

Chester
Thordarson's

Rock Island

Tim Sweet

by Tim Sweet Rock Island is a small, heavily forested stepping stone in the Grand Traverse Island chain, which stretches across the waters of Lake Michigan between the Door Peninsula in Wisconsin and Michigan's Garden Peninsula. Early French explorer Jean Nicolet, credited as being the first European to visit the islands in this region, visited this 910-acre island when he reportedly paddled the waters of Lake Michigan and Green Bay in 1634.

Field research conducted under the supervision of Lawrence University archaeologist Ronald Mason in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s provided evidence and understanding of the Native Americans who once lived on Rock Island. Excavations made along the southern and southeastern shore have uncovered close to eighty thousand artifacts.¹

American and European settlers established a fishing village on the eastern shore of the island around 1835, the year before the U.S. government began construction of the Pottawatomie Lighthouse. A band of Chippewa was living on the island at this time. The fishing village was short-lived. Most people left the island during the 1850s and 1860s.² By the turn of the century, the island was virtually unpopulated.

In 1910, wealthy Chicago businessman Chester Hjortur Thordarson began purchasing parcels of private land on the island. He bought 661 acres from Rasmus Hanson, a boat builder from nearby Washington Island, who used Rock Island timber for his business.³ Hanson used part of the \$5,000 sale to finance a trip home for his homesick Danish wife. Unfortunately, she returned to Wisconsin with pneumonia and died at a hospital in Sister Bay.⁴

By 1912, Thordarson acquired all the land on the island, except for the government reserve where the lighthouse stood. His attraction to the island may have come from his Icelandic roots. Born on this isolated island in the North Atlantic on May 12, 1867, he and his family immigrated to Wisconsin in 1873. The Thordarsons lived in Milwaukee, DeForest in Dane County, and Shawano County before joining an Icelandic community in North Dakota in 1879. His formal schooling was limited, perhaps because of his family's nomadic lifestyle. During his time in North Dakota, he was influenced by a book—a physical sciences text by J.G. Fischer, which his uncle translated into Icelandic.

