

SIRDAL
NORWAY

BY CARL TWEITEN

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by Carl Tveiten
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The valley of Sirdal where our ancestors lived for so many generations is of interest to us who have lived there and other direct descendents from this valley. For all people, it is of interest to learn and study about the past. It influences, to a large extent, our thinking and behavior now and in the future. We are, to a large extent, like what our fathers and mothers have been like in the far past and to some degree we are like the culture of the present. For myself I cannot wish for or imagine a better heritage. I wish all people of the world would feel about their heritage in the same manner.

When writing this I try to imagine myself as a guide for so many relatives in first, second, and third generations in America. I will try to point out the history and way of life and culture in this small valley.

Of course one can only gather as much as one has knowledge and interest. The ideal would be for one to have knowledge of old and more recent history. This area was influenced so much by religious history from heathen days from the year one thousand. Then came a period of over four hundred years of Roman Catholic rule, followed by the time of the Lutheran and the reformation time of Europe.

When traveling in this valley, to understand their culture, one must be aware of the close relation in the

language to German and English. I am including Scandinavian languages almost as one. One can notice when going back a thousand years or much more, when the farming and fishing was so much alike in these countries, the basic words are still the same in England, Germany, the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands and Scotland. So many times one word can be spelled and spoken and have the same meaning as in Scandinavian. Next, when traveling, learning in Geology is of much interest in this valley and all of Norway where the glaciation is so recent. A study in Botany and Biology will make a trip in Sirdal of great interest.

One advice I would give when traveling is not to judge a country if one should meet someone who is rude or negative. One should not let a single incident spoil one's trip. So many more people are kind and friendly.

Now as to Sirdal, this paper is more or less telling of Sirdal from two or three hundred years ago to the early 1930's. So much change has occurred in the way of life and culture as it has in all parts of the world since then. One thing I notice over in this land, that is, in the United States, in the second, third and fourth generations of young people, many of the stories of old Norway and from up in Sirdal are carried forth by some of their grandparents and parents who came over and they still carry the stories and think that Norway is as it was in those days. One has to remember, that would be the same as people in Norway thinking it is the same here as in the 1800's. So always be prepared

that Norway is completely modernized. One will not find any of the old ways of life any more. The younger people might not even know what the mountains and "støl" meant to those old farms. All the homes over there are just as modern as over here with running water, bath, and toilets inside. The houses are built very warm and comfortable.

And--as one of my nephews, Marvin Berg, who visited Norway, said--there wasn't a house he'd seen in Norway that didn't have a grand view of river, lake or mountains. That would, of course, be true because I don't think you could turn a house without having a view of that kind of landscape.

The houses are always clean and neat since cleanliness was a trait and of prime importance. The same being for the roads and highways and surrounding landscapes throughout Norway.

Now, houses are often built with both a basement and an upstairs. They used to often have a cellar, but not of concrete, and not built as well as they are today.

In the past, the houses were usually just one story, long, with sort of a hall, then a room with a four poster bed where the older people would sleep. The younger members of the family would sleep up in a loft. On one end of the house was a room more for guests or finery and it might not be used often. It might become another bedroom in the case of a big family or an addition might be built to make more room.

Those with a knowledge of carpentry would be interested in how well the houses were made. Mostly, the timbers were

hewed out and in later years, whipsawed, until the use of power from creeks and rivers for small sawmills. The creeks also provided power for the grindstone to sharpen the scythes. The men did like good steel. They were good in a blacksmith shop although I was never clear on whether they used charcoal or packed in a little coal from the cities over the mountains.

All villages had one or two mills for grinding grain.

Many changes have occurred in Sirdal because of transportation with new highways and most Norwegian families own one or two cars. The culture has changed and many outside people have moved into the valley. Many of these farms are no longer self-sufficient. A lot of the men work in manufacturing and the hydroelectric projects throughout the valley.

As far as the young people go, they are very well informed. I would say they are better informed on world affairs than the young people in the U. S.

