
History of the American Reading Forum

Bob W. Jerrolds

Ruth Kurth, Chair of the Board of Directors, has asked me to produce a history of the American Reading Forum on the occasion of the association's tenth anniversary. She said that people do not want a dry-as-dust history; she asked me to make it funny; she asked me to cover the past ten years in ten pages or less—double spaced.

Now that's funny! Everything that is accurate in this report is the result of my own rigorous historical scholarship. Everything that is inaccurate or misleading is the result of stuff told to me by Nicki Askov, Chet Laine, or Marian Tonjes.

My comments reflect my own perception of the events leading to the founding and the early days of the organization. I have not consulted with those who would know of antecedent events and might have different interpretations of the events I witnessed. Certainly my comments do not have any official sanction of the Board or the General Assembly.

The genesis of an association such as the Forum can never be traced to a single person or event, emerging instead from multiple events and the exchanges of several persons. The American Reading Forum came into existence because a good many people in the various reading and other professional groups felt that their needs were not being met through any of then extant groups.

As our public and private elementary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities became more and more product-oriented and the "publish

or perish" idea became a reality in even the smallest colleges, programs in our professional associations seemed to go in two directions:

1. give the classroom teacher and reading specialist concrete, practical suggestions for raising tests scores and meeting other realities of the public and private schools;
2. have as many presenters as possible to meet the vita needs of the association's members and keep the conference attendance as high as possible and membership roles as extensive as possible.

There was also abroad in the land concern for the political jockeying and egotripping that went on as some individuals sought to become officers in a professional association.

As those of us here came together in small informal groups to discuss our dissatisfaction with our home institutions and our associations, one theme seemed to emerge among the veterans of the field—we missed the more leisurely paced meetings where we could spend time with friends and colleagues from across the country and discuss and debate at length, in a congenial setting, the problems and issues of our field.

The young people we talked with expressed repeatedly their wish to present their research and their ideas about possible research in a forum that could be helpful and rigorous and provide criticism and suggestions without subjecting them to savage attacks. They wanted to be able to meet and talk with some of the leaders of the field without being cast in the role of sycophants.

All of us were concerned that colleges and universities that had once been, at least to some extent, cloistered environments where study, contemplation and scholarly dialogue were valued and encouraged had become rather noisy factories where administrators and tenure, promotion, and merit-pay committees counted products in terms of instructional hours generated, numbers of scholarly presentations made, and numbers of articles published.

What we seemed to want was a small organization, with opportunities for audience reaction and with a pace that allowed for thoughtful discussion and scholarly debate. We wanted a conference where friends and colleagues could assemble with some tranquility and young people in the field could meet and get to know those of stature in the field in an informal setting.

We had talked of our needs and wishes to some of the then-current officers of the various associations, particularly as programs exploded in size in 1977 and 1978. Our concerns fell on deaf ears.

In 1979, Jim Dinnan told me that he had examined the programs of the various reading organizations in recent years to find numerous instances where people would have six or seven minutes to present their research or other scholarly writing. With conferences lasting from two-and-a-half to four days and several hundred presenters scheduled, the possibilities for people to present were minimal at best and the possibilities for scholarly exchanges were virtually nil.

Jim asked me if I knew of any movement to start a new organization. I replied that I had been party to one such discussion. He asked if it had been a serious discussion. I replied that since Wayne Otto had been involved, it was not without its facetious side. As best I remember that event, during an early National Reading Conference three women and four men met for dinner at a well-known restaurant. Out of the group of five people, four were wearing navy or black clothes. Wayne commented that we looked more like an undertakers' convention than a group of honest people. From there it was downhill. Someone suggested that we should form a new reading association called the Undertakers of Reading. Then another wag, reminding us of the three reading groups of bluebirds, redbirds and buzzards, suggested that as the Undertakers of Reading we could have a logo depicting a buzzard. Wayne then suggested that the date and place for the annual convention would be predetermined since it would have to be on the 15th of March each year, when the buzzards come back to Hinckley, Ohio.

Jim allowed as how that was an unlikely foundation for a new association. He said he would call George and Evelyn Spache, Al and Betty Raygor, Emery Blismer, Betty Yarborough, Paul Berg and others who might be interested. I agreed to talk to Wayne Otto, Sylvia Carter (now Hutchinson), Gordon Gray and others. All these people talked with their friends and colleagues. To my surprise, but not to Jim's, virtually everyone we talked to thought a new organization was needed and contributed ideas and volunteered to contact others.

George and Evelyn Spache volunteered to do local arrangements for the first convention. Later they were joined by the Raygors, as hosts.

We agreed among ourselves that if we could get as many as 35 solid commitments to attend a conference in Sarasota, we would give it a shot. Jim sent out a one-page paper to those whose names he was given by various people, inviting them to submit proposals and join us in the formation of a new organization. The list of those contacted was relatively small, since we did not want another large organization.

The decision was made early on to do the thing with class and style. George and Evelyn made arrangements at the Colony Beach and Tennis

Resort, which was not the kind of place that most new groups would choose for their first convention. We all agreed we did not want to deal with an organization that would nickel and dime itself to death and limp financially from one year to the next. Whereas other organization began with mimeographed programs, a three- or four-dollar membership and eternal membership drives to stay afloat, we set the membership fee at \$35.00, decided to have a refereed yearbook based on the first conference, and decided to have a classy looking printed program the first year out. It was also decided that any person in the groups was free to invite any promising person to join but that we would not do any wholesale recruiting drives.

Suggestions were made that we become a special-interest group of IRA, that we try to fill the gaps in the other associations, that we schedule our conference so as not to compete with other associations, etc. Finally, it was decided that we would meet our own needs as we saw them and not in any way define ourselves by what any other group might or might not be.

To have a conference when the time pressures from our jobs would be fewer, we wanted to move into the beginning of the Christmas break period, which was also the examination period for some schools. We knew that our exams could be proctored by others when we went to the conference. George and Evelyn Spache pointed out that we had to come early in December, to get convention rates in Florida, since the in-season rates would soar. That put us square on the dates of the National Reading Conference that first year. We talked it over, and most of us who were involved said that since we were taking on a new association, we were not going to NRC the next year anyway.

That led to accusations that we were attacking NRC. As far as I know, no official action was ever taken by NRC. But some individuals in that organization made threats—we would be blackballed in the field; they would use their influence to see that our scholarly work was rejected by reading journals, etc. Apparently telephone calls, and letters went out to the past and present leaders of NRC. The telephone and letter writers were apparently considerably chagrined to find that all but two or three of the living past presidents of NRC were among the charter members of the new organization. Then their tactics changed. We were offered places on the NRC program; we were offered blocks of rooms at the hotel, etc. We had no official or unofficial contacts with the College Reading Association. The International Reading Association contacted us about a possible co-sponsored program. We just said "no"; we wanted to go our way and made our plans for Sarasota.

Jim Dinnan agreed to do the program. All was moving swiftly and smoothly ahead until Jim was told by a federal judge that he had to tell how he voted on a promotion and tenure committee back