

# **DEMOGRAPHIC DESTINIES**

**Interviews with Past Presidents of the Population Association of America  
A Project of the PAA History Committee:**

**John R. Weeks, Chair and PAA Historian  
Dennis Hodgson  
Deborah McFarlane  
Karen Hardee**

**Interview with J. Richard (Dick) Udry  
PAA President in 1994**

**Interviewed by John R. Weeks in Chapel Hill, 2006**



*Photo by John R. Weeks*

Dr. Udry was a Kenan Distinguished Professor of maternal and child health in the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Gillings School of Global Public Health and professor of sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences. He also directed the university's Carolina Population Center (CPC) from 1977 to 1992. Dr. Udry earned a PhD in sociology from the University of Southern California in 1960. After teaching briefly at Chaffey College and California State Polytechnic College at San Luis Obispo, he moved in 1965 to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he remained for the rest of his career.

**Q = John Weeks**

**A = Dick Udry**

Q: We are at *Top of the Hill* restaurant on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill interviewing Dr. J. Richard Udry, Kenan Professor of Maternal and Child Health and Sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. He was President of the Population Association in 1994.

A: You also may not know that I retired in 2005.

Q: Okay, so you are now Kenan Professor Emeritus.

A: I suppose. One of the things I learned in retiring was once you are retired, you can call yourself any damn thing you want because nobody tells you.

Q: When was the last time you actually taught a class here?

A: I haven't taught a class since the early 90's.

Q: So your grants have bought off all of your time since then.

A: Yes.

Q: And when you were teaching here, were you actually teaching both in the School of Public Health and in Sociology.

A: Yes.

Q: You taught what, one course each?

A: No, the last course I taught in Sociology was a seminar in gender and the last one I taught in maternal and child health was a graduate seminar where people were working on their dissertations.

Q: So let's go back and review your career--back to graduate school days or even before that if you want. You got your doctorate at USC in Sociology in 1960.

A: Yep.

Q: What was it that attracted you to that program at the time?

A: There wasn't anything that attracted me to that program except the fact that I was teaching high school and I was using up my GI Bill just enough to keep it active and so I could go to school at Southern Cal part time and from my house I could drive there in like 40 minutes and I had a fellowship that I could have used at either UCLA or Southern Cal and I chose to use it at Southern Cal because I lived in Orange County and so that's why.

Q: Had you gotten your undergraduate degree in Los Angeles?

A: Actually, I was already finished with that before I went into the Marine Corps. I came to California to go into the Marine Corps.

Q: You went through Camp Pendleton?

A: I did boot camp at San Diego.

Q: The MCRD [Marine Corps Recruit Depot] in San Diego?

A: Right. So that was my introduction to California and having spent the first 10 or 12 weeks in boot camp was my first experience with California and I decided I wanted to live there.

Q: Turned out that you didn't stay for long though.

A: I stayed there pretty long; I stayed there about 15 years. It only seems short because it's been a long time since.

Q: You've been in North Carolina for so long, that's right.

A: Right, I've been here 40 years.

Q: You said you'd already gotten your undergraduate degree when you went into the Marines.

A: Yes.

Q: Did you go into the Marines as an officer?

A: No, I was drafted and they invited me to go to Officers Candidate School, but if I did that I would had to stay in for four years and so I elected to stay an enlisted men.

Q: Was this the early involvement in Vietnam.

A: Korea.

Q: I was trying to remember when we had a draft before Vietnam.

A: The Marine Corps never admitted that it had one. After I was drafted they sent my wife a letter saying we just want you to know that you should be proud that your husband was selected to go into the Marine Corps.

Q: Did you see any action?

A: I didn't see any, but the Marine Corps was seeing plenty because I spent the first year of my draft in the Marine Corps Air Squadron, so we had people finishing their tours of duty in Korea and coming back to our squadron, and our band was full of people coming back from 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> combat duty in Korea.

Q: What instrument do you play?

A: The French horn.

Q: Do you still play the French horn?

A: No.

Q: When did you give that up?

A: When I got out of the Marine Corps.

Q: You learned the French horn as a survival strategy?

A: No, I actually was a pretty proficient horn player. I could have been a symphony musician, but I decided when I went to college that I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life blowing a horn. It didn't seem like something I wanted to do for my life.

Q: Your teaching high school--what was the subject, social studies?

A: I taught everything from 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. I taught in a new junior high school in Anaheim, which then became a high school and so I taught almost everything they had.