Sirdal is now a mecca for both summer and winter tourists. For summer visitors, the mountains provide hunting, fishing, and general camping. In winter there is excellent skiing with many ski resorts.

The main approach to Sirdal in olden days was from the southeast on the twenty mile long Sirdals vatn, or lake, from Sirness to Tonstad. From the late 1800's to the 1930's, a motorized boat carried mail, passengers, and freight. Roads for the wheeled rigs were built beginning in the 1850's. The

two-wheeled carriage was used. One, for passengers, was called a Kariol and the one used for freight was called Langkjerra, meaning long carriage. The first road for wheel traffic came into Sirdal from the South, what they called Nordgarda, meaning North Villages, or up by way of Espetveit and Bjornestad and later to Helleland where later the railroad station was located. In the upper half of the valley from Omlid and Tveiten, many folks traveled westward over the mountains to the sea or fjords and then into towns, mostly Stavanger, for trade. From the villages of Tveiten, Skreaa, and others, they traveled with packhorses and by foot in the summer, or on skis in winter time. From the upper valley, they walked across the mountains to Lysefjord on foot as it was too steep for horses. Many stories were told of the large packs they could carry up from the deep valley of the fjord, bringing additional sacks of grain or flour. Usually they grew all their own food, but brought in the extra in case it was needed.

In the last few years a road has been built from Sirdal to Lysefjord. I have not seen it, because the road was built after my latest trip to Norway in the early 1970's. This Lysebrikkaor pass is one sight worth seeing. They say there are 28 switch backs going down to the fjord.

The reason I am now writing this paper is that I was so well acquainted with this valley. The lower half I have walked many times for our Uncle Ommund who bought and traded in cattle and sheep. For a period of time, we would drive

them from Tonstad up to Tveiten then over the mountain to Hunnedal, and down to the Dirdal, the fjord, then by boat into Stavanger.

Many of our relatives from the lower valley lived in every village. Many of the men in the past found their wives in the lower valley from Lunde to Liland, Homplane, Fintland, Tonstad, and Espetveit. In 1920, when our father and mother returned to Norway from America with six children, I was the oldest. Martha was next in age then Oscar, Anna, Alma, and Bertha. Later, Jorgen and Barney were born in Norway. In 1921, our father and Uncle Ommund were the main instigators to start a company and establish the first scheduled bus and first route for mail, passengers, and freight from Tonstad and up the valley to Omlid. Our father was the driver for the next eight or ten years. Many people, in the early twenties, had their first ride in a car or on this bus which was a new Reo, built in America.

In the upper valley the mail was carried from Omlid to Fidjeland and in the winter we carried it on our back on skis. The pack could weigh sixty to seventy-five pounds. And in the lower valley a horse and sled carried the mail in the winter because there was no snowplow to clear the roads.

Besides living and working in this area, I spent a couple of months helping a road engineer who was surveying the road. In this manner I became well acquainted with the people and conditions.

Even today, from Tonstad up to Dorgefoss, it is a

beautiful alpine valley with its enormous, high mountains with sheer walls of rock. One misses the big, foaming river and all the big, roaring side streams that made up Sira. They are now mostly dried up and gathered together into the one big tunnel that leads into Tonstad on top of the mountains and into the big power plant. But I imagine this is the best form of power or energy that has been found to this day. Maybe in the future they will find a better type of energy and probably let the rivers flow back in their own channels and grind and wear and wander their own way again as it had been in ages and eons past.

The beautiful, white, roaring river is no more. It has been harnessed for power--the largest hydroelectric works in Europe. The river is now channelled through tunnels and many dams have been built. Three villages were put under water and are gone forever...Hedleren (meaning "Big Cave"), Vatnedal (meaning "Water Valley"), and Valevatn.

