

# The Norris THOMPSONS

By Thurston Warren



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**S**OME families just inevitably make their mark in public affairs. But sometimes the public doesn't realize that the members it hears about are of one family. Such a group is the Norris-Thompson family.

First there are Kathleen, Charles and Frank, all writers. Of them, Kathleen has reached the largest public. She was born Kathleen Thompson, one of six children left on their own early in life. She went through a succession of jobs as bookkeeper, saleswoman, school teacher, newspaper reporter, and social worker. Capitalizing on a vivid imagination, Kathleen launched her career on two stories she sent to a New York newspaper that published a story a day. She had married Charles G. Norris, a young newspaperman, who was so enthusiastic over her achievement that thereafter, she was the writer, and he the business manager. Charles' brother, Frank, was the late powerful social novelist.

Another member of the family was showing his mettle, too. He was Kathleen's brother, Joseph S. Thompson. He started manufacturing electrical equipment in a country shed near San Francisco. This firm, which employs hundreds in war work, has never had a strike in its thirty years, and never failed to discount a bill.

Joe Thompson is a Fellow of the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, and was for four years a director of the San Francisco Chamber of Commerce. A favorite toastmaster and speaker on the West Coast, Joe Thompson has told many a group of his passion for freedom, citing Henry George's works as his foundation.



Schalkenbach Foundation

Joe Thompson remarked in a recent letter to LAND AND FREEDOM:

"I feel that Judge Ralston is right, when he quotes the man, who says, 'Some new type of orientation or approach would have to be worked out.'\*

It indicates the most important duty we have.

"For a long time I have felt the heavy incubus on our principle involved in the name 'Single Tax.' Although I always make reference to it, I then refer to the guinea pig, who is neither from Guinea or a pig. A whole new vocabulary or glossary will have to be worked out.

"Every economist should always begin his comments on the sales tax, the income tax, and the personal property tax with the statement, 'So long as we are resolved to maintain our Nancy Astors, it would seem as though'—and then go on with his observations."

Mr. Thompson says that for twenty-five years he has been advising his business friends to read "Progress and Poverty" whenever they have complained about monopoly competition, labor troubles, red tape, and the increasing burden of taxation. But he found it a large order to get most busy men to read a 565-page book. Finally, he abridged the theme into 138 pages, calling it "More Progress and Less Poverty." Published by the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, it retains all of Henry George's colorful writing. Mr. Thompson added ten pages in an Addendum "for the business man or the Average Citizen."

"Henry George wrote as a pleader for the oppressed," says Mr. Thompson "but the oppressed are more and more becoming charges on the business element through relief and social security measures." The professional man, the entrepreneur, and the business man, deriving nothing from monopoly privileges will find the Addendum of added importance to them.

The Henry George School extension of Los Angeles announces this group was privileged to hear Kathleen Norris, novelist laureate to the American public and her brother, Joseph S. Thompson, industrialist, both of whom gave inspiring speeches at the Annual Banquet on January 14, in the Mona Lisa Banquet Room.

Mrs. Norris drew from her own experience and observation many instances of inequities resulting from the legalized monopolization of the national bounties. She offered an historical case of the English lord who left his estate to travel through Europe and Africa with

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\* See "Why The Single Tax Was Opposed In California," November-December, 1942.—Ed.

basis than 100% of true value (fair market value), means that the various properties may be assessed from 10% to 50% of true value, and in many instances, much more than 50%, so that it is practically impossible for the average taxpayer to know what the assessment rate is, and all he does usually is grumble about his high taxes.

In commencing our formidable task of assessing North Plainfield, the first thing we did was to procure topographical maps of the district from the Federal government, and enlarge the perimeter by using a pantograph—a drafting instrument used to enlarge drawings, maps, etc. On these maps we drew in, as nearly as we could conceive, the various properties, from information gathered by owners and our own observations. While the completed maps were anything but accurate, they served as a practical starting point for discovering the true state of affairs. We were able to discover land that had not been assessed or taxed for years, and in one instance we came across a property assessed as 22 acres which we found to be 422 acres.

