

Who Should Inherit the Land?

IT WAS NEARLY DARK when we turned the car up the short birch-lined lane to the Borg farm. I could hear the familiar *click-click* of the chains on the back wheels of the car as we plowed through the deep, soft-piled snow toward the large buildings that loomed ahead in the half darkness of late afternoon. The half darkness seems to make up most of the Norwegian winters — for Norway is as far north as the mainland of Alaska, and the December sun shines only three and a half hours a day, when it shines at all.

Alfred Borg, the present owner of *Borg*, stood in the doorway of the big two-story house as we pulled into the *gaardstunet*, a three acre quadrangle surrounded by seven or eight large gray and white farm buildings. He called out to welcome us as we stopped in front of the door and explained, I later learned from my Norwegian traveling companion, that Ole Borg was out at the barn and would soon be back. We left our coats and overshoes in a large entranceway with blue plank walls and were ushered into the sitting room with the usual *vaer saa god*, the Norwegian words of hospitality.

We had hardly sat down until with another *vaer saa god*, we were invited into the dining room for supper. It was here that we met the rest of the family — Fru Borg, a motherly woman with a pleasant smile and a happy laugh, and son Amund. Then Ole came in. Ole is a young Norwegian farmer, 24 years old, who is keenly interested in American farm machinery and constantly talks of increasing the efficiency of their farm and lessening the labor required with American machines. I had known Ole in America where he spent seven months last summer to learn how we farm.

It was the day after Christmas; the dining room was still dressed up for the holidays. A green spruce tree decked out in tinsel, electric candles, and tiny Norwegian flags sat over in the corner. A white bell, tied on with red and green crepe paper rope, hung from the ancient-looking, hand-beaten, iron chandelier. A pot of red tulips sat in the center of the table surrounded by miniature *julenisser*, Norwegian Santa Clauses, dressed in red suits with white fur. Even Fru Borg wore an apron with red embroidered Christmas bells. A six-pointed electric star in the window wished *god jul* to the outside world. Even the grandfather's clock along the farm wall seemed to beam with Christmas cheer after ticking in over a hundred Christmases.

After supper we went back to the living room with its pink board walls, its blossom-laden Christmas cacti in front of the two large windows whose

blinds were now pulled to keep out the Norwegian winter, and its red draperies. Over coffee and cakes we discussed the farm itself. As long rows of former Borgs looked down from their black wooden frames, Herr Borg showed us the old deeds, *skjöter*, and explained that all Norwegian farms are designated by official registration numbers, *gaardsnummer*.

Borg has been in the Borg family since 1723. Ole, who will take over the management of the farm this spring, explained that turnips, potatoes, oats, wheat, barley, and timothy and red clover hay are the important crops on the 110 acres of cultivated land. Of equal importance, he told us, were the 900 acres of productive forest that furnished lumber for buildings, work for the farm hands in the winter, and a goodly proportion of the farm income. He brought out piles of record books to answer my questions about the farm, the forest, and the dairy herd. Most farmers in eastern Norway, the best farming section of the country, keep very complete and accurate records on every phase of farming.

Farm Buildings

The next morning as we waded through the snow across the *gaardstun* to the barn, I could not help but ask how the farms in Norway could support so many huge farm buildings. Ole told me that the buildings had accumulated over a number of years. "The house was built in 1849 and the

rest of the buildings at various times since. Many buildings on other Norwegian farms are even much older," he said.

"The barn, completed in 1933, was built in three different installments. And like most of the farms in Norway, the lumber for all the buildings came from the forests on the farm. Then, too, we have to have good barns because of the long, severe winters. Here livestock raising is an indoor occupation for eight months out of the year. Of course," he went on to explain, "labor was cheap when most of these buildings went up, but in the future with the high cost of labor and the high upkeep, new farm buildings will have to be smaller and more efficient."

I could hear the *click-click* of the milking machine as we entered the cow part of the barn. "Our milking machine is similar to those you use in America, but it was made in Sweden. There are a few American-made machines in Norway, but not many," Ole explained. Two lines of red milk cows were eating mixed timothy and clover hay as the two hired hands, a man and a woman, did the milking. "We have 23 head of milk cows now, in addition to our calves and heifers. These small, red polled dairy cattle belong to a Norwegian breed, *Raukoller*. They are smaller than many of your American breeds. A mature cow will weigh about 900 pounds and of course, as you can see, they carry more beef than your dairy herds."

