

A Life for Language

A biographical memoir of Leonard Bloomfield

Robert A. Hall, Jr.

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A LIFE FOR LANGUAGE

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A LIFE FOR LANGUAGE
A BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR OF
LEONARD BLOOMFIELD

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to J Milton Cowan and Charles F. Hockett

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Leonard Bloomfield at age 57

PREFACE

One of the major intellectual advances made in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the provision of a firm basis for the study of language in the science of linguistics. Leonard Bloomfield (1887-1949) was outstanding among the scholars most active in the achievement of this goal. Whether he was the most outstanding of all may be a matter of opinion. Is he to be rated above, say, William Dwight Whitney, Ferdinand de Saussure, Otto Jespersen, or Edward Sapir? Opinions may differ as to which of these was *primus inter pares*. In any case, Bloomfield must certainly be regarded as *par inter primos*.

The details of Bloomfield's life-history need to be better known, so that we may evaluate his achievement more fully. To date, they have not been as well known as they should have been, for at least two reasons. In the first place, he was very modest and shy, and this made it difficult to elicit from him very much in the way of personal reminiscences. Secondly, he downplayed the importance of the individual in contrast to the society in which he or she lives. Consequently, historians of linguistics have tended to view Bloomfield's life and character almost exclusively in the light of his published writings, especially in his 1933 book *Language*. His emphasis in most of his publications on a purely objective, scientific approach has led many critics to view him as having been cold, hard, and unfeeling.

It is to correct this view that I have undertaken the present — admittedly sketchy and incomplete — biography and personal memoir. It will be noticed that there is a great disproportion in length between the first two chapters (which deal with the first half of his life) and the remaining four. This discrepancy is due to the almost complete absence of detailed information, especially concerning his family and personal contacts, before he went to Ohio State University in 1921. When certain persons who might have furnished such information (e.g. his brother Grover or his adopted son James) were still alive, no-one seems to have thought of consulting them.

The "personal memoir" aspect of this biography is based on my contacts with Bloomfield, first when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1930's, and then when I was a junior colleague of his at Yale in the 1940's. I had one course with him, in Gothic, in 1936, and saw him from

time to time in casual contact in Wieboldt Hall or the Classics Building at the University of Chicago. My wife Frances and I had dinner with the Bloomfields only once, in the summer of 1937, as narrated in Chapter 4. After Bloomfield had gone to New Haven in 1940, we saw him frequently at the meetings of the Yale Linguistics Club, to which we went regularly from Providence, Rhode Island. In 1943-1944, I was a Visiting Assistant Professor at Yale, in charge of the linguistic side of two Army programs involving Italian. During that year, I saw Bloomfield frequently at the University, and had lunch with him and other linguists several times a week.

For the information presented in this biography, I am, first of all, indebted to all who have already written on Bloomfield's life and work, particularly his friend and personal lawyer Léon M. Després, and his wife's sister-in-law Frances Clarke Sayers, in their articles in Hall (ed.) 1987 [see References to the Notes]. Especial thanks are due to the Archives of the University of Chicago for access to their files and permission to reprint the documents reproduced in Chapter 4, which cast a wholly new light on the relations between Bloomfield and the University administration (particularly Dean Richard P. McKeon) in the crucial year 1939. I am further indebted to the following persons who have aided and abetted me while I was preparing this biography:

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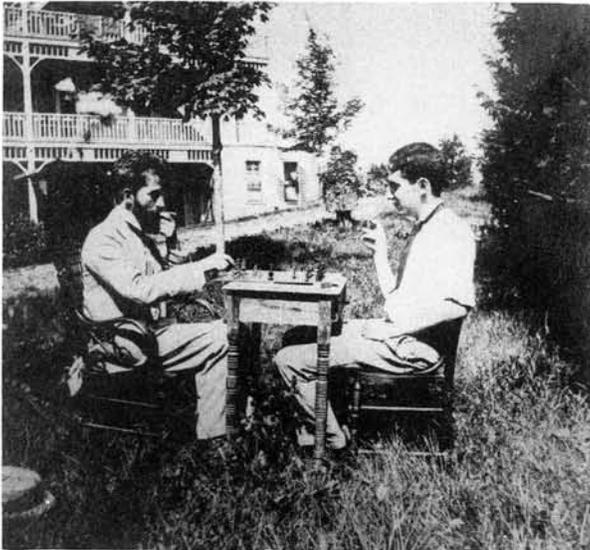
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 June, 1989.

