

Book Review of
NORSKE GAARDNAVNE
(*NORWEGIAN FARM NAMES*)

O. (Ole) Rygh, et al., (Kristiania (Oslo) W. C. Fabritius & Sønners Bogtrykkeri, 1898-1936)

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When engaging in Norwegian family history research, **it is crucial** that the *little place* where a person is living at the time of a recorded life event be correctly identified. In the heart of a Norwegian city such as Oslo, Bergen, Stavanger, that would be an address such as *Prinsessengade 24*. In all the rest of the country, that *address* is generally going to be the name of a farm (*gaard*) or one of the farm's subdivisions known as a *bruk*, a smaller land usage area belonging to the major farm.

These place names, which were extant long before any vital record keeping began, are used as identifiers. They can help separate the two *Lars Larsen's* in this parish and the three *Ole Olsen's* in that parish because as a normal rule, when a Norwegian's life events are recorded in the Lutheran church or other records, that place name is also given.

Sometimes when reading the records the place name is so dark, or so light, or so missing in a torn or otherwise not good page, it is hard to decipher. Or, you might have to read an original census and follow the farms around. Those are some of the instances where the use of Rygh's, as it is known in the professional world, comes into play.

Professor Ole Rygh, Professor Sophus Bugge, and Provst Johan Fritzner were appointed heads of a commission established 11 Apr 1878 by royal resolution, to carry out a 6 Jun 1863 law. They were to oversee the "Revision af Nevnene i Matrikelen" (establish standards i.e. normalize place names for the tax lists). To do that, two things had to happen; they had to find out how place names were recorded/spelled in documents dating from 1878 back to the Middle Ages and beyond, and they had to identify and establish how place names were pronounced by the local populace. In short, they were to identify the etymological origin of every place name in Norway.

With the help of University students and others, land records, tax records, censuses, court proceedings, letters and land division books from their beginning, perhaps dated before the Middle Ages, perhaps beginning in the Middle Ages, or later, the *Diplomatarium Norvegicum* (royal papers and proceedings), local archives, private farm (estate) archives and all other records which could contain place names were researched, and the various spellings of place names noted. Local residents were interviewed as to how they pronounced their place names, and/or asked if local places were known by a name totally different than that listed in official records.

The results of this massive project were not initially going to be put out to the public. However, when it was assembled it was judged to be of such great interest to every farm in the country and of such great importance and meaning for the study of the national language, that arrangements were made for it to be printed.

The published results includes 18 volumes covering every county in Norway (some counties have 2 volumes), a master place name index to the whole country, a volume of *Old Personal Names*, and supplemental volumes. The latter contain such items as explanations of place name changes through time, dissimilation and assimilation of place names, an alphabetical listing of the Herreds, frequently occurring words with their meaning and use, explanations of names coming from the Viking period on down, and so forth. Each county volume contains

- A listing of the herreds, with sub parishes indented, and a reference to the page where each parish begins.

- The names of the farms within each herred and/or parish, arranged in numerical order as per the farm's 1875 tax list number. For each farm name the following pieces of information are also given;
 - A pronunciation guide and/or what it is called locally
 - Spellings of the name as it occurred in documents through the ages, for example
 - Merdø in Tromø parish, Vest Agder County was spelled
 - Merrdøn in a document dated 1610
 - Meerdøen in a document dated in 1611
 - Merdøe in documents dated 1670 and 1723
- The history of the name, if they found anything about it, or their best judgment as to where it came from
- Page and volume number references to where that farm name or part of name is found in other parishes in Norway
- The names of the *bruks* or usage areas belonging to a major farm, if they were listed in the records
- Place names which have disappeared i.e. found in older but not current (1800-1900era) records
- An alphabetically arranged index with 4 parts i.e.
 - Farm and village names, including older forms or spellings of the place name
 - Names of rivers, waterfalls, lakes, fjords, bays, and Islands
 - Names of persons and of gods used in farm names
 - Place names alphabetically arranged by the appended word such as ---bay, ---hill, and so forth

Besides providing a resource researchers of Norwegian records can use to try and figure out a place name, the arrangement of *Norske Gaardnavne* provides another valuable way pointer i.e.

Many Norwegian communities/parishes have commissioned histories of their parishes to be researched and written. These are referred to as a *bygdebok/bygdebøker*. These histories often contain more than one volume; maybe a general history about the parish i.e. the bronze age archeological discoveries, the postmasters, the teachers, the ministers, and so forth, **and**, then one or more volumes containing the history of each farm within the parish. Most of the latter list minimally the names of the farm owners, some beginning as far back or as recently as the records exist i.e. 1200 A.D., 1500 A.D. or 1920, if the farm was subdivided from another one in more recent times. Names of wives, children, and their spouses in each generation down to present day may also be part of the history. To try and find your ancestor in such a book, you have to find out by search in other records the name of the farm(s) where they were born, married and/or died or lived at some point during their life, as they will be listed under that farm name in the history. The history may be based on the parish level, or the clerical district (*herred*) level. In order to use the history effectively, to find **YOUR** "*Lars Larsen*," it is imperative that the farm be located/placed within the exact parish (*sogn*) it belongs to. The *Norske Gaardnavne* series can be used to do that.

Often, the farms in the community history are not in alphabetical order, but arranged according to their 1875 tax list number, as reflected in *Norske Gaardnavne*. If, for some reason, the *bygdebok* is not indexed, finding the farm name and its number in *Norske Gaardnavne* could be a way to quickly locate the place within the history.

Anyone who does research in Norway has to be aware of and use this resource to the fullest extent possible – or they will not be as effective as they should be in solving problems nor putting together correct lineages. This work is of inestimable value and can be used in several ways to procure excellent Norwegian research results.

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