

THE HOUSES OF THE NORWEGIAN "SETERS": AN ANALYSIS OF LOCAL TYPE-VARIATIONS (Part II)

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(for Part I, see 'Northern Studies' Vol. 16)

THE SETERHOUSES

We have already pointed out that the most important house on the seter is the house where the seter personnel have their accommodation and dairy-working facilities. This is regarded as *the main house of the seter*, and is called "*sel*" or "*bu*". *Sel* is the term used in Western Norway, part of Valdres, Hallingdal and Gudbrandsdal. (Cf. ON and Icelandic *sel*, n.: "small dwellinghouse on seter". In Iceland *sel* is also used of the grazing area, cf. *shieling* and *seter*.) In other areas of Norway the term *bu* is very common in its compound form, e.g. "*seterbu*", "*stølsbu*". (Cf. *seter* < *saetr*, n./ *setr*, n. and *støl* < *stobull*, m., ON.)

This house, evidently, will need to cover more activities and functions in the "fullseter"-area than in the "milkingseter"-area, where e.g. virtually no cheese was produced at the seter itself. This gives us the important clue that we will not be likely to find a *big fireplace* (or hearth), or a big pot for cheese-making in the "milkingseter"-area, while these are key features of the seters in the "fullseter"-area. Likewise, the storage space for dairy-produce is extremely important in the "fullseter"-area, less important in the "hayingseter"-area, and virtually unnecessary in the "milkingseter"-area, where you carry the milk to the farm every day.

These simple facts may lead us to think that we will find three very neat types of main seterhouses, according to which seter-system they belong to. Yet, it is not quite as simple as that. I have already introduced the various other factors which have to be considered (location, building techniques, material, etc.); let us now bring them fully into our analysis.

Size and plan of seterhouses, number of rooms:

The size of the timber houses naturally tends to be standardized according to the available local timber. For instance, where the pines grown to a height of 15–18m, you will find that the houses are 7–8 m long, since a good log of about 15 cms diameter can be cut to a length of 7–8 m from a tree of the size mentioned. Furthermore, during field studies we have found that *transport* problems and conditions have standardized the size of wooden buildings in many areas. This is especially the case in the west. On the other hand, the regularity in dimensions is not only to be found in wooden buildings, but even in stonebuilt houses. On the whole, we find a strong degree of conservatism and continuity in both plan and construction of seterhouses. The outer frame, the building itself, remains the same – and continues to be built in the same way even fairly late, while the interior furnishings might change. Continuity in *size* and *plan* is in some areas so strong that it can be followed through several generations, from early stonebuilt houses (Fig. 16), through a combination of stone and log construction (Fig. 17a & b), to the recent framebuilt houses. (Cf. e.g. Mørkrisdalen, Fig. 18a & b). This unity or standardization to a large extent carries through and evens out any possible social strata which might appear in the farming community. Any major changes and differences in construction and plan *within* a local area are due to chronological changes and development, rather than to social differentiation. On the other hand, we find – as may be expected – variations in size and layout between the various *regions*, related to geographical and ecological factors.

Single-room house: Evidently the oldest type of seterhouse, previously found all over the country (Fig. 19). Now found in part of Rogaland, in Setesdal (Agder) and in West-Telemark. Generally log-construction ("*laft*"), but stone constructions are found in Hordaland. Storage space is often secured in an extra, small house, (single room), with door facing the entrance of the main house.

