

# A LIFE OF LEARNING

Robert K. Merton

Charles Homer Haskins  
Lecture for 1994



American Council of Learned Societies

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*by*

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**Introduction**

The Haskins Lecturer in 1994, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the American Council of Learned Societies, was Robert K. Merton, University Professor *Emeritus* at Columbia University. Professor Merton, a native of Philadelphia (where the Lecture was delivered on April 28), was educated at Temple University (B.A., 1931) and Harvard (Ph.D., 1936). After serving as tutor and instructor at Harvard, he taught briefly at Tulane University, and then began his long career at Columbia in 1941.

One of the pioneers of modern sociology, Merton in fact began his scholarly graduate career as a humanist, working on the history of science in seventeenth-century England with George Sarton. In recognition of this and subsequent work, especially *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript*, Merton was awarded a prize for “distinguished accomplishment in humanistic scholarship” by the ACLS in 1962. He has received numerous other prizes and memberships in scientific honorary organizations, and has delivered an impressive number of honorary lectures in this country and abroad.

Perhaps the most astonishing characteristic of this scholar’s career has been its range and variety. He has worked in theoretical and empirical sociology; he has written important historical works; he has investigated a breathtaking variety of subjects; he has helped to establish or strengthen several intellectually crucial institutions, including the Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research, the Center for the Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, and the Russell Sage Foundation (where he remains an active force). And, though born 84 years ago, he is still going strong as a scholar and as a creative force in the intellectual organization of American life.

Readers of this fascinating and elegant lecture will hardly be able to experience the excitement of the lecture in “real time.” Professor Merton, clearly moved by the opportunity to speak about his early life in his home town, used slides to give a sense of

his own development as well as of the context of his education. He spoke passionately about his family, his neighborhood, his city, his relatives, the transformation of his nominal identity and his emergence as a young scholar. Unfortunately, the President of ACLS (who is writing these words) claimed too much time in introducing Professor Merton, and so some of the latter portions of the lecture as printed here had to be omitted. The result, however, was a stunning lecture on the coming of age of a new American in Philadelphia and Cambridge, Massachusetts, which moved the audience with its intensity, insight, and sense of place. The ACLS is honored to now bring the entire lecture to a wider audience of readers.

# A Life of Learning

*by*

**Robert K. Merton**

<sup>1</sup> Since my long-term memory is distinctly limited, this essay draws freely upon reminiscent passages in previous publications.

I doubt that any of my learned predecessors experienced as much harmless pleasure as mine when *they* were asked to give the Haskins Lecture. After all, none of them was a sociologist, happy to learn that his work was thought humanistic enough to warrant this great honor. And surely, none of them had their lecture mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of ACLS and also take place in their hometown.<sup>1</sup>

Other coincidences of time and place deepen my pleasure in this meeting. For one, this new Benjamin Franklin Hall of the American Philosophical Society happens to be within walking distance of the house in which I was born almost 84 years ago. For quite another, the daunting invitation to give the Haskins Lecture reached me just as I was preparing a new edition of my prodigal brainchild, *On the Shoulders of Giants*. And naturally, *OTSOG* as I have come to call it in a breathsaving acronym, draws often upon Haskins's magisterial work, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century*.

But enough. Now that I have subjected you to this brief recital of coincidences, some of you no doubt ache to remind me that the humanist Plutarch anticipated this sort of thing when he observed: "Fortune is ever changing her course and time is infinite, so it is no great wonder that many coincidences should occur. . . ." And no doubt others of you would prefer to draw upon the mathematical statisticians, Persi Diaconis and Frederick Mosteller, who conclude that "we are swimming in an ocean of coincidences. Our explanation is that *nature* and we ourselves

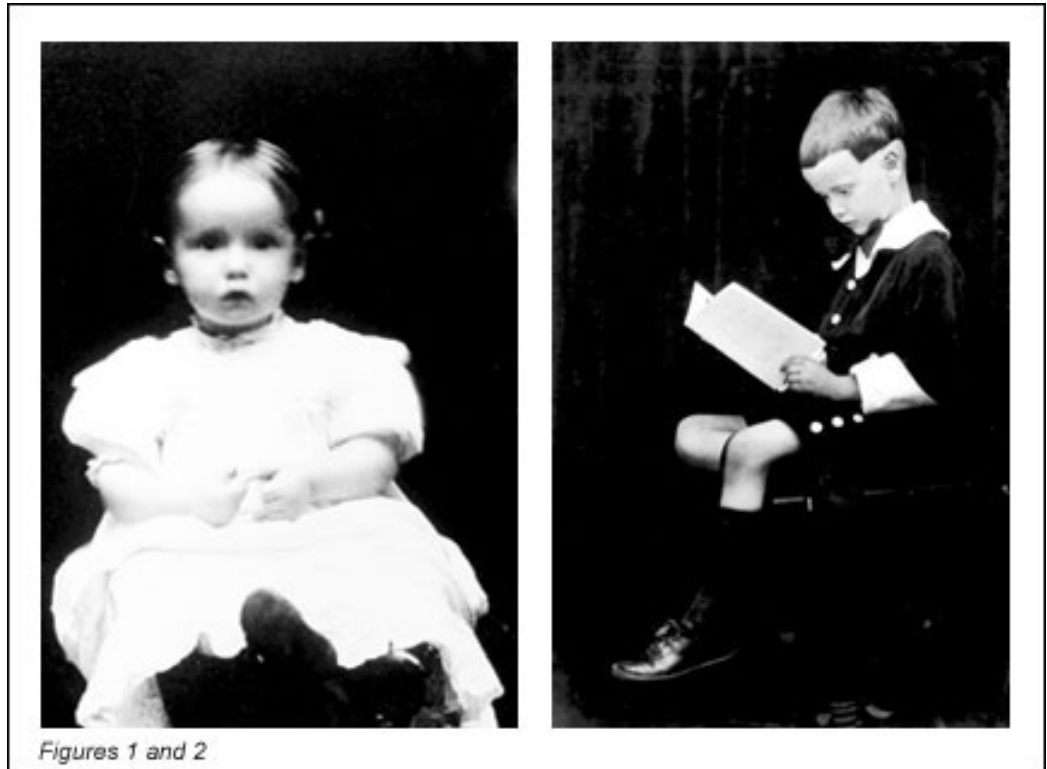
are creating these, sometimes causally, and also partly through perception and partly through objective accidental relationships.” As will soon become plain, I am inclined to agree with both the humanist and the scientists.

