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## Hattie Plum Williams (1878-1963)

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# HATTIE PLUM WILLIAMS

## (1878–1963)

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The professional life of Hattie Plum Williams unfolded on the geographically isolated Great Plains of eastern Nebraska. She is the first woman known to chair a coeducational, doctoral department of sociology, and as the author of major studies on Russian German immigrants, she made significant disciplinary contributions to sociology. As a woman caught between changing definitions of the division of labor in sociology during the 1920s, she often is characterized as a social worker, although her professional allegiance remained to sociology. Williams epitomized the first generation of professional women sociologists on the Great Plains.

### BIOGRAPHY

Hattie Plum was born on August 29, 1878 in Minden, Iowa. The details of her life are sketchy (she eschewed public notoriety as an adult) but can be gleaned from a brief, unpublished biography prepared by her husband, T. F. A. Williams. The biography is found in Box 68 of the Hattie Plum Williams Collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society. Florence Brugger (1964) wrote a useful but biased account based on T. F. A. Williams's later recollections.

Hattie Plum's father was a tenant farmer from Ohio, and her mother was from Pennsylvania. She had six half brothers and sisters. She graduated at age sixteen from the Shelby, Iowa, High School in 1894, and taught in a country school for the next four years. Concurrently, she attended Iowa State University.

In June 1898 Hattie Plum married T. F. A. Williams, a young lawyer and pioneer from Lincoln, Nebraska, and she moved there to live. Before their marriage her husband attended the University of Nebraska, where he made the acquaintance of two noted sociologists, Amos G. Warner and George E. Howard,

who were then on the faculty. Both Warner and Howard impressed T. F. A. with their activist, egalitarian scholarship. Thus her husband's lifelong sympathy for sociological ideas had an early foundation.

Williams continued studies at the University of Nebraska in 1899 and graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1902. She resumed her teaching career as a substitute teacher in the public schools and at the First Christian Church in Lincoln. In 1907 she taught in a "beet-sugar room" that offered special classes for the children of Russian German immigrants who worked in the Nebraska sugar beet fields during the fall harvest. In response to the social conditions faced by these children, Williams decided to document the discrimination against Russian Germans in Nebraska. Her husband noted that "Mrs. Williams decided to gather the facts" on the lives and work of the Russian Germans in Nebraska.

Her empirical interest in the Russian Germans shaped her graduate sociology work at the University of Nebraska. "In 1908," wrote her husband, "a year in which there were 10 inches of rain in one month, Mrs. Williams tramped through the mud making home visits to take the Lincoln School census of the German Russians." She wrote a thesis on the naturalization of Russian German immigrants (Williams 1906) and received her master's degree in 1909.

She began doctoral studies in sociology under George E. Howard. Her continuing research on the Russian Germans occupied the next six years. During this period she also studied with Lucile Eaves.\* Williams's (1916) dissertation was titled *A Social Study of the Russian German*. Her doctorate, the first awarded in sociology at the University of Nebraska, was conferred in 1915.

On receipt of her doctorate, a major opportunity opened unexpectedly. Lucile Eaves left Nebraska in 1915 (because of inadequate salary), and Williams was offered Eaves' position—albeit at an even lower salary. With Howard's encouragement, Williams accepted the post, and thus filled "the woman's position" of practical sociologist at the University of Nebraska from 1915 until her retirement in 1945.

Williams was an effective and committed educator. "From the outset Dr. Williams has proved herself possessed of the qualities of a strong and zealous teacher" (Howard 1988, 14). Her students became "a small army" for social betterment (Pound 1916). Her courses included Introduction to Sociology, Modern Social Betterment Movements, Community Problems, Criminology, Immigration, American Race Problems, Child Welfare, and Seminar in Medical Sociology (Howard 1988, 14–15).

Emphasis on detailed field research hallmarked Williams's courses. Her students mapped the sociological patterns of eastern Nebraska, and their reports (preserved in Williams's archival papers) provide untapped data for modern analysis. The reports reflect Williams's high academic standards and chronicle her influence on waves of cohorts who passed through her courses.

Williams's faculty appointment was soon followed by the departure of her powerful and respected mentor, George E. Howard. In 1917 he retired and devoted himself to his presidency of the American Sociological Society. From 1917 to 1922, without Howard's supportive presence, Williams became increas-

ingly isolated in the department of political science and sociology. Howard's position was not filled, and the political scientists chafed at Williams's continued tenure. Her experience was not unique, however, as women sociologists were everywhere under fire during this period (Deegan 1988, 309–317).

Williams's slide into professional obscurity took an extraordinary turn in 1923, when George E. Howard successfully urged the university to make Williams the next departmental chair. To substantiate his endorsement, Howard came out of retirement and taught full-time at half salary in 1923–1924 (Howard's support is documented in the Hattie Plum Williams Collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society and the George E. Howard papers at the University of Nebraska Archives).