The names of the villages are interesting. Most of the names typify the village. In southwestern Norway, many places end in "-land." Sirdal has eight villages from Tonstad up that end in "land." One can find almost every name like in Scotland or England. Liland has birch on the hillsides and the name means land or hillside clad in birch. Espetveit refers to "aspen place." Hompland has hillsides clad in fir but is named for a hump of rock, a high dome laying in front of the village. Tveiten might be from Germanic languages, the "tveit" meaning "place." An old

"legend" tells of the origin of the name of Sirdal. It says that after the Black Death or bubonic plague in the 13th and 14th centuries, only one person remained alive in this valley, a young girl named Siri, and so the valley was named for her. Probably the name actually refers to it being the most southern valley.

In Sirdal, they have been trying to gather in much of the old names and their meanings from way back in time. Just in Tveiten alone, they came up with, I think, 78 different names of different places, of sidehills, ledges, rocks, and so on for miles back into the mountains, names of little creeks, little lakes, big lakes, cirques, caves, everything had a name!

After the 1930's, many new roads have been opened into this valley and more are on the drawing board. One road being built goes from Sirdal over to Saetesdal in the upper part of both valleys. This way has been used in past centuries for travel and communication. Some of the oldest Norsk language and traditions in all of Norway are used in this area because of its isolation. Many families in the upper and middle part of Sirdal can trace some of their ancestors to these parts.

The two churches, one in Tonstad and the other at Lunde, as we have read, were more or less built in the early and middle of the eighteen hundreds. On Tonstad there was an old church from the Roman Catholic times and I have heard that there are some things in museums from that period of time.

The state churches had such large influence on the way of culture and way of life. These influences are still carried forth, to this day, in its generations that have migrated to America and other lands. School and reading and writing have been practiced in Norway for several hundred years, with no illiteracy in any family. The written language in the past, the same as Danish during the past hundred years, has been altered somewhat to Norwegian conditions. The old books were in the old German script and lettering. The Bible and old song books and history books were the most frequently read. Our mother had a New Testament of the Bible from the year 1730. This, mother gave to Pauline Handeland, her granddaughter named after her. Pauline's name is now Campbell and she lives in Aberdeen.

Our family on Tveiten had many books of old. I could not locate any of them on my two trips later to Norway.

When going up or down the valley, and telling mostly about Tveiten, Liland, Espetveit, Lunde, Hompland, and Fintland, where our close relatives lived and are still living, these villages have a common history and similar way of life. My story would be typical of any other Sirdal family. If you studied a family tree back several generations, everyone in many of these villages would have common ancestors. Every family and village were so much alike in their daily lives.

In this valley the farms were relatively small. One can see from history that the Northern countries had no feudal or

colonial system from the oldest of times. Probably because of the lack of roads and transportation, they could not be exploited. To me, when looking back in time, I think they were the most self-reliant people in any part of the world. The small farms were large enough to grow all they needed in grain and potatoes. We notice in the Sirdals Book by Per Seland that the first potatoes came to Sirdal in the late 1700's or early 1800's. Notice that a great, great, grandfather, Osmond Lunde, planted the first potatoes in Sirdal. Before that time it was only oats and barley that grew in this high, cold country. Flatbread was made from barley or oat flour. Later, "lepsa" was made with lots of spuds and wheat flour in it. The flatbread of course has been used down through the ages many times when traveling over mountains with very little food. Concentrated food was used, trying to travel as far and as light as possible. I can still imagine that a thousand years ago, people in Norway had food just as good as we have today for hikes and travel in the mountains. Most of the meat was from sheep and goats and was cured in brine, salted and then dried, then used as jerky meat.

Notice that their food must have been nourishing and good for some of the largest and strongest people, both men and women, came from this valley. From the longest time back, no one farmer could be greedy and have more sheep, cattle, or goats than his farm would support. Every village had its own boundaries and the pasture land was used in

common.