After much ego-centered meditation about the Haskins Lecture, I have come to two conclusions: one, that my life of learning has been largely shaped by a long series of chance encounters and consequential choices, and not by anything like a carefully designed plan. The other that, in my case at least, “the Child is [truly] father of the Man,” a conclusion that invokes Wordsworth and Laurence Sterne rather more than Sigmund and Anna Freud. Those conclusions will lead me to focus this evening, far more than I had at first intended, on my early years. And since few, if any, of you gracing this ACLS celebration will have known the vanished world of my distant youth and since my word portraits of that world are bound to be imperfect, I shall resort from time to time to the use of more lifelike visuals, pictures from a family album.

## I

My very first chance encounter occurred, of course, with my birth. For who or what dictated that I, and not another, should be born to my loving mother and father? Not the genetic me but the entire me as I have come to be. As it happens, my first appearance also involved a coincidence of time and place, for I was a Yankee-Doodle-baby, born on Independence Day eight blocks from Independence Square. This I report on the firm testimony of my mother, who was presumably close at hand. As she vividly described it more than once, the event took place in the family house well before midnight of July 4th — while local patriots were still noisily celebrating the holiday. It did *not* take place on July 5th, as mistakenly recorded on the birth certificate after a forgetful lapse of a month by the family doctor who helped bring me into the world; said doctor plainly being a latter-day version of Tristram Shandy’s accoucheur, Dr. Slop. My parents did not discover the error until they needed evidence that I was old enough to enter public school; by that time, the bureaucratic damage had been done. Ever since, I’ve had two birthdays a year: July 4th for the family and July 5th on public documents (until, in a much-delayed show of independence, I recently began to set the record straight).

(Incidentally, the same sort of thing also happened to Saul Bellow. His birth certificate has him born on July 10th although he generally lists it as June 10th, since his mother insisted that it *was* June. And yet, his impending biographer James Atlas tells us, Bellow entered that misconceived July birth-date on his application for a Guggenheim fellowship just as I did, in turn, on my own Guggenheim application. A continuing reign of bureaucratic error.)



At any rate, here at least is visual evidence of my having appeared at all (Figure 1). Followed by apparent evidence of my being oriented to the glories of the book years before I began my formal schooling (Figure 2). I suppose that my mother was making a statement by placing her only son in that Little Lord Fauntleroy garb.

The document wrongly attesting the time of my birth sensitized me early on to an elementary rule of historical method: when reconstructing the past, draw gratefully on archival documents but beware of taking them at face value. So it was that decades later, when I became apprenticed at Harvard to the pioneering historian of science, George Sarton, I found myself resonating to his cautionary remark that even “the dates printed on the covers of periodicals are often inaccurate.” Just as I resonated

later to the infectious seventeenth-century John Aubrey who, while doing strenuous field work in English cemeteries to discover when little lives were *actually* rounded with a sleep, concluded that even epitaphs etched on tombstones might deceive; as, for example, the epitaph which asked passers-by to “Pray for the soul of Constantine Darrel Esq. who died Anno Domini 1400 and his wife, who died Anno Domini 1495.” But no more about rules of historical evidence and back, for another Shandean moment, to my birth.

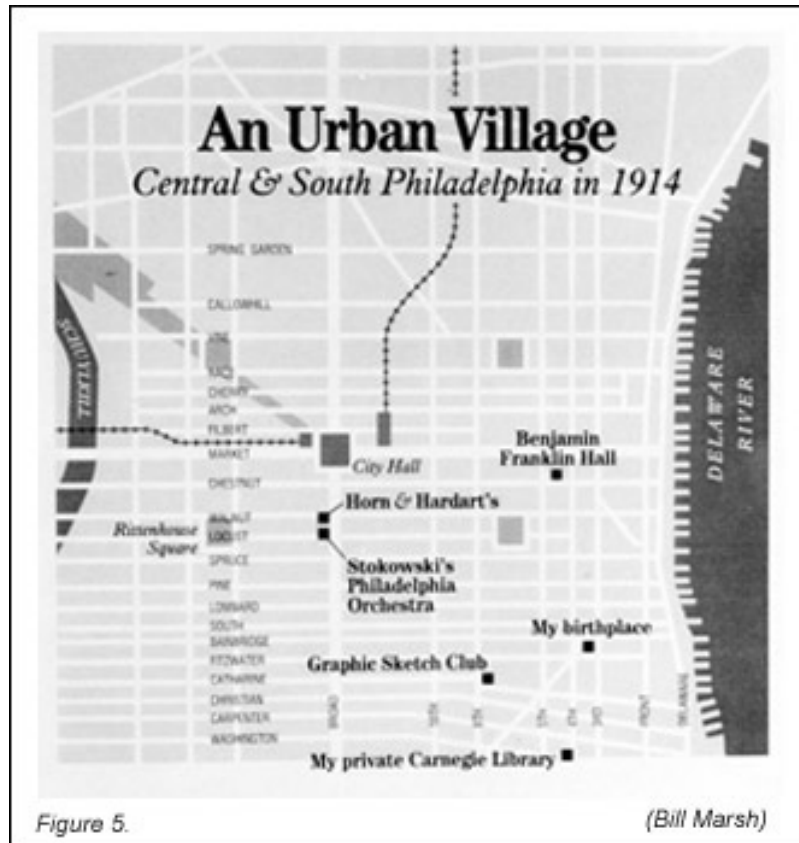
That event received no public notice. Not, I believe, because it was obscured by another historic event that same day: the battle for the heavyweight championship of the world between the “black giant” Jack Johnson and the “white giant” Jim Jeffries (if I may adopt Jack London’s description of that pugilistic pair). Nor do I think that *The Philadelphia Inquirer* failed to record my arrival simply because it was busy reporting that “not since October of 1907 has the financial district been thrown into such a state of demoralization . . . by the panicky markets in stocks.” Nor again, do I believe for even a moment that word of my birth went unnoticed simply because “mid-summer clearance sales” had the ladies hurrying to Philadelphia’s Lit Brothers for their pick of “\$6 dresses marked down to \$3.50” while the men were off to Blum Brothers, just two blocks away at Market and Tenth, where they could find “white serge suits with black stripes” for a mere \$10 — both of these being obvious good buys in a consumer society even for that distant time.

