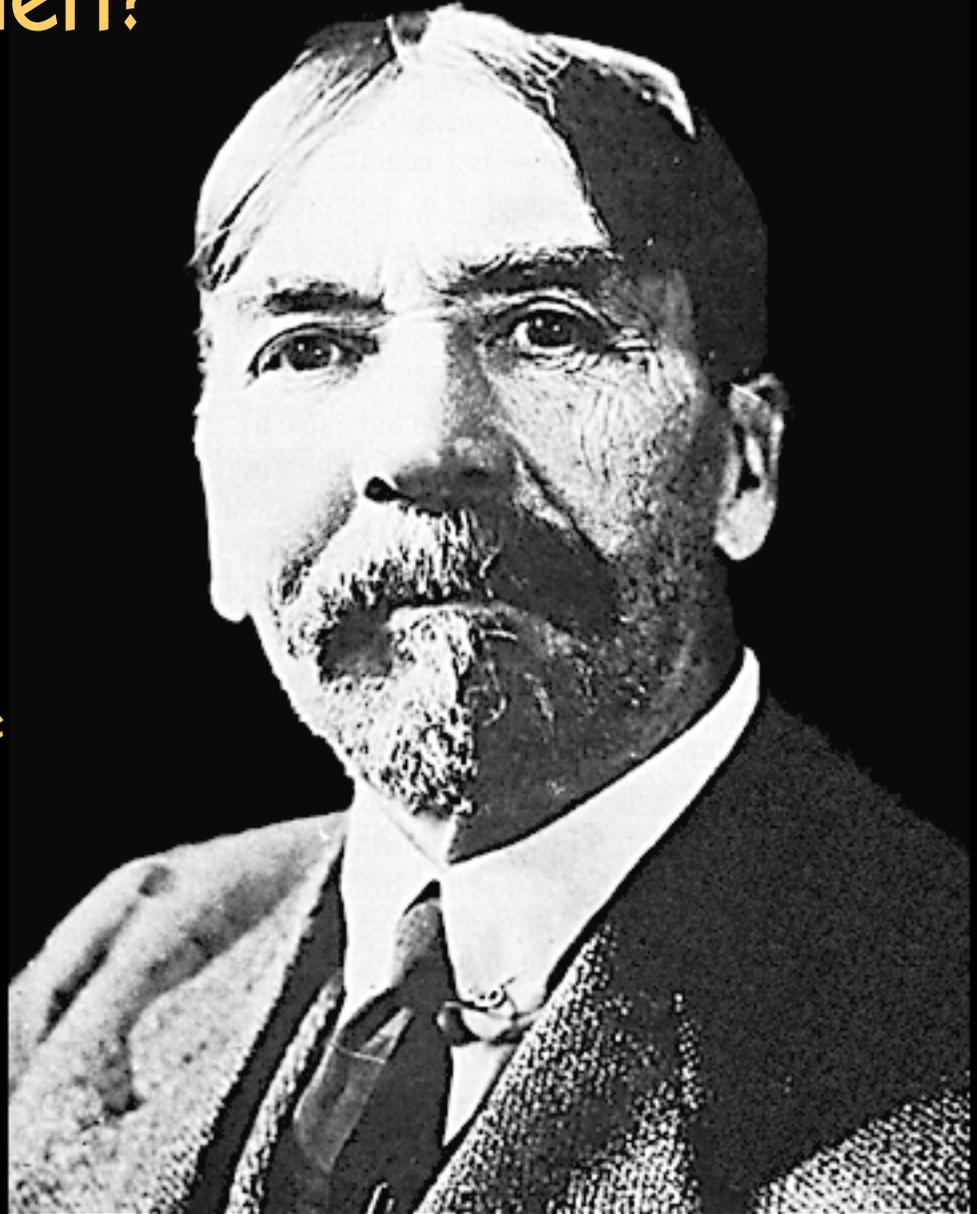
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# Who was Thorstein Veblen?

and why would anyone want to restore his childhood home?



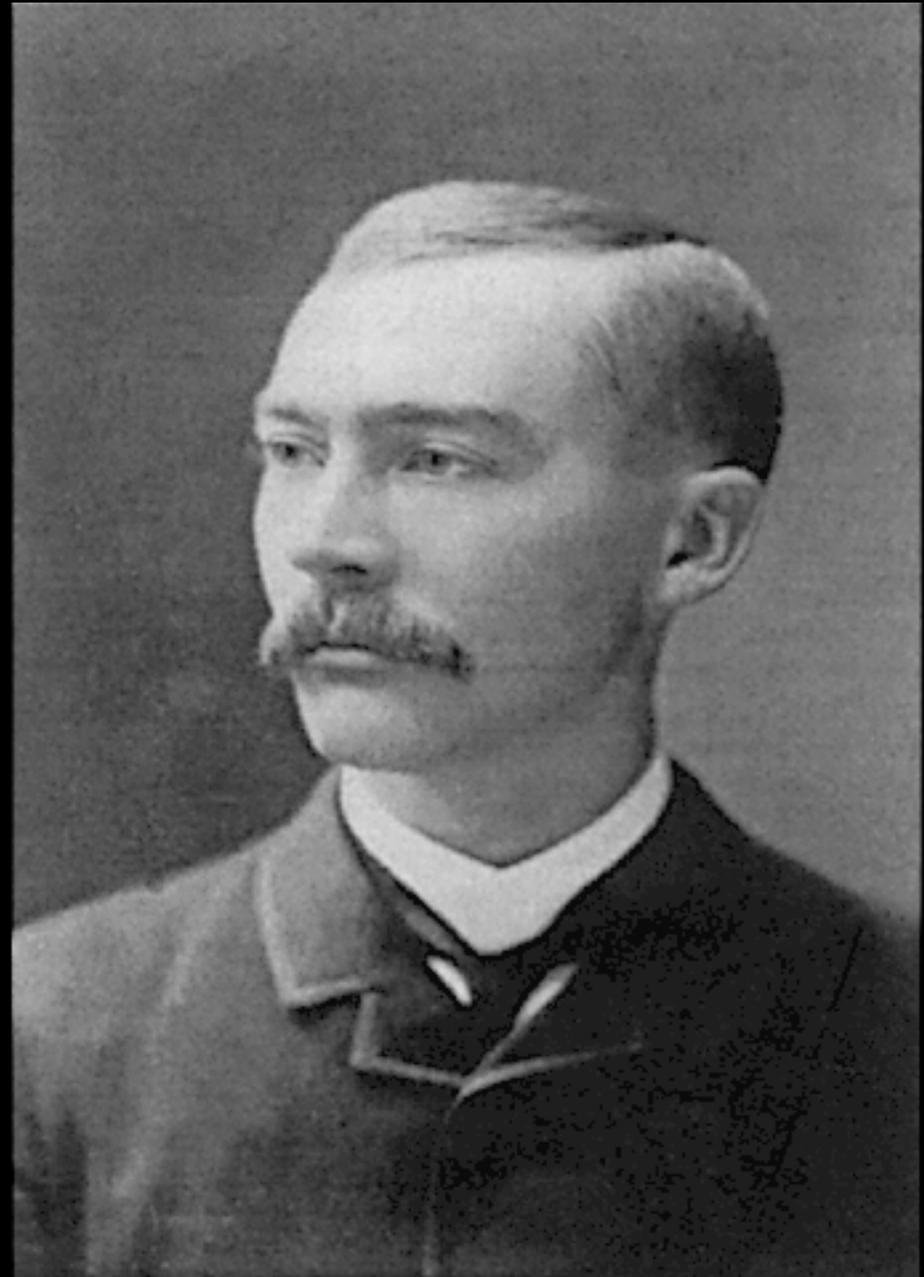
# Thorstein Veblen

Born: Cato Township Wisconsin July 30, 1857

Died: Palo Alto California August 3, 1929

Veblen's books include:

- The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899)
- The Theory of Business Enterprise (1904)
- The Instinct of Workmanship and the State of the Industrial Arts (1914)
- Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution (1915)
- An Inquiry into the Nature of Peace and the Terms of its Perpetuation (1917)
- The Higher Learning in America, A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men (1918)
- The Vested Interests and the State of the Industrial Arts (1919)
- The Engineers and the Price System (1921)
- Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times: the Case of America (1923)



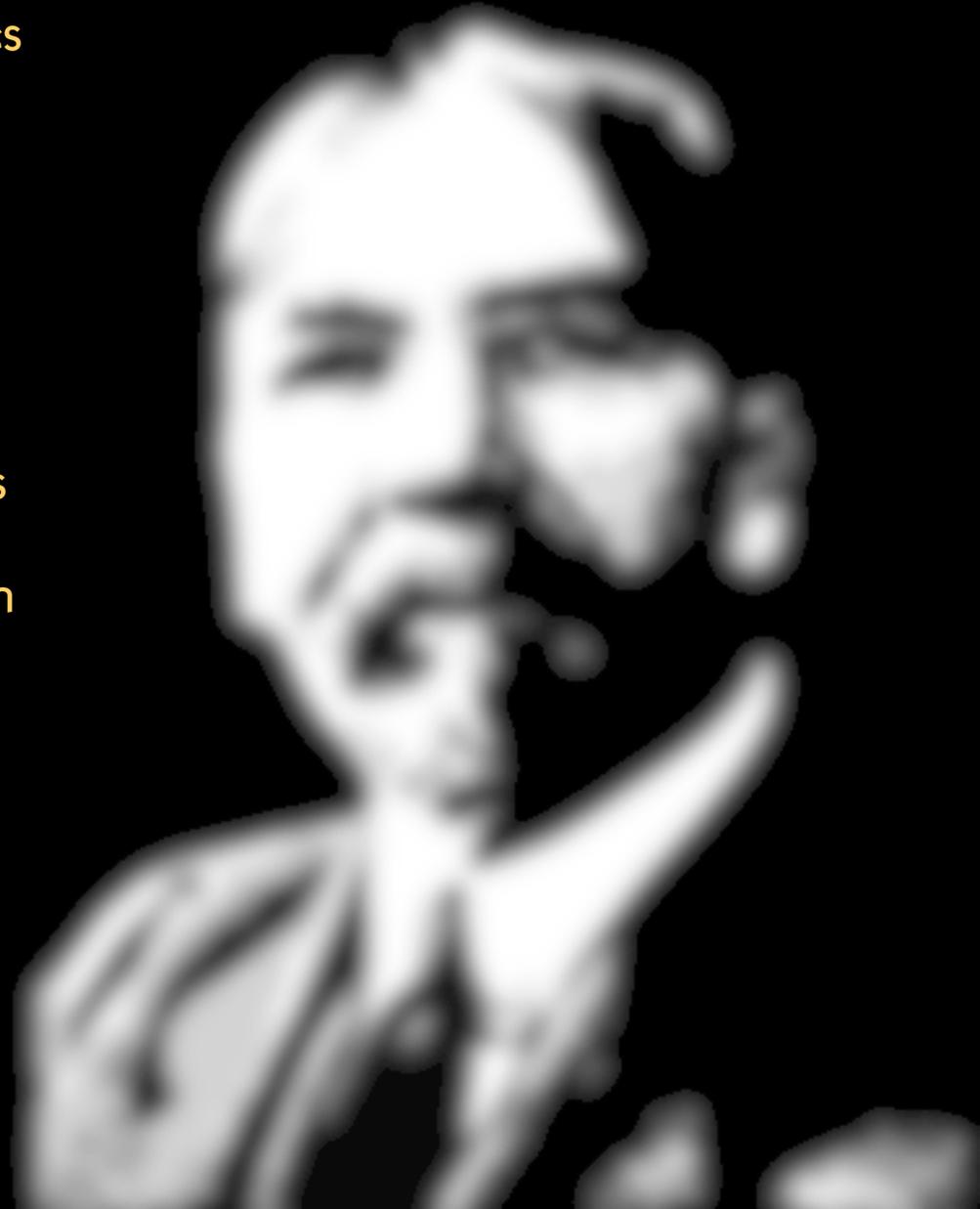
Veblen on graduating from Carleton College 1880

Even though most have never heard of Veblen nor read his books, virtually everyone knows and uses the expression “conspicuous consumption”—a chapter title from *The Theory of the Leisure Class*

What is more remarkable, virtually everyone uses this hugely popular expression the way Veblen first defined it in 1899

Veblen’s greatest popularity came shortly after his death. His books were widely read, Justice Brandeis quoted him in a Supreme Court Ruling in 1936, and Albert Einstein called him his favorite science writer.

Many of the generation of economists who fought the Great Depression, organized the war economy of the 1940s, and then the Great Prosperity of the 1950s and 1960s had read Veblen and could quote him at length.



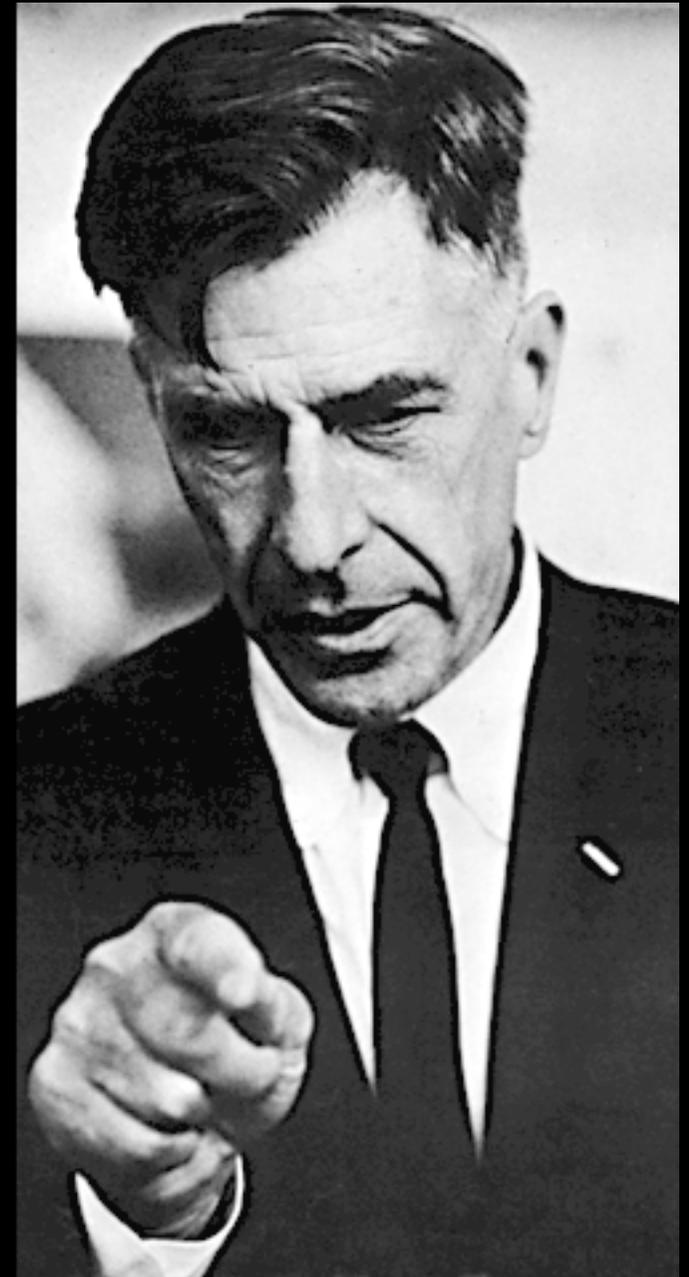
The most famous was John Kenneth Galbraith, the New Deal economist who became a bestselling author, Harvard Professor, and advisor to various Democratic Presidents.

