

The Bygdelag Movement and its Effect Upon the Norwegian
Church Union of 1917

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Outline:

I. What is a bygdelag?

- A. The name explained
- B. The societies' founding, growth, and statistics
- C. Types of bygdelag
- D. The purposes of differing types
- E. The conventions, their appeal and social character

II. What is Bygdelag tie with church union?

- A. Unionism a basic bygdelag goal
- B. Evidence of church union within the movement
- C. Names of pastors within the movement

Footnotes

1.

The Bygdelag Movement and its Effect Upon the Norwegian
Church Union of 1917

This paper will deal with the title in two parts. The first part will define the movement. The second part will attempt to show the movement's working toward union and the effect of this on the Norwegian peoples involved in the church union of 1917.

I. What is a bygdelag? A bygdelag is a Norwegian folk society. In Norway, the first part of the compound, bygd, might refer to a topographically or socially defined community of farmsteads, an administrative township, a parish, or even a group of these units. To a Norwegian, the word connoted a sense of sharing, of living together, and represented a unified area of customs and traditions. The term lag in the context of the compound means society or even societies. An American bygdelag is a society of immigrants from a particular settlement, group of settlements, general district, fjord, or valley in Norway. It might consist of people from a few to a great number of communities referred to as a bygd in Norway. These societies began in the twentieth century, and have been sustained mainly by first and second generation immigrants in America. Geographically the movement has largely confined itself to the Middle West.¹

The first bygdelag meeting was a reunion of near 800 immigrants from Valdres, a district in the central interior of Norway. It took place in Minneapolis, on June 25, 1899. The reunion was such a success that annual meetings continued. A permanent organization was drawn up by 1902. The leaders

were urged to adopt a lasting framework to the organization. In the future, all other contingents of Norwegian immigrants were to shape their groups after the lines of these successful Valdres folk.²

That first meeting in Minneapolis was an expression of the Norwegian's growing need for social intermingling outside the church. As it had back in Norway, the church green in America became a place to seek out friends and relatives, to exchange news of family and community affairs, to attend to urgent business, and to reminisce about times past.³ With increasing wealth, mobility, and a Norwegian national awareness, the position of the church as a social center was reduced.⁴ The American immigrant felt honor ~~toward~~ his homeland when in 1905, the Norwegians were finally successful in overthrowing Swedish dominance.⁵ Likewise, the improvement of roads and gradual marketing of automobiles in the early 1900's, made feasible large conventions of widely dispersed people.⁶ Though it took eight years, the Valdres reunion concept was catching on. 1907 saw the beginning of both Telelaget and Hallingslaget. 1908 saw (5) new lags. 1909 (4). 1910 (7). By 1913 there were 35 separate bygdelag.⁷

Attendance at their conventions was sometimes very high. The 1911 Hallingstevne held in Brooten, Minnesota, reported attendance of about 6,000. A smaller lag like Sunnmorslag reported only 200 at its meeting.⁸ It is estimated that about 75,000 individuals came under the direct influence of the lag annually.⁹ Indirectly, many more came under the lag spirit.

Just what was the lag spirit? Basically, the lag sought to foster and maintain a feeling of kinship and cooperation among immigrants from a common ancestral region. They worked to retain and enrich inherited cultural values in the fields of language, literature, history, and art, and to create a knowledge and appreciation of these values among their members. The lag also expressed plans to collect, preserve, and publish biographical and historical matter from the pioneer period.¹⁰ Beside the basic goals, individual bygdelag stressed their own specific purposes and goals. The national bygdelag developed chapters. There were state lag, local lag, family lag, and sometimes sub-lag for the different districts in the home region. These chapters held their own separate reunions during the national conventions.¹¹

The activities of the bygdelag were sometimes strongly influenced by the environment of the bygd in Norway. For instance, Stavenger Amt Laget represented an area of Norway where the pietistic influence was great. They tended to display a strict religious quality in the bygdelag. The valleys of the interior produced lag with a pronounced feeling for folk music and dancing. The Setesdal people adopted competition in improvising short verse in dialogue. Some bygdelag fell into the hands of the clergy.¹²

Big or small, national society or family sub-chapter, the greatest attraction of any lag was its reunion (convention). At the reunion the intense social considerations came into play.¹³ Much importance was placed on the vernacular language of the individual bygd. For those who were second generation

immigrants the reunion was a trip into the past. It was like a visit back to the bygd; something that could be cherished and hashed over from one reunion to the next. It was a time to take pride in Norwegian background, and to delight in recalling the difficulties of their travels and growth in America, difficulties common to all.¹⁴

At a common reunion of the original lag, the Valdris folk, there was profusion of speech making and storytelling. All gatherings practised community singing and listened to individual performers or groups. Generally there was some kind of religious devotion or church service. Exhibitions and displays of arts and crafts aroused interest. Local and national dishes were part of the traditional banquet. Of course, visiting and reminiscing continued throughout the gatherings. The informal fellowship was the most cherished aspect of these one to three day long conventions.¹⁵

These activities, along with the social drives for self image and recognition for the immigrant, made the Bygdelag movement a very important part of the Norwegian life. In many ways (social as well as psychological) the bygdelag had begun to fill needs formerly associated with church gatherings. Add to this circumstance an appeal to Norwegian nationality and toward pre- World-War-I American patriotism, and one can understand the control over the Norwegian people which the bygdelag movement was in a position to exercise.

II.

Normally such control would have little importance in the religious sphere. In this instance the setting was right

for the bygdelag movement to influence the union of the Norwegian Church in 1917.

