

Special Section: In Honor of James Emmett Birren (2018-2016)

The Journey to Social Policy and Aging: Yet Another Birren Contribution to Multidisciplinary Research and Graduate Education

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1. The Social Policy Lab Journey Begins

In the early 1970s the seven-year old Andrus Gerontology Center (née Rossmoor-Cortese Institute for the Study of Retirement and Aging)—working from its off-campus offices in an old industrial building on “the other side” of the Harbor Freeway—was implementing plans for a permanent USC Campus home. The new elegant three-story building (plus basement for animal studies and a running track on the roof for human exercise) with its red brick façade, multiple arches, and courtyard [including a “fountain of youth” with a time capsule buried underneath] designed in the “New Formalism” style by Edward Durell Stone, was being built.

The second and third floors would have ample space for the “laboratory” structure that Jim Birren brought to USC, reflecting his substantial experience with the National Institutes of Health. At the USC Andrus Center these included a Biology Lab, a Psychology Lab, and a Sociology—Social Organization and Behavior—Lab. Around the same time that the architectural plans were developing, so too were plans developing for the further expansion of multidisciplinary research in aging and the social sciences. An application submitted to the U.S. Administration on Aging [AoA] resulted in the three-year “Social Foundations of Aging” grant. In addition to resources for Psychology and Sociology the project also would support new Andrus Center faculty positions in Political Science and Economics.

By intellectual inclination and institutional experience, Jim Birren believed in and promoted a multidisciplinary approach to the study of aging. The close physical proximity of biology, psychology, and sociology research labs in the same building was a major expression of this epistemology. The Social Foundations of Aging grant, however, offered an opportunity to develop an even more integrated multidisciplinary activity.

Birren and colleagues decided to create a new “Social Policy Laboratory” that would reflect not the work of a single social science discipline but would be multidisciplinary “inside” the unit. This would be a lab whose identity would be defined by the issues it studied rather than the academic disciplines of its faculty. Political Science and Economics were identified in the AoA grant as clearly central to the analysis of aging and social policy. Demography is typically a field within Sociology and also a “natural” dimension of social policy, and thus would be part of the new lab. After faculty discussion, Communications and Social Work were also included.

Being new to both the USC faculty and the Andrus Center, I worked closely with both Jim Birren and Phoebe Liebig to make sure that USC faculty recruitment policies and diplomacy were followed. In addition to my Political Science faculty appointment, the Social Policy Lab recruited four recent or soon-to-be PhD faculty: Robin J. Walther, Economics; Robert A. Harootyan, Demography; James A. Danowski, Mass Communications; and Raymond M. Steinberg, Social Work. The primary goals of the lab were to contribute to research on aging from multiple perspectives, which these researchers began to accomplish fairly soon.

In addition to facilitating further research contributions to the world of gerontology research, the multidisciplinary nature of research in aging and social policy resulted in a variety of other institutional campus opportunities. It was, for example, the first time Chairs (and Deans) in Economics, Communications, and Political Science were involved in gerontology faculty recruitment. In turn, these new relationships promoted further visibility and multidisciplinary activity between the Andrus Center and an increasingly research oriented USC campus. The recently established (1971) Annenberg School for Communications and Journalism was so new that I met with Dean Frederick Williams in a mobile home trailer in the middle of USC as the ground-breaking for their dramatic new building was literally taking place around us.

2. Young Meets Young Meets Young

In September 1973 I joined the USC faculty as Laboratory Chief of the Social Policy Laboratory and Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science.

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My journey “back to” USC and to working with Jim Birren and the Andrus Gerontology Center, however, turned out to be an intermingling of both intellectual and personal factors. I graduated USC as a political science major with a research interest in politics and aging—yes, even before I knew how to spell *gerontology* yet alone pronounce it correctly. During my junior and senior years I was a research assistant in the Population Research Laboratory, the demography research unit of the Department of Sociology, under the direction of Maurice D. (Don) Van Arsdol. This gave me the intellectual direction and the data to write an undergraduate honors thesis examining age, aging, and cohorts in a political context. This became the foundation of a career-long focus: three years later I completed a dissertation still trying to understand and “unwind” the maturational vs. generational causes and correlates of political attitudes and behavior.

During my dissertation-writing year I began to exchange notes with another young “generations researcher,” Assistant Professor of Sociology Vern Bengtson, the Laboratory Chief of the Social Organization and Behavior Laboratory at the Andrus Gerontology Center. Vern’s USC letterhead in this pre-email era was emblazoned with *Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center* in the upper right corner, and just below it the words: *The Study of Generations*. I was impressed; no, blown away. Really! An entire university research center devoted (I concluded) to the study of generations. And at my beloved alma mater no less. The letters turned into phone calls and meetings, and the meetings resulted in an invitation to give a guest lecture (I was now an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania), and so, two recent Chicago-area PhD students in Sociology (University of Chicago) and Political Science (Northwestern) each interested in the study of aging and generations became colleagues and later good friends and international traveling buddies—all combining not only to be a door opener but a critical intellectual part of my journey to the Social Policy Laboratory.