In 1976, the British Broadcasting Company aired a series hosted by Galbraith on the subject of political economy which included scenes from Veblen's boyhood home in Rice County Minnesota.

This series, was also shown in USA by PBS under the title of *The Age of Uncertainty*.

Soon after, Galbraith penned a letter to Governor Wendell Anderson of Minnesota deploring the sorry state of the farm writing, "only the Scandinavians are so neglectful of their heroes."

Suitably chastised, the state of Minnesota did the appropriate paperwork and the Veblen Family Farmstead entered the rolls of the National Register of Historic Places.



But there is nothing intrinsically obvious



about restoring a building simply because someone famous once lived there

There is something vaguely ghoulish about the historic preservation of buildings associated with notorious people that smacks of graveyards, icons and votive candles. In the case of the Veblen farmstead, the creation of a shrine is especially inappropriate given Thorstein's lifelong distaste for such practices.



It is particularly appropriate to explore an abandoned farm site on a gloomy day.



A leaden stillness remains where once the sights and smells and sounds of people and animals joined forces in a productive effort as old as recorded history.

The squealing and snorting and pawing of animals have been



replaced by the lonesome sound of a loose piece of barn siding banging in the wind.

From a distance, the house looks merely abandoned.



Peeling paint covers wood so rotten that it would need replacing up to two meters high along the first floor.

Up close, the extensive rot becomes apparent.

The second floor "loom room" was filled with debris, had three dangerous holes cut in the floor,



and everything was covered by a thick layer of raccoon droppings.

The corner china hutch so carefully crafted by Thomas Veblen (Thorstein's father) in the 1870s was nearly destroyed and covered by many layers of ugly paint.



The roof on the south side of the barn had a huge hole.



The silo and lean-to are obviously not 19th century.

From the inside of the barn,  
it almost looks as if there is  
more hole than roof.



Clearly, if the farmstead was to be saved, work would have to begin immediately.

Where is Nerstrand Minnesota?

And how did Thorstein Veblen come to live there?

In 1847, Thorstein Veblen's parents would leave southern Norway looking for a better life.



At the time, Norway was still a colony of Denmark—a desperately poor backwater on the northern fringes of European settlement.



They were the peaceful Vikings who came from breathtakingly beautiful, yet sparsely populated valley named Valdres located far enough inland to have escaped most of the marauders of history.

In addition to geographical remoteness, a harsh climate and a high latitude (61° N) made Valdres unattractive to anyone unwilling to work hard enough during the long summers so one could survive the cold and darkness of a subarctic winter.



In a trip that took four and a half months, Thomas Anderson Veblen and his wife Kari Bunde would journey to Wisconsin USA, by way of Hamburg Germany and Quebec Canada.

This ordeal would kill several of the party from Norway, and left Thomas, an extraordinarily strong and healthy man, gravely ill.



Thomas and Kari arrived in Milwaukee September 16, 1847. Kari found a room, put her husband to bed, found work and nursed him back to health.

In the summer of 1848, Thomas, a master carpenter by trade, would build his first home in the new world at Port Ulao, 11 km south of Port Washington.

In 1849, soon after Wisconsin became a state, Thomas would file a land claim in Sheboygan Co. But the land was poor so in 1854, he moved again to Cato Township. It was in this house that Thorstein Bunde Veblen was born in 1857.



In 1863, Thomas visited relatives in Minnesota and discovered 200 acres of grassland for sale. For a man who had been winning farmland by clearing dense timber with an ax, this must have looked like heaven. So in 1864 he bought it and in 1865, he moved his growing family to Rice County Minnesota.



Prairie Restoration Project 8 km from Veblen farm.

In addition to providing the Veblen family with a part of the transportation link to their new home, the Mississippi River forms one of the more distinctive natural boundaries on earth.

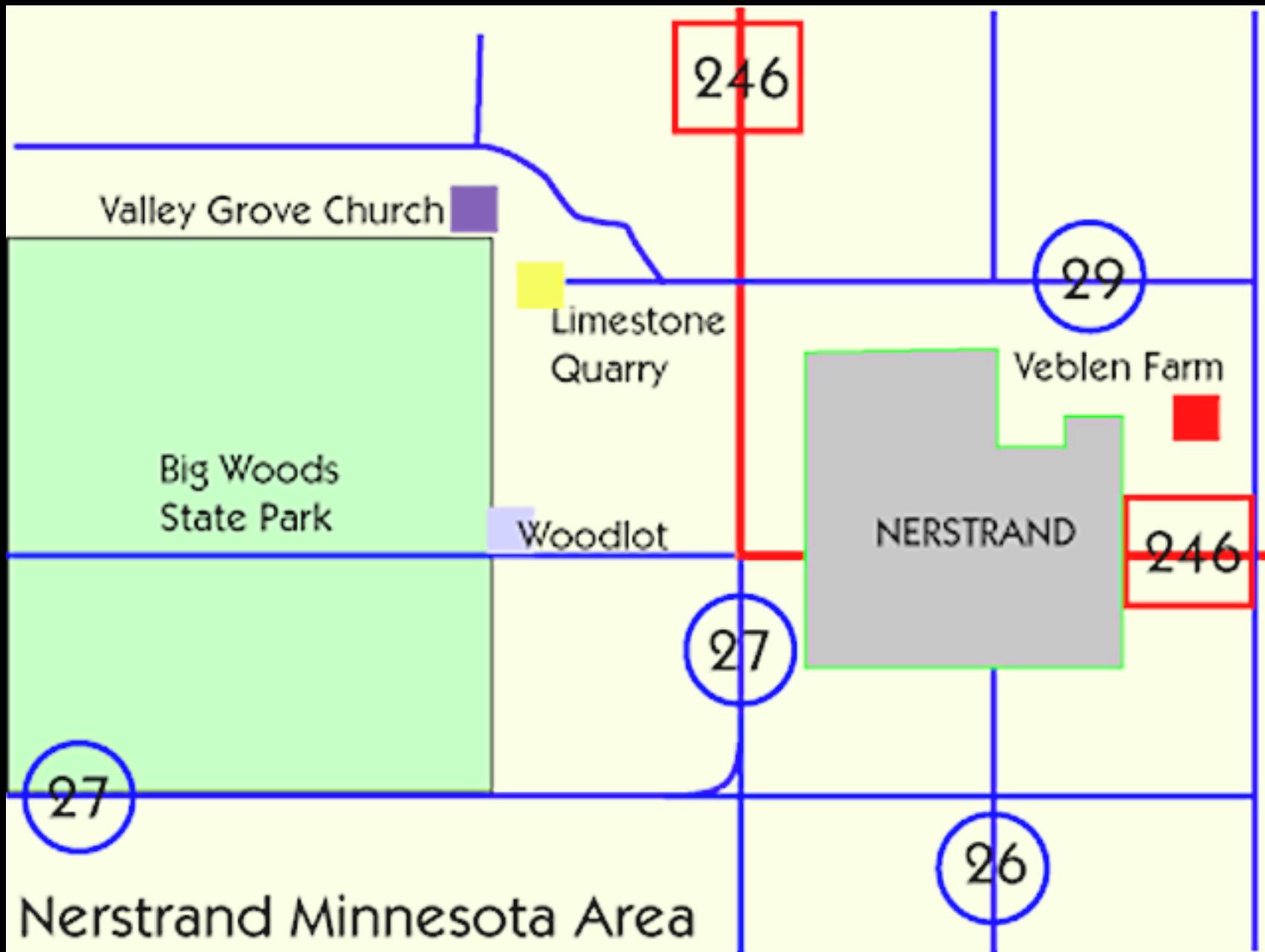
North America from the Atlantic seaboard to the Mississippi was covered by trees when the settlers first arrived—trees even grow to the tops of eastern mountains. By contrast, there were few trees from the Mississippi to the Continental Divide.



The 200 acre virgin grassland farm was purchased for \$1450 according to Rice County records (red square).

The woodlot at edge of present day State Park also had a house good enough to get the family through that first winter. It cost \$350 (blue square).

Thomas quarried the stone needed for the new house the winter of 1865-66 (yellow square).



## Summer in the Big Woods State Park

Many scientists now claim that most of the important incubators of life are found in natural transition zones such as estuaries and wetlands. They may be on to something for it was in a natural transition zone that Veblen grew to manhood and become a political economist-the first of many advantages he would have on his way towards becoming an historically significant intellectual.



In contrast to the virtually empty grassland less than 4 km away, this is how the Veblen woodlot probably appeared when purchased in 1865.

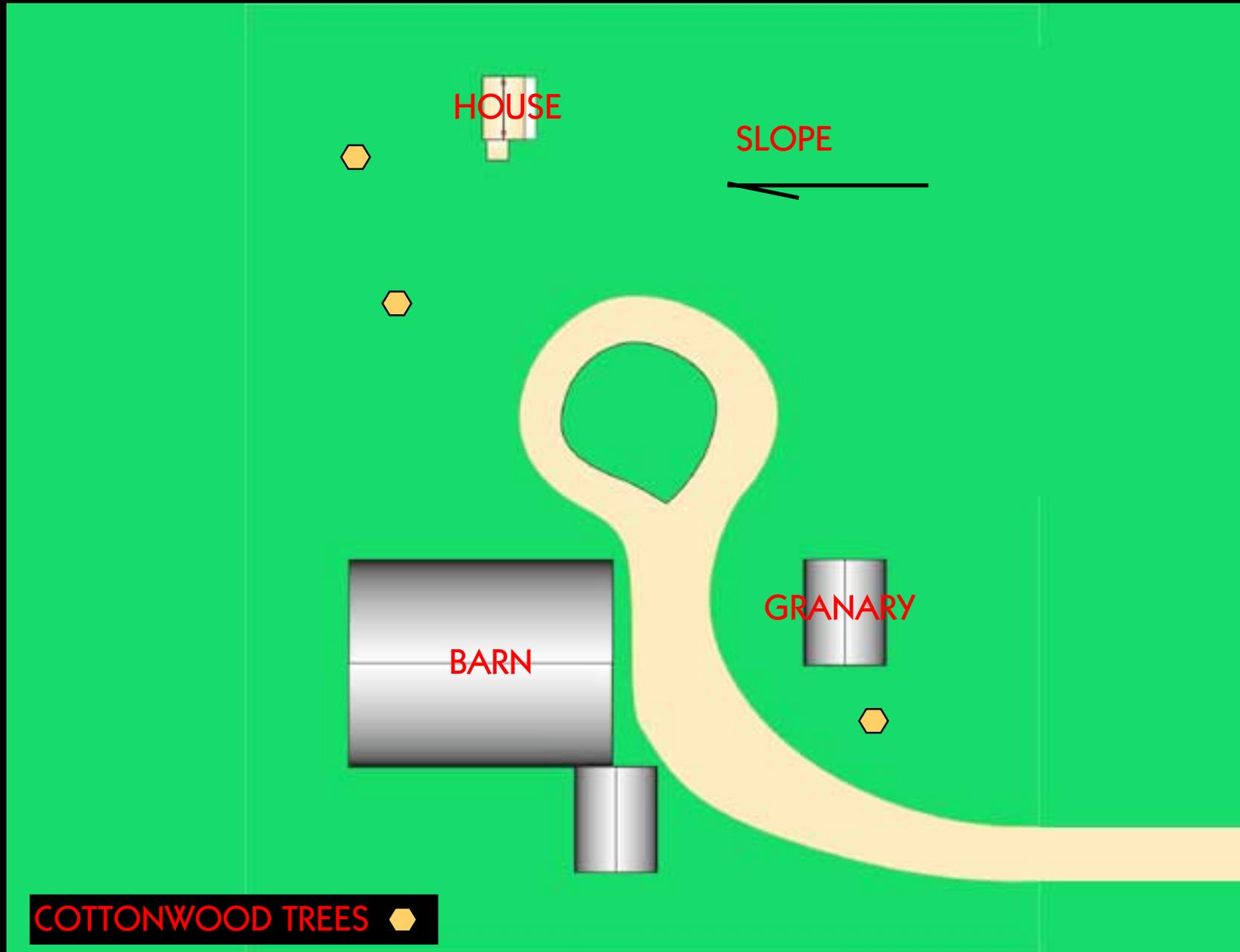
Grassland meant that crops could be planted immediately yet in the wide-open spaces a new hazard was discovered—wind. The house would be located in a shallow depression and probably for the first time in his life, Thomas would plant trees for shelter.

The farm looking West-Northwest (the road runs exactly East-West). The house is partially sheltered from the East, and there were large Cottonwood trees for summer shade but the house is exposed at all other points of the compass. The Veblens would discover the meaning of windchill long before the term was used in the newspapers.



For a man who had cut down acres of trees just to get at the poor soil underneath, Thomas would underestimate this new problem in his joy of having his first prime agricultural land.

There were no obviously good solutions. It is clear Thomas was aware of the problem that wind would pose. Yet 125 years later, some of his choices would almost destroy the house and make the restoration very difficult.



# The Restoration gets New Energy

New blood arrives

Ruthmary Penick, the Carleton College archivist, lobbied for funds to rebuild the house. She was not always successful but did get the roof repaired. This saved the house from total destruction.

The Minnesota Historical Society (MHS) did two studies on a restoration but failed to solve the question, "What would you do with the house once it was restored?" It was judged too far from the large highways to become a tourist attraction and too small to become a bed and breakfast establishment.