Two-roomed house: Very common type. Used both in

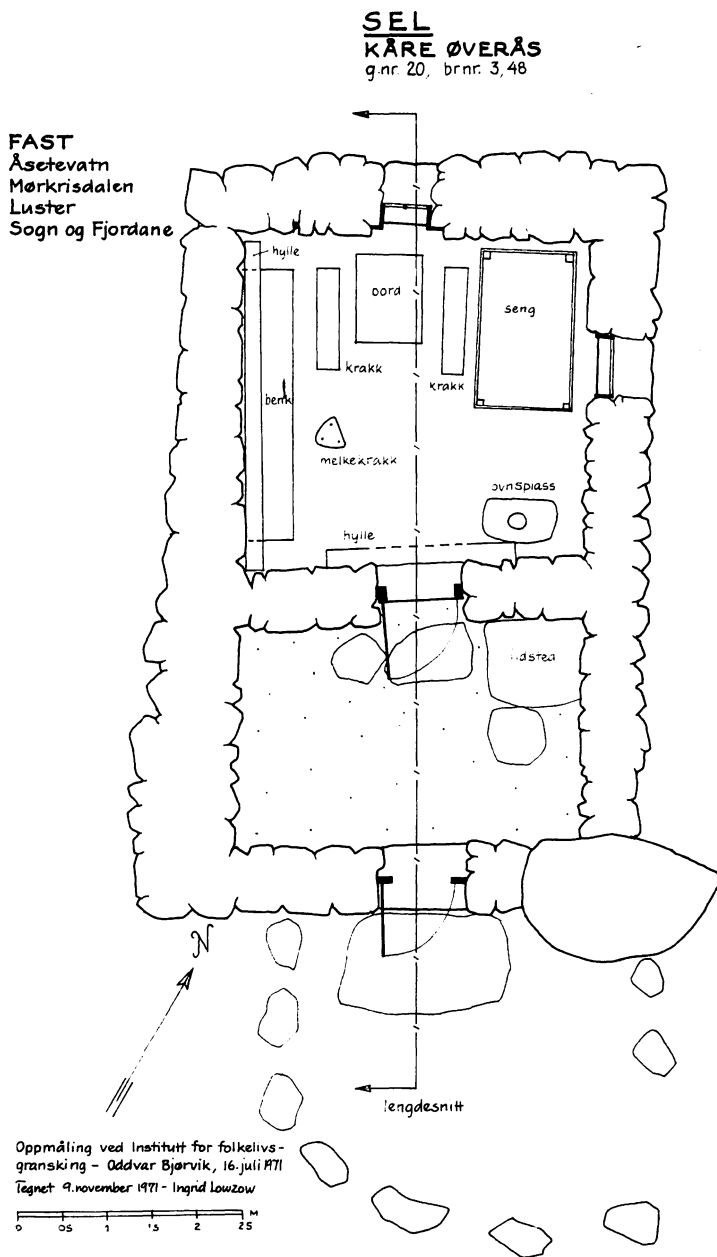


Fig. 16 Plan, seter house, drystone construction. Fast, Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane.

SEL
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 g.nr. 20, br.nr 15

Mørkrisdalen
 Luster, Sogn og Fjordane

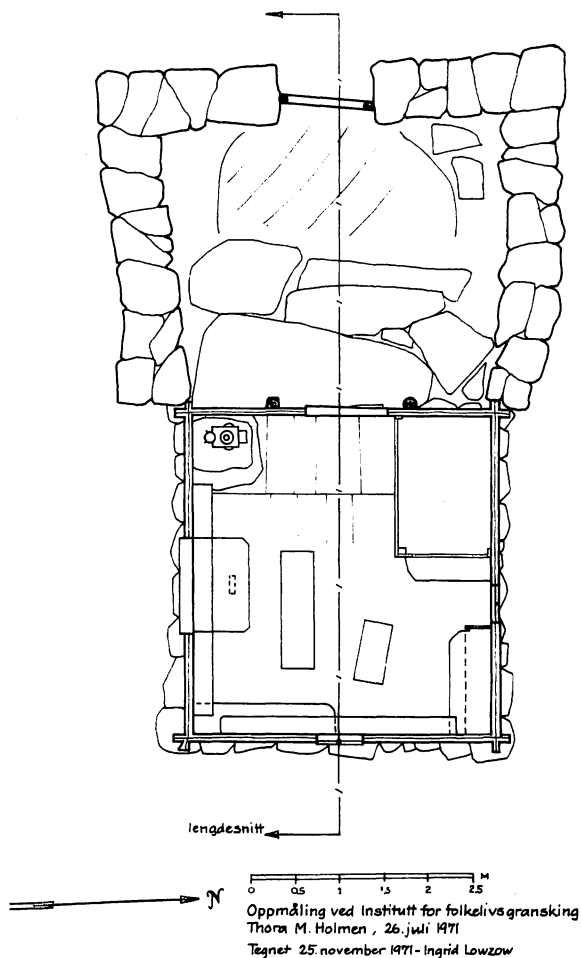
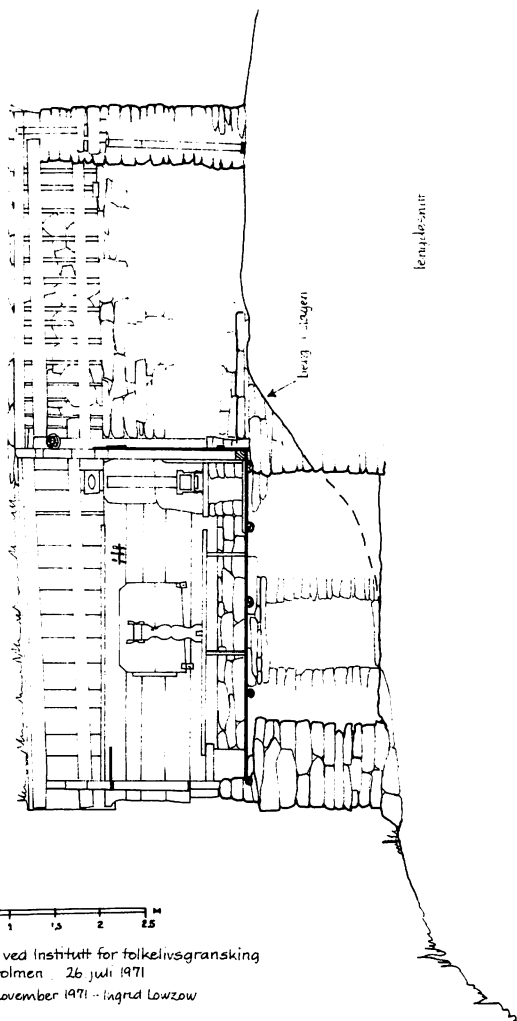


