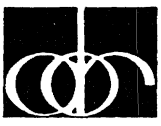


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MARILYN WILSON: A CASE HISTORY OF
PSYCHOLOGICAL SUCCESS AND
CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Working Paper No. 235

Raymond E. Hill

The University of Michigan

Graduate School of Business Administration
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I. THE EARLY YEARS

Marilyn Wilson was born on a farm in northwestern Kansas, the first child of young parents. Not only was she a first child, but she was also the first grandchild on both sides of the family. During her early life she spent much time with aunts and uncles as well as with "very attentive" grandparents.

She described herself as particularly close to her father's brother, Uncle James, who lived with the family during her early childhood, and to her mother's brother, Uncle Bart. She enjoyed being "the apple of their eye."

Her closeness to these uncles was in part a function of having a very busy father who spent long hours out-of-doors, determined to be successful at farming. His long hours and hard work concerned everyone; grandparents, as well as friends and neighbors, cautioned him that he would "work himself to death." Ironically, as Marilyn related it, he is still alive and well, but she unfortunately lost her mother to cancer at a relatively early age.

As a young child, Marilyn spent much time at her grandparents' homes. She noted that the types of play engaged in at the two grandparents' homes differed significantly. "At my maternal grandparents, I had an enclosed porch set up as a 'kitchen.' There I was always involved in traditional 'little girls' play.' At my paternal grandparents' home, I was always 'at the office.' (Though they, too, were engaged in

farming, this set of grandparents was involved in county politics; my grandmother served as town clerk for many years.)"

During this early period, she experienced two difficult events: first, the death of her maternal grandfather and, second, the birth of a brother. "Not only was a person with whom I was very close removed from my life, but I found myself having to share the remaining close relationships with this new brother.

"Recently I discovered a copy of my grandfather's obituary, which I don't recall having seen before. (It had been given to my by my grandmother -- along with a stack of clippings about my high school and college accomplishments.) I was somewhat surprised to note that I was listed as his only grandchild, 'whom he loved so dearly.' Apparently my fond recollections of this grandfather are accurate. (I still have, and cherish, the kitchen set which he built for me.)"

Though her parents had only high school educations, it was always assumed that both she and her brother would attend college. Her father, upon graduation from high school (soon after the Depression ended), was awarded an athletic scholarship to Kansas State University. However, feeling the need to help his family get back on its feet financially, he declined the scholarship. "I have always sensed a regret on his part at not having attended college; perhaps that regret was a factor in the assumption that both Keith and I would go to college. That regret

may also explain part of the ambition and drive which my father has; he is very proud of the fact that he began farming with \$3,000 borrowed from a friend of his father's -- and is now one of the biggest farmers in northern Kansas." She elaborated further on her father:

"My father is now 'semi-retired.' I have often wondered if he is satisfied with all that he has amassed; I would guess that he is pleased -- but not yet satisfied. There is still within him a drive which will motivate him as long as he lives, I am sure. However, he is now able to take the time to enjoy his money (he vacations in California during the winter) and his grandchildren. I don't recall his being able to vacation with us [when I was a child] for more than three or four days at one time; I don't remember his having time to enjoy us as small children. It is a surprise -- and a pleasure -- to see him enjoy his grandchildren. I think of my father as a man who has suppressed his true feelings and emotions for many years. Under the surface is a 'man of feeling'; unfortunately, he has great difficulty expressing those feelings."

In describing her mother, she related the following: "My recollections of my mother during the early years are hazy. I know that she must have had a difficult time adjusting to life on a farm away from her home -- married to a very ambitious young man who spent little time in the house with his wife and children. In addition, she was a mother at

the age of twenty-one -- barely having had time to adjust to being a wife. I wish that I could have had the opportunity to discuss with her the feelings she had as a young wife and mother. "

Marilyn's elementary school years were happy ones; she did well in school, and became involved in a number of extracurricular activities. The most significant of these was 4-H, which she joined at age ten. She was extremely active in both "girls and boys 4-H, " with interests ranging from cooking and sewing to raising and showing Angus cattle. However, she did spend much more of her time indoors with her mother than outdoors with her father.

The first three years of school were spent at a country school (one room, eight grades). "During the first and second years I was alone as 'the first grader, ' enjoying much attention from the older children and from the teacher, Miss Field. I remember her as a beautiful lady -- and one who took a very special interest in me.

