Thor Brandt-Erichsen
1939-2008

By Scott Brandt-Erichsen

With generous contributions from Jean Nandi, Nancy Brandt-Erichsen and David Brandt-Erichsen

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Foreword

I once wrote about how my father, Thor Brandt-Erichsen, seemed to have a most interesting relationship to outhouses. He built them in several places, and each had a story. When he died I decided to change the direction and tell a more biographical story for posterity. I think it is important to know about your ancestors because they shape the kind of person you become. I cannot count the number of times I have caught myself saying or doing things in a way that I observed my parents doing so as a child. Even if you don’t want to do it, they are there inside of you, influencing your behavior.

This account includes some of my thoughts and observations about my father. It also includes a great deal of biographical information and memories from his sister Jean Nandi who generously contributed stories from his early life which she was uniquely situated to observe. I have included a poem written by his nephew Amitava “Papu” Nandi which captures in prose so much of what he was like in life. His wife, my mother Nancy, has contributed a great deal of information about his work with Russians and interaction with others in his adult life. As you read this, I hope that you will be able to have some picture of this man who was both complex and simple, and who helped shape and influence those who came in contact with him. This is written for posterity and for those who come after him to have access to information about what he was like in life.
(Cover Photo of Thor painting in Italy. Above, Thor and Nancy in Hawaii)
THOR BRANDT-ERICHSEN – EARLY LIFE

Thor was born June 3, 1939, by Caesarian section in the small community hospital in Petersboro, NH, home of the McDowell Colony in the southern part of the state. Named Viggo Thor Brandt-Erichsen, his mother was a paraplegic, pianist and composer Joan Crowley, married to the handsome Danish immigrant, sculptor Viggo Axel Brandt-Erichsen. They lived on a 100-acre farm in nearby East Jaffrey, at the foot of Mount Monadnock.

Joan was born a Crowley, and her parents hailed from Massachusetts. Her mother and father were lawyers before it was common for women to be lawyers. Her sister Theresa was an actress. They were of Irish decent, and claimed a distant relation to Mrs. O’Leary whose famous cow started the great Chicago fire.

Three months after they were married, Joan and Viggo had been living at an inn and there was a fire. They jumped from a second story window and Joan broke her back and was paralyzed from the waist down afterwards. However, after a few years they learned that, although paralyzed, she could still have children (by Cesarean section) and they had Thor.

They called the baby “Thor,” so as not to confuse him with his father, and early on he was imbued with the Norse tales that spoke of the “God of Thunder.” And by the time he was six he was sporting a “silver” ring displaying a lightning bolt, proving that he was that True Norse God!
Thor with Viggo and Joan.
Young Thor had light colored hair.

Joan was interested in music, and had written some music as well as taken some lessons from Alan Hovhaness, a famous composer. Alan was at the time married to Martha Mott (Patt) Davis.

Thor had blonde hair when he was born, and it remained blonde until it turned dark when he was a couple years old. His appearance was more like his mother than his father.
Because Joan was disabled, delicate, and also focused on her music studies, Viggo took charge of the baby and provided most of his, and also her, care. She disliked household help, although they did have women from the town in to look after things part of the time, but Viggo’s artistic work was for the most part laid aside during these early years of raising a baby, then a toddler, who toddled after his father like an imprinted young duckling. He came to worship this father, who was capable of almost anything at all—repairing the broken plumbing, fixing the fences outside, or a leaky roof—whatever needed doing, his creative mind and capable hands found a way to do it. Thor imitated all of Viggo’s gestures and mannerisms, and also soon carried small tools around on his belt and “worked” alongside his Dad with a small hammer.
East Jaffrey (most frequently shortened just to “Jaffrey,”) was the business center of this sparsely-populated region at the foot of the mountain, and distinguished from the slightly westward Jaffrey Center, an even tinier hamlet which boasted the only hotel in this beautiful region which was a tourist attraction to folks from Boston and other New England cities. Jaffrey boasted a few stores: grocery, hardware, grain & feed: the usual country fare. In the center of the typical New England green stood the granite World War I Memorial, a soldier carrying his wounded buddy, created by Viggo Brandt-Erichsen.
Thor with “Buddies”, Viggo’s WWI memorial, in Jaffrey.
The commission to build it was given him when, having arrived with the coffin of his dead first wife (she had died in France, where they had been married) he created a memorial for her in the local cemetery.

His first wife’s grave site has some ornate granite images which match some in the copper chasing he did for a church in the town. He had created the images as part of a competition in France.

The photo is of the memorial grave marker for Viggo’s first wife, Dorothy Caldwell, in the Jaffrey cemetery.
Viggo’s copper relief piece.
He had liked the town, and the townspeople adored him—having fixed in their minds the mistaken notion that this handsome foreigner was a “Count” of some sort. He wasn’t, although some ancestor of his mother’s had been, but titles were never inherited through one’s mother.

Viggo had brought a pet with him from Europe—a small Icelandic horse (almost as small as a Shetland pony) which had once been wild on Iceland. Goodness knows where he had obtained such a creature. Named Jørgen (pronounced “Yeam”), this tough little shaggy brown creature was kept in the barn with the cows, goats and a big old cart horse called “Bobby.” Viggo had grown up on a farm, and loved the country surroundings and animals. There were always lots of house pets, too—cats, and plenty of kittens both in the house and the barn, plus a small Cairn terrier named “Bonnie,” not much bigger than the cats, who kept well away from her. But all these creatures were an important part of Thor’s environment growing up. Although he seemed not to love the animals with the kind of passion exhibited by his father, yet he was never afraid of any of them, and accepted them as normal.

Jørgen was a source of endless entertainment, as he used his flexible lips and strong teeth to unfasten any catch, knotted rope, lock, or other device designed to lock him into stall or pasture. Then he would amiably trot downhill on the long dirt road which formed the driveway to the farm and poke his nose into stores, churches or other spots where there might be people who would play with him and perhaps feed him something special. Occasionally he would open other stalls in addition to his own, and entice other animals to escape with him, herding the somewhat confused horse or goat in whatever direction
he, Jørgen, desired to go. But the little horse was useful, as well. Powerful, with the strong muscles found on Shetland ponies as well (who are used to haul coal, among other things), Jørgen turned into a work horse during plowing and haying seasons, being as capable as his big white companion to haul the heavy farm equipment. Viggo occasionally harnessed him in the winter just for fun. Putting on a pair of skis, he let Jørgen gallop over the snow, giving him a ride similar to that experienced by a water-skier.

Sadly, Joan became increasingly frail, and by the time Thor was five, she was dying of cancer. Joan and Viggo both smoked, and she died of lung cancer. I always got the impression that between her health issues and other demands, Thor may not have gotten as much attention from his mother as many children do.

It seemed she had not been much of a companion to little Thor, and he rarely spoke of her in later years. But his father was grieving and spending as much time with her as possible until the end. Thor was parked out with neighbors, and also spent time playing by himself around the farm, which was a reasonably safe place for him, and he seemed not to be inclined to wander very far alone. The cows on the farm actually belonged to a man who had the skills, but no property, to use for his little dairy. This Mr. Stratton used Viggo’s barn for his cows, and in exchange took care of Viggo’s two horses and several goats. The hay grown on the farm fed all these animals, and Viggo took some of the milk, while Mr. Stratton sold the rest in town. And there were occasional young girls who helped look after Thor and the house in general. But it was a sad little household when Joan finally died. Viggo created a beautiful memorial site for her at the graveyard—the second wife he laid to rest there.
It was with a sense of adventure, then, that late in July, 1945, Viggo and Thor, now six, set out to visit an old friend of Viggo’s—a woman he had known some years before when she was the wife of composer Alan Hovhaness, with whom Joan had been studying composition in Boston. Known to all her friends as Patt (her given name was Martha Mott Davis), she was an artist too, and had been divorced from Hovhaness for a number of years. A book Patt wrote about Viggo called The Four Leafed Clover tells the story of their relationship.

Viggo was somewhat nervous, but hopeful. He had been very fond of Patt, but hadn’t seen her for a good many years, and he had begun to dream that she might make a real mother for Thor and an artistic companion for himself. He needed very much to get back to his art, and he and Thor were both lonely. It is doubtful that he mentioned these thoughts to Thor, but he did tell his son that Patt had a daughter just a few years older than himself, and that they would probably have fun together. Furthermore they were going to Cape Cod, to a bungalow near the mouth of Bass River, where the warm Atlantic Ocean was easily accessed as well.

The ten days or so that they spent on the Cape were an ecstatic experience for both of them. For Viggo, thin and worn and less fun-loving than was his wont, it was a beautiful, relaxed period with Pat, a woman he felt he could truly come to love. And Pat’s daughter Jean, who was cute as a button at ten, was there along with a young friend who was visiting them for the summer. Jean fell immediately, passionately, in love with Thor.
Whispering together, apart, Jean and her friend Maggie began spinning stories about Viggo and Patt. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if they would get together for good? Jean would have her two greatest desires fulfilled as if by magic: both a brother and a father! How thrilling! And Thor was so terribly cute, with his big blue eyes and wondering expression. Surely this would be perfection itself!
Young Thor was terribly cute.

And Thor, his big eyes growing bigger with each new sight, tagged along happily with the girls at their every activity. On the walk through the pine woods to the small store on the other side where groceries—and better yet, ice cream!—could be had. Or past the big Cape Cod windmill that lived right next door to their bungalow and which belonged to the wizened little old “Aunt Alice” in the cottage beyond, who made hundreds of tiny jigsaw puzzles which were the entertainment of hours. And with all five of them, out in a rowboat across Bass River and over the dunes to Eastern Beach, where the low breakers of the Atlantic rolled gently over the sand, and they could wade far out into the warm sea-water and catch jellyfish. On shore, there were nests of gulls in hollowed-out places in the sand and huge, ridiculous horseshoe crabs that one could pick up and turn over, watching them waving their
legs in vain attempts to right themselves, until one took pity and did it for them. On the way home, in the reeds beside the river, Viggo would *spear-SPEAR!* eels which were taken home in a wriggling bucket and later cooked and eaten.

And Thor did want a big sister like Jean—wanted her so bad that he threw his arms around Patt and asked her, most seriously, “Miss Patt, can I *buy* Jean?”

Of course he didn’t have to, as it turned out. Viggo had indeed popped the question as soon as he saw how this little family just came together, hungering for each other, delighting in everything about each other. They only needed to spruce up the farm a little, although he had decided he wouldn’t stay there, but find another house in the town of Jaffrey closer to the schools and away from the environment where, at the last, had come so much unhappiness. Patt, on her side, had to extract herself from the contract she had teaching art in the private school where Jean was also a pupil. All these things were managed as quickly as possible—and by Thanksgiving holiday Viggo and Thor were on their way to Rochester, New York, to cram themselves into the tiny apartment Patt and Jean had been living in. The wedding was all planned, and Jean and Thor would be bridesmaid and ring-bearer, respectively. The children (and probably their parents) could hardly contain themselves, being ready to burst with joy!

Although most of this perfection did indeed come to pass, there were complications. By the time Thor and his Dad had reached Rochester, Thor had a hacking cough. They had arrived on Tuesday night, and the wedding was to take place on Thanksgiving Day. But by Wednesday
morning the cough was bad enough, and accompanied by some vomiting, that they took Thor to the family doctor that had been treating Jean over the years. Returning with a diagnosis of whooping cough, with strict orders of quarantine for both Thor and Jean, the glorious wedding plans had to be considerably modified. While the kids remained in the little apartment, the new Mommy and Daddy went off alone in their finery to be married. What a disappointment! Worse yet, Thor was really sick by now, and no longer had much interest in either the wedding or the excitement of a new family.

On Friday, Nov. 26, 1945 the kids were bundled into the back seat of Viggo’s two-door Plymouth coupe. Thor was wrapped up in blankets, and huddled uncomfortably in one corner. It was a subdued and very cold trip to New Hampshire, where they arrived about 1 a.m. to a farmhouse feeling no warmer than the air outdoors. Typical for New England, snow was already on the ground and temperatures were already below zero degrees Fahrenheit. Without removing their clothes, the kids just fell into their beds in separate rooms, while the grown-ups worked to start the heating system so that things would feel a bit better by morning. For Patt, at least, it was a bitter plunge into this marriage, and she was beginning to wonder whether she had really made the right decision to come here. But, what was done was done, and although perhaps both she and Viggo had their misgivings, neither ever considered undoing the knot they had just tied.

Thor was sick for a very long time, and the two children were quarantined for many weeks. Actually, after the first bout of severe coughing and vomiting, his stomach settled down well enough so he could run about with Jean and proudly show her the farm, about which she knew even less than he had about the sea. They were able to survey
the snow-covered fields with woods beyond in every direction, as both road and town were hidden from view in the clearing on which the farmhouse and its outbuildings stood. He showed her the barn with its hayloft and all the animals, but she had already explored the connecting shed with its two-holer on one side, where one could enter the barn directly from the kitchen by going through this covered passage. Thor didn’t naturally rise early, so she had already met Mr. Stratton and the milking operation, but Thor introduced her to Jørgen and Bobby and the two current goats. He also showed her Viggo’s studio in a small outbuilding and rather handsome little Danish-style one-room cottage away from both house and barn (which Viggo had built himself before Thor was born), but entry was forbidden without Daddy’s presence.

By Christmas Patt and Jean were quite acclimatized to life on the farm, and the new parents outdid themselves creating a marvelous Christmas for the children. Not able to attend school because of their quarantine, they enjoyed another month or so of winter sports on their new sleds, and in the attic upstairs, they had set up an electric train, and performed mysterious experiments with a toy chemistry set. By the time they were released to start school—Thor in first grade and Jean in sixth—they were as close as any brother and sister could possibly be.
The farm house in Jaffrey.
By summer 1946 the new family moved from the farmhouse. Viggo had found a dream house near the edge of East Jaffrey across the street from the large Catholic Church, so vital to this town full of French-Canadians. Viggo and Patt both heartily disapproved of this church, ostensibly because the Catholic kids were kept segregated from the rest of the town’s children, and herded into a playground at the back of the church after school. Once settled into the new house, a three-story one of solid stone, set on 14 acres of somewhat unkempt land, the family began attending the Congregational church on their own side of the street. This was the next building down the hill which ran towards the town’s center, approximately a half mile distant. They even began entertaining the new young minister, who lived in a small house nestled next to his church.

The stone house. Laura, Scott and Grace in the foreground.
With the help of Jørgen, Viggo and Jean began cultivating some of the land near the house, and they elicited Thor's help to plant a substantial vegetable garden. The huge front yard had a beautiful lawn, which Jean and Thor (now a sturdy seven-year-old) took turns mowing, and they were also put to work weeding both the flowerbeds around the lawn, and the newly-established vegetable garden. There were plenty of outdoor chores to be done during the summers, which were so hot and humid that they had to rise very early to accomplish anything involving energetic physical activity before about nine in the morning, when the heat became intolerable. In the late summer, the several large sugar maple trees scattered about the front lawn were tapped for their sweet sap, and the children were fascinated by the subsequent process of boiling the thin liquid down to make maple syrup, and even some hard sugar. Children had to compete with goats, however, since the latter would try to drink the sap as it began filling the little buckets hanging on the trees. Later in the 1970's Thor tried repeating the process in Anchorage and with taps bought from New England collected sap from the many birch trees. It took a lot more boiling down than maple sap, and the syrup wasn't as sweet, but it was an interesting experiment.

