

Founding of the Rural Sociological Society

The Rural Sociologist

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William Sewell on the Founding of the Rural Sociological Society

On January 18th of 2001, I [Glenn Fuguitt] interviewed William Sewell, one of the two surviving founders of the Rural Sociological Society at the time. (1) Sewell died on July 12th of 2002, leaving Olaf Larson as the sole surviving member of those active at the beginning of the RSS; Julie Zimmerman's interviews with Larson have been published in previous issues.

Sewell was an active member of the Society, serving as its president in 1954-1955. The interview that follows concerned the founding of the RSS. Documents verifying many of the statements are attached to the original copy of the interview that has been placed in the Society's archives.

Fuguitt: According to the written record, the Rural Sociology section of the American Sociological Society (later renamed the American Sociological Association) had a meeting in Chicago in December of 1936. And you say you were at that meeting. **Sewell:** I was at that meeting. **Fuguitt:** So that is when, according to the minutes, some consensus was reached that some sort of autonomous organization needed to be founded.

Sewell: A little prehistory. What had happened was that for two or three years, a number of people were unsatisfied with the allocation of time that ASS gave the Rural Sociology section at the annual meeting. A committee was appointed, some time probably in 1935 or 1934, consisting of John Kolb, T. Lynn Smith, Carl Taylor, and Otis Durant Duncan. They were to come to the business meeting in 1936 to report on their contacts with members. I don't know if there was a formal contact letter, like a survey or something, but anyway, they were to report on the basis of their contacts on the pros and cons of remaining a section, or leaving the ASS and forming an independent organization. This did not necessarily mean to quit being members of ASS but to have their own independent meetings so that they could have more time on the schedule. They also felt there were many things that were not considered by the American Sociological Society that rural sociologists were interested in. I think the report was given by John Kolb. His report was that we should remain a part of ASS but demand more space on the program and other concessions. Carl Taylor spoke and I think Dwight Sanderson also was on the committee. That opinion was presented at the meeting.. There was one dissenter on the committee, O.D. Duncan. O.D. just absolutely refused to agree. He couldn't see that continuing as a section of the ASS was sufficient for the needs and interests of the rural sociologists. After the report was presented O.D. then gave his report. He was the one person who was not in favor of remaining in the American Sociological Society. Much to everybody's surprise, however, practically everybody there was in favor of Duncan's report. The Section therefore went ahead and accepted his report and turned down the majority report. It was done with very great enthusiasm. So O.D. reflected the wishes of those present better than the other committee members who were all closely associated with ASS. Sanderson had been

president of the American Sociological Society. It wasn't too long after that that Carl Taylor also served as American Sociological Society president. I thought that they voted there to accept the minority report and that was the beginning of the Rural Sociological Society. I was not at the Atlantic City meeting the next year, so I don't know what happened. But Ole (Olaf Larson) said that (the next year in Atlantic City) was when they formally decided to become a society.

Fuguitt: That's right, on the basis of these minutes. These are the minutes for Chicago from a set of documents we have in the department. Sanderson moved that a committee be formed to draw up a plan for organizing an affiliated unit of the American Sociological Society. Taylor said there is nothing sacred in organization. "Orient to the task, not to loyalty. There is a job to be done." He offered an amendment to Sanderson's motion for a committee to organize an affiliated unit, that the present chairman appoint a committee of three to formulate plans for the organization of rural sociologists. The amendment was accepted, motion carried.

The chairman asked for suggestions, and announced he would appoint the committee at the regular business meeting of the section that year. Lowry Nelson was section chair in Chicago. (Interviewers note: If the minutes are correct, O. D. Duncan's dissent occurred the next year at Atlantic City. Later, Bill Sewell decided that he did attend the meeting in Atlantic City).

