

## REMARKS PRESENTED AT WILLIAM H. SEWELL'S RETIREMENT BANQUET

MAY 30 1980

Friends of Bill Sewell. Bob Hauser phoned a few weeks ago to ask if I'd give a talk on Bill's life and work, especially the early years at Wisconsin--to review it completely, and do it all in ten minutes. I told him I'd try.

Those of you who are familiar with Bill's main research area--stratification--will know that privilege and responsibility are two of its key variables: not that he himself would work with them; he'd think they're too messy. Well, to have the chance to capture some central themes in Bill's contributions and to present them in ten minutes is surely a privilege--one I welcome. But it's also a worrisome responsibility, impossible to carry out. Bill is one of the great sociologists of our time--not in the sense of fame nor in the sense of the charismatic leader with a clique of disciples, things he's always shunned: great in that he is a sociologist's sociologist, a scientist's scientist. These last phrases were not concocted just for the occasion: for many years, we've all heard well-known sociologists describe him in these very words; and I once heard a professor of physics praise Bill's research as a model of scientific research. But comments like these only confirm what we already know: sociologists have shown their admiration for his work by electing him to the presidencies of the sociological societies--the Midwest Sociological Society (1953-4), the Rural Sociological Society (1955-6), the Sociological Research Association (1963-4), and the American Sociological Association (1970-1); other scientists have elected him to various positions, most notably to the National Academy of Science (1976). In fact, the list of honors recognizing his achievements goes on and on--as well it should.

But I don't want to stress these. It's more useful to summarize his contributions--his efforts in behalf of a scientific sociology. It's also harder to do than to count honors. Honors are discrete, singular events easy to identify and count. Bill's contributions to knowledge cross time, place, and topic. And they are not only world-wide in fact, but world-class in consequence.

At the risk of greatly understating them, let us put a large set of specifics under three headings:

1. Contributions to the thought system of sociology;
2. Contributions to sociology at the University of Wisconsin;
3. Contributions to sociology abroad.

The Thought System of Sociology. Bill would probably claim merely to be a sociological researcher. But his work is more than that. It has always been a model of methodological rigor and of fruitful development of theory. Yet he doesn't really separate the two: his methodology is always at the service of theory, and his theory is always carefully tested. Not everyone manages to do this. For decades sociologists have been split on the issue of truth vs. importance. Some ask whether assertions are true, and work out elaborate methods to test them. Others ask whether assertions are important, and claim to use theory to decide which is which. Bill has never allowed himself to be drawn in to either of these camps. Over his whole career his

efforts have been directed to specifying or developing theory on demonstrably important subjects, and to providing rigorous tests of the resulting hypotheses. Mainly, these have been on ways to think about social stratification, about variations among persons, and about the relationships between the two. Always, his work has been done so as to maintain conceptual clarity and operational rigor.

You can see this in his doctoral thesis. There he developed a scale for measuring socioeconomic status which was not surpassed for at least 25 or 30 years, either in the clarity of its ties to previous attempts to develop status concepts and measurement techniques, or in the care that was taken to construct and test it.

You can see it in his social psychological work in the 1950s. During this period he identified two broad hypotheses concerning social contexts presumably determining personality. Then he tested them. The first, an essential assumption of Freudian theory, was the hypothesis that infant toilet training and feeding practices determine the quality of the child's personality. If the whole idea sounds odd to us today, it's largely because Sewell showed that the practices made no appreciable difference at all. At the time his work was bitterly controversial. With this project he destroyed an hypothesis which was then extremely important to large numbers of serious thinkers in sociology, psychology, and psychiatry.

The second was on the notion that the personalities of middle class children were marred by the restrictions their parents put upon them, while the personalities of lower class children were better because they were allowed greater freedom. Again, this notion was widely accepted at the time. And again, by carefully measuring the appropriate variables and the relationships among them, it was shown that there wasn't really a very large relationship at all; and what there was, was in the opposite direction: on the average middle class children were a bit better off. Today, hardly any social scientist would take the hypothesis seriously. One of the main reasons is because Sewell showed it to be false, said so, and then showed that all the previous quantitative research on the topic--till then ignored--showed the same thing.

