

ARNE BREKKE:

His work bridges two cultures

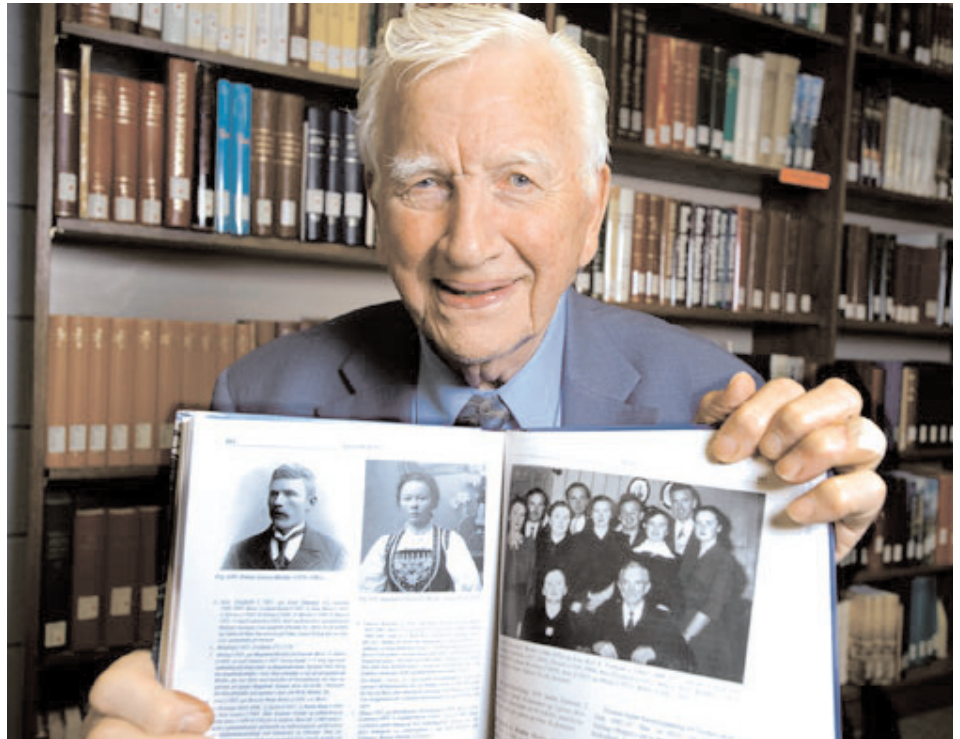
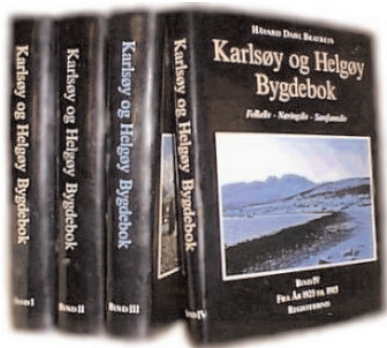


PHOTO BY DAVID DODDS

by David Dodds

The Norway of Arne Brekke's youth is the one of postcards and travel guides.

It's the iconic representation of Scandinavia: lush green agrarian valleys lorded over by snow-capped peaks feeding ancient streams and rivers that flow into the world-famous fjords, forming a mirrored reflection of Mother Nature's terrestrial masterpiece above.

This was the view from Brekke's homeland doorstep in the Flåm Parish Valley, in the present-day municipality of Aurland by the famous "Sogne Fjord," the world's longest and deepest.

For generations, Flåm Parish has been a fertile land for farmers and families that lived off the land. But once the secret of its beauty escaped, and once the Norwegian government made access to the region easier with new highways and railways to and from population centers such as Bergen and Oslo, the rest of the world started coming en masse.

And the folks of Flåm have obliged visiting throngs by building hotels and offering tourist facilities to supplement

their agricultural way of life. Brekke, now 85, a former University of North-Dakota (UND) languages scholar and longtime Grand Forks, North Dakota, businessman, and his family were no different.

Travel promotion is in Brekke's blood, and for more than 50 years he's made a living at it. He's the founder of Brekke Tours & Travel, a successful Grand Forks-based business that spun off his UND scholarly work on languages and Scandinavian place names as well as the strong connections he's maintained in his native Norway.

