

Sociology at Purdue: The Early Days

A very preliminary draft, by
Richard Hogan, February 2013

George Ritzer, *Sociological Beginnings: On the Origins of Key Concepts in Sociology* (McGraw-Hill, 1994, p. 67) indicates that the first sociology course taught in the U.S. was in 1873 at Yale. Kansas was the first to add “sociology” to the name of an academic department (in 1889), but the sociology department at the University of Chicago, organized in 1892, was the first “real” sociology department (according to Ritzer 1994). The *American Journal of Sociology* (still the house journal of the Chicago Sociology Department) was first published in 1895 (edited by Albion Small—see his 1895 essay, reprinted in the centennial edition of 1995 (Volume 100, No. 1, pp. ix-xxiii).

The U.S. was a pioneer in establishing sociology as an academic discipline, but the most important centers of sociological theory were in Europe. Durkheim was the first professor of sociology in France (1913) and established a journal and a school of sociology (Ritzer 1994, p. 41). Weber was one of the founding members of the German sociological society (1908) and also edited a sociology series (although he did not establish a journal and a school like Durkheim did; H.H. Gerth and C.Wright Mill, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 21).

There were, so far as I can tell, no sociology departments anywhere in the world when Purdue was founded in 1869. The 1955 history of the Purdue Sociology Department reports that the first sociology courses were taught here in 1917 by an associate professor of educational sociology, Oakel Fowler Hall, in the Department of Education. In fact, although the content was introductory and rural sociology, with an emphasis on education, the courses were officially listed as Education 19 and Education 20. Educational Sociology and Urban Sociology were offered a few years later.

Hall chaired the Sociology Section, which expanded under his tutelage between 1935 and 1947. During this period, Hall earned a Doctorate of Divinity from Wabash College, in 1942, so he served briefly as both professor and assistant minister before retiring in 1947. There was at least one person in the School of Agriculture teaching rural sociology before the sociology department was organized. There was, at that time, industrial psychology, and there might have been some sort of urban planning in engineering. Even today (2013) there is no urban planning at Purdue (Ball State has that program), so urban planning, urban history (e.g., Carl Abbott’s work on Portland, Oregon), and even some urban sociology books (like Richard Hogan, *The Failure of Planning*, Ohio State University Press, 2003) are located in the engineering library. The 1955 history reports that there were sociology courses taught by Theodore K. Moss, who earned advanced degrees in education, theology and, perhaps, sociology and taught at Purdue from 1935-1942, during which time he completed a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago, in 1940, before joining the Navy in 1942. Marjuerite Hall Albjerg is also identified as a teacher of sociology courses, from 1942-1943, although her academic credentials appear to be in American history and her position in 1955 was “counselor in the Office of Women at Purdue.”

According to the 1955 history, the graduate program in sociology was started with the MS degree in 1947, but there are records of MS degrees as early as 1942, even though the Sociology Department was not established until 1953. The first Master of Science degree in the departmental records was earned by Ruth Gosma Van Camp. This was, in fact, an MS in Home Economics. Dean Mary L. Matthews was department head and "Professor in charge of thesis," but J. Roy Leevey, one of three full-time "sociologists" in 1947, was also a member of the committee. The thesis, "One Hundred Rehoused Negro Families in Gary, Indiana," was a survey of 100 women living in a public housing project in Gary, focusing on their leisure activities. The research indicated that "the greater part of these families are living in a manner which could be considered wholesome and that their standard of living is relatively high for low-income Negro families." (quoted from unnumbered first page of abstract; the original document is available at the Hicks Repository of the Undergraduate Library at Purdue University, West Lafayette).

The late Harold Christensen, the first head of the newly organized Purdue Sociology Department, had been hired in 1947 in Education and what appears to be the forerunner of Child Development and Family Studies. Christensen reports that he was a professor of "both Sociology and Family Life." Presumably, these departments were in the same school. He reports that "we started as the 'Sociology Section' in the Division of Education and Applied Psychology," but the sociology department was officially organized in August of 1953 in the new School of Science, Education, and Humanities. It seems likely that this became the School of Humanities, Social Science and Education after the School of Science was created (**I'll have to check on this**). In any case, the Ph.D. program in sociology was approved in May of 1953.

When Christensen arrived in 1947, there were three fulltime faculty members from the old Sociology Section of the Department of Education. Allan A. Smith and J. Roy Leevey had earned doctorates in education, although Leevey, in particular, seems to have developed a sociological perspective. Hanna H. Meissner earned her Ph.D. in Frankfurt, Germany in 1922 and worked as a social worker before teaching sociology and social work courses at Purdue, beginning in 1943. J. Edwin Losey came to Purdue in 1943 and was in Agricultural Extension before securing a joint appointment in Agricultural Economics and Sociology. He also assumed the directorship of the "Rural Leadership School," 1948-1951, after Professor Hall retired. Elizabeth Wilson joined Purdue in 1946 and also retained a joint appointment, in her case with the Guidance Department, when Christensen took over as chair of the Sociology Section in 1947.

The late Walter Hirsch also came to Purdue in 1947, while he was completing his Ph.D. at Northwestern. Walter and Bernard Barber later co-edited a book on the Sociology of Science. Barber had been at Columbia, where Robert Merton pioneered this specialty field. So Walter, along with his interest in social theory and his service in American Studies and undergraduate counseling, was perhaps at least partly responsible for establishing the Sociology of Science and the legacy of Robert Merton here at Purdue. In what we would now call the spring semester of 1955, William F. Ogburn spent a semester at Purdue. One of his students, S. Column Gilfillan, a research assistant on his study of the "social effects of aviation," had taught at Purdue in 1937-1938, which suggests an early association between sociology and science or engineering. It appears that Ogburn had some contact with Purdue engineering or technology programs, since he offered, in 1955, an "Interdepartmental Seminar on the Social Aspects of Technology."