Then almost a year after the Chicago meeting (November 27, 1937) we have from the record this letter from Duncan: "Dear T. Lynn (Smith): I fear I have been dismally defeated in my efforts to bring this committee around to recommend separation. The vote stands at 4-1 in favor of a more conciliatory policy." Apparently he ended up on this committee that was supposed to work for the 1936-37 year. Of course, you get some of Duncan's beautiful rhetoric here. "I do not want even membership in one group to have anything to do with membership in the other. Nor do I want to recognize any part of the constitution of that parent society as having jurisdiction over the rural people. Several people are trying to make it appear that the young fellows are trying to kick out of the harness while the old birds, so they pretend, are trying to save the day." (In other words, the old birds are the ones who are trying to stay in the ASS). Anyway, O.D. Duncan was saying "I don't know what to do (to change this direction)." Well, then T. Lynn Smith comes to his rescue because T. Lynn Smith was the other champion for separation and was the champion who was the organizer. In only two weeks, he prepared a detailed letter with the help of his faculty, including Fred Frey, Harold Hoffsommer, E. H. Lot, Edgar A. Schuler, Marian B. Smith and himself; it was unanimous and, needless to say, T. Lynn would not have been pleased by a minority report among his faculty. The document was carefully prepared and well thought-out as to the reasons why we should be independent. Then Smith mailed this around to all key people in the rural section and there are letters responding. One of the other persons who wrote a long letter and hung in there with Sanderson (against total independence) was B. O. Williams of South Carolina. Williams wrote a two-page letter reply to T. Lynn saying why they should stay together. He also wrote to Sanderson and tried to reassure Sanderson they weren't a rump session, that they would be loyal. Very shortly after, the meeting of the Rural Sociology section took place at the American Sociological Society meeting in Atlantic City, December 29, 1937. The report of the committee was presented signed by J. H. Kolb, Carl Taylor, B. O. Williams, and Dwight Sanderson, with the dissenting report by O.D. Duncan. The majority report proposed setting up an independent organization, but remaining affiliated with the American Sociological Society. The minutes of the meeting report that after a lively discussion it was agreed to close the affairs of the section, organize a new national society, and operate under a provisional constitution. The provisional constitution was included in the minutes of a subsequent special meeting of the section in Atlantic City along with the election of officers for the new society.

Fuguitt: Well, Bill, you are supposed to be telling me and here I am telling you on the basis of the written record. In this recommendation that J. H. Kolb, Carl Taylor, B. O. Williams, and

Dwight Sanderson sent to the membership, they wanted to send a request to the ASS, amending an article in the constitution so that the American Sociological Society may include an independent society or association. Apparently being independent depended on the way you saw it, since Sanderson and his supporters on the committee came back in a rear guard action, saying yes let's be independent but stay affiliated. Something like that. That must have been what happened. So it may consist of an independent society or association and so on, and the constitution of the independent association must specify that it's a section of the ASS. So they came in and said we want to get the ASS to give us this amendment and then we can be independent but we will be a section. I think he wrote in this other letter to Farris about so many sections and only one day's worth of meetings. Note that the rural section program for the year they broke off only included four papers. So you could see what was going on in that. Then O.D. Duncan wrote the section following in the minutes as a minority report.

Sewell: Which year was that? *Fuguitt:* This was prepared in the year between the meeting you attended and the one in 1937 in Atlantic City. Duncan wrote this minority report, but T. Lynn Smith set the stage for him through being his champion and that sort of thing. The report stated "That this group here and now declare itself to be an independent society and as an organization its allegiance to the American Sociological Society in all matters of jurisdiction shall be regarded by this action as having come to end." He proposed further that for the year 1938 the Rural Sociological Society operate under a provisional constitution and that a committee be designated to draw up proposals for permanent organization to be considered by the Society's regular annual meeting in 1938. (They actually went faster than that.) So that was his minority report that was accepted by the group. Here are the minutes including the committee recommendation and the minority report.