Fig. 17 a) Plan and b) Section of seter house, "laft" and drystone construction. Fjellsli, Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane. Byre under "innset". Cf. Fig. 12 (house in the background) and Fig. 25.

SEL
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JENSADALEN (OLAV O. BOLSTAD)

gnr. 20 bnr. 8

Mørkrisdalen

Luster, Sogn og Fjordane

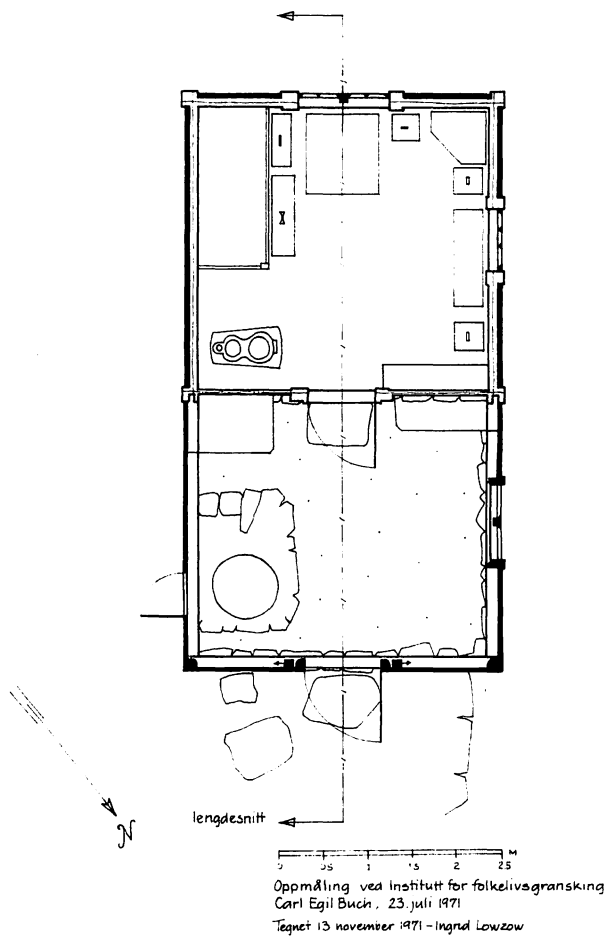


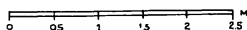
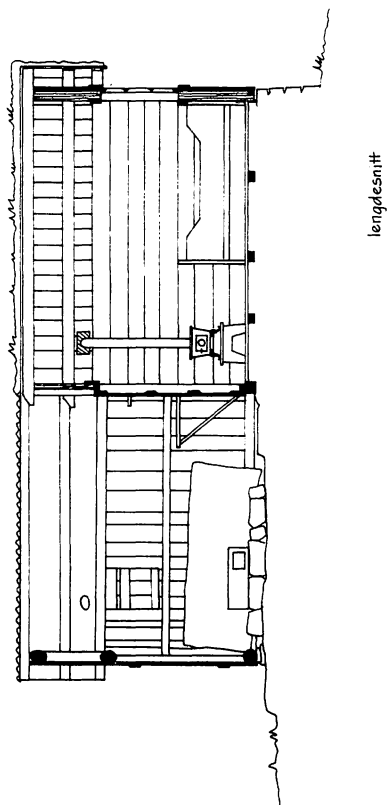
Fig. 18 a) Plan and b) Section of seter house, “laft” and frame construction. Jensadalen, Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane.