Enter Bill Melton.



The MHS decided to dispose of the property to whomever could make a reasonable offer. William C. Melton “won” the rights to fix up Thorstein Veblen’s childhood home.

Shown here chatting with the author and playing with his small son, Melton’s country outfit hides his obvious qualifications for the restoration. He had restored a farmhouse before, was the son of a noted Veblen scholar, and a senior staff economist with IDS/American Express. He knew why the property was historically important.



Bill Melton probably didn't have any better ideas of what to with the house than the Minnesota Historical Society.

At first, he probably thought it would be a nice hobby that would lead to a rural country house for weekend retreats.

Soon after the basic cleanup began, the extent of the structural damage was exposed. The author, shown here scrapping out a 1940s-era kitchen, uncovered one of those telltale soft spots in the floor.

This was not to be a weekend hobby employing volunteers. This was a project for professionals.



Peter McKinnon would prove the perfect choice for general contractor.

He lives in the neighborhood. His own restored farmhouse is located next to the Valley Grove Church, some of his neighbors are distantly related to the Veblens, and he has a generous dose of what Thorstein Veblen called The Instinct of Workmanship.

Peter was much more than a contractor, he was an enthusiastic participant in a historical restoration. He was open to all suggestions concerning authenticity. When he discovered the incredible level of craftsmanship exhibited by Thomas Veblen, the master carpenter, he was thrilled that the bar had been set so high.

From the start, Peter would use the question “What would Thomas have done?” to settle all matters of methodology.



# Arresting the damage

Deciding how to proceed is often the biggest problem of historical reconstruction. With the Veblen farm, however, the esoteric concerns about historical authenticity could wait. First efforts would address the matter of simply keeping the buildings from falling down.

In spite of the difficulty and expense, this is the framing that justified the decision to restore the barn. Done completely with hand tools using wood harvested from the Veblen woodlot, this masterpiece of mortise and tenon framing shows that Thomas was well-versed in traditional Viking jointery. The board framing that angles into the room was the later modification that failed.



Too much structure had been removed in an open floor-plan modification, which is why the roof eventually began to cave in—mostly from snow-load.

A computerized program was run to determine the minimum bracing necessary to cope with snow and wind loads. The same program proved that the roof would not have collapsed had Thomas's framing been kept. Whatever methods he used, Thomas was evidently a skilled "structural engineer."



Shown here are a series of jacks and chains used to straighten out the remaining framing.

Except for one silo, all the 20th century improvements have been removed and the framing straightened as that first summer (1992) wore on.

Much of the roof was still missing, however.



When the old shingles were removed,  
about 50 percent of the roof boards required replacement.

New  
framing was  
placed in  
likely  
original  
locations  
as  
determined  
by mortise  
holes.



It required real courage to remove old shingles from rotten boards.

Progress was slow as repaired areas provided footing for old sections that needed shingle removal, then possibly board or even rafter replacement.



The roof goes on; the leaves are down.

The rush to beat winter is still a problem of Minnesota construction—even with power tools.

Building such a barn with hand tools in the five real months of construction season while also creating a farm from virgin grassland, demonstrates Thomas's incredible planning ability, skills, and capacity for hard work.



Just made it! The roof is straight, the shingles are on and the big holes are covered.

Whatever can be saved is now protected from further damage.



All obviously non-20th century modifications have been removed—the rot uncovered.

Major repairs  
were  
indicated.  
They would  
wait for spring.



Lilac time 1993. Repairs on the house have begun in earnest.

The major rot involved the rim joist. This was a squared oak beam where the house met the foundation. To replace the rim joists, the house would have to be raised. Here that process has started.



The north-side rim joist required replacement along with most of the rest..  
Peter McKinnon is shown working on the square-section white oak replacement.

Note the wedge-tenoned joint at the corner. Peter felt compelled to recreate that joint even though it would be hidden forever.



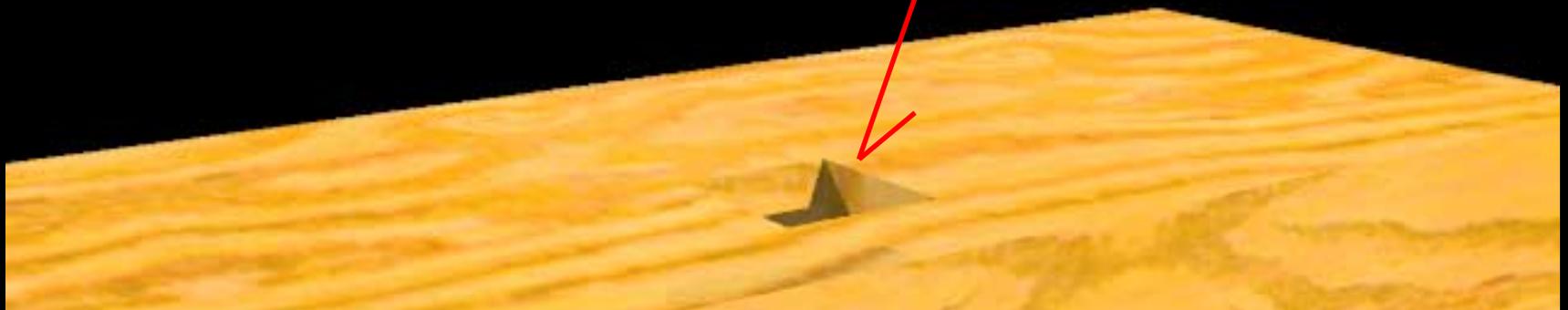
Significantly, all the wall studs were originally mortised into the sill beam. Peter's explanation for this near-furniture craftsmanship for simple house framing (that will never be seen,) is that it was just Thomas's way of "showing off as a craftsman."

This explanation is attractive for it would be just one more origin for the ideas contained in the Instinct of Workmanship. More likely, this example of a carpenter's high art was the result of traditional training or the economic and technical constraints of very expensive, low-quality nails.

In spite of the great difficulty, this feature was recreated.

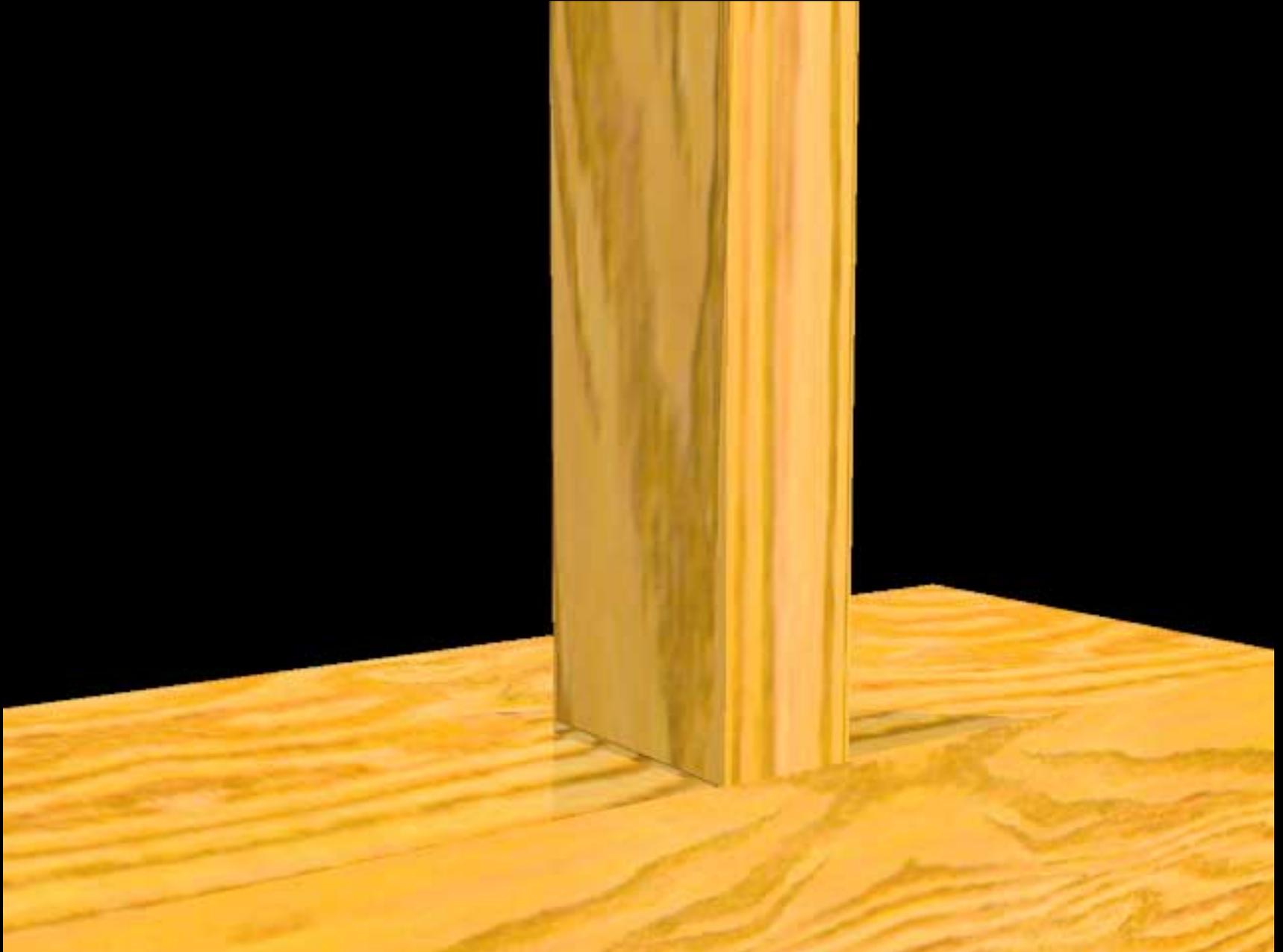


Notched wall stud



Mortise

These joints were very strong but removing all that mortise material from oak with hand tools would have been a lot of work.



The east side of the house sustained the most structural damage because of a bad earlier renovation of the porch. A concrete pad had trapped water against the rim joist causing extensive rot.

Further, during the years of vacancy, snow had blown through the two ground-floor doors and the resulting meltwater caused rot in the floors and walls.



The end view of the rebuilt hardwood floor shows that the original construction method was groove and spline. This suggests that the flooring was produced with hand tools on the job site rather than a tongue and groove flooring that would have been produced at a millwork.

Andrew Veblen claimed this was the first house in the county with hardwood floors. Creating a hardwood floor from simple boards using only hand tools would have involved an incredible amount of brute labor. Such an effort would have left a lasting impression on the Veblen children so Andrew's claim is plausible—even if impossible to verify.



The first floor sitting room shortly after the hardwood floor had been repaired. The rot extended at least four feet in from the wall. On the board nearest the foreground that extends into the new wood, there is a patch. (end of arrow)



A closer look at the patch reveals a careful job. Based on the overall craftsmanship exhibited throughout the house, this was probably not a repair done at the time of the original construction. More likely, it was done to patch damage done by a house full of active children long after the house was finished. Even so, because it has all the marks of Thomas's craft, it was saved at some trouble—even though there was a small bit of rot on this board.



# Breakthrough

The Restoration gains Direction

In Bill Melton's proposal to the Minnesota Historical Society he promised to use a book entitled "Thorstein Veblen and his America" as a guide for the restoration.

It was a reasonable promise. This biography, written by a respected Columbia University professor named Joseph Dorfman and published in 1934, has long been considered definitive in matters Veblenian.

It was soon discovered that Dorfman's book would be very little help in the restoration. On page 10 he wrote that the house was a "one-storey or a one-and-a-half-storey house like many of the farm houses at that time, with access to the second storey or attic by means of a ladder through a trap door."

Obviously this was not the house needing repair.

Like the good scholar he is, Bill Melton went to the MHS to see if there was not something better. There was. In the files were copies of letters that [Andrew Veblen wrote to Professor Dorfman.](#) Dorfman had sent a copy of the manuscript for review and Andrew Veblen was attempting to correct the record as it concerned the conditions of Thorstein's youth.

The first letter from Andrew, dated February 25, 1930, covers topics such as Norwegian naming conventions, whether Thorstein knew English before he attended Carleton College, and the conditions of frontier life. At the end he gives a short description of the Minnesota house. This letter covers five closely-spaced typewritten pages.

It is clear that Andrew considers Dorfman's book little more than character assassination. On March 13, 1930, he follows up with another letter—this time it is six pages of even more tightly spaced lines. (The copy is very hard to read)

Andrew Veblen was for years a Physics professor at Iowa State University and was from all accounts a very meticulous scholar. But beneath his careful descriptions of the life as a son of a pioneer is a barely contained rage at the insult to the family. He probably placed those letters in the files of the MHS because he hoped that some day, someone, would set the record straight.

The descriptions of the Minnesota house were amazingly accurate. Soon, it became the philosophy of the jobsite that if Andrew had written it, the evidence that he was correct could be found if the search was sufficiently diligent.

But the letter that intrigued everyone most was written May 10, 1931. This letter was only one page but it begins, “I am mailing you, enclosed two prints of the Rice County house, one of the barn...”

The pictures were not on file at the MHS but Bill Melton, on a business trip to New York, went up to Columbia University to see if by any chance those pictures might be found among the papers of the now-deceased Joseph Dorfman.