Next, we copied every name on an index card, and made our assessments on a 100% basis, using the available figures. This, too, was merely a convenient starting point.

Our next job was to go out into the field and make our investigations of the properties. The situation was rather amusing. I, a resident of New York, would introduce Mr. Bodin as the new Tax Assessor. Who I was, was not stated. We told the owner we wanted to treat each taxpayer fairly and equitably; that in order to do this, we had to know the true value of the property. They accepted our statement in good faith and cooperated fully. Some even offered to open a bottle for us. We started at the end of a valley about three-fourths of a mile from a railroad station and about one and a half miles from the same station at the head of the valley. The owners of property at the end of the valley said uniformly that their land was worth \$125 an acre; at about the middle of the valley, the owners declared \$100; and at the head of the valley the figure given was \$75. This did indeed sound reasonable, and I must pay tribute to those owners who were prepared to be honest when approached honestly.

As we approached the head of the valley we found many tenant farmers who could not help us, and much vacant land. We saw a piece of land assessed as 22 acres. It ran up the side of the mountain where we could see more than 100 acres. It continued on the other side of the mountain to a road. This is the property we found to be 422 acres. The assessment was raised from \$1,100 to \$16,000.

Under the law, the Assessor had the power to put any protesting taxpayer under oath. The owner of this piece of land started protest meetings around the district and Mr. Bodin was perturbed, but I kept up his morale by telling him to wait till grievance day, when he might put this taxpayer under oath and accept his sworn statement as true. The day after grievance day, Mr. Bodin came to me with a smile. "He did not show up," was the report. Our assessment job was completed with relatively little trouble.

The system in New Jersey provided for county boards to equalize unequal assessments of the various townships, each of which tried to keep its assessments low so as to pay less county taxes. Above these county boards was the State Board of Equalization for the purpose of equalizing unequal assessments of the counties, who in their turn were trying to escape with as little state taxes as possible. If all property were assessed at true value there would be no need of these equalization boards.

In its annual report for 1913, the State Board of Equalization announced that the North Plainfield township was the best assessed district in the state that year.

Thirty-one years later, 1943, the situation which beset us in North Plainfield, New Jersey, is as true in certain centers of the United States as it was then. Areas in Ohio, western and southern states present just as fantastic a condition today as we were faced with then. Some communities are not assessed for three years; others not for ten years! And because one assessor, elected this year, uses no more than an alphabetical list supplied him by his predecessor, and no assessment map of any description has ever been prepared, lands will remain unassessed for years and decades—and what owner of such lands will complain?

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## THE NORRIS THOMPSONS

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his family. While they were leisurely driving through Italy and France, stopping at chateaux as caprice suited them, they discussed with the children's governess the advantages of travel to their offspring's education.

Business was at a comparative stand-still on the vast estate, and its dependent environs during the master's absence. Surrounded by forests and parks stocked with deer, rabbits and other potential food, many in the countryside, forbidden to trespass within the bounds of this great, idle territory, watched their families slowly succumb to undernourishment and the actual pangs of starvation. One countryman, goaded by the piteous wails of his hungry children, poached two rabbits from the great man's park, and was hanged for his temerity.

Kathleen Norris admitted that this was an extreme case. She justified her story by quoting as a classic example, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," reputed to have precipitated, more than any other issue, the war between the states. The incidents upon which this book was built, written by a woman who had never been in the South, were so extreme as to have happened rarely, if ever, yet under the then law of the land such instances *could* have happened, and for this reason they were sufficient to whip the nation into a fury of righteous indignation, resulting in all the horrors of a civil war. Kathleen Norris pointed out that only by theoretically following a legalized evil through to its ultimate extreme application, can the public be brought to a realization of the immortality of customs founded upon such evils.

Kathleen Norris, as a writer whose readers number millions, will perhaps carry this thought into a social novel some day.