"During the summer the cows spend most of

their time on lush timothy and clover pastures, but from the middle of September until the middle of May, they stay here in their stanchions all of the time. The manure is raked into these openings in the gutters. It accumulates down in the basement until we spread it out over the fields during later winter and early spring. We like to haul it out before the snow melts so we can haul it on sleds. That small trough right in front of the gutter carries the liquid part of the manure to a cistern. We sprinkle it out over the fields in late spring. I don't particularly like the system, and in the future I think we shall not separate the manure."

"Potatoes are the northern European farmer's corn," Ole said, as we started down the steps to the potato cellar. "Now we have to carry the potatoes down these steps when we put them in the cellar and then we must carry them up again as we use them. You see, most Norwegian barns were built when labor was plentiful so no one thought of building the barns to save labor. We hope soon to send the potatoes up and down by elevators like you use to fill your corn cribs."

From the potato cellar we stopped at the root cellar piled high with turnips. "Turnips serve much as silage, even though we feed some grass silage. We feed every cow about 60 pounds of chopped turnips every day. We store the turnips out in the field by covering them with straw and

then with dirt. We bring them in as we use them. That way they keep all winter."

Over in the corner of the feed room I noticed several barrels. Ole grinned as I looked into one of the barrels and found it full of fish in brine. "That's herring. We call them *sild*," he explained as he watched the puzzled look on my face. "You see, protein feeds are very scarce now in Norway, so we feed our cows fish. We soak them in water for a day to get rid of some of the salt and then we feed each cow a fish every morning. The cows actually seem to relish the herring."

At my first breakfast in Norway I had been surprised to find that the first thing I was served was pickled herring. Now I found out that both the people and cattle start off the morning with pickled herring.

Hogs and Sheep

From the cow barn we went through a small door into a hog barn. The hogs, like the rest of the livestock, are kept in their own part of the barn in pens with low concrete partitions. The Borgs keep only 11 head of *Landsvin* hogs, a white Norwegian bacon breed. "We feed our hogs slop made from grain mixed with herring meal, cooked potatoes and whey from the nearby milk factory. Many farmers cook all the potatoes at once and then store them in miniature silos, but we cook them fresh every day in barrels with live steam,"

Ole explained. "Our sows farrow in February and March and again in September. The Oslo market likes for the hogs to weigh from 150 to 200 pounds, somewhat lighter than your American markets want. But just like the American farmers, our farmers like to feed them to heavier weights. We generally sell our pigs when they are about one month old to nearby farmers who fatten them for their own meat. Most of the food on Norwegian farms is produced on the farm itself, you see."

Sheep on eastern Norwegian farms is strictly a sideline. Most farmers keep only a few head, frequently penned off in a corner of the horse barn. The Borgs keep 20 head of mixed breeding. They are sheared both in the spring and in the fall and most of them have long tails. "We have never docked our lambs before, but next year we shall," Ole told me. "Our lambs come the last part of April or the first of May."

I was surprised to find small limbs with dried leaves on them in the feeding racks. "Those are aspen branches. We either cut down small trees in August or we may take the small branches from trees cut for firewood. The leaves are dried after they are tied in bundles and then we feed them along with hay to the sheep during the winter-time."

"We have only six horses at present and we will cut them down to four head because we hope to do more of our work with tractors. But most Norwegian farms still have from 10 to 15 work horses.

The most popular horses here are small, chunky, brown horses that we call *Gudbrandsdals Hest*, a Norwegian breed."

The Borg family has two tractors, both American-made, one a 1924 model and the other a new one bought last year.

By then I could see that nearly the whole livestock operation during the winter is carried on under one roof. The far wing of the barn contained chopped straw, used for feeding the horses, young dairy stock and dry cows, peat used for bedding, hay, two square 25 foot silos containing rather strong smelling grass silage made by adding acid to the grass, farm machinery, and fertilizer. The Borgs use lots of fertilizer on their 110 acres of cropland, as much as 1,500 pounds per acre on their potatoes. "Before the war we bought mixed fertilizer, but now we can only buy the ingredients and mix it ourselves."

As we walked back through the snow to the house, I marveled that here was a farm that had been kept in the same family for nearly 200 years — and that such farms were not at all uncommon. A few days later I was on a farm that had been in the same family for 600 years.

In Scandinavia the family farm generally goes to one son. The father generally gives over control and retires right on the farm. Even the laws are set up to reserve the rights of the family to hold the farm.