Brekke didn't set out to be one of the world's most prolific and successful tour operators. The tracks along that path were laid, figuratively and literally, before he was born, with the construction of the Oslo-Bergen Railway across the high mountain range in western Norway. A construction road was built through the Flåm Valley to supply materials for the railroad, and when the railway was finished in 1909, the road continued to be used by tourists by horse and buggy on their way to the famous fjord country.

During this period, the farmers of the region did much better economi-

cally if they could speak English to the tourists.

From 1920 to 1940, a 13-mile railway was constructed through the Flåm Valley. It wasn't long before railcars would be bringing as many as 650,000 tourists a year. Eventually, a new highway between Oslo and Bergen added a million more by car.

Cruise ships started packing the tight coastal inlets to the point that many more had to be turned away for lack of room, Brekke says.

Love of language

In addition to being a good host and guide for these world visitors, young Brekke had a knack for languages. Today, he rattles off German, Swedish, French and Icelandic as languages he's able to communicate in effectively.

As a boy during the Nazi occupation of Norway, he was called "young professor" by German foot soldiers in need of his translation help, Brekke recalled.

The exposure to so many foreign tongues from tourists and others allowed him to practice and hone his gift, especially when it came to English. He speaks affectionately and appreciatively of an aunt who hailed from England

and who gave him his first formal tutelage in the English language.

“That English helped me so much later in life,” Brekke said.

With a solid background in English, Brekke headed abroad to pursue his educational goals in the heart of America and the epicenter of Scandinavian immigrant culture. He landed at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, in 1949. Officials there were so impressed with Brekke’s proficiency in English that they worked out an arrangement to provide him free room and board.

He would go on to receive his bachelor’s degree in English from Luther College and a master’s degree in English from the University of Colorado in 1952. He did graduate work at Cornell University and returned to Luther College in 1954 to become head of the Norwegian Department there for three years.

It was during his stay at Luther College that Brekke organized his first escorted tour of Europe as a way to fund a return visit to his homeland. Brekke said this arrangement was the “very modest” beginning of what would become his travel business later in life.

Brekke got his Ph.D. from the University of Chicago in 1962, becoming an expert in comparative Germanic and Indo-European languages and place name research. Again, he found himself sought after by others: “I was able to interpret names that other people couldn’t interpret,” he said.

Birth of a business

To finance his studies, Brekke maintained his role as tour operator, leading summer tours throughout Europe.

Brekke joined the UND faculty in 1962, teaching primarily German and Norwegian classes. That same year, Brekke connected with a Sons of Norway lodge in North Dakota and worked out a deal to organize charter flights to Norway for the lodges.

“That’s when the numbers started becoming very large for us,” said Brekke, describing a burgeoning travel business model. His success in this venture directly led to the formation of his business: Brekke Tours & Travel, a full-service travel agency specializing in

“heritage tours” to and from Norway.

In a career that spans 57 years, Brekke estimates that he’s chartered to Norway more than 200,000 tourists—many seeking their ancestral roots—and countless others to other points around the globe. He has also helped a large number of Norwegians to visit America.

Since 1956, Brekke says there’s only been one year that he was unable to return to Norway at least once, though in some years he’s made five or six trips.

In 1977, Brekke received the St. Olav Medal from Norway for his work to foster relationships between people of Norwegian descent and their ancestral homeland.

The collection

Brekke’s desire to foster these relationships extends beyond his travel agency to another of his great passions.

In 1980, Brekke began spearheading a project to greatly bolster the Norwegian genealogical research materials of the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections within UND’s Chester Fritz Library. At the time, Special Collections had only two sets of “bygdebøker,” compiled histories of genealogical, cultural and geographical information about local areas.

So with the acumen of a scholar, Brekke began penning letters in his native Norwegian to representatives of Norway’s nearly 450 municipalities. With each letter, he requested donations of bygdebøker.

“Within a year, we had secured about 200 more volumes, and we had about 600 in three years,” Brekke said.

He used his chartered trips to Norway to promote the bygdebøker project, often garnering attention through Norwegian media that took part in the trips, and as a way to transport the sets back to Grand Forks.