Sewell: Does that say where it was? *Fuguitt:* Claridge Hotel, Atlantic City and you said before you didn't go to that. *Sewell:* I don't think so. I know I went to one in Atlantic City and we were there in time for the beauty contest. And Marilyn Monroe was crowned the queen and was the big shot and we stood up in the balcony above the street and we could look down and she had a dress on that was open from there to there. *Fuguitt:* That had to have been later because Marilyn Monroe was about 11 years old at that time. Anyway the record shows that Sanderson's proposition was presented in Atlantic City in 1937. Then Duncan's minority report was presented. Then there was a lively discussion among members of the section including Sanderson, Kolb, Taylor, Duncan, and Carle Zimmerman. They didn't mention T. Lynn Smith, which surprises me because he certainly was a strong advocate for forming a national organization. The principal point of disagreement was concerning the desirability of affiliating, as a section, although being an independent organization. In other words, they presented it as if we're all agreed here, that we should be independent, and they nevertheless proposed remaining an affiliate of the American Sociological Society. It was pointed out by Sanderson that this question could not be settled at the time because of the provision in the constitution in the ASS which provided amendments be proposed at least 90 days before a meeting. (Thus the required amendment allowing for affiliated organizations could not be adopted until the next year). Then the minutes reported that accordingly, it was agreed to close the affairs of the section on Rural Sociology, organize a new national society, operate under provisional constitution, and defer for one year the adoption of the permanent constitution. Meeting adjourned.

Fuguitt: Then it appears that about two hours later the same day they had a special meeting for organizing. They decided they couldn't wait a year. So they got a provisional constitution and by-laws. *Sewell:* Probably T. Lynn had it all prepared. *Fuguitt:* Anyway Sanderson moved the new Rural Sociological Society constitution be provisionally adopted. Kolb was nominated for the presidency. Kolb withdrew his nomination. Lively nominated Sanderson for president and he was elected. T. Lynn Smith was nominated for secretary-treasurer and he was elected. Smith said he preferred not to have the office but he was elected. Sanderson moved the nominations be closed. Kolb was elected vice-president. Nominations were held for additional members of the Executive Committee, and they

wanted to get two of them. Those present nominated Taylor, Gee, Manny, Lively, Zimmerman, and Duncan. The people who won were Taylor and Lively, even though Duncan led the movement for a separate organization.

Sewell: That's what I remember – that part of it. *Fuguitt:* **Maybe** you were there (in Atlantic City in 1937). *Sewell:* Yes, because among other things, Kolb made a little speech and said, "No I don't want to be elected president." Everybody was embarrassed because we already knew who was going to be president and Kolb was refusing to accept the office. Because he was going to be in Brazil the next year. So he said he just couldn't accept. But nobody had offered it. Then everybody was kind of embarrassed. But anyway, I remember that. I must have been there.

Fuguitt: Let's go back to the Rural Soc section of the American Sociological Society. You were an instructor when you went to the meetings in 1936 and 1937? *Sewell:* No, I was an assistant professor. Once the Bulletin came out on the Socioeconomic Status Scale I started getting offers. So O. D. got me promoted to associate professor. (Note: According to his vita this was by the fall of 1938.) I was a full professor at the end of seven years. O. D. was probably 7-8 years older than me.

Fuguitt: One of the things I noticed in going through all these records is that rural sociology seemed to be more elitist then than it is now. I assume that was true of most organizations at the time. That is, the major figures were really important and influential. That could just be the written record, of course. For example, do you remember much discussion in which you participated, and did other people who were instructors and assistant professors participate in the discussions about the future of the Rural Sociology section or the establishment of the Society? *Sewell:* It depended on who was president. Mr. Sanderson just kind of ran it. *Fuguitt:* When he was president of the Rural Sociological Society. *Sewell:* Yes. Who was the next president? *Fuguitt:* Probably Kolb, wasn't it? *Sewell:* I think probably Kolb. No, Taylor. Carl would involve the young people and was always interested in the young people and what they were thinking and how they were trained. He would appoint people even like me to committees. Then Kolb came and he was more formal and more likely to rely on the older people. Although he was certainly very helpful to me. *Fuguitt:* So in these fateful meetings, as far as you know, the younger people didn't have much to say or did they discuss these issues? *Sewell:* There was something about it that was a little different than today. If you were young assistant professors, you didn't feel it was up to you to dictate so much. You felt lucky if they even invited you to give a paper. *Fuguitt:* That continued more than 15 years later. The RSS was established 15 years before I arrived on the scene, and there was a good bit of that feeling around in those days, in 1952 and years immediately following. *Sewell:* I don't remember being on any committees in those days. They didn't have that many committees. I felt perfectly free to talk to people like Sanderson. *Fuguitt:* Do you remember much discussion about this issue (that is, creating an independent organization) among people you were in contact with? *Sewell:* No. I think we all felt we were treated well and welcome but we didn't feel that we were welcome to play an important part, or that that was something we should aspire to. *Fuguitt:* Yes, I think that's important to get in the record because people these days might not appreciate that, the way it was then.