Not at all. I suspect that my birth went unregarded for quite another reason. It was probably because, as a *New Yorker* profile by Morton Hunt put it some 35 years ago, I was born “almost at the bottom of the social structure” in the slums of South Philadelphia to working-class Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. But since a proper slum involves wretched over-crowding in dismal housing, perhaps our family situation did not truly qualify as slum-like. After all, upon being delivered by our own Dr. Slop, I found myself at ease in the ample six-room quarters above my father’s newly acquired milk-butter-and-egg shop located at 828 South Third Street. When the uninsured shop was destroyed by fire a few years later and the family’s fortunes declined, my father became a carpenter’s assistant in the Philadelphia Navy Yard and we moved into a smaller, red-brick, row house. There too, I had no cause to feel deprived — or, as the sociologists now say, I did not

experience “relative deprivation.” Our house had an occasionally used parlor and a diversely used dining room — where, for example, I developed a slender interest in technology by building a crystal radio set, followed by a peanut-tube set and ultimately by a grand heterodyne set. The coal-burning stove in the kitchen provided heat for the entire house. The gas-lighting served admirably for years and, having nothing better, we made do with the privy in the backyard. In short, we were living the lives of those who would come to be known as “the deserving poor,” fueled with the unquestioned premise that things would somehow get better, surely so for the children.



(As you see from Figure 3, I still have a picture of my mother and her darling son, then aged 10 or thereabouts, standing tall in that tiny backyard, his innocent child’s head encircled by what appears to be . . . a saintly nimbus. Coincidences continue to abound. Some 40 years later, Jerzy Kosinski, author of that haunting autobiographical novel of the Holocaust, *The Painted Bird*, and sometime student of sociology at Columbia who also happened to be a prize-winning photographer, takes a snapshot of his sometime teacher, with this result [Figure 4]. As you see, my older, rather less innocent head is again nearly encircled by what surely can no longer be a *saintly* nimbus.)



Those early appearances notwithstanding, I was not greatly deprived during the rest of my 14 years in that urban village. Thanks to its great array of institutional riches close at hand, I soon began to discover the larger world. From the start, I had a private library of some 10,000 volumes, located just a few blocks from our house (Figure 5), a library thoughtfully bestowed upon me by that ultimately beneficent robber baron, Andrew Carnegie. The neighborhood was secure enough for me to make my way alone to that library of mine from the tender age of five or six. From then on, I spent countless hours there, having been adopted by the dedicated librarians — all women, of course — who indulged and guided my interest in literature, science, and history, especially in biographies and autobiographies.

It was not at school but there in the Carnegie library that I was introduced to *Tristram Shandy* which, read and re-read over the years, often to cope with bouts of melancholy, eventually found expression in my Shandean Postscript, *On the Shoulders of Giants*. It was there also that I came upon James Gibbons Huneker, the Philadelphia-born-and-reared music, drama, and literary critic who introduced my teenage self

to new aspects of European culture. To the French symbolists, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud, for example, and to Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw who, more than any other critic of his time, Huneker brought into the American consciousness. To say nothing of that “Beethoven of French prose,” Gustave Flaubert. I still treasure the half-dozen Huneker volumes I later acquired at Leary’s grand four-story bookstore, located, as I seem to remember, next to Gimbel’s at Ninth and Market.

Evidently, the child was engaged in becoming father of the man as my presumably slum-bound self managed to travel widely in time and space. It may also have been in the Carnegie library that I first read David Brewster’s engrossing and Victorian *Life of Newton*, although I have no documents to support that conjectural memory. In any case, those early years turned out to be prelude to the years I lived in seventeenth-century England where, thanks to Harvard’s Widener Library and archives, I hobnobbed with the likes of Newton, Boyle, and Christopher Wren. Just as that early addiction to biographies may have been prelude to a quantitative analysis in my doctoral dissertation of some 6,000 entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a mode of analysis which, I learned only much later from a paper by the Princeton historian Lawrence Stone, contributed to the research art of “historical prosopography”: “the investigation of the common background characteristics of a group of actors in history by means of a collective study of their lives.”

Those sojourns in libraries exemplify the Bernard-Bailyn-and-Lawrence-Cremin thesis that much consequential education takes place outside the walls of classrooms. In defense of the South Philadelphia High School of that time, however, I must report that it did provide some of us with four years of Latin, two of French, and several years of physics, chemistry and mathematics. Not quite Groton, or Exeter, or the Bronx High School of Science, or, for that matter, Philadelphia’s *Gymnasium*-like Central High School, but I might easily have done worse.

Other institutional assets were there just for the asking. A few blocks from the library was the local settlement house with its Graphic Sketch Club (Figure 5), ever engaged in search of artistic talent among the culturally deprived but emphatically finding no trace of such talent in me. Still, it was there that Sundays brought us chamber music, at times by

members of the celebrated Philadelphia Orchestra.

The Orchestra itself was also ours since we were within easy walking distance of its Academy of Music (Figure 5). First as children and then as adolescents, we had only to wait in line for hours on end to be admitted to the Saturday night concerts. The princely sum of first 25, then 50 cents would entitle us to a seat in the last six rows of the amphitheatre; that allowed us to hear and almost get to see the charismatic Leopold Stokowski taking his orchestra of world-fame through his masterly and controversial renditions of Bach — this, of course, without the customary baton. Those far-up seats also permitted us to hear him scolding the Philistine audience for noisily objecting to the new complex music of a Schoenberg, Varèse, or Alban Berg. And, after the concert, we could repair to the lavish Horn & Hardart Automat where we would sit near those of Stoki's men we had come to know and eavesdrop on their talk about the concert or, on occasion, about the baseball triumphs of Connie Mack's A's. But that too was not enough to turn me into howsoever mediocre a musician, though I do detect traces of that early musicological experience in the footnotes of *OTSOG*. Our horizons were further extended in the mid-1920s by the new, rather overwhelming Central Library and monumental Museum of Art.

At this point, my fellow sociologists will have noticed how that seemingly deprived South Philadelphia slum was providing a youngster with every sort of capital — social capital, cultural capital, human capital, and, above all, what we may call public capital — that is, with every sort of capital except the personally financial. To this day, I am impressed by the wealth of public resources made available to us ostensible poor. *Ostensible* poor, of course, since we held important property-rights in the form of ready access to valued resources otherwise possessed only by the very rich. The opportunity structure of our urban village was manifestly and rapidly expanding. But it is also the case that, in the absence of capability, all manner of opportunities being presented to me — for example, in music and the graphic arts — were without visible result. As I would argue long afterwards, in elucidating the sociological concept of opportunity structure, opportunity is probabilistic, not deterministic; it opens possibilities but does not assure their being realized. Just another biographical reminder of the continuing interplay between social structure and individual agency.