Through the ages there had been a good balance in ecology in regard to grazing. In the lower part of the valley with its steep mountains and ledges, there the goats would graze where no cattle or even sheep could go. Now, we understand, there are wild deer, probably imported as they were not there in ages past. The moose, which over there are called elg, have always been in Eastern Norway. The reindeer have always been in the mountains of upper Sirdal. The bear has always been part of the wildlife from olden times. So many names and stories told of this from the past. Wildlife has been plentiful. In the line of birds, the large Tiur, almost as big as a turkey or other roughed grouse down to the ptarmigan, so plentiful in the higher mountains and so much of the economy in the past. So many ptarmigan were snared and caught and sent to England as a delicacy. The large arctic hare was common in the mountains and hills. The fox was plentiful and many times there was a bounty on them. The same on the lynx. Martin and weasel were fur bearing animals; they were hunted by the local people and their furs were taken into town to sell. The reindeer had been hunted for food for many years. The Lords of England and other Barons of Europe and wealthy people hunted the reindeer in the upper mountains as sportsmen--to get the large horns for trophies. Before the 1920's and the acid rains, the rivers and lakes had large amounts of rainbow trout. These were so plentiful, one could fish wherever one wished. In the large

lakes there were the speckled trout up to arm's length. Fish were caught and eaten in the summer and caught through the ice in the winter.

The one thing I would like to stress is the vast expanses of the highlands, what we called Heiane. Here were meadows with the wild grass. This grass was cut with the scythes and laid up in one-load haystacks to be brought home in the winter time on a sled. Up by these meadows and lakes was where the Støl and Saeter was. These Stølishus (or one might call them cabins, for each one was, in fact, a small log house) were used for two or three months in summertime when the whole family with cattle and all would spend time to cut the wild hay. This was so important to feed the cattle in winter time. They used manure on the home farm to fertilize the fields--this for hundreds of years in the past when no commercial fertilizer was known. On the meadows in the mountains they knew enough to only cut the grass every second or third year, this in order for the meadows to replenish themselves with the necessary elements to go on forever. Most villages had several Stølishus (cabins). On Tveiten there were several. Any one interested when visiting the old places, I would say you haven't seen the places unless you hike up into the mountains. On Tveiten there was Radestøl, Heimsestøl, Smaagestøl, Gamlestøl, Eldrestøl, and Nordstøl. On Liland there were several but I cannot recall these names since I was never into them. Only mother talked so much about them. But all villages had their own. All in

the old days made as log cabins. One end was for cooking and sleeping--no stove, just a stone hearth. It could be smokey when cooking if the weather was heavy. The one end was about twelve by fourteen feet, then a hallway like and then the other end the same size called løya which was to put hay in. This end was also used to sleep in when the family was large.

There was never a lock on any of these stølshus that I ever heard of or knew. They were always there so anyone traveling could go in and warm up and stay overnight in one of the bunks which were made with straw to lay on. Food was never left in them, because it would have been eaten by mice as there were no jars or tin cans, but I imagine if one was traveling in spring or summer, there was always a fish in a creek that could be caught. In winter, finding the stølshus would be hard. Unless it was on a knoll, it might be completely covered with snow so one could hardly see where it was. Then, if one could find the støl, he would have to dig down in order to find a door. Most of these timbered stølshus were standing in the 1920's but have now disappeared.

For me it is so interesting to see how stable and well off the past generations lived. One can take up a handful of soil that has been farmed for hundreds of years, still yielding food as always. I wonder if the commercial fertilizer can do the same.

As stated before, the food must have been nourishing and good, for the people, as a whole, were healthy and strong.

In this valley, dairy products and meat were the main foods along with the oats and barley which were baked and cooked into so much of their food. Milk was used in many ways. It was made into many kinds of cheeses. Grains were often cooked in milk or, if cooked in water, the milk was alongside to eat with it. Household utensils were wood and there was a tendency for the milk to be a little sour and would clabber very easily. The people were used to that and would rather have the sour milk than the sweet milk as we know it today. It was raw milk, not pasteurized.