"I also remember my disappointment in learning that our school was closing (due to consolidation) and that 'my teacher' was getting married and retiring. I have remained in touch with her over the years; in fact, she and her husband attended our wedding. I remember thinking, 'she's as beautiful as ever. '

"Another grade school teacher whom I remember well is Mrs. Garrett, who was my fifth grade teacher. Again, she was a beautiful

lady -- and again I seemed to be a special student of hers. In fact, she gave me her stamp collection (which I have now given to my daughter, Anita). Unfortunately, I lost contact with Mrs. Garrett; she and her husband moved on to a larger school district. "

From her earliest memories, Marilyn did extremely well in school, but began to realize that she had no athletic ability. In fact, she dreaded recess in the fall and spring, because she was the last one chosen for the softball team!

"Elementary school brings with it vivid recollections of my mother. She became very active and involved in the activities I was a part of (4-H leader, for example). As I look back now, it seems that these were the years when she began to blossom -- to come into her own.

"During these years I 'kept books' for my father. I was very good with numbers -- and enjoyed getting his books in shape for the farm account specialist. My father paid me for this work -- the one task I remember being paid for while I lived at home. "

II. HIGH SCHOOL YEARS

"Life continued to flow along. High school found me excelling in math and science, but still very involved with the 'traditional girls' activities -- home economics, Future Homemakers of America, Future Teachers of America. I was involved in leadership roles at the local, county, and state levels for both FHA and FTA, as well as 4-H, and

attended national conferences for 4-H. High school, then, was a succession of classes and activities in which I did very well (with the exception of physics -- which I absolutely detested.)"

In high school, math and science teachers were all males; females typically taught typing, English, home economics, and physical education. A very influential person was her high school home economics teacher. Her physics and chemistry teacher -- who was also the school superintendent -- tried to interest her in the sciences, but later in college she did not enjoy science.

In looking back on high school she noted, "I was often driven to Dundee (where I had gone to grade school) to 'substitute' for teachers who were attending meetings. It seemed that the die was being cast; I was being groomed for a career in teaching.

"Socially, I had friends -- but was always a bit fearful that I would not have a boyfriend. As a result, I tended to go from one 'steady boyfriend' to another. As I look back now, I see those boyfriends as my 'security blankets.'

"As I glanced through my high school yearbook, I noted that boys commented that 'I was the one who did poorly on exams (in my estimation) but who had the A when the papers were returned.' I seem to have a history of underestimating my performance."

Marilyn summarized these formative years: "I was a very task-

oriented person. I was a leader of organizations, never a follower. To a certain extent, my leadership roles set me apart from my peers. I never quite felt like 'one of the gang.' Now I wonder, 'Can you be a member and a leader at the same time? Do leadership roles create barriers?' For me, I believe the answer was yes, barriers were created between me and my peers because of my many leadership positions.

"I grew up in an 'adult' world -- one in which I was highly respected by teachers, youth group advisors, and so on. I tended to identify with teachers; I became the object of their special interest.

"My parents did not believe in setting rules or guidelines; when discipline was needed, it was exercised by my mother. Discipline was rare; my conscience served as my guide. My relationship with my mother was a close one; however, my father was distant, difficult to reach emotionally. Our family was one in which affection was not often expressed overtly.

"Because I was the oldest and a girl, I assumed a great deal of responsibility. My brother, however, was much less responsible. If there was trouble, he was usually the cause of it.

"I was known in the community as a very ambitious, capable, conscientious person -- one who was always a perfect lady. That label did not bother me then; however, it very much disturbs me today. I much prefer being known as 'a capable person.'"

III. THE COLLEGE YEARS

Marilyn chose the University of Kansas in part because she wanted to prove to herself and others that she could "make it" at a large university. Also, Kansas had a good home economics school; at that point in time, home economics education seemed to be the logical career choice for her. Also, the university had something unique -- Home Ec House, an independent house comprised of about sixty women -- with a pledge/active system and a competitive entry system.