My own youthful life was also expanding through an encounter of the first magnitude with Charles Hopkins — or “Hop,” as he was known to his friends — the man who became my sister’s husband and, in effect, my surrogate father. And a truly chance encounter it was. Soon after my father lost his job at the Navy Yard and we moved once again, we were startled by white mice racing through our newfound row house and intrigued by rabbits in our back yard. Our next-door neighbor, Hop, came by to ask if we had happened to see his pet mice or rabbits. They turned out to be part of his stock-in-trade as an avocational magician. (Only later did I discover that his accomplished craft and artful inventions had won him a secure reputation among prime professional magicians of the time.) That encounter began Hop’s courtship of my sister Emma and my idolization of Hop as he began to induct me into the art of prestidigitation. The apprenticeship continued so that I became fairly adept by the time I was 14. Enough so, for this arcane practice to help support me through my studies when I entered Temple College three years later. I still have copies of the card which Hop, as a Ben Franklinesque printer, designed for me (Figure 6).



Figure 6.

As you see, against a background of top hat and wand etched in soft blue, it declares in flowing script that Robert K. Merton was ready to produce “Enchanting Mysteries,” presumably for a modest fee; as it turned out, chiefly at children’s parties, at Sunday schools and, for part of one summer, in a small and quite unsuccessful traveling circus.<sup>2</sup>

When I began that short-lived practice as a magician, Houdini became a “role model” (if I may resort to that once well-defined sociological term now become blurred if not vacuous by frequent and indiscriminate use; a

term, incidentally, which *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* maintains was first used in 1957 by my Columbia research group then at work on *The Student Physician*). But I swiftly end this tiny digression into sociological semantics to return to another consequential moment in my youth, when I seized upon Houdini as my subject for a biographical sketch required in a high school course. During research for the paper, I soon learned that names in the performing arts were routinely Americanized; that is to say, they were transmuted into largely Anglo-American forms. For this, of course, was the era of hegemonic Americanization, generations before the emergence of anything resembling today's multiculturalism. The process of symbolic renaming was then in full force as we know, for example, from Leonard Rosenberg becoming Tony Randall, Issur Danielovitch Demsky becoming Kirk Douglas, and Irving Grossberg becoming first the musician and then the artist, Larry Rivers. And so, just as Ehrich Weiss, the son of Rabbi Mayer Samuel Weiss had become Harry Houdini, naming himself after the celebrated French magician, Robert Houdin, the 14-year-old Meyer R. Schkolnick fleetingly became Robert K. Merlin, after the far more celebrated magician of Arthurian legend. Merlin, in turn, soon became Merton when my mentor Hop gently observed that Merlin was a bit hackneyed. By the time I arrived at Temple College, my close friends were more often than not calling me Bob Merton and I did not discourage them. I rather liked the sound of it, no doubt because it seemed "more American" back then in the 1920s. With the warm consent of my devoted Americanizing mother — she attended night school far more religiously than the synagogue — and the bland agreement of my rather uninterested father, this was followed by the legal transformation of my name some 65 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

## II

It was at Temple, a secular college established in 1884 by the Baptist minister Russell H. Conwell for "the poor boys and girls of Philadelphia," that another chance encounter changed the direction of my life. Brought there by a scholarship, I had ventured into a class in sociology given by a young instructor, George E. Simpson, and there I found my subject. Then still at work on a doctoral dissertation on *The Negro in the Philadelphia Press*, Simpson recruited me as his research assistant and

soon had me doing some of the routine work: classifying, counting, measuring, and statistically summarizing all the references to Negroes over a span of decades in Philadelphia newspapers. The purpose was, of course, to gauge changes in the public imagery of Negroes (not, I recall, of “Blacks,” a term which, in those days, was regarded by us white liberals as a demeaning epithet). Only years later would George Simpson and I learn that we had engaged in the research procedure which Harold Lasswell came to designate as “content analysis” — no more aware that *that* was what we were doing than Molière’s Monsieur Jourdain had been aware, before the moment of epiphany, that he had actually been speaking prose all his life. It was that research experience which sealed my decision to enter upon the still fairly new and, for many, exotic and dubious field of sociology.

It was also through George Simpson that I entered into new social and cognitive networks, especially with Negroes. Through him, I came to know Ralph Bunche and Franklin Frazier from the time they were instructors at Howard University, along with the Arthur Fausets and others in the reclusive Negro Philadelphia élite of physicians, lawyers, writers, artists and musicians. While at Temple, I also came to know the Philadelphia-born, Harvard-trained philosopher, Alain Locke, who had been the first black Rhodes scholar. I had invited him to address our nascent Sociology Club at Temple and several years later he invited me to join him for a summer in Paris but, to my great regret, time and circumstance kept me from what would have been my first direct experience of Europe. That wide array of Negro friends provided early contexts for my later assisting Kenneth Clark to put together the much-debated Social Science Brief on desegregation in the public schools for *Brown v. Board of Education* just as they provided contexts for my later studies of racism, Negro-white intermarriage, and the social perspectives of Insiders and Outsiders.

Taking his assistant in hand, George Simpson also saw to it that I would see and hear key figures at an annual meeting of the American Sociological Society. There I met Pitirim Alexandrovich Sorokin, the founding chairman of the Department of Sociology then being tardily established at Harvard. That too proved to be a consequential encounter. For I would surely not have dared apply for graduate study at Harvard had Sorokin not encouraged me to do so. After all, my college advisers had warned me that Temple was still not fully accredited. To

which I replied, rather ineptly, that it was the scholar Sorokin, not the institution Harvard, that mattered most to me. For, as a rather arrogant undergraduate, I had brought myself to believe — not entirely without foundation — that I knew just about everything American sociology had to offer in the late 1920s, although I had to confess to having only peripheral knowledge of the older and, to me, more evocative European traditions of sociological thought. Sorokin had recently published his *Contemporary Sociological Theories*, a wideranging, contentious overview of, in the main, European sociology, and plainly he was the teacher I was looking for. Moreover, it was evident that Sorokin was not your ordinary academic sociologist. Imprisoned three times by czarists and then three times by the Bolsheviks, he had been secretary to Alexandr Kerensky, the Socialist Revolutionary Prime Minister of Russia, and had had a death sentence commuted into exile by the normally unsparing Lenin. That too was bound to matter to me since, like many another Temple College student during the Great Depression, I was a dedicated socialist. In the event, I did nervously apply to Harvard, did receive a scholarship there, and soon found myself embarked on a new phase in a life of learning.