Q: Well it would be appropriate for somebody coming out of the Marines to teach junior high. I have a niece who teaches junior high and I've always figured she deserved combat pay of some kind. So then you heard about the GI Bill and you just started looking around for a graduate program.

A: Yes. So I really was not driven to academics and graduate school. It was just kind of a gradual thing to do and I finally used up every single instant of my GI Bill and got a Ph.D. out of going into the Marine Corps.

Q: Not a bad deal.

A: No, it seemed like a pretty good deal at the time.

Q: Good for the rest of us.

A: Yep.

Q: Your dissertation was on marriage and the family, and adolescent health topics. You have been around this for a long time, haven't you?

A: Actually, it had to do with adolescent friendship patterns.

Q: When you finished your doctorate, you didn't immediately go to North Carolina right? Weren't you teaching in Southern California before you came to North Carolina?

A: Right. I didn't have a burning in my belly to become the winner of the Nobel Prize or be a champion researcher so I taught two years in a junior college [Chaffey College] in Ontario [in Southern California] and three years at the polytechnic college at San Luis Obispo. That was my favorite place to have been in California.

Q: Is that right? I have driven through San Luis Obispo many times, but never actually spent any time there, never even been on that campus.

A: I have been back once since I left California--in 1989--and I can say that time never did anything bad for San Luis Obispo. It was a beautiful place then and they didn't completely mess it up.

Q: Not too many places you can say that about.

A: Nope. Many of us old time residents of California have lots of places that we can't tell you that about.

Q: That's exactly right. You were buying ranch property, for example.

A: Yeah, I had a place picked out to buy that was sitting on a mountain.

Q: How did it happen that you took the job at North Carolina, how did that transpire?

A: Well I loved San Luis Obispo, but it didn't love me and so...

Q: You decided to get out.

A: It was just a bad fit. I built a house right across the street from the school. I could get on my bicycle and ride to my classroom and ride to my office without pedaling.

Q: Just like some old movie.

A: Yeah. I started looking for a job and I had a friend from graduate school who was recruiting for jobs at UC Riverside, but I went to UNC before we went to Riverside. So I did and I ended up here. I never even looked at Riverside.

Q: The job you applied for was a joint appointment in the department of public health and sociology. Had somebody already decided this was actually with the Carolina Population Center? Was the job designed essentially by the Population Center?

A: The Population Center wasn't formed as yet.

Q: It was formed in what, '66?

A: Yes '66.

Q: Right. So how did it become, how did it transpire that you later became the director.

A: Well after Moye Freymann left, he was replaced by Tom Hall who was another top physician. And that was a time when the population center was on the brink of whether it was going to be closed down by the administration on account of the academic departments didn't like it.

And the sociology department actually said let's close it down, but among the people in the sociology department at that time was Amos Hawley and he volunteered to be in charge of the committee of what should be done to the pop center. He said it should focus on research, not technical assistance, and everybody agreed.

And then he said: I nominate Dick Udry to be the new director and then there was a big silence. Then Amos said, any more nominations, and there was more silence, and then he said, I recommend we appoint Udry and so they nominated me for it and so I said to them, I said if you want an academic research center, I know how to build one.

*[Note: for a history of the early days of the Carolina Population Center, go to:  
[http://www.cpc.unc.edu/aboutcpc/history/history\\_first\\_decade](http://www.cpc.unc.edu/aboutcpc/history/history_first_decade) ]*

Q: Right.

A: So that's how I became the center director. I was center director for 15 years.

Q: During your directorship, the Carolina Population Center then became famous as it is today. As director what were the important things you saw yourself having to do?

A: The most important thing was to identify faculty among those who were already working in the population field and to invite them to join the center and be under my directorship. We designed a method where the fellows of the center could nominate and approve the addition of new fellows and the reason that I succeeded then as director was that I saw to it that promising

scholars were nominated as fellows and then put in a position to develop their careers using the center as a mechanism.

Q: Right and so you were able to offer them things like summer money and research?

A: Nope, I never did that.

Q: You never did that?

A: I did that the first year I was the director, but very quickly discovered the problem with giving summer money to people is that they were going to do what they were doing anyhow, so there wasn't any point in wasting any money on them. What I learned was to encourage people who were going to become career scholars and what I was encouraging was the development of programs in research in which scholars would gather together and get money to establish a research program and that's how the center became a research center.