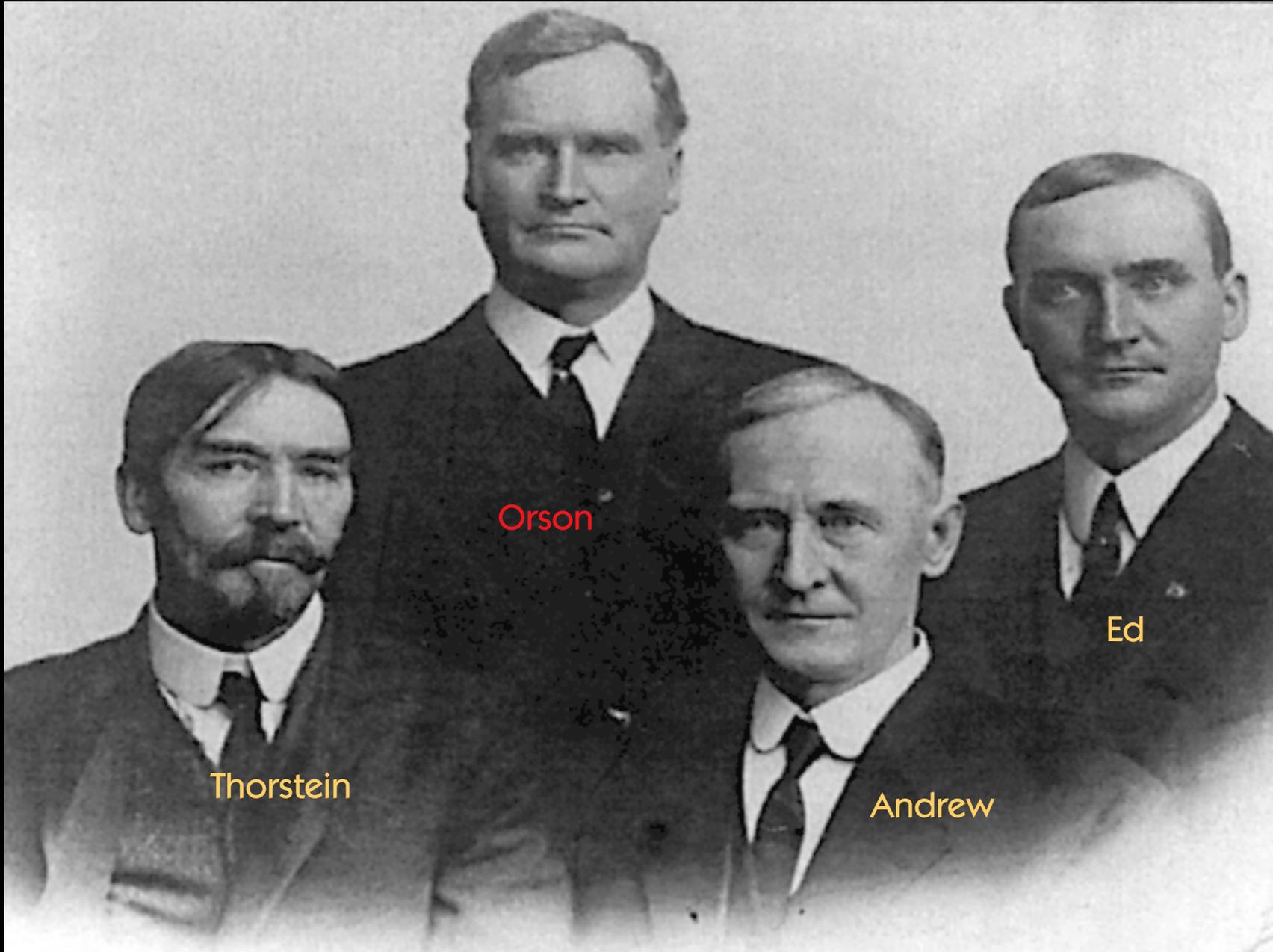
Anyone who has done restoration will agree that there is absolutely nothing that tops historical photos for settling those many debates concerning authenticity that crop up during the process. One picture is worth many more times than a thousand words in restoration because words can be interpreted so many ways.

Actually, once Melton got to Columbia, the pictures proved surprisingly easy to find.

Eureka!!!

The restoration had now acquired a purpose even old Thorstein could approve of. He had burned his personal papers shortly before his death to prevent the sort of biography written by Joseph Dorfman.

The Veblen Brothers 1910



Fixing the farm was now much more than a sentimental reconstruction of a shrine, it was a way to correct an account that had stood virtually unchallenged for almost 60 years

This is the house the would be created down to the last detail

Photo taken 1890

Peter McKinnon finessed the objection Thorstein would have to shrines by dedicating his efforts to Thomas, the original builder reasoning, "Thomas was the genius here, Thorstein just wrote it down."

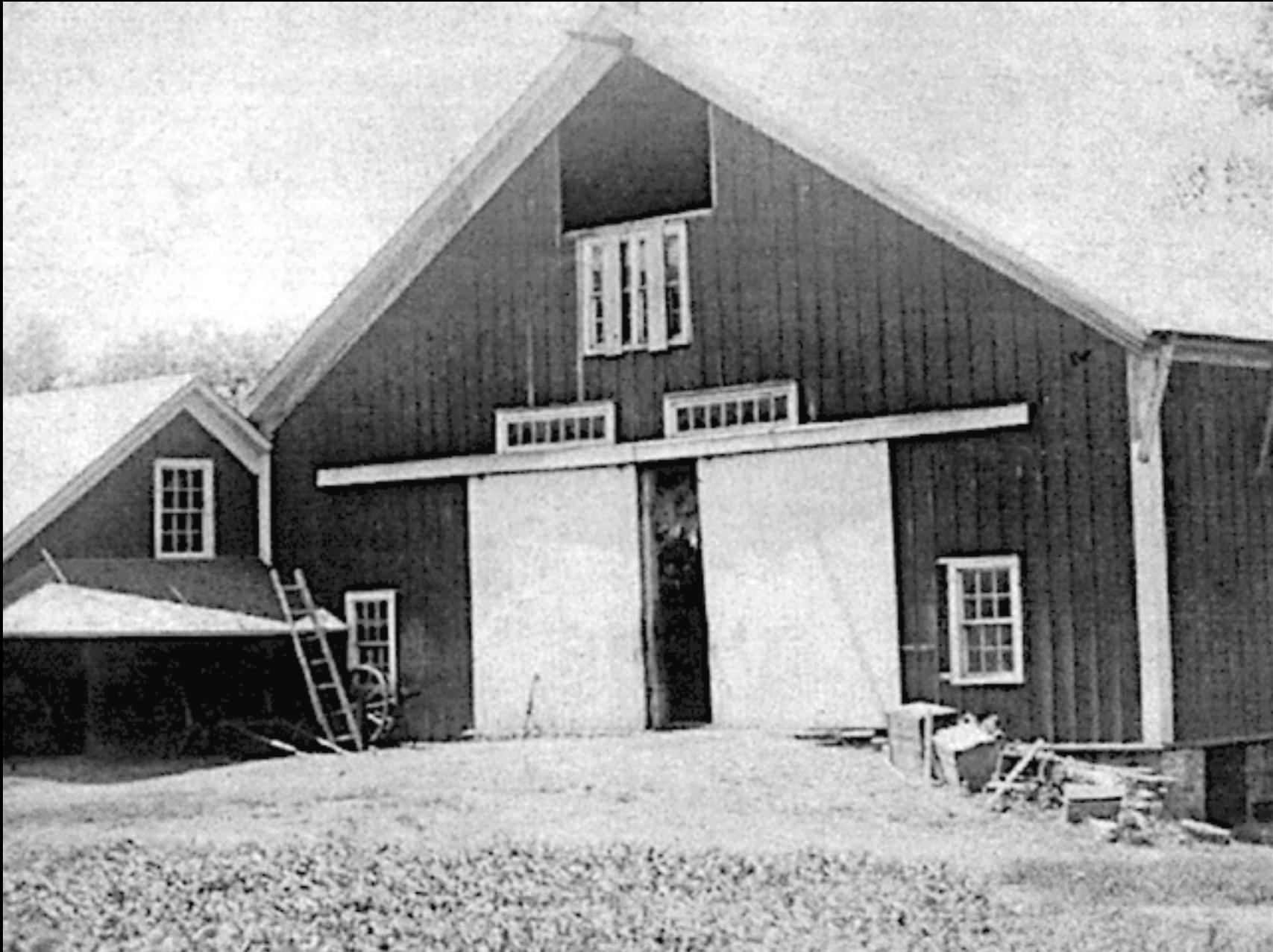


“A great barn will build a great house, but not the other way around.”

Old Nordic saying

Photo taken 1890

Andrew included this picture of the barn little knowing how unimpressed Joseph Dorfman would be. This was Andrew's proof that Thorstein was not the son of poor peasants but a very successful landowner. But one would have to be from rural America to understand this.

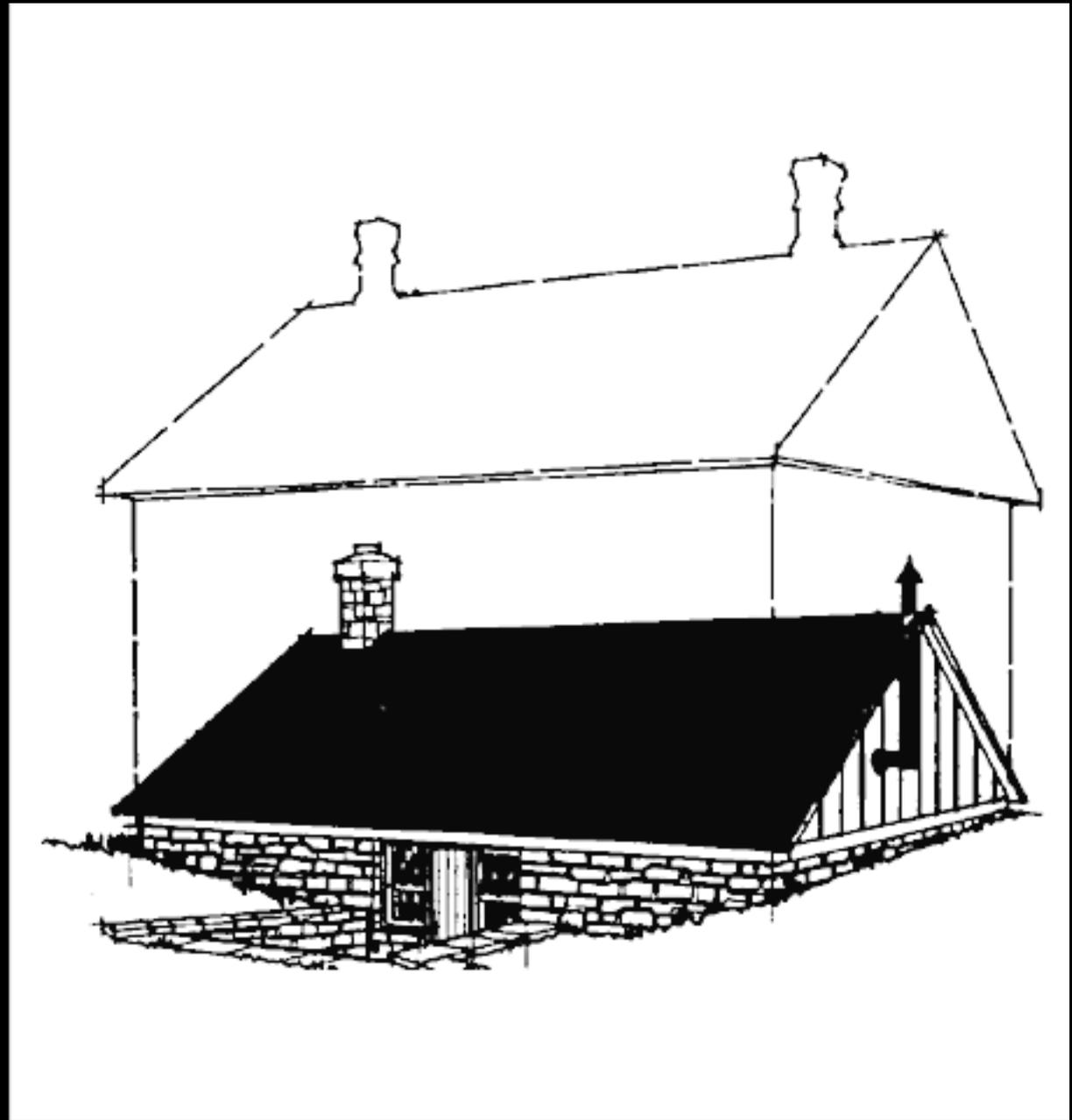


# Uncovering History

In the spring of 1866, Thomas Veblen would begin laying the foundation for the new house using limestone quarried during the previous winter. Prairie was plowed for the first time, crops planted, and a small barn built that summer as well.

By late fall, a temporary roof had been installed over the foundation and the family moved in.

The foundation was laid square with the compass. The door faced west.



As can be seen in this view of the west side of the house, the opening had been buried. The only reasons to suspect a walkout entrance to the house ever existed were Andrew's accounts, a "bricked-up" opening visible from the inside, and the fact that the rim joist in this section was the only part of the whole perimeter that did not need replacing.



Digging for historical treasure. All speculations about the historical record would soon be confirmed or denied.



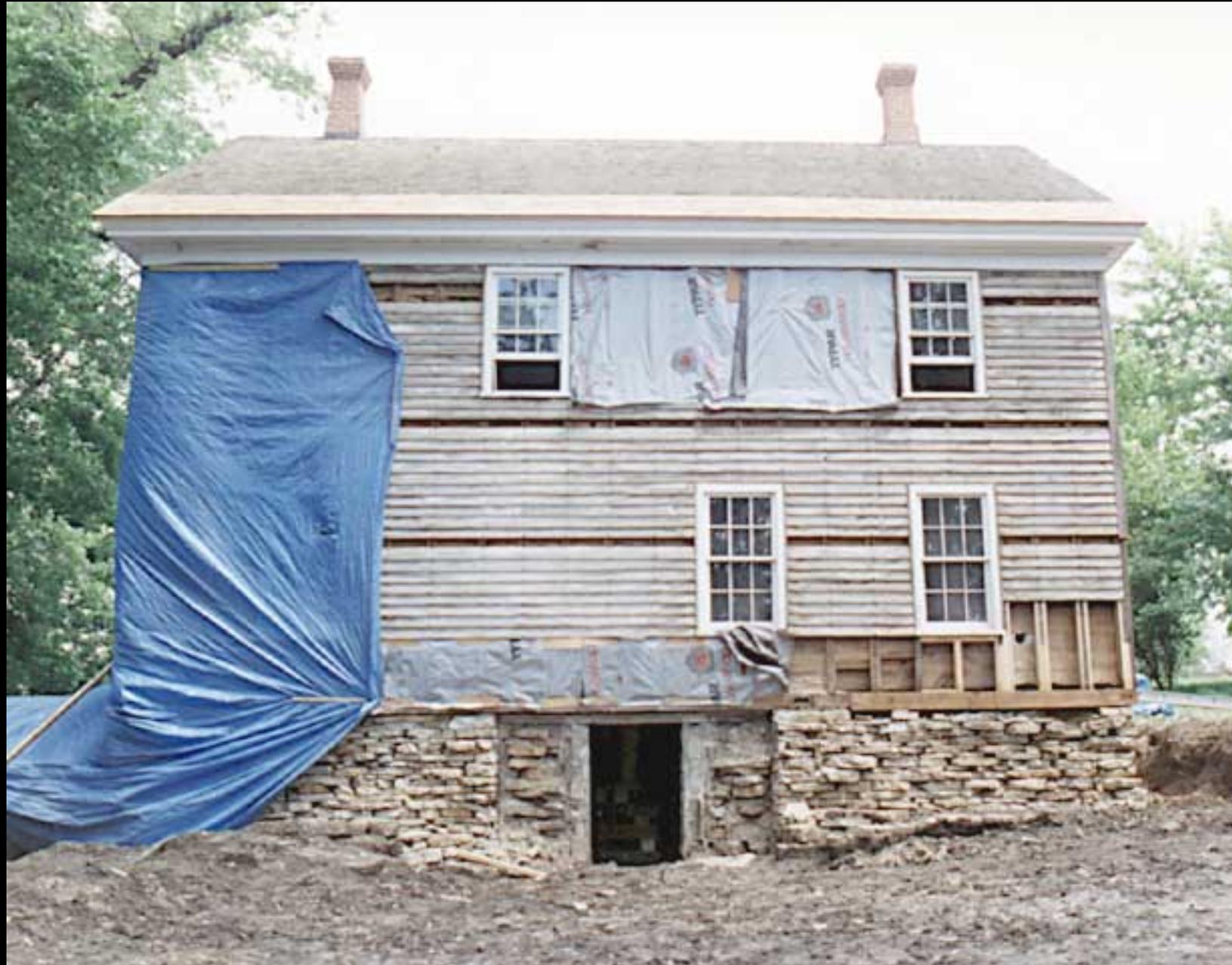
Expecting to find a simple doorway, an elegant stone entryway was found instead.