R. A. H., Jr.

CHAPTER 1
THE EARLY YEARS
(1887-1909)



Leonard Bloomfield standing in front of the "Hotel Schwartz",
Elkart Lake, Wisconsin, owned and operated by his parents, Sigmund
and Carola Bloomfield



Leonard Bloomfield at a game of chess with a Dr Zinkin
(Both pictures taken in 1908 or 1909 by Elsa Wolfe; courtesy of
Leon M. Despres, Chicago)

CHAPTER 1

THE EARLY YEARS (1887-1909)

Leonard Bloomfield was born on April 1, 1887, at Chicago, Illinois, the son of Sigmund and Carola (Buber) Bloomfield. He was born into an Austrian-Jewish family, whose original name was Blumenfeld (later Anglicized to Bloomfield) and which had emigrated to America in 1868 from Bielitz (now Bielsko in Poland). Leonard's father Sigmund was the middle of three children. We do not know Sigmund's exact birth year, but it must clearly have been between 1856 and 1862. His brother Maurice (1855-1928) became one of the leading scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in comparative Indo-European philology and Indic studies. Maurice was noted as a defender of the principle of regular sound-change; when one finds references to "Bloomfield" in this context, up to the 1930's, they are to Leonard's uncle Maurice. Under her married name of Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler (1863-1927), Sigmund's and Maurice's sister was an outstanding concert pianist. Her son Ernest Bloomfield Zeisler was an authority on the Haymarket riots of 1886-1887 and on the Sherlock Holmes stories of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. On the Buber side of the family, they were related to the philosopher and theologian Martin Buber (1865-1925), and on one side or the other, also to the pianist Moritz Rosenthal (1862-1946).

Little is known of Leonard Bloomfield's earliest years in Chicago. Presumably both German and English were spoken in his family. Leonard's English was completely native, with what he always referred to, in his discussions of English, as a Chicago phonology. Martin Joos, however, considered that it was a normal Wisconsin pronunciation. (In any case, the difference between the two varieties would have been very slight.) Bloomfield's German was extremely fluent, with a somewhat Austrian-tinged accent and an inimitable uvular trill for /r/. As with nineteenth-century Austrian Jews in general, no Yiddish was used in Leonard's family. Significantly, in his book *Language* and elsewhere, Leonard Bloomfield always referred to that

variety as *Judeo-German*, not as *Yiddish* (in marked contrast to the usage of others such as Edward Sapir [1884–1939]).

We do not know in what business Sigmund Bloomfield was engaged in Chicago before 1896. When the young Leonard was nine, his father moved his family to Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, where he took over and ran the Hotel Schwartz. This was Leonard's official residence from 1896 to 1906, with the exception of the two winters of 1898-1899 and 1900-1901, spent in Europe with his family. The Hotel Schwartz was a resort hotel, with a main building (which included the dining-room and kitchen) and other houses and cottages on the grounds. According to reports, Sigmund was a bright, strong man, but his wife Carola did all the work connected with the operation of the hotel. Léon Després has described her as widely read, thoughtful, and intelligent. Like a great many other persons of German or Austrian origin, Sigmund Bloomfield was strongly pro-German during the First World War, at least until the United States became involved.

Leonard Bloomfield's parents were free-thinkers, in the tradition of the Austrian Jewish enlightenment. Consequently, their children received no instruction in the Jewish religion. In the operation of the Hotel Schwartz, they did not keep a kosher kitchen, and their guests included non-Jews as well as Jews. This absence of any but an ethical foundation for his beliefs may have been a factor in rendering the young Leonard defenceless against hostility, in any way except retreating into a protective shell of outwardly deadened sensitivity.

Bloomfield was very reticent on matters of religion, but was clearly agnostic, at the very least. On at least one occasion, I heard him remark "Wouldn't it be strange if, after we die, we should find that there really is an after-life, with a Heaven and a Hell?". When his wife Alice fell into a state of deep depression after leaving Chicago in 1940, well-meaning friends suggested that she join the local chapter of Hadassah and take part in its activities, but neither she nor her husband looked favorably on this suggestion. In such matters, Bloomfield's attitude was in marked contrast to that of Edward Sapir (1884-1939). (The latter, as is well known, was brought up in a strongly orthodox Jewish tradition, which he abandoned for a time, but towards which he returned towards the end of his life.) Bloomfield eventually substituted science (in his own particular view) for religion, and defended it

with a quasi-religious fervor in his writings. This was, however, in no wise a kind of “naïve scientism” on his part. He was fully aware of the relation between science, religion, and other types of attitudes, and of the choice between them being essentially a matter of faith. But he insisted that, no matter what one’s beliefs in such matters might be, one must never allow them to interfere with or distort one’s perception of the facts.

