# MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE TRENDS IN WISCONSIN, 1915–1945

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DULT behavior, in terms of marriage and divorce, continues to demand an increasing amount of attention in the writings of sociologists, rural sociologists, and related social scientists. General understanding of the phenomenon, however, has not increased in proportion to the growth in the volume of literature because of the conflicting views which one finds expressed by the writers. Differences of opinion exist in such items as the trend in age at marriage, occupational influences upon divorce and marriage, childlessness and divorce, and rural-urban differences in the trends. Regardless of the nature of the evidence, the generalizations of social scientists tend to become the "facts" upon which laymen, ministers, social workers, counselors and sociologists depend for buttressing their practical ventures into the field of marital relations.<sup>3</sup>

This paper reports on data which we have uncovered in a project devoted to the study of certain portions of public statistics on marriage and divorce. The research was prompted by a desire to test some of the statements which have been incorporated into the theoretical—and practical as well—discussions concerning marriage and divorce. In this "passive role of verifying and testing theory" however, we are hopeful that a more active role may emerge so that the facts may lead to a reformulation of theory, if not to the establishment of serendipity components.<sup>4</sup>

The study is confined to an analysis of marriage and divorce statistics in the state of Wisconsin from 1915 to 1945. The data

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The reader is referred to the sociological literature of the last ten years for corroboration of the confusion which exists in this general area of sociological activity.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Robert K. Merton: The Bearing of Empirical Research upon the Development of Social Theory, *American Sociological Review*, 13, No. 5, Oct. 1948, pp. 505-515.

came from the original certificates in the files of the State Bureau of Vital Statistics in Madison and, in order to reduce the time and expense of tabulations, the years 1915, 1920, 1935, 1940 and 1945 were selected for study. Two of these years were prewar years (1915 and 1940), two were post-war years (1920 and 1945) and the other year was in the midst of the depression decade (1935).

The marriage certificates are bound in volumes, by counties, for each year. Every tenth marriage certificate was included in the five samples, beginning with the first certificate in the first volume of each year. The data transcribed included the year of marriage, the age at marriage of the bride and groom, and occupation of the groom.

A total enumeration of all divorces was made for the five periods studied and the data tabulated included the year of divorce, date of marriage, age of wife and husband at the time of divorce, occupation of husband, and number of children by the marriage dissolved. Divorce, in the sense defined in the article, includes divorce and annulment.

No attempt was made to control out-of-state marriages and divorces of Wisconsin residents or marriages and divorces of out-of-state residents in Wisconsin because there was no practical way of determining their occurrence.

## DIFFERENCES IN FARM AND NON-FARM MARRIAGE RATES

Crude farm and non-farm<sup>5</sup> marriage rates were calculated, for each of the five years, according to occupational classifications rather than residence of the groom because of the more precise practices followed in listing occupational data.

In 1915, the non-farm marriage rate per 1,000 population was 7.6 and the farm rate was 6.5 (Table 1). The non-farm rate rose to its highest peak (9.2) in 1920 but the farm marriage rate had increased then to only 6.7. Both the non-farm and farm rates had dropped in 1935 from the pre-depression (1920) figures to 7.5 and 5.4, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> Non-farm, as used in this article, denotes all people other than farmers.

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Year	Estimated Population <sup>1</sup>	Total Marriages <sup>2</sup>	P <sub>1</sub> <sup>3</sup> Marriage Rate Per 100 Population		P2 <sup>3</sup>				
	FARM								
1915 1920 1935 1940 1945	925,000 915,237 931,000 872,189 768,000	599 613 501 488 663	6.1 6.3 5.0 5.2 8.1	6.5 6.7 5.4 5.6 8.6	6.9 7.2 5.8 6.1 9.3				
	NON-FARM								
1915 1920 1935 1940 1945	1,564,061 1,732,754 2,116,792 2,265,398 2,369,587	1,183 1,596 1,592 1,847 1,851	7.3 9.1 7.4 8.0 7.7	7.6 9.2 7.5 8.2 7.8	7.8 9.5 7.8 8.3 8.0				

<sup>1</sup> The farm population base is the same as the census definition of rural farm. The non-farm population base is a combination of the census classification of rural non-farm and urban populations.

<sup>3</sup> This total marriage represents a 10 per cent sample of all marriages in each of the five years. In all five years of the total marriages in which the groom did not report an occupation, one-half were assumed to be farm; the other half non-farm. In 1945, 816 grooms gave their occupational status as servicemen. Fifteen per cent were assumed to be farm and 85 per cent were designated as non-farm.

