

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY  
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

**ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS WILLIAM HAMILTON SEWELL**

We here remember our colleague William Hamilton Sewell, Jr., who passed away on June 24, 2001. Sewell, the son of a pharmacist, was born on November 27, 1909, in Perrinton, Michigan. He wanted to become a physician, but first became a licensed pharmacist. He completed a pre-med curriculum as an undergraduate at Michigan State, and was accepted by several medical schools, but he decided to study sociology, earning both BA and MA degrees in sociology from Michigan State, and a PhD from the University of Minnesota. Sewell's first academic appointment was at Oklahoma State University, from 1937 to 1944. He was a lieutenant in the U.S. Naval Reserve from 1944-46 and served in the postwar strategic bombing survey of Japan.

Sewell came to the University of Wisconsin in 1946 as professor in the Department of Rural Sociology in the College of Agriculture. He was chair of that department from 1949 to 1953. In 1958 he moved to the Sociology Department in the College of Letters and Science and was chair from 1958 to 1962. He was a Vilas research professor from 1964 to his retirement in 1980. Sewell played an active role in the wider university community. He was on the University Committee for some years and was its chair. From 1967-68, during the Viet Nam war, the Dow Riots and their sequella, he was chancellor of the Madison Campus.

At the national level, Sewell played a key role in creating support for the social and behavioral sciences in the post-World War II federal research architecture by serving on committees in both the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation. He chaired the National Commission on Research from 1978-1980. He was president of the Sociological Research Association, the Rural Sociological Society and the American Sociological Association. In 1997, he received the ASA's highest award, the Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award. He was elected to the American Philosophical Society, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the National Academy of Sciences.

Sewell was a superb and prolific research sociologist and methodologist. "Write early and often" was advice he gave others and followed himself. There are ten books and monographs on his *CV* along with about 125 papers and book chapters. His earliest publication was a monograph in 1937. He was preparing the most recent one for publication in the weeks before he died. His work made a difference. Early papers were on the problems of rural people in the depths of the depression in the South. Income was a notably unreliable measure of level of living in rural areas at that time, and finding a substitute was a problem of national concern. Sewell applied his training in scaling methodology and produced the well-known Sewell Farm Family Socioeconomic Scale. In the early 1940's, Bill's attention turned to questions about personality and society, particularly ones about childhood and adult socialization. These topics would characterize the remainder of his career. A major contribution of that work is his initiation of the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study (WLS) of more than 10,000 Wisconsin high school graduates of 1957. The study traces their post-secondary schooling, careers, and marriages to identify, measure, and explain the linkages between social background and social and economic achievements in adulthood. The WLS has taught us most of what we know about the long-term consequences of cognitive skills and aspirations in adolescence and their key role in carrying the effects of social and economic origins. The WLS paved the way for our national longitudinal population surveys. That research is continued by Sewell's colleagues here. WLS has now become a major resource for research on aging.

Bill was one of a remarkable generation of sociologists that began their careers in the midst of the depression. By their training in the American Pragmatists who populated the reading lists of that time and by their early career experiences, they were committed to doing work that makes a difference; work that

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can be used for policy purposes. If you are going to do that you need to be sure that what you say will actually work. That constraint led Bill and many others in this generation to empirically test their assertions. Often that testing was quantitative. Methodological issues were of great importance. His work created major turning points on the path to the sociology of today. His concerns were always "Is it important?" and "Is it correct?"

Bill was survived by his wife, Elizabeth, who died earlier this year. He is also survived by three children, five grandchildren and one great grandchild. He will be missed as well by a host of former students and colleagues. William Hamilton Sewell was a scholar and a gentleman. We shall not see his like again any time soon.

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE

Robert Hauser

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