### III

Harvard proved to be a serendipitous environment, full of evocative surprises. The first definitely consequential surprise was Sorokin's inviting me to be his research assistant, this in my first year of graduate study, and then his teaching assistant as well. That meant, of course, that I became his man-of-all-work-and, as I was soon to learn, his occasional stand-in as well. Summoning me to his office one day, he announced that he had stupidly agreed to do a paper on recent French sociology for a learned society and asked if I would be good enough to take it on in his stead. Clearly, this was less a question than an unforgiving expectation. Abandoning all pretense at attending classes, I devoted days and nights to the vast *oeuvre* issuing forth from Émile Durkheim himself and from such eminences in the Durkheim school as Lévy-Bruhl, Mauss, Halbwachs, and Bouglé. This turned out to be the first of several such unpredictable and fruitful occasions provided by the expanding opportunity structure at Harvard. This one was doubly

consequential, for it catapulted me at once, in my second year of graduate study, into the role of a published scholar and led to my being invited to do the first essay-review of Durkheim's newly translated *Division of Labor in Society*. The intensive work on those two papers resulted in my becoming a transatlantic Durkheimian and laid the groundwork for what would become my own mode of structural and functional analysis.

As I've said, Sorokin, not the University, was the lodestone that drew me to Harvard. But, in the event, it was not the renowned Sorokin who most influenced my sociological thinking there; instead, it was a young instructor with no public identity whatever as a sociologist. Talcott Parsons had then published only two articles, both based on his dissertation; moreover, these had appeared in the *Journal of Political Economy*, a journal, it is fair to suppose, not much read by undergraduates in sociology bent on deciding where to do their graduate work. However, those few of us who did come into Talcott Parsons's very first course in theory (despite its long, seemingly humdrum title, "Sociological Theories of Hobhouse, Durkheim, Simmel, Toennies, and Max Weber") soon experienced him as a new sociological voice. The corpus of social thought which Sorokin summarized, Parsons anatomized and synthesized. As we students could not know and as I later learned Parsons himself did not anticipate, those lectures would provide the core of his masterwork, *The Structure of Social Action*. That monumental book did not appear in print until five years later, only after having been worked and reworked in lectures and seminars.

I truly cannot say whether that experience of observing Talcott Parsons virtually write his book in the course of his teaching led me to adopt, quite self-consciously, a similar and lifelong practice of engaging in what can be described as "oral publication" — the working out of ideas in lectures, seminars, and workshops — before finally converting their developed substance into public print. For some of us, teaching is itself a mode of scholarship. Continually revised lectures amount to new if unprinted editions. At least, that has been my experience. On exceptionally good days, the effort to re-think a subject or problem in advance of a lecture or seminar session is capped by new tentative ideas emerging in the lecture or seminar itself. On bad days, I feel that such continuities in lectures over the years risk my becoming a repetitive bore. At any rate, I notice that a dozen years raced by between the time I first

lectured on “manifest and latent functions” at Harvard and the time those ideas took printed form in a “paradigm for functional analysis.” Just as a dozen years intervened between my 1936 paper focussed on the unintended consequences of intentional action and the paper introducing the kindred concept of “self-fulfilling prophecy.”

Although much impressed by Parsons as a master-builder of sociological theory, I found myself departing from his mode of theorizing (as well as his mode of exposition). I still recall the grace with which he responded in a public forum to my mild-mannered but determined criticism of his kind of general theory. I had argued that his formulations were remote from providing a problematics and a direction for theory-oriented empirical inquiry into the observable worlds of culture and society and I went on to state the case for “theories of the middle range” as mediating between gross empiricism and grand speculative doctrines. In typically civil fashion, Parsons paid his respects to my filial impiety and agreed that we both had cause to disagree.

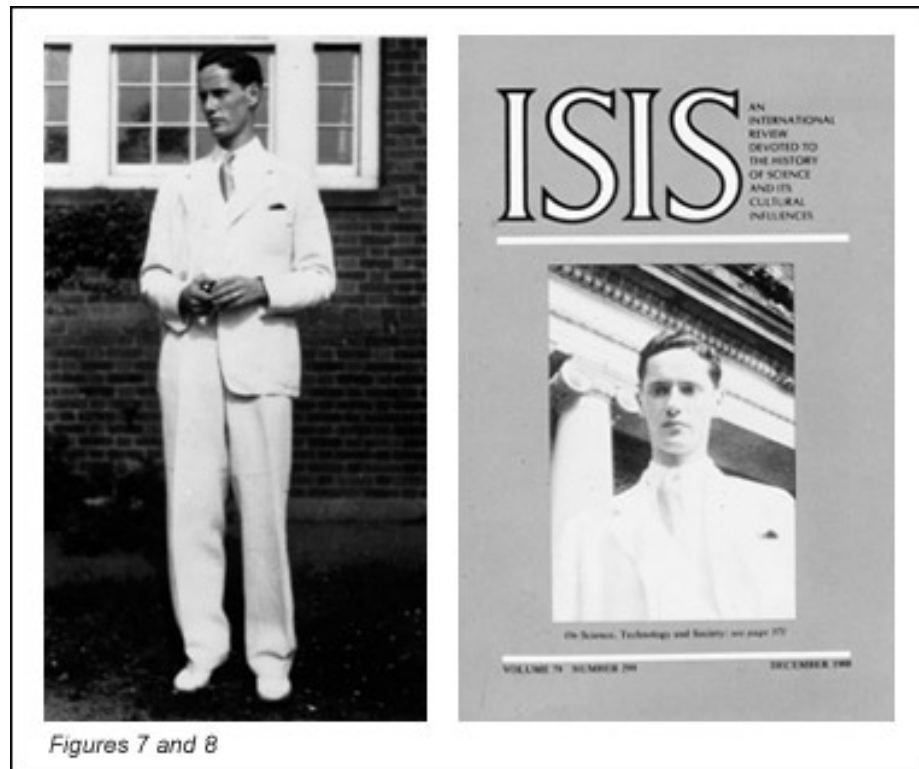
However, it was not the sociologists Sorokin or Parsons but the Harvard economic historian E.F. Gay who, with no such intent, triggered my enduring sociological interest in science and technology. Gay had studied at Berlin with the economic historian Gustav Schmoller, notorious, among other things, for his sociological bent and famous for his insistence on archival research. I decided to take Gay’s course rather than an alternative in sociology and that led to still another truly consequential encounter. An assignment in the course had me doing an analytical essay on A.P. Usher’s recent *History of Mechanical Invention*. Gay liked the essay and suggested that I audit Harvard’s sole course in the history of science given jointly by the biochemist and self-taught Paretan sociologist, L.J. Henderson, and by George Sarton, the world doyen among historians of science. I did so but it was only after I began work on a dissertation that I dared seek guidance from Sarton. For he was reputed to be a remote and awesome presence, so dedicated to his scholarship as to be wholly inaccessible. Thus do plausible but ill-founded beliefs develop into social realities through the mechanism of the self-fulfilling prophecy. Since this forbidding scholar was unapproachable, there was no point in trying to approach him. And his subsequently having very few students only went to show how inaccessible he actually was. But when in the fall of 1933 I knocked on the door of Sarton’s office in Widener Library, he did not merely invite