Some may argue that all this is negative. True enough. Negative results arrived at by careful tests of prestigious hypotheses have a positive value in science: they clear the way for more useful hypotheses to be devised and tested. Sewell saw this and acted upon it long before it was widely understood among sociologists.

Now we'll skip briefly to the late 1960s and 1970s. I won't say much about this work because Bill is already so well known for it. In a few words, he pioneered long-term analyses of the status attainment processes of persons moving from adolescence into full maturity, and he is still working in this area. As you know, in 1964 and again in the mid-1970s, he and others recorded and analyzed the status achievements of Wisconsin's 1957 high school seniors and worked out the ways early characteristics influenced later attainment. This work is often cited among the best sociological research aimed at

constructing a simple but powerful theory of human behavior in an important area of life. We have often heard it referred to as sociology's most successful example of middle-range theory construction. Of course Bill would be the first to pass the credit over to others; he is among those who understand, with Margaret Mead, that scientific creativity is a social process.

In a few words, Sewell's contributions to the thought system of sociology have been made, again and again, through the application of exemplary research methods to theoretically important research problems. His work has excised fruitless but influential notions from the body of sociological thought, and added new useful ideas to it.

Sociology at the University of Wisconsin. In science, the solid ideas one gives to his field are the basis for all of his other contributions. This is as true in sociology as it is in physics, chemistry, and biology. From the date of his arrival at Madison, his unusual gifts have been recognized. This, and some happy historical accidents, has made it possible for him to develop the field of sociology here at the University and elsewhere, and to train quite a few influential research sociologists.

He improved, not one, but two departments. Bill arrived here in 1946 as professor of rural sociology. A year or two later he became chairman. At the time the department included only about four sociologists. It also had a number of faculty members whose interests lay outside of any of the social sciences. In the boom days after World War II, he succeeded in adding two new positions for sociologists and he found a more appropriate departmental home for the others. He encouraged Professors E.A. Wilkening and Douglas G. Marshall to join the faculty. Together, they and Professors Kolb, Wileden and Sewell strengthened and solidified an already formidable, though small, Department of Rural Sociology.

In 1958, after a year in India, he moved to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. A year or two later he became chairman. Even more than at the end of WW II, the rising enrollments of the late 1950s and early 1960s made it a good time to develop a field. The department separated into two: one of sociology, and the other of anthropology. Sociology was small but good. It might be said that Bill was the right person in the right place at the right time to lead in building on this base. During his chairmanship, a series of key appointments were made and facilities developed which ultimately secured for the department its present position among the outstanding departments of sociology. As the years have passed, his example and his sensible advice, quietly given, have continued to add strength to the program, as they will no doubt continue to do.

Sociology Abroad. We'd not be far off if we guessed that eighty percent of the world's sociological writings and indeed of the world's trained sociologists are in the United States. Yet the thought system of sociology requires information from the whole of mankind's experience, not just that of one country. Similarly, the practical advantages of sociological knowledge are potentially world-wide. Bill has always understood this. So he has devoted much of his time and attention to sociology overseas.

Outside of the U.S., his direct influence on the field has probably been greatest in India. Some 25 years ago he and his family spent a year in India helping to develop the social sciences. Both before and since that time he has trained and inspired a number of Indian research sociologists who have taken over key positions there. Even earlier he trained soon-to-be-influential Latin American sociologists, especially Puerto Ricans and Chileans. Throughout the 50's, 60's, and 70's more and more foreign graduate students studied with him and went on to develop scientific sociology in their own countries.

Besides all this, he has consistently worked to identify and encourage potential Wisconsin faculty members who could strengthen both the thought system of sociology and its infrastructure abroad through work in various countries. The same may be said for graduate students whom he has trained--not only the many from other countries, but also Americans who themselves have gone on to develop sociology programs abroad or to enrich sociological thinking through their overseas research.

It's too bad that time is so short...there are many things more that need to be said. But that'll have to wait.

Bill, all of us have gained from you. And we fully expect to continue to do so, in spite of your so-called retirement. Liz, everyone knows that Bill is always in demand and that he likes to travel. Don't let him go too far, too often. We need him.