

## Eier, Leilender, Husmann, Strandsitter, Innerst

From the Middle Ages through the 1700s and into the 1800s most of the farmland in Norway was owned by the Crown, the church or rich landowners. The farmers on the land were mainly tenants with lifelong rental agreements. Gradually as times changed, more tenants were able to buy land and became self-owners and both *selveier*/self-owners and *leilending*/tenants had *husmenn*/cotters on their farms. A system of landownership developed into the 1800s when many Norwegians emigrated to North America. The terms we often see and use in our research are explained below.

	<i>Land resource</i>	<i>Contract type</i>	<i>Contract time</i>	<i>Houses</i>
<i>Selveier</i>	Registered farm unit	Registered deed	No fixed limit	Own the houses
<i>Leilending</i>	Registered farm unit	Registered lease contract	Lifetime	Leased the houses
<i>Husmann med jord</i>	Unregistered farm land	Holders lease	Limited time	Leased/owned
<i>Husmann uten jord</i>	No farm land	Holders lease	Limited time	Leased/owned
<i>Strandsitter</i>	No farm land	Holders lease	Limited time	Leased/owned
<i>Innerst</i>	No farm land	No contract	N/A	Rented rooms

There are different Norwegian terms for “farmer depending the farmer’s situation. Thanks to Johan Borgos for permission to use his chart also found online: (<http://www.borgos.nndata.no/leilend.htm>).

“*Selveier*” translates as “self owner” so this man owns his land and farms the land. He paid property tax and could lease his land to tenants. A “Gaardnummer” is assigned to each farm.

The “*Leilending*” (*leie* to rent and land/lend), a tenant, paid “*landskyld*” (land debt) for for annual rent. His lease was for his lifetime. The number assigned to the leased section was a “bruknummer”.

“*Husmann*” is often translated as “cotter” but that term has different connotations in different countries. Literally it means “house’ and “man” but could be translated as “housekeeper.” Using “**husmann**” (pl. *husmenn*) is generally understood in Norwegian genealogy use. If he owned his house, he could take it with him if he moved. *Husmenn* were expected to be married.

“*Strandsitter*” were beach dwellers who had direct access to the ocean. They were often fishermen, sailors, boatbuilders, carpenters, ferry pilots. A *strandsitter* rented a plot of land for a house he owned and lived in with his family—and could move the house if he moved. With the ocean at their doorstep, they seldom had to look for food.

“*Innerst/inderst/losjerende*” was a lodger who rented a room or bed



in the leidending or husmann's house—without food, just lodging. He could be a tailor, shoemaker, blacksmith, et al. who travelled from farm to farm doing seasonal work.



**Husmenn** were the largest group of people in farm areas of Norway in the 1850s who were not land owners. This was due to the population growth at the beginning of the 1800s and a growth in the number of members in the landowners' families who took over land ownership by inheritance. These farmers often needed workers who were the husmenn.

The husmann rented either “med jord” or “uten jord” – either with land or without land. The rent was a combination of cash, work done for the landowner or product—grain or garden vegetables, depending on the contract. The husmann's place did not have its

own registration number for tax purposes so in bygdebøker when farm numbers and extensions are used (such as gnr 65.4), the husmann's place didn't have its own number and he didn't pay “landskyld”. His wife and children also had duties for landowner.

A husmann's house could be owned by him and since it was constructed with numbered logs, it could be dismantled and moved. If he had no land he could be a fisherman, carpenter, blacksmith, forest worker. Supposedly the husmann had a contract for his plot of land but many did not. April 14 and October 14 each year were “fixed moving days” (*de faste flyttedagene*). The husmann's law of 1851 (*Husmannsloven av 1851*) required a contract. The contract would outline the yearly fee for land and the work requirements that would be hours per week and his pay for work. He may have had privileges for grazing land or firewood.

The layout of the house was pretty standard. An entryway and storage room on one side and a *stua* (living room) that was over half of the house for the family to occupy. The parents' bed was in the corner and a fireplace (*peis*) in another corner. If they could afford it a loft could be built or added for sleeping. Maihaugen Museum in Lillehammer has collected over 200 historic houses. Vesterheim in Decorah, Iowa has a house moved from Valdres and other buildings from Norwegian settlers.



Conditions and requirements for rent, work requirements, etc. varied somewhat throughout Norway. Along the coast going north there were more “*Strandsitter*” (beach dwellers), the husmenn of the coast.



The child of a husmann or strandsitter was usually expected to be “on his/her own” by the time he/she was confirmed. Their lifecycle is explained as follows:

1. Toddler: provided for by the family.
2. Age 10 or by confirmation: Fully support oneself, most often as a servant on the *gard* (farm).
3. Grown-up: About age 25 the goal was to be married and have a livelihood to support a family in a home. Until about age 50.
4. Empty nesters: Involved in work but not needing to provide for children.
5. Old age: Give up work as a husmann and become an “*inderst*” or “*innerst*”. May be “*på legd*” or “*fattig*”. (On community support or poor)

On census records there may be young people designated a “*tjenester, tjenestepige, tjenestegutt*” (servants or hired help living with a selveier or leielender. There are also “fostered” children who might be family members.

The working conditions for the husmann group of farmers were dependent on the landowner. The land a husmann rented was often on the worst soil. Social customs meant not speaking out, giving way on roads, tipping your hat to a higher social class. These conditions were more noticeable inland than on the coast. Some husmenn did very well but the contract had to be renewed although tenants had theirs for life. Contracts defined the area of land, responsibilities for maintain the house, allowed quantity of resources such as firewood, if grazing was allowed, how the rent was paid—goods, money or combination.

When a farm name in bygdebøker or other records ends in -eier, or -eye, that usually indicates the person living there was a husmann.

Below are website resources. These are also posted on our website: [norwegianamerican.org](http://norwegianamerican.org) under “Research.”

### Sources

<https://www.norgeshistorie.no/bygging-av-stat-og-nasjon/1413-husmannsvesenet.html>

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<http://martinroe.com/blog/index.php/2018/08/23/who-was-the-husmann/>

<http://www.bredebygden.com/artikler/landskyld-byggsel-og-skatt/>

<https://talknorway.no/husmann-what-is-a-cotter-and-a-cotters-holding-norway/>. Good explanation on development of the husmann concept.

<http://homepages.rootsweb.com/~norway/na27.html>

<https://martinroe.com/blog/who-was-the-husmann/>

Photos from <https://digitaltmuseum.no/021058790658/hovdestugo> and [nb.no/bilder](http://nb.no/bilder)