Speaking of goats, the big barn which stood separate and downhill from the house soon began to fill with animals. There were more goats than before, and Jean learned to milk a couple of them. She enjoyed milking and caring for the goats, but couldn't abide the taste of that milk, which fed the cats and some neighbors who drank it for their health. There were two new horses, in addition to Jørgen, and Viggo fenced in the half-acre or so of pasture that ran between this barn and the Congregational church.
Gradually the children were given other creatures to care for: chickens for Thor, who immediately started an egg “business,” and ducks and rabbits for Jean, although the rabbits didn’t last too long as they had a propensity to eat each other. A couple of geese named “Blondie” and “Dagwood” became pets for a while, too. (Only when eggs were laid was it discovered that these names should have been reversed!) The geese became wonderful “watchdogs”—chasing loudly and fearsomely after any stranger who entered the yard, scaring friend and foe alike until finally these erstwhile pets were shoved in the oven and eaten for dinner. By this time nobody loved them and had no qualms about this apparent act of cannibalism! Until they became so belligerent, however, the geese hung about during afternoon tea on the lawn, daintily sipping tea from saucers placed on the ground. In and out of the house were Bonnie, the Cairn terrier down from the farm, and miscellaneous cats and frequent kittens.

Viggo, with Thor by his side, was always building things. There was a woodshed on one side of the house which they soon turned into a studio for Viggo with a small workshop for Thor where he constructed things, and just as rapidly deconstructed them. The children were wide-eyed at the kiln, since Viggo worked primarily in ceramics now, and soon he was turning out many small birds and animals which were fired in the kiln—periods of great excitement and anxiety as there were times when explosions occurred and everything was ruined, and other (more frequent) times when these clay objects came out hard and beautifully glazed in different colors. Soon Patt and Viggo set up a small shop in what had once been a sun-room on the uphill side of the house, and began selling these items, with Patt, Jean and Thor each taking turns at being the salesperson, proudly showing off the charming small birds...
and other ceramic creatures to villagers and tourists alike who came by during the summers and fall.

Although Jean adored all the animals, Thor was relatively indifferent to them, although he enjoyed his egg business and the idea of raising plants and animals for food or to sell. Jean had finally taught Jørgen to be ridden, but had soon outgrown him, so Thor inherited the stubborn little pony, but soon grew bored with him. It seemed that Jørgen stubbornly refused to go in the direction that was wanted, and like a mule, was as apt to suddenly back up as to go forward. The canny little pony must have sensed Thor’s lack of real interest or love for him. So Thor found himself becoming more and more fascinated by Viggo’s work, and began himself making clay models and wooden constructions with or without use, in his own “workshop” (a corner of his Dad’s). By the age of eight or nine, Thor acquired a real tool belt, which weighed down his pants but was worn with great pride, awkward as it may have been. He was always available to help when Viggo was fixing or constructing something, and he learned a great deal from his father about working with his hands, as well as the basics of ceramics: how to work the clay, and to make the pieces hollow with a hole to the outside so they would not explode during firing, as well as the chemistry of the glazes, which turn from one color to another during the firing process. Sometimes his little items would go into the kiln along with Viggo’s—just beginning experiments, to see how they would turn out.

As Viggo put his little studio shed together, and built the kiln out in back of it, he began building larger works of ceramic: a magnificent large bull, among other things. He was also receiving some commissions from wealthy people, particularly from the Boston area, and created some models of large memorials and other such works in
the hopes of getting still larger commissions. And during these Jaffrey years, Patt and Viggo were developing their longed-for artistic companionship, and enthusiastically included the children in activities such as painting field trips. Here Thor began to excel, or at least showed tremendous enthusiasm if not yet much skill. Jean, however, preferred her music, which, apart from the piano and some singing, included participating in the school band and learning the clarinet. So gradually, as close as sister and brother were always to feel towards each other, their differences in skills and interests began to assert themselves.

However, both Patt and Viggo felt strongly that, wherever possible, the family should do things together. For example Viggo loved games of all sorts, and of course Thor followed exactly in his footsteps. Patt had a history of game-loving, although her preferences tended towards games of skill. Viggo taught the others to play cards: especially Hearts, Old Maid, Bridge, and something called “O Hell!,” and the kids particularly enjoyed board games like Monopoly and Parcheesi, which in the early years they played with each other. Viggo and Patt began to play rather serious chess in the evenings, and by the time Thor was about nine, he had learned the moves and enjoyed challenging his father to chess, although Viggo of course always won in these early years. Thor wasn’t deterred, however, and truly became expert by the time he reached college. Jean, on the other hand, would far rather sit alone with a book, or practice the piano or clarinet, than join the family in evening card games. This gradually became a bone of contention, since they needed a fourth in most of their card games, and Patt and Viggo leaned hard on her to be more cooperative. Thor, more social than Jean right from the beginning, loved the games, and he reveled in getting good at them.
This was all part of emulating his father, as he tried to do in just about everything.

On weekends the family often went to local auctions—the kind of thing that in California would be called anything from “estate auctions” to “garage sales”—where often wonderful bargains could be had. Especially around New England, many antiques turned up in peoples’ old barns or attics, the value of these usually quite unknown, and it became an enjoyable treasure-hunt. Sometimes animals were to be gained in this way, too: goats, chickens and other livestock that Viggo liked to add to the menagerie, and even an occasional horse could be bought cheaply on these weekend sales. Thor’s love of auctions continued all his life, and eventually he even attended an auctioneers school and put his skills to work at charity auctions for his rotary club.

The family usually went to church on Sundays, and both children were encouraged to attend Sunday school. One summer it was Church “camp,” which was nothing more than an extended Sunday school held at the local schoolhouse. Although they attended all these things obediently, neither was very impressed by much of it, and religion was not a topic discussed very often at home. Thor had very early learned to say his prayers before going to bed, and sometimes grace was said at table. But these matters were only rather erratically attended to. Jean happily joined the church choir, but Thor never found his voice and was shy to try it out among others in such a setting. Only later, after the family had moved clear across the country, did he join a school band and blow happily into trombones and tubas for a while. But again, this was more to be a part of a social “club” of sorts, rather than from any compelling musical interest.
Surely Thor’s burgeoning social skills came from his constant observation and emulation of Viggo, who was very socially adept. The family had invited guests constantly, and Viggo was always the life of the party. He told fabulous stories, sometimes purported to be about his own life, but many were clearly fabrications. Just as often, the family would set out to visit neighbors and close friends on weekends. Particular favorites were the McGouns. Alec McGoun was a spry, twinkly gentleman who had been a University professor, and was Thor’s godfather. They owned a lovely hide-away on one of the local lakes, and had a good swimming area in the lake near their house. They all loved visiting there, and Jean and Thor enjoyed the swimming, at least prior to the following near-tragic incident:

The McGouns had strung ropes with buoys to clearly demarcate a safe area under which a shelf of rock extended out from the shore for several hundred feet. This made the lake quite shallow in that entire area, and Thor, not yet an accomplished swimmer, could walk all the way out to the farthest rope barrier. This rocky shelf abruptly gave way to deep water just beyond that barrier, however, and the children had been repeatedly warned to stay well inside the ropes to avoid that cliff-edge. Of course Thor, a typical 7-year-old just looking for a challenge, wanted to get just as close to the rope as he could ... close, closer ... when oops! He suddenly slipped under the rope and vanished from sight! Jean panicked—she was a very strong swimmer but had always been told that it was unsafe to try to rescue a drowning person unless she knew how to avoid being dragged under herself. She yelled loudly but was paralyzed to go toward her little brother and terrified that he would just drown out there. Suddenly Viggo was running fast through the water and had grabbed Thor, who had just come bubbling up somewhere near the farthest rope. Viggo slung Thor over
his shoulder and ran for shore, then hung the boy upside down by the feet and whacked his back a few times. Thor upchucked a large volume of water, and appeared none the worse for wear. Much shaken, however, he had lost all interest in swimming.

Aside from family and friends, Jaffrey and its surroundings offered a certain amount of outside entertainment. There were lots of good saddle trails through the woods surrounding the town, and many roads were still unpaved for Jean and various “horsey” friends. Viggo occasionally accompanied her on summer rides. There was an annual horse show where locals could compete, and even Thor participated in one of these. Tourists, as well as visiting friends from out of town, enjoyed hiking up Mt. Monadnock. Thor and Jean, sometimes with Patt or Viggo, would escort friends up the trail to the top (a mild 3,000-ft. climb). The family used to picnic out in the woods as well, and often combined picnics with painting trips. Of course in winter there was both sledding and skiing, although nearby ski hills were very modest in height and neither Thor nor Jean developed much skill. During the winter that they lived on the farm, however, there was sometimes no other way to get off the farm and into town, and cross-country skiing through the woods continued to be a winter pastime. On Saturday afternoons, the one theater in town showed movies for children, which included serialized adventure films that enticed them back each week. Apart from occasional purchases of coca cola or candy downtown, most of their spending money went to the cheap tickets for these films. At times they were involved in drama productions. Thor once played the part of Clod-Hans, a character from a Hans Christian Andersen story.
Thor as Clod-Hans.

Spending money was earned as an allowance in exchange for the fairly extensive and carefully scheduled
chores at home, which included cleaning their rooms and helping Patt with other housecleaning chores, doing the dishes (Thor and Jean took turns washing and drying them), taking care of the animals, and in winter, shoveling snow. In the summer snow-shoveling was replaced by weeding the gardens and mowing the lawn. And of course there was school. The Jaffrey School was an old-fashioned one, determined to give kids a solid grounding in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and history. Thor, in the first through fourth grades, had a minimum of homework, but Jean was fairly swamped with it, since her big city “modern” schools had not required anywhere near as much work or learning!

The most exciting event that happened in Jaffrey, however, was without a doubt the birth, in April of 1947, of their younger brother David. The entire process of Patt’s pregnancy and then the final arrival of a baby fascinated both Jean and Thor. In those days, long before ultrasound scans and the like, the pregnancy was a topic of endless speculation and a certain amount of fear. Patt was 40 years old, and had had a difficult time with high blood pressure before Jean’s birth 12 years before. This baby had been an “accident” in the sense that Viggo was terrified of harming his new wife and had not really wanted to impregnate her. But birth control was then still a primitive science, and so this unexpected event had occurred, but once done, the entire process filled the family with joy. Jean and Thor could scarcely contain themselves, and although so much younger, David seemed to forge yet another and even more solid bond holding the little family together.

Having a baby brother at home was a source of endless entertainment to the older children. As David grew into a very active toddler, Viggo fixed up a yard outside the
house for him to play in, but like the wicked little pony Jørgen, David was almost always able to unlock or undo any kind of closure used to hold his gate shut. Various attempts to make the inside of the yard more enticing than the outside were successful only as long as David could not see other family members—or animals, for that matter—doing interesting things beyond the fence. A pair of baby goats helped for a while, being closed in with David, where they danced and cavorted around him. Although they knocked David over occasionally, they were too small to do him harm. Jean and Thor became second parents to the new addition to the family, and were a great help to Patt, whose middle-aged body was not always up to racing after a crawling, then toddling youngster. For Jean this was a truly valuable lesson in childcare, and for Thor, now happily no longer the youngest, the beginning of an understanding of fatherhood. Unfortunately for David himself, however, the existence of two sets of parents, all four of whom were sometimes at odds with one another, was often a source of confusion.

Speaking of mothering, Patt had remained rather shy about establishing a close motherly relationship with Thor, feeling that it was perhaps too soon after he had lost his real mother. Both Thor and Jean spoke of Patt and Viggo as “Mother” and “Daddy,” but the two children leaned on each other more than their parents, partly just from the new joy of having a sibling. Patt probably didn’t realize how distant that mother (Joan) had been from her son, and how much Thor really needed and wanted a mother, whether or not Thor himself understood this. However, sensing Patt’s reluctance, Thor sought out his new sister, instead, for the caring and advice that a mother could give. They certainly did have a very loving relationship, but Jean was in fact too young and immature to stand by him at all times—they often got into spats and Thor found
he could get on her nerves by certain kinds of teasing. Jean, in irritation, would sometimes withdraw from him at times when he wanted and needed her love. Only much later, after Jean was no longer at home, did Thor finally seek Patt out as his true and only mother. Of course by then, in high school, he was very independent and had learned to shift for himself. Indeed, Patt raised all three children to be thoroughly independent, with Viggo leaving most of the “upbringing” to Patt, and this stood each of them in very good stead as they went out into the world.

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These years in Jaffrey seemed idyllic. Family life was normal now, and all had settled into the rhythm of life as it is lived in a country New England town, through the powerful seasons of the region. It was a town where “everybody knew everyone,” and of course Thor had known no other home. He was now ten years old, and eager to become a Boy Scout. Jean, at fourteen, was ready to begin high school, having already been for two years in the building which housed both junior and senior high classes. David was an extremely active two-year-old with a sparkling personality. How—or why—would this wonderful life ever end?

Of course the kids knew nothing of family finances. Viggo had some kind of small income from the estate of his first wife, but it was nowhere near enough to support this enlarged family. He clearly loved to give the appearance, at least, of living well above his means, so neither the children nor neighbors and friends knew his actual financial status. He may even have kept the truth of this from Patt as well. In any event, the family experienced periods of being very flush whenever a big
commission had been sold, and then ate hash and spam for weeks when that money was gone. Patt became adept at making meals out of practically nothing, and was grateful for the garden full of vegetables, some of which could be kept in a cold cellar over winter. She never involved herself with anything so time-consuming as canning, or in making clothes for the children either, detesting these chores and having no skill in them. Viggo teased her about her meals, which he would look at glumly and ask, “is this to be eaten, or has it been eaten?” Thor passed this little gem on to his children and occasionally said it in jest at the dinner table, along with another saying which likely he heard as a child: “the time for peas are when peas are passing.”

The plain fact was that they could no longer afford to live in such a big house in such a grand style (at least externally). Heating bills alone, through those long New Hampshire winters, were more than the family income, and they had begun to go into debt. Viggo apparently cadged money from friends rather than accruing formal debt from a bank, but finally he had decided they needed to seek at least a warmer climate (without realizing that there might be other high costs in such regions).

He was an avid reader of *The Saturday Evening Post*, and an article about avocado ranching in California attracted him. Soon he began spinning warm and wonderful dreams about California and without further ado simply sold the big Stone House and its acreage outright, packed the family into a car which towed a trailer carrying their most precious possessions (furniture and large ceramic pieces and the like were shipped by truck later), and took off into the sunset! Of course the children thought this a
marvelous adventure, and Patt simply kept her mouth shut, although she surely had many private misgivings.

Thor always said to his sons that his father got tired of shoveling snow. He speculated that Viggo may have been starting to suffer from lung problems and that may have contributed to getting tired of shoveling.

