

Background concerning the Bygdebok Collection at UND, Grand Forks, ND, USA

While serving as Associate Professor of Norwegian at UND in 1980, the librarian at UND, Colleen Oihus, (descended from Sør-Aurdal in Valdres) asked me to help secure more Norwegian genealogical records. At that time, we had only two sets of *bygdebøker* at the University Library - Lars Reinton's 8 volumes for Hol in Hallingdal, Buskerud, and O. H. Holta's book for Hitterdal (Heddal), now part of Notodden, Telemark.

A letter was sent to the *bygdebok* committees of approximately 450 municipalities (kommuner) in Norway requesting assistance. The response was enormous! At that time, we operated charter flights from Oslo to Fargo and Minneapolis and we were able to transport the books free to the Midwest. At one time, a large number of books were mailed to a good friend in Skedsmo, Akershus, Erling Skogvold, who collected them in his garage. UND law students, whose luggage we helped send home by charter, brought the books to Gardermoen Oslo Airport and we in turn shipped them with our charters to the Midwest!

As the collection started to grow, we received good publicity from Norwegian journalists, radio and TV personalities who accompanied our Norwegian groups to Grand Forks.

With the help and support of the Director of Chester Fritz Library, Wilbur Stolt, and the able leadership of Sandy Slater, present Head of the Department of Special Collections, and many other people, the collection has grown steadily until we recently passed one thousand volumes this year. You may wish to browse through the website: www.library.und.edu/Collections/Famhist/bygdebok.html

The *bygdebok* collection assists in helping an ever-increasing number of Americans find their ethnic roots in Norway. Incidentally, the number of North Americans with Norwegian genes, i.e. with one or more ancestors from Norway, who are potential users of our collection, is in itself an interesting question. Whereas the Norwegian authorities have often talked about 3-5 million Americans with Norwegian roots, many of us believe there are 30-60 million! It is interesting to note that people with partial Norwegian background, are just as interested--often more so--than those with predominantly Norwegian ancestry.

It is our hope that the conference (visit: www.conted.und.edu/norwegianconference) will stimulate interest in heritage and provoke discussion. To enhance the collection and provide needed information to those seeking their roots, it is necessary to set up a network of genealogical experts in North America, as well as in Norway. On this side of the ocean, it is important to help people identify their Norwegian family background. In Norway, it is important to help Americans identify ancestral farms and living relatives. Database expertise is important in all stages of family research.

What can local municipalities (kommuner) in Norway do?

1. Ensure that the collection features all of the *bygdebøker* from their municipality
2. Identify genealogists in each municipality (kommune) who are willing to help connect Americans to living relatives.
3. Urge other municipalities and the Norwegian Government to support the UND collection (sandyslater@mail.und.nodak.edu) along with the Nordic Initiative in Grand Forks (bruce@innovators.net) in order to provide additional services needed, e.g. translation services and database expertise.

Sincerely,

Arne Brekke
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