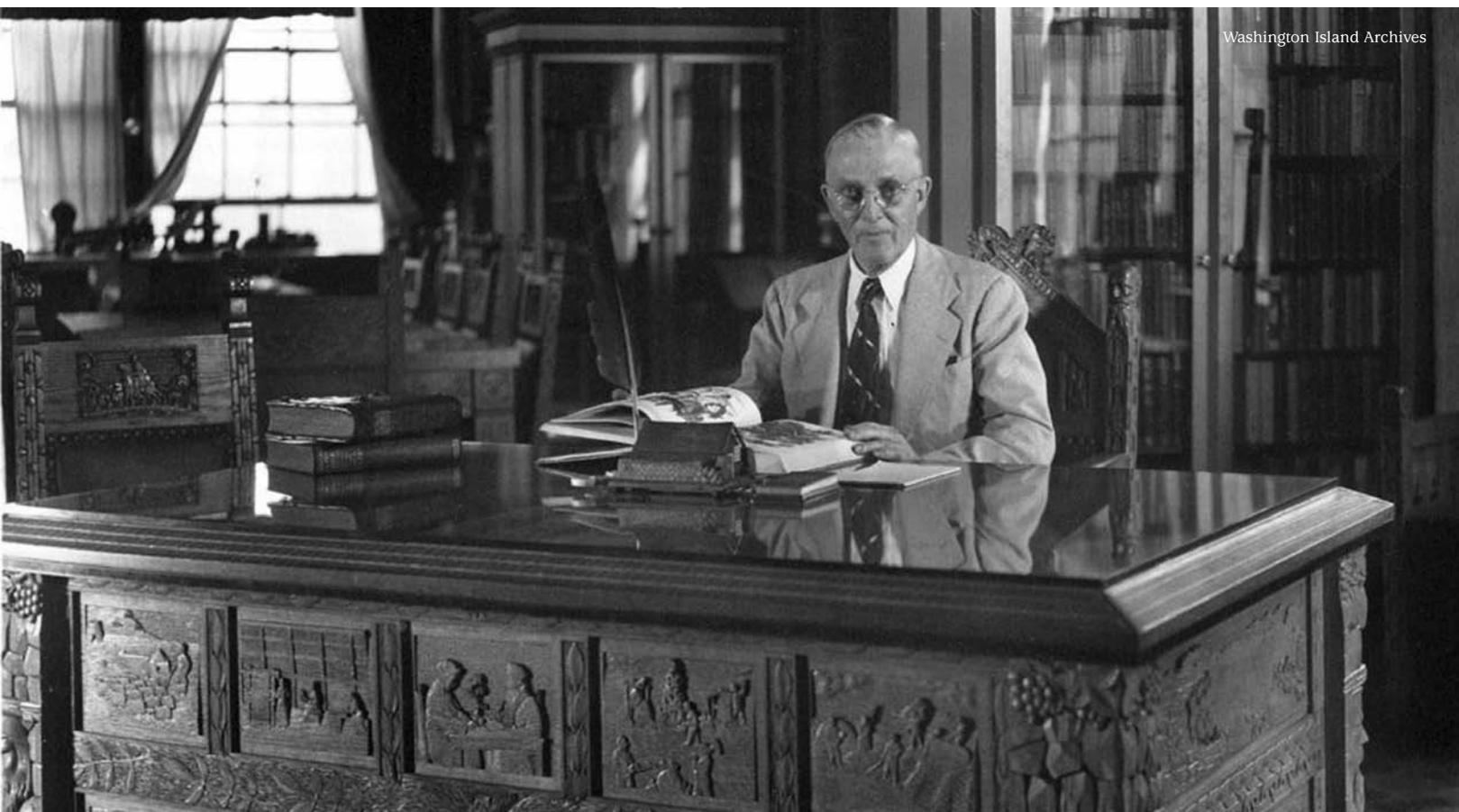
In 1887, Thordarson took a job in a Chicago electrical manufacturing shop. He was paid \$4 a week. One dollar of that income was invested in purchasing books. The collection's initial focus was Iceland, but he soon turned his attention to history of science and technology, including science in England. With the guidance of Walter Hill, a Chicago rare book dealer, and J. Christian Bay, librarian of the John Crerar Library, he amassed 11,000 rare and fundamental books on the subjects of physics, chemistry, alchemy, zoology, botany, scientific travels, scientific illustration, technology, agriculture, surveying, building arts, cooking, medicine, agriculture, husbandry, natural history, medicine, mathematics, ornithology, electricity and magnetism, and domestic occupations.⁵

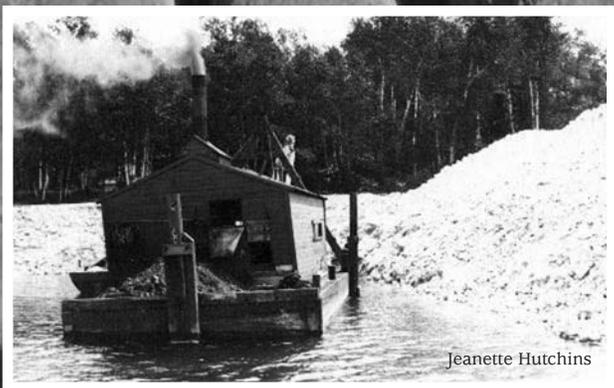
He opened Thordarson Electrical Manufacturing Company in 1895, where Thordarson began inventing. One of his specialties was laboratory apparatus for use in university classrooms across the country. His company also made ignition coils for the automobile industry, amplifiers and transformers for radios, and neon signs. He became widely known after one of his 1,000,000-volt transformers won a gold medal at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis. As Thordarson gained notoriety, his wealth began to grow.