Before actually heading for California, however, the family decided to spend a last summer at Cape Cod. It was a way for Patt and Jean to say farewell to their old home there, and to Patt’s father and aunt as well as friends who still lived in Bass River. By this time Patt’s father, Charles Henry Davis, was seriously failing in health. This old gentleman fascinated Thor. He was a highway engineer, and an early designer of and investor in the nation’s public roadways. He had himself travelled all over the country by car in the days when this was a true adventure. He had license plates on display in his old studio from nearly every state in the union. From somewhere—perhaps Bass River itself—he had been made an honorary Police Chief. Much to Thor’s excitement, he would don his police cap and drive at great speed along the Cape Cod roadways blasting away on a siren. But before the end of this summer of 1949, the family had to pay a final visit to him in the hospital, knowing that they would not see him again. [For more information on Charles Henry Davis, see www.elverhoj.org/archives/davis.html]

Thor was now old enough to have adventures of his own on the Cape. One of Patt’s friends was an old seafaring salt, Ted Frothingham, who owned a boat business. This consisted of a boatyard on Bass River where he rented both moorings and boats, and he also took people out on fishing expeditions. During this summer Ted took Thor with
him on an overnight trek to Nantucket Island. Thor was ecstatic, and looked quite the fisherman with his 'southwester' and yellow waterproof hat. He was practically speechless with wonder when he returned the next day, and never actually told the family much about his adventure, but his eyes were shining and he might have instantly joined the Coastguard had we not been heading for California, which evidently seemed even more enticing. Nevertheless Thor was full of sea yarns worthy of a Conrad, and now he could consider himself far and away Jean’s superior when it came to sea lore, which surely befitted this namesake of the lofty God of Thunder.

Having extracted all the joys and sorrows that Cape Cod was likely to give them that summer, the family at last was on its way west. It was already September, and knowing nothing but the Northeastern idea of weather, they assumed it was best to go by the southern route through Oklahoma, the Texas panhandle, etc. on to Los Angeles, where a sister of Patt’s lived. How much they had to learn of our vast country! Truly they were as ignorant as 49ers as they set out on this trip. They took two weeks, making their days fairly short for the sake of the children (particularly David, who was only two), and driving sedately while dragging their open trailer behind. They also included a few detours to see notable sights such as the Kentucky caverns and the Grand Canyon.

In 1949, most highways were still pretty new. They had read about the famous Pennsylvania turnpike, and were enormously excited to be on it, driving mile after mile without stops. Eventually they found themselves on famed Route 66, headed for Los Angeles. Somewhere in Oklahoma they stopped for lunch and Thor looked bug-eyed at a real live cowboy who walked in with his ten-
gallon hat, boots and spurs, talking in a drawl so thick he could barely be understood by this family, which (as would become plain later on), had its own collection of local accents! Each evening they stopped in a motel, and Jean and Thor would take David for a walk on the invariable walkway past all the numbered doors. Coming to the end of the paved strip, it was “far enough,” they would say. David thought these walkways were called “Bardemuhs,” and for some months would wonder why all houses didn’t have them. Strange to contemplate how quickly this daily journey and nightly motel turned into the whole of reality for him.

Given their ignorance, the trip might have been a total disaster. They took off across the desert in the great Southwest in mid-September, not realizing that this was the hottest month of the year in these parts, with no water either for themselves or their car. David nearly died of the heat, the car struggling up over mountainous passes barely made it to a small town’s gas station where the radiator promptly boiled over, and one of the two lovebirds they had carried with them (the only pets they had kept) did succumb and was buried by the highway somewhere in Arizona. When they at last crossed the border into California, with whoops and screams of joy—“We’re HERE!!”—they discovered it was still many, many more miles of desert before they finally came to the wonderful and astonishing sight of an orange grove! And then, driving into Los Angeles, where Patt’s sister was waiting to receive them, they drove through more miles of smelly oil fields, with ugly derricks pumping up and down, up and down—an utterly unexpected sight indeed.

But at long last they drew up in front of a small ranch-style house to be greeted warmly by Priscilla (“Prill”), Patt’s sister, and her two children, Lucy and Charles (“Chuck”)
Matteson. Prill, a practicing nurse, had married a man from California, and had remained in Los Angeles although long since divorced. So the Brandt-Erichsen family of five managed to crowd in with them for a few days, using Prill’s home as base while scouting around southern California looking for a place to settle down.

It took only a very few days of driving around in the fast cars of realtors, up and down barren California hills which, they were informed, would be “ideal places to live” once developed. Within a week the family collectively (apart from David, for whom every single bit was a big adventure) decided that southern California was NOT an ideal place for them at all, and surely not Viggo’s dream. They hadn’t seen a single avocado farm, but the brown bare hills surrounded by oil derricks certainly carried no charm, in this, the driest and dustiest of seasons. By now it was well into the month of October (1949), and Patt stated rather firmly that the kids needed to get into school somewhere. “Let’s just find a place to rent,” she said, “and take our time looking. After all, if we really don’t like California we can try another state—maybe Colorado?—next summer.”

In looking through advertisements for houses to rent, Viggo spotted one just north of the city of Santa Barbara, 100 miles or so up the coast. “Let’s try that,” he said. “Remember the pictures Paul Draper showed us last summer of the Santa Ynez Valley? That looked like a beautiful place, and we could look around there.” In any case, they needed to get out of poor Prill’s hair, since five extra people in a house designed for three was hardly a help to her, despite her generosity. So the next day they said farewell to their cousins and set out for a tiny hamlet north of Santa Barbara called Ballard, where the rental house had been advertised.
As they drove north of Santa Barbara, they turned in from Highway 101, as directed, to the town of Solvang, where the Real Estate office was located. As they came over the brow of a hill leading into this small town (at the time, population 700), Viggo spotted the spire of a little Danish Lutheran Church. “My God,” he said, “I haven’t seen one of those since I left Denmark!” They stopped on the main street to ask directions to the Realtor’s office, and people were speaking Danish on the street!

Solvang was a small community. Like most small towns everyone knew everyone. It was not the tourist mecca that it has become now. There were regular stores, a gas station, and drive-in diner. It was home to Atterdag College, a school founded by Danish immigrants fashioned after similar institutions in Denmark. Solvang was out in the country, and offered many of the attractions of rural life.

It didn’t take them long to settle down in the nearby village of Ballard, where their rental home was located, and to decide to remain in this “little bit of Denmark” for keeps. Regardless of what one might think of the glitzy, tourist-trap sans Danes that Solvang has become, with the surrounding Santa Ynez Valley housing movie stars and other rich elites with their expensive horse ranches and wineries, in 1949 it was a sleepy little town nestled in an agricultural valley, given to the raising of wheat and oats. This area, being a farming community bathed in Southern California sunshine, became a sunny haven for the Danish farmers whose families had earlier settled in Minnesota, and they had named their new Land of Oz “Solvang,” meaning “Sunny Valley.”
So the family moved into a small ranch house in the middle of an enormous field of oats, planted and harvested by an unknown farmer who rented access to the surrounding land. The Brandt-Erichsens had access to an acre or two near a gully, not much good for plowing, and Viggo soon bought a couple of horses which ran freely in that field, and were fed in a paddock near the lengthy, winding driveway. This dirt drive took large tums and swoops down through the gully (during most of the year a dry riverbed) and eventually out to the two-lane road which connected the towns of Los Olivos, Ballard and finally Solvang itself. In the winter the riverbed occasionally flooded, and the family would find itself marooned in the house. Walking out through the unpaved roadway, now turned to the adobe mud which constituted most of the soil in this region, resulted in shoes hugely weighted down with the thick clay. But most of the year it was a dry, dusty place, with the prevailing winds blowing adobe dust through all possible cracks into the house.

Thor, now ten, had changed quite markedly from “that cute little boy with the huge blue eyes” into a serious, hard-working kid on the verge of growing up. He simply thrived in this new environment. Immediately he and Jean went off to different schools: Jean being bused to the consolidated Santa Ynez Valley Union High School, into the tenth grade, and occupied herself with horses. But Thor, having acquired a bicycle, took off by himself to the one-room, literally “little red schoolhouse” in Ballard where he matriculated into the 5th grade (the dozen or so kids in the one room were at all different levels), and a year later moved to the Solvang Elementary School at the 7th grade level. He went everywhere around the country roads of the valley on his bike, and by summer had gotten himself a job hoeing beans on a farm near Solvang.
Thor joined the Boy Scouts and began to show real leadership there, taking every opportunity to go on camping trips with the Scouts. Later that winter, when all the power had gone out in the Ballard ranch house, Thor announced that he would cook the family meals in the fireplace for the duration. He did it, too! The family had flapjacks for breakfast—uh, slightly fluid in the center, perhaps—but tasting ok if slathered with syrup. The dinner menu was not memorable, except for the carrots for desert, because Thor hadn’t figured out how long they took to cook relative to meat and potatoes. But a wonderful time was had by all, and Thor was clearly learning and experimenting, and not at all afraid to try anything! And that, pretty much, has been the key to his success ever since.

While Thor and Jean were settling to school and other routines, and Patt was figuring out how to entertain David (who managed, now a toddler, to get into plenty of trouble!), Viggo had taken his few remaining dollars from the sale of the New Hampshire property to try and see what he could purchase in the way of land in California. Once again, he had not bothered—or perhaps had not known how—to determine the difference in land values or cost of living on the West vs. the East coasts. Perhaps it never occurred to him that there might be a difference—presumably there isn’t any in little Denmark. In any event, he was horrified to discover that his large house on 14 acres of land left him with a “nest egg” that would hardly cover their living expenses over the next year or two, let alone purchase land or a house.

Typically, Viggo remained unfazed, or, if he had serious misgivings, he was not going to let those on to his family. Instead, he enacted a clever business deal: a rather surly
vegetable farmer owned a plot of some six acres on the edge of Solvang. Others had tried to purchase this land before, without any success, as the farmer stolidly insisted that he wanted his little farm and nobody was going to take that away from him, no matter how much the town thought it wanted to grow. But Viggo used his Danish-Count-style charm on this old gentleman, wheedled the land from him, and paid him cash. Of course this bit of intrigue emptied the Brandt-Erichsen savings account, but before that could be discovered, Viggo had cut the six-acre parcel into a number of half-acre lots, and sold half of the original garden plot (six lots) for the price of his original purchase! Viggo had now acquired three acres of land on the edge of town at no cost whatever, and he then proceeded to draw up plans for a Danish-style farmhouse, announcing to the world that he would build the house himself.

Now building a house is not a simple matter—and this turned out to be quite a large house, too. True, Viggo had built a small workshop on the farm in Jaffrey, and another workshop attached to the stone house in Solvang (or rather, he had remodeled a shed to turn it into a workshop). But neither of these enterprises were anything like the scale or complexity of a dwelling place: a house that would have a second story above the first, a wing with bedrooms on one side, a large two-story studio on the other, with a large living-room, kitchen and hallway in between. It would have two bathrooms, but no basement, typical of California homes. And apart from the enormity of the task he was undertaking, Viggo knew nothing at all about California soils, and little enough about weather conditions after only a single fall and winter lived in Ballard. He got into plenty of trouble with this venture, and never succeeded in really finishing it, but he recruited the kids to help with some of the work (much to Thor’s joy, and Jean’s acquiescence, at least), and
drew up his elegant plans. They decided to name this “dream house”—for a long time it seemed to be only a dream—“Elverhøj,” after a famous nineteenth-century Danish play titled “Elf Hill.”

Since Solvang was not yet incorporated as a town or city in California, there were few local codes to deal with. Nevertheless, Viggo worked with local town planners to allow a street to go between his new property and those across what had been a narrow dirt road along the side of the old vegetable garden. Thus a regular city street was created, to be named “Elverhøj Way.” Each of the new lots was to give up a slice to allow the road to be widened to county specifications. Before there was even one house, therefore, a paved road led from the back of what was the Brandt-Erichsen property to connect with “Alisal Road,” which ran from Solvang to the county park and “Alisal Ranch”—a large Dude ranch.

Their work was certainly cut out for them! Each day, Viggo and Patt would pack David into the car with them, having packed a picnic lunch, and go to “Elverhøj” to start work. But after having staked out the basic outlines of the house, it was necessary to dig out and pour a foundation before other construction could begin, and for this they needed help. Having hired some workers to do most of the digging, they found themselves in the middle of winter, in one of those dry spells that typically occur in December or early January. Not realizing that this might end inconveniently, it did, of course, after ditches were dug but before any concrete could be poured. Now there was a long delay during several weeks of very heavy rain, during which the dug-out foundation became a sea of mud, and collapsed in on itself. Their ignorance was showing! Everything had to be re-done, of course, but now they waited until the rains had stopped for good—by
now late spring. And before any real work could get started, Jean had a serious accident which left her bedridden for a very long spell—six months, in fact, followed by a long, slow recovery.

House construction began very, very slowly. Viggo now had only Thor, just eleven, to help him with actual building projects, while Patt (when she wasn’t looking after Jean) tried to keep the weeds out of the construction area and David ran interference. Once the foundation was in, Viggo bought wooden beams and showed Thor how to paint them with creosote, as is done with telephone poles, to protect the wood from moisture and insects. Before doing that, however, Viggo took an adz and scraped along all the edges of the beams to give them a hand-hewn appearance. When these beams were erected in their proper places, they looked old, and as though the building had been constructed by hand. He even used wooden pegs to fasten the beams together, using the method found in sturdy old Danish farmhouses. As beams began to go up, the townsfolk in Solvang started calling the house “the old ruin,” and it did have the appearance of something very ancient being dismantled, rather than a new construction! It seemed that this house would never be finished, and in a sense, it was not really finished until long after Viggo’s death, although the family moved into it in 1952.

Thor, and Jean to a lesser extent, hugely enjoyed working on the house, starting with painting of creosote on the beams. Later, when the beams were pegged together, they were gradually raised up via ropes and pulleys, and both Thor and Jean would hang their bodies on these ropes to hold everything on one side of the house in place while Viggo pegged the beams to a connecting side, until finally the ropes could be let loose. In the spring and
summer, weeds grew wildly up into the various parts of the house that still had dirt floors, and finally all three kids were set to weeding the living room, or the kitchen, or whatever was getting out of control. When the house was finally closed in—Viggo did hire a bricklayer to do the fancy brickwork in between the beams, and a roofer to put the enormous roof on and seal it more or less tight against winter rains—the work continued with much painting and varnishing of woodwork. All was done most decoratively, with artists Viggo contributing a sculptured fireplace, a carved wooden front door, and many small carved moldings around inner doorways, and Patt elaborately painting the walls and other areas in the kitchen and the two bathrooms. (This house has now been made into a showcase of art and Danish memorabilia—the Elverhøj Museum, which is open to the public in Solvang [see www.elverhoj.org].)

Thor served on the board for a number of years. More recently David has become very involved with the museum.

Elverhøj as it appears now at 1624 Elverhøj way in Solvang.
Naturally Thor’s skills with his hands and his knowledge of construction were growing apace, so that later in life he was able to build houses in Alaska himself. He continued to have ideas for many small projects of his own. Once, having embarked on an anti-smoking campaign (both Patt and Viggo were inveterate smokers), he constructed a device to demonstrate the dangers of smoking. It was a character he called “Smoke-fiend Joe,” — a head with a rather wild-looking face, into whose mouth a cigarette could be fitted. In the rear was a filter and a vacuum device; when a lighted fag was inserted into Joe’s mouth, it was smoked down to a tiny butt within seconds. Thor would dramatically pull out the filter and show all and sundry the horrid tars and other nasty junk that a smoker was depositing into his or her lungs with every inhalation.
Then there was the local soap-box derby, for which each entrant had to make his own racing car. For Thor, about 11 or 12 at the time, this was the best part of the competition with his fellow school-mates. The cars had certain specifications: there was to be no motor, and its size and shape were limited, but within these limits the kids had free reign. Thor’s was built out of the standard wooden crate with two axles mounted underneath, and some kind of steering contraption in the front. The kids had to haul their wheeled crates to the top of a long hill—for the event this was a macadam road which had been blocked off from regular traffic.

