

Robert A. Polson

July 6, 1905 — July 4, 1997

Robert A. Polson, Professor of Rural Sociology Emeritus, died on July 4, 1997 at his home in Ithaca, New York. Bob was a part of the Department of Rural Sociology for 66 years starting in 1931. He was department head during 1948-57. His career, which spanned the decades before and after World War II, had a significant change in a career path, and was marked by years of generous contributions to the university and the community, and a devoted dedication to family and friends.

Born in Nova Scotia, Canada, Bob and his family moved to the state of Washington where he was reared on a large dairy farm. His initial career goal was to stay in the dairy industry, but after only two years at Washington State College in Pullman, he transferred to the University of Wisconsin where he received a B.S. degree in Agricultural Economics in 1928. He then continued at Wisconsin in the field of Rural Sociology and earned a Ph.D. degree in 1933. He also did graduate work at the University of Chicago and postdoctoral studies at Columbia University.

Polson's dissertation research was used for a Wisconsin publication, *Trends in Town-County Relations* (1933), co-authored with his thesis advisor and one of the founders of the discipline of rural sociology, J.H. Kolb. This study was conducted in the same county used 16 years earlier by Charles J. Galpin for his pioneering work reported in *The Social Anatomy of an Agricultural Community* (1915). Polson's was one of the first locality group restudies made by sociologists. The restudy was in cooperation with the U.S.D.A.'s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life and with President Hoover's Committee on the Study of Recent Social Trends. Though the nature of Professor Polson's career changed dramatically, his interest in the community continued.

Polson came to the then Department of Rural Social Organization in 1931, the same year Warren Hall, the Cornell home of rural sociology, was built. His appointment as an extension instructor in rural social organization had been preceded by a year as rural sociologist at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. During the years of the depression, Bob assisted New York communities in planning and developing improvements in community services such as fire districts (the number grew fourfold in the 10 years preceding World War II) and in training officers of community organizations. World War II made new demands on faculty, especially those who might give some assistance to the war effort. In this regard, Bob had two special assignments: he was first called upon to organize civilian defense programs while on the field staff of the New York State War Council, and in 1944 and in 1945, he was the

State Supervisor of the Emergency Farm Labor Program run by the Cooperative Extension Service at Cornell. This program helped house and feed seasonal farm workers.

Polson's career underwent a change in 1948 when he began a nine-year term as department head. The task of administration exposed him to the broad scope of programs and activities covered by the department and facilitated a more marked change in his career. This change began during 1952-1953 with a Fulbright appointment the purpose of which was to start a rural social science research program at Silliman University in the Philippines. The results of the original research and restudy were reported in *Rural People's Response to Change: Dumaguete Trade Area, Philippines* (1973). The work also began a long affiliation with Professor Agaton Pal. Polson was also asked to help train the first group of community development workers who inaugurated President Magsaysay's barrio improvement program. The theme of local community improvements was the same as that begun as an extension specialist in rural social organization many years earlier. The exposure to Philippine villages, and later, under the auspices of International Cooperation Administration and the Ford Foundation, similar exposure to rural development programs in 13 countries in the Far and Near East, changed the domain of his work. He turned to the under-developed areas of the world where technical assistance programs undertaken by the United States government and by public and private international agencies called for the contributions which social scientists could make to understand the problems of rural communities and regions and to the train staff for development agencies. Bob specialized in training students, foreign and U.S. citizens, in the application of sociology to the organization, the conduct, and the evaluation of rural community development and agricultural extension programs.

Bob had a key role in the formative years of Cornell's international programs in the 1950s and 1960s. He helped establish the Office of International Agricultural and Rural Development in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. In 1953, he was a cooperating member of the prestigious graduate program in South and Southeast Asia. His work at Silliman University added considerable strength to the university's many new efforts in the Philippines. Even his classroom interests shifted to courses in social change and organization. Over the years, he was an advisor to more than 200 graduate students of whom more than half were from Asia and Africa.

Professionally, his work was recognized through service in 1950-51 as President of the Rural Sociological Society. He was also a member of the American Sociological Society, the American Academy of Political and Social Science, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Alpha Gamma Rho, Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, Epsilon Sigma Phi, and Alpha Zeta.

In his devotion to the betterment of the communities in which we live, Ithaca was not overlooked. He served as President of the Ithaca Rotary Club, was director of the Ithaca Community Chest, the YMCA, the Tompkins County TB and Public Health Association, and the Cooperative Consumers Society. Similarly, his personal generosity supported a student emergency fund in the Department of Rural Sociology. Dozens of students benefited from the Polsons' contributions to this fund. In 1989, this fund was named the Polson-Larson Fund for Excellence and has since grown to be an important source of support for Department of Rural Sociology programs.

The warm hospitality of Professor and Mrs. Polson, who opened their home to graduate students and faculty, was widely recognized. Professor Polson is survived by Ruth E. Polson, his wife of 67 years; and a daughter, Margaret R. Polson, of Boone, North Carolina. A second daughter, Marion, died in 1975. Bob was devoted to his immediate family and to his extended family. (He proudly displayed photos of his family's large dairy farm and, later, their logging operation in western Washington.) It is extraordinary that on July 4, 1997, the day Bob Polson died, the Polson Museum, devoted to the long Polson family history, was opened and dedicated in Hoquiam, Washington.

Olaf Larson, Philip Taietz, Eugene Erickson