SHELDON J. LACHMAN, Ph.D. (1921-1997)

Sheldon J. Lachman was born on December 17, 1921 in Detroit, Michigan. He graduated from Western High School in Detroit in 1939 and subsequently attended the University of Detroit, Wayne University, Ohio State University and the University of Michigan before receiving his B.S. degree in Psychology from the University of Michigan in 1942. He received the M.S. in Psychology from UM in 1943 and the Ph.D. in Psychology from UM in 1952.

Dr. Lachman served in the Army Air Force during World War II. He was an instructor in psychology at the Armed Forces Institute in Guam during the war and at Pratt (Kansas) Junior College in 1944. He took a position as an Instructor at Wayne State University in 1946, prior to completing his doctoral work at UM. He was promoted from instructor to assistant professor at Wayne in 1951, received tenure in 1953, and was promoted to associate professor in 1958 and full professor in 1971. He served a total of 47 years at Wayne State, the longest service of anyone in the Psychology Department at WSU. He was elected to Sigma Xi, and received a Sigma Xi research award in 1952. He was also elected to membership in Psi Chi and in Phi Delta Kappa (the Education Honor Society), and was listed in American Men of Science and Who's Who in the Midwest. He was elected to Fellowship status in the American Psychological Association as well as the American Psychological Society.

Dr. Lachman published several books including The Foundations of Science and Psychosomatic Disorders: A Behavioristic Interpretation. The latter book was translated into Portuguese and Italian, and was widely used in medical schools in both this country and abroad. He also published a textbook on History and Methods of Physiological Psychology, as well as a research monograph on The Detroit Riot of 1967, summarizing research he had been commissioned to conduct analyzing antecedents and possible causes of this occurrence.

His early research included his "maximum variance" study, which showed that if rats were given a number of pathways to follow and a previously chosen path was blocked, they tended to choose the pathway furthest or "most variant" from the original choice. He compared that with an energy conserving theory that would suggest taking the easiest or nearest pathway. Subsequently he published numerous articles and papers on a variety of topics including psychological testing, political attitudes and values, level of aspiration, brightness discrimination, learning, and perception.

Growing out of his experiences during and after the Detroit riots of 1967, Professor Lachman engaged informally in "court-watching" and expressed both concern about what he saw as unjust procedures on occasion as well as an appreciation of the distress and limited resources of many of the poor he saw there. He photographed abandoned homes and decaying buildings of the neighborhood, as well as various buildings around the University, including a building, which served as the first "home" for the WSU Psychology Department.
Dr. Lachman taught the introductory psychology course and also developed and taught the Physiological Psychology course for many years. He served as the Chair of the department's undergraduate committee for about twenty years and was advisor to about half of the department's undergraduate majors during that period. His willingness to spend time, offer assistance, and listen seriously and sympathetically to many undergraduates who had questions or concerns about their academic careers and other matters was very much appreciated by these students. He developed and served as faculty advisor to the Wayne State Psi Chi Chapter and the Psychology Club for many years.

As Faculty Advisor to Psi Chi, he took the initiative to organize and arrange the annual Psi Chi initiation dinner. As part of this annual event, Lachman arranged to have a psychologist give a talk on some topic of general interest, since the dinner included Psi Chi members, initiates and their families. Because there were very limited funds available for the speaker, Lachman had to find someone from the Detroit metropolitan area or nearby, since no travel funds were available.

Just before he died, Lachman completed work on History of the Department of Psychology at Wayne State University, which he describes as "not entirely an objective history; the author has permitted his impressions, opinions and judgments to intrude." The History includes many interesting and amusing anecdotes, related in Shel's inimitable style. It is a fitting legacy to his many years of service to the Psychology Department.

Following Lachman's death, a Lachman Memorial Fund was established, and the Department Chair, Donald Coscina, formed a committee to decide on appropriate uses for this fund. The Committee agreed that a most appropriate use would be to cover expenses for an annual Lachman Memorial Lecture in which a prominent psychologist would be brought to campus to give a talk of general interest to a relatively diverse audience.