Sheldon, Henry Davidson (1874-1948)

Henry Davidson Sheldon, professor of education and history and dean of the School of Education at the University of Oregon, was a leader in the development of public high schools in the state. He was a progressive in his educational and political views, and was dedicated to teaching the history of education and culture**.**

Born on October 3, 1874, in Salt Lake City, Utah, Sheldon grew up in Santa Clara, California, in a strong Methodist family where his mother, Mary, supported the suffrage and temperance movements. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Stanford University in 1896 and 1897, and counted classmate Herbert Hoover as a friend. Lured by a $100 scholarship and the reputation of the president, child psychologist G. Stanley Hall, Sheldon attended Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he earned his Ph.D. in 1901 with a dissertation on student life and customs.

In 1900, Sheldon was hired as an instructor of philosophy and education at the University of Oregon, earning $1,000 a year. He married Florence Perry of Holden, Massachusetts, and they had two children, Henry Jr. and Marion. He would remain at the university for almost fifty years except for 1911-1913, when he studied education in Europe and taught at the University of Pittsburgh, and 1933-1935, when he suffered from tuberculosis. Sheldon agreed with John Dewey's advocacy of progressive education: problem solving rather than rote recitation, and emphasis on play, self-expression, and vocational classes.

At the University of Oregon, Sheldon found allies in President Prince Lucien Campbell and colleagues in several departments who reformed the university and guided the surge for public high schools as the state population increased. They established electives to the curriculum, provided extension classes, offered correspondence courses, started research institutes, raised certification requirements for teachers, and expanded accreditation standards for schools. Sheldon became known throughout the state for his lectures at county teacher institutes.

In the 1920s, Sheldon developed the School of Education, and in 1924 he chaired a committee of three that acted as an interim presidency for the university until the arrival of Arnold Bennett Hall in 1926. In 1932, feeling out of step with courses being taught on behaviorism and methods, Sheldon relinquished his administrative duties as dean and turned fulltime to teaching and research. His work was interrupted from 1933 to 1935 by a stay at the state tuberculosis hospital in Salem. He managed to publish his *History of the University of Oregon* in 1940, and he taught cultural history until 1947.

A popular lecturer who influenced thousands of students, teachers, deans, and professors, Sheldon was a faculty leader for over thirty years. He was respected for his sound reasoning, calm demeanor, and advocacy of high standards. Toward the end of his life, he stated that the educational system had failed to influence society as much as he had hoped; yet he accomplished many reformist measures in an era of rapid change.

Sheldon died of stomach cancer on May 14, 1948. A residence hall on the University of Oregon campus and a high school in Eugene are named for him.

Written by James H. Hitchman

Further Reading:

Hitchman, J.H. *Henry Davidson Sheldon and the University of Oregon, 1874-1948.* Bellingham: Center for Pacific Northwest Studies, 1979.

The Henry Davidson Sheldon Papers. Coll. 155, University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, Eugene.

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