Q: Okay. So how did you manage to get people to be involved in these things?

A: We had a method of providing service to the faculty research program to help write NIH grant applications. And we taught them to do it and I personally nursed them through the first application and I personally patted them on the shoulder when they didn't get it and said now, we really have to get this one, so I specifically brought in people who were going to be able to develop programs of research and many of them had had been working on the same research programs that they began 20 years ago.

Q: You helped bring Ron Rindfuss along and Barbara Entwisle along? Were they here when you became director?

A: They were already here. When I became the director of the center we had research grants by two people.

Q: Is that right, two people?

A: Rindfuss and me.

Q: So, you built the center by taking in people and essentially nurturing them cradle to grave getting them involved in research.

A: That's right, and we made the center so attractive as a place to do research that no departments could compete with it.

Q: How did you do this?

A: We built a staff to do it. We built—this would have been in about the late 70's--we built a computer program which would give them the resources of people and know-how and up-to-dateness that everybody wished they had, but they didn't have and that was a very big help.

Q: You were probably the first center to get geographers involved in any meaningful way, was that your decision to do that?

A: No. They were already involved and they continued to be involved. So I don't deserve any credit for that and in fact we probably had too many disciplines at that point that I started to direct the center so there were things that we had that we were putting money in at that point that I stopped putting money in, like religion. Would I do the same today, I don't know, but it wasn't contributing anything in those days.

Q: During this period of time, you had 30 NIH grants on line and you were the director, the focus though was largely United States demography or were you looking at international things?

A: There were programs in several countries around the world.

Q: Was this the period of time when the Thailand project came on.

A: Yes. This started with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation to build a pop center in Thailand. But after 5 years of fooling around with this, I said this is not the way to do it and if we're going to get another Rockefeller grant, we've got to do it a different way so we did it by holding a national competition for Ph.D.'s in demography and selected people for those positions and then sent them back there 5 years later with Ph.D.'s and that's the way we got the population center started.

Q: Very interesting, very clever idea.

A: Because what they were doing was retreading old faculty and if there was anything that I learned from that experience and other experience it is that retreading old faculty is a terrible way to build a research center. So in case you want to build a research center, I will give a capsule of advice.

Q: It's good to know. Readers over time will be able to look back at this and know what to do or what not to do. So now as you came up to the end of your period as director of the center, that was the time that you were elected PAA President-Elect, and then you became PAA President.

A: Yes.

Q: What were the hot button issues in the PAA during that period of time that you were coping with.

A: Well, the first thing we had was that our membership had plummeted to about 2,100-- something like that from about 3,000, and that looked like an organization that was about to depopulate. So the first thing we did was to send out a program for encouraging membership and we developed quite an articulated program of several different steps aimed at the same direction and so in the course of that program, which we set it out for 3 years, and in the course



of that program we had increased the size of the population center by about 50% and got it back over 3,000 again.

Q: And most of it was kind of networking, right? If I recall, wasn't that the case, encouraging people to get others to become involved or renew their involvement?

A: Yes, but any program like that is probably going to succeed because you do more than one thing and we did more than one thing and as far as identifying which ones were successful nobody ever felt the need to do that because if they were all successful then whatever reasons there were, there the population association was, and that is what matters.

Q: So what were the things that you had on tap as a strategy?

A: I actually don't have a very clear picture of how we did it. We talked about it and we put a person in charge of this and a person in charge of that, but exactly what was successful I can't tell you. All I can tell you is immediately the problem was solved, but I noticed in previous and in subsequent periods when I wasn't on the Board of Directors that you get into periods where it can decline and if nobody does anything, it continues down until somebody does something.

Q: Right, any volunteer organization really needs that reinvigoration.

A: Right.

Q: As I recall correctly, too, while you were president you also brought up the issue which is, of course, related to membership, but of finances, and didn't you initiate the program to encourage additional donations on the part of people?

A: Yes, but until I gave a good sized donation to set the pace for it, it wasn't particularly successful, but since then it's continued apace, it's continued to work on a minor level and so I don't think it should be considered a howling success, but every year there are new people who do donate substantial amounts, and a substantial amount I would put in the category of \$1000, which is what we established as--Great poobah or whatever.

Q: Right, there's some category of poobahiness in terms of the giving.

A: Right. But that's not a way to increase membership.