<sup>3</sup> Confidence limits are two points, one above  $(P_2)$  and one below  $(P_1)$  an estimate, which we can determine and expect to be right 95 times out of 100 in saying that they include the universe parameter.

Table 1. Crude farm and non-farm marriage rates for Wisconsin for 1915, 1920, 1935, 1940 and 1945.

With renewed prosperity well underway in 1940, both the farm and non-farm marriage rates had risen. In 1945, the non-farm rate dropped to 7.8 from 8.2 in 1940. However, the farm marriage rate took a tremendous jump from 1940 (5.6) to 1945 (8.6). This is the only year in which the farm marriage rate surpassed the non-farm rate.<sup>6</sup> It is probable that the rise in farm marriages in 1945 was influenced by the large number of farmers and farm laborers who were deferred from military service and who remained at home during the war. From November, 1940, to June, 1945, farmers and farm laborers

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> In 1945, 25,269 marriages were recorded for the state of Wisconsin—in other words there were 8.1 marriages per 1,000 population. In 1946 the Wisconsin marriage rate reached its highest peak since 1870—12.3 marriages per 1,000 population. By 1947 the marriage rate declined to 11.1 and in 1948 it dropped to 10.0.

accounted for only 13.6 per cent of the total males inducted into the United States Army in Wisconsin.<sup>7</sup>

It can also be demonstrated that more of the Wisconsin men who were deferred in agriculture were in the age groups at which men normally marry than the men who were deferred in industrial employment during World War II. On July 1, 1944, 55.9 per cent of the agriculturally deferred men were 18–29 years old, while only 24.6 per cent of the industrially deferred men were in this age group.<sup>8</sup> These age differentials remained almost the same on August 1, 1945, as on July 1, 1944. These data support the change in the position of the farm and nonfarm marriages rates in 1945, because they show that a larger percentage of the farm men remained on Wisconsin farms because of deferment and that they were substantially younger than the much smaller number of industrially deferred men who remained at home.

### DIFFERENCE IN FARM AND NON-FARM DIVORCE RATES

The general trend in the crude farm and non-farm divorce rate has been decidedly upward during the time interval studied. The non-farm rate was over twice as high as the farm rate in each of the five years (Table 2). The farm rate was 0.3 divorces per 1,000 population in 1915, increased steadily to 0.4 in 1920, 0.5 in 1935, 0.6 in 1940, and 0.9 in 1945. The non-farm rate was 0.9 in 1915, rose to 1.2 in 1920, 1.5 in 1935, then decreased slightly to 1.4 in 1940, but almost doubled in 1945 with crude rate of 2.4.<sup>9</sup>

From 1915 to 1945, the non-farm divorce rate increased from 0.9 to 2.4 per 1,000 population, an increase of 167 per cent. The farm divorce rate increased 200 per cent from 1915 (0.3 divorces per 1,000 population) to 1945 (0.9 divorces per 1,000 popula-

<sup>7</sup> Source: Selective Service System, AGRICULTURAL DEFERMENT. Government Printing Office, Washington, 1947, pp. 94, 96, 240 and 246.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> There were 2 divorces per 1,000 population in 1945. In 1946 the Wisconsin divorce rate increased to its highest level since 1867—2.6. But by 1947 the divorce rate had declined below the 1945 level—1.8 divorces per 1,000 population, and in 1948 the rate was down to 1.5.

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Year	Estimated	Total	DIVORCE RATE PER	
	Population	Divorces <sup>1</sup>	1,000 POPULATION	
		FARM		
1915	925,000	320	.3	
1920	915,237	371	.4	
1935	931,000	502	.5	
1940	872,189	508	.6	
1945	768,000	715	.9	
		NON-FARM		
1915	1,564,061	1,371	.9	
1920	1,732,754	2,012	1.2	
1935	2,116,792	3,108	1.5	
1940	2,265,398	3,139	1.4	
1945	2,369,587	5,703	2.4	

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<sup>1</sup> The total divorces in which occupation was not reported were divided equally between farm and non-farm groups. In 1915, of a total of 6 servicemen, 3 were counted as farm and 3 as non-farm. In 1945, 850 divorced males reported that they were in the armed forces. Fifteen per cent of these divorces were counted as farm and 85 per cent as non-farm.

Table 2. Crude farm and non-farm divorce rates for Wisconsin, for 1915, 1920, 1935, 1940 and 1945.

tion). Thus while Wisconsin farm families have a divorce rate that is only now as high as that of other Wisconsinites of a generation earlier, the rate is climbing. The spread between the farm and non-farm rates is not as great now as it was thirty years ago.