Thor and the soap box derby group.

The race itself, when it finally came about after months of talking and tinkering, was something of an anti-climax. Probably fifteen or twenty kids were started down this hill,
one by one, and in a few seconds had sped, hopefully, across the finish line. The winner was the one who reached that line in the least amount of time. But the family’s eyes were only on Thor who, like all the others, had a football helmet three sizes too large pulled onto his “hard head.” (Thor had long been teased about his hard head, after it smashed into a car windshield in a sudden stop. The windshield ended up with a spectacular star like a sunburst, but Thor’s forehead hadn’t the slightest spot or bruise!). At any rate, on racing day he never made it to the bottom of the hill at all. Something went wrong with the steering mechanism, and half-way to the finish line his soap-box suddenly veered to the side and tipped over, spilling Thor onto the pavement. What was seen from above ... to the horror of all, was his head bouncing and rolling down to the bottom of the hill. Only when this macabre item had crossed the finish line all by itself was it realized that it was only the helmet, bouncing happily, while the head was firmly attached to a slightly scraped-up body crawling out from under the vehicle. Although Thor’s pride had been bruised a bit more than his arms or legs, as usual, he quickly took it all in stride and immediately began a brand-new project.

Thor was always very gregarious, and apart from the people and his many friends, he loved Solvang and its physical surrounds as well. From the beginning he easily made friends among his peers, and joined his school chums in various pranks and mischief. For a period, he begged Viggo (who cut both Thor’s and David’s hair) to give him a Mohawk haircut, which was then all the rage at school. Actually, it was talked about at school a great deal, but there may not have been many boys who actually ventured to wear their hair that way. But he begged and pleaded and finally dared Viggo to clip his hair with the long bit over the top and shaved sides—and finally Viggo took him up on it! Thor instantly regretted it,
and it took many months before he looked “normal” again, so he was slightly more cautious about his needling and nagging after that. But the incident illustrates his desire to join his school friends’ culture, not only to be a part of it, but a leader of it as well.

He rose up quickly through the ranks within the Boy Scouts, going close to the level of Eagle Scout. He had badges up and down his sleeves, which Patt made him sew on himself, as she hated to have anything to do with a needle and thread.
Thor receives a merit badge in scouts.

Of course he’d already gotten a cooking badge before he’d fed the family over the fireplace in Ballard, but he was very adventurous and practically fearless when it came to trying almost anything new. He enjoyed going to a national Boy Scout jamboree. It sounded like quite the experience and he spoke of it fondly. He loved camping and hiking in the mountains and desert.
Thor’s scout troop.

He was bored with school—the California schools were clearly geared to a level somewhat beneath the intelligence and curiosity of any of the Brandt-Erichsen kids, and was apt to be a bit of a troublemaker, but his winning personality enabled him to get away with most of his pranks.

Outside of school he was a very hard worker. When quite early on he took a job hoeing beans and for many of the summer months one could observe him hard at it, in a cowboy hat, sunburned, sweaty, and very proud of the job he was doing and of the good money he earned by that sweat (eighty cents an hour). And when Thor really wanted to learn something, nothing could stop him. Near the start of his high school years he became a “printer’s devil” at the local newspaper, and soon he was running the linotype and soaking up the lore of printing and publishing. In this he had found his calling; he was a professional printer and print shop operator for 30 years. Thor started working at the Santa Ynez Valley News when he was 14. The publisher, Karl Jorgensen, was an influential father figure for him after Viggo died. He got him started in the printing trade.
Clearly the discipline instilled by Viggo, and perhaps even more, Patt, stood Thor in good stead. He and Jean had always been given chores to do at home, and had learned to earn and then save money. They were never given extra money—there wasn’t any—but were paid a steady small wage for the work that was done both inside and outside the house, and that now included help with the building of Elverhøj. From this, it was only a small step to holding down a good job at quite an early age, and Thor’s friendly and easy manner with adults made it easy for him to talk them into hiring him as well. He treated his jobs as responsibilities, was steady, a quick learner, and an asset to whomever hired him. Thus he was well on the road to independence before graduating from high school.

Actually not all was well at home. When Thor entered high school, Jean had left home to go to college. Since her departure was more or less permanent, Thor now found himself the oldest of the two remaining children, and David was proving something of a handful. Even worse, however, was the fact that Viggo was ailing, and it soon became apparent that this sickness would be fatal. Patt and Thor clung to each other during this first year, even as Patt needed to spend more and more time with Viggo. Indeed, they left home together for a few weeks to go to Albuquerque, NM for radiation treatment of what they now knew was cancer. Such treatment was brand new at the time (1952), and Albuquerque was the only place where the techniques were sufficiently developed to use on patients, though they were still very crude by today’s standard. The treatment itself may indeed have made things worse, although the outcome was never in doubt. At this stage, however, such thoughts were scarcely whispered among family members.
They each tried to put a good face on things: The family, without Jean, had finally managed to move in to the Elverhøj home, although the upstairs was entirely unfinished (there was a finished stairway that led only to an enormous unfinished attic), as was the studio. The large kiln planned for the latter, which would have permitted the firing of life-size ceramic sculptures, was never built, and the studio itself became largely storage space for Viggo’s work. He did work a little on smaller things, and spent much of his time doing decorative work inside the house—carving the gorgeous redwood front door, and sculptures of Adam and Eve on each side of the fireplace, as well as small decorative squares with flowers or other decorations completing the lintels for inside doorways. He made a large metal spider web, complete with a huge spider. This, when lined with yellow silk, became a chandelier which hung over the sofa in the living room. He called this marvelous creation “the pain in the neck,” noting that people were wont to develop such a disorder while gazing at it overhead.

But clearly Viggo had slowed down a great deal, and by spring of 1953 he lay around the house reading light novels, and finally by summer he was almost entirely bedridden. Jean came home that summer to help care for him, as it was too much for Patt to look after David—only five years old—and managing the cooking and trying to make a place for Thor to feel wanted, and where he could make a racket with his tuba and the friends he occasionally brought home with him from school. By this time Thor had his job at the print shop, and he spent much of his free time there, learning the trade. He began researching the history of Solvang, and writing a column under the pseudonym Clod Hans. When he was 21 he published a little booklet about Solvang called “From The Danish Quarter” to sell to tourists. Much of the material came from his columns. His boss at the Valley News, the
local press, was delighted to print and sell the booklet, and it went through many reprintings and became a staple as Solvang grew and tourists became more numerous.

Thor had his picture taken for publicity for the book. He was wanting to look like a serious writer.

In the late fall of 1953, Viggo finally slipped away in his sleep. Viggo died when Thor was 14. I have always thought that Viggo’s illness and death at such an early age had the effect of creating a larger than life image of his father in Thor’s mind and prevented him from getting past the developmental point of seeing parents’ weaknesses as well as their strengths. As a result, I often thought that he tried to emulate his father and that he lived partially in the shadow of a boy’s idealized image.

By now this was just a final, blessed rest for both Viggo and for Patt, who had been exhausted both emotionally and physically by his terminal care and trying to keep up a good front for the boys at home. Jean had come back to
Solvang for the funeral, but she was in the middle of her finals at Berkeley and was unable to stay very long, although it meant a lot to them to have the three siblings together again to support Patt at this difficult time.

In fact, Patt was about to face many new and some truly unexpected challenges. Although the new house, Elverhøj, had been finished enough to be livable, she only now discovered the enormous debts Viggo had incurred, both for building costs and for his medical care. Thor was still in high school, but working many hours a week at the Santa Ynez Valley News.

Thor's senior picture.

Patt finally was forced to spend even more money to hire workers to clear up the studio and make space there in which she could open a school for art students.
Additionally, she took a job as art teacher at a local private school (she had no California Teaching Credential, so could not teach in the public schools).

Then, after struggling through these early years of widowhood, she suddenly received a real windfall: Her father, Charles Henry Davis, had owned some stock in a Kentucky coal company, and suddenly this corporation began making huge profits! The trustee who had been managing the Davis estate sold this stock and divided the proceeds among Patt and her remaining three sisters. She was of two minds about this, having developed strong liberal political leanings, but being fairly desperate for money, decided to accept her share of the family treasure. This finally enabled her to pay off the last of $17,000 in debts from Viggo’s various business dealings, and also to finish the upstairs of Elverhøj. She put in a full apartment with kitchen and bath at the top of the stairs, leaving still a goodly amount of storage space over the living room. The roof had to be repaired as well, but she felt now she could rent that space if she needed extra income. That apartment eventually became home for the manager/director of the Elverhøj Museum. Patt, far from being a lonely widow, in fact began to blossom in her own right, becoming established as a respected teacher in Solvang, which was growing a strong artistic community.

Thor was blossoming right along with her. By now he was a skilled lineotypist, and fully able to manage the print shop for the little valley newspaper. Throughout high school he worked part time at the newspaper, and he continued to work for newspapers, working at the Santa Barbara News Press during college.
Thor on the track team at Santa Ynez Valley Union High School.

While in high school Thor ran track. He ran the 1320, which is a distance they don’t really run any more. When Svend and I ran track in High School, Svend ran the 440 and I ran the 880. So we imagined the 1320 would have been a pretty grueling race. Thor spoke of his track efforts with fondness, but I never saw him running as an adult. He ran on a dirt or cinder track which called for long spikes (about 5/8 inch). He kept them and let me wear them when I ran in Jr. High. The long spikes didn’t work so well for cross country on a golf course because they skewered leaves and acted like you were picking up garbage. They made it feel special though.
Thor running track.
Thor once took the prom queen to his prom. He asked out one of the girls who had been nominated as one of the potential prom queens. At the time the school selected the queen by having a collection jar for each girl, and the queen was chosen based upon whose jar had the most money. Thor made sure his date would win by putting a lot of money in her jar.

Thor told me about this story when I was growing up, but I had forgotten about it until on a visit to Solvang in 2009 I ran into Charlene Hansen (now Witfield) at the visitors bureau, and she told me what a gentleman Thor had always been and how he had made her feel so special by doing that. She said that “He was my hero.” She was so excited that she forgot about the other people there to ask for directions and she even asked some of the tourists to take her picture with me with her camera. It was cute how animated she got and made me feel good about the impact Thor had on her and others.
He also began to go out with girls, and by his senior year in High School he was madly, passionately in love with someone named “Sue Money.” Being the kind of guy he
was, Thor never went half-way with anything. He wanted desperately to run away with Sue, to get married and ditch the rest of school, where he felt he was learning very little anyway. He was quite capable of earning a good living, he knew, with a newspaper just about anywhere. Fortunately he was sensible enough to try to get a second opinion about this before taking such a drastic step, and decided to pay Jean a long visit in Berkeley.

Jean felt he had never seemed so much like the small boy she had first met when he was sporting a Viking ring on that first Cape Cod visit, with his big blue eyes wide with excitement at the thought of what was to come! Of course he was deeply disappointed with her advice, that he be “sensible” and finish school before rushing into a marriage. Jean stated that she did not know what happened next, but the name of “Sue Money” was very soon thereafter dropped from his vocabulary, and Thor graduated a year ahead of his class in the spring of 1956, and headed to Santa Barbara to college at the University of California branch in that city.

One Christmas trip I was talking to Patt and she told the story about Thor having been engaged to a girl named Sue Money when he was 17. She moved to Florida. He ran up such large phone bills calling her that Patt cut him off. She didn’t actually say she cut him off, but I think she removed his phone privileges or something like that. It is hard to say whether it was Patt’s influence or other factors which led to the end of that relationship.

Thor may have followed Jean’s advice (and probably everyone else’s with whom he had discussed his plans) on this occasion, but he retained a youthful zest for everything that he did, often going to excess with
whatever caught his imagination at the moment. For example, despite his poor start in the soap-box derby, he had never lost his love of cars, and of speed. He was 19 when he obtained a Jaguar, which was by no means new, and began to tinker. This low-slung sports car was a dull gray in color (presumably called “silver” in the days of its youth!). Thor’s tinkering involved, among other things, the removal of the mufflers, causing the car to make a frightful noise, especially when he gunned the motor, starting it up from zero to 70 or 80 mph in as few seconds as possible.

One day when Jean was down from college on a brief visit, Thor insisted on taking her “out for a spin.” She should have recognized the gleam in his eye, since teasing her unmercifully was a favorite game of his. There were no such things as “freeways” in those days, and the main highway from Santa Barbara north through Buellton and Santa Maria was still only two lanes, but there was a speed-limit of 65 mph which was rather loosely enforced. Once out on this highway all normal conversation was impossible over the racket of the car itself and the roar of the wind, but he happily shouted to Jean that he could “do” at least 120 miles per hour (the upper limit of the Jag’s speedometer). “I’ll show you,” he yelled gleefully. “No, no,” she screeched in return, “I believe you! But I don’t want to go so fast!” Paying not the slightest heed to her protest, he floored the accelerator, flying up the roadway faster and faster, weaving crazily past the few other cars on the road, until Jean’s throat was so dry she could no longer protest. Thor kept turning his head to look at her (she noticing with fright that he did not have his eye on the road), gauging the effect he was having. Finally, satisfied that he had thoroughly terrorized his sister, he relented, returning home rather sedately through the back roads past Los Olivos and Ballard. He chattered on about the details of how he had rebuilt the engine and whatever
else he had done to his “Jag,” none of which did she understand or even hear. She never drove with him again, but he undoubtedly subjected each of his successive girlfriends to the same treatment.

This incident typified what would remain an adult relationship between brother and sister, for the most part. Jean could hardly blame her younger sibling, since during their childhood she had retained the upper hand, and there were plenty of occasions when he treated her with utter sweetness. But there were topics, such as politics or certain aspects of religion, which she ruled out of bounds, because he always knew he could “get her goat” with a relentless tease on such subjects, and he never hesitated to goad her into a conversation that inevitably raised her blood pressure!

On one of our family trips to California later, when Reagan was president, he insisted on driving over a dirt road through the mountains between Santa Ynez and Santa Barbara which ran past Reagan’s ranch which was on the top of the hill. Neither my mother nor we boys wanted to go on that route. It was much slower and the road was very winding. He was determined however and seemed to enjoy it more because of our complaints. He could sometimes get something stuck in his head like that and he would do it regardless of what we wanted. I think he wanted to show us areas he enjoyed as a boy. Or maybe it was just the same teasing spirit which Jean saw when he drove her so fast in the Jaguar.

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Back in 1956 when Thor was starting college, he was deeply involved with another girlfriend, and enjoying classes in geology which took him out into the field—the mountains that he so loved between Santa Barbara and Solvang. Later when he and I were on a driving trip when I was in high school, he told me stories. When we drove through the Nevada Desert he told me about a geology field trip in college where the professor talked about alluvial fans and how you could coast down a road built down the slope of an alluvial fan. He liked the desert because it is easy to see the geology where there are not many plants covering the rock. He attended college in Santa Barbara for two years. He studied geology, and had dreams of being a miner.

