



SONS OF NORWAY

HERITAGE PROGRAMS



IdeaBank#64

DUGNAD: WORK DAY

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Dugnad: Work Day

Reason For Idea: A Norwegian "dugnad" is defined as "many persons assisting one person." It is an idea from the old Norwegian peasant society which is still useful today. A dugnad is a work day on behalf of an individual or a group. It is still common in modern Norway when the residents of condominiums or other cooperative living situations choose a day to clean up the neighborhood. Sons of Norway can adopt it for such activities as a group of lodge members getting together to paint a person's house, clean up a yard, or spruce up a lodge building. Persons needed: Lodge members interested in helping others and one person to organize the event.

Materials needed: Depending upon the chosen task, the lodge group will need painting supplies, gardening tools, carpentry or electrical equipment, or lawn tools and plenty of food for volunteers. Ideal location: The home of a shut-in or widow, or the local lodge building.

Ideal time: A warm Saturday

Preparations: Preparation needed will depend upon the task

Other important information: In peasant culture in Norway, the dugnad was an important element of survival. While most farms were self-sufficient, there were situations where assistance from neighbors was required. The farm could consist of both a nuclear family as well as cottagers and servants, but on occasion more help was needed. The exchanged work of the "dugnad" was institutionalized in many parts of Norway.

One or more persons from each farm within a certain circle of farms worked one or more days with the person needing assistance. It was carried out without thought of equivalent return effort or payment. The only reward one could count on was the food and drink which was served, and which more often than not came with festivity (like the old barn raising parties in America's past). In fact the serving of food was the difference between voluntary work and a formal obligation, such as paid work: The compensation for dugnad work lay instead in the social security that the institution gave to the individual members of the community. The fact that each member of the circle could receive assistance if and when it was needed gave them all security.

The dugnad, then, was based upon reciprocity. Contributions were made and received without thought of personal gain or direct return of equivalent work. There were, however, clearly defined norms and rules of behavior.

First of all, the dugnad was considered to be a neighborly obligation, and one who did not participate was labeled a bad neighbor. The rest of the community could refuse to help him when he needed it

It was also a rule that the person holding the dugnad should lead the work. He must also provide the food and drink, and it must be a certain kind. It was said that there had to be "sufficient" hard liquor. If the person holding the dugnad was a little short with the food, he was called a "gjerrigbuk" (a stingy goat) and got a bad reputation among his neighbors.

Dancing after the work WAS over was a common custom.

The types of dugnads found in peasant society included roofing-dugnad, a driving-dugnad (for transporting timber, rocks, etc. by horse), hay mowing-dugnad, fending-dugnad, or a carding-dugnad. The larger the task and the longer it would take, the more likely the farmer would need a dugnad. Or if a job had to be done quickly at a certain time, such as during good weather, one might ask for help. In addition, illness and accident were circumstances which could bring neighbors. The dugnads were more common in the mountain, valley and fjord districts where farm work could include moving things from great heights. The carrying of hay by rope down from the seters was a common dugnad task in the interior of Sogn.

There was some social distinction in the dugnads. When a farm owner needed assistance, it was usually the other farmers themselves who should come. It was less preferable that he send a son or a cottager. The cottagers could have their own dugnad on their social level, but one was rarely required as they had less need of anything done on a larger scale.

Occasionally a "large-dugnad" was held for a business such as when all the farmers in surrounding neighborhoods came to haul materials for a mountain resort hotel. The only payment was the food and drink. This violated the usual rule that a dugnad was not held for something which would earn money, but the hotel trade could produce new economic activity for the region. It was also one of the rare times people could meet those from distant areas. There could also be large-dugnads for the entire district for such purposes as building or repairing a road.

A final assumption made by historians about the peasant dugnads was that people were eager to assist with the dugnads because it was an occasion for visiting neighbors seldom seen and the comradery of being together with good food and drink. That is certainly something that could apply to a Sons of Norway dugnad today.

Material from "The 'Dugnad' in the Pre-Industrial Peasant Community", by Helge Norddolum.