

A Conversation with Morris Hansen

Ingram Olkin

Morris Hansen was born on December 15, 1910 in Thermopolis, Wyoming. He entered the University of Wyoming in 1928. After a working leave for a year he returned to the University in 1930, and received his BS degree in accounting in 1934. After graduating, he joined the Bureau of the Census in Washington, D. C. He studied part time for several years at the graduate school of the Department of Agriculture and American University, and received his master's degree in statistics from American University in 1940; he became Chief of the Statistical Research Division at the Bureau of the Census in 1947, Assistant Director for Statistical Standards in 1949 and Associate Director for Research and Development in 1961. He retired from the Bureau of the Census in 1968, and joined Westat, Inc., then a small statistical research, consulting and service organization, as Statistical Advisor and Senior Vice President. In 1986 he became Chairman of the Board. He received an honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws from the University of Wyoming in 1959, was President of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics in 1953, President of the American Statistical Association in 1960 and President of the International Association of Survey Statisticians 1973-1977. He is Honorary Fellow of the Royal Statistical Society, and a member of the National Academy of Sciences.

The following conversation took place in late May 1986 in Washington, D. C.

"I THOUGHT I KNEW SOMETHING ABOUT STATISTICS AND LEARNED LATER THAT THAT WAS A MISCONCEPTION"

Olkin: Morris, I notice that you received a bachelor's degree in accounting from the University of Wyoming and a master's degree in statistics from American University. Can you tell me about how you got to American University from Wyoming and how you got into statistics?

Hansen: Well, in Wyoming I didn't know what I wanted to do and finally decided to take accounting after one false start. And in accounting I was exposed to courses in economic statistics by a professor in the Commerce Department. He was a really fascinating teacher and got me interested in statistics. When I finished those courses, I thought I knew something about statistics and learned later that that was a misconception. But I knew a little and decided that I would like to go into statistics.

Olkin: How did you get to Washington?

Hansen: I had seen some output from the Bureau of the Census, and I thought that I would like to work there. I took a batch of Civil Service exams. Wyoming was below the state quotas and I rated high on the exams, so the combination put me high on the list. No one would call me because I was from Wyoming, until

a professor of mine who had a contact with the Bureau of the Census went back and soon thereafter I was there.

The contact at the Bureau brought me into the Personnel Division with the expectation that I would learn more about the Bureau and move out later. In Personnel I worked on classification problems and learned a lot about the Bureau that way for a year. Then Cal Dedrick, who was head of the Research Division, which at the time was a very small division, arranged for me to join him and start working in statistics.

Olkin: I was surprised by your resumé in that I did not think that a master's degree was available at American University in 1940. Apparently I was wrong.

Hansen: Well, most of the statistics courses I took were in the Graduate School of the Department of Agriculture. I'm not sure if any statistics courses actually were given at American University, but they cooperated in a program. I took other courses at American University, and they did indeed grant a master's degree in statistics. The faculty at American University responsible for statistics were applied statisticians; they didn't know much theory of statistics.

Olkin: So the main courses were at the Graduate School of the Department of Agriculture.