Q: No, but we were just thinking back over the kinds of things that you took on during that period of time of the presidency of the population association. So now to a certain extent, it was almost a set of crisis years while you were involved, because if you are seeing this decline in membership and you don't do something about it, then essentially you had to step up to the plate once again.

A: Yeah, well we never had to do that. There have been times since then that I said somebody better do something about that, but it wasn't my responsibility.

Q: I was thinking about how, in your life, you were put in the position with the pop center of essentially having it be on your shoulders to make something of this.

A: Right.

Q: As with the PAA, if something was going to be made of it, it was going to be up to you to do something about that.

A: Right, but other people will only remember the free drinks that they had at Miami. When I finally got to the open cocktail party, they told me all the free drinks were gone!

Q: I remember that.

A: And I said then, well then open it up, and we sold \$5000 worth of mixed drinks, which wasn't budgeted and so that was the year we ran over the budget, in fact! Also, I worked to establish the Association of Population Centers, the purpose of which was to make a membership group out of the population centers themselves and that gave that organization a purpose for holding meetings to talk about how to organize population centers and I believe it has been a very successful organization, they have told me.

Q: Yes, that's always been an interesting thing to me because what you created was a group of cooperating institutions who were really all in competition with one another because every five years you come up for refunding and you kind of compete against one another or any potential newcomer for those monies.

A: Anyway, I started out with 12 organizations for the first meeting and I told them that my purpose, my function was to get the group organized and not to direct it and, therefore, I was going to conduct the first election which would not include me and so the concept is right and the people are working at it. It should be very successful, but that's been a long time ago and I have not kept up with how well it's doing.

Q: Your presidency of the PAA was also a tough transition time--moving out of the administrative association with the American Sociological Association and becoming administratively independent. You were right in the middle of that transition.

A: Right.

Q: Also wasn't that the period of time when the Adolescent Health project [Add Health--the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health] was getting going so all this time were you involved in that.

A: Well, Add Health depends on where you want to start it. We started working on a grant in the mid 80's. We got a planning grant from NIH about 1989 and then in 1991 a grant from NIH to do that study and then it hit the fan and if you haven't heard that story, a good place to get a view of that is this book [*he hands Weeks a book*]

Q: I haven't read that.

A: You haven't read it, take that with you. You can see I have two of them.

Q: Very good, I appreciate that. For the record, this is: Morton Hunt, "The New Know-Nothings: The Political Foes of the Scientific Study of Human Nature; New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999.

A: Yes. There was a chapter in there about what eventually became Add Health. My own congressman and my own senator were happy when trying to see what we didn't get what we had applied for.

Q: Yes I remember Jesse Helms. Wasn't he the one who thought that there just ought to be a barbed wire fence built around Chapel Hill.

A: Yes, he thought that was a very good idea but he was also a budget cutter and he never voted for the barbed wire to go around. That's the history of Ad Health. It basically amounts to the fact that the congressmen and senator--both a Democratic Congressman and a Democratic Senator and a Democratic President voted for killing the adolescent sex project that NIH wanted to do.

Q: Just a reminder that you never know who your friends are going to be or aren't going to be.

A: Right, and so there were interesting little stories earlier in the book on how this came about and the legislation that killed it--that study and the Chicago study at the same time, which was an adult study. The policy manager for a congresswoman from Colorado added a paragraph to the legislation that killed these two projects, but which added to this legislation this new paragraph saying that NIH should direct NICHD to make sure that project should be a study of adolescence, which had to do with their general health in which developed a program to determine what was beneficial and what was detrimental to the health of the adolescents and what they should particularly focus on. But the point was that it was supposed to focus specifically on the social determinants of behavior, not on biological issues, and so in essence it killed the main study. It mandated Congress to do this other study and since they mandated this other study done, I called NIH in late June of 1993 and said, would you like to receive a proposal to do the study that you have been mandated in the new legislation, which I just happened to know about because I had lunch with the lady who wrote the paragraph the week before and she said yes, we'd like to receive an application and I said you will have one there in a month.

Q: So it was basically like a Congressional earmark, something on that order?

A: Yeah, well, except they didn't get any money.

Q: Unfunded mandate.

A: That's right and that's exactly what it was, but we played that for what it was worth and we got a Congressional mandate to do this study and so that was a successful strategy.

Q: Of course I read your article in *Demography* that came out of that [Udry, J. R., 1994, *The Nature of Gender*, *Demography* 31 (4):561-74] and your ASR article about bringing the role of biology back in to the study of sociology [Udry, J. R., 2000, *Biological Limits of Gender Construction*, *American Sociological Review* 65:443-457]. It seemed to me that if there's any one person who has helped do that, it would be you. Is that the way you see your own role.