<sup>2</sup> I need hardly remind this company that Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, those closest of friends and most devoted of antagonists, also took pleasure in the esoteric art of magic; as do Persi Diaconis and Frederick Mosteller, that pair of mathematical statisticians I have quoted on the complex subject of coincidence.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, Hop and I had no idea back then that the name *Merton* had been adopted by the Moses family of British and German industrialists. That I learned only in the

1970s in noticing that a biographical sketch of me in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* followed an entry for another, rather wealthier and vastly more philanthropic, Merton family. (They had founded *Metallgesellschaft*, one of the largest metallurgical firms in Germany.) Once again, coincidence reigns. For it was the philanthropic Wilhelm Merton who founded the Academy that eventually became the University of Frankfurt where the group advocating critical theory located its Institute for Social Research, later known as “the Frankfurt School” of social philosophy, sociology, politics and economics. When Hitler came into power, members of the Frankfurt School found their way to New York and a peripheral affiliation with Columbia University and it was there that Leo Löwenthal and occasional others of the School eventually became members of the Bureau of Applied Social Research founded by my longtime collaborator, Paul Lazarsfeld. It was not until those entries in the *Encyclopedia Judaica*, however, that Löwenthal and I took note of the wholly-secularized ethnic if not national coincidence of the German and the American Mertons.

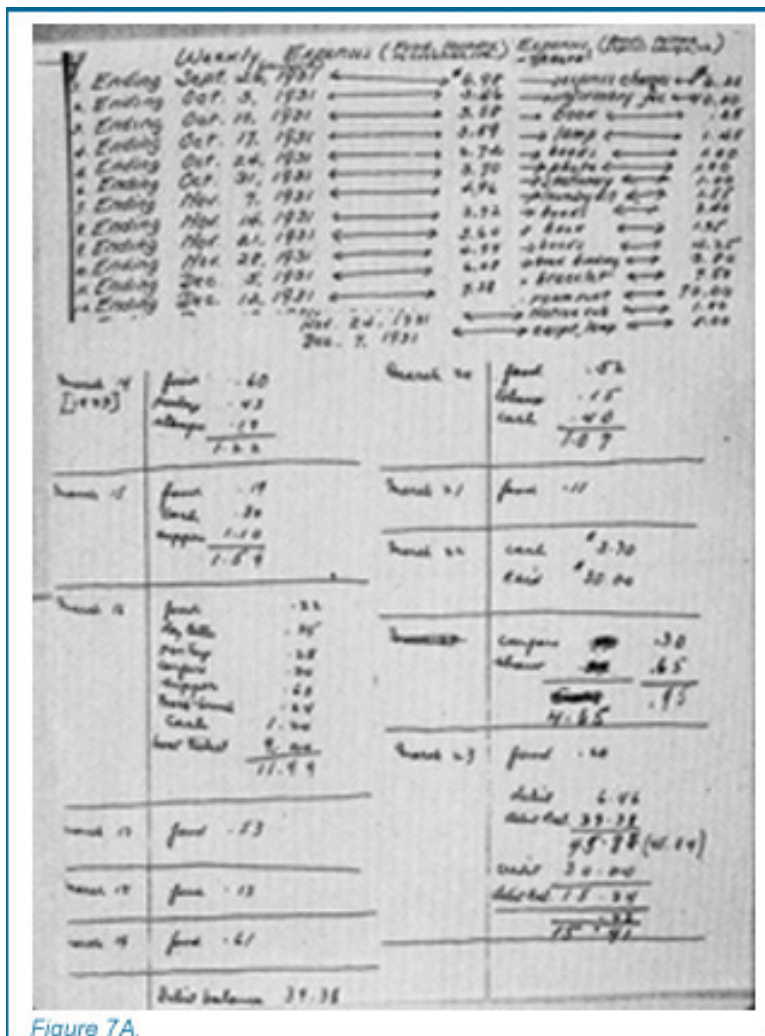
me in; he positively ushered me in. That first audition had me sketching plans for a dissertation centered on sociological aspects of the growth of science in seventeenth-century England — a problem not exactly central to sociology back then. I cannot say that Sarton greeted those plans with enthusiasm; in his knowing judgment, so large a canvas as seventeenth-century English science might be a bit much for a novice. But he did not veto the idea. Then began my intensive, sometimes unruly, apprenticeship, followed by an epistolary friendship that continued until his death some 25 years later.



Figures 7 and 8

From the start, George Sarton did much to set me on a new path of learning. He proceeded methodically — he was methodical in most things — to transform me from a graduate student (Figure 7),<sup>4</sup> struggling with early work on a dissertation, into a tyro scholar addressing an international community of learned scholars in print. This he did first by opening the pages of his journal *Isis* to me. During the next few years, he accepted several articles of mine along with some two dozen reviews and scores of entries for the annotated critical bibliographies appearing in *Isis*. Sarton then went on to bestow a “threshold gift”: the special kind of gift which, in the words of the anthropological poet-ethicist Lewis Hyde, acts as an “agent of individual transformation.”