SEL**JENSADALEN (OLAV O. BOLSTAD)**

g.nr. 20, br.nr 8

Mørkrisdalen

Luster, Sogn og Fjordane



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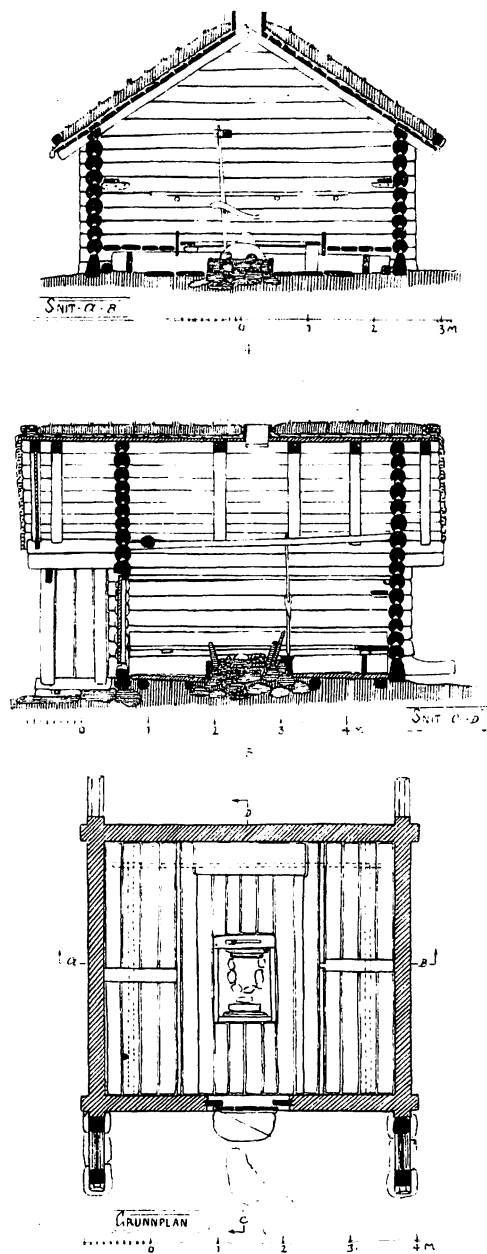
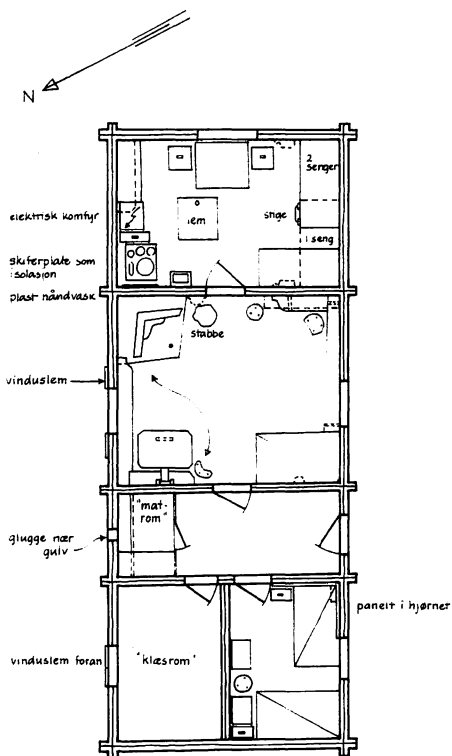


Fig. 19 Single room seter house, Valle, Setesdal, Aust-Agder.
 Drawn by Gisle Midtun. (From *Norske Bygder — Setesdalen*,
 Kra. 1921. pl. 23.)

NORDRE BRIMIS SETER

Nordseter

Tesse, Lom, Oppland

STUE

0 1 2 3 4 5 M

Oppmåling ved institutt for folkelivsgransking
Ingrid Lowzow
14. juli 1970

Tegnet 2. desember 1970 - Ingrid Lowzow

Fig. 20 Plan, five-roomed seter house, Nordre Brimis seter, Nordseter, Tesse, Oppland.