The steps leading to the cellar-home door are wide, graceful, and are set between curved retaining walls. Records indicate the family first occupied the cellar house on November 15th—which is truly tempting the Gods of Winter in Minnesota. In the crush to finish a dwelling during the havoc of harvest, such fancy stonework could have be easily delayed. So it is possible that these steps were not completed that second year.



As long as the backhoe was on the job site, the whole foundation was exposed. The diggings were examined for historical artifacts. Virtually nothing was found.

Summer 1993 was extremely rainy—the upper Mississippi River stayed above flood stage for over five months. Because the farm is on a hill, it was spared flooding, but the flaws of a stone foundation set into the side of a hill were exposed. The basement was probably always wet at least part of the year, and that soil erosion had raised the ground level over time which had caused the rot in the rim joists.



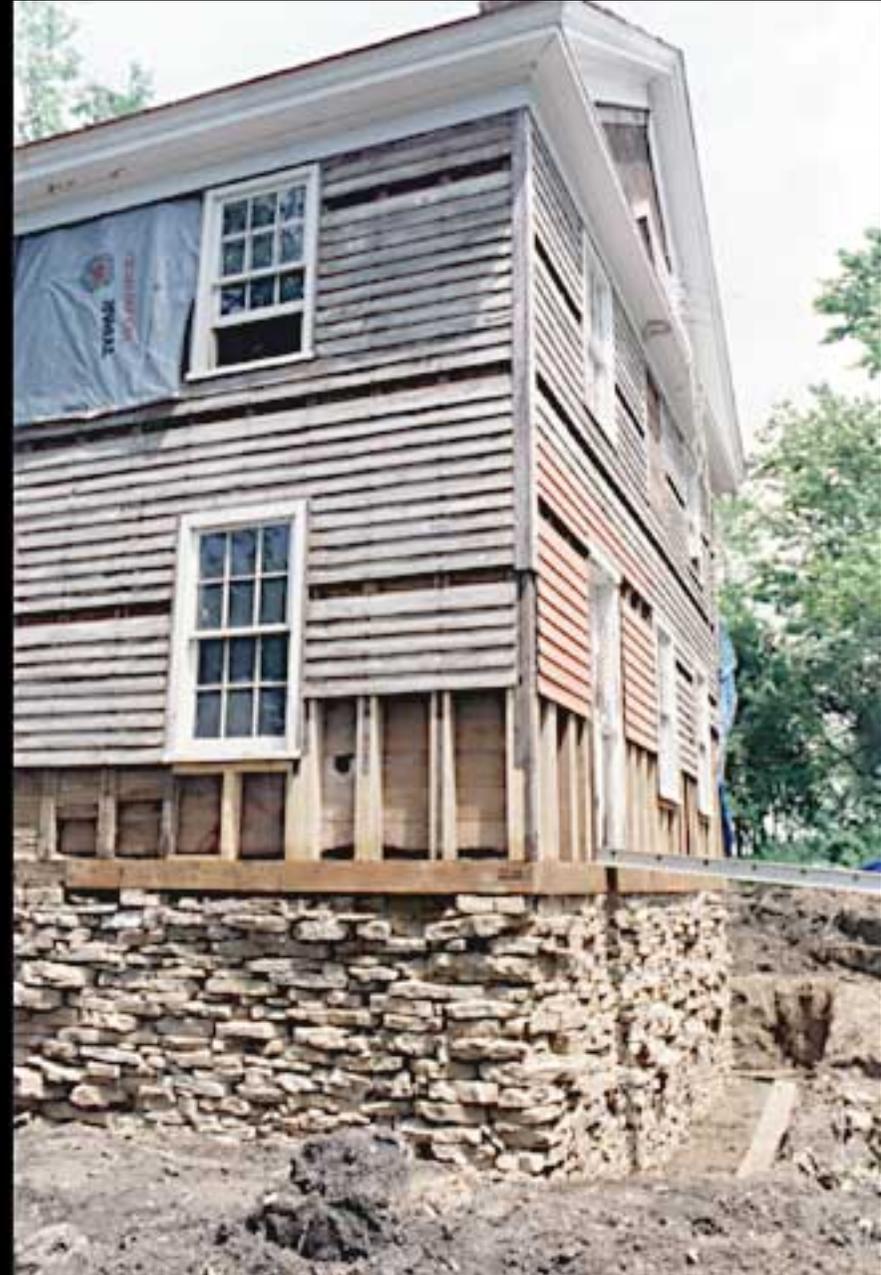
The walkout entrance is rebuilt. Unfortunately the old stone entrance had to be removed. Quarried limestone deteriorates quite rapidly if kept continuously damp. These stones would break if stepped on.

So it was decided that the old steps would be recreated using new stones set in properly drained footings.



With the foundation completely exposed, it could be tuckpointed from the outside. Then a waterproofing was applied, and an elaborate system of drainage tiles were laid along the footings.

With some justification it was reasoned that if a dry basement could be had in the monsoons of 1993, the foundation had been indeed preserved.



After 100 years of modification and accumulated junk had been removed, this huge hearth was exposed. Even though there were only two windows and one door, they were exposed to the Northwest Winds. It required a lot of fuel to keep such a large fire going. And for the first time, wood was no longer a nuisance but something to be hauled 3 km.



The stone partition in the cellar repeats the theme of an opening designed to accept a door with windows on either side. Here shown during restoration with window, doors, and shashes removed.



The sleeping quarters. Even in his desperate race to provide shelter from the oncoming winter, Thomas installed a wood ceiling. The stone ledges under the windows are wide and high enough to provide comfortable seating.



The door and window frames built by Thomas were carefully restored and fit back into their original openings after the stonework had been tuckpointed.

The ceiling was reinstalled in the order it had been removed.

Incredibly, the cross-braces on the back side of the door are dovetailed into place and have kept it stable for 125 years.



When other interior doors had to be recreated, the identical construction methods were used. This is the dovetailed crossbuck.



And this shows how groove-and-spline construction looks from the end view.



Andrew said there was a well directly under the kitchen—an enormous cold-weather convenience. It took some digging, but Peter and crew found it exactly where it was supposed to be.



In the spirit of restoration, only that siding that was rotten was replaced—using historically accurate nails. Peter found out that square nails tends to split the siding. His solution was to predrill all nail locations saying, “I have no idea how the old guys did it.”



A break in the clouds.

There were two layers of siding. The South peak shows the top layer still in place. The orange paint near the back door suggests the “mudroom” was built very early.

What has been replaced represents what could not be saved on the inner layer.



# The Stonecutters Arrive

The interior of the shed suggests that this building was the original barn. The iron strap suggests that this barn was built in stages--a small shelter and then one slightly larger.

The rafters are simple poles flattened on one side.



Building the barns required much more stonework than the house.

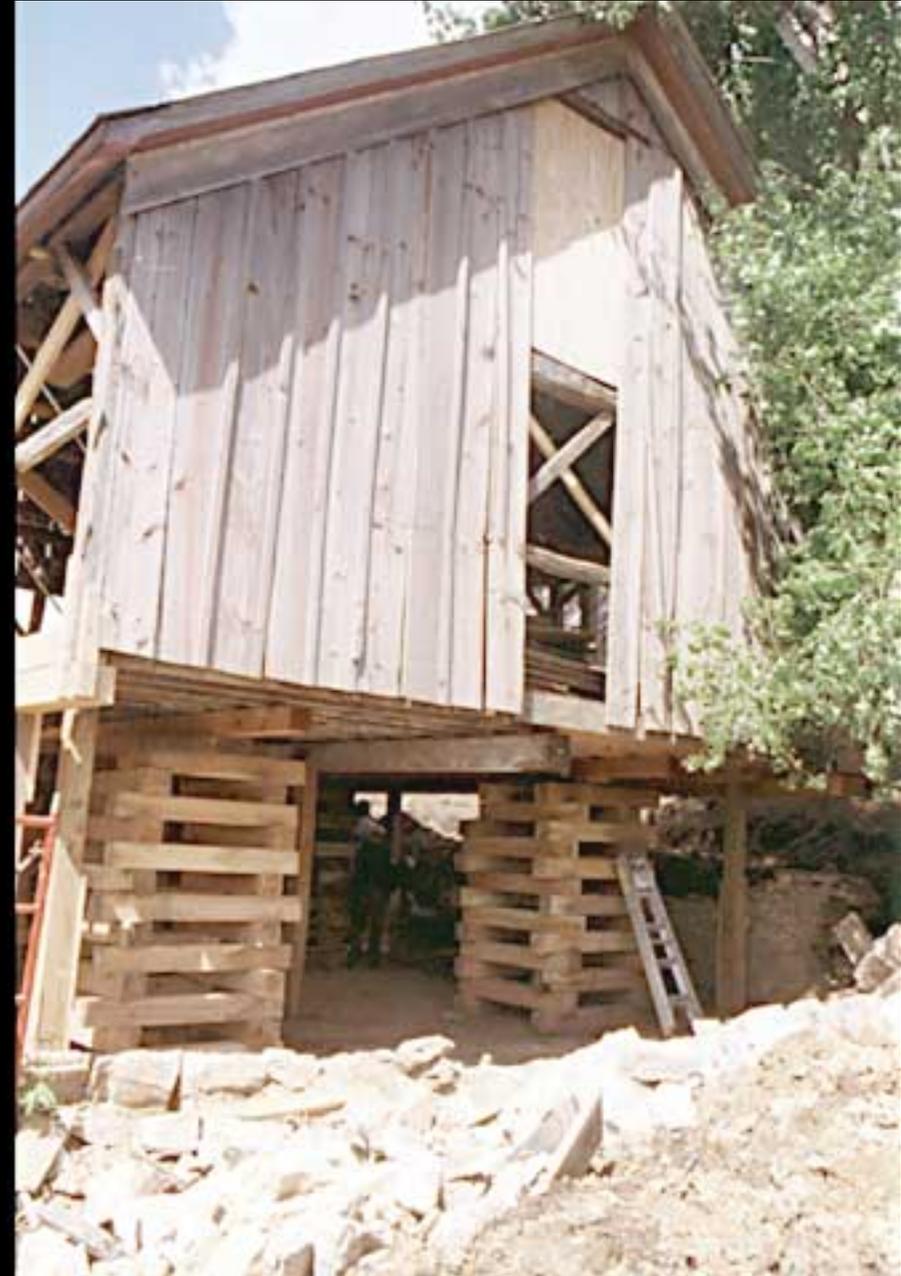
The sorry state of the foundation walls with the remaining mortar removed in preparation for tuckpointing.



Just as the wall was ready to be pointed, one of those infamous rains of the summer of 1993 dropped seven inches in two hours. The foundation under the stable collapsed.



Fortunately, for safety reasons, a cribwork had been installed which prevented the structure's collapse.



It required three men a month to rebuild the walls. Even though this effort included cleaning up the mess, sorting the stone, and those other things that make restoration at least twice as difficult as new construction, it gives a real notion of how much labor is required. Thomas probably had the help of up to three men that summer but he also built the cellar home. Recall that laying stone was not his profession.



The foundation on the barn's west end was beyond saving so along with the walls under the stable, both were rebuilt completely. The stone masons have done a superb job of restoration.



One suggested that Thorstein probably would have been secretly pleased to know that not many churches have so much fine stonework, these days, as the rebuilt foundation of a nearly-destroyed barn.



Working outdoors in winter CAN be done. But it is not pleasant. This experiment in roofing was tried on a sunny day that was also, unfortunately, minus 10° F. Thomas might have needed to work outside when it was extremely cold to shelter animals, for example. But this job did not have quite that priority. It was about historic preservation—not survival. The experiment was not repeated.



Closing up

The professional stonemasons left after the barn had been completed. Because of the problems of the rain delays, their whole company was behind schedule.

The mudroom required new footings. Peter's crew had successfully completed every other task they had encountered. So a real-life experiment of what happens when carpenters become stonemasons was conducted informally. Like Thomas, they did a fine job but it also looks like it was done by carpenters.



The foundation for the mudroom is done and looks a good deal like the original cellar. The stone did not come from the original quarry, however. Because of unsound quarrying practices of the past, the original quarry now can only produce aggregate.

There are many limestone outcroppings in Southeastern Minnesota. The new stone came from the nearest quarry that still produces building stone.

A summer of rain has produced a very clean sky.



The bricklayers did finally arrive. The chimneys had to be rebuilt. They were not original and did not conform to code. Worse, they did not look like the 1890 picture.

It's raining again.



This is not an optical illusion. The rebuilt chimney really does slant. Thomas did not think like a bricklayer who would have insisted the chimneys go straight up. Instead, bricklaying would conform to other considerations such as floor layout.

It was quite easy to see that Thomas wanted the chimneys to emerge at the peak of the roof. This saved the house because this location is optimum for both the chimney and the roof.

