Several aspects of Harry Stack Sullivan’s life history are quite strange, and so, according to some biographers, was Harry Stack Sullivan himself. He was born on February 21st, 1892, though his medical records say he was born in 1886, in the rural community of Norwich, New York. His father’s name was Timothy Sullivan and his mother’s name seems to have been Ella Stack, but it remains unclear whether her name was actually Ella. That is the name that appears on Sullivan’s birth certificate and on her death certificate, but in the family records her name was listed as Ellen, and on Sullivan’s baptismal certificate it was listed as Ellina. Timothy Sullivan was a hired-hand on the Stack farm (or another farm nearby), whose father had died when Timothy Sullivan was young, leaving the family quite poor. There was a great deal of discrimination against Irish Catholics at the time, and Timothy and Ella struggled. They lived in a poor part of town, where there was an improperly drained canal that was believed to be a breeding ground for “black diphtheria.” The Sullivans had two children before Harry, both born in February, who died in terrible convulsions before reaching the fall of their first year. When Harry was born in February, his mother was terrified that he would die as well (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

When Sullivan was 2 ½ he was sent to Smyrna, New York to live with his maternal grandmother. Where his mother was for the next few years is unknown. It was rumored that she had a nervous breakdown, and may have been kept hidden away in the attic of the barn until she recovered. Although she eventually returned to public view, she was never really Sullivan's caretaker again. Neither was his father. When Sullivan’s maternal grandfather died, there was no one to run the farm, which provided the support for him and his grandmother. Being poor himself, Timothy Sullivan was granted control of the farm. However, the Stack family had always considered Timothy Sullivan to be beneath them (the Stack family had a prestigious ancestry), so the legal documents were quite demeaning to Timothy Sullivan, and the farm’s name remained the Stack farm. Timothy Sullivan worked hard, but withdrew into himself and had little contact with others (Alexander, 1990; Evans,
Sullivan did very well in school, but had few friends due to the common prejudice and discrimination. At one point, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in front of the Stack farm. His only friend was a boy who was 5 years older, Clarence Bellinger. The two were very close throughout school, and both went on to become psychiatrists. However, after high school, they never contacted one another again. Bellinger always spoke poorly of Sullivan, and Sullivan simply never spoke of Bellinger. The reasons why are unknown, but it may have something to do with the fact that neither one of them ever married, and Sullivan was widely regarded as a homosexual. When Sullivan was 35, he took in a foster son, who may also have been a psychotic patient. Late in life, Sullivan seems to have referred to the young man as a “lover” (Alexander, 1990). If this was their relationship when his companion was only 15, and if his companion was a former patient, it was both unethical and criminal. It is tempting to suggest that Sullivan’s sexual development and alleged later actions may have been influenced by an inappropriate relationship with Bellinger while Sullivan was still quite young. However, the truth is not known, and there are other gaps in the history of Sullivan’s life (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

Two family members helped Sullivan with his education during his school years. His mother’s sister Margaret, a schoolteacher, brought him many books and introduced him to a wide range of intellectual ideas. His father’s brother, Will, was a respected lawyer and then a judge who was influential in applying psychological issues to the law. He helped to foster Sullivan’s interest in human problems. This aunt and uncle both later helped Sullivan with college finances, and they helped him to win a prestigious New York State Regents’ Scholarship to Cornell University. However, Sullivan was not prepared for college. After a fair start, his grades dropped drastically. He became involved with a group of boys who were illegally obtaining and selling chemicals. Only Sullivan was caught, and he was convicted of mail fraud. His whereabouts for the next 2 years are unknown. He may have been in jail, but there is evidence to suggest that he was hospitalized at Bellevue Hospital following a psychotic break. Later in life he was friends with the renowned A. A. Brill (the psychiatrist who first translated many of Freud’s books into English), and Brill was working at Bellevue at the time. Sullivan was also friends later in life with another employee who worked at Bellevue at that time, and no simple explanation can be given for his friendship with two men who worked at Bellevue Hospital during the time Sullivan’s whereabouts are unknown (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

In 1911, Sullivan reappeared and entered the Chicago College of Medicine and Surgery. He finished his coursework in 1915, but did not receive a degree, possibly due to owing the school money. He worked briefly as an industrial surgeon in a steel mill, and in 1916 joined the Illinois National Guard. After only 5 months he was released on medical grounds, supposedly due to a broken jaw. He then disappeared for a while, later claiming that he received 75 hours of psychoanalysis during the disappearance. But where that occurred, or with whom, is again unknown. In 1917, he was
finally awarded his medical degree, and he joined the U. S. Army. His application contained many inaccuracies and falsifications, including lying about his age. Nonetheless, he was commissioned as a lieutenant, promoted to captain at the end of World War I, and spent 2 years moving between Chicago and Washington, DC. In 1920, he left the Army, and again a year of his life seems to be missing. In November, 1921, he joined St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, DC, and began his career in psychiatry (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

St. Elizabeth’s Hospital was one of best psychiatric hospitals of the time (and remains so today), under the leadership of the renowned William Alanson White, a pioneer in applying dynamic psychotherapy to psychotic patients. After a year, however, there was no permanent position for Sullivan. So, he applied for a position at the Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Baltimore (as prestigious as St. Elizabeth’s both then and now). White's letter of recommendation for Sullivan was lukewarm and vague. He described Sullivan as “better equipped than the average State Hospital assistant,” but he also acknowledged that he didn’t really know Sullivan because of Sullivan’s personal distance from other people (Alexander, 1990). Nonetheless, Sullivan was hired for his first clinical psychiatric position at Sheppard Pratt (as it is more commonly known - Note: The author’s wife had the privilege of working at Sheppard Pratt early in her career), and he began an exciting and innovative period of eight years, during which he did the most important clinical work of his career, including innovative techniques for the treatment of schizophrenia in young patients (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982). Today, the Sheppard Pratt Health System includes the Harry Stack Sullivan Day Hospital, a partial hospitalization program assisting adults with severe mental illness, including psychotic disorders.