In recognition of his contributions, the Chester Fritz Library named the Bygdebok Collection in honor of Arne in 2010. And thanks to Arne and his daughter, Dr. Karen Hoelzer, the Arne G. Brekke Endowment was started to fund ongoing support for the collection and its activities.

Brekke continues to do his part to

secure copies of all known Norwegian bygdebøker. At last count, the collection numbered about 1,340*. “We are getting closer to having a complete collection of all bygdebøker in one building,” he says. “That is truly amazing!”

Culture bridge

Brekke said the next goal, working with Special Collections archivists, is to make the entire list of bygdebøker available online**. Library staff have created a website (library.und.edu/special-collections/bygdebok) for people to find information about the individual publications in the collection. The website is used by people throughout North America and also by researchers in Norway.

Brekke still communicates nearly daily with friends and colleagues in Norway, pounding out letters in Norwegian. Sometimes it’s to request more bygdebøker; other times, it’s simply to keep in touch. Whatever the reason, Brekke explains the true value of his activities is that it enables him to keep up to date with the Norwegian language, which, like all living languages, is ever-evolving.

It also allows him to keep doing what he does best—bridging cultures, something he’s been doing his entire life. “It has been a great ride so far, and it’s been so much fun.”

Editor’s note: This article first appeared in UND Discovery magazine’s Autumn 2012 edition. We are reprinting it here with permission; the author is editor of that magazine.

**As of May 2014, that number has grown to 1,457. It is expected to surpass the milestone of 1,500 volumes later this year.*

***See article on next pages for update.*



UND collection brings gift of family history to world

by Jo Ann Winistorfer

We arrive at Chester Fritz Library on the University of North Dakota (UND) Campus in Grand Forks, North Dakota, promptly at 1 p.m.

Our guide is Dr. Arne Brekke, owner of Brekke Tours & Travel and the Grand Forks guru of a Norwegian phenomenon known as *bygdebøker*. We (Arne, writer Larrie Wanberg and I) ride the elevator to the fourth floor—the “penthouse,” Arne jokes, exiting at the Elwyn B. Robinson Department of Special Collections.

Arne ushers us into a room full of bookcases containing many hundreds of volumes, arranged in sets of several on up to a dozen or more. Each set represents a specific area of Norway.

A photo of Arne hangs on one wall, with a heading proclaiming, “The Arne

G. Brekke *Bygdebok* Collection.”

Several stacks of *bygdebøker* laid out on a table catch Arne’s eye. “We’ve been expecting these books, and what a coincidence that they have arrived today, in time for your visit,” he says.

Despite his age (he’s 87), he’s as excited as a little kid at Christmas. He sits down at the table and thumbs through one of the just-arrived volumes.

“Do you realize the magnitude of this collection?” he tells us. “It’s one of the largest accumulations of *bygdebøker* in the world, even bigger than those in Norway!”

In fact, researchers in Norway refer to the UND collection website for information, he says. They have no collection this complete in their country.

A *bygdebok* (pronounced *big-da-book*, plural *bygdebøker*) is a history of a *bygd* (region or community) in Nor-

way. Unique among countries, Norway has compiled and published farm and family histories since the last century, a project that continues.

What makes these books such valuable tools for those seeking their Norwegian roots is that they often contain histories of farms and names of those living there through the ages. Some of the history dates back a thousand years, when the farms were first established.

Crash course on *bygdebøker*

We’re joined by Michael Swanson, assistant archivist and primary contact of the *bygdebøker* department. He’s also president of the Minnkota Genealogical Society.

According to Michael, the *bygdebøker* are usually listed according to the name of the *kommune* (community), the administrative divisions within each



Arne points out the bygdebøker for the community of Luster in Sogn og Fjordane fylke (green books above his hand) as being the “most professionally done.”

fylke (district or province).

Michael explains that bygdebøker are grouped into three categories:

- **General**—a general history of the area. Typically organized into chapters by time period and/or by topic, these books may include short sections of interest to genealogists such as the early development of the farms, descriptions of local customs, and perhaps special listings of individuals or emigrants.

- **Farms**—histories of the main farms in an area. These books usually include information on farm owners and their families—the most useful type of bygdebøker to genealogists.