It was also very easy to determine the original walls. The location for the chimneys on the second floor did not align with the holes on the first floor or the roof. These are the chimneys that retain the original location while still conforming to modern fire code.



This is some fancy bricklaying. The original chimneys were something of a work of art as well. Not surprisingly, Veblen would eventually name a book "The Instinct of Workmanship." He did not have to look far for a prime example.

Building the chimney to code required the wall between the kitchen and front parlor be relocated. By straightening the wall, space was provided for a modern heating system.



The detailing begins on the new chimney.

Authentic restoration is in the details.  
This is especially true when building to a  
photograph. Everyone can easily see if it  
is done right.



It is getting cold. The chimney at the right has been wrapped to assist curing.



Doing what they do best, the carpenters were very happy to build the mudroom. The modern mudroom would be fully insulated and be plumbed for a washer-dryer. It only had to look correct in the pictures and a full-function mudroom would make the house much more habitable.



For the first winter in 20 years, it is warm inside.



# The Porch

Fresh from the shop, these porch pillars are visually identical to the 1890 picture. As original building methodology is unknown, the porch would be built using best known modern practice.



Lots of on-site figuring needed to be done. The floor would be slightly pitched to promote run-off of water. There would be plenty of flashing to protect those carefully repaired studs and rim joist.



The upper level might someday need to support a crowd. It is also as exposed to elements as a roof.



With ceiling bead, flooring and crown molding in place the porch takes on a finished look.



The assumption was that the general public would walk on this porch. It was really screwed together well.



Note the careful shaping of the spindles.



The porch nears completion. The missing parts are the rail and staircase.



# Finishing Upstairs

When fully uncovered, the master bedroom floor shows the signs of hand fitted floor. The boards taper from end to end as they do when first cut from a tree. As this floor had never been cut into for any reason, the assumption was that this is original.



The second floor had plastered rooms. There were no accounts of the plastering process so it is not clear if Thomas tried to do that himself as well. The old plaster was in terrible shape so it was all removed. It was very thick and employed wood lath.

Here the plasterers rig up a system for getting all that replacement plaster where it would be needed. Because of the thickness required, enough plaster would be used on the second floor to do a typical home.



Troweling on the scratch coat. Because of the thickness involved, commercial-grade metal lath was used for stability. Wood lath is almost impossible to obtain and because of swelling, wood would have probably caused cracking in the final job.

Because no one would ever see the lath anyway, metal was a good choice and as Peter reasoned, "Thomas always used the best available methods."



The floor in the loom room is finally patched. It was very tedious work matching boards for grain and taper. The new plaster looks terrific.



With the finish applied, the patches can still be seen. Sunlight and time would take care of that problem. There is nothing like time to make new wood look old.



# Detailing Downstairs

Behind the built-in corner cabinet of the first floor is the shadow of a wall sconce. This indicates that furniture had to wait. Thomas was certainly not the first builder to treat his own home as an ongoing project—and not the last. When Peter first uncovered this sconce shadow, he could only mutter knowingly “winter project” when describing the corner cabinet.

There has probably been few pieces of furniture ever removed more carefully. But it had to be removed because that was that nearly destroyed east wall behind it. And removing it provided an excellent view of the original wainscoting.



The wall between the two first floor sitting rooms had been modified. It was returned to its original position. Peter used poplar for planking instead of the original pine for three reasons—clear pine has virtually vanished from the market in clear wide boards, it holds paint extremely well, and it would make it easier to identify the 1990s modifications should any further evidence emerge indicating error.



The pass-through between the kitchen and dining room was built according to the shadows on the wall, ceiling and floor. The doors and joint were copied from the corner hutch. The wallboards were cut to match the existing wall while the new interior doors were copied from others in the house.



While suburbia made pass-throughs a cliché, this was a very luxurious feature in 1867. The drawers are made so that they can be opened from either side. Whether this is authentic is open to question but it was a best guess.



Much of the original woodwork on the first floor had been faux-grained. So at great trouble and expense, this feature was recreated. That door really does look as if it were constructed of quarter-sawn oak when finished.



The wainscoting and corner hutch get their faux-grain finishes. The paint is still wet in this photo.

Determining the grain pattern for the wainscoting was easy because so much of the original remained. The hutch, however, was a best guess based on a careful rubthrough of the old coats of paint.



# Restoration joy

surprises that make a great effort worthwhile

The place in the attic where, according to Bill Melton, “the Institutionalists will come to light their votive candles.” In this space between the chimney and the window, Thorstein Veblen became a political economist. One can wonder what he saw out that window that gave him such a clear-eyed vision of reality, yet in truth, this window was probably frosted over for at least five months a year.

This space is not large but it is private. It is the farthest location in the house from any exterior door. When Thorstein returned from Yale, his family thought he had malaria. It was then that he began to sleep and read in this hideaway.



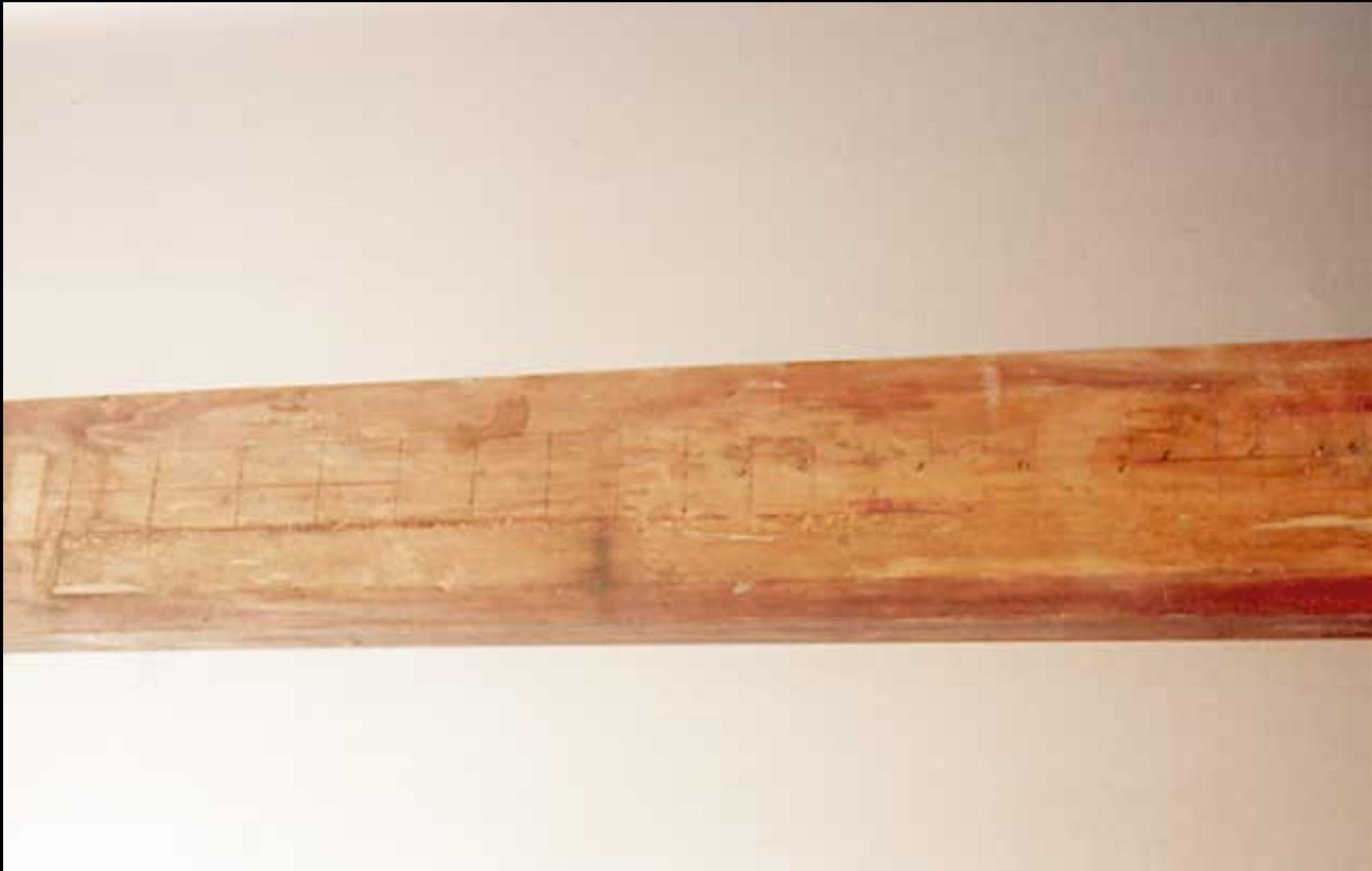
The interior wall paneling exhibits a very rare tongue-tongue, groove-groove pattern. As virtually all mill-run lumber is the more traditional tongue and groove variety, the implication is that this paneling may have been fabricated on-site as well.



When holes were drilled for electrical outlet boxes, it was discovered that the kitchen wall were two layers thick. On the original wall this picture was discovered. Obviously Thorstein's mother was not immune from the winds of fashion. That a second wall was built later also indicates that sealing the house from the wind was a real problem before the widespread use of caulking.



Found in a wall, this measuring device still defies explanation. Interestingly, its markings get proportionately closer together as they are laid out from right to left. Hand-fabricated measuring devices with logarithmic or square function spacing demonstrates that Thomas's understanding of his craft was highly complex.



Found beneath rotting plaster, these initials were created by driving lathing nails on their side by a playful youth. Thorstein Bunde Veblen was obviously quite aware of the excitement surrounding the construction of this grand home on the prairie and wanted to leave a mark.

A small door through the plaster in the wall of the master bedroom was added so that all can still see this proof that this really was where Thorstein lived.



It was hard

The Veblen farm still produces food. With the barn in the background, John Hellerud, a distant cousin of Thorstein's through Kari, prepares the ground for soybean planting. It is easy to lose sight of the fact that all the building was done around the work of farming 200 acres before electricity and internal combustion engines. It was a life of continuous hard work.



Corn became a dominant crop because it thrived on a short growing season. It is not known exactly the crops planted by Thomas, but all had to produce in the brief Minnesota summers.



The lush woods where Thorstein played as a child give a colorful warning that they too will soon be barren and gray.



Fall is glorious in northern hardwood forests.  
The beauty was probably lost on the pioneers  
who were picking corn by hand.



A late October sunset highlights a lone burr oak at the edge of the graveyard where Thomas and Kari are buried. Such trees survived because they could withstand the fires that periodically swept the grasslands. This tree is probably 400 years old and was already magnificent when Thorstein was a boy.



This granary had not been built when the Veblens lived on the farm. But it has been kept because it is 19th century, it is very clever, and it reminds us how important storing provisions was to those brave folks who settled this harsh but fruitful land.



Winter is long. It is the dominant feature of the area. To live in such a place, planning for winter is a daily fact of life.



Winter can also be gorgeous. Here, a dead blade of grass has been transformed into a thing of beauty by hoarfrost.



The hazards of wind are never far away. A windstorm in the summer of 1998 blew a large section of the roof off the partially restored barn and dropped it on the completed shed heavily damaging both.



Because the structure was essentially undamaged, Peter's crew was able to replace the damage in days, rather than the weeks required for the original repairs in 1992.



Norwegians were very successful settling the open grasslands. From the barn looking towards Nerstrand, a late afternoon sun reflects off the crust on the snow. Farming the prairie was much like being a ship at sea. This view looks much like light on the water, a sight which must have confirmed their impressions.



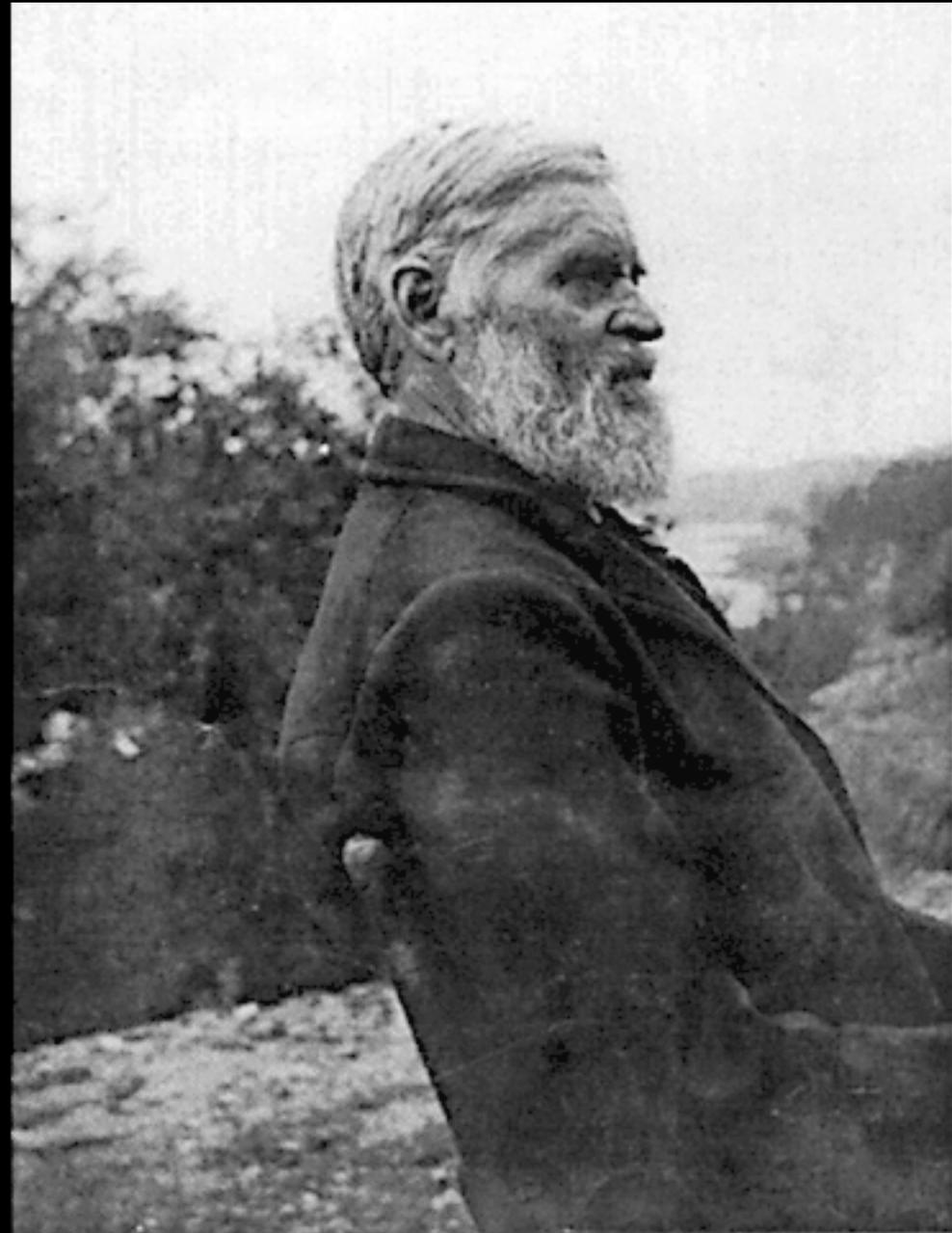
# A Substantial Family

The Veblen clan gathers to celebrate the completion of the house. The kids loved the porch—good thing it was built so well. Thorstein had no children but his grandnieces and nephews seem to share the family traits—handsome, gifted, hardworking, and accomplished.