"milkingseter"- and "fullseter"-area. (Note lack of big hearth or fireplace on the "milkingseter"). This plan/layout has been used in areas of wood construction and stone construction alike, and even with combinations of the two materials.

Three-roomed house (or more): These are found in areas with a plentiful supply of building materials (Fig. 20). The rooms are traditionally built in a row, in contrast to many traditional Norwegian farmhouses. Some three-roomed seterhouses may just consist of a main house plus a storehouse put close together and with a roof over the combined entrance area, forming the third room. But generally this group is characterized on the whole by larger houses and several rooms.

The most radical change in the layout of the seterhouse has been introduced when we find an extra room for sleeping accommodation – which meant that the shepherd boy remained in the main room, while the dairy maid got a little room to herself. This change happened in the eastern areas just before the turn of the century.

"New", squarish type of house: This type of seterhouse (Fig. 21) belongs to this century, and is found in the eastern areas of the country. With its greater number of rooms, variations in layout etc., it differs considerably from other types of seterhouses. Even so, the type represents a traditional type of dwellinghouse plan, which was common on many *farms* well into and towards the end of last century.

Interior and furnishings:

An earthen floor was previously common in the seterhouse. Later on, one finds that the inner room, ("*innsetel*"), will get a wooden floor, while the outer room, ("*utsetel*"), remains with a floor of earth or flags. In Hedmark in the east of the country, we know that this change took place in the 1880s.⁸ The storeroom, however, continues to have an earthen floor, being a cold room. The fireplace, which has generally started out as an open hearth, developed to a corner fireplace with a chimney in

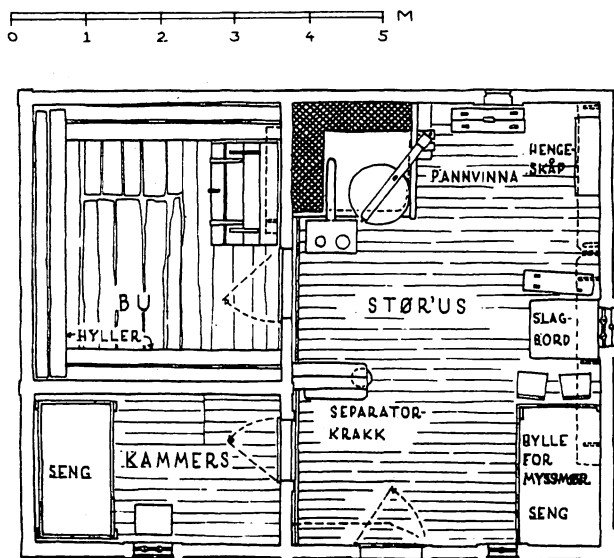


Fig. 21 Plan, seter house, "suarish" type. Ruskåsen, Stav, Furnes, Hedmark. Drawn by Per Martin Tvengsberg. (From Lars Reinton: *Til seters*. Oslo 1969).

eastern districts (Fig. 22). Other areas kept the old solution with just a smoke vent or skylight for letting out the smoke from the open hearth where all the boiling of the cheese took place. The smoke even found its way out through the open door, or e.g. through the airy construction of the walls and roof of the "utsel" (Fig. 23). Later on, small iron stoves were brought in, mainly as a help when cooking the daily food, and perhaps for a bit of comfort on a cold day. The early seter-houses had just small openings for daylight (cf. the combined smoke vent/skylight, "ljore"). Windows started to come in on the seters in the latter part of last century, but in the main only small and with a few small panes. (It is important to remember that any "openings" in the walls, like doors, windows, etc. will allow movement of air and temperature "leaks", and these are also the weak points in a house which is necessarily constructed