### DIFFERENCES IN AGE AT MARRIAGE

Farm men married earlier than non-farm men in 1915, 1920, 1940, and 1945. The reverse was true in 1935 (Table 3). Migration studies in Wisconsin have shown that there is a heavy migration of young men from farms to cities. This would exert an influence toward lowering the age of farm grooms and increasing the age at marriage of non-farm men. However, in the middle thirties migration to the cities was considerably curtailed and this, no doubt, helps to account for the rise in the age of farm grooms over the non-farm grooms. In 1915, 1920, 1940, and 1945 the migration of farm men to the cities tended to lower the age of farm grooms.

Year	Total Marriages		Non-	-Farm	Farm		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
1915 1920 1935 1940 1945	27.8 28.3 28.4 27.9 29.7	24.2 24.9 24.8 24.6 26.0	27.8 28.3 28.3 28.0 33.7	24.4 25.2 25.0 24.8 28.9	27.7 27.9 28.7 27.1 28.0	23.6 23.8 24.0 23.2 23.8	

Table 3. Mean age at marriage of men and women in Wisconsin, for total group, non-farm, and farm, 1915 to 1945.

In the four periods when non-farm grooms reflected higher age at marriage than did farm grooms it will be noted that, except for 1945, this difference tended to be slight. The deferment policies of World War II, already mentioned, undoubtedly influenced the increase of more than five years in the average age at marriage of non-farm grooms in 1945 in contrast to the age in 1940. Wisconsin farm women married earlier than nonfarm women in all five periods studied. They also married younger grooms than did non-farm women.

The data demonstrate the commonly accepted position that women marry earlier than men (Table 3). For Wisconsin as a whole, women married more than three years younger than men in all five periods. Non-farm women were likewise about three years younger when they appeared at the altar than non-farm grooms. Farm women, on the other hand, married about four years younger than the farm grooms did. The heavy migration rate of women under 25 years of age from farms is a factor in reducing age at marriage of those who remain.

## LENGTH OF MARRIAGE AND OCCUPATION

Among the marriages which ended in divorce the proprietor, manager, and official class had the longest duration of marriage for the five years studied (Table 4). The median duration of marriage for divorced couples of this group was ten years in 1915, nine years in 1920, eleven years in 1935, nine

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years in 1940, and eleven years in 1945. For the five years combined the median was ten years. That this occupational group had the highest median duration of marriage before divorce may suggest that our middle class mores are such that "Main Street Babbits" are more rigorously controlled than any other group in our midwestern states.

The farmer and skilled occupations had the next highest duration of marriage before divorce for the five-period average -nine years. In 1945 farm families were fifth from the top of the list. Their present behavior suggests that factors which formerly operated against divorce may be disappearing.

Four occupational groups ranked intermediate with a median of eight years before divorce: (1) clerical, sales, and kindred workers (2) unskilled (3) domestic and protective service workers and service workers, and (4) occupation-not-

0	Year I	All 5 Years				
OCCUPATION	1915	1920	1935	1940	1945	Combined
Professional and Semi- Professional Workers Farmers and Farm Managers, Farm Laborers and Farm	8	7	7	7	7	7
Foremen	10	9	10	11	8	9
Proprietors, Managers and						
Officials, except Farm	10	9	11	9	11	10
Clerical, Sales and						
Kindred Workers	8	7	8	8	9	8
Skilled	8	8	10	10	10	9
Semi-skilled	6	6	8	7	8	7
Domestic and Protective						
Service Workers and						
Service Workers	8	8	7	9	10	8
Unskilled	8	7	7	6	8	8
Servicemen	4				4	41
Occupation-Not-Reported	9	7	8	9	7	8
Total Divorces	8	7	8	8	8	8

Table 4. Median years married of all persons divorced, by occupational groups in Wisconsin for the years, 1915, 1920, 1935, 1940, and 1945.

<sup>1</sup> Median is for the two years 1915 and 1945 combined. SOURCE: Data were tabulated from divorce certificates on file at the Wisconsin State Board of Health Office, Madison, Wisconsin.

reported. Just below these four groups were the semi-skilled and the professional and semi-professional classes with a median duration of marriage of seven years. Most studies have shown that the professional group has a high divorce rate and the Wisconsin data definitely support this observation.

## SILVER WEDDING ANNIVERSARIES AND DIVORCE

It can be demonstrated that a sizable proportion of divorce occurs among couples after 25 years of marriage in certain groups of Wisconsinites. One remarkable fact that these data illustrate is that 16 per cent of all divorced farm couples were divorced *after* their silver wedding anniversary. No other occupational group has even half as high a rate as this (Table 5).