This is Thomas in the only known photograph. Truly one of Rolvaag's Giants in the Earth. The restoration was a continuous revelation of his skills. It seemed that every time this author would talk to Peter during the project, at some point in the conversation he would shake his head and say of Thomas, "Damn! He was good!"

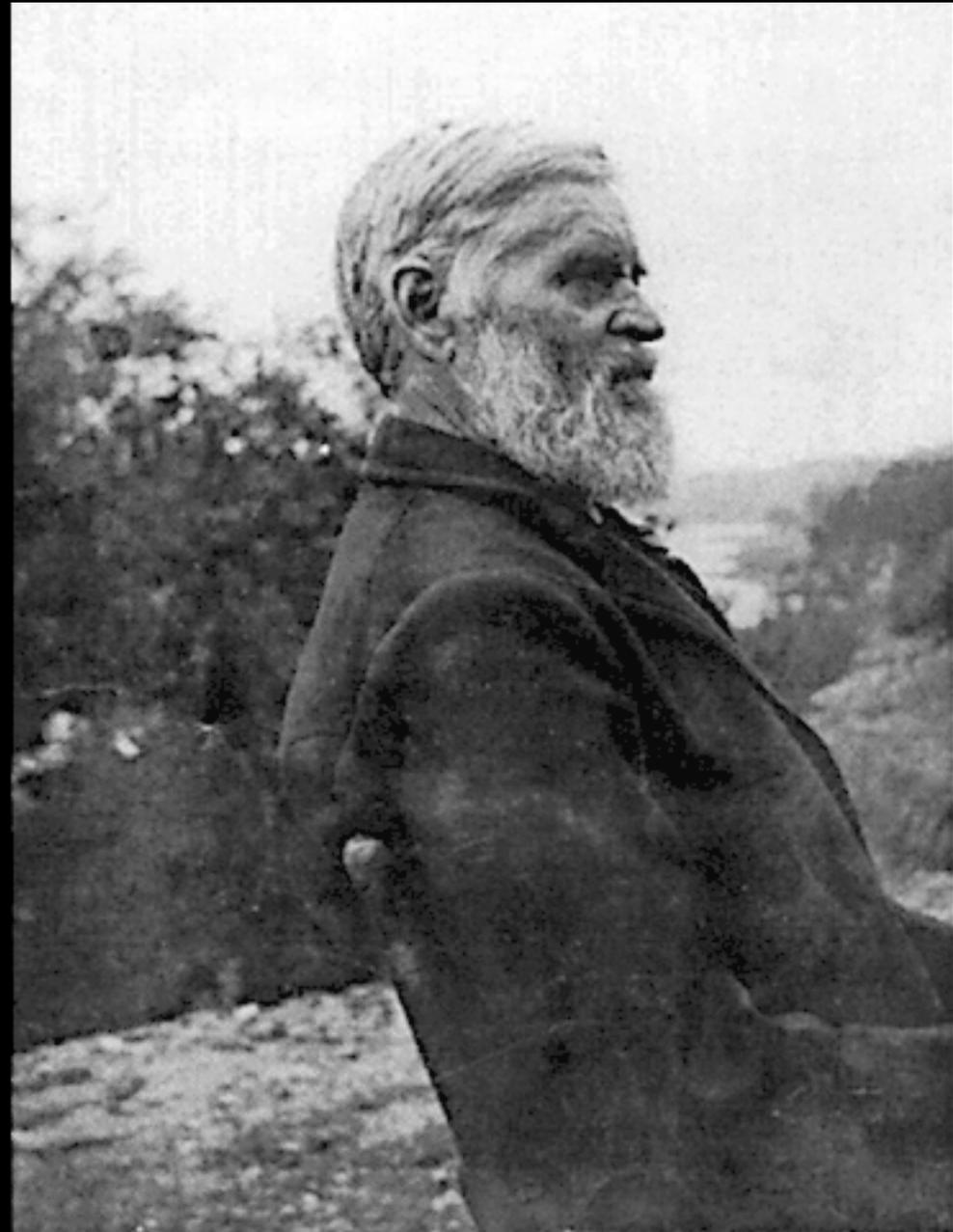
But he was so much more than a gifted craftsman, he was serious reader of the affairs of his day, and provided employment and otherwise helped numerous immigrants gain a foothold in this new land. In spite of some criticism, he sent his daughter Emily to Carleton College—she became the first woman to graduate from college of any of the Norwegian immigrant community.



Thomas understood the science of his day. He crossbred Merino sheep to produce a hardier version capable of surviving Wisconsin winters yet produce high-quality wool. He built Kari a loom—an endeavor that required precision far above that necessary for homebuilding. He invented a portable threshing machine powered by two horses that allowed neighbors with small crops to avoid threshing with a flail.

He was entrepreneurial. Part of his success in Wisconsin was due to his ability with an ax. He discovered he had a market for ax handles and according to Andrew, carved hundreds of them. Folks would buy his handles in the belief that they could then cut with his speed and accuracy.

Finally, Thomas was a man of affairs. He was consulted about far more than ax handles. Thorstein, a man who attended four universities and taught at four more, described Thomas as the most intelligent man he ever met. The restoration uncovered nothing that would dispute that claim.



It is unfortunate that so much of this narrative is only about Thomas. It was his evidence that was being examined. But Thomas had an incredible partner in Kari.

Kari was also highly skilled. Andrew writes that he was 16 before he wore any clothes she had not made. This was quite a process. She would shear the sheep, clean the wool, spin the yarn, weave the cloth, make a dye from bark, dye the cloth, full it, and only then was she ready to cut and sew the clothes. Of course, now she needed thread so for that purpose, she grew flax, cut it down and left it three weeks to rot in the field. Then it was gathered into rolls that had to be roasted in front of the fire. Then the stems would be raked over the sharp edge of a board so the woody parts would fall out and the fibers remain. This fiber was then spun into thread. She also wove heavy linen for work clothes.

She was resourceful. Emily claims the first house the family occupied in Cato township was so cold because of poor construction, she tied her hand-knit mittens to her toddler children so they would not lose them in their sleep and freeze their hands.



Kari was a skilled birth assistant. Combined with a phenomenal memory, she became the authority on births for the community—a skill that came in handy when it became necessary to register for citizenship. Her medical skills did not end at midwife for she could sew up serious cuts and set broken bones as well.

Emily writes how sorry she is that Kari did not have photographs from her youth. She remembers her as so pretty. Reports are that she was the most beautiful in the Valdres valley. As all the children were exceedingly handsome and Thorstein was the only political economist in history that could be called sexy, this claim is probably valid.

Mostly, Emily writes of Kari's enduring kindness and good nature. She was always willing to help out and the house was rarely without guests for long periods of time. She even took in a poor widow that first winter they lived in the basement house. All this while she successfully raised nine children to adulthood on the edge of wilderness.

She loved poetry. It was she who encouraged Thorstein to read the sagas and he was apparently her favorite. Quality Ph.D. thesis will be written on her influence on his writings.

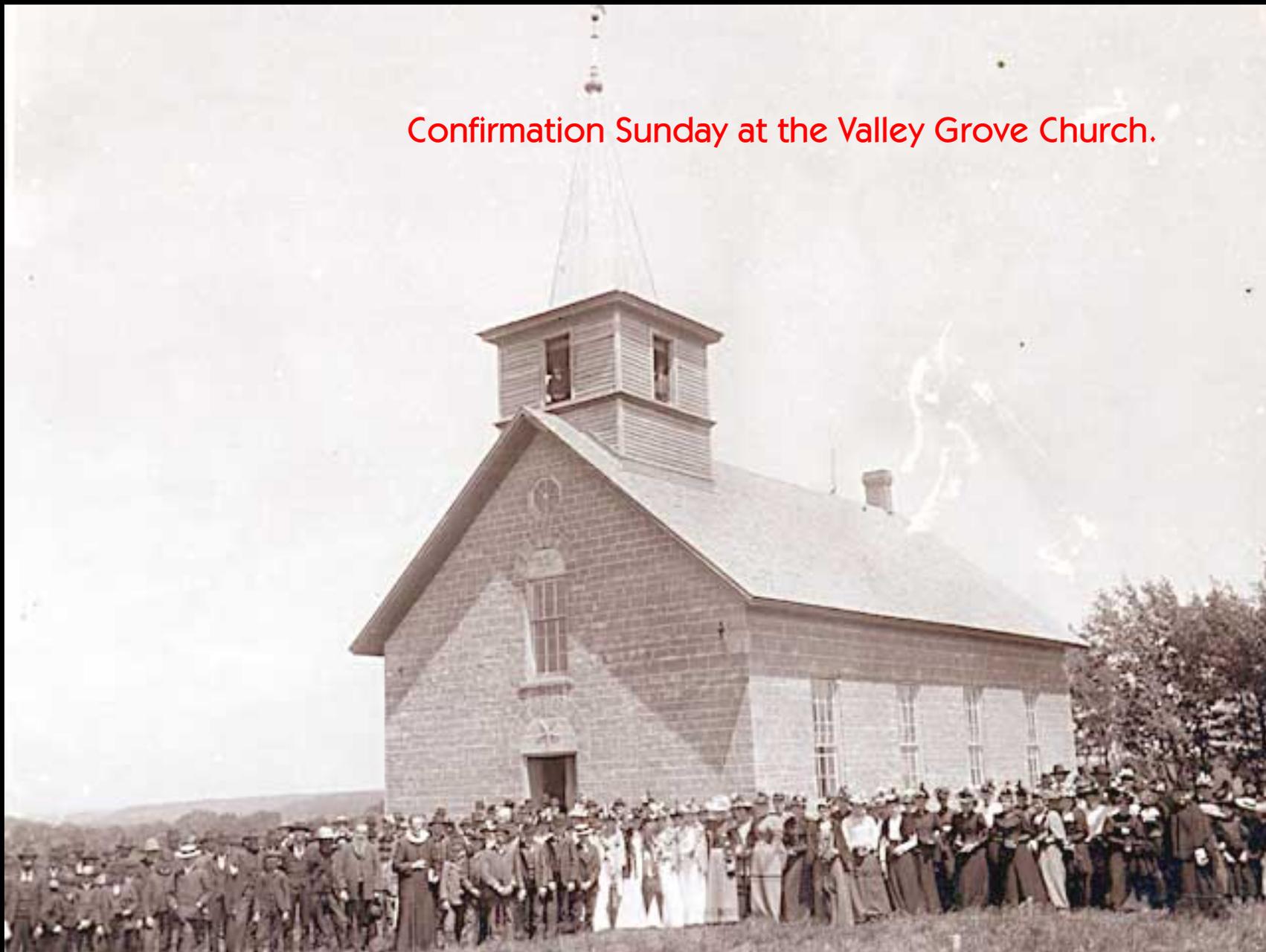


# Pillars of the Church

Andrew credits Confirmation as the ritual that has ensured almost universal literacy in Lutheran countries. Young people must read and memorize large sections of the Bible and Luther's Catechism and recite these obscure theological notions in front of the congregation.

One of Thorstein Veblen's more pithy remarks concerning religion was recalled in the following exchange:  
Q: What is your religion?  
TBV: I am a Lutheran.  
Q: And why is that?  
TBV: Because the nearest Lutheran Church is 50 miles from here.

Confirmation Sunday at the Valley Grove Church.



Note the segregation by sexes. The women may have wanted it that way—no matter how well-scrubbed, rural men can get pretty fragrant during long services. Besides learning the Bible and Catechism, Lutherans are supposed to sing difficult hymns in parts (this is the religion of J.S.Bach). Segregation by sexes assists in this effort.