During his time at Sheppard Pratt, Sullivan became close friends with a young psychiatrist named Clara Thompson. They shared an interest in questioning Freud’s concepts of the feminine psyche and other challenges to orthodox psychoanalysis. As Sullivan became particularly interested in the work of Sandor Ferenczi (who accompanied Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung on Freud’s only trip to America, but later split with Freud), he encourage Thompson to go to Budapest and be psychoanalyzed by Ferenczi. She did so, and upon her return she was Sullivan’s training analyst, and Sullivan was later admitted to the American Psychoanalytic Society. The two remained close throughout their lives, and supposedly agreed to marry one another, but both quickly broke off the engagement the very next morning (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

In 1930, Sullivan moved to New York City to establish a private practice and conduct research. However, he failed to make much money, incurred some family debts following his father’s death, and he filed for bankruptcy in 1932. The next few years were interesting, but unstable. He was the driving force behind the establishment of the William Alanson White Foundation in 1933, and he actively collaborated with two colleagues at Yale University (where they likely had an influence on Erik Erikson’s work). However, one of those colleagues died in 1939, and Sullivan immersed himself
in a project studying Black adolescents in Tennessee and Mississippi. He then settled in Bethesda, Maryland, where he spent the rest of his career (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

The year 1939 marked the beginning of a highly productive period for Sullivan. Dexter Bullard, the director of a psychiatric hospital named Chestnut Lodge, provided Sullivan with steady consulting opportunities. This provided Sullivan financial security, and through Chestnut Lodge he met many influential psychiatrists in the Washington, DC area. William Alanson White had died in 1937, and Sullivan delivered a series of public lectures, which became the First William Alanson White Memorial Lectures, and which were released as Sullivan’s only book published while he was still alive: *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry* (Sullivan, 1940). The White Foundation established the journal *Psychiatry*, and the Washington School of Psychiatry. Sullivan also encouraged the White Foundation to establish a second training program in New York City, and the core faculty included Clara Thompson and Erich Fromm. The second program is known today as the William Alanson White Institute. When, in 1941, Karen Horney was disqualified as a training analyst by the New York Psychoanalytic Society, Clara Thompson walked out of the meeting, and helped to establish a rival Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis, with Horney as its dean. A series of political battles between opposing psychoanalytic societies followed, in many ways pitting followers of Freud against those whose interests and relationships were closer to Sullivan (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

In 1945, Sullivan became quite ill, and was urged to retire for his health. Instead, Sullivan accepted a new challenge. He was invited by Brock Chisholm, who was soon to become the first director of the World Health Organization, to serve as a consultant for the post-World War II International Congress on Mental Health. Sullivan focused on applying psychiatric principles to problems of world peace, including educating children on values for peace. He helped to establish the World Federation for Mental Health, and participated in the UNESCO Seminar on Childhood Education Toward World-Mindedness. In January 1949, following a particularly frustrating meeting of the World Federation for Mental Health, Sullivan died in a hotel room in Paris, France. He was cremated, as he had requested, and his ashes were buried at Arlington National Cemetery, honoring his service to the U. S. Army Medical Corps during World War I. A committee was established by the White Foundation to publish his papers. Between 1953 and 1972, the committee published seven books of Sullivan’s work, ensuring that his theories remained available to the fields of psychiatry and psychology (Alexander, 1990; Evans, 1996; Perry, 1982).

**Placing Sullivan in Context: America’s Psychodynamic Theorist**

Harry Stack Sullivan was an enigmatic character. His parents were poor and, apparently, both suffered from mental illness; his siblings died during their infancies. The region where he was raised
was extremely prejudiced against Irish Catholics, and the KKK burned a cross in front of their home. As a student, Sullivan was very successful, but legal problems (due to his own bad choices) and presumed hospitalizations for his own mental illness delayed his success in college and medical school. And yet, he went on to become the most influential psychodynamic theorist born in America, worked at two highly prestigious psychiatric hospitals, co-founded an influential foundation, and has a hospital named after him. Like Adler, however, his contributions seldom receive proper recognition, and he remains somewhat obscure.

Sullivan’s most interesting and enduring contributions relate to his relationship with William Alanson White. Although Sullivan only worked with White briefly, and White’s letter of recommendation for Sullivan’s next position admits that White considered Sullivan to be distant and hard to get to know, Sullivan vigorously pursued White’s interest in the treatment of schizophrenia. Sullivan helped to found the William Alanson White Foundation, which established two psychiatric training institutes and the journal *Psychiatry*, and Sullivan delivered the First William Alanson White Memorial Lectures. Today, the Sheppard Pratt Health System includes the Harry Stack Sullivan Day Hospital (for the treatment of psychotic disorders).