Marilyn reflected on her college decisions: "Actually, they were more 'nondecisions' than decisions. Careers other than home economics weren't seriously considered, a college other than U. of K. wasn't seriously considered. Home Ec House was chosen because I knew I would fit; I would be with people like myself. Also, I had been encouraged to apply by my county 4-H advisor, herself an alum of the house, and a very influential person during my high school years.

"I took with me to U. of K. another 'security blanket'; at the end of high school, I was dating a fellow who had just completed his freshman year there. He 'showed me the ropes, was my guiding light' during my freshman year. During my sophomore year, when I decided I could 'make it on my own,' he was discarded. For the first time, I was into the dating game (now wearing contact lenses, which improved my self-confidence almost 100 percent), and I thoroughly enjoyed the social life.

My freshman year was devoted to serious study -- as I still had the fear of 'not making it' at a Big-8 university. At the end of my freshman year (with a GPA of 4.6 out of a possible 5), I decided that I did have time for extracurricular activities, more extensive dating, and so on.

"The next three years resulted in my graduating with honors in home economics education. I really had begun to question whether I wanted to teach, but -- after all -- teaching was something I could always 'fall back on' if I needed to work (after those initial few years in a job).

"After a course in economics at the Business School, I was interested in taking some accounting courses, but was discouraged from doing so because they were 'such a drudge.' Needless to say, I was easily influenced by others during those years.

"During my junior year in college, I campaigned for and was elected to the presidency of Women's Group System (an organization which represented the 7000 independent women on campus). As President, I worked closely with the Dean of Women, Marianne Shane, and her staff. At the end of my senior year I was encouraged by Dean Shane to go to Harvard for an MBA. At the time, I was engaged -- and didn't give it serious consideration. After all, David was going for a Master's and possibly a Ph.D. -- and someone needed to earn some money. But, that seed [the idea of pursuing an MBA] was planted.

"The assistant deans I worked closely with were Jane Hall and Susan Ford. I remember thinking of them (and of Dean Shane) as unusual in that none of them were married; they were 'career women' -- something to which I hadn't been exposed. Dean Shane had served as an officer in the WAC's -- and was certainly a 'military type.' I had a great deal of respect for her; she was the first true 'business-woman' I encountered. She was extremely competent, efficient, but cool and reserved. She was someone I worked closely with for nearly two years, but never felt close to emotionally. I admired her, but was too different from her at that stage in my life to become close to her.

"Dean Hall was short, athletic, 'tomboyish.' I enjoyed being with her; she was fun. Dean Ford probably would have become a role model; she was younger, attractive, someone I felt I could identify with. However, shortly after my term of office began, she left U. of K. for another assignment. I remember being disappointed when she left. I felt that I had lost someone whom I could identify with."

IV. EARLY CAREER

Marilyn's first paid position (summers during high school and college had been spent either at home helping with gardening, canning, freezing, occasionally driving a tractor, or at summer school) was teaching home economics, grades 8 through 12, in a small town twenty

miles south of Manhattan. She thoroughly enjoyed that year, teaching five extremely varied classes plus advising the junior class. She had the freedom to "do her own thing," as she was the only home economics teacher. No two days were the same; there was much variety on the job.

For the most part, she was teaching "nontraditional home economics classes" -- getting into areas like career exploration and money management. It was the seniors whom she particularly enjoyed working with. They tended to have a very narrow view of the world (marriage immediately after high school), and she was interested in making them aware of their options and in encouraging them to look seriously at the alternative they had chosen.

Unfortunately, near the end of that first year of teaching, she was asked to apply for a position in a junior high school in Kansas City. Lured by the prestige of teaching in Kansas City and by more money, she interviewed, was selected, and accepted the position. As Marilyn talked of this new job she said, "Disaster # 1: Teaching junior high home economics was not for me! I was teaching four sections of an eighth-grade class, one section of a ninth-grade class. This was 'traditional home economics' (cooking and sewing), being taught to twelve-, thirteen-, and fourteen-year-olds. I found myself bored with the subject matter and thinking that anyone who could tolerate junior high students day after day must be a saint!

"The variety and the freedom to do my own thing were gone. I was now a member of a highly structured system and of a multi-teacher department. Fortunately, after one and one-half years -- and before I lost my sanity -- we moved to St. Louis, where David started his career with Ralston-Purina.