- **People**—typically, name indexes representing those living in an area. Usually in the form of alphabetical listings, sometimes the names are arranged into family units or pedigree charts.

Michael boots up a computer in the corner and takes us on a tour of the website: library.und.edu/specialcollections/bygdebok.

The first thing to pop up is the home page, which contains a digital map of Norway. Clicking on the fylke of interest on the map (or listed under “legend”) takes you to a more detailed map showing communities in that region.

On the right-hand side is a listing of all the communities in that fylke that are featured in bygdebøker housed in the UND collection. Corresponding blue pins on the map point out those

areas as well. The map can be zoomed to view more details.

Clicking on one of the communities listed at the right takes you to a graph showing all the bygdebøker available for that community—and to another smaller map with finer details of the area, including individual farms.

A click on “Alphabetical” under the word “Places” in the guide yields a long list of communities and parishes (or sokns/sogns) covered by the bygdebøker. This list also helps one to understand the

placement of the three extra Norwegian letters—Æ (æ), Å (å or aa) and Ø (ø)—at the tail end of the alphabet.

While Michael adds information when each new set of bygdebøker come in, he and Arne both credit Will Martin, web services librarian (who is also a linguist), for designing the site.

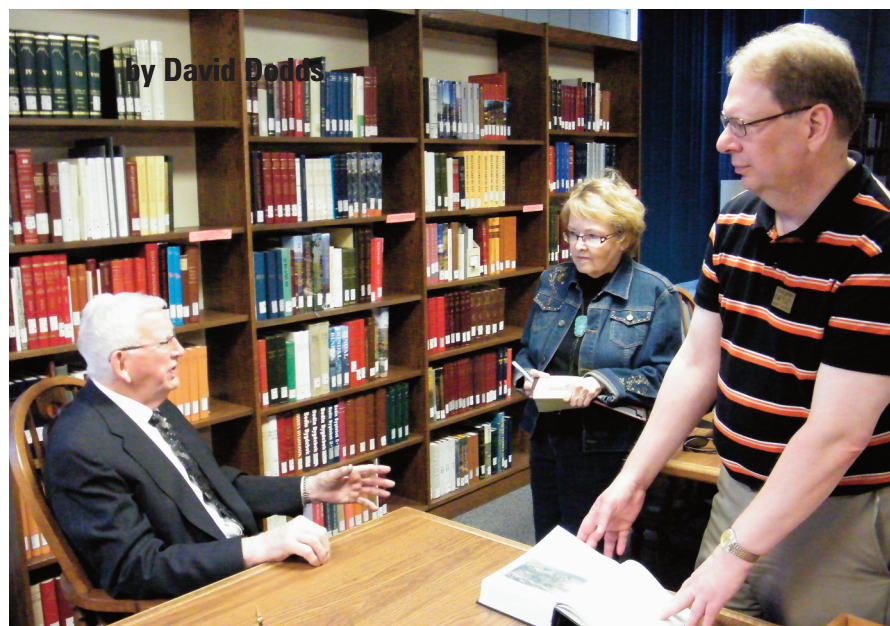
Linguistics plays a role

Trying to find whether a bygdebok exists for the areas of your Norwegian ancestors involves some homework.

And that’s where Arne’s skills as a linguist and an expert in comparative Germanic and Indo-European languages come into play. A special interest of Arne’s is finding the original meanings of place names.

While historians and others may use “folk etymology” to reconstruct the meanings, Arne stresses that “linguistics” are needed to ferret out the true meaning. That may entail going back to some of the earliest sources to interpret it correctly. “You need to check the earliest spellings, the earliest documents,” he says.

Arne points to the nine volumes for the kommune of Luster, in Sogn og Fjordane fylke. These bygdebøker are “the most professionally done,” he says. Unlike any others, they include summaries in English. Luster is located



Michael Swanson (right), assistant archivist, and I listen as Arne proudly proclaims the UND bygdebøker to be “among the largest such collections in the world.”

along the Sognefjord, fed by meltwaters from Jotunheimen and the Jostedal-glaciers.

What was the meaning of the municipality word Luster in Sogn? “Norsk stadnamleksikon,” the official lexicon of Norwegian place names, edited by Jørn Sandnes and Ola Stemshaug in 1976, suggests the meaning as “the warm fjord, the mild fjord or the quiet fjord,” in comparison to the neighboring Årdal Fjord.