Fuguitt: What are some of the things that led to this consensus about the need for an autonomous organization? According to the record it seemed to develop in 1936, whether it would be affiliated with the American Sociological Society or not. *Sewell:* I think some of it was psychological. I think they (the rural sociologists) felt that they were second-class citizens. They had reason to think so. A lot of general sociologists felt (in the older group) that rural sociologists had money to do research and they didn't do anything that was outstanding. *Fuguitt:* Yes, and it was applied research anyway which most people then disdained. *Sewell:* And rural sociologists were looked down on by them and I think rural sociologists just didn't figure that they were as competent and so on, except some exceptional ones like Dwight Sanderson and Carl Taylor. Those two could transcend that, and

they were accepted in the American Sociological Society, as evidenced by the fact that they both were made president. I think most rural sociologists at that time really felt like they were considered second class by the general sociologists. I don't know about T. Lynn Smith. He was probably in the period of his greatest aggressiveness in terms of building a career and he built a remarkably good department out of LSU. He became editor, wasn't he one of the early editors of *Rural Sociology*?

Fuguitt: He was the managing editor and I think he may have been kind of the founding managing editor. Lowry Nelson was the editor and T. Lynn was the managing editor in one of the early letter-heads. **Sewell:** And I think T. Lynn was the guy that went out and got the money from the foundations to establish the journal. **Fuguitt:** My feeling was that if you want to look at motivations here, his could have been much more ambition for himself to have a separate organization, and play an important role in it. **Sewell:** I think that's correct and then he had another thing going for him. There was the Dean or the President of LSU, with a Ph.D. in Rural Sociology. **Fuguitt:** Was that Frye? **Sewell:** Yes, Fred Frye. **Fuguitt:** He was one of the signers of that memo. **Sewell:** Yes, he was one of the guys that made the university money available for rural sociology and to build the department up. I knew Mr. Frye, but only slightly. He was probably ten years older than T. Lynn, so he was more like Duncan. But that probably had a lot to do with this. He felt T. Lynn was a great guy and he turned out to be. He was a very able scholar. (Note: Fuguitt was T. Lynn Smith's student for the Master's degree at the University of Florida).

Fuguitt: Speaking about the elitism of those days, I thought it was interesting to see how the election turned out. The leader of the group that wanted to stay in ASS became the president of the new independent organization. The leader of the opposition, O.D. Duncan, didn't get anything. He was nominated for a member of the council and he didn't make it. It's sort of like he was kind of a gadfly who may have influenced people's thinking, but the people didn't take him that seriously.

Sewell: I think that's exactly right. He was probably a more able person than people in general thought he was. One of the things that he did was he wrote things to the newspaper and that sort of thing and lots of times he made himself a little bit ridiculous trying to be funny. For a while he wrote a column for the local Stillwater paper and one of his former students, when he had been in Ag Economics before they had Rural Sociology, was the editor of the paper. O.D. wrote something that sounded like it was opposed to some of the actions of the local WCTU (Women's Christian Temperance Union). The head of the WCTU was a very powerful political figure. She wrote to the paper answering O.D. and raising questions about his sincerity and all that sort of thing. Finally, after several of these letters had been published, the editor of the paper wrote an editorial and stated that he wanted to bring Duncan's controversy to a close. The big question is O. D. Duncan dry or wet? He said, I had two courses with him and I can tell you he's dry. And that ended the whole thing. Everybody knew what he meant by "dry." O.D. was very upset. He thought of himself as being rather funny and he was.