Laws in Norway, called *odel*, go back to very

early days. Under the old laws, any member of a family had a right to reclaim land up until 20 years after it was sold outside the family. To keep his rights of rebuying a family farm, the member had to make known his request to reclaim the land three years after the sale. He had to reaffirm it every three years until he bought it back. If unclaimed after 20 years, the land then became the permanent property of the new purchaser. Present laws have shortened this time considerably.

French Farms

In sharp contrast, let us look at the French farms. There is an old story in southern France of eight men and a grapevine. By old Napoleonic laws, inheritance is divided equally among the children. So down through the years, large land holdings were broken up as the land was parcelled out among the children.

Gradually the land area became scattered, fields became smaller and smaller as they were divided and redivided generation after generation.

And as the story goes, on one farm the land had been divided and redivided until now eight men each own a portion of the land required to grow one grapevine.

As we drove along the straight roads of northern France, I noticed small fields, many of them only a few yards wide, scattered up and down the hill-sides.

Godart Marcelcin is a farmer in northern

France. He was out planting potatoes as we stopped along the road to talk to him. A veteran of the first world war, he had served with the English troops and could speak English very well.

"Too many small fields make a French farmer's life difficult here," he told me. "Some of us spend more time running from one small field to another than we do working in the fields."

Germany Has the Same Problem

On the walls of a German extension office I saw before and after pictures of a land consolidation project. One looked like a crazy quilt pattern.

"This is a map of land owned by different farmers before consolidation," I was told. "As you can see, each farmer owns a dozen small tracts scattered all over the countryside. We actually have cases of strips of land so narrow the farmer can't drive his tractor down it without one of the rear wheels running on his neighbor's land. Now here is the same communiy after land consolidation."

I was then shown a map of farms in large blocks. "Not only does it make the farm land more convenient and more usefully located, but the farmers can now use modern equipment which was out of the question when their land was scattered in small garden sized patches, frequently far apart. Of course, at first some farmers hesitated to consolidate their land because they felt that they had taken better care of their patch than their neighbors. Or they did not like to give up a

certain tract because it had been in the family for several hundred years. But they generally agreed once they thought over the advantages pointed out to them."

Part of this trouble goes back for many years to the early German settlements called *Germanische haufendorf*. The farmers clustered their farmsteads around the church to protect themselves against ambush by hostile neighbors. As new cropland was cleared in the forest, each farmer would get a new plot of land.

As in France, in some parts of Germany when a father dies, his fields are divided equally among all the children. That means that if the farmer owns four fields and he has four children, each child will get a fourth of each field.

People in Europe don't like to sell land that they have inherited. They don't like to part with land that has been in the family, perhaps for centuries. Since land is scarce, people feel that its ownership gives them a certain security.

Some people have feared that here in America we would eventually be confronted with this same problem of land divided among the heirs. So far, this has not happened. Perhaps it is because land here is not so scarce. Or perhaps we do not have the long tradition of family land ownership.

I think it is because we have learned that the family size farm is the most profitable. That's why farms are more likely to be sold and the money divided rather than the farm land parcelled out.



Fig. 7—The future of this German farm lad depends on how his people will move. To preserve democracy they must cast off the cloak of political neutrality (Chcp. 7).



Fig. 8—The Borg family in Norway eat their Christmas dinner on the farmstead which their family has owned since 1723. Norwegian laws and customs protect the rights of the oldest son to inherit the farm. Many Norwegian farms have been in the same family for centuries (Chap. 9).

Our problem has been how to keep the farm in the family rather than how to keep the farm from being divided into small, widely scattered patches of land.

With more and more money needed to get started farming in America, we may soon come to the place that a lack of capital is as great a handicap for the would-be American farmer as the scarcity of land is now a handicap to the would-be European farmer.

One way to bridge this is for farms to pass from father to son with as few debts as possible acquired in the transferral.

A few years ago I knew of an elderly farmer who died and left a very good cornbelt farm to his children. One son had been farming it for a number of years. But there were several children. The farm was sold because it would have been nearly impossible for this son to have paid off his brothers and sisters at the then prevailing land prices. This is not an uncommon event.

The idea of equal inheritance is firmly grounded in American thinking just as in most western culture. We're not apt to change it, but more and more farmers are working out sensible agreements with their sons who want to farm so that the sons can take over without financially overburdening themselves. Father-son partnerships have been on the increase. It is a tradition to be encouraged in America.