V. CAREER IN TRANSITION

At this point, Marilyn knew that returning to teaching was not for her. The field of retailing had always appealed to her; a professor from the University of Kansas suggested that she contact Lord & Taylors regarding their management training program. As it turned out, their Corporate Training Department needed a person to develop a "textiles training package" for sales personnel. Marilyn had enjoyed the area of textiles, was good at writing and developing programs -- and very enthusiastically accepted the position. Shortly afterwards, she learned that the Westgate store was nearing completion and that a training manager was needed. Again, lured by the prestige of the title "manager" and by more money, she accepted the position. The first year she really enjoyed, as there was a massive task to be accomplished (hundreds of new employees to be trained) and many "fires to be put out." However, after that first year the position became a rather routine one. The hectic pace and the excitement of opening year were over.

At this time, she and David were contemplating dual careers -- weighing that option against Marilyn's dropping out of the "world of paid employment" for six to eight years so that they might have children. She was convinced that if she chose to have children, she needed to be home with them during their preschool years.

Marilyn described the forces surrounding this decision: "At about the same time this decision was being contemplated, I learned that my mother was dying of cancer (at age forty-six). Her last wishes were that she might live long enough to be a grandmother and to see my brother married. I believe the desire to satisfy her first wish (to become a grandmother) was instrumental in our decision to have children at that point in time. Unfortunately, Mother died many months before our first daughter, Anita, was born -- and years before my brother married.

"Her death was a very significant event in my life. For the first time, I realized how we all (my father, my brother, and I) had relied on her. I felt we had developed an unhealthy dependence, and vowed to raise my children differently so that they would become independent, self-sufficient adults. Also, I had seen my mother begin to struggle with the 'empty nest' syndrome just before her illness was diagnosed. This factor was influential in my decision to return to a career the minute my youngest child entered first grade.

"Less than two years after Anita's birth, our second daughter, Lana, was born. To retain my sanity, I returned to substitute teaching when Lana was about a year old. At about that same time, I began working on the ten-hour teacher certification requirements. The last of the courses I took, 'Psychology of Women,' was taught by an outstanding professor from Washington University. She encouraged the entire class to do a lot of self-exploration. Many of us had long ago realized that we didn't want to return to our former careers; others were only beginning to examine the possibility of a new career. We took a battery of tests and these tests were followed by hours of career counseling.

"The tests and the career counseling renewed my interest in pursuing an MBA. (At that time, I viewed the MBA as a means of entering university administration of some sort.) Nearly two years were to pass before I applied for the Graduate Management Aptitude Test. During those two years, I was mustering up confidence. This was a big step for me -- for only the second time in my life was I contemplating something I wasn't at all sure I could accomplish successfully. (The first 'something' was completion of an undergraduate degree at a large university.) Finally, I took the test in the fall of '74, passed with flying colors, and was admitted to the Washington University MBA Program for the winter of '75."

VI. UNPAID CAREER

Marilyn digressed somewhat to talk about what she considered a very significant portion of her career development: involvement with the American Association of University Women. She first became a member of the St. Louis branch in 1967 and worked her way up through the ranks, beginning as newsletter mailer. Her next appointment was directory editor; then came a series of elected positions: treasurer, vice-president for program development, and finally president. As president, she enjoyed community exposure and also had the opportunity to freshen her leadership style and work on oral and written communication skills. Serving two years as president of this large organization did much to improve her self-confidence. Looking back, she realized that being president of this group was a goal she had clearly in mind from the beginning, but one which was never communicated directly to others.

As program development vice-president, she encouraged the branch to open up to the community and change what had been something of an "elitist" image. The group began to sponsor workshops, seminars, etc., not just for members, but for the community as a whole. There was some resistance to this "opening up"; however, as a result of the increased publicity, exposure, and change in image AAUW grew from a membership of four hundred to a membership of more than five hundred.

This "unpaid career" died with another personal loss, however. As Marilyn noted, "During the later years of my involvement in AAUW, I had been pursuing the MBA on a part-time basis in the evening program. As I neared the end of my presidency, the decision to return to the 'world of paid employment' with 'half an MBA' versus returning after completion of the degree had to be made.