At Elkhart Lake, the Bloomfield children attended the local elementary school. It is said to have been a family joke that Leonard did not like the school there and at one point failed of promotion to a higher grade, perhaps because he disapproved of their teaching methods. This may well have been a typically Bloomfieldian way of concealing the unpleasant reality that, in his years in the Elkhart Lake school, he was badly out of place, as a bright but small, bespectacled Jewish boy from Chicago. The other boys — mostly German Lutheran — teased him unmercifully, calling him “April Fool” because of his birth-date and making him the butt of considerable nastiness.

There is an interesting parallel between Leonard Bloomfield and the German composer Johannes Brahms (1833-1896), in both their respective childhoods and their professional achievements. They both had very unpleasant experiences in their early years — Brahms in the lowest and most immoral slums of Hamburg, and Bloomfield in the school at Elkhart Lake — which left indelible psychic scars. Both grew up to become “classics”, each in his own field, achieving the highest degree of professional competence possible, but with considerable self-restriction in approach and technique. Both retreated from the onslaughts of the world around them into a many-layered shell of self-defence. Their ways of keeping the outer world at bay were, however, markedly different. Brahms became more and more gruff and bearish as he grew older. Bloomfield, on the other hand, was more and more shy as time went on, so that in the end it was next to impossible to draw him out on any purely personal matter at all.

Leonard had two siblings, an older brother named Grover and a considerably younger sister Marie, both of them brilliant persons. As for Leonard’s relations with Grover, the historian wonders whether they may have been such as to put the former still more on the defensive. The only anecdote known concerning the two comes from Léon Després:

[Leonard] said that his brother Grover was eating an apple. He watched Grover eat the apple, and was filled with a desire to have some too. It was a beautiful apple. Finally, he said quietly to Grover 'May I have a piece of the apple?'. Grover said to him, 'Since you asked me, no.'*

One such instance of course furnishes insufficient evidence on which to base any definitive conclusions as to Grover's having established, or tried to establish, any kind of psychological domination. Were there any other such instances? Was there any significant conflict or rivalry between the two? Léon Després tells us that Grover grew up to be an outstanding chemist. Did Leonard feel that, as a younger brother, he had (as many younger brothers often do) to prove himself Grover's equal or superior? We do not know.

Certainly, Leonard's experiences as a boy of elementary school age at Elkhart Lake were unpleasant, and it must have been clear that he needed to go elsewhere for high school. For this stage of his education, he was sent back in 1900 to Chicago, where he attended the North Division (now the Waller) School. His record in high school was spotty, averaging between B and C, with A's in German but with D's in French and physics. (In view of Leonard's later prowess in learning such a difficult language as Menominee, it seems strange that he should have done so poorly in French.) Nevertheless, his high school record was good enough to get him admitted to Harvard in 1903, with eight points additional for "advanced studies" and what would nowadays be called "advanced placement" in Greek and Latin.

In addition to intellectual ability, Leonard had marked artistic talents. It was rumored among the graduate students at the University of Chicago in the 1930's that a certain house in Chicago had, on the walls of its basement, some paintings by the youthful Leonard Bloomfield. These paintings, if they existed (as may well have been the case, given his artistic ability), must have dated from his years in high school. Léon Després reports that, in Bloomfield's undergraduate copy of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Bloomfield had drawn very skillful and imaginative pictures in the margin. Many years later, he illustrated the original manuscript (which I have seen) of his elementary reading materials with similar drawings.

* Interestingly, in his 1933 book *Language*, Leonard used an apple as the object which Jill asks Jack for, in his simplified version of the function of language in transferring stimuli from one person to another.

At Harvard, Leonard's extra credits enabled him to finish his undergraduate studies in three years instead of the customary four, so that he obtained his A.B. there in 1906, at the age of nineteen. His scholastic record was definitely better, with no mark below B and with mostly A's. Among his teachers at Harvard, he most admired Charles Townsend Copeland (1860-1952), from whom he considered that he had learned not only to write effectively, but also to think clearly, through "Copey's" thorough and detailed criticism of his daily essays. (The results of "Copey's" teaching were evident in the mature Bloomfield's absolutely clear and concise style, saying exactly what he meant, no more and no less.) In his senior year, Bloomfield won the coveted Detur prize, receiving an edition of Tacitus as his award.

