

A collection of distinction housed in an academic library does not develop by happenstance. A need is identified and validated and a plan of action is implemented. The Chester Fritz Library's Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections houses a collection of distinction, the Bygdebok Collection, a collection of Norwegian local history books considered essential for researching family in Norway.

The growth and rising interest in genealogical research and family history was tremendous after the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1976. Researchers gathered information from relatives, cemeteries, courthouses, churches, and visited libraries seeking details about the lives of their ancestors. The Chester Fritz Library and its North Dakota Room acknowledged this research interest and opened a small Genealogy Room in January 1980 to centralize the Library's genealogical holdings and public service expertise.

At the same time, then Assistant Archivist, Colleen Oihus, and Associate Professor of Norwegian, Arne Brekke, recognized that to fully assist Norwegian American family historians searching for ancestors and ancestral farms in Norway, access to a unique source, the bygdebok, would be crucial. Creating an ethnic focus for the genealogical collection also seemed prudent. The majority Norwegian immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s settled in the Upper Midwest. Today, approximately one third of North Dakota's population claims Norwegian ancestry and more than half regionally.

A typical bygdebok set consists of several volumes. The first generally describes the history of a community, its geography and geological features, economic base, and social and political culture. Subsequent volumes offer genealogical or family history information about the farms in the area and frequently indicate those individuals who emigrated to America.

In 1980, the Library only held nine bygdebok volumes for two farm areas in Norway, Hol in the Hallingdal Valley, Buskerud, and Hitterdal, Telemark, both fylkes located west of Oslo. Oihus and Brekke sent a letter to 450 municipalities in Norway requesting their assistance to enlarge these holdings. The response from these communities was tremendous. Donations of 400 bygdeboks were received and additional gifts continued to be steady. In 1988, Brekke again assisted Special Collections and a second letter was sent to all municipalities. A significant addition of approximately 150 volumes was added to the Collection.

One can state without any hesitation that the kindness and generosity of the people of Norway has made the Bygdebok Collection possible. Gifts have been donated by numerous individuals, historical societies, community organizations, and local governmental agencies, in addition to the University of Oslo Library's gift of seventeen volumes.

Locally, the Nodak Mutual Foundation recognized the research value of the Bygdebok Collection in 2000 with a generous grant of \$2,000 to UND's Nordic Initiative that resulted in an additional 33 volumes representing 17 Norwegian parishes. From the onset, District Four of North Dakota Sons of Norway, Gyda Varden Lodge, has lent monetary and gift book support, and most certainly, Arne Brekke has lent his expertise, personal connections, gift books, even shipping assistance, to the Collection to fulfill his vision of making the Chester Fritz Library's Bygdebok Collection one of the finest in the country.

From 1995 to the present, the Chester Fritz Library has provided significant resources for the acquisition of nearly 250 additional volumes. The Family History Room in Special Collections houses this extensive Collection totaling more than a 1000 bygdeboks. The Collection also contains many town history books, published emigration listings, and several yearbooks that contain genealogical information.

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Bygdebok Collection, the Library and UND's Nordic Initiative sponsored an international conference, "Norwegian Heritage in the United States: Resources and the Research Experiences" October 10-11, 2005 in Grand Forks, ND. The conference brought together speakers and panelists from Norway and the United States to discuss the resources available to scholars and genealogists interested in Norwegian family history and immigration to the United States. Participants from 12 states, one Canadian province and Norway gathered for an enlightening exchange of information the sharing of common interests. The Conference succeeded in increasing the knowledge of resources and furthered discussion on Norwegians heritage. Future conferences are expected to expand the discussion initiated at this event. In addition to the Library and Nordic Initiative, conference sponsors included the Norwegian-American Foundation, the Grand Forks Visitors and Convention Bureau, Brekke Tours and Travel of Grand Forks, and Scandinavian Airlines.

The Chester Fritz Library has also published a guide to its bygdebok holdings and remains committed to acquiring these valuable resources in the future and to enhancing this premiere collection, one of the largest in the United States.

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