

Hal Williamson: A Remembrance

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Harold F. Williamson died in Sarasota, Florida, on October 24, 1989, at the age of 88. He was born in Piper, Kansas, outside Kansas City, in 1901, but soon thereafter his family traveled to the West Coast. After a short stay in Seattle, Washington, they moved to Orange County, California, where Hal's father was one of the first orange growers. Hal graduated from the University of Southern California in 1924 where he was a star tennis player and captain of the team. He stayed on at Southern Cal, earning a master's degree in economics in 1926 and serving as an instructor the following year. He then moved to Harvard where he earned a second master's, and in 1936, his Ph.D. In the 1930s, he taught at M.I.T. and then at Harvard where one of his students was John F. Kennedy. In 1939 he moved to Yale, then in 1948 to Northwestern where the Williamsons moved into my old neighborhood in northeastern Evanston just as my family moved to northwestern Evanston.

My first day of graduate school at Northwestern was one of those bright, pleasantly cool late September days that's just perfect for playing golf. As it was, I had two classes that afternoon, the second one being Hal's Economics D20-1, Economic History of Europe. I was taking the course because it was required; I had no idea what the subject matter would be. As I looked around the room at the still unfamiliar faces of my classmates, I encountered the very familiar face, of Sam Williamson, Hal's younger son who was a year ahead of me in school.

As we sat in his father's classroom, I knew Sam was in graduate school at Purdue. I knew his father was highly regarded by the other fathers in the old neighborhood, but little more. Sam and I had arrived at economics via similar paths. Evanston Township High School's strong tradition in math and science led Sam toward engineering and me toward math until we had to face the reality of what it meant to major in those subjects. Like many others, we found that economics, as it was coming to be taught in the early 1960s, offered an outlet for our deductive, quantitative aptitudes. As we sat in that classroom, the probability both of us would become economic historians was slight. It never occurred to me Professor Harold Williamson would become an integral part of my life from that day onward.

If Sam's presence in the classroom that first day was an omen, its import was not immediately apparent. Hal made the class far more interesting than I had imagined, but I treated it with the benign neglect my students now treat the required courses I teach. When the opportunity arose the following quarter to take an advanced course in operations research, I deferred taking the second half of the required economic history sequence to the quarter when I would take my doctoral qualifying exams. I reasoned that if I could enroll in a pleasant *divertissement* during the same quarter I had to take prelims, I could kill two birds with one stone. As prelims neared, I recognized I was getting farther and farther behind in doing the work for Hal's course. As I was the only one from my class foolish enough to enroll in anything other than that quarter's required seminar, I confessed my predicament to Hal two weeks before prelims. To be perfectly honest, I was copping a plea.

To my amazement, there was no need for such a ploy. Hal recognized my motivation and did not explicitly disapprove. He emphasized the need to pass prelims, which I interpreted as a willingness on his part to temper the penalty I faced in his course. This characteristic, gentle human act helped me concentrate on prelims and then to recharge my batteries in order to minimize my embarrassment a few weeks later when my (lack of) knowledge of American economic history was called into question.

The following summer, with prelims and most of the coursework for the doctorate completed, the daunting task of picking a dissertation topic, or perhaps more accurately of picking a dissertation adviser, loomed large. I went to talk to Hal about the possibilities in economic history. If he had any misgivings about advising what had been a lackadaisical student, he didn't show it. Neither did he proselytize for his field, as other faculty had done. Rather he spoke enthusiastically about the possibilities the "new economic history" afforded someone with my preference function.

I joined Hal's economic history seminar in the Fall of 1965 as I began to read what was being done and to think about what could be done. The next fall, as Hal turned 65, Jonathan Hughes arrived from Purdue to assume his classroom responsibilities. With Hal and John interacting, it became clear economic history was far more expansive and far more interesting than what was contained in its textbooks, including Hal's *Growth of the American Economy* which first appeared in 1944. Those of us in the seminar elected to begin an ambitious program of reading the classics of the field (old and new) as we began our dissertations. Hal and I never discussed this commitment in the context of my previous lack thereof.

Among the classics we perused were Hal's business histories. His first was a collaboration with Arthur Cole, *The American Carpet Manufacture* (1940). *Winchester, The Gun that Won the West* (1952) was the first of several he wrote at Northwestern. In addition there was a history of Bucyrus Erie, *Designed for Digging* (1955), *Northwestern Mutual Life* (1957), and the two-volume *American Petroleum Industry* (1959 and 1964). The petroleum industry study was ending when I arrived, but the old house where Hal had his office was still known as "the refinery" by the older graduate students, and it was there the seminar met.

Hal and John became as immersed in the job of finding things for us to read as we were reading them. It was a fortunate pairing at this point in the Cliometric revolution. Hal was a member of the old school who actively encouraged the young. Ralph Andreano, one of Hal's students from an earlier cohort, dedicated a book to him as the man who bridged the old and the new economic history. John Hughes was a full blown revolutionary, a cofounder of what has become the Cliometrics Society. It was a unique adventure that Paul Uselding and I remember with a sense of intellectual excitement. It was a bonding between faculty and students that has left its mark on Northwestern's economic history seminar to this day.

More than the matter of the man, what proved important to me was the manner of the man. Hal was a gentleman and a humanitarian in every sense of those terms. He was not one to pick intellectual fights. He would express privately what he considered good and what he considered trash, but in public he dealt with charlatans by offering too few words of praise rather than too many paragraphs of criticism. I remember his anguish over two Chicago conventions in 1968, that of the Democrats and that of the economists. Hal was still serving as Secretary-Treasurer of the American Economic Association, and the escapades of Chicago's Democratic mayor led many economists to demand the association's convention boycott the city. Hal was irritated at some officers' ignorance of logistics and sense of financial stewardship; they believed you could move a convention of that size at a moment's notice. He was as irritated by Mayor Daley's behavior as those who wanted the convention moved. His skill as a conciliator and facilitator helped keep the convention in Chicago and helped lead to an examination of the societal problems televised live daily for one memorable week that August.

In the late 1960s, Hal asked me to discuss two papers at the Business History Conference in Iowa City. Then, as now, the Conference was scheduled during my Spring vacation. I had made Florida reservations, but agreed to alter them. Between an air traffic controllers' strike and a postal workers' strike I made my first appearance at the BHC one Saturday morning on three hours sleep discussing papers I had never seen. Unwittingly, I echoed the leitmotif of the previous day, "I am not a business historian." What were all of us doing there? I came to understand it was Hal and the other founders of the Conference who insisted on a broad definition of "business history." I came to understand it was Hal and a few others who annually produced a conference under surprisingly informal circumstances. It then came as no surprise as attendance grew and as the older generation reached retirement, Hal urged (and assisted) those of us in the younger generation to make the BHC a formal organization. I am delighted the Conference has chosen to remember Hal with a prize presented in his honor.

By the early 1970s, I had the distinct sense of passing from student to colleague. I learned that experience was common to most of Hal's former students when Paul and I edited a festschrift in his honor. It was sometime during these years that Hal and I first played golf. It was an activity we shared for the next two decades. Hal was a gifted athlete. My

first year in graduate school, when he was 62, he was the winning pitcher in the annual graduate student-faculty softball game. He swam and played tennis into his 80s and is rumored to have been undefeated at Northwestern's faculty club pool table. I know I can't refute the rumor. Our friendship blossomed on the golf course. Intermixed between Hal's reminding me to slow down my backswing, and my reminding him not to peek, were discussions of our profession and our families. The Williamsons, including sons Bill and Sam, became part of our family in the years before the boys became parents. Hal and Arline "adopted" my daughter as an additional grandchild.

The qualities that attracted me to Hal as dissertation adviser endeared him to me on the golf course. Observing Hal with a golf club in his hand, I could see the competitive drive, the concentration and determination that served him well throughout his academic career. Two vignettes suffice. The two of us once were paired with two high school students. On the 18th tee, the boys told of having played with an older man a few weeks earlier whose drive on that hole was even with a particular bush. "Not bad for a 65-year old man," he had commented to the boys' amazement. Hal proceeded to drive the ball 20 yards beyond that bush. He then turned to the boys and said, "Not bad for an 80-year old man." My suspicion is that they hadn't thought him to be a day over 55 the way he played that day. Nor had they noticed the sense of determination their story elicited in him.

On his best days, Hal scored in the low 90s, so breaking 90 was an ever present goal. Yet, if he knew on the 18th tee he needed only a bogey, his ball would inevitably find a sand trap, water, or meet some equally frustrating end. I began to keep score so he could remain blissfully ignorant of his progress. One summer afternoon in his 85th year, as he routinely tapped in his final putt, the rest of the foursome let loose a roar as if he'd just chipped in to win the U. S. Open. When we explained his score for the round was 88, Hal's face broke into a smile he still bore two weeks later. That gentlemanly joy of accomplishment (either his, his family's, or his student's) is what I shall remember most.

My grandfather was a Presbyterian minister. Before he died, he inscribed a Bible to be given to me on my 16th birthday. One of the passages he noted was II Timothy 2:15 - "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." Though I have strayed far from the fold my grandfather shepherded, I have tried to live up to those words. Hal Williamson succeeded.