"At that same time, I suffered another significant loss -- the unexpected death of my sister-in-law. I returned to Kansas to be with my brother, as we literally waited for Karen to die (she was in a hospital in a coma for six days). During that period of time I did more reflective thinking about life and its meaning than I had ever done before. It seemed to me that many of the decisions I had made in the past had been the result of societal pressures or of my family's influence -- rather than of my own choosing. Seeing a person die at such a young age (Karen was thirty when this tragedy occurred) made me realize how vulnerable we all are -- and made me realize the importance of living for oneself rather than for others."

VII. THE FIRST JOB AFTER COMPLETING THE MBA

Marilyn came back to St. Louis after Karen's death, determined to finish the MBA -- and to spend the year sorting through the values she considered important in a career. She didn't quite finish the degree before accepting a full-time position (as coordinator of the Internship

Program at Washington University, School of Management). As she reflected on this choice, several points emerged. "I sorted through my career-related values, and arrived at the following list:

- freedom to be my own boss; having sole responsibility for 'my own area'
- variety on the job; a minimum of routine
- the opportunity to develop and expand the position;
- opportunity for creativity
- opportunity for advancement
- a title and an office (where I can close the door)
- flexibility of hours (because of my family's needs at this particular stage)
- location; I felt I had been 'wasting' much precious time commuting to and from Lawrence
- number of vacation days per year (I enjoy traveling with my family)
- a paycheck (an unpaid career would no longer do)

"The position at Washington University met the above criteria. There is potential for advancement; within the year, the director's position should be opening up. In addition, I'm working with young men and women -- serving as a role model which many of them otherwise don't have. (Until I arrived, there were no other professional women in the School of Management.)

"Despite all of this, I had an initial feeling of having 'copped out.' With an MBA, I should be taking my place in the business world. I have the feeling this 'should' comes from peer pressure, plus my perceptions of my father's definition of success.

"As for my future career goals and aspirations, I would like to become Director of Placement eventually, then perhaps Dean of Student Affairs. How will I pursue these goals? I have already represented my dean at a large gathering of university personnel, I am serving on a Search Committee for an admissions officer (the committee is made up of personnel from all areas of the campus). I will be a member of an 'experimental committee' concerned with coordination of the various internship programs and of the placement function at Washington University. I would like to develop a course in Wirtten and Oral Communication for the Business World; our students are weak in this area -- as are most college students. I would very much enjoy teaching such a course; this is a possibility, since I do have a quarter-time faculty appointment.

"Forces and factors which might help and/or hinder me include:

- my ambition (which might lead to getting caught in the 'status-money' trap)
- my desire to do everything to the best of my ability (leading to an overconcentration on performance in this position, rather than

on preparation for the next position)

-my feminine appearance (I was recently introduced as a 'lady
you'll be hearing and seeing a lot more of,' rather than as a
woman)

-my lack of assertiveness (perceived as a lack of toughness)

-lack of a Ph. D. (I may at some future time return for this degree)

-lack of contact with successful female role models."

VIII. THE PRESENT - UPDATED

The following represents a conversation with Marilyn shortly after taking the job at Washington University. "I have now been in my position three months; after 'finding' a job description for the position I was hired to fill, I complained to my dean. (My described duties and my actual duties were miles apart! I was carrying out the director's duties.) My position and duties were reevaluated; my position is now a Grade 10 (rather than a Grade 8) and I am now officially the Director of the Internship Program. To date, my salary has not been adjusted; I am working on this! Perhaps my lack of assertiveness has been overcome.

"I no longer have the feeling that I have 'copped out.' I have gone back through papers, files, and so on, from years past, and this interest in student personnel work or college administrative work has always been there! It is a bona fide interest of mine! I believe that I

can now look at what I am doing and say, 'Yes, Marilyn, you are doing a good job.'

"I have just been asked to participate in a program sponsored by the Office of Student Life. It will have to do with dual-career families, an area I am very much interested in. My involvement in campus activities continues to grow; I seem to be developing a 'reputation' as an interested, concerned, dedicated person.

"Because of my involvement on the Admissions Search Committee, the position of Director of Admissions is now among my list of 'campus positions which are of interest to me.' I see admissions as a challenging, vital area -- one which will become more so as the number of 'traditional' students decreases.

"I am no longer concerned with lack of contact with successful female role models. Perhaps I enjoy being a role model; also, I am finding myself at ease and enjoying the men I work with."