

## COMMENTARY

### Robert Straus in Berkeley

IN 1986 (I believe it was), Bob spent a sabbatical year in Berkeley. We shared a large office room on the top floor of Alcohol Research Group's stately old building on Scenic Avenue. Our quarters had a broad view of San Francisco Bay and the far-off Golden Gate Bridge. We also had ample time now and then to talk about ideas, history, and people. I recall that Bob would smile a little, not without affection, when I asked him about E. M. Jellinek (he told me "Bunky" was terrible about managing money but a great intellectual asset in the Yale alcohol group). I remember one conversation in which we kicked around the notion that alcoholism's stigma, over time, helped create alcoholism treatment specialists—partly because nonalcoholic patients, on becoming aware their doctor treated alcoholics, sought to avoid derived stigma by finding another doctor.

Knowing my interest in the early history of post-Repeal alcohol science in the United States, Bob sometimes gifted me with source materials from his files. One such gift was his file of correspondence concerning the troubled history of the Cooperative Commission on the Study of Alcoholism in the early 1960s. When he left Berkeley for home in Kentucky, he also gave me a copy of *Drinking in College* (Straus & Bacon, 1953) with a warm inscription, a volume I still have and hold dear. I visited Ruth and Bob in their Lexington home one summer—enjoying their hospitality and a cooling mint julep prepared by Ruth. I'd like to think that we remained friends, although our communications waned through the '90s and beyond.

Bob was one of the younger researchers in the alcohol studies group that grew up in Howard W. Haggard's Laboratory of Applied Physiology at Yale University over the 1940s. Selden D. Bacon's first assignment for Bob was to go out and learn something about homeless alcoholic men. Bacon advised Bob to take the role of the bear that went over the mountain. "Without preconceived assumptions," wrote Bob, "I was to see what I could see" (Straus, 1991, p. 114). Bob credited Bacon as one of the two most significant people in his career's development (the other was William R. Willard, founding dean of the University of Kentucky's College of Medicine). He also credited Leo Simmons and John Dollard for stimulating his interest in life history research.

Bob completed his dissertation in 1947 and was invited to join the Yale alcohol unit's full-time research staff. Especially notable in his early alcohol-related work were two coauthored studies with Bacon: an article titled "Alcoholism and social stability" in what was then called the *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* (Straus & Bacon, 1951) and *Drinking in College*, published in 1953. Both studies, once again, sought to apply disinterested empirical investigation to subjects fraught with stereotypes, myth, and misunderstanding. In the first, the widely held belief "that alcoholics were primarily people whose lives had totally disintegrated or fallen apart" was tested against a sample of admissions at recently opened facilities offering outpatient treatment for alcoholism. The stereotype was disconfirmed. A newspaper reviewer of *Drinking in College* wrote: "Anyone who selects this book for a rainy afternoon's reading about flaming youth and bacchanalain [sic] gurglings on American campuses is going to be bitterly disappointed" (Hill, 1953, p. 26).

I think Bob felt quite at home at the Alcohol Research Group. He may even have felt a paternal or avuncular tie because ARG represented an institutional realization of Selden Bacon's call for devoting more attention to achieving a fuller sociological understanding of alcohol and society. The feeling was mutual. For instance, Paul M. Roman's (1991) edited volume celebrating Bacon's contribution to the sociology of alcohol included chapters written by members or former members of ARG's research staff—Harry G. Levine, Robin Room, and the late Kaye Middleton Fillmore (herself a former Bacon student). Bob left an indelible impression on us. If a more modest and ego-less human being ever existed on this planet, I've never met him. Whether as officemate, scholar, or friend, he was a model of kindness, warmth, and good cheer.

RON ROIZEN, PH.D.<sup>a,\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Independent scholar

\*ronroizen@frontier.com

**References**

- Hill, J. D. (1953, November 15). Report on college drinking. *Brownwood Bulletin*, p. 26. Brownwood, TX.
- Roman, P. M. (Ed.). (1991). *Alcohol: The development of sociological perspectives on use and abuse*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies.
- Straus, R. (1991). Selden D. Bacon as a teacher, colleague, scholar, and founder of modern alcohol studies. In P. M. Roman (Ed.), *Alcohol: The development of sociological perspectives on use and abuse* (pp. 113–123). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Center of Alcohol Studies.
- Straus, R., & Bacon, S. D. (1951). Alcoholism and social stability. A study of occupational integration in 2,023 male clinic patients. *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 12, 231–260. doi:10.15288/qjsa.1951.12.231
- Straus, R., & Bacon, S. D. (1953). *Drinking in college*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. Reprinted by Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971.