They did not eat the abundance of meat as we do today. Every child or person would just eat a thin sliver of the jerky or salt meat. It would have been too salty to eat much. In later years, they would then fill up on large amounts of spuds.

In the time of our mother and father, when they were children, the loaf of bread was never baked up in this valley. There were no baking ovens before the grain and wheat came in from other lands. A sourdough type bread was made--this from the mostly dried yeast that would be saved after the homemade beer was made. The beer was made only once or twice a year or some festive occasion. The beer was made only from the malt they made from the barley grain. When the beer was made, the foam was skimmed off the top and dried for the yeast. To make their bread, a thick dough was made of this yeast with barley flour and water. It was made into a flat cake--a sour dough cake about eight inches around

and up to two inches thick. This was fried in sheep or beef tallow until browned on both sides, then it was stood up on edge beside the fire to bake.

I wish there had been a museum in Sirdal for all the implements that were at home, the sleds and rough wheels for farm use and so many other implements. All the kitchen utensils were at one time made from wood for all milking buckets and pans to keep the milk and butter and cheeses in.

The women did their weaving, spinning and knitting. Everything was homemade. The clothes were of the best, made from their own sheep. I know, for men in mountain country in summer or winter, that one could not to this day improve on the garments we wore.

Our father and mother used to tell of their childhood. From Tveiten in old days, usually only the men would go to town or Stavanger. They would go to get some steel for the blacksmith shop that most villages had. They would trade for guns, powder, and iron utensils to cook in. They would trade with wool and woolen goods and some hides or skins. Butter and cheeses were of value but were too heavy to carry for so long a distance. The going was too steep and difficult. The lower valley from Liland and Espetveit was closer and better to travel than the upper valley. These people traded in Egersund or Flekkefjord.

Once in a while mother and father would tell that in their earliest childhood they had very little sugar as we know it, maybe only a couple of kilos would be all for an

entire year. Mother used to tell how her grandfather came up from Espetveit, walking, and that when going by Tonstad, he would stop at the store and buy a loaf of bread and a little candy. Oh, how they would look forward to a visit from him when he had what mother called a skreppa on his back, meaning a small pack sack!

The people of Norway draw so much of thought from nature itself. If a visitor could learn their language, and understand it well, then we would see how interesting their old stories and songs are. They are so closely tied to nature, telling of birds, animals, the country and its hillsides. Especially in both verse and song, one notices that. This also is true in many of their proverbs.

If you visit there, you should be forewarned. Many of the farms are not what they used to be. Many of the places are being abandoned because the income was not enough so there are many homes, old houses, standing empty. They do not have the cattle in every farm as they used to, cows and goats. The only thing they have now are large numbers of sheep. Now they are grazing at the farm, on the hillsides, and up through the mountains.

When traveling in early times in this century, there were a couple of hotels at Tonstad, but none up through the whole valley. Now, there are many large, modern hotels for travelers. These are vacation places both for summer or winter. The costs are very similar to U. S. prices and vary depending upon the size of group and how well kept or how

modern a hotel is.

I've laid so much emphasis on Sirdal but way more people have left the valley and small villages over the past hundreds of years and have moved out to all parts of southern Norway, to ^{Kristiansand}~~Christensen~~ and Flekkefjord, Stavanger and Bergen. Many of our relatives could be found there if you knew how to find them. Some of the men kept their village name, but many probably changed their name. For illustration, of all of Uncle Peder's family, only Olav remains in Sirdal. He is living on the old farm. The rest of the children have families in other parts of Norway. The boys would probably carry the Liland name. Whoever visits might want to locate these relatives in other areas and see other historical spots, parks and museums.

During the past two or three hundred years, the people in Sirdal were crowded--for those little farms could not take care of too many people. They moved out, especially after the general migration to America. We probably have third or fourth cousins in every state although many of them took on names like Thompson, Johnson, or Carlson, and lost the names of the villages. Now, though, there would be more of their descendents over here in the Americas than the three or four million people still in Norway.