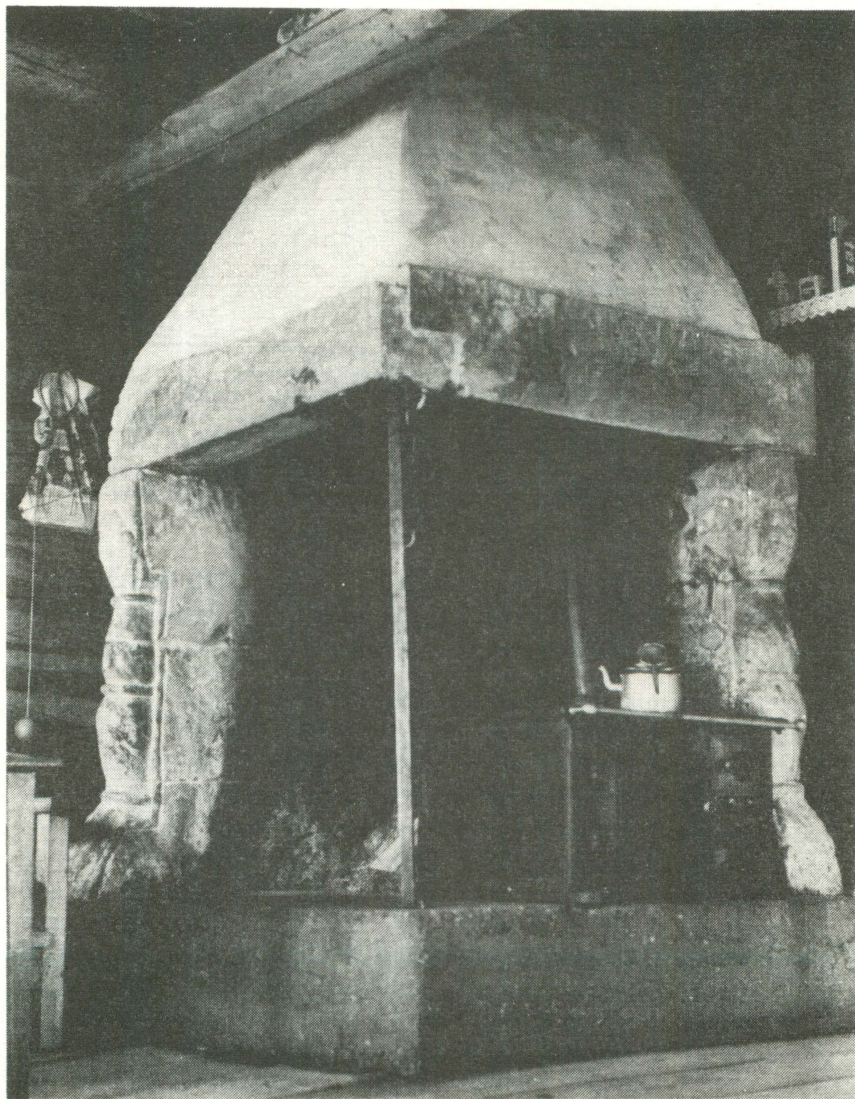


Fig. 22 Corner fireplace (of soapstone) with chimney. Later iron stove added. Austrem seter, Sjødalén, Oppland. phot. A. Sand.