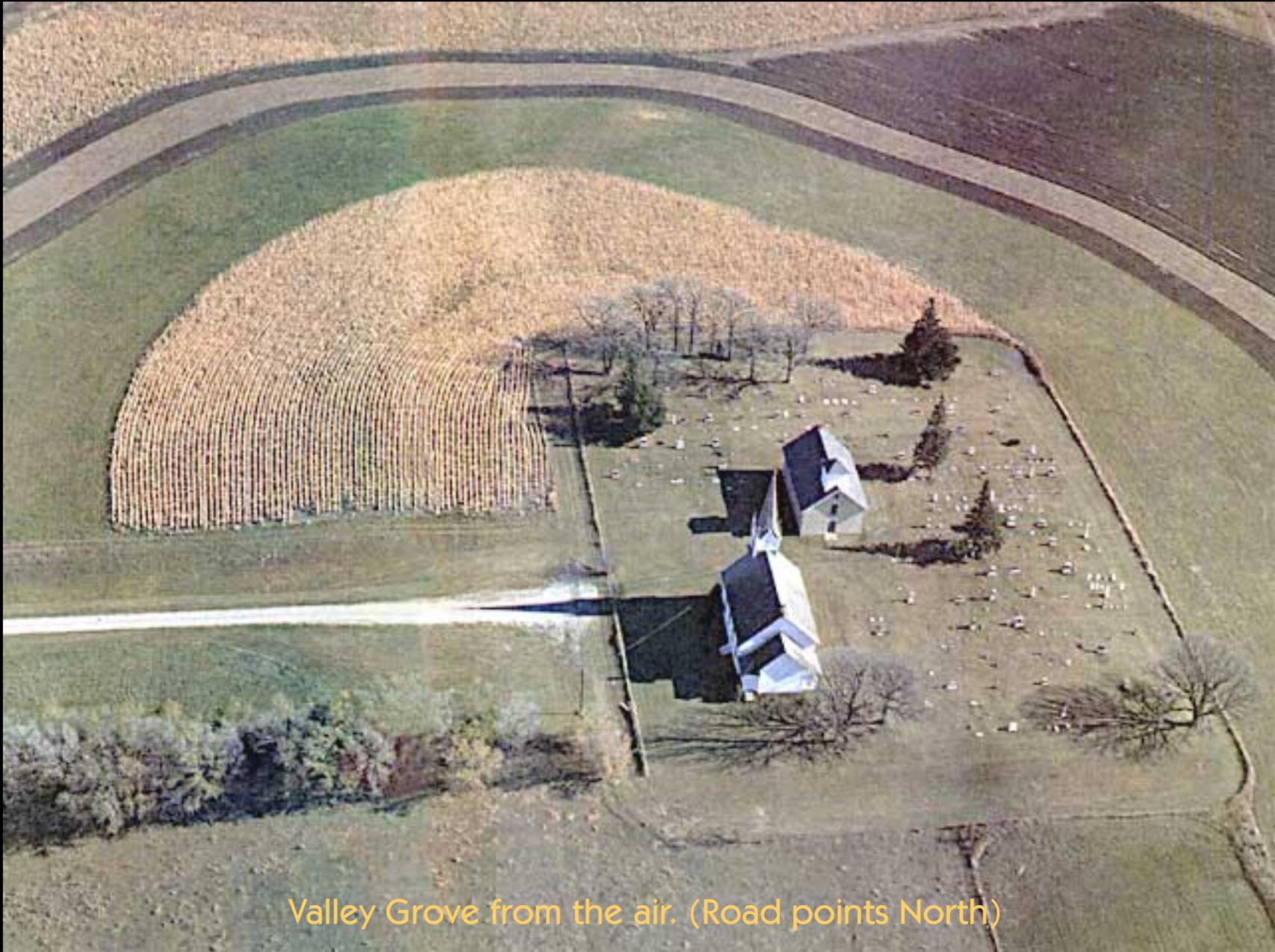
The Veblen children claimed not to be musical. This may be true or it maybe they only suffered by comparison. Lutherans take their choral music very seriously.

That stern fellow in front is a true man of learning named Quomman who could preach in German, Norwegian, and English, read Latin and Greek, knew enough medicine so that when Minnesota began to require board certification for doctors, he passed the test.



The Norwegians do not have a long tradition of intellectuals. The most educated person in a given area was typically the clergyman. In a country with a state church, such a person was an employee of the king, or because Norway was a colony for centuries, an agent of a foreign power.

The history of the Valley Grove congregation provides ample evidence why Veblen would claim his religious / cultural heritage and why he would have had his fill as a child.



Valley Grove from the air. (Road points North)

Valley Grove was a congregation that craved respectability. They accepted the theological authority of the state church in Norway and the congregation was one of the mother congregations in the establishment of St. Olaf College in nearby Northfield. Even so, this was not a welcoming atmosphere for an intellectual. Thorstein was turned down for a job with the St. Olaf philosophy department even with a Ph.D. from Yale because his theology was insufficiently pure.

(The 1862 building today)



Like the vast majority of Scandinavians, Thorstein would become a secularized Lutheran. Such folks lose their taste for devout observance but retain the cultural manifestations of the creed such as the requirement for universal literacy, a profound suspicion of the extravagant manifestations of wealth, and the requirement to provide for the weak and needy.

The view from the Veblen tombstone. 1893 building on left.



Thorstein Veblen might have disapproved of all the money and effort spent to save farm buildings that will not be used for their intended purposes. He ordered his remains cremated because he did not want monuments built in his memory. Those involved in the restoration were quite aware of his wishes so informally dedicated the effort to the folks who taught him everything he knew of importance.

And this is where they are buried



Some final words

The restoration was a success far beyond anyone's reasonable expectations. Thorstein wrote virtually without footnotes so scholars for years have speculated on the source of his ideas. They will not discover all the missing footnotes from what has been learned restoring an old farmhouse, but it is certainly a treasure trove of new information.

In this picture, the completed house is seen from the approach to the original front door. Since this photo was taken, those huge cottenwood trees had to be removed. These trees are very hardy because of their deep root systems. Unfortunately, this makes them lightning targets and these had been hit several times.

Lightning damage led to extensive rot so that these grizzled survivors of 150 years of wind, hail, sleet, subarctic temperatures, and blazing heatwaves were so damaged they threatened to topple on the house.



A beautiful winter day is, fortunately, the norm. The Veblens were aware that they had migrated far south—from 61°N to 44°N. The blazing summers probably came as no surprise. What certainly required adjustment was a climate that could deliver winter storms so dangerous, walking from the house to the barn was occasionally a life-threatening exercise.

But while winters in Norway were milder because they are on the receiving end of the Gulf Stream, they are also very cloudy and dark. There was much more winter sunlight in their new Minnesota home.

Thorstein had an extraordinary sense of aesthetics—especially for a political economist. If this scene is what filled his eyes for about 40 days per year as he grew to manhood, a sense of beauty and its worth is not at all surprising.



Residing the barn is still unfinished business. The siding is not original so replacing it simply protects the original framing better. And so long as the foundation and roof have been repaired, and the internal structure reinforced, the valuable pieces are protected.



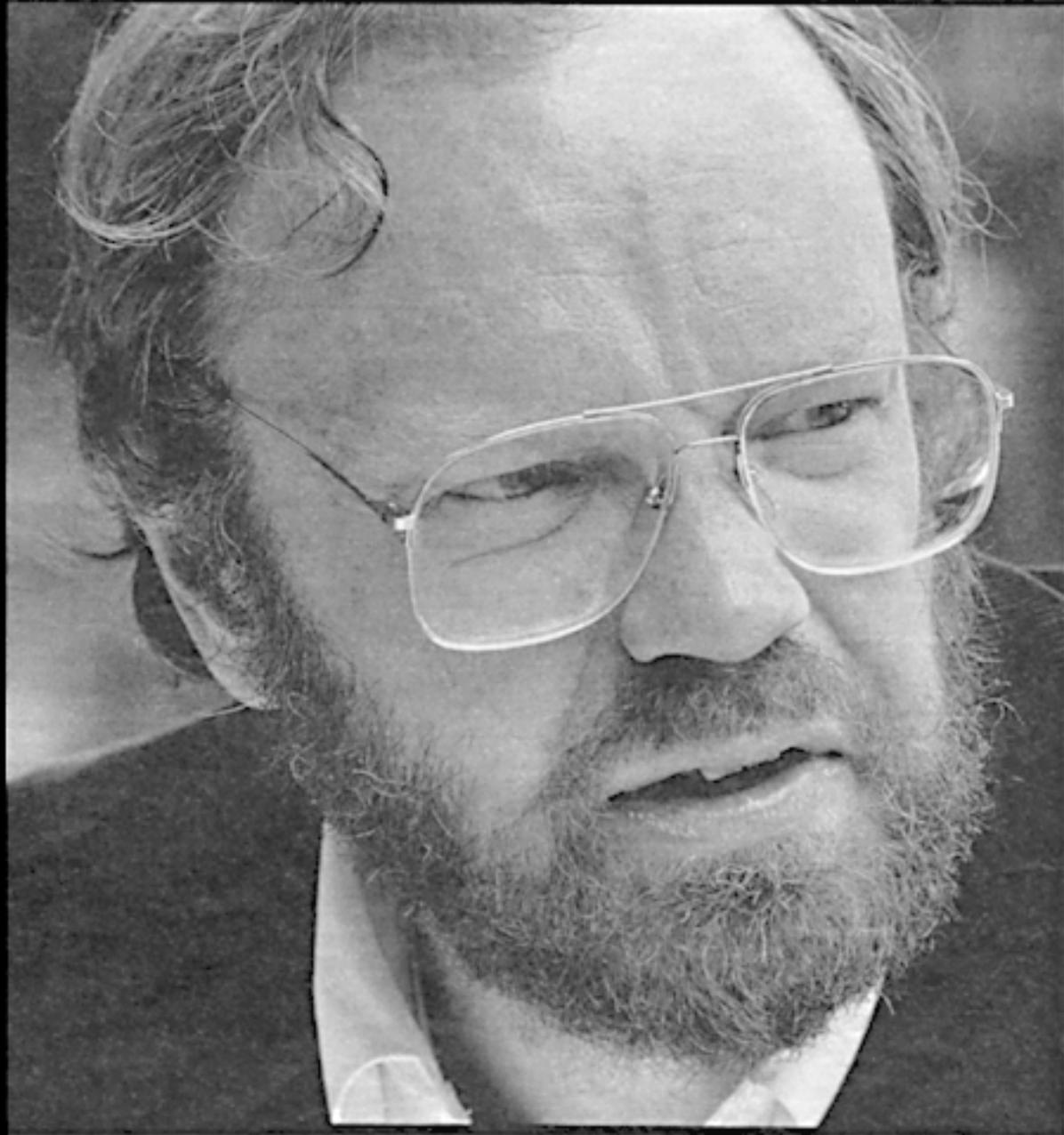
The completed shed shows how magnificent this barn was when new. The restoration in some ways changed Peter's life as a builder. From Thomas the master builder, he learned that you even build barns well. He has gone on to prosperity building the most expensive homes in the area—mostly because he will try to build anything and succeeds magnificently.



# About the Author

Jonathan Larson was born and lives in Minnesota. He currently makes his home about 25 km from the Veblen farmhouse.

A grandson of a Swedish immigrant political organizer of the Farmer-Labor party, he is a longtime reader of Veblen and has read all his books “at least twice.”



Picture of Larson taken in Helsinki Finland during a book tour.

“Elegant Technology”, written by Larson during the 1980s, was edited and published in 1992 by Professor John Adams of Northeastern University. At the time he was president of the Association for Evolutionary Economics—the organization that exists to perpetuate the economic theories of Thorstein Veblen.

ISBN 0-913215-58-9

*Why industrial redesign has become the preferred environmental strategy in Japan and Northern Europe and the lessons for all who would follow*

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# Elegant Technology

Economic Prosperity  
*from an*  
Environmental Blueprint

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*Innovative alternatives to a future without hope  
based on  
a 10-year examination of industrial possibilities and  
the most successful environmental agendas worldwide*

JONATHAN LARSON

Tuottajat was a translation of a precursor to “Elegant Technology” and was published by Hanki ja Jää of Helsinki Finland in 1989.

ISBN 951-8916-07-4

Finland is certainly not Norway but they do share a far-north location, a state Lutheran church, and a history of being colonized by Sweden. The Finnish readers truly understood modernized Veblenian thought—shared cultural traits will do that for you.



Larson also has a history of historic preservation. In 1976, he organized the effort to save this building, now on the National Register of Historic Places, from becoming a K-mart parking lot.



Like Peter McKinnon, Larson did a great deal of the work himself. He learned an appreciation for Thomas Veblen's skills the same "hard" way.

The Louis  
Lockwood  
Rowhouse,  
St. Paul  
Minnesota.  
Built: 1904  
Restored:  
1976-79



Larson is also a skilled carpenter. In 1984, while writing "Elegant Technology", he built this precision replica of the Cass Gilbert Lytchgate at St. Clements Episcopal Church, St. Paul, Minnesota.

Larson is currently on the board for the Preservation of the Valley Grove Church Building.



Thank You

Thank you.

To Peter McKinnon, who would look up from whatever dangerous, difficult, or disgusting work he was doing to tell me about another wonderful historical tidbit he might have uncovered.

To William C. Melton. When Bill Melton “won” the right to this amazing headache, many of us wondered if he was really the right person for the job. While he is an economist, he is certainly not an Institutional and if judged from his many writings, he is the sort Veblen labored so hard to discredit. Economics is the subject that attempts to describe why some folks get richer while they sleep while others get poorer even as they work. This is a subject that inspires high passion—most of the wars and revolutions of the past 500 years have been over economics. Some of us feared that Bill Melton would read the “Instinct of Workmanship” some day, decide he was building a monument to alien thought, and give up on the effort.

Our fears were totally unjustified. Bill Melton simply could not have done a better job. He uncovered the important evidence and shared it with all interested parties. He paid attention to the visiting scholars. In short, he made every critical decision in a manner utterly beyond criticism.

Those of us who doubted are left wondering “Why did he do such a wonderful thing?” And for those partisans of heterodox economics who needed the evidence Bill Melton uncovered, he truly did a wonderful thing.

The most wonderful aspect of the restoration is that it helped discredit the biography of Joseph Dorfman. He had physical evidence that his portrayal of Thorstein Veblen's upbringing was, at best, good storytelling, yet he stuck to his position his whole adult life. He misled two generations of scholars and in doing so, helped to discredit Veblen so thoroughly, virtually no one born in USA after 1950 has any idea why Veblen was a favorite among the most successful generation of economists in history.

Since the restoration of the house, the serious Veblen scholars have done a pretty good job of uncovering the many errors in Dorfman's account of Thorstein's life. But the restoration was still the key breakthrough. It was the hard evidence that validated the rest.

There is also a sad irony here. Joseph Dorfman, a mere biographer, had a long and comfortable career at Columbia University. Veblen, by contrast, the man without whom Dorfman would never have had a career, was persecuted, dismissed from faculties, lied about, and had an FBI file opened on him filled with the most outrageous slander. Dorfman survived the McCarthy period unscathed. Veblen was accused of treason for writing "Imperial Germany and the Industrial Revolution"—probably the only book that correctly predicted World War II and the reasons it would be fought while WW I was still in progress.

The lesson is that good storytelling trumps genius. But fortunately, not forever. The restoration proved Andrew Veblen was the superior storyteller because he had the facts. And they were found.

Thanks to William C. Melton.

# Supporting Documents

## Books by Thorstein Veblen

[The Theory of the Leisure Class](#) (1899)

[The Higher Learning in America](#)

[A Memorandum On the Conduct of Universities By Business Men](#) (1918)

## Essays by Thorstein Veblen

[The Instinct of Workmanship and the Irksomeness of Labor](#) (1898)

[Why is Economics Not an Evolutionary Science](#) (1898)

[The Limitations of Marginal Utility](#) (1909)

[Review of John Maynard Keynes](#)

[The Economic Consequences of the Peace](#) (1921)

## Memories of Thorstein Veblen written by his siblings

[Emily](#)

[Orson](#)

[Andrew's Critique of the Dorfman Biography](#)

[Andrew's final protest to Dorfman](#)