This high rate of divorce among the silver anniversary farm couples leads to many questions which this statistical analysis

Occupation	Total Divorces	Divorces After 26 Years or More of Marriage	Per Cent
	Number	Number	
Farmers and Farm Managers, Farm Laborers, and Farm			
Foremen	1,403	229	16.3
Occupation-Not-Reported	1,758	128	7.3
Skilled	3,601	259	7.2
Proprietors, Managers, and	-		
Officials, Except Farm	858	56	6.5
Professional and Semi-			
Professional Workers	796	49	6.2
Unskilled	4,180	240	5.7
Clerical, Sales and			
Kindred Workers	1,711	83	4.9
Domestic and Protective Service	, . , .		
Workers and Service Workers	950	46	4.8
Semi-skilled	1,637	60	3.7
Servicemen	856	2	.2
Total <sup>1</sup>	17,750	1,151	6.5

Table 5. Number and per cent of divorced couples who had been married 26 years or more.

<sup>1</sup> Totals are a five year average, 1915, 1920, 1935, 1940, and 1945 for Wisconsin.

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cannot answer. Does this high farmer divorce rate reflect family instability after the children have left the parental home? Does this rate mean that farm marriages in reality approach the reported instability and incompatibility of urban marriages, but that the conservative rural mores prevent such marriages from earlier dissolution? Do farm couples really have a more tranquil married life than non-farm people, as the body of literature on rural life explicitly states? Is the much vaunted sacred farm family in reality a preferred place for child rearing?

## DIVORCE AND CHILDREN

Slightly over 45 per cent of the couples who were divorced were childless. (Table 6). The divorced farm and non-farm families differ but little in the proportions that come from infertile unions. For the five year average, 40.8 per cent of the farm couples had no children while 46.3 per cent of the non-farm divorced families were without children.

For the five years combined, a larger proportion of divorced non-farm couples had one child (24.6 per cent) than divorced farm couples (19.2 per cent). Twenty-four per cent of all divorced families had one child.

For the five year average, 13.9 per cent of all Wisconsin divorced couples were parents of two children. A larger percentage of non-farm divorced families had two children (14.1) than farm divorces (12.5) for the average over the same period (Table 6).

Of all couples divorced in the five periods studied only 7.3 per cent had reared three children. The proportions for the farm and non-farm families were the same as that for the State as a whole. However, an outstanding difference exists in the percentage of farm and non-farm families having four or more children. One-fifth of all divorced farm families had reared four or more children. In contrast, only 7.8 per cent of the non-farm couples had a family as large as this. Differential fertility studies have demonstrated that Wisconsin farm families have a higher reproduction rate than urban families. The divorced farm families are no exception. There were almost half as many divorced farm couples that had four or more children (283) for the five-year average as there were farm couples that had no children (573). In the non-farm population this ratio was only slightly more one than one-sixth.

Is the absence of children in a family a cause of divorce? Possibly it is in some cases, but the relationship is not as simple as some would have us believe. The most frequent year of marriage in which divorce occurred was the third year. No doubt many couples postpone children for the first few years

	Number of Children							
Year	0	1	2	3	4 and Over	Total		
1915								
Total Percentage	44.9	25.8	12.0	8.0	9.3	100.0		
Non-Farm Percentage	46.1	26.2	11.9	8.1	7.7	100.0		
Farm Percentage	35.8	22.8	13.0	7.3	21.2	100.1		
1920								
Total Percentage	47.4	24.6	12.0	6.7	9.3	100.0		
Non-Farm Percentage	48.0	25.5	12.2	6.8	7.6	100.1		
Farm Percentage	<b>43</b> .0	17.4	10.9	5.8	22.9	100. <b>0</b>		
1935								
Total Percentage	45.4	26.1	13.8	6.6	8.1	100.0		
Non-Farm Percentage	45.9	26.7	14.2	6.4	6.9	100.1		
Farm Percentage	40.1	20.8	10.1	9.2	19.9	100.1		
1940								
Total Percentage	43.5	26.2	14.6	7.1	8.7	100.1		
Non Farm Percentage	43.9	26.8	14.8	7.0	7.6	100.1		
Farm Percentage	39.1	18.5	11.8	9.1	21.6	100.1		
1945				1				
Total Percentage	47.1	21.5	14.9	7.7	8.8	100.0		
Non-Farm Percentage	47.3	21.7	14.8	7.8	8.4	100.0		
Farm Percentage	44.5	17.4	16.8	4.9	16.5	100.1		
Total Percentage For								
All Five Years	45.8	24.2	13.9	7.3	8.8	100.0		
Non-Farm Percentage	46.3	24.6	14.1	7.3	7.8	100.1		
Farm Percentage	40.8	19.2	12.5	7.3	20.2	100.0		

Table 6. Distribution of divorces by number children, Wisconsin, 1915, 1920, 1935, 1940, and 1945, by total, non-farm, and farm groups. (Only living children by this marriage were counted)

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in order to better their economic security. It is therefore possible to conclude that divorce seems to select the less stable of the childless marriages and also those of the fertile marriages.