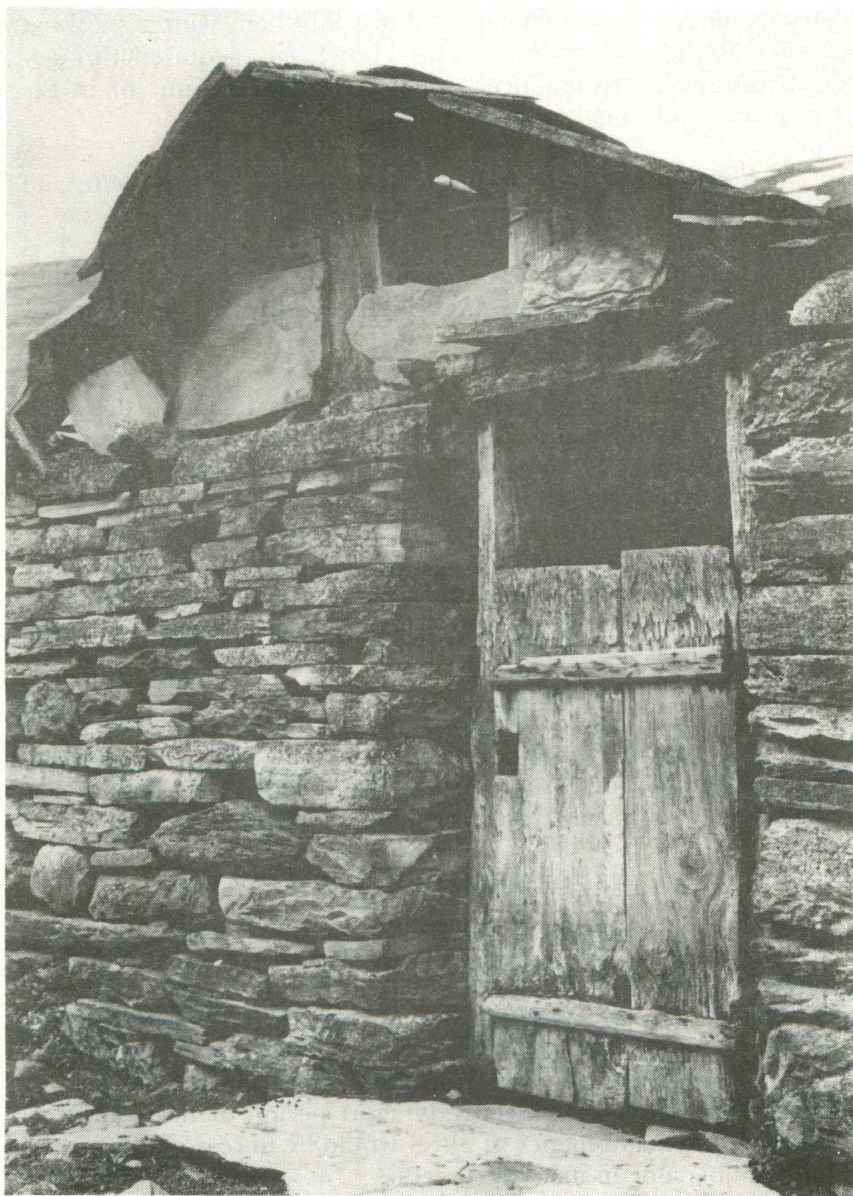


Fig. 23 Smoke vents above door to "utsel", mountain seter. Fast, Mørkrisdalen, Sogn & Fjordane. phot. A-B. Ø. Borchgrevink.

to stand up to hard climate and possibly high winter snows at generally high altitudes. This knowledge, acquired through generations of experience, has been taken account of in the farmers' traditional way of building).

Furnishings were traditionally *attached to the walls*, and show little differentiation or specialization. That is to say, a few elements of furniture will serve a variety of purposes. It is important to note, however, that there is always a fair number of *shelves* along the walls of the seterhouses, for the storing of milk and milk produce, etc.

In this century "loose" furniture was introduced, which brings more choice and specialization. However, the interior of the seterhouse still retains a conservative and "retarded" character. Often items of furniture which were "discarded" on the farm, were taken to the seter, and continued to function there, a fact which not only will give the seter interior a "primitive" or "oldfashioned" appearance, but also in many cases leads to the seterhouses today being furnished with Norwegian country antiques!

The "winterseter" follows the same plan as other "full-seters", but is generally more substantially built, and is well though simply furnished. It will also have a full range of the subsidiary buildings we are discussing — byre, stable, barn, etc.

HOUSES FOR ANIMALS — BYRES, STABLES:

Many seters did not have any byres or stables until quite recently. This was especially the case on the high mountain seters in the west. The lack of wood for building materials has been suggested as the reason for this, but I would rather suggest that the great *number* of seters which each farmer previously utilized has in itself been a restraining factor here. The stay at each seter lasted for a relatively short period of time, and the building and maintenance of byres would be unreasonably costly and cumbersome in many instances.

However, there are a number of byres to be found, some

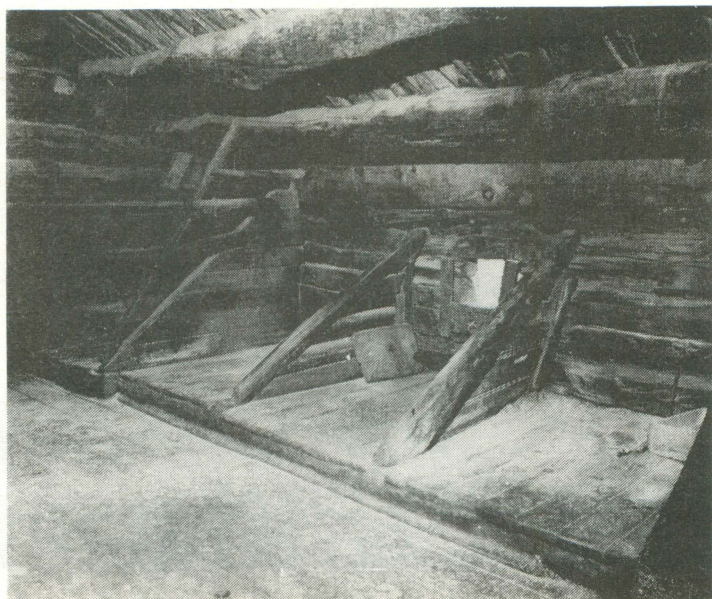


Fig. 24 Interior, byre, Nåvårseter, Tesse, Oppland. (Note roof-beams). phot. A. Sand.

even of considerable age (Fig. 24). They are log-, stave-, or stone constructions, generally independent buildings; but we also find byres built *under the seterhouse* (Fig. 25) or *under a barn*. The size of the byre will vary according to the number of animals brought to the seter. (It is important to note here that log- and stave- constructions are easily extended lengthwise.) The cows were generally tethered to the side walls in the byre, sometimes stalls were erected.