There is, however, a more personal, or anecdotal, and certainly more fortuitous piece of this journey, and one that brings long-term reminiscing about Jim Birren even more front and center. A good part of my undergraduate senior year (1964-1965) was spent working on my senior thesis with guidance from Don Van Arsdol, Director of the Population Studies Laboratory (not to be confused with one of the Andrus Center Labs—which did not yet exist). Although part of the Sociology Department, as with many research groups the “Pop Lab” had separate offices—and they just happened to be on the second floor of that old industrial building on the “other side” of the Harbor Freeway. Knowing of my “unusual” [50 years ago!] interest linking political science with gerontology, Van Arsdol wanted me to meet his new neighbor, the director of the Rossmoor-Cortese Institute on Retirement and Aging, which a few months earlier had set up shop on the first floor. And so on a Friday afternoon in early 1965 I went downstairs and met the smiling, dark-haired, enthusiastic, 47-year-old James Birren. Now that I know

how the journey unfolded I wish I could recall more of that meeting. Even four years later when the two assistant professors were exchanging letters and phone calls, I didn’t make the connection between Birren’s Rossmoor-Cortese Institute and Bengtson’s Gerontology Center that focused solely on The Study of Generations!

3. Doctoral Education and Degrees

Jim Birren’s support for multidisciplinary doctoral training at the Andrus Gerontology Center was well-known and long-standing. For successive five-year renewed Training Grants, the National Institutes of Health, and later the National Institute on Aging, funded Andrus Center doctoral students primarily in the “traditional” gerontology disciplines of Biology, Psychology, and Sociology. With the Social Policy Lab faculty now part of the Center, the next USC renewal application to NIH/NIA for the first time included funding for graduate students in Economics and Political Science. As it turned out, this successful application was not only a breakthrough for the Andrus Center but also a notable extension of disciplinary doctoral support policy for the NIA itself.

Although the NIA was created in 1974, the history of aging research at the NIH and James Birren go back much further.¹ In 1959 the NIMH established a Section on Aging headed by Birren, who had been at NIMH since 1950. In 1962 Congress established the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development) as part of NIH. A year later the new NICHD expanded its interest into adult human development and Jim was selected to head the NICHD aging division which he directed until 1964 when he moved across country to that old USC building on the other side of the Harbor Freeway. Not surprisingly, when Congress created the National Institute on Aging in 1974 he was asked to be its first Director. By then, however, Jim and his family were solidly established at USC and decided to remain in Los Angeles, and Dr. Robert Butler, his long-time friend and colleague, became the first NIA Director.²

As part of this USC and NIH tradition of multidisciplinary doctoral training, the Social Policy Lab took an active role in developing the Davis School of Gerontology’s first doctoral program. The Davis School’s current PhD in Gerontology encompasses the full range of aging studies from biology through social policy; and more recently (2014) a second doctorate in the Biology of Aging also has been established.³ In the mid-1980s, however, with the strong encouragement of Jim Birren and David Peterson, long-time Director and Associate Dean of the Davis School, we began planning for a new doctorate in aging rooted in the social sciences and focused primarily on social policy. It became the first doctorate in aging in the United States and perhaps the first of its kind in the world.

As the internal and the university-wide planning process evolved over a two-year period, the “academic politics of university degrees” became fully revealed when the Andrus Gerontology Center, now part of the Davis

School of Gerontology, petitioned the university to establish the degree. Because the parent institution was now a *School*, the new doctoral degree could be offered by the USC Davis School rather than by the Graduate School, which is the traditional grantor of doctoral degrees. So, good news and bad news.

The Good: If the degree was owned and offered “in house” then the Davis School would have substantial authority over such traditional rules and requirements as admissions criteria and foreign language testing. The Bad: The Graduate School apparently owns the “rights” to the phrase “Doctor of Philosophy” and so a doctoral degree awarded by the Davis School could not be a PhD. To be sure, our new degree could be called a “Doctor of Gerontology” as are some professional doctoral degrees (e.g., DPharm in Pharmacy, DBA in Business, and JD in Law). Gerontology itself, however, was (and perhaps is still) somewhat unknown publicly as an academic discipline, and so an unknown or ambiguous “Doctor of Gerontology” provenance would likely be an added burden. Further, beyond these issues of traditional usage and academic legitimacy, the Andrus/Davis coordinating committee also saw peril in a “DoG” program and degree. And so, what became the first U.S. doctorate in aging and gerontology is indeed a PhD.