### Summary

In conclusion, the following observations seem pertinent from the preceding analysis which in some aspects, we believe, for the first time makes possible some farm and non-farm comparisons:

1. Crude marriage and divorce rates, easily computed, appear to be as satisfactory as refined rates for the foregoing type of analysis. Subsequent refinement of the rates did not provide any additional insight for the interpretation of the problem.<sup>10</sup> The use of refined rates forces the making of assumptions which may not be warranted in view of the crudeness of the raw data which sociologists have at their command in studies of this nature.

2. If more sensitive rates are wanted, and if statistics are available only from marriage and divorce records as they are in Wisconsin, then the following refined rates may be preferable to the crude rates:

a. A marriage rate computed on a population base of single males age 15 to 44, or all single males 15 years of age and over;

b. A divorce rate computed on a population base of the married males 15 years of age and over.

3. The non-farm marriage rate per 1,000 population was above the farm rate in 1915, 1920, 1935, and 1940. The farm marriage rate in 1945 surpassed the non-farm rate because of the differential rate of induction into the armed services of farm and non-farm men. In other words, there is no evidence

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Refined rates (age specific and standardized rates) were computed for only one year, 1940. These rates showed about the same relative difference between the nonfarm and farm populations as the crude rate did. For this reason the refined rates are omitted from consideration here. It is conceivable that the processes of social and cultural change had erased many of the factors which in earlier periods may have operated to give more point to the use of refined rates. This would make an interesting hypothesis to test at some future date.

that the environment of the Wisconsin farmer has "commanded" him to marry, to borrow the language of one rural sociologist.

4. During the periods from 1915 to 1945 the non-farm divorce rate per 1,000 population was consistently higher than the farm divorce rate, but the gap between the two population groups is narrowing. It appears reasonable to expect the gap to continue to close more rapidly now that divorce has become a significant part of the rural family pattern.

5. The average age at marriage has risen but very slightly and irregularly during the last thirty years. The thirty-year span is broken by two wars and one devastating depression so that the trend, if there be one, is not pronounced. This applies to both sexes.

6. In this same period farm grooms married younger than non-farm grooms by one-tenth of a year in 1915, four-tenths of a year in 1920, and nine-tenths of a year in 1940. Farm grooms married at an older age by four-tenths of a year in 1935, whereas the non-farm grooms married at an abnormally high age in 1945. Again, except for 1945, the differences are slight—not pronounced as we have been led to believe—and the interpretation of the traditional differential migration patterns of our rural and urban populations seems to offer logical explanations for these differences. In contrast to the grooms, the farm brides have been marrying about one year earlier than the non-farm brides.

7. The divorced proprietor, manager and official couples, on an average, remained married longer before divorce than all other occupational groups. The median length of marriage before divorce for this group was 10 years. The farmers and skilled classes had the next longest duration of marriage (9 years) before divorce. These statistics suggest that the middle-class mores of main-street society may be a much stronger deterrent to divorce than the much-vaunted sacred forces which at one time may have been operative in farm communities. Marriage and Divorce Trends in Wisconsin, 1915–1945 17

8. A larger proportion of farm couples who were divorced took this way out of their marriage after their 25th year of marriage than for any other occupational group. No other occupational group had even half as large a proportion of divorces in this category. Herein may lie many a clue to the correct interpretation of the oft-repeated stability of the farm family. In view of our data we feel justified in asking, do farm couples, in reality, suffer more discord during their marital union than non-farm families because the latter more often take the divorce way out of unhappy marriages? Of course, this study cannot answer this question, but it does cast doubt upon the naive conclusion, so widely held, that a mere absence of divorce among farm families necessarily means greater stability of the farm than the non-farm marriage. The relationship is not necessarily a causal one.

9. Children may help to hold married couples together as is so generally stated, but divorces do occur among couples with children as well. The mere presence of children, therefore, may not be as forceful a deterrent to divorce as is commonly believed.

The authors are fully aware of the limitations of their data; they are regional in character and suffer all the shortcomings of public records. Nevertheless, the statistics and their interpretation are presented in the hope that they will contribute to the understanding of American family life and its marriage and divorce patterns.