Rock Island's secluded location supplied the quiet, isolation, and inspiration that allowed an inventor the time and space needed to think, dream, and create. It also provided an ideal setting for him to pursue interests in nature, landscaping, and botany and offered solace from the hectic pace of Chicago. The east side of the island was where Thordarson began spending his summers. He started by renovating the Jacobsen cabin, a home that once belonged to one of the original settlers. This part of Rock Island faces Lake Michigan, and there is no protection from the full fury of the lake. As a result, he was unable to keep a docking facility intact. This eventually convinced him to build his estate along the southwestern shore, which faces neighboring Washington Island.⁶

Edward Cornell was the lighthouse keeper at the Pottawatomie Lighth during Thordarson's early days on Rock Island. Thordarson sold six cords of firewood to the

Left: With its beautiful stonework and interior, Thordarson's casino (more commonly called the boathouse) is one of the most stunning structures on Rock Island. Below: Icelander Chester Thordarson, inventor and owner of Thordarson Electrical Manufacturing Company in Chicago, used his great wealth to purchase most of Rock Island.





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The machine in the small picture scooped up beach cobbles for construction of the greenhouse. Major Rock Island structures such as the pavilion and the water tower were built using dolomite limestone quarried or collected on Rock Island.

Lighthouse Service in fall 1912 for \$34.50. The wood was to “be delivered to keeper at Pottawatomie Light Sta., all charges paid, to places as designated by him.”

Thordarson, who was concerned about his property when he was unable to be there, wrote the lighthouse keeper once when he could not get away from Chicago. Thordarson asked Cornell to hire someone to gather his apples and vegetable and to dig potatoes.⁷ Thordarson also contacted Hanson via wire: “If you have not time yourself to look after my property on Rock Island, then I wish you would find someone who could watch it properly at least until I come there, and I hope you can help me out in a satisfactory way.”⁸

He was also concerned about trespassers and did not take them lightly. He offered a reward for the arrest and conviction of thieves who stole a box of dynamite from his premises. He also put the following notice in Sturgeon Bay’s *The Advocate*:

All of Rock Island, except for the Government reservation, is private property. Trespassing upon the Island, (except the Government reservation), is strictly forbidden. All persons who enter upon the Island will be trespassers, and will be dealt with as trespassers according to the Laws of the State of Wisconsin.⁹

Thordarson also lobbied for communication with the outside world with the U.S. Life-Saving Service. He wrote

S.I. Kimball, requesting a telephone, so he could call Washington Island and further if necessary.

The house in which we lived last year is situated on the East Side of the Island, facing Lake Michigan, and we have a clear view from the house over the entire Lake from Poverty Island to the Fisherman’s Shoals. That house is, therefore, the best position for lookout from that portion of the Lake now available anywhere, and I feel confident that we could be of service to you in case of light buoys becoming extinguished on the Fisherman’s Shoals.¹⁰

The U.S. Life-Saving Service responded by installing a Telephone Lookout Station in Thordarson’s temporary building on Rock Island, thus connecting him with the Plum Island Telephone Line of the Life-Saving Service.¹¹

Thordarson’s business, which held patents on 115 electrical inventions, boomed in the 1920s, and his financial resources swelled. His company employed 1,500 people.¹² He needed workers both at his Chicago factory and for clearing land and constructing buildings on a 30-acre area of land along Rock Island’s southwestern corner. In 1923, Thordarson advertised in the *Winnipeg News* for Icelandic men to work for him. The Icelandic crew came from Lundar and Gimli, Manitoba, Canada, and consisted of nine men, one woman (a cook married to one of the laborers), and their young son.

Included in this group were Daniel Lindal, William Lindal, Oddor Oddsson, Allen Sviensson, Mr. and Mrs. Myrdal, Mundi Myrdal, Emil Beck, and Finni Eilofsson.¹³ Being an Icelander, Thordarson believed these new employees would be good workers.¹⁴ Daniel Lindal was crew foreman from 1923 to 1926. Lindal and his group built most of the wood-frame and log buildings on the Thordarson estate, including a bunkhouse, a kitchen, a garage, a workshop, and a beautiful log guesthouse.