It was natural for the movement to pursue the goal of unity among Norwegians. They were also very interested in bridging the gap between the immigrants and the home land. These bonds were strengthened by gifts and visits.¹⁶ The gifts were presented as tokens of gratitude for the heritage the bygd had imparted. Contributions were often in the nature of relief for the poor, endowment funds for the deserving needy, aid to old people, or financial support to combat the scourge of tuberculosis. Other gifts filled specific needs, such as a rescue ship to aid fishermen along the northern Norway coast, church organs, commemorative markers, or just plain money.¹⁷

The desire for inter-lag union came to fruition as early as 1909. The occasion was the desire to participate jointly, both in this country and in Norway, in celebrations to commemorate the centenary of the Norwegian constitution of 1814. The three day celebration in St. Paul was a success. It also demonstrated the need for a permanent common forum. In 1916 the Council of Bygdelags came into being as an advisory body and clearing-house for the bygdelag and whatever joint projects they adopted. In this council all member societies had equal representation.¹⁸

The bygdelag trend toward unity carried over to the religious sphere. The bygdelag cut across religious lines. Pastors and lay people of different synods, but from the same community or area in Norway, were drawn together. Acquaintance-

ship on the social or cultural level often led to "better" (quotation marks my own) understanding on the religious level.¹⁹ This flow toward church union especially took place on the grass roots level. There laymen did not understand the fine doctrinal points which had been so hotly argued in the past.²⁰ Many of the lag were led by influential churchmen. For example, Gjermund Hoyme of the United Church and the Brandts, both father and son, of the Norwegian Synod were members of the Valdreslag.²¹ In fact, the annual meetings of the lag occasionally heard addresses on religious and ecclesiastical problems. In 1908, when the churches appeared to be moving toward unity in doctrine, Pastor I.T. Aastad of the Norwegian Synod addressed the Valdreslag and dwelt at length and favorably on the cause of church union among the Norwegians.²² This is clear indication that this non-religious society became a medium for promoting ecclesiastical union. The bygdelag movement was the " only major trend cutting across all dividing lines; controversial issues were deliberately kept out of lag programs."²³ The bygdelag movement was even more influential on the religious issue because most of the other types of societies drew their membership from urban Norwegians, whereas the lags found their strength in the rural areas.²⁴ The movement was in a position to influence something as broad as religion among the Norwegians because the movement tended to utilize leaders from most all the segments of Norwegian society. Many religious leaders, pastors and professors of the Norwegian Lutheran churches participant in the 1917 union, were members

of this union bent folk society.

It is interesting to observe that the membership of the bygdelag society embraced such names as Prof. Gisle Bothne (N. Synod), Prof. J.L. Nydahl (Luth. Free Church), Prof. P.J.Eikeland (United Church). Likewise, the following pastoral names are listed under one or another bygdelag membership. H. Allen, O. Andrewson, H. Bergeland, H. Bjornson, Giere brothers, O. Hanson, S. H. Holstad, Martin Halling, K.O. Lundeberg, T.H. Mohn, (Pres. St Olaf), O. Nilsen, O. Nestegaard, O.T. Rikansrud, B.J. Rothnem, O.G.U. Siljan, O.H. Sletten, C.K. Solberg, P.O. Strømme, Lars Swenson, A. Weenas.²⁵ Of the above (22), thirteen were listed in the 1922 Lutheran Almanac. (12) of those were members of the newly formed (in 1917) Norwegian Lutheran Church. O.H. Sletten had died by 1917.

I leave the conclusion (as to whether this folk society seriously effected these pastors and its lay members in their vote for church union) up to the reader. I realize that more research would have to be done as to the individual votes in the conventions, perhaps actual bygdelag publications, as well as reports in the conventions. None the less, I hold the position that lay society work toward church union had greater effect on the individual votes than a mere allusion; which it is often given in accounts of the union.

The End

Footnotes:

¹ Odd Sverre Løvoll, "The Bygdelag Movement," Norwegian-American Studies, Vol. 25, (Northfield, Minnesota: The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1972) p.9.

² Ibid., pp 10,11.

³ Ibid., p 7.

⁴ Ibid., p7.

⁵ Ibid., p 12.

⁶ Ibid., p 8.

⁷ Olaf Norlie, History of the Norwegian People in America (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1925), p 8.

⁸ Løvoll, loc. cit., p 14.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Løvoll, loc. cit., p 13.

¹¹ Ibid., p 14.

¹² Ibid., p24.

¹³ Ibid., p 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., p 23.

¹⁵ Ibid., p 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., p 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp 15,16.

¹⁸ Ibid., p 15.

¹⁹ E. Clifford Nelson, The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian Americans (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960) Vol. II, p 239.

²⁰ Ibid., p 238.

²¹ Ibid., p 153.

²² Ibid.

²³ Løvoll, loc. cit., p 18.

²⁴ Nelson, loc. cit., (footnote) p 153.

²⁵ Norlie, Loc. cit., pp 434, 435, 439-441.

Selected Bibliography

Løvoll, Odd Sverre. The Bygdelag Movement. Vol. 25 of Norwegian-American Studies, (25 vols. ; Northfield, Minnesota, 1972).

Nelson, E. Clifford. The Lutheran Church Among Norwegian Americans. 2 vols. (Nelson sole author of vol. II, co-author with Eugene L. Fevold of vol. I), Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960.

Norlie, Olaf. History of the Norwegian People in America. Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1925.

The Norwegian - American Studies series may well have more information on the bygdelag movement, but they are rather hard to look at, being far down in the Milwaukee Library archives. We were looking for an index to the series and the ten minute wait for vol. 25 was blessed by there being an article on the movement. We found no index!

Veblen, ?. The Valdris Book It should be most helpful, but I was unable to find it.