One would like to know more about Bloomfield's undergraduate years at Harvard. Who were his friends, how many were they, what were his major interests and his avocations (if any), and so forth? All his teachers and class-mates are gone now, and virtually no information is available. The only indications I ever had came from one of his class-mates, William F. O'Reilly, who had gone to the (then newly acquired) American "island possession" of Puerto Rico after leaving Harvard, and whom I knew there in the late 1930's. All he said was that Bloomfield had been a brilliant lad, very studious and very shy. Now I regret that I did not "pump" Bill O'Reilly for a more detailed picture of Bloomfield as an undergraduate.

On completing his undergraduate study at Harvard in 1906, Bloomfield went on to graduate work, first at Wisconsin (1906-1908) and then at Chicago (1908-1909). In those days, it was by no means uncommon to complete the requirements for the doctorate in three years after receiving the A.B., even while serving as a teaching assistant. Normally, one put in two years on course-work and a third year devoted primarily to work on a dissertation. The latter was often quite short, by present day standards, sometimes only seventy-five pages or less (as was Bloomfield's dissertation in its printed form in *Modern Philology*), It was not uncommon to complete the dissertation while also taking courses and acting as a teaching assistant in one or more sections.

At Wisconsin, Bloomfield was a teaching assistant in German, in charge of two sections, each meeting four hours per week. He was not a degree candidate, and therefore never took an M.A. As a graduate student, however, he took ten courses in German and Germanic philology, as well as work in Old

Bulgarian, Lithuanian, Russian, and Sanskrit. Among his teachers were Alexander R. Hohlfeld (1865-1935), Edwin G. Roedder (1873-1945), and Eduard Prokosch (1876-1938), all outstanding scholars in Germanic philology. The last-mentioned, who was nine years Bloomfield's senior, exerted an immediate and lasting influence on him. Bloomfield's description of their first meeting has become a *locus classicus*, and deserves to be quoted in full here:

[...] In the summer of 1906 I came, fresh out of college, to Madison, to be looked over for an assistantship. Desiring to earn an academic living, I had developed no understanding or inclination for any branch of science. The kindly Professor Hohlfeld delegated Prokosch, one of his young instructors, to entertain me for the day. On a small table in Prokosch's dining room there stood a dozen technical books (I seem to remember that Leskien's Old Bulgarian grammar was among them) and in the interval before lunch Prokosch explained to me their use and content. By the time we sat down to the meal, a matter of perhaps fifteen minutes, I had decided that I should always work in linguistics. At the end of the two years of study that followed, I knew no greater intellectual pleasure than to listen to Prokosch.

In his year (four quarters) at Chicago, Bloomfield was again an assistant, presumably in German. He took courses in Germanic and Indo-European philology with Francis Asbury Wood (1859-1948) and Carl Darling Buck (1866-1955), and in German literature (the Romantic school) with Martin Schütze (1866-1950). (With the two last-mentioned, I had courses, twenty-five years later, in Indo-European and Goethe's *Faust*, respectively.) The topic of Bloomfield's Ph.D. dissertation was "A semasiologic differentiation in Germanic secondary ablaut", suggested to him and directed by Francis A. Wood. In view of the later wide-spread (but wholly inaccurate) canard that Bloomfield neglected or opposed the study of meaning in linguistics, it is worth noting that his very first work in the field involved semantic considerations.

Among the "summer complaints" (to use a New England term) at the Hotel Schwartz was the family of Chander Sayers, a well-to-do St. Louis business man of Lithuanian Jewish origin. Their daughter Alice is described by Léon Després as having been a "very strong woman", who "really set her mind on capturing Leonard". The latter, says Després, was "no match for her determination". Bloomfield passed his examination for the doctorate at Chicago, *magna cum laude*, on March 15, 1909, and married Alice Sayers three days later, on March 18.

We do not know exactly when Bloomfield made the translation of Gerhart Hauptmann's *Vor Sonnenaufgang* ("Before Sunrise") which appeared in 1909, his only publication in the field of literature. (In later years, he was by no means insensitive to literary values, but referred to them or discussed them in writing only rarely.) Nor do we know how early he began to collect the materials for his 1914 book *Introduction to the Study of Language*. Given their extent, he must have drawn on knowledge accumulated during his years as a graduate student or perhaps even earlier. His discussions with his uncle Maurice may well have begun at this time. Léon Després remembers Maurice Bloomfield's "coming to see Leonard once and being treated with great respect and surrounded with silence so that he might confer with Leonard". This latter event must have taken place on one of the occasions when the young Després was at the Hotel Schwartz, in the summer of 1919 or 1920, or thereafter; but the professional discussions between Maurice Bloomfield and his nephew Leonard must undoubtedly have begun much earlier.

In the spring of 1909, Leonard Bloomfield was ready to begin his academic career, which started that fall at the University of Cincinnati.