Fuguitt: But the rhetoric was very important to O.D. He loved to do that. What about Zimmerman? What kind of role was he playing in the organization back at that time? **Sewell:** Although he was an important figure at Minnesota, he was a small figure when he moved to Harvard. He never could quite live up to the Harvard tradition. He wrote two or three books while he was there. They weren't bad but they kind of had a fascist sound to them. So he was kind of looked down upon, but he was still highly regarded by rural sociologists because he had done some really good work in rural sociology. The Sorokin, Zimmerman, and Galpin book was a classic. And there was another book (evidently Sorokin and Zimmerman's *Principles of Rural-Urban Sociology*) that was a very good book. But those were done at Minnesota, and then after that he kind of was on a downward course. He was drinking a lot. I remember when they held the meetings in Stillwater, he stayed at O.D.'s house because he was O.D.'s professor. We didn't stay there; we were staying in a local motel but went over there for meals and all sorts of things. One morning Zim came. He never went to meetings the whole time they were there and he had a quart of whiskey and he was drinking that and seeing his

friends. By the end of the day, the bottle was absolutely gone. So, he drank half of it. Our kids were wide-eyed. He was admired for his early work, very much by not only rural sociologists but other sociologists, but then the later work they didn't think much of. He was kind of a personality case.

Fuguitt: You mentioned Carl Taylor. In his correspondence, he seemed to be somewhat on the fence about whether they should be independent or not probably because, as you say he was part of the American Sociological Society establishment. So that's not surprising. **Sewell:** He was one of the most respected. Carl wrote very well. He got his undergraduate degree at Drake where he also was the holder of the national record for the 440. He was kind of a big shot in college and then he got his Ph.D. at Missouri. He had worked with some pretty well-known people at Missouri. He was kind of a social psychologist. He took work with—what was her name? Ross was the first sociologist in social psychology at Missouri. Taylor was a great believer in the fact that sociologists ought to be leading the fight against poverty and those kinds of things. **Fuguitt:** Kind of a social gospel sort of thing so many people in that era had. **Sewell:** Yes. He wrote very well and some of his books were really great classics. He went to North Carolina where he became head of the department. Then he got in trouble with the new president and was practically fired out of the place and that's when he went to USDA during the great depression. He was out of work. **Fuguitt:** Did he come to replace Galpin or did he come for awhile and then assume that job later? **Sewell:** No. I think he came to replace Galpin. **Fuguitt:** Galpin retired around 1932 or 1933, something like that. So his name isn't in the record of the founding at all. He was really out of it by that time, by 1937, 1938. **Sewell:** Oh yes. On the other hand, he was one of the greats. If you look back over what he did, all his community studies, he really opened up human ecology long before they did at Chicago. **Fuguitt:** No argument from me there. That's absolutely true. **Sewell:** I read his books on New York communities and I just thought he was the nearest thing to a genius of his generation of sociologists. **Fuguitt:** Think about the empirical work. That's when almost nobody was doing that kind of thing. I think he was great.

Fuguitt: The minutes are vague, but do you remember in either the Chicago or the Atlantic City meetings, was a vote ever taken? The way I read it, the way it appeared in Atlantic City, the minutes just said we did it, in the passive voice. But the minutes didn't say that a vote was taken. **Sewell:** I think there was a vote taken to accept Duncan's report and to reject the report of the majority. **Fuguitt:** There seemed to be consensus by that time that there would be some kind of an organization with a president and with autonomy of some kind. The only question then was affiliation or not. So Duncan came in hard against affiliation and worked during the succeeding year with T Lynn Smith and some others to break off entirely and the break was made then in Atlantic City. **Sewell:** I think that's near correct because I remember definitely the shock of the old guys when Duncan's minority report was accepted. **Fuguitt:** They expected deference and they didn't get it that time at least. **Sewell:** They got disagreement for once. **Fuguitt:** You don't happen to remember do you? Did they raise hands or say ayes? **Sewell:** I don't remember. **Fuguitt:** There was a vote and that's how it came out. **Sewell:** They wouldn't have just gone ahead and done all the preparatory work if they hadn't voted. But then, somebody might raise questions, why people like Sanderson and Kolb and Taylor, why were they negotiating with the American Sociological Society? I think they just believed that was part of the burden that had been put on them. **Fuguitt:** And those three were fishing to go that way, but by that time it had been decided and they didn't realize it maybe. **Sewell:** Sanderson must have tried to save that by saying affiliation rather than separation. **Fuguitt:** But I expect the new journal (*Rural Sociology*) had a lot to do with the consensus on creating some kind of autonomous organization. **Sewell:** No doubt. They felt more confidence when they got the journal.