<sup>4</sup>Only now does this ancient snapshot call back to mind how it was that Filene's bargain basement of world fame allowed an impecunious graduate student to indulge himself by sporting a heavy, white-linen and originally expensive suit long before it became Tom Wolfe's signature. That Harvard student's standard of living can be gauged from a segmented summary of his weekly expenses in the academic year 1931-32 and from a sampled daily record maintained by his roommate, budgeter, and chef, Richard Deminger, during the next academic year (Figure 7A). Note: An enlarged copy of Figure 7A is appended to this document.



that was something of an event. But only temporarily so. This was, after all, the midst of the Great Depression — and even Harvard was hurting. Its still fairly new president, James B. Conant, signaled his intention to do away with the rank of assistant professor altogether and to limit promotions to the replacement of retiring or otherwise departing professors. That meant, of course, that a permanent post at Harvard would largely depend on the age distribution of faculty in each department. To be sure, Conant, self-described as “an amateur historian of seventeenth-century science in England,” had gone out of his way to let me know “how much I enjoyed your work” — the language is his. However, the presiding elder in our fledgling department, Sorokin, was still in his forties; reason enough for me to leave the to-me indulgent yet alien Harvard before my instructorship had run its course. And so when Tulane University beckoned with a professorship in that bleak economic time, the decision was over-determined and the die was cast. Besides, for a provincial whose life had been confined to Philadelphia and Cambridge, the fanciful culture of New Orleans provided a distinct attraction. After a relaxing — and intellectually rewarding — two years at Tulane, I moved to Columbia and entered upon another, wholly unpredictable, phase of learning: what turned out to be 35 years of an improbable collaboration with the mathematician-psychologist turned sociologist, Paul F. Lazarsfeld.

#### IV

I say “improbable collaboration” because Paul Lazarsfeld and I may have been the original odd couple in the domain of social science. He, the mathematically-minded methodologist, inventor of powerful techniques of social inquiry such as the panel method and latent structure analysis; I, the confirmed social theorist albeit with something of an empirical bent, insisting on the importance of sociological paradigms (in a pre-Kuhnian sense of “paradigm”); Paul, a founder of systematic empirical research on mass communications, voting behavior, opinion leadership, and individual action; I, engrossed in developing the paradigms of functional analysis and deviant behavior while trying to bring a nascent sociology of science into fuller being by exploring science as a social institution with a distinctive, historically evolving ethos,

normative structure and reward system; Paul, from his early days in Vienna, the inveterate creator of research institutes unable to imagine himself working outside of a research organization; I, the inveterate loner working chiefly in libraries and in my study at home; he, the matter-of-fact but methodologically demanding positivist; I, something of a doubting Thomas who, in my very first published paper, had dared satirize the “enlightened Boojum of Positivism.” But, when I joined Paul in his prime institutional creation, the Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research, presumably for just one research project, we soon discovered elective affinities and common ground. That temporary affiliation with the Bureau lasted some 30 years. Throughout that time, our shared lives of learning would center on a continuing program of theory-guided and methodologically disciplined empirical social research on a wide variety of substantive problems.

I have failed miserably in every attempt at even a meagre digest of the influence Paul Lazarsfeld and I may have had on each other. Documentary evidence does testify, however, that I finally did persuade this resolute mathematician-psychologist that there really was a discipline of sociology. For eventually Paul published a little book with the engaging title *Qu'est-ce que la sociologie?* which, in his private idiom, translated into the question: “What on earth *is* sociology all about?” Or, as his self-mocking inscription in my copy of the book put it: “All the questions you always wanted to have answered but never dared to ask.”

Correlatively, Paul’s abiding concern with research methods rubbed off on me and once resulted in a codification of what I called the focussed interview. Designed to elicit responses of groups to texts of various kinds — say, a journal article, radio program or educational film — the focussed interview took hold in academic sociology and then, after dubious sea changes, boomed its way into what we all know as the focus group. In their enthusiasm for the now ubiquitous focus group, marketers and political advisers of every stripe, not excluding habitues of the White House and of Congress, often mislead themselves and others by failing to recognize or to acknowledge that such group interviews can at best only yield guesses about the current state of the public mind. Not being representative samples, focus groups cannot, of course, provide reliable knowledge about the extent and social distribution of public preferences, practices, and sentiments.

In retrospect, I am persuaded that the most consequential result of Paul's and my working together went far beyond our collaborations in print. It was of a quite different sort, one nicely summed up about a century ago by the French mining engineer and self-taught sociologist, Frédéric Le Play: The most important thing to come out of the mine, he wrote, is the miner. In much the same spirit, it can be said that the most important thing to come out of Columbia sociology back then was the student. Owing in no small part to the war's end and to the GI Bill, successive cohorts of brilliant students brightened our Department and Research Bureau in the 1940s and '50s and did much to bring about the intellectual excitement that then brought us a continuing flow of new talent. Paul Lazarsfeld and I had no doubt that a good many of those students would go on to leave an indelible imprint on sociological scholarship. As has proved to be the case. Indeed, I now find myself periodically diverted from work-in-slow-progress by writing papers designed specifically for those honorific volumes known as *Festschriften*. Not, as might be supposed, *Festschriften* in honor of teachers or aged peers but in honor of onetime students. Hardly the usual pattern. Most recently, I have found myself gladly paying tribute to James S. Coleman, as I had gladly paid tribute before to Lewis Coser, Franco Ferrarotti, Peter Blau, Rose Coser, and Seymour Martin Lipset along with Alvin Gouldner and Louis Schneider though abjectly missing out on the two-volume *Festschrift* for Juan Linz. Contemplating the extraordinary run of gifted students over that period of decades, I see more *Festschriften* in the offing. In anticipatory celebration, I have begun work on a paper entitled "The Emergence and Evolution of the *Festschrift*: A Sociological Study in the Reward-System of Science and Learning." Prefaced by individualized tributes, it may serve as a template for contributions to future *Festschriften* honoring onetime students whose scholarship has happily advanced beyond that of their onetime teachers.

## V

In this retrospect on a life of learning, I have dwelt upon the private life rather more than upon the public learning. After all, the fruits of that learning are accessible in the public domain to those who care to sample

them; the private life is not. But now that my time and your patience are rapidly drawing to a close, a few scattered remarks that bear variously upon the theme of the child as father of the man and upon oddities in my style of work over the years.

I first give way to the intrusive thought that age has its strange reckonings. I find it hard to believe that I was born a mere 45 years after the Civil War and exceedingly hard to believe that I have lived through more than a third of our nation's history. All the more difficult to believe since, as a young romantic, I was convinced that the good die young and that, like Byron, Keats, and Shelley, I'd not live much beyond the age of 30. A latter-day reminder that if age is renewed opportunity, it is also continuing obligation.

With regard to my work, I only touch upon three quite discrete matters: an almost lifelong addiction to editing, a preferred expositional style, and lastly, certain thematic orientations in social theory.