He said that he made more money working as a printer than some of his college professors. He liked to spend money too, such as on his Jaguar, which he would drive over San Marcos Pass from Solvang to Santa Barbara to go to school and work. Every time we visited Solvang he used to like to drive over the pass. It brought back fond memories for him. He liked to stop at Cold Springs Tavern also, an old stage coach stop on the way up the pass from Solvang. Some time later, after his terrorizing of Jean, he was driving over San Marcos pass to Santa Barbara, one of his favorite drives, and the Jaguar lost a wheel which rolled off the roadway. That was the last time he drove it. It sounded like a pretty harrowing experience in the retelling. He drove too fast I am sure. After that experience he traded it in for a sedate “woody” station wagon just before becoming a married man at age 22.
Thor always liked fancy cars. Here he is in his Cadillac.

In early December of 1956 Patt became severely ill with a respiratory virus, serious enough to hospitalize her eighteen miles west of Solvang in the nearest hospital facility at Lompoc (the town nearest to what is now the Vandenberg Air Force Base). A friend of the family had taken David in temporarily, and Thor was left more or less to his own devices, being at college. But because of the coming Christmas vacation, he was scheduled to return home for several weeks. The friend made a frantic call to Jean, who was in graduate school at Columbia University in New York City that year. Frightened, and not really knowing what to do, she borrowed some money and made what was then an arduous trip across country to San Francisco. There were no commercial jet airlines yet, and in a mid-winter snowstorm she was grounded half-way across the country for a day. Having stopped in Berkeley overnight she then trekked down to Solvang in a day-long trip on the local Greyhound Bus.
She had been wise to come. Patt had been gravely ill, although it seemed that the worst was behind her by the time Jean got there. But she was terribly weak and fatigued from weeks of high fever, and obviously would need help once home. Thor, 17, was in full adolescent mode. His idea of being “helpful” was to drop in on his mother with his latest girlfriend, and he never fully realized the seriousness of her illness. His visits, full of excited chatter about college life and future plans which were never to materialize, simply exhausted Patt. Jean finally had to politely tell him to leave, but saw that she would have to organize things at home and lay down some ground rules, staying in charge until their mother was well enough to deal with her energetic sons. Soon she was able to bring everyone home, and begin to plan for the holidays.

In fact, once home, the boys worked manfully to produce a beautiful Christmas—Thor obtained a tree, and he and David set it up and Jean helped them decorate it. Patt remained in bed for a week or two, but was able to mutter instructions to Jean, who, fixing meals, was running back and forth from kitchen to Patt’s bedroom right next door whenever she got “stuck.”
Thor managed to find a turkey for the family and together Jean and Thor produced a bang-up Christmas dinner with all the fixings, and to wrap presents for everybody so that it became, all at once, one of their better Christmas days since Viggo had died.

In July of what was now this same year (1957), friends of Jean’s from Berkeley and from Solvang gathered at Elverhøj to celebrate her marriage to a young scientist from India. By now Thor had grown tall and handsome,
and Jean found herself astonished that she had to look up to her kid brother, who was hardly a kid any more. As the male head of household, he gracefully gave his sister away at the home ceremony presided over by the Danish Lutheran minister. He managed to calm a very nervous Jean by solemnly telling her to “curl her toes,” a prescription that seemed to do the trick, if only by making her laugh. For a wedding present he gave the new couple an old Plymouth he had partially rebuilt, in which they soon took off on their honeymoon.

This year was a crossroads for the Brandt-Erichsens. Jean now comfortably settled in Berkeley with her new husband. David began slowly to settle down, and spent a lot of time listening to classical music, a habit surely encouraged by Patt. Patt herself was busy using the huge studio as a classroom and studio for her own paintings as well. Within another couple of years Thor himself would leave college, take a job at the Santa Barbara News Press, and soon take a wife—a lovely girl well known to Jean, since she had often looked after Nancy and her younger sister when they were kids and Jean still in high school.
THOR MEETS NANCY.

Here the stories diverge a bit. All the time growing up the story I always heard was that dad had to quit college because he got married. However, the math does not quite work out. He and Nancy started dating when she was 17, which would make him 19. They did not marry until after her second year of college, which would have been four years after he graduated from High School at 16 in 1956. So obviously the dropping out of school was not entirely part of getting married. I thought for many years that it was more a situation of planning to return to school, but getting caught up in raising a family and not having time, or the need, to go back to school because he had a good job in the printing trade. Nancy recently advised that another factor was that Thor was very generous and in January of 1961 he loaned money to a friend for tuition and when he didn’t repay the money Thor didn’t have enough to enroll that semester.

Thor met Nancy during a Danish Days celebration in September in Solvang. He said it was love at first sight and he instantly knew that was the girl he wanted to marry. Danish Days is a festival celebrating Danish heritage of the area. The residents cook aebleskiver in the street and have dances and other events.

I got to go once when I was staying with Patt when I was in 6th grade. I participated in a Danish gymnastics troop show. It was a fun event, and the weather in September was just perfect.
Thor cooking aebleskiver when he met mom. Barbara Petersen is in the background. She married Bo Peterson, another printer, and they lived across the fence from Patt.

Nancy’s parents, Bob and Louise Hunt, were slightly leery of Thor. He behaved well and went to church with them so he seemed like a good boy, even if he would race back to the house much faster than they drove. There is a story they told about Thor letting Nancy drive the Jaguar, but I can’t remember the details.
Bob was the sort of father who would make sure that his shotgun was visible when Thor came courting. He was not threatening, but it was a subtle reminder for Thor to mind his manners.

Bob had known Viggo before he died. In fact there is a picture of the two of them together lifting a large ceramic cast of Ferdinand, a bull.
Thor and Nancy got married in June of 1961. The Petersons were part of the Wedding party, along with family friends, the Andresens. They had a traditional Danish wedding cake, a *kransekage*. Thor had a job offer in Anchorage in the fall of 1961, but Nancy insisted that they not go North until the baby was born and proved to be healthy.

Svend was born in 1962 in Santa Barbara. In the summer of 1962 Thor took the job offer from the Anchorage Daily News and was ready to move to Alaska. He relished the idea of getting into the outdoors and doing some prospecting and homesteading.

They believed they were prepared for the wilds of Alaska, and so they moved out of their rented house and purchased an International Harvester Scout, a skookum vehicle capable of traversing rough roads and pathways. Along with a six-week-old baby, they drove north hauling a trailer packed with their possessions. They spent two weeks in Fort St. John after the trailer got caught in a soft shoulder and rolled both the trailer and vehicle. Svend was in a crib in the back of the Scout, but bounced around unharmed. I am sure Bob and Louise were nervous about their daughter moving so far away, but they didn’t interfere.

Finally arriving in the Anchorage area, they lived in the Eagle River Campground while they built their first Alaskan home. The first paycheck was a down payment on the land, the second was for concrete for support pads which became the base for a 16 by 24 foot A-frame. They pitched a tent on the subfloor in September, and they borrowed $600 to buy insulation and an oil heater. It was
finished enough for them to move out of the tent in November, with visqueen windows, and an oil stove.
Thor on the ladder building the A-frame. Willy Stark and John Piper (hard hat) look on. The outhouse is visible in the background.
Thor working on the addition to the A-Frame.
Thor and Svend at the A–Frame in Hollowbrook. Patt later painted 2 portraits from this picture.
The location is now in a very urban portion of Anchorage. At the time however it was well away from town on the edge of the wilderness. When Thor and Nancy moved to Alaska in 1962 from southern California, Thor came in search for adventure, with dreams of mining and the urge to establish a homestead in the wilderness like the pioneers of the West. Nancy came to Alaska with more humble objectives. She wanted to be with Thor, and believed him when he said it would be just for a couple of years and they could go back when she wanted.

Predictably, despite Nancy’s desire to return to the familiar surroundings of youth, they stayed. After two years had passed, they didn’t move back, even though Nancy would have wanted to. Over time any thoughts of leaving were forgotten.
The Brandt-Erichsens decided to stay in Alaska.
Alaska is known as the Last Frontier. When newcomers arrived in the state they recognized immediately that things were different there. The rugged terrain and natural beauty are the first things they would notice. But before long, people come to realize that the environment has profound effects on the perspectives of those who choose to live Alaska. They start saving things because you never know when you are going to need to re-use something for another purpose, and because everything needs to be shipped in. Often fresh foods were unavailable. Fruits and vegetables would be older and poorer quality, and milk was best stored as powdered milk to be mixed up as it was needed.

Coming from southern California, they were unfamiliar with such challenges as deep freezing soil. When building their house they placed their water and sewer lines only 18 inches below the surface. As a result, by December of each year the water and sewer lines would freeze. Fortunately the subdivision well was an artesian well and they could get Jerry cans of water whenever needed. At one point I remember a neighbor left a hose running all winter for us to get water. My elder brother and I were assigned water hauling chores. We had two collapsible 3-gallon jugs which we would fill from the neighbor's hose and carry home.

The sewer was dealt with by an outhouse. It was a white two-seater. Every winter we would use the outhouse for a few months until the spring thawed the sewers. When I was five they finally dug up and re-buried the sewer lines.

This also created social opportunities. In addition to relying on neighbors, the frozen plumbing resulted in a weekly ritual for bath night. Every Sunday night we would go to a
friend's house for bath night. We would watch the Wonderful World of Disney and take turns taking a bath. Often we shared baths to conserve hot water.

In the summer we had a home made shower. The front lip was about 6 inches so you could soak and the walls were roofing paper – with the mineral side out.

They were without a phone for a long time. In the early 1960s in Anchorage there was a 18 month wait to get one hooked up. When it was hooked up it was a party line. This meant that several families had the same phone line. If you picked up the phone they might be talking and you would be in on their conversation, so several houses had to take turns with a phone.

Thor and Nancy did not have a TV either. I remember when they got a TV for the Moon walk in 1969. It was just black and white of course. They did not get a color set until after 1982. Before that there were no cartoons or Sesame Street, just playing in the outdoors for entertainment.

The A frame was a pretty small place. It was very cozy and homey though. Svend and I had a room together. They built a raised bed for Svend and I had a wooden bed raised about four inches off the floor. We painted Svend’s bed like a castle. I remember sleep walking once and falling down the stairs and waking up crying. I never sleep walked again. There was a large storage area out the back door called “the addition”. This was where Thor stored a lot of that stuff that might come in handy some day.
We had a concrete bath tub which was only about six inches in depth. We didn’t know anything different though, so it was just fine. I remember when I was about five Nancy was in the bathroom combing Svend’s hair because we were going to pick up Grandma Patt at the airport, and the stove pipe soot broke loose and fell into the bum chamber, blowing fine black soot all over the house. I can just imagine how embarrassed Nancy was having her mother-in-law come to visit and having the house covered in soot.

We had no dishwasher, so Svend and I would do chores. One was to wash the dishes by hand. That and hauling water and cleaning the cat box were the chores I remember most. We would order clothes from the Sears and Roebuck catalog, and Nancy sewed some too. She had a garden in the back yard. I remember they tried to grow corn, but it didn’t grow very well in Anchorage.

Thor and Nancy didn’t generally spank for discipline. We would get restrictions when we were older, but as little kids they used psychology more. Thor would sometimes thunk us on the forehead with his finger. He had hard nails and thick strong fingers. I remember it hurt. The only time I remember a spanking was when we spread jello on the floor and slid on it in our socks. Nancy was so flabbergasted she just said “wait until your father gets home.”

The earthquake in 1964 was quite an event. The house was not damaged, but they had homebrew on an upper floor and the bottles fell down the stairs and broke. Thor was at work when it hit. Nancy was nine months pregnant with Scott. Her parents were preparing to leave for England at the time and did not get news for a while and
were pretty worried. They were able to contact a neighbor at 3 AM three days later to learn that they had all survived. Only then did they feel comfortable leaving for England. Scott was born two weeks later.

Thor also played the guitar. He liked to play a flamenco style with fast rhythmic strumming. When he and Nancy were dating they sometimes played together with her on the flute and he on the guitar.

Thor and Nancy playing a duet at the Hunt's.
Having a functional water and sewer was a lower priority than staking claim to a piece of the Alaskan wilderness. Thor and Nancy staked a 160-acre homestead parcel and spent two seasons building a cabin. I spent 6 months of my first two years of life living in a tent in a place called Nebesna.

Nabesna is an old mine location about 40 miles in on a dirt road from the Glen highway. They selected some land at mile 22 and a half. The Nebesna road junction is 60 miles from Tok. It is a dirt road with several stream crossings. There is a small lake by the road. Dad called it Thor’s pond. The Alaska Geographic place names office would not allow a name after a living person so it got re-named Rock Lake.

One year we were stuck and cut off from the road for two weeks when the Rock Creek bridge washed out. The people who lived there year-round used to have a movie night at the Sportsman’s Paradise Lodge at Twin Lakes. We went there and watched The Maltese Bippy. It was starring Rowan and Martin who hosted the TV show Laugh In. We also went there fishing. Nancy was a pretty good fisherman. Thor would fish once in a while, but he was not one of those sportsman types who was always going out fishing or hunting.

We would wear our rubber raincoats even when it was not raining because the mosquitoes in Nabesna were the most ravenous in the state (except for the Steese Highway).
Again the outhouse. This was a log affair with a seat fashioned from lengths of willow. It was a two-seater, of course, with an old army blanket for a door. We were little kids and didn’t want to go alone. We got our water from Rock Creek, which runs a few yards from the cabin.

Thor and his friends cut and hauled the logs from the area around the cabin. My Grandfather Hunt shot home movies of part of the construction process, and in these movies there are pictures of the men “surfing” on the logs. They had a vehicle with big tires for driving over the muskeg. They called it a swamp buggy. It looked like some army surplus rig. Once I think they took it into McKinley Park. I remember being told that my fingers got very frostbit on that trip, but I was under two years old and can’t remember.

Thor building the cabin in Nakesna.
Thor was always very outgoing and accommodating to new people. They developed a network of friends who would stay at the house and who shared their interest in homesteading. They made homebrew and built cabins in Nabesna. Many of the people Thor befriended remained friends for the rest of his life.

Two of the visitors they befriended were Japanese students, Homa and Kenji. They were part of a group that came to Alaska for a student trip and got stranded. Someone told them to go to Anchorage and look up Thor. They did and stayed with us for several months. They
enjoyed the outdoors, and got a kick out of cutting trees in Nabesna because they could not cut trees like that in Japan.

When they built the cabin in Nabesna they spent part of the summer until October 1965 and June to October 1966 out there. Thor would work at the newspaper for a while and save up money and then buy materials and work on the cabin. Nancy stayed in Nabesna with Svend and I. Because they were concerned about spending the winter in Nabesna with two small children being so far from medical care, they did not stay the winter. Unfortunately, because of this they did not qualify for a homestead.

Later, in 1973, they amended the homestead application and sought to get the land as a trade and manufacturing site. The first business plan was a sawmill cutting boards for locals, but ANILCA stopped all access to trees. Thor also got a sawmill built with an engine and a big 3-foot blade. He got it set up and running and had a plan of trying to import logs from Canada and cut them there. The economics of it just didn’t work out though.