4. Legacy

In 1990 my wife Donna Crane, baby Elizabeth, and I left USC, first for a Fulbright year at the University of Glasgow, and then for Philadelphia.⁴ Through USC visits and professional meetings I continued to seek Jim’s counsel. My long-time interest in maturation vs. generation research continued but the focus moved from political gerontology to financial gerontology.⁵ For a population of aging baby boomers the central issues of retirement, pensions, and health insurance clearly are a place where politics smashes into finance. Given the current tumultuous national discussion of these issues, perhaps the move from political to financial gerontology isn’t so far after all.

In my capacity as Director of the University of Pennsylvania’s Boettner Center of Financial Gerontology I asked Jim to be a member of our Board of Trustees. During his four years on the Board he continued to be an available and valuable critic, mentor, and friend. Indeed, in 1994 he gave the Center’s annual Boettner Lecture in Philadelphia, again demonstrating his strong multidisciplinary knowledge and insights, linking psychology to finance and policy: “Consumer Decision-Making and Age:

Maintaining Resources and Independence.”⁶ At a Board meeting two years earlier, however, I introduced him to Dr. Davis W. Gregg, Founding Director of the Boettner Center—and my “East Coast mentor.”

Even their first conversations revealed that they shared a number of experiences and similar career paths as educational pioneers. Davis W. Gregg (PhD, 1948, Economics, University of Pennsylvania), had been the intellectual leader of the American College of Life Underwriters (initially a program of Penn’s Wharton School, now a school to train financial professionals in Bryn Mawr, PA⁷) for more than four decades, retiring as President (1954-1989) at age 71. In the context of an aging society he saw the need to expand financial education to include social gerontology, and in 1987-1989 laid the groundwork for what became the Boettner Center of Financial Gerontology at Penn⁸ (and enticed me to move from L.A. to Philadelphia).

As we know, James E. Birren (PhD, 1947, Psychology, Northwestern University) had developed aging studies at NIMH and NICHD, *retired* as a commissioned officer in the U.S. Public Health Service to oversee the creation and flourishing of the USC Andrus Gerontology Center and Davis School of Gerontology, and “retired again” in 1989 at age 71 to develop the Borun Center for Gerontological Research at UCLA.⁹ As I sat in during these first conversations between my two mentors, my own career-long interest in the cohort concept as a lens through which to view the generational dimension of gerontology was brought into amazingly sharp focus. Swapping educational administration stories, Gregg and Birren noticed how their PhD and “retirement” years were similar. I should not have been surprised then, as they were not surprised, that their birthdays were just 22 days apart, March and April 1918. My West Coast and East Coast mentors were members of a very narrowly defined generational cohort!

The following Monday Dave Gregg told me how much he not only enjoyed exchanging shared life (and cohort) experiences with Jim Birren, but how much he admired what Jim had accomplished, especially Jim’s serial successes at NIH, at USC, and then UCLA. He observed simply that in academic life successful professors accumulate impressive vitas, but great leaders build lasting institutions.

James Emmett Birren was truly a great leader.

End Notes

- ¹ National Institute on Aging, “NIA Time Line,” <https://www.nia.nih.gov/about/nia-timeline>.
- ² NIH History Office, “Telephone interview with Dr. James E. Birren,” conducted by Dr. Ingrid Farreras, March 22, 2002. <https://history.nih.gov/archives/downloads/birrenjames.pdf>.
- ³ USC, Davis School of Gerontology, Ph.D Programs, <http://gero.usc.edu/students/prospective-students/ph-d-programs/>
- ⁴ NB: The move did not end my academic affiliation with USC. Moving from traditional work to more applied research I accepted a one-year position in the Los Angeles area which turned out to be five years (2008-2012) as Executive Director of the Center on Aging at the Motion Picture & Television Fund (MPTF) in Woodland Hills. With MPTF encouragement I accepted an invitation from my Gerontology friends and colleagues to teach a course from within my “new field” of Financial Gerontology (an undergraduate seminar on “Silver Industries”) as part of the Davis School’s emerging emphasis on Business and Aging. This became my fourth “tour of duty” at USC: I lived much of the summer between my junior and senior years in high school on the USC campus as part of a high school debate squad clinic (it was the summer of the Democratic Convention that nominated JFK and I got to see his acceptance speech in person at the Coliseum); then four undergraduate years; then seventeen years as Professor; and five years as Adjunct Professor. Quite a journey!
- ⁵ Wikipedia, “Financial Gerontology,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Financial_gerontology.
- ⁶ The American College, “1994 Boettner Lecture Invitation,” http://digitalcommons.theamericancollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1070&context=archival_miscellany.
- ⁷ Wikipedia, “American College of Financial Services,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_American_College_of_Financial_Services
- ⁸ “Davis Gregg, 75, Insurance Authority,” *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/10/29/us/davis-w-gregg-75-insurance-authority.html>
- ⁹ Wikipedia, “James Birren,” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Birren.