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U research project is a heckuva deal

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To some, Charlie Braaten is the punchline to a funny story.

At 63, raising crops near Flom, Minn., Braaten really *is* a Norwegian bachelor farmer.

As recently as the 1930s there were tens of thousands of men just like him, tilling the soil and tending to animals on farms across the Upper Midwest. But there aren't many left -- not even in Minnesota, once home to more than half the nation's crop.

Who, you might wonder, has been counting? The U.S. Census. But it has taken a monumental new project at the University of Minnesota to allow researchers to access the millions of individual entries needed to construct such detailed accounts of the patterns of American life over the past 150 years.

Welcome to the IPUMS project, a rapidly growing 100-person research center housed in a converted art gallery on the university's West Bank and armed with more than \$50 million in grants.

The ocean of data patiently gathered from all of our ancestors, once strictly on paper, is slowly being entered into computers, so that researchers can ask questions and listen for answers. Although much of the data entry work has been outsourced to China, it must be checked and corrected in Minneapolis.

Although other teams of academics have made efforts to gather segments of that data, the university's Minnesota Population Center has "cornered the market," said Jon Gjerde, until recently the chairman of the history department at the University of California at Berkeley. "It is a great resource, not only in the U.S. but the world."

Probing the past

To dramatize the power of the new research tool, the Star Tribune asked one of the research center's pros to undertake a relatively lighthearted quest: to trace the history, since the earliest horse-drawn days, of that Minnesota icon, the Norwegian bachelor farmer.

Were Norwegians any likelier than anyone else to be bachelor farmers? Are we right to associate them with Minnesota? Or are they just another Garrison Keillor coinage, along with Powdermilk Biscuits and all those above-average children?

It turns out that unmarried farmers are a demonstrable trend in Minnesota, peaking in the 1930s, particularly among Norwegians.

Such queries are precisely the type of questions the database is best-suited to answer, because you can't get them out of any book of standard tables. You can look up total populations, populations of Norwegians, and plenty of other things. But without the Minnesota center's new ability to tap into

billions of individual records -- what's called "microdata," as in Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) -- only the broadest of trends are discernible.

Serious researchers, of course, ask more serious questions. The center's director, Steve Ruggles, points with pride to recent scholarship that used the census data to look at real people over long spans of time, tracing what they became, and who their parents were in hopes of determining if Americans today are more or less able to move up in the world than in the 19th century.

"It's terrific work," Ruggles said, "overturning a whole generation of research on 'social mobility.' It's part of an explosion of new findings."

Another new work relying on the same type of data: an article in June's Population Bulletin, released last week, tracing interracial and interethnic marriage. It finds for instance that U.S.-born Asian men are six times likelier than newly arrived immigrants to marry non-Asian women (32 percent vs. 5). And Hispanic women who get college degrees become seven times likelier than a high school dropout to marry non-Hispanic men (35 percent vs. 5).

Like many Minnesotans -- like Norwegian bachelor farmers, in fact -- the people who are compiling all this stuff at the university are a peculiar combination of pride and self-deprecation.

On the one hand, to walk down the main hallway is to pass a series of quotations -- almost like those on movie posters -- proclaiming what an immense gift to humanity their work represents. One expert likens it to the human genome project, the mapping of the genetic material inside the human body.

On the other hand, the impish chap who pads about in sandals overseeing it all understands that it is somewhat lacking in glamor. Ruggles speaks of his campus as having a "major concentration of census geeks," and concedes that a great deal of what his staff does is "factory work" -- quiet and subtly fascinating, in its rollcall of American humanity, but also a fatigue-inducing fact-checking of the keyboarding being done on another continent.

Raising questions

Of course, knowing what happened is different from knowing why. Some answers simply lead to more questions. Why Norwegian farmers were particularly fertile ground for bachelordom remains an enduring puzzle.

Gjerde, a Norwegian-American historian specializing in immigration, and co-author of the book "Norwegians in Minnesota," speculates that much of the answer is rooted in Old World traditions.

Norwegians, he said, were more likely than Germans to pass a farm to a single son, meaning the other sons either farmed but didn't have as much to offer a wife, or left for the city and stopped being farmers.

Only in the very oldest data can one find real names. Whatever recent census enumerators found out about Charlie Braaten, or his acquaintances, the Swenson twins, Arvid and Aaron, 66, or other bachelor farmers remaining in western Minnesota, will be a secret for decades.

It's still possible moreover that late-blooming romance could further shrink the number of Norwegian bachelor farmers by the 2010 Census.

"I'm just a little bit kind of tired of being alone," said Braaten. "So you never know. I guess I would prefer not to live alone for the next 20 years. By the time they are in their 70s or 80s it seems like the women get to be widows. They do outlive the men."

Absolutely, Charlie. The proof is in the Census.

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Crunching the numbers

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The Holy Grail in census research is easy access to the data by anyone with a modem, but that seems a long ways off. Anyone can obtain the numbers by e-mail at the University of Minnesota website (www.ipums.umn.edu) but it takes a lot of expertise to understand exactly what to ask for and how to process the stuff once you get it. The website warns that the database is not very useful for genealogical research. A company like the Ann Arbor, Michigan-based Public Data Queries (www.pdq.com) stands by to help, but charges \$200 an hour for small projects with a minimum fee of \$500. Experts with the university's Population Center can suggest other options.

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