The second plan was a remote hunting lodge. Thor called the main cabin “Viking Lodge” and had some of his friends build outbuildings as other lodge cabins elsewhere on the property. There were four other cabins built in all, one by the Kingerys, one by the Dahls, one by Norm Burletek (a deaf-mute friend from the Daily News), and one small one that Thor built. Thor had several printing friends who were deaf. The printing trade was a good fit for deaf-mutes because the machinery was very loud and the noise would not bother them. Thor was very fluent in sign language from working with them.
Thor taught Svend and I to shoot a 22 at the cabin. We had a target on a tree and learned how to operate a gun. He also taught us how to properly use an axe. He passed on a lot of his Boy Scout knowledge to us.

The front view of Viking Lodge.

Thor did some hunting there also, although Svend and I did not hunt with him. On one trip when I was about nine, he and Don Kingery and Don Dahl got two moose and three caribou. We had a big butchering party where we cut up the meat and packaged it. The caribou tasted the best. The moose was kind of dry. My favorite was the caribou sausage.
Unfortunately, after about 20 years of fighting with the federal government to try to get rights to the land, this did not get approved either. But the family retains some rights to the cabin. I spent 10 years fighting the case for them.
after finishing law school, and appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court, but we did not convince the Court to take the case and in the 9th Circuit we only had one of the three judges on our side.
VARIOUS CHILDHOOD MEMORIES.

Back to 1968. In 1968 Thor had what my mother calls a “nervous breakdown.” I think that he was struggling with supporting the family and his dreams of mining and homesteading. He took a leave from work and the family went to Solvang. After returning to Alaska, Nancy went back to school and finished her degree in teaching, graduating in 1970.

They had the Scout still, but bought a VW beetle. We would drive Thor to work and then sometimes stop off at the Sunrise Bakery for a treat. I used to love doing that. When I started school Thor would work graveyard shift and he would make breakfast for Svend and I. He taught us to play chess and card games like canasta and hearts.

At some point when Nancy and Svend and I were outside visiting relatives, Thor sold the Beetle and bought a Ranger. This was a small tractor rig. He used it to clear land for an airstrip in Nabesna. It had a skid steering system. I thought it was cool. He was working on getting a pilot’s license, and had the idea of eventually using a plane to get to Nabesna, but that never materialized.

When I was in kindergarten they bought a lot on the hillside and started building the house they have lived in ever since. It cost $1800 for the lot. Prices for land are much higher now. We moved into it in the fall of 1971. Thor did a lot of the work himself.

He had it set up so it could be a duplex at some point, but the downstairs was never finished. The ceiling remained
open all the time I was growing up. Sometimes we would throw things over the top of the wall between the ceiling joists.

Around this same time Thor built a boat. It was a wooden dory he designed for going out in Prince William Sound prospecting. He took my brother with him but I was too young. I guess that was when my mom insisted he write a will and he scrawled out a holographic will on the inside of an unfolded envelope. That was the only will he left when he died. He was very enamored of holographic wills and commented more than once that a “miner’s will” was valid in Alaska.

Later Ray Finch and I used the boat to try commercial fishing for halibut in Katchemak Bay. We caught one halibut and Ray got very seasick. That was the extent of our commercial fishing on our own, although I did work for a set netter one summer and worked the slime line with Ray.

John Piper was one of the Nabesna friends who lived with us for about two years. He lived with us at the A frame, and moved to the new house too. He was very tall to me as a little kid. He had a bag of old army c-rations which Svend and I got into once. He stored them in a burlap sack in “the addition.” We couldn’t read the labels, but there were some things we knew we liked, so we opened a bunch of the cans looking for good stuff. Nancy made us eat nothing but those c-rations for three days to teach us the value of food.

In the summers, in addition to going to Nabesna, we would go other places. One summer, I think in 1971, we went up the Steese Highway and Thor prospected for antimony. He brought back samples and built a smelter in
the yard to melt down the ore. He was never intimidated by a large project, and would read up and use ingenuity to figure out a way to do things.

The things I remember most about that trip were the mosquitoes. They were even worse than in Nabesna. Svend and I would wear our raincoats so only our faces were uncovered, and put on lots of bug dope. At night we would close ourselves in the tent and kill any mosquitoes that got in before going to sleep. We still got a lot of bites.

In the early 70’s Thor was involved with Scouts as a Scoutmaster. Svend and I were both in Boy Scouts. This continued up until they started the newspaper. We went to lots of places on Scout camping trips. He shared his knowledge and love of the outdoors. One of the best trips was a hike to Crescent Lake on the Kenai. It was a 6-mile hike in and there were lots of grayling in the creek and lake.

Thor always helped with making stuff. When I did the Pinewood Derby he bought some graphite for me to lubricate the wheels. I thought it was the greatest thing. One of my other friends whose dad was an engineer had some special liquid lubricant that seemed to work better, but I thought the graphite my dad had gotten was pretty cool.

After about 1973 or 1974 there was a family that lived in the Nabesna cabin for several years. One of their kids was born there. They had a dog team and a trap line. They were sort of hippie refugees from the Bay Area. They were pretty nice folks. Later other people lived there at various times, and there was another baby born there in the 80s.
In 1974 the Daily News closed its hot metal shop. Thor took a job at Color Art Printing, a commercial print shop in downtown Anchorage. He ran the linotype. He was always a very fast typist. When the Daily News closed he bought a lot of equipment and moved a linotype into the basement.

![Thor at the linotype.](image)

He also bought a lot of hand set type. We had a pool table in the basement for a while, but it had to go to make way for more printing equipment.

As a family we played in chess tournaments throughout much of the 1970s. Svend and I were pretty good as kids go, and Thor was one of the top twenty or so players in town. A family ritual was playing in the Fur Rendezvous tournament in Anchorage. Svend and I stopped doing this when we got into sports when we were older, but Thor continued with chess for a long time.
Thor playing chess in the 1970's.

When Nancy was teaching he ran a chess club at her school for her. He built a large (4-foot by 4-foot) board which would be propped up vertically so people could see the display to teach moves and go over strategy with kids. Later he played a multi-game exhibition in Homer with his Rotary club. He could also play blindfold chess, remembering the position of the pieces on the board and calling out the moves. I have tried it but after about 15 moves it is hard to keep straight.
Later in 1976, when I was 12, they started a newspaper business based in Talkeetna. The newspaper office was a cabin in downtown Talkeetna. Once again, the outhouse. This one was located on a 5000 square-foot city lot. Once the brush was cleared it was right there in plain view for all the world to see. I remember helping put the insulation in the ceiling. I only later found out that it made you itch something terrible. They bought the lot in 1975 and we cleared it and built the cabin on posts. The posts were old telephone poles soaked in creosote to prevent decay.

In the early 1980s when the town of Talkeetna got water and sewer lines, Thor chose not to hook up because he had a perfectly serviceable outhouse. The first outhouse here was very rustic. The blanket didn't fully cover the door, the cubicle listed to one side, and the seat was Styrofoam. He replaced this in 1991 when Svend and Sarah Jane came to visit. Concerned that Sarah Jane would be put off by a crude outhouse, he built a plywood model with a Dutch split door. It immediately proved to be a good home for wood wasps.

My father's theory was if it works, and he doesn't have a monthly bill, then why change it. Not all of my family shares his lack of modesty. Beth prefers to use the tri-rivers pay-per-toilet rather than being observed by the neighbors using the outhouse.

From 1976 to 1979 Thor worked at Color Art in the day, and did all the typesetting for the Susitna Sentinel in the evenings and on weekends. Svend and I were the press crew, and we would break down the pages each week to re-melt the lead for the type and make it ready for the next week. This was a major undertaking. It is difficult to convey in words the time and effort which he put into this
enterprise. As a weekly, we would start printing on Sunday or Monday, and assemble the papers on Tuesday. Then Thor would drive the papers up the highway each Wednesday, dropping them at stands betweenWasilla and Talkeetna. Then we would start again for the next issue.

I remember once when the United Features Syndicate material for the crossword and horoscope didn’t arrive in the mail in time, so Thor just sort of revised an earlier horoscope. Nancy was sort of mad that he just made it up.

There had been a vote in 1976 to move the state capital to Willow, and Thor wanted to develop a newspaper there and have it become the capital city newspaper. Later the vote got sidetracked and they didn’t move the capital. The newspaper continued to be a marginal enterprise, but it was a labor of love for Thor as it was one of his dreams. He was successful at it, but it was more work than it was worth, and after the vote sidetracking the capital we cut back on the frequency of publication. They made a lot of friends through the newspaper work.

In 1979 we suspended publication of the newspaper. We took a family trip that summer to Washington D.C. and to New Hampshire and to the Virgin Islands. It was a wonderful vacation. In New Hampshire Thor showed us the sights around Jaffrey, including the monuments that his father had made. We stayed at the Monadnock Inn. They had a 3-hole golf course. Thor and Svend and I played. It was the first time I ever played golf. There were lots of families there from cities back east. Some of them came every year to stay there for a week or so. I remember thinking that it was like east coast kids going to
We visited an old school mate of Nancy’s in Vermont and swam in Lake Champlain. We went out like 100 yards and the water was still only chest deep. We also visited Thor’s godfather who was about 90 years old.

In the Virgin Islands we went snorkeling and took a sailboat to another island for snorkeling. Svend got very sunburned. On the way home Thor and Nancy stopped in San Juan Puerto Rico for a couple days. That vacation was one of the best travel memories I have as a child. We also visited Curran and Emmy Tiffany in Washington D.C.. Curran was Thor’s first cousin on the Crowley side. He was a classmate of Jimmy Carter’s at Annapolis. He worked as a lawyer and later a lobbyist. Travelling all over the East coast was an adventure. Eastern airlines had a special where for a flat rate (then about $600 per person) you could have unlimited flights for 21 days. Thor and Nancy made the most of it, combining St. Thomas, Puerto Rico, D.C., and New England.

Later when Svend and I worked in D.C. we visited with Curran and Emmy a few times. They lived in Arlington, just across the river from D.C..
LIFE GROWING UP

Before the newspaper Thor always took classes from time to time in business or accounting or other things. He took a bookbinding class and bound several books. He did very fine work. He was always very precise.

He also used his printing skills to make our Christmas cards each year. He would use artwork from Nancy or Svend and I. Later he used photographs. They were always unique for the family.

We took a family trip to Nabesna and Skagway and the ferry to Ketchikan in 1976. That was my only view of Ketchikan before moving there. We spent 4th of July in Skagway. It was fun, with sack races and kids contests on the dirt main street. My great grandmother was 85 and in Nabesna they had to take the double bladed axe away from her so she would not hurt herself cutting wood. On that trip we met Louise Kuntz and Lynn (I can’t remember Lynn’s last name) who came to live with us for several months before getting established in Anchorage.

In Skagway Svend ran in a mountain race they had. I did some kids relay games on the street including a bat race where you would spin until you were dizzy and then try to run 100 yards. Thor entered the strong man contest. They had a pack with a bunch of weights and each contestant had to pick it up and carry it about 30 feet. He got to 300 pounds and they were down to six guys. One wiry little guy toppled over forwards and did a flip, and a big tall burly guy took big strides and the weight pulled him over backwards and it fell on his back leg. Thor went slow and deliberate and took lots of small steps. After the big guy
got hurt they called it a draw between the remaining people and Thor won a steak dinner. He always loved a big steak dinner.

Thor often took the bus to work. There was a guy on the bus he would play chess with. It was pretty convenient. At Color Art he worked in the daytime, while at the Daily News he usually worked either in the evening or the night shift.

Thor liked to play penny ante poker with his friends. When I was a junior and senior in high school my friend and I liked to play poker too. One night I had my dad host a dads and sons poker party at my house and Kurt Jokela’s dad, Kurt Adler’s dad, and Chris Green’s stepfather came over to play and we had a kids table and an adults table. That was kind of fun. He was always open to things like that.

Starting in about 1978 or 1979 we started a pattern of traveling to Solvang every other year for Christmas. We continued to do that even after I was out of law school. It was fun to get together with all the relatives in southern California every other year. I think my parents felt bad that we did not have more family around. Even though we had such infrequent visits we saw them consistently over such a period of time that we still developed a good sense of family connection. Especially as I got older and some of my school friends went their separate ways I realized that as you go through life your family (or your kin, as my dad’s cousin Curran Tiffany once said to me) are the most important. They are always there for you no matter how long it is since you have seen them.

Nancy and Thor always combined the visits to California with another trip. One year we flew to Las Vegas and
stayed at Circus Circus and then drove over Hoover Dam to the Grand Canyon and also to Solvang. I was about 14. Svend got mugged outside Circus Circus. Apart from that the trip was cool. It has made me want to take my kids to the Grand Canyon. It is truly a beautiful sight.

Thor, Scott and Svend at the Grand Canyon.

On another trip we drove up into the mountains inland from Solvang and went hiking. That was pretty fun. One of our favorite places to go was Nojoqui Park which is between Solvang and the coast. It is a community picnic area, and there is a short walk to Nojoqui Falls. Bob Hunt’s farm bureau organization had annual picnics there, and it was the venue for some of the 4-H shows as well. Later, I enjoyed taking my own children there. There is, or was, a
hollowed out sycamore tree that we all took turns having our picture taken in looking through the hole. It was also the venue for Thor and Nancy's 40th wedding anniversary.

When Svend was a college freshman at Boulder in 1980 Thor and I flew to Colorado to pick him up. I shared a room with Thor, and he snored so loud that if you didn’t get to sleep first you couldn’t sleep. Hona once taped him sleeping and mailed me the tape as a joke saying it was so I would not feel homesick. When he would nap on the couch he could sometimes snore so loud you could not hear the TV. He was a great power napper. He would nap for 15 minutes or a half hour and wake up refreshed. He could nap anywhere. Sometimes he would even curl up on the floor at a party and take a brief nap. Later he learned that he had sleep apnea and part of the napping was because he did not get full sleep at night.

Thor was always great at Christmas. He would fill the stockings full and have presents dangling with curling ribbon down the outside. It was great fun to see the stockings in the morning on Christmas. When we had Christmas outside the Hunt family tradition was to have a big get-together on Christmas eve and open presents then, but we still had stockings on Christmas morning.
A Christmas in the A-Frame.
A Christmas with the Hunts at the ranch. Svend, Bob Hunt, Louise, Scott, Alice, Ronan, Nancy and Thor.

Thor loved parties also. He was a great host and would enjoy being the gregarious showman. We all thought he pushed the drinks a bit much, but there was no way to restrain him. He loved to set up scavenger hunts. He would hide common objects in the house and have a list that party goers had to find. Some of them stayed in their hiding places for years. I suspect there is still a thimble stuck into the bottom of the living room chandelier with some plasteline clay.

In 1982 when I was a college freshman in Idaho Thor flew to Moscow (Idaho) at the beginning of Christmas break and he and I drove down through Nevada to California. He was fun to go on driving trips with. He always listened to classical or country music though. At the house he had a radio by the linotype which my brother and I determined must have been broken so it would only play KYAK country
music station. We tried to turn the dial but the station would not change. During family dinners he would always put on classical music records. While I did not enjoy it at the time, it instilled in me a great appreciation for classical music, which I enjoy now.

