

Joseph Kirk Folsom

Read at Vassar Faculty Meeting 10/12/60

Joseph Kirk Folsom, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Vassar College, died suddenly on May 27, 1960, within a year of his retirement. He came to Vassar College as Professor of Sociology and Economics in 1931, after having taught at the University of Pittsburgh (1922-24), Dartmouth, and Sweet Briar College (1924-1931). During his last year, he taught as Lecturer at Boston University. He was to have conducted a seminar in sociology in Germany as a Fulbright Scholar in the spring of 1961, and had made plans for a trip to the Soviet Union to study the contemporary Russian family.

He graduated from Rutgers University with a B.S. degree in Civil Engineering in 1913, received a Masters Degree in Sociology at Clark University in 1915, and a Ph.D. in Psychology at Columbia University in 1917. In World War I, he served in the U.S. Army as Psychological Examiner, and shortly after the war went to Czechoslovakia as Regional Director of the American YMCA. During the Second world war he took a leave from Vassar to serve as Psychological warfare Executive in the Office of war Information in this country and in England. He was the author of several books, a contributor to others, and wrote scores of articles for professional and semi-professional Journals. His first two books were written prior to his selection of the family as a field of specialization - Culture and Social Progress in 1929 and Social Psychology in 1931. He later contributed two major books to the literature on marriage and family living - The Family, Its Sociology and Social Psychiatry in 1934 (revised as The Family and Democratic Society in 1943) and Youth Family and Education in 1941. He was editor and contributor to a series of pioneering Vassar lectures published under the title of A Plan for Marriage in 1938. In 1939 he was elected President of the Eastern Sociological Society. From 1942 to 1944, he served as editor of the American Sociological Review, culminating his work with a special number devoted to Recent Trends in the Soviet Union. Here his knowledge of the Russian language, one of four languages he had mastered, was of great assistance in getting at the sources.

In his articles appearing in various journals, one senses the urgency he felt to counsel and educate people in the skills of interpersonal relations in order to help them increase their satisfactions in living. This concern for the distribution of useful information on the sociology and psychology of personality formation within the family is borne out by his administrative and consultative roles in such organizations as the National Congress of Parents and Teacher, the National Council on Parent Education, the National Conference on Family Life and the National Council of Family Relations. He was one of the founders of the American Association of Marriage Counselors, and upon his retirement from Vassar, began a practice as a marriage counselor in Boston.

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At the time of his death, he had almost completed an interdisciplinary social science test, to be called Society for Man. He

was also well along on a new book on the family.

Through the years at Vassar College, the courses which became most closely identified with Professor Folsom were those in the Family, Social Theory, Social Institutions, and the interdepartmental course on the Soviet Union. He was one of the first social scientists at any college to introduce fieldwork as a part of academic course work. In 1936, he wrote an account of his students' activities in local social agencies and organizations, in a Report to the President of the College.

Temperamentally, Joe Folsom was a liberal, a pragmatic social scientist, and a man who cared very much about what happened to people. In attempting to trace the strands of his interests, his point of view, and the nature of his association with faculty and students at Vassar, one becomes increasingly aware that even those colleagues who worked most closely with him never really knew him as a person. What is evident is that he was a shy man. He was also a courageous man, for in 1953, his teaching and writing were interrupted by a period of hospitalization which he sought voluntarily. Moreover, after a semester's leave, he returned to the College and quietly took up his teaching and research. In his last years at Vassar, he continued to speak eloquently in faculty meetings, especially urging us to entertain "outrageous hypotheses" as a stimulus to rethinking educational policy in a wider frame of reference. He was creative, experimental, and of liberal outlook to the end. He was a man who believed deeply that a liberal education could lead to a life of self-fulfillment in work and personal relations. He believed that, since family life is located at the very core of society, in understanding it, one finds many clues to an understanding of the larger culture. Once he said in tribute to Ernest Groves, what can now be said of Professor Folsom himself: "in (his) life we may read this meaning, that family living can be made better through science, if it be guided by the faith that man was not made for the family, but the family for man".

Joan Gordon

John Murra

Leslie Koempel, Chairman