Olaf Larson, Professor Emeritus of Rural Sociology, passed away on November 14, just three months shy of his 108th birthday. Prior to his passing, Olaf was Cornell’s oldest emeritus professor. Professor Larson was born in 1910 in Rock County, Wisconsin where his parents were tenant farmers until they purchased the farm in 1923. Olaf graduated from a one-room school prior to matriculating at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Wisconsin, he studied agricultural journalism with additional work in soil science and agronomy. Four years after obtaining his B.S. degree, Olaf earned a Master’s degree in agricultural journalism with a minor in agricultural economics. He went on to do his Ph.D. study in rural sociology, a field that was to become his life’s passion.

After completing his preliminary exams for the Ph.D. in 1936, Olaf left Wisconsin to join the faculty of Colorado State University (then Colorado State A&M) as an assistant professor. It was at Colorado State that Professor Larson’s reputation as a rigorous social science researcher, and a keen observer of rural life in the United States, began to develop. Olaf’s research during this time focused on national studies pertaining to rural relief problems, farm labor, farm families, population change and mobility, and a study of three Colorado communities as part of a nationwide study of agricultural communities. It was also where he met and married his wife, Clair.

After being promoted to associate professor in 1937, Olaf left Fort Collins to begin his career’s second chapter at the United State Department of Agriculture’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life. The Division was the first federal government agency devoted to sociological research. As Olaf, and his longtime colleague, Julie N. Zimmerman, were to show in two landmark books published in the 2000s, the “Division” was hugely influential in developing theory-driven empirical social science in America. Olaf’s wide ranging research for the Division foreshadowed the issues that were to define his scholarship throughout his career—rural development, racial and other forms of inequality, and farms, farmers and farm families. In 1941,
while still employed by USDA, Professor Larson completed his Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin.

Along with many other federal agencies, the Division was moved out of Washington DC early in World War II. These moves were made to reduce the risk of disruption in the case of an attack on the capital. Olaf was moved to Cincinnati, Ohio where he led the Division’s research on rural rehabilitation and low income farm families. When a new regional office was established in Portland, Oregon, Olaf was transferred there to be the Division’s western regional leader. While in Portland, Olaf directed and conducted research on rural poverty, with a particular focus on very low income families. He also led the region’s contributions to a nationwide effort to establish cultural regions within rural America.

In the summer of 1946, Olaf accepted an associate professorship in Rural Sociology at Cornell. Thus, started the third of four stages in Professor Larson’s scholarly career. Olaf’s work at Cornell spanned all three Land Grant functions: teaching, research and Extension. At Cornell, Olaf was able to conduct research on many sensitive issues that were out of bounds while he worked for USDA. These included migratory farm labor, rural health, and rural values and beliefs, along with his continuing focus on rural community organization. During this time, he testified before Congress, his research was used by the President Lyndon B. Johnson’s Commission on Rural Poverty, and by the New York State Legislative Committee on Migrant Labor. For Extension, Professor Larson produced demographic data in a form that was useful to local appointed and elected leaders. His “People of New York:” series was produced for over 20 years. In addition, he was the first director of the Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, one of four regional centers established by USDA through Title V of the 1972 Rural Development Act. In 1957, Professor Larson became Head of the Department of Rural Sociology (now Development Sociology). He served in this capacity from 1957-1966. In the 1960s, Professor Larson was influential in developing the College’s leadership role in international agricultural development studies. This area became institutionalized as the College’s “4th dimension” along with teaching, research and Extension.

At Cornell, Professor Larson became an internationally recognized scholar of rural life in America. He was twice selected as a Fulbright Scholar (1951-52 in Oslo, Norway and 1961-62 in Naples, Italy); voted into the prestigious Sociological Research Association in 1954; elected president of the Rural Sociological Society in 1957-58, and awarded the RSS’s career award of Distinguished Rural Sociologist in 1985. His profound influence on rural research and teaching far exceeds his personal scholarship. During his career at Cornell, Professor Larson chaired 69 graduate committees, and served as a minor member on 85 more. Many of these scholars have gone on to distinguished careers of their own.

In 1975, Professor Larson was forced to retire due to mandatory retirement laws at the time. Retirement notwithstanding, he remained an active scholar for more than a quarter of a century. His research with Dr. Minnie Miller-Brown of North Carolina State University on Black farmers, for instance, was presented to the Congressional Black Caucus. In addition to articles on the history of rural sociology, Olaf co-edited an influential book on the sociology of agriculture with Cornell Professors Fred Buttel and Gilbert Gillespie.
In the late 1980s he began research exploring the profound impact on social science research and public policy of the USDA’s Division of Farm Population and Rural Life—the first unit of the federal government devoted to sociological research and for which he had worked. This project, supported by the Rural Sociological Society, the American Sociological Association and Cornell University’s Agriculture Experiment Station, spanned into the 1990s resulting in three books. Even after Olaf and Clare moved to a retirement community in Mt. Dora, Florida he remained an active scholar and writer. While he would lose his wife and lifelong partner, Clair, in 2011, Olaf published two more books during his centennial year. One of the books, the final in his series on social science research in the USDA, was nominated for the ASA’s History of Sociology Section’s Distinguished Scholarly Publication Award. The other book, published by the University of Wisconsin Press, was a memoir of Olaf’s boyhood in rural Wisconsin.

Professor Olaf Larson was the last of a generation of rural sociologists, and in many ways his career traced the history of rural sociology. He was the Rural Sociological Society’s (RSS) oldest past president, the oldest member of the RSS, the oldest sociologist and rural sociologist in the nation, and the last person who had worked in the first unit of the federal government devoted to sociological research. To honor his long years of achievement, “in recognition of his significant commitment and contributions to the discipline of sociology” the American Sociological Association bestowed Olaf with an honorary lifetime membership. His legacy lives on many ways including the Cornell’s Department of Development Sociology where the Larson Award for Excellence in Sociology is bestowed each year to the Department’s outstanding junior.

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