Thor had an old mining buddy, Jack Marington, who was born in Dyea in 1902. He had a mine in Moose Pass. Thor would go visit him and help with his mine. When Jack died Thor took over the mine. I hiked in with him once and helped haul dynamite and ladders. He drilled rock and blasted for samples. He continued to go to the mine for years, but it never panned out. He often took friends up there. He had mining buddies who would help him out. He hiked around and took lots of transect samples and had them assayed. None of them were strong enough for commercial operations, but it could be a hobby mine.
Thor and the outhouse at Grant Lake adjacent to Jack Merrington’s mine.
In 1983 when I went off to college in Denmark the whole family went for the first two weeks and we visited relatives in Denmark. We also visited Hona’s grandparents in Germany. We met lots of Brandt-Erichsen’s and cousins who were nieces and nephews of Viggo’s.

While I was over in Denmark Grandma Patt died. It was strange for me. Thor had always been interested in psychic predictions and such and had lots of books about the power of plants to sense emotions and things like that. I always thought it was kind of baloney, but I experienced a strange thing. When Patt was sick in the fall I knew she was doing poorly. One morning I woke up in Denmark in the middle of the night and had this overpowering sense that something was wrong with her. I felt it so strongly that I called Nancy and asked if she was OK, but Nancy didn’t know anything. The next day I got a call that Patt had fallen at home and when they came to the house she was on the floor. She died a day or two later, having never really recovered. I honestly believe that there may be something to Thor’s theories because I felt something so strongly about my Grandma’s poor health.

Thor was always open to meeting new people and new ideas. He participated in a séance group, and always read lots of Edgar Cayce and Jeanie Dixon stuff. When Betsey Finch died his group even tried to communicate with her and he reported back to us, although Beth was not really in the mood to hear about it. Beth’s friend Ann Nelson, who had worked in Betsey’s book store and was familiar with Thor and Betsey, pointed out that of all the people we knew, if Betsey wanted to communicate through someone, Thor was the one she would pick. Thor and Betsey were similar in that way for idiosyncrasies.
Thor’s brother David was always the scientist/rationalist/skeptic type, and the two of them would get into long arguments about Thor’s psychic interests. Although the arguments remained good-natured, they would go on for so long that usually they would just agree to not discuss the subject so they could do other things. Thor would send David books by Ruth Montgomery and the like and David would send Thor compilations of articles from *Skeptical Inquirer*. None of this ever made the slightest dent in the other’s opinion.

The two brothers did have a bet once. Thor took seriously some psychic predictions that California would “fall into the ocean” by the turn of the century. David wanted to bet $10,000 that this would not happen, but Thor only agreed to a $150 bet that “the Pacific Ocean would abut the Sierra Nevadas by the end of 2001.” They both signed a document to that effect. When the time came and California was still there, Thor dutifully paid off the bet.

In the late 1970’s both the Don and Betsey Finch (Beth’s parents) and Thor and Nancy were involved with the Episcopal Church marriage encounter group. This was sort of a marriage or relationship counseling thing where couples would have dialogs and go on retreats together. They had a fundraising auction for the marriage encounter group once and Thor donated a hole in a rock. He had a rock drill for mining and he would drill a hole in a rock of the buyer’s choice. Betsey was the buyer of the hole in the rock. Beth has said many times that her mother is the only one she knows who would buy a hole in a rock, and Thor was the only one who would sell one.
In 1984 on our trip to California at Christmas, I told Thor that I was going to graduate a year early and go to law school the next fall. He seemed pretty proud. He commented that we had all skipped a grade. He did it in elementary school, Svend did it in Jr. high, and I did it in college.
GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

In 1984 Thor retired from his job at Color Art and started going to college to study art. He got a degree in fine arts from UAA in 1989. He had always wanted to finish college, and after his mother Patt died he went back to school and studied what he wanted. I sometimes thought he should have worked longer, but it wasn’t really up to me to make decisions for him. He commented that with the taxes he would be working for only a small percentage of the wage. I always thought that even if it was a small percentage, it was still money coming in not going out. But again, it was his life to choose. I did not go without due to his choice. He helped me with money during school, and helped me pay students loans after I graduated.

Thor learned welding among other skills, and made some fine art work with welding. He also used it for practical purposes: when on a Thanksgiving trip to Nabesna with Svend and Sarah, the tie rod on the truck broke. He also made fine jewelry. I liked his metal work a lot.

When Beth and I got married I asked him to make the rings. I told him the design I wanted, and he made it in wax first. Then he put the wax into a plaster cast in a metal pipe. He heated the pipe and the wax ran out. Then he put the pipe with the plaster on a centrifugal caster and cut up and melted a Canadian maple leaf (1 oz. of gold) in the crucible with some silver to alloy it to be stronger. When he tripped the caster it spun around and the gold-silver alloy ran into the mold. He picked it up with tongs and dropped it in water which made the plaster dissolve and I could hear the ring drop to the bottom of the bucket. I will always treasure the personal time and effort
which went into the making of the rings. They are a wonderful family heirloom.

It was around this time that he started getting involved in Rotary and in exchanges with Russia. He had taken some Russian in college, and he refreshed his learning and expanded it. Over the next 10 to 15 years, Rotary and all things Russian became a big part of what he did. Both were areas where he would shine. He was very generous with his time and wanted to help others and learn from his interactions with them. The Russians following the fall of communism were very needy.

One time when I was a senior in high school one of my friends called and dad answered the phone in Russian. Bruce, the guy who called, happened to be one of the few people who took four years of Russian in High School, and could have responded appropriately, but he was so surprised that he forgot. I always thought that was an amazing coincidence.
Thor took his first trip to Russia in 1991, and it changed his life. His interest in Russia began when Sputnik was launched in 1958. He chose Russian as his required language at UC Santa Barbara because he believed we were ignorant of the achievements in Russia because we couldn’t communicate. Language difficulties were complicated by access and secrecy. At that time the possibility to visit Russia and have Russian friends was unlikely as the Cold War was at its most intense. Our scientific community was challenged by the Russian Sputnik achievement after the initial shock and dismay.

Thor’s trip in 1991 came about somewhat unplanned. We had been on a one year sabbatical to England and Tucson, Az. and had just returned to Anchorage in late May. In July, friend Gary Gantz stopped to inquire about the possibility of Thor joining a team of three artists to visit Magadan Russia for a cultural and painting exchange with six Russian artists. Things happened quickly. In September Gary, Thor and John Pearse gathered art supplies and gifts for the Russians and went to the airport. The adventure began immediately. Their plane was a cargo plane and they shared a space with cargo in nets. They sat along the side, strapped in and hoping the cargo stayed put. There was no food service so it is good it was only a four and a half hour flight. Did I mention the plane left nearly 12 hours late?

Once in Magadan they were treated royally. Vladimir Vasilchuk, who ran a hotel, and his wife Lidia, who ran an art gallery, were their hosts. Three artists from Magadan and three from Moscow came together for four weeks, staying at the old communist camp, Sneznya Delia—
“Snow Valley.” Actually Vasilchuk had been a communist leader and the Hotel had been the Party “retreat” for the communist leaders. He had easily arranged their stay. The group called themselves “The Terikani” because the place was full of “terikani” (cockroaches).

Thor and the “cockroaches” in 1991 in Magadan.

The rapid changes happening in Russia included currency, government, the beginning of a free market economy, changes in jobs and the whole financial set up. The artists had been hand selected and groomed as artists since early childhood, and continued to be supported by the state. Their studio and supplies were provided, and shows of their work and sales also largely managed for them. The government was stepping back, taxes were being instituted, businesses were trying to act independently, and artists were cut off from their subsidies.

Thor’s Russian lessons from 1958-59, his great memory, his ever ready dictionary, and his insistence that Russians write
down words for him all contributed to his being able to have conversations with these new Russian friends. The once impossible was now possible—he was getting to know Russians and they were sharing life experiences with an American. Translators were provided for much of their time together, but Thor was instantly bonded with these northern neighbors, who shared his love of art, chess, vodka, and partying. They talked about everything. They all felt the uniqueness of their venture, and marveled at how similar they were. The sense of humor, the appreciating of nature, love of family, openness to new ideas, thrill at being in friendship with their former “enemy” of the Cold War. In one home Thor visited he had an emotional exchange with a man who said he’d never met an American before. He continued that he was too old to go to America, but he was thrilled that it was now possible that his son would one day have American friends! They both were teary at this thought.
Thor ice fishing in Russia.
The turmoil of change was a great burden on the Russian people. There were always shortages before Perestroika. The manufactured goods and most foods were coming from assigned cities around the USSR. Transportation was unreliable and goods were often warehoused, not shipped. Under the Communist system there was no market incentive to speed goods to consumers because everyone got paid whether they produced efficiently or not. Factories produced the number if items assigned them by the government. Supply and Demand was not in effect.

At the same time, the government arranged the economy so that the prices and salaries were created artificially. Workers received equal pay, and very little private ownership of dwellings existed, as everyone had assigned apartments and assigned jobs. No one starved; all had shelter, and health care. Children were valued and grandparents frequently lived with the family and took care of the children while both parents worked. To supplement their store food many families had a garden plot to raise potatoes, carrots, cabbage and beets. The apartment buildings were frequently five stories, with stairs for each group of four apartments. Most apartments had one bedroom and a WC plus a tub and sink room, living room and kitchen. Parents frequently slept in the living room and the children or grandparents had the bedroom. Off the kitchen is a balcony. Most use it as a cooler for foods, a place to hang laundry, and a storage area. Some people had two bedrooms. The furniture was alike in most apartments because the factories didn’t have much variety. People living above the first floor usually used a lighter or flashlight to find their way upstairs. The landing bulbs either burned out or were borrowed for apartment use.
Into this controlled world came Thor, who was a blast of energy, eager to make contact and open to all. Surprisingly he met with his Russian mirror self. Their environment had not confined the robust nature of the Russian people. They saw in Thor one of their own, and he found a connection on a soul level. Ever after he claimed his “Russian Soul”.

The month painting in Magadan and the resulting show was an inspiration to Thor. He maintained contact with his new artist friends, and the sponsors in Magadan, who were at that time starting a Rotary Friendship Club, a prelude to a full Rotary club. His interests were engaged on two fronts. He worked with the artists to try new ways of making a living, with the changes in the support system they’d lived with. He got fired up about developing useful ceramic items because the stores had irregular supplies of china and Thor believed artists could make unique pottery to sell.

This became a Russian/American venture, C----. Thor paid for two artists to come to Anchorage to live with us and learn to use the wheel and kiln. He had local clay samples sent to him for testing, and made a careful examination of each, firing at different cones and testing glazes on them. When all was ready he bought glazes, clay (small amount), kiln, wheel and other needed items and took them to Magadan. With his core artists he set up a studio and returned to Anchorage.
Thor working in the studio in Anchorage on Russian pottery projects.

Communication was slow, and the products the group wanted to make were very sophisticated figures of Russian heroes of folklore. They insisted Thor set up a proper production plant with room for 200 workers. This was the Russian way—the state provided everything. Thor exhausted himself trying to explain his view of capitalism. Making a few utilitarian items, testing the market, producing what sells, making a profit, putting it back into the business that would grow the company. These diverse visions were too great an obstacle and all ended disappointed in the other. It was a great frustration to Thor.

The other front that captured Thor’s imagination was the possibility of Rotary Clubs influencing the new Russians with integrity in business and volunteerism. Gary Gantz invited Thor into Rotary and he gave it his full attention. He made
trips once or twice a year to help new Rotary Clubs get
started and again when they obtained their Charter.


Vadim was very popular in Russia in the 40’s through the
80’s as a singer. He was kind of like Frank Sinatra is in the
US. He was imprisoned in Russia during the Stalin era.

Anchorage was in the height of excitement about
meeting with Russians, and having them visit and sharing
our lives was intoxicating. People volunteered housing and
friendships were being made all over the city. Once a
week the plane from Magadan arrived and it was met by
eager Alaskans who brought items to be sent to friends,
pick up visitors, collect mail and packages from Russian
friends. We got to know quite a few regulars, and
frequently knew some of the new arrivals. Everyone was
into an exchange. The city of Anchorage through the
Sister City Program sent a plane full on a cultural
exchange. The return Russian group of musicians and
artisans arrived and the big auditorium at the PAC was
filled with an excited and enthusiastic crowd. People at
first were giving their guests many gifts and some money but within a year the eager visitors were met with less enthusiasm. Student sport groups had exchanges, skaters, hockey players, and boxers. There were classroom exchanges—Russian students studying English and Alaskans studying Russian.

Thor painting in Yakutia.

The fervor died down in time. Later visitors were given fewer material goods and wished they had been among the first. Some real efforts were made to build lasting ties. The University of Alaska opened a Russian American business center and had a branch in Magadan. Business students prepared in Magadan, then came to Anchorage for six weeks. By the time they left for home they had visited many types of business, had basic business principals, and a business plan. Students from Russia could attend U.A.A. for the same cost as locals, with no out of state fees. Many students enrolled and a number of women students married Alaskans. In fact there were
many marriages between Russians and Anchorage residents. We housed a Russian student, Anna Chernyenko, who stayed with us for more than a year, married an Alaskan and graduated from UAA.

Another effort was the Russian American -------- started by Kent Lee Woodman. Woodman was a flier and was part of the small group of private pilots to make a visit in Russian airspace (in 1990 I believe). He worked with a number of Russian businessmen to promote trade and joint ventures. A number of Alaskan businessmen got inspired and started companies in Magadan, Kabarovsk, PK and Vladivostok. To my knowledge they were all defeated by the differences in marketing systems, the lack of stable Russian banks and a fickle Russian government.

One of the losses for the people was a stable health care system. The Iron curtain had kept Russian doctors behind in medical and dental techniques. Rotary sent thousands of dollars in medical equipment through the grants program. One young boy came to stay with us while Rotary found doctors in Portland to repair his heart. He had been identified for this surgery by Rotarian doctors visiting Magadan.

It was not long until mining interests found ways to connect and the Sakhalin Peninsula oil interests and Magadan gold reserves became profitable joint ventures.

Several economic factors were happening at the same time. The ruble was being devalued at a rapid rate. When we visited in 1992 the exchange was 30 rubles to the dollar. People wanted crisp hundred dollar bills and wanted us to exchange with them privately. Those hundred dollar bills were the stable currency in an
economic turmoil. The government had the habit of borrowing money from any bank because it needed it—so bank savings were unsafe. In 1997 the exchange was up to 1,000 rubles per dollar and the government declared devaluation by 1,000, so the new ruble was worth one American dollar. Within six months the value settled at about 30 new rubles per dollar. What little savings people did have was now worthless.

There was now a great variety on the store shelves. Those skilled businessmen, from the black market days, were ready to operate in the new climate and were getting rich. They bought boats and hauled goods from Seattle, Korea, Japan and many other places. They figured out how to move goods, because there was profit in it. Interestingly, those who rose to the top under the communistic system also rose to the top under capitalism.

Voting was approached with cynicism and cautious optimism. In looking at two candidates the decision was between the one who was rich from graft already so would take less versus the more honorable one who was poor and would probably become corrupt and take more to catch up. I was told “We don’t pay much attention to the government, and it is always against us. We survive by having many friends.” I wonder how it is viewed fifteen years later.