However, Arne came up with a new interpretation by applying the science of comparative linguistics—and the science of glaciology. Derived from the Latin *lustrō/lustrare*, which means “to make bright, illumine,” it refers to the reflection of light in suspended particles of sand, silt and clay in water, carried by glacial water into the Luster Fjord!

What’s in a name?

Speaking of place names, often the last name of searchers with Norwegian roots can yield clues as to the place of origin of their ancestors.

When Norwegians immigrated to North America, most carried with them three names: their **given name** (example: Knut), **patronymic name** (Temanson, meaning “son of Teman”), and **farm name** (Størodden, meaning “from a farm called Størodden”).

When Knut moved to another farm (let’s say Gravli), he would be identified by the name of the new farm, thus becoming Knut Temanson Gravli. The farm name thus points to the place of

the immigrant’s origin.

Not all Norwegian families kept the farm name. When North American laws at the turn of the last century forced them to choose a stable surname—one that didn’t change with each generation, some Norwegians dropped the farm name and chose the patronymic (ending in -son or -sen); others chose the farm name.

Names were also Anglicized, further distorting the Norwegian name. And to further complicate things, the Norse alphabet has three additional letters not found in English that fall at the end in an alphabetical listing in Norse. Thus a kommune such as Ådal (also spelled Aadal) would be found after the “z,” not at the beginning of the alphabet.

The name of the farms have not changed since ancient times. However, the same farm name may be found in multiple *fylker* (plural of fylke), so it’s important to establish the parish or community in which the farm is located.

Brekke Tours has extensive information on all aspects of Norway: the location of all farms; detailed information on the 448 municipalities; current information on persons employed in the communities (mayors and cultural directors), and access to the latest genealogical information.

In many cases, Brekke Tours can help Norwegian-Americans find their places of origin in Norway. And when they do, “These people want to go there to see where their families came from,” he says. That benefits the tourism side



PHOTO BY JO ANN WINSTORFER

Arne points out that many of the bygdebøker contain pictures of Norwegian farms along with their histories.

of the business.

Brekke Tours’ secret weapon is Jean Marthaler, a genealogist from St. Joseph, Minnesota. For a fee of \$75, Brekke’s will arrange for her to do research. The firm can then make any desired travel arrangements.

If requested, Jean also makes contact with the searcher’s relatives in Norway. And, if possible, Brekke Tours guides them to the home farm. Not all places are readily accessible during tours. Some can only be reached by boat or helicopter, but Brekke’s has organized such “off-the-beaten-path” tours before.

Arne tells this story: “A guy in

UND website: library.und.edu/special-collections/bygdebok



Clicking on the fylke (in this case, Nordland) on the main map (far left) takes you to a map with blue pins indicating communities in that fylke with bygdebøker. A click on one of the pins (or on the listing of kommuner to its right) whisks you to a graph showing bygdebøker available for that area—in this example, Sømna in Nordland.

Sømna — Arne G. Brekke Bygdebok Collection					
Author	Title	Year	Call Number	Type	Notes
Mathisen, T.Q.	Sømna, v. 1	1987	DL596.S602 S04	Farms	
Mathisen, T.Q.	Sømna, v. 2	1989	DL596.S602 S04	Farms	
Mathisen, T.Q.	Sømna, v. 3	1992	DL596.S602 S04	Farms	
Mathisen, T.Q.	Sømna, v. 4	1996	DL596.S602 S04	Farms	
Mathisen, T.Q.	Personregister Sømna bygdebok	1996	DL596.S602 M37	People	Name index
Law, M.L.	An English introduction to Sømna's bygdebok	1988	DL596.S602 M54	General	English overview to the bygdebøker for Sømna
Mathisen, T.Q. (ed.)	Sømna bygdebok: slekt I-IV	1997	DL596.S602 M37	People	Corrections & additions

Chicago lost contact with his family in Norway and Minnesota. He meets a guy in Wisconsin who asked him, 'Have you tried Brekke Tours in North Dakota?' ”

The man did just that! Jean Marthaler's research determined there were three brothers who emigrated from Norway originally. A fourth brother came later with his wife and nine kids. The Chicagooan was descended from the latter group.