Even with Howard's backing, Williams struggled with her male colleagues during her years as chair from 1923 to 1928. In 1925 sociology and political science separated. Williams continued as chair of the new department of sociology, and Joyce O. Hertzler (a male protégé of Edward A. Ross) was added to the staff. Howard's death in 1928 marked the end of Williams's rise in sociology. His egalitarianism (Williams 1929) was not institutionalized, and Williams relinquished the chair to Hertzler. Williams was assigned responsibility for a new program in "social work," and turned her attention to her students and the local community.

When Willard Waller arrived on the Nebraska campus in 1929, he judged that Williams was the "powerhouse of the department" even though Hertzler was then chair (Goode, Furstenberg, and Mitchell 1970, 33). Hertzler was passively instrumental in Waller's subsequent abrupt dismissal, however, and university administrators later subjected Williams to a year's unpaid leave of absence during a financial shortfall in the 1930s.

Before being administratively shunted aside, Williams became the first woman known to chair a coeducational, doctoral sociology program in the United States. Her chairship marked the only respite in the long saga of patriarchal control of sociology at the University of Nebraska. Not one woman was hired in a tenure track position during Hertzler's subsequent forty-year reign. A sign that patriarchal domination may be lessening at Nebraska was evidenced in 1986, when Lynn White was appointed to a three-year term as chair, and thus became the second woman to hold the chief administrative office in the Nebraska department.

Professionally, Williams became increasingly identified with the emerging field of social work. Nonetheless, Williams located her interests within sociology, not within a new and separate discipline. Although her interest in practical sociology led her in 1923 to establish a medical social work program at the University Medical College in Omaha, it was operated under the joint control of the medical college and the sociology department. This initiative resulted in controversy, and the program was terminated—much to her regret—in 1926.

Williams was pushed and pulled into a widening circle of professional social workers, in which she found the collegiality that most male sociologists denied her. Williams and Edith Abbott\* (a University of Nebraska alumna) corresponded

about students that Williams sent to the University of Chicago for graduate work (where Abbott was dean) and about candidates that Abbott recommended for faculty posts at Nebraska. These professional exchanges in the 1920s and 1930s (preserved in the Hattie Plum Williams Collection at the Nebraska State Historical Society) document Williams's inclusion in a national social work network.

Williams's commitment to activist research (modeled after her mentors, Howard and Eaves) distanced her in the 1920s from a new breed of male sociologists who shunned progressive political action and defined sociology as "value-free." She worked tirelessly for progressive laws, in the 1920s for child welfare legislation and in the 1930s for public assistance. Ernest Witte (1963), a student of Williams and a former director of the Nebraska Graduate School of Social Work, wrote: "During the '30s and '40s [Williams] was a frequent visitor to legislative sessions where she urged support of numerous bills in the sociology field." She also traveled extensively, including a harrowing return from war-torn England in the fall of 1938 (Williams, T. F. A. 1939).

Given her commitment to social betterment, her professional visibility at the University of Nebraska, and the lack of colleagues to share the responsibility, Williams became a clearinghouse for numerous volunteer associations in Nebraska. Her correspondence reflects the heavy load she carried as the leading social welfare activist in the state for many years. Her many organizational accomplishments included cofounding the Nebraska Welfare Association. She worked long, dedicated hours answering requests for help, information, and encouragement. She also was a frequent lecturer throughout her professional career (Williams, note on "The School as an Assimilative Agent," 1916).

Williams was honored in 1936 when she received the Distinguished Service Award from the Nebraska Conference for Social Work in 1936. Despite such well-deserved recognition and her public association with social work, Williams identified herself as a "practical sociologist." Her ties to a progressive, active vision of sociology ran deep. Hattie Plum Williams retired from the University of Nebraska in 1945. A memorial fellowship was established in her name in 1963, the year of her death.

Williams's impact on the discipline of sociology was stunted by organizational and institutional factors. She was increasingly pushed away from sociology as a profession, and her research and writing were not structurally supported by her University. She never fully flourished in either social work or sociology. She remained "betwixt and between," and forged a particular practice of sociology valued in everyday life but not in the academy. She was rewarded locally by the community for her service to Nebraska as a social worker and an educator. She inspired her students, supported people of color, and lived an active political life.

## MAJOR THEMES

Williams emphasized the social processes of immigration and naturalization. "Immigration is the field of Dr. Williams' special research" (Howard 1988,

14). Williams's work is grounded in the school of thought called "critical pragmatism" (cf. Deegan 1988, 247–263, 288–295). Her ideas echo those of Edith Abbott and Lucile Eaves. Williams's concern with the adjustments made by immigrants to new social conditions dovetailed with her equally strong interest in the operation and effectiveness of social welfare agencies. As a "practical sociologist," Williams focused on themes now included under the rubric of "applied sociology."