Thor made more than fifteen visits to Russia and spent a total of more than one year’s time. In Anchorage we had frequent Russian guests. We were entertained by Russian musicians here for performances. We had a Russian artist, Valeri Tsertzen, stay for two months and Thor arranged a show for him at the Artique and bought frames for all his paintings.
Thor and Valery Tsertzen who was in Anchorage in the summer of 2003. Thor and Valery painted together and had an exhibit at Artique in Anchorage. Here they are framing works for the show. In the foreground on the right is a portrait of Vadim Kozen painted by Thor. It hangs in the museum in Magadan.

We housed friends of friends from Magadan. We hosted doctor/Rotarian teams who came to learn about starting Health Fairs in their communities. Thor organized the training of three Russian Group Study Exchange teams and devoted hours beyond the week they were in Anchorage. We had Russian Rotarians stay with us when they came for meetings or trainings. We were also involved in the Ted Stevens project of bringing young politicians from Russia to visit the United States to learn more about how our system works.

On one of his trips to Magadan his friend Anya Vemya, a t.v. journalist, introduced him to Vladimir Cosen, a long
time singer/performer who was much loved by people all over Russia. He had been imprisoned in Magadan for being a “blue man”, a homosexual. Thor painted a portrait of Cosen and presented it at a Rotary function in Magadan. It was warmly received and is housed in the Cosen Museum in Magadan.

Rotary! Thor and others saw Rotary as having a wonderful influence on a developing economy. It promotes honesty and fairness in business and relationships, volunteerism and international relationships. Alaska Rotarians Steve Yoshida, Jack Randolph, Lloyd Morris, Caroline Jones, Soldotna woman, Fairbanks woman managed to get permission from Rotary International to organize Rotary clubs from the East Coast of Russia to the Ural mountains. Together they formed District 5010 comprising 11 time zones from the Ural Is to the Yukon Territory. The district leadership started Rotary in Russia training and information sessions around the US and Thor was involved in many of them. They set a pattern of getting about 4-8 clubs from around the world to be sponsors for each Russian club. The best sponsors actually visited the clubs, and had members visit them to learn more about how Rotary works. In Fairbanks a teacher who was with the University spent four months to a year in a community helping a new club get started.

The Russians were very responsive—but it took awhile for some to realize this was not just a way to get money for their area, but to really make a contribution to others, also. Thor’s role was in communicating with and encouraging members. He made great personal ties with many, and he was trusted as having their best interests at heart. He personally volunteered to teach art to deaf college students in Novosibirsk. I went along as a teacher of English. The members of the Novosibirsk Rotary confessed later that they learned about volunteering from us. They
couldn’t believe we weren’t out to get something from them. In their experience, if someone does something for you, you owe them back.

One Russian Rotarian must be named, Vladimir Donskoy. He learned about Rotary when in Sacramento California for a year of study. He could see the possibilities for Russia and started the first Rotary Club in Irkutsk. He has translated all the Rotary materials into Russian and worked tirelessly to spread Rotary in Russia. He attended a number of conferences in the States on developing Rotary and is considered the Father of Russian Rotary. In 2004 Vladimir was elected District 5010 District Governor and served with an unmatched ability and devotion. Thor became his assistant, arranging his travel, lodging, and transportation while on visits in Alaska and the Yukon. They had a wonderful working relationship and a great respect for one another. It was a golden year for Thor.

By 2005 Thor was ready to spend more time on his art, but Rotary had more challenges for him. He worked on the Grants committee, set type and printed the District Directory, and in 2006 became a founding member of the Homer Downtown Rotary Club. To do this, he drove to Homer and back nearly every week for two years. While he was in Homer he worked on our 12 by 16 wanagan cabin. He wired it, connected the electricity, installed kitchen cabinets, put in sheetrock and wainscoting, and painted. He also added a wooden floor. We designed and had an architect draw up plans for a permanent home on the site, had the driveway put in, the building site cleared, and a well drilled.

As a chess player he had often played blindfold chess, and played against more than one opponent at a time.
The Homer club put on a Youth Fair and Thor took on twenty high school players at once, and was beaten by only one. It got coverage in the paper and the second year the kids were ready for him, but he still beat most of them. He personally bought chess clocks and books to give as prizes. Thor also loved being auctioneer for Rotary fund raisers—a skill he studied in Minnesota at an auctioneering school.

Thor playing multiple simultaneous chess as part of a Rotary function in Homer at the Homer high school.

He was elected to be the president of the Homer Downtown for the 2008-2009 year. In preparation he attended PETS in Seattle, and took a one year leadership academy course. He had plans to personally do much of the building of the new home, and on May 22, 2008 he was cutting limbs from a willow tree that was blocking the view, when he was stricken with a heart attack and died. A celebration of his life was held in Anchorage and later in Homer. He was also remembered and honored in Solvang.
He felt a strong bond with the Russians, and they with him. It was not just the vodka. He seemed to be able to connect with them and his giving nature without seeking to take advantage of them conveyed a sincerity which they could feel was real. Of all his accomplishments, his efforts to create and develop peaceful links between Russians and Americans was probably his greatest success. The outpouring of affection from the Russians he interacted with upon his death was a real testament to this success. The Russians inquired about the exact time for his memorial service and lit candles in churches in 4 different time zones in Russia to coincide with the schedule of his memorial service.

The family honored the Russian traditions following Thor’s death. We had his celebration of life on the 9th day, and Russian American singers participated in the service. We received word that at the Russian District Conference they had a period of silence and a toast to Thor’s memory. Later in the year an award was developed in Thor’s name to be given the Rotarian who did the most to promote the relationship between Russians and Americans. We had a gathering of Russian friends at the house for a Russian meal on the fortieth day. And on the one year anniversary of his death we had a Russian sashlik barbeque with many guests who shared their favorite Thor stories.
MEMORIES FROM ADULTHOOD

When I graduated from the University of Oregon in 1985, mom and Thor came down to Eugene. Dad and Eric and Chris Green and I went out to the bars, but Eric and Chris and I could not keep up and we were ready to hit the hay when Thor was still ready to go. He liked celebrations. It was fun to go out with him.

While I was in college I had more limited contact with my parents. I would call them every week or two, and write sometimes. Thor always forwarded my mail, even junk mail. His letters, like his phone calls, were always very businesslike. He conversed in letters and on the phone in the same manner as men go shopping: you know what you want before you go in the store, you buy it, and you get out. While in school I would see them in the summer (except the summer of 1986 when I worked in D.C.).

They took up river rafting, and took trips to Talkeetna and Nabesna. Nancy still taught and Thor went to school. He loved studying art. He bought all the best gadgets for art work.
Thor and Nancy rafting with John and Mary Hunt and friends.

When I was in my second year of law school I got a job as an intern in the City Attorney’s office in Anchorage from January to June 1987. I lived at home and he went to school and mom worked. That summer I went to law school in Denmark and then finished and graduated in 1988 and moved home. Thor was still going to school, but was nearly finished. I missed my graduation because I had to study for the bar, so my parents hosted a graduation party for me. Thor barbequed on the outdoor barbeque he had made.
I also started working on the Nabesna homesteading case for Thor. It had been rather stale since 1979. We went through the administrative process and then filed a complaint. The case took a long time to wind through the system until we exhausted all appeals.
In 1989 Svend got married back east. We traveled there for the wedding.

Thor dancing with Sarah Jane at her wedding.
Thor and Nancy helped make the traditional Kransekage.

When I got home Beth started trying to set me up with her friends. That didn’t work out, but then she and I started dating. Just after Beth and I got married in 1990, Nancy and Thor went to England and Arizona for nine months for a teaching sabbatical. We lived in their house while they were gone, and then bought a place in the spring.
In Arizona they stayed in Tucson, where his brother David lived. During this time, Thor went on a week-long trip to Utah that David was guiding for the Southern Arizona Hiking Club. There were fifty hikers on the trip, and they went to 65 natural arches in Arches and Canyonlands.
National Parks and vicinity. David described this as “one of the best weeks of my life.” Thor did a lot of hiking and 4-wheeling and also some painting.

Thor and David at Petrified Forest.

Thor was great with kids, but he was a bit unsure of himself around babies. When Laura was born he got that deer-in-the-headlights look if he thought we were going to leave Laura with him without Nancy. I don’t think diapers were his thing. If the kid was old enough to talk to he was fine. He had a special bond with his grandchildren.
Thor surrounded by his progeny.

Thor with Haley and Laura.
Thor helps Laura with her candles.

Thor puts the girls to work moving the wood pile. He paid $.05 per log.

He was very supportive of their activities. When Sarah took piano lessons he helped pay for them. He also took her to horseback riding lessons. One summer he leased her a horse and got her a job as a barn girl at Diamond H ranch. Something he told her I have re-used several times. When she was getting into showing horses he said that the horse is really what wins the shows, and there is always someone who can buy a better horse. I found it to be a great
metaphor for not getting caught up with materialistic things and the negativity that comes from envy. He did not ride regularly, but he did like horses. When in Russia he rode on a horse there.

Thor continued his fondness for horses. Here he is riding a horse in Russia.

I helped get him appointed to the Anchorage Mayor’s Council on the Arts when I worked for the City Attorney’s Office there because the person responsible for appointments was a co-worker. He was appointed to a second term after I no longer worked there, and really put a lot of effort into it. He was a very good Council member.
Thor smoked a pipe. When they got setup with computers he used to like to sit and play chess or other games on the computer and smoke his pipe. We never had video games growing up, although one year we did get a “pong” set. That was probably a good thing.

He also read a lot. He always had a pocket book with him. He loved Louis L’Amour books. He had hundreds and hundreds of books all over the house and kept building more bookshelves to hold them. He would stack them two deep. There was always a big cache of books stacked next to his favorite reading chair. He didn’t watch TV much, and was never into watching sports on TV. He would love to sit and read late at night.

He also always had a notepad in his pocket and some pens so he could jot down notes or sketch things. He would always carry around a pocket paperback also, and never seemed to mind just sitting patiently, smoking his pipe and enjoying a good book in pleasant surroundings.
Thor enjoying his pipe with the pigeons in Europe.
He also liked auctions. The furniture for our house growing up was purchased largely at auctions. I used to like going to the auction with him. Sometimes he would let Svend or I pick out things and bid on them. He got some of his printing equipment and a lot of paper at auctions. He bought all sorts of stuff at auctions. In the late 1990s he went to auctioneering school and used to like practicing his patter. He ran several fundraising auctions for Rotary and other events.

In 1997 Nancy and Thor purchased a lot in Homer. Again he built an outhouse. This outhouse was a “loo with a view.” He always let Nancy dig the hole. I helped build this one. It has a large picture window overlooking Katchemak Bay. He loved it in Homer, and for years planned on building a place there. They were torn about leaving the Anchorage area. As a result they kept procrastinating but were finally getting going on a house in Homer in his last couple of years.
The Homer loo.
Thor was very involved with art activities also. He created a number of pieces. He travelled to Russia to create art with a group of other artists. He got involved with plein air painting. They travelled to Italy to paint and see the sights. They also took trips to Mount McKinley to paint.
Above, Thor painting in Nabesna. Below, painting in Italy.
Plein Air painting.

Thor painting in Alaska.
They travelled a lot more after Nancy retired in the mid 1990s. Thor and Nancy travelled to international Rotary conventions. They went to Japan and Australia.

Thor and Nancy in Florence.

Thor in Italy.
Thor in Lake Bakaal in Russia on a rotary trip.

When Thor turned 60 we started a tradition of taking joint vacation trips with my parents, Svend’s family and my family. The first trip we took was to the Oregon coast. We went to Cannon Beach and rented a house near the beach. It was great fun. The granddaughters stayed together and had some time to get to know each other.
Svend, Nancy, Thor and Scott at a Mariner’s game July 2007.

In 2007 we went to the Florence area near the Oregon dunes. That was fun too. We had no idea how windy it was going to be. Nancy, Thor, Svend and I played a little golf, but the wind in the afternoon made it pretty challenging.
After a dune buggy ride in Florence 2007.
At Christmas in 2006 we went to Hawaii for Christmas and Nancy and Thor went too.

Trevor, Thor, Scott and Eric golfing in Hawaii.

Thor and Eric and I played golf one day. It was a wonderful day. We went to a Luau on Christmas Eve.

Thor was always very organized. He would make lists for camping trips of all the stuff he would need. He always did this for any road trip. He always had a notepad in his pocket and a pen to write things down. He had a whole file cabinet full of old pocket notepads he had filled up.

He was organized in learning Russian too. He printed sticker labels with Russian words and put them on things in the house so the Russian word was there to help learn them. He developed a crash course for learning Russian for people travelling to Russia. It was a pretty smart way to do it to learn the 600 most common words. He let me loan it to outbound exchange students to Russia.
He was also very playful and loved practical jokes. One year I got my mom some bear paw slippers and he liked to hide them in funny places in the house.

Thor was good at building things. He built several cabins and two houses. He would build sheds and shelves. He helped me one Christmas installing a hardwood floor and new linoleum in our house in Ketchikan. He had plans to build much of the house they had planned in Homer. He had good skills as a welder and carpenter.

Thor creating the moose.
Thor moving the moose for installation.

Thor and Nancy with the Moose installed.
He used his welding skills in art as well. One of his best art pieces was a life size moose made from steel. He created it on commission, and it is in a woman’s yard in Anchorage. It was quite a project.

Thor liked all things Alaskan. One year he was a volunteer for the Iditarod.
Thor and his giant halibut.
Thor skiing at Grandview glacier.
When I was growing up he usually wore a big puffy down parka in the winter. He always liked fur hats, and one Christmas he got a wolf fur coat. He was so excited he was like a little kid getting a big basket of candy.

Thor loved to dance also. He particularly liked to waltz. He and Nancy used to always go to the Anchorage
symphony orchestra’s Strauss waltz nights. He loved good music, good food, good friends, and celebrations. At more solitary times he enjoyed a vodka martini, smoking his pipe and reading for hours on end. He was always optimistic, and always thinking about new challenges and projects. At the same time, he was good at living in the moment and just enjoying his surroundings.
Thor relaxing with his pipe.
A POEM ABOUT THOR

By Amitava Nandi, on the death of Thor

My Uncle

I wonder if you ever knew what a great, bright, shining presence you were in my life. It was my spring and you were the Lord of Summer moving towards Fall. A great big Bear in the guise of a man lumbering along playing with paints and poetry and different peoples. I was one of those privileged to be taught by you. Of course you could only teach me what I was able to receive. Chess was not one of them. It makes me smile even now as I remember those endlessly bright days and nights up in The Great Northern Territory as you tried
so patiently
to teach me a game of Kings and Pawns
What I learned instead
was how to be a man
You taught me to never underestimate anyone
least of all you
loud and blustering you may have been
But undemeath, you were so sharp
you were apt to cut yourself now and then
But you had your better half there
to match you wit for wit
laugh for laugh
She was the eagle who soared aloft
and helped you steer your way
along the path you had chosen
My path crossed yours but briefly
but what gifts you gave!
Generosity was to you
the meat and drink of your life
You gave to me freely
And I filled my mind and my spirit both
Those gifts remain in a pocket next to my heart
I will never forget
My uncle