One of the log cabins was for Thordarson's good friend, William Hale Thompson, the mayor of Chicago. He described the cabin to Thompson in this letter:

I will build for you next spring a log cabin in cowboy style on Rock Island (I hope to have same finished by June 1st) to be used exclusively by you and your friends as long as you live. There will be no taxes, rents nor maintenance charges to bother you.¹⁵

Thordarson's stone structures built during the late 1920s are his most lasting legacy. Many think the estate was an attempt to recreate a part of his Icelandic homeland. A water tower (on the east side of the island), guesthouse, reservoir, greenhouse building, pantry, and pavilion (also known as the pagoda) were built using dolomite limestone quarried or collected from Rock Island.

The casino, said to have been modeled after the Althing, Iceland's parliament building, commands visitors' attention.¹⁶ More commonly referred to as the boathouse, it has a great hall, assembly hall, or Viking hall. Frederick P. Dinkelberg, a Chicago architect, designed this impressive structure in 1926.¹⁷ According to Helga Thordarson Charest, the millionaire inventor's daughter-in-law, his private name for this immense boathouse was "The Jewel House of Art and Nature." Charest, who spent thirty-eight summers on Rock Island, explained, "The name only applied to the upper level. That's where he kept his collection of rare books."¹⁸

Thordarson and Dinkelberg created an architectural wonder combining beauty and strength. Stonemasons put a lot of time and toil into this beautiful, sturdy monolith anchored to the bedrock 7 feet below the surface of Lake Michigan. Two of those skilled craftsmen were Peter Urdahl and his brother from Sturgeon Bay. Although the brothers had never built a base in deep water, they were experienced stone workers and confident they could do the job.¹⁹ Thordarson sought the help of other notable Door County stonemasons, including John Buechner of Egg Harbor Township. Buechner

built the fireplaces and stone walls at the Alpine Resort in Egg Harbor. He also did much of the masonry work at the Gordon Lodge and the town hall in Baileys Harbor.²⁰

An account book from 1926 listed the names of some of these workers: Chas Urdal, Pete Urdal, Walter Urdal, Alfred Goodlet, Emil Beck, Sam Solomonson, William Einerson, John Fons, Edward Dehos, George Jorgenson, Evret Larson, Loren Arnson, Ruben Oleson, Ramond Johnson, and Bill Anderson.²¹

It is believed to have taken three years to complete Thordarson's grand boathouse-casino. In 1928, the fireplace was yet to be built. Francis Willard Puckey, a Chicago architect, wrote as follows:

Herewith enclosed please find a blueprint copy of the drawing showing the fireplace in the Casino which we discussed yesterday. Our price for furnishing drawings with necessary details, specifications, etc., but no superintendence, is six percent of the cost of the work, this cost to be furnished us by you, as it is our understanding that all this work is being done by your own crew of workmen, using as far as possible, local materials found upon your island...²²

In another letter, Puckey continued:

Herewith enclosed please find two sets of five drawings each showing the arrangement of the stairs, toilets, dressing rooms, etc., of the land end



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The Pottawatomie Lighthouse was the only other prominent building on Rock Island during Thordarson's time.



Jeanette Hutchins

Chester Thordarson, far left, and his Icelandic work crew took a break from construction in this log chalet they had built for Thordarson.

like very much to meet you at Sturgeon Bay, if possible, or at the Island and have you come and take a sail, for, at least, a few days in case you can't spend any more time.²⁷

McDonald brought his yacht, *The Mizpah*, up from Chicago and moored it at Rock Island. In 1942, the Navy commissioned his boat to serve in World War II. "Our house has reported to the Navy—for active service," he explained in a postcard.²⁸

Other boats like *The Carolina*, *The Griffin*, *The North Shore*, and *The Welcome* made deliveries of cargo and visitors.