If Schopenhauer had it right in declaring that to put away one's own original ideas in order to take up the work of another is a sin against the Holy Ghost of scholarship, then indeed *peccavi, peccavi*. I have truly and chronically sinned. For almost as soon as sociology became my vocation, editing became my avocation. This began as early as my student days. Following upon a moderately effective editing of Sorokin's Russified English prose, I agreed to try my hand at editing Parsons's classic *Structure of Social Action*. Although kindly appreciated in the Preface, that editorial effort plainly had an indifferent effect. But this failure was evidently not enough to stay my editor's pen. For, based on some sample lists, a back-of-the-envelope estimate has me editing some 250 books and 2,000 articles over the course of the past 60 years. Behavior hardly in accord with the Schopenhauer canon.

My preferred style of exposition also emerged from the start. As in the 1936 paper on the "Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," the 1938 paper on "Social Structure and Anomie," and the 1948 paper on "The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy," I have generally set out my sociological ideas in the form of highly condensed paradigmatic essays, typically running to few more than a dozen-or-so pages. By adopting the relatively discursive form of the essay, I have no doubt irked some sociologist-peers by departing from the tidy format long

since prescribed for the scientific paper. Designed to instruct fellow scientists about a potential new contribution to a field of knowledge, the stylized scientific paper presents an immaculate appearance that tells little or nothing of the intuitive leaps, false starts, loose ends, opportunistic adaptations, and happy accidents that actually cluttered up the inquiry. After all, the scientific paper is not designed as a clinical or biographical account of the reported research. In contrast, the essay provides scope for asides and correlatives of a kind that interest historians and sociologists of science and is, in any case, better suited to my ungovernable preference for linking humanistic and scientific aspects of social knowledge.

However, those sociological essays of mine are not wholly discursive. They are disciplined by being “paradigmatic” in, as I’ve said, a pre-Kuhnian sense of the term “paradigm.” That is to say, the analytical paradigm identifies the basic assumptions, problems, concepts, and hypotheses incorporated in the sociological idea in order to generate researchable questions and to provide for continuities of theoretical and empirical inquiry. Thus, the “paradigm of anomie-and-opportunity structure” laid out in a set of essays has been put to use by successive generations of scholars over the past half-century, first in the sociological and criminological study of deviant behavior and then in continuing researches in a variety of other disciplines, just as the “paradigm of the self-fulfilling prophecy,” which was first applied to the sociological problem of ethnic and racial discrimination, has since led to traditions of theoretical and empirical inquiry in social psychology, political science, anthropology, economics, and public administration.

Reflecting briefly on thematic orientations emerging in my theoretical work, I take note of a prime aversion, a prime preference, and a prime indulgence.

My prime theoretical aversion is to any extreme sociological, economic, or psychological reductionism that claims to account uniquely and exhaustively for patterns of social behavior and social structure. By way of rationale for this aversion, I confine myself to the William James parable about the reductionist fallacy: “A Beethoven string-quartet is truly . . . a scraping of horses’ tails on cats’ bowels, and may be exhaustively described in such terms; but the application of this description in no way precludes the simultaneous applicability of an

entirely different description.”

As I have intimated, my prime theoretical preference is for sociological theories of the middle range which, I hasten to say in accord with Arthur Stinchcombe, can be shown to derive in principle from a more general theory if they are worth their salt in providing an improved understanding of social behavior, social structure, and social change.

And my prime theoretical indulgence finds its fullest expression in my one avowedly humanist and self-winding book, *On the Shoulders of Giants*, which adopts a non-linear, divagating Shandean mode for examining the enduring tension between tradition and originality in the transmission and growth of knowledge along with a variety of related themes.

And now, as befits a short essay on an improbable life of learning, a final brief thought about autobiography, that mode of self-reflection in historical contexts which has held my interest since those distant days in the Carnegie library. But not, of course, with reference to myself. Until recent decades. For it happens that ever since the publication in 1961 of *The New Yorker* profile, with its condensed South Philadelphia story, kindly disposed friends, colleagues, and publishers have been urging me to write an autobiography or, at least, a longish memoir. Would that I could. But, as all of us know, God is in the details. Without thick, textured detail, an autobiography is bound to be weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable. But the sinful fact is that I simply haven't access to the needed detail. Cursed my life long by a scant and episodic memory, I dare not rely on vagrant memories without visible means of documentary support. But, alas, I've not kept a diary or a journal, with documentation thus confined to notebooks and voluminous but still inadequate files of letters. And so, when asked to venture upon an autobiography, I have only to recall the caustic review of a memoir by the prolific novelist and playwright, Heinrich Böll. The reviewer notes Böll's many tiresome passages lamenting his inability to remember and concludes that the author "seems almost to boast of his mnemonic failures." For me, that review amounts to a preview. It provides timely warning that any memoir of mine would surely display an even more humiliating amnesia. But perhaps, just perhaps, this slight remembrance of things past will serve in its stead.

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	Weekly Expenses (Food, laundry, recreation, etc.)	Expenses (books, tuition, general - general)
1. Ending Sept. 26, 1931	6.98	express charges 6.28
2. Ending Oct. 3, 1931	3.46	infirmary fee 10.00
3. Ending Oct. 10, 1931	3.58	book .25
4. Ending Oct. 17, 1931	3.59	lamp 1.45
5. Ending Oct. 24, 1931	3.72	books 1.00
6. Ending Oct. 31, 1931	3.70	photo 1.00
7. Ending Nov. 7, 1931	4.96	stationery 1.00
8. Ending Nov. 14, 1931	3.92	laundry kit 1.55
9. Ending Nov. 21, 1931	3.60	books 3.40
10. Ending Nov. 28, 1931	4.99	book 1.95
11. Ending Dec. 5, 1931	6.08	books 4.25
12. Ending Dec. 12, 1931	7.38	book binding 3.80
		bracelet 7.50
		room rent 70.00
	Nov. 24, 1931	Nation sub 1.00
	Dec. 7, 1931	carpet, lamp 5.00

Perkins Hall, 1932

March 14	food .60 postage .43 stamps .19 <u>1.22</u>
March 15	food .19 cash .30 supper 1.10 <u>1.59</u>
March 16	food .22 day letter .25 postage .28 carfare .20 supper .60 taxi-branch .24 cash 1.20 boat ticket 9.00 <u>11.99</u>
March 17	food .53
March 18	food .13
March 19	food .61
	Debit balance 39.38

March 20	food .52 tobacco .15 cash .40 <u>1.07</u>
March 21	food .11
March 22	cash 3.70 Acid 30.00
<del>March 22</del>	carfare .30 shower .65 <u>95</u> 4.65
March 23	food .20 debit 6.46 debit bal. 39.38 <u>45.84 (45.84)</u> credit 30.00 debit bal. 15.84 <u>43</u> 15.41

Figure 7A (enlarged for legibility)