



Merton, pictured on the wooden steps of his home in South Philadelphia (c. 1920), was born at what has been described as “the bottom of the social structure.”

self dabbling in show biz. Maybe it was the tap water; like other famous South Philly residents, Robert Merton’s earliest public persona was as an entertainer. During his boyhood, his next-door neighbor, Charles “Hop” Hopkins, his “surrogate father” and, later, the husband of his sister, initiated him into the secrets of wizardry. And by the time he was 14, Merton was hiring himself out as a magician for children’s parties, a vocation which helped see him through Temple.

He was Meyer R. Schkolnick then when he learned that names in the performing arts were routinely Anglicized — a practice which led him to adopt the stage name Robert K. Merlin after the legendary Arthurian sorcerer. But when Hop observed that that surname was a bit hackneyed, Merlin was transmogrified into Merton.

By the time he arrived at Temple in 1927, his friends were calling him Bob Merton, and he reports he “rather liked the sound of it...it seemed more American back then in the ‘20s.” He changed his name legally at 19. His father, whom he recalls as a remote almost shadowy figure in his life, reacted with indifference. But he did have the approval of his mother, lovingly described as having a pivotal influence on him. A philosophical anarchist, she led, he recalls, an intense cultural life. Determined to get an education for herself at night school, she encouraged him to believe that a life of learning was a life worth pursuing.

Temple gets the credit for birthing the nascent sociologist. He was a philosophy major when, he says, he “ventured into a class in sociology given by a young instruc-



As an undergraduate at Temple, Merton posed with other members of the

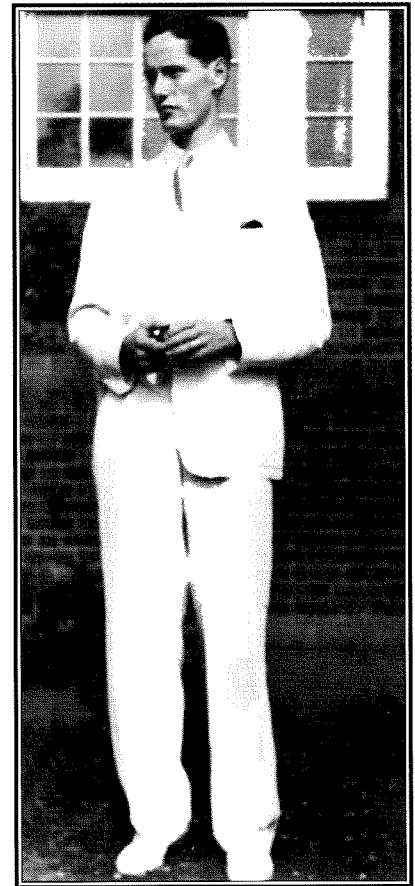
Sociology Club for the 1930 *Templar*. He was one of several students who selected speakers and made arrangements for their visit to the University.

tor, George E. Simpson, and there I found my subject.” (“Simpson, who was single and lived on campus, all but adopted Merton, making him...his principal drinking and talking companion,” wrote Morton Hunt, in the previously cited *New Yorker* profile.)

Obviously, that friendship has endured because in a recent correspondence with *Temple Review*, Simpson, now in his 90s, wrote from his home in Ohio that it is his good fortune to have had Merton not only as a student but “as a friend for more than two-thirds of a century.”

Recruited as Simpson’s research assistant (Simpson was working on his doctoral dissertation, *The Negro in the Philadelphia Press*), Merton’s maiden voyage onto the sea of sociological inquiry was the collection of data that would reveal changes in the public imagery of Philadelphia’s black community. Through Simpson, Merton came to know Ralph Bunche and members of Philadelphia’s elite black society of physicians, lawyers, artists, writers and musicians. And the chance meeting of these new friends would matter mightily in Merton’s later studies of racism.

Chance plays a major role in Merton’s life. In a 1948 paper on “Theory and Empirical Research,” he spends the better part of three pages discussing the workings of *serendipity* in scientific study — in fact, explaining how he serendipitously discovered the word in the 16-volume *Oxford Eng-*



Robert Merton made a name for himself as a graduate student at Harvard in 1934 when his work was published in an internationally reputed professional journal.

lish Dictionary that he favors, while looking up another. It was serendipity that brought him to Temple by way of a scholarship, serendipity that caused him to wander into George Simpson’s sociology class, and serendipity that transported him to Harvard.

At a meeting of the American Sociological Society (now Association), of which Merton would one day be elected president, Simpson introduced his protégé to Pitirim Alexandrovich Sorokin, a Russian emigré who had escaped execution when he was exiled by Lenin in a generous moment.