

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
WALTER FIREY**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Walter Firey, professor emeritus, sociology, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.



Hillary Hart, Secretary
General Faculty and Faculty Council

**IN MEMORIAM
WALTER FIREY**

Walter Firey was a member of the Department of Sociology at The University of Texas at Austin for thirty-nine years, from 1946 to 1985. He was an emeritus professor for about twenty-nine years.

Walter Firey was born in Roundup, Montana, on August 13, 1916, and he died in Austin, Texas, on December 21, 2014. Rather early in his life, his family moved to Seattle, Washington, where he attended public schools. After that, he attended the University of Washington, receiving his B.A. and M.A. degrees, and then on to Harvard University where he received his doctoral degree. While at Harvard, he took courses from the world-renowned sociologists Pitirim A. Sorokin and Talcott Parsons, and he audited a course taught by the famous economist Joseph Schumpeter. Pitirim A. Sorokin chaired his dissertation committee, and Talcott Parsons was a member of that committee.

Upon leaving Harvard, Walter Firey taught at Michigan State for a year and a half, after which he joined the faculty at UT Austin, becoming an assistant professor of sociology. At about that time, his book *Land Use in Central Boston* (1947) was published; it brought him considerable acclaim in the field of urban sociology.

During the 1950s, Walter Firey came to address a somewhat different set of sociological issues. Firey received a grant to study groundwater problems in the South Plains. His interest in and his research on water appear to have been influenced by the writings of the noted historian Walter Prescott Webb, who taught at UT Austin. In any event, Firey not only studied the ground water/resource in the South Plains but also examined resource use in two societies in Africa and medieval England. His research resulted in his major work: *Man, Mind and Land* (1960). He was the first sociologist to address what is viewed as a world-wide problem: water. He wrote about resource use more generally before environmental sociology came to be recognized as a subfield of sociology.

In *Man, Mind and Land*, Firey outlined three main approaches to resource use: the ethnographic (or cultural) perspective, the economic perspective, and the ecological perspective. He espoused the cultural orientation, and it is noteworthy that his views of culture were more aligned with those of Sorokin than those of Parsons. Another key feature on *Man, Mind and Land* is Firey's effort to formalize his theoretical analysis, relying primarily on lattice theory. Indeed, a few reviewers have suggested that the formalization of his theory in one sense stands in the way of the reader's ability to understand Walter Firey's basic theoretical framework. Still, *Man, Mind and Land* was a path-breaking book regarding the sociology of resource use. And it is likely to be read by some scholars for decades to come.

Walter Firey wrote two other books, both worthy of attention. One was *Law and Economy in Planning* (1965). In his preface, he observes that his book was a product of more than a dozen years of participation in an interdepartmental program of community and regional planning at The University of Texas. In this book Firey examines the intersection between the state as theorized by Hans Kelsen and the market as articulated by economist Leon Walras. Once again, Firey formalizes his analysis through the use of lattice theory. If the idea of social planning should return as an integral feature of American society, Walter Firey's analysis will likely receive greater attention than it has thus far.

In his fourth book, *The Study of Possible Societies* (privately printed in 1977), Firey seeks to push out the boundaries of phenomenology, having been heavily influenced by the philosopher Edmund Husserl's concern with logical reasoning. Phenomenology has a place in the sociological pantheon; witness the writings of Alfred Schutz. Still, as we interpret this book, Firey views phenomenology (the study of consciousness from a first-person point of view) as adding to traditional sociological analysis, not displacing it. Nevertheless, we would surmise that only a few sociologists have tackled this book. It is not a book for the fainthearted.

More generally, Walter Firey was deeply committed to the world of ideas. In the early 1980s, a few years before his retirement, a colleague, Anthony Orum, organized a small study group on reading Hegel. Indeed, a member of this Committee, Nestor Rodriguez, attended many of the meetings of this study group. Firey's participation highlighted his scholarly interest in and commitment to the world of ideas.

Over the years, Walter Firey taught a rather wide range of courses: institutions, rural sociology, social ecology, and sociological theory. Although he kept abreast of the main trends within sociology, his own specialized interests (as noted above) did not readily lend themselves to teaching of graduate courses. Indeed, he enjoyed teaching advanced undergraduate courses, and the students benefitted from his lectures and especially the ensuing discussions. Firey was a very nice person who was highly respectful of the views of his students, and they in turn greatly appreciated him as a teacher.

Undoubtedly, Firey was a highly respected departmental citizen. He was graduate advisor for a time in the early 1960s. But most of his service was rather hidden from view. For instance, Firey chaired the elections committee. Part of the Budget Council was elected, and Firey took the lead in making up ballots and counting them as well. These kinds of tasks needed to be done, and Firey did more than his fair share.

Walter Firey received a number of scholarly honors: He had a one year Fellowship at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, an Award of Merit from the Natural Resources Research Group of the Rural Sociological Association, and a Pro Bene Meritis Award from the College of Liberal Arts, The University of Texas at Austin.

Clearly, Walter Firey was devoted to sociology. Still, his first love was his family. Those who knew him would remember well how happy he was to leave the campus every weekday and go home to his beloved wife Mary Lou (they were married for sixty-two years) and their two sons Paul and John. His family made his long life worthwhile.

This memorial was prepared by a special committee consisting of Gideon Sjoberg (chair), Sheldon Ekland-Olson, and Nestor Rodriguez.

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