In North Gudbrandsdal and Valdres in the east of Norway, one sometimes provided a special house for the calves. More common was it to have a special byre or house for the *goats* and also for the *sheep*, but again this applies to the eastern part of the country, not to the west.

An all-over common feature was to keep the animals in



Fig. 25 Stone byre under timber “*innsel*”, stone “*utsel*”. (Cf. Figs. 12; 17 a & b). Fjellsli, Mørkridalen, Sogn & Fjordane. phot. A-B. Ø. Borchgrevink.

folds. A *stable* for horses is an important feature where you have a “*winterseter*”, and need a horse for transport of fodder to the seter from the various storing places in the surrounding area. This was of course also important where you used the seter as a base during logging work, etc.

BARNs:

Haybarns are found on all “*fullseters*”, except the ones at very high altitudes. They are quite common on seters in “*milkingseter*”-areas and on the “*hayingseters*”, but strangely enough, on the latter we also find quite simply an extensive use of *haystacks*. Again, I would suggest that the great number of interlinking seters and the enormous areas covered under this system, has restricted the building and maintenance of barns. Also, the fact that the plots where they cut the grass were very

small, numerous and highly scattered, thus making it more rational and economic to use haystacks.

Barns are most commonly of *log* construction, but often very openly constructed and airy. Deciduous wood is often used for these houses. Stave-construction is also found, and in some areas even "*skjelter*"-construction (e.g. Gudbrandsdal, Hardangervidda). Often we find a combination of wood and stone construction, and the sizes vary greatly.

A feature often found on these barns, is a door at either end of the house, one of them placed quite high up on the wall. This is to give easy access in winter when the snow is high, when the farmer wants to transport the hay home to the farm.

BOATHOUSES:

The use of one or several boats was and still is very common in connection with the seters, and formerly was necessary for transport to a very high degree. Boathouses have thus been quite common, not only at the seters or close to them, but also at strategic points on lake shores etc. en route to the seters.

The boathouse — ("*naust*") — is commonly a small, simple house with a wide door or opening in the gable end that faces the water. Stave-built boathouses were previously most common. Boathouses of stone or a combination of logs and stone are also well known.

CONCLUSION:

We have seen that on *all* Norwegian seters we find a main house, *seterbu* or *sel*, for the seter personnel. The construction, plan and size of this house varies according to the actual seter system it belongs to, but also according to ecological and geographical locational factors. Yet, we find a strong tendency towards standardization and continuity in building forms, relatively little affected by social differentiation.

Summing up, we find:

1. Small, simple houses (main houses) in the south/southwest, (generally the "hayingseter"-area, with bare mountain areas and many seters). This may have been the original type of house in all areas.
2. A "standardized" two-roomed type in the greater part of the "fullseter"-area, both east and west.
More stone-construction or combination of stone and wood used in the west. Wooden houses (log construction) general in east.
3. Better access to wooden materials (conifer) in the east, has led to development of bigger houses, more rooms — but still following a conservative, traditional pattern until this century (ca. 1900 onwards).
4. Development of open corner fireplace with chimney common in the east.
5. Special need for substantial houses on "winterseters" (east). This also implies a full range of "outhouses" on the "winterseter".
6. More common to have a complex of main seterhouses *plus* barn and byre(s) in the east than in the west.
7. Haybarns generally more common in all areas than byres. Found in all seter areas (except at very high altitudes).
8. Byres for cows and calves common in the east, also houses for sheep and goats. If byres are found in the west, they usually are for cows only.
9. Stable for horse(s) only on "winterseters" (east).
10. Boathouses common in east and west alike, when boats are necessary for transport.

Reference:

8. Ragnar Pedersen: Seterbruket på Hedmarken. Gjøvik 1974.

(For Part I, see 'Northern Studies', Vol. 16).