A: I had been influential in that movement to the extent that it's successful but this is a very difficult change to bring to sociology. They spent their graduate school learning that there wasn't anything to be learned from biology and that everything is social and so whatever success I have had in that field, I consider to be minimal.

Q: Still you put the agenda out there on the table.

A: I was acting in that agenda, that agenda didn't necessarily come from Add Health. In fact, that article that you saw in the *American Sociological Review* came from a grant that I got in about 1989 and I was never able to get through another study set. It seems that I was working on people at their developmental ages and some of the beginnings of reproduction and that in addition to working on the beginnings of reproduction, I started by focusing on both biology and sociology in the beginning.

Q: What struck me is that people who teach junior high and high school are always talking about the effect of hormones. You see hormones popping out here and there. People dealing with the kids understand that many of the issues they deal with are hormonal issues. You can't attribute them to anything else and yet it seems as though when we get into the university, we tend to forget that.

A: We forget it because we're sociologists because the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade teachers know that there is something hormonal going on in their classrooms and sociologists don't know that.

Q: Sometimes unwilling to accept it I guess. That's what I saw you trying to do--get people to understand that you can't understand how the world works unless you understand that piece.

A: That's my thesis. Clearly it isn't that biology determines everything, it's that you can't understand what's going on in sociology and the sociology of development and adolescence and reproduction if you don't know the biology.

Q: Has that perspective been important among other researchers working on the Add Health project or has that been kind of peripheral to the overall research program?

A: No it hasn't been. I have continued to promote it, but I don't promote that as anything special as compared to the rest of them. We have so many, I mean, our publication list from Add Health is over 1,000 publications and most of them are not biological in nature and most of the writers are sociologists. The project has been successful in highlighting the key elements of adolescence and reproductive development and so now that the grant has many other parts, and many different parts of NIH are continuing to fund it, but a key contributor this time is the National

Institutes of Aging. If you have a grant that's called adolescent health and you've got over \$1 million in funding for your study the Aging Institute, you know your study's got a future!

*[Note: for more information about the Add Health project, go to:  
<http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/addhealth> ]*

Q: Very good. Well, is there anything else that we should cover, anything else that you had thought about after I mentioned that I was coming to interview you.

A: Actually I wish I could claim to have thought deeply about this, but when I start thinking deeply about my own contributions, I get I can easily find lots of people who have contributed more.

Q: It makes you a nicely modest person, but no less influential.

A: Okay, I'm reading about Bruce Merrifield who received a Nobel Prize in 1984 and he just died at age 99 or something like that. So I think I will know when I'm honored for my contributions when somebody offers me the Nobel Prize in Sociology.

Q: Okay.

A: And nobody has yet.

Q: You may have to live long as your mother-in-law in order to do that.

A: I don't need to worry about it. My parents both died before they were my age. So that's how I calculate I have achieved my natural age span, and I've been able to live as long as my parents.

Q: So now you're living on borrowed time. Interesting perspective. All right, well I appreciate very much the time that you were willing to take for this interview!

A: Well, since we are gathered here for these purposes, before we get our prayer to end the meeting, we should ask: what did I contribute to the Population Association that makes it different now from what it would have been without me? And I have to say it beats the hell out of me!

Q: That's a very modest thing to say, but, in fact, I guess one of the reasons why in these interviews we don't talk just about your role as PAA president is because all of the things that you have done--in particular the development of the Carolina Population Center and all the scholars that you have influenced--are, in fact, importantly related to the business of the Population Association.

A: That's true, and so I take full credit for everything they do...

Q: That's what you should do, in fact. Thank you!

END

*Dick Udry died in Chapel Hill in 2012 at age 83*

<http://www.cpc.unc.edu/news/features/udry>

<http://www.populationassociation.org/sidebar/paa-fund-campaign/honored-members/j-richard-udry/>

[http://www2.sph.unc.edu/schoolwide\\_news/richard\\_udry\\_pioneering\\_adolescent-health\\_researcher\\_and\\_population\\_scientist\\_dies\\_july\\_29\\_23682\\_8289.html](http://www2.sph.unc.edu/schoolwide_news/richard_udry_pioneering_adolescent-health_researcher_and_population_scientist_dies_july_29_23682_8289.html)