Fuguitt: One last question, because I'm running out of tape. It seems that many of the issues raised about rural sociology then are still alive, though not as strong as they were then. But there are still feelings of tension between sociologists and rural sociologists. For example, right now there is the issue of meeting at the same time and place as the American Sociological Association, and every other

year we do. *Sewell*: That's an issue that's been with us all along. In my experience, when I was still more active in both societies, the meetings we had when we were separated were not as good as when we were together.

(Note: *The tape ran out here. The following is reconstructed from my notes of our succeeding discussion*).

Sewell: Later rural sociology gave up on me--figuring I was now a sociologist only. But, I always felt loyal, remaining an active member of the Rural Sociological Society, and with an interest in the rural community. I was raised in a town of 600, Barrington, Michigan. When it came time for me to go to high school, our parents sent me and an older sister to live and go to school in a nearby larger town—Jackson, Michigan, with a population of 60,000 then. Jackson is 39 miles from Ann Arbor and 40 miles from East Lansing, the two university towns in the state. We went to a very good high school with a college curriculum. So, I spent five years, beginning in the eighth grade there before going to college. But, I always had a rural interest.

In my early career as a sociologist, I thought rural areas were better for doing the kind of empirical research I wanted to do, which was close to the experimental method, like my project on infant training. One can hold constant ethnic and socioeconomic status better in a rural area. Plus the fact that I felt more affinity with rural village and farm people. Actually, Carl Taylor encouraged me in my research program. He thought I should do more basic research, not his kind of rural studies. Taylor had perhaps the most interest in basic sociological research among the early leaders of rural sociology. Maybe also that was true of Sanderson.

Fuguitt: Do you have any ideas about the implications of the issues surrounding the founding of the Rural Sociological Society for rural sociologists today? *Sewell*: I think rural sociologists should be first sociologists. They should meet with general sociology—that is, participate in the ASA meetings, etc. For God's sake, just because you feel you'd get a bum deal you shouldn't stay away. I would today vote against having separate meeting places for the two organizations. Contacts among rural sociologists and other sociologists are very important. In the future I think we should meet together most years, perhaps separately only once every four or five years.

Contributed by Glenn Fuguitt
University of Wisconsin

(1) I've deleted some material (you'll find three dots at that point); Glenn Fuguitt's own phrase there ("Let's go back to the Rural Soc section...") indicates the conversation drifted from the RSS founding. That cuts about five pages from the original and makes it more manageable as far as getting it in TRS, I think. I've also deleted the attachments from the copy attached and I've removed references to those attachments in the text—W. Goudy

Editors Note: Julie Zimmerman, University of Kentucky-Lexington, interviewed Olaf Larson who was referenced in the Sewell article. TRS published a three-part series on the interviews in Volume 25: 1 and Volumes 26: 1 and 2. In a forthcoming issue of TRS, Glenn Fuguitt will write about his interviews with Olaf Larson on the founding of the Rural Sociological Society.

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Volume 29 Number 2
June 2009

President's Column.....	1
RSS Election Results	2
Scraps from Pigg's Pen	3
RSS Annual Report 2008	4
RSS Constitution 2nd Reading	13
2009 Annual Meeting	
Theme & Deadlines	14
Plenary Speaker	15
Preparing Future Rural Sociologists	
.....	16
Program Highlights	18
Student Opportunities	21
Endowment Silent Auction	22
Endowment Contributors	22
Endowment Grant Report	
Richelle Winkler	24
Endowment Grant Report	
Jennifer Wiegel	26
Endowment Grant Report	
Jamie Dolan	28
Welcome New Members	29
"Founding of the RSS"	30
New Voice goes to Washington	37
In Memorarium	
Donald M Crider	38
What's New on the WWW	40
Of Interest to Rural Sociologists	40
Future Annual Meetings	
inside back cover	

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Managing Editor: Edith A. Pigg

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Rural Sociology Society

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University of Missouri

Columbia, MO 65211-7040

Tel: (573) 882-9065

Fax: (573) 882-1473

E-mail: ruralsoc@missouri.edu

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RSS Business Office

104 Gentry Hall

University of Missouri

Columbia, MO 65211-7040

Tel: (573) 882-9065

Fax: (573) 882-1473

E-mail: ruralsoc@missouri.edu