"I then connected them to family and took them to Flåm," Arne says. It turned out the man was a shirt-tail relative of Arne's!

How to access bygdebøker

When you establish the correct bygdebøker for your family's history and find the title, author, call number and type of book (general, farm or people), how can you access the book?

First, you can contact Michael Swanson with your request. He can then either photocopy or scan information from the book dealing with your family.

Why hasn't the UND Library scanned these books in their entirety so researchers can download them? Copyright restrictions prevent that. "Even the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah, is trying to get permission to digitize these books," Michael says. But thus far, this hasn't happened.

A few bygdebøker can be downloaded from other websites. To learn which ones are online, do a "google" search for "bygdebøker online."

Another source for bygdebøker is interlibrary loan. While no library has the collection that UND has amassed, some have other bygdebøker in their archives. And some loan out their books.

To find out if such a book is available for the area of your ancestors, talk to your local librarian, who can check to see if a particular bygdebok can be obtained through interlibrary loan. When it arrives, you can browse through the bygdebok before returning it.

The fact that UND *does not* lend its bygdebøker benefits those who visit the library in person: They can be assured the books they need to research are there and not out on interlibrary loan!

Researchers should keep in mind that not every area's books are equal

Do your homework first!

Key to finding the bygdebøker that may contain information on one's family is determining the area one's ancestors came from in Norway.

That may involve checking for records such as birth, marriage and death certificates, church records, U.S. and Canadian censuses, county or province histories and old newspapers, or asking older relatives.

Websites such as the Digital Archives of Norway (digitalarkivet.uib.no) provide free access to searchable databases and images of primary records, helpful tools for tracing one's Norwegian roots.

Another important resource is the *bygdelag* (pronounced *big-da-log*), an organization comprised of people whose ancestors originated from a particular district in Norway and immigrated to North America.

For example, the bygdelag covering the three northern districts of Nordland, Troms and Finnmark in Norway is called Nordlandslaget. This group will be holding its annual *stevne* (meeting) in Grand Forks on June 24-26.

For more information on bygdelag (plural *bygdelagene*), visit the Norwegian-American Bygdelagenes Fellesraad" (NABF) site. NABF is the national council for the 29 (currently active) affiliated Norwegian-American bygdelagene. Each lag has a genealogist who can be contacted for genealogical information. For details, log on to www.fellesraad.com.

when it comes to the genealogy information they provide. Plus, not all communities published such books. And since these are secondary sources, they can contain errors. Despite this, these are among the most valuable of Norway's resources for finding family history.

Funds readily available

New bygdebøker continue to be published across Norway. Some of these are completely new books, while others update and correct information provided in previous editions.

Arne continues to keep close tabs on any new printings, and to solicit missing volumes or books not yet in the collection. The goal for the immediate future is 1,500 books—as of this writing, the collection is 43 books short of hitting this mark. When that milestone number is reached later this year, Arne will send out news releases proclaiming the fact. Arne will celebrate the accomplishment at his lake home near Park Rapids, Minnesota, one of his "hubs of heritage" (the other two, he says, are Brekke Tours and the UND Library).

Arne has deposited funds in Norwegian kroner in a bank in Norway, which can be transferred electronically for purchase and shipment of books to the UND Bygdebok Collection. Some of

the books are donated for free; others may be purchased at a discount. Still others are paid for in full.

Giving thanks

Arne gives credit to all those who have helped to make the collection a reality. Among them is the University of North Dakota. "Without their help, we couldn't have done it," he says.

Many of those he has led on tours through Norway have also donated to the cause. Area businesses have contributed as well. And help from Norway has been invaluable.

Arne himself has gleaned honors as a result of this project. In October 2011, the North Dakota Library Association presented Arne with its Major Benefactor Award. He was nominated by UND Library Director Wilbur Stolt for being the "driving force behind the growth of the Library's Norwegian Bygdebok Collection."

Arne beams with pride over his "babies," the bygdebøker that march across the shelves surrounding us. Instead of passing out cigars, he dishes out praise.

"This is a collection of world fame, of global reach," Arne says. "People have called us from Norway to Australia. They say, 'There's nothing anywhere in the world like this.' "