Summertime on the island must have been filled with comings and goings, family and friends, good times, and warm memories.

Despite Thordarson's lack of formal education, he received many awards during his lifetime. The University of Wisconsin recognized him for his inventiveness, his interest in self-education, and his collection of rare books by conferring an honorary master of arts degree on him.²⁹ The University of Iceland in Reykjavik elected Thordarson as an honorary doctor of philosophy.³⁰ He, along with his good friend Thomas Edison, was awarded government medals from the Louisiana Purchase Exposition and the Pacific International Expeditions in 1904.³¹ And King Christian X of Denmark presented Thordarson with the Order of the Falcon, a gold and cloisonné cross, in 1939 for "meritorious service and contributions to society." Thordarson held patents on more than 350 electrical inventions, including neon lighting, X-ray devices, and

of your Casino and Boat House, also the revised scheme for the fireplace in this building.²³

A newspaper clipping reported: "Twenty men are employed in building a \$40,000 boat house for C.H. Thordarson on his Rock Island estate."²⁴

Thordarson also had a water tower constructed on the east side of Rock Island. The structure resembles the other stone buildings on his estate—built of limestone and topped with a red tile roof. It rises unexpectedly out of the woods. The building is also a bit of a puzzle because it may never have actually functioned as an operating water tower. It is not located on a prominent hill, and there is no pumping mechanism present. Time and material invested in the construction of the water tower came to \$1,504.²⁵

Thordarson shared his island estate with his family, his co-workers, and many friends and acquaintances. It became a popular destination for yachtsmen and sailors. Among Thordarson's prominent Chicago guests were Clarence Darrow, U.J. 'Sport' Hermann, Mayor Thompson, and Commander Gene McDonald, an arctic explorer and president of Zenith Radio.²⁶

Hermann, together with his dog Brownie, cruised the Great Lakes in his sleek sailing yacht, *The Swastika*. Hermann arranged this meeting in 1937:

My dear Thor:
Will be around Washington Island more or less the early part of July and would

This striking stone pavilion, or pagoda as it is also known, was the setting of many outdoor activities such as picnics.



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Jeff Benzow

Overlooking Lake Michigan's scenic waters, the boathouse is thought to be modeled after Iceland's parliament building, the Althing. The second floor houses "The Jewel House of Art and Nature," where Thordarson kept his rare book collection.

different types of transformers.³²

Thordarson died in 1945 at the age of 78. Rock Island remained under the ownership of his heirs until 1964, when the island was sold to the state of Wisconsin for \$175,000. The Wisconsin Conservation Department took over responsibility for the property shortly after the sale was finalized. It has been a state park ever since.

Unfortunately, the state destroyed many wood frame and log buildings after it took ownership. An Illinois reporter, wrote Dewey and Helga Thordarson as follows:

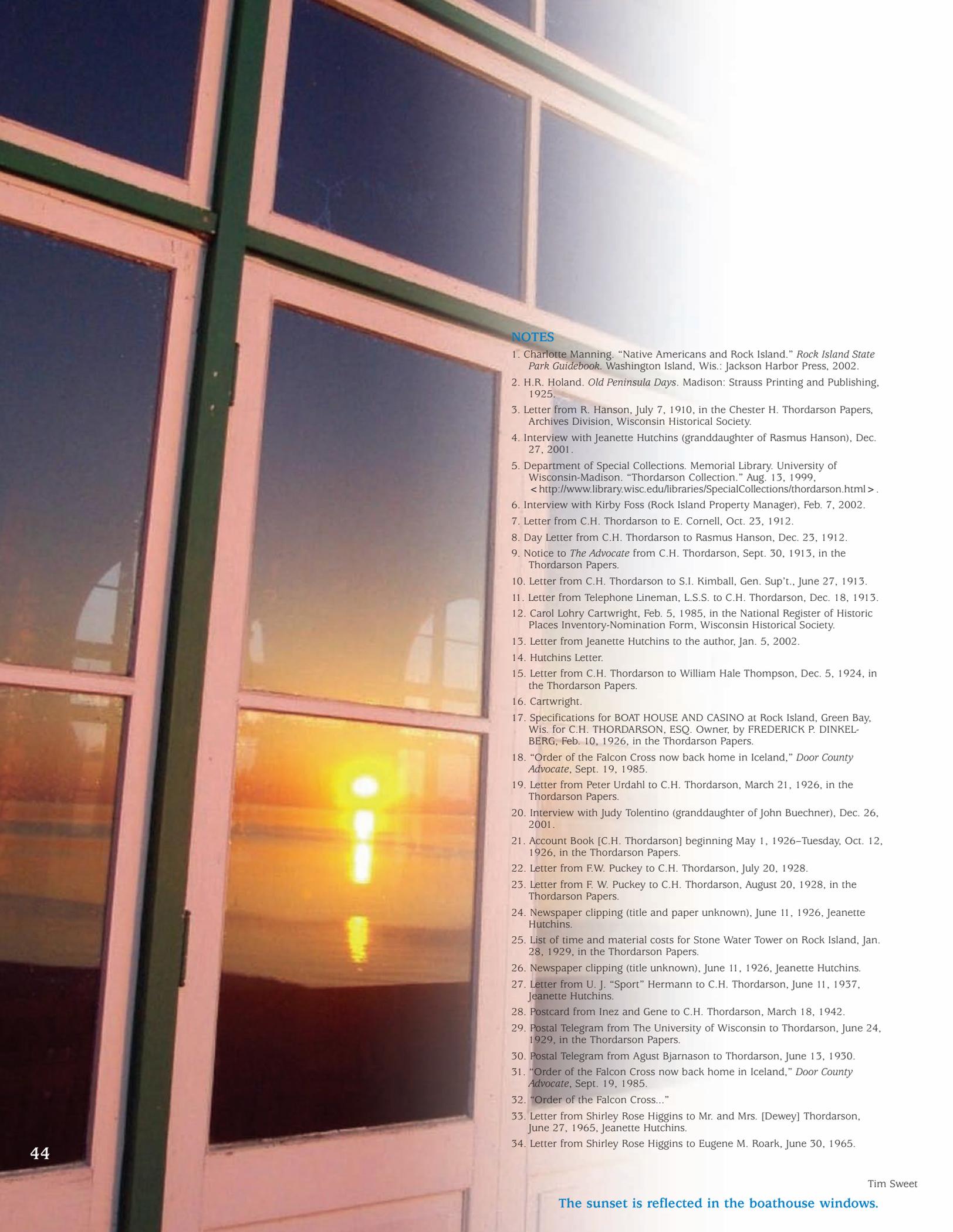
Thought you might be interested to know that upon arrival home last night I immediately telephoned a Conservation official friend of mine in Madison to express concern over what is being done on Rock Island. He, too, was concerned when I explained the destructive way matters are being handled and promised to investigate. I don't know if you feel as our family does, but to us it seems a shame that the State is demolishing buildings and ignoring your father's botanical and horticultural interests.³³

She also wrote a letter to a Wisconsin Conservation

Department official in Madison.

I realize some of the buildings are in disrepair, but would be interested in learning how the Department determines what is to stand; what is to be destroyed. Has the Wisconsin State Historical Society evidenced any interest in the project—if there are funds available to build up a historic attraction like a Stonefield Village, can't some also be appropriated to maintain an existing site representative of a vanished and equally colorful era—the roaring '20s?³⁴

Part of Rock Island's appeal comes from its isolation and the effort it takes to get there. People go to this enchanting place to get away from it all. But it's not only the natural beauty that keeps many coming back time and again. The remaining buildings create a sense of wonder about the man who built them nearly eighty years ago. Those charged with the stewardship of this property need to ensure that Thordarson's "Jewel House of Art and Nature" and his other rock-solid links to the past endure for the many generations of island visitors who have yet to make the journey.



NOTES

1. Charlotte Manning. "Native Americans and Rock Island." *Rock Island State Park Guidebook*. Washington Island, Wis.: Jackson Harbor Press, 2002.
2. H.R. Holand. *Old Peninsula Days*. Madison: Strauss Printing and Publishing, 1925.
3. Letter from R. Hanson, July 7, 1910, in the Chester H. Thordarson Papers, Archives Division, Wisconsin Historical Society.
4. Interview with Jeanette Hutchins (granddaughter of Rasmus Hanson), Dec. 27, 2001.
5. Department of Special Collections. Memorial Library. University of Wisconsin-Madison. "Thordarson Collection." Aug. 13, 1999, <<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/SpecialCollections/thordarson.html>>.
6. Interview with Kirby Foss (Rock Island Property Manager), Feb. 7, 2002.
7. Letter from C.H. Thordarson to E. Cornell, Oct. 23, 1912.
8. Day Letter from C.H. Thordarson to Rasmus Hanson, Dec. 23, 1912.
9. Notice to *The Advocate* from C.H. Thordarson, Sept. 30, 1913, in the Thordarson Papers.
10. Letter from C.H. Thordarson to S.I. Kimball, Gen. Sup't., June 27, 1913.
11. Letter from Telephone Lineman, L.S.S. to C.H. Thordarson, Dec. 18, 1913.
12. Carol Lohry Cartwright, Feb. 5, 1985, in the National Register of Historic Places Inventory-Nomination Form, Wisconsin Historical Society.
13. Letter from Jeanette Hutchins to the author, Jan. 5, 2002.
14. Hutchins Letter.
15. Letter from C.H. Thordarson to William Hale Thompson, Dec. 5, 1924, in the Thordarson Papers.
16. Cartwright.
17. Specifications for BOAT HOUSE AND CASINO at Rock Island, Green Bay, Wis. for C.H. THORDARSON, ESQ. Owner, by FREDERICK P. DINKELBERG, Feb. 10, 1926, in the Thordarson Papers.
18. "Order of the Falcon Cross now back home in Iceland," *Door County Advocate*, Sept. 19, 1985.
19. Letter from Peter Urdahl to C.H. Thordarson, March 21, 1926, in the Thordarson Papers.
20. Interview with Judy Tolentino (granddaughter of John Buechner), Dec. 26, 2001.
21. Account Book [C.H. Thordarson] beginning May 1, 1926–Tuesday, Oct. 12, 1926, in the Thordarson Papers.
22. Letter from E.W. Puckey to C.H. Thordarson, July 20, 1928.
23. Letter from E. W. Puckey to C.H. Thordarson, August 20, 1928, in the Thordarson Papers.
24. Newspaper clipping (title and paper unknown), June 11, 1926, Jeanette Hutchins.
25. List of time and material costs for Stone Water Tower on Rock Island, Jan. 28, 1929, in the Thordarson Papers.
26. Newspaper clipping (title unknown), June 11, 1926, Jeanette Hutchins.
27. Letter from U. J. "Sport" Hermann to C.H. Thordarson, June 11, 1937, Jeanette Hutchins.
28. Postcard from Inez and Gene to C.H. Thordarson, March 18, 1942.
29. Postal Telegram from The University of Wisconsin to Thordarson, June 24, 1929, in the Thordarson Papers.
30. Postal Telegram from Agust Bjarnason to Thordarson, June 13, 1930.
31. "Order of the Falcon Cross now back home in Iceland," *Door County Advocate*, Sept. 19, 1985.
32. "Order of the Falcon Cross..."
33. Letter from Shirley Rose Higgins to Mr. and Mrs. [Dewey] Thordarson, June 27, 1965, Jeanette Hutchins.
34. Letter from Shirley Rose Higgins to Eugene M. Roark, June 30, 1965.