Williams left a small, but solid body of scholarly works, of which the most important part relates to immigration and naturalization. Her master's thesis (Williams 1906) prefigured her 1915 doctoral dissertation, which appeared as *A Social Study of the Russian German* (Williams 1916). Williams (1912) published her first article, on naturalization, while in graduate school.

Williams meticulously documented the experiences of the Russian Germans in Lincoln and Nebraska. She explored their historical roots in Germany, their first dislocation to Russian control, and their subsequent migration to the United States. The poverty, isolation, speech, and customs of the German Russians set them apart from their neighbors, who did not accept them as equals. Williams's analysis mirrors her strong advocacy—and that of her immigrant subjects—for democracy and human rights.

Williams's unflinching critical insight is exemplified in her comments at the 1917 meetings of the American Sociological Society, where she was asked by George Howard to discuss the papers presented in the session on "immigration" (Williams 1918). She responded favorably to Edith Abbott's paper, but Williams critiqued the work of two male sociologists (Henry Pratt Fairchild and Arthur J. Todd) as fundamentally meaningless and lacking in imagination. With the exception of Howard, there is no evidence that her critical abilities were welcomed by her considerably more powerful male colleagues.

Williams planned further studies on the Russian Germans, but did not complete the project because of her heavy teaching load and her time-consuming commitments to civic service (cf., Williams 1919, 1920). Her preliminary work (including several unpublished papers) was collected and posthumously published as *The Czar's Germans* (Williams 1975). This noteworthy, but uneven effort suggests the direction of Williams's unrealized research agenda.

The second major category of Williams's work includes careful, pragmatically useful studies of social legislation and social welfare agencies in Nebraska. In the *Nebraska Survey of Social Resources* Williams (1936) contributed a major account of the history of social welfare legislation in Nebraska. It was "used as a reference" for many years (Witte 1963).

*A Handbook of Social Agencies in Nebraska* was compiled by Williams (1940) from her students' cooperative research on local organizations. This was a useful contribution but not a stimulating intellectual production. It did, however, reflect the cooperative research model advocated by Lucile Eaves (1920).

Many of Williams's writings on social legislation, often unpublished or narrowly distributed, remain in archival deposits in Lincoln. Her field reports for

the national Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement (Williams 1933) are good examples. In 1931 she completed metropolitan studies of "the cost of crime" for the Commission. Her reports on Lincoln and Omaha, Nebraska, were abstracted and summarized with those of numerous researchers from across the country (National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement 1931). The typescripts of her full "cost of crime" reports reside in the University of Nebraska Library.

## CRITIQUES OF HATTIE PLUM WILLIAMS

There is little published criticism of Williams's work. Herbert A. Miller, an expert on immigration, wrote a positive review in the *American Journal of Sociology* of Williams's (1916) *A Social Study of the Russian German*. Miller's (1917, 848) major criticism was that "the study is essentially objective," a comment considered praiseworthy today. Several sociologists, including Emory Bogardus, wrote to congratulate Williams for her research in *A Study of the Russian German*.

Hill (1988a) explicates Williams's (1933) unrecognized work for the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement. He further explores the bureaucratic ecology of Williams's work vis a vis that undertaken for the Commission by fellow Nebraskans Edith Abbott and Roscoe Pound (Hill 1989).

Williams's role in Nebraska sociology is being documented by a small group of researchers now analyzing "the Nebraska school of sociology" (Hill 1988b; Deegan and Hill, in process). This work identifies Williams's career as representative of the ideological and organizational struggles that women faced in the discipline of sociology and the academy from 1900 to 1925. Her successful fight for recognition from the majority of her white male colleagues exemplifies the contests for control typical of the discipline in the 1920s.

The meticulous demographic data collected by Williams on German Russians in Lincoln, Nebraska, is used with frequency by the many historians and popular writers who study this ethnic group. Many of these authors use Williams's raw data but do not cite her as the source of their information. An exception to this behavior is found in John Anderson's detailed study of Lincoln, Nebraska's local election on May 4, 1909. He draws on Williams's data and writings to document the contrasting view of "Americanized settlers" versus the "foreign" element of German Russians (Anderson 1989).

Williams played a major role in local women's groups, social legislation, and teaching from 1915 to 1950. Such roles were frequently filled by other, even more obscure women sociologists throughout the Midwest, Southwest, and Great Plains. These heroic women's lives have not been documented, although they deserve attention. Frequently aligned with progressive interests, these women helped to build and shape the social infrastructure of their communities. Their ideas were rooted in applied sociology both within and outside of the academy.

Hattie Plum Williams is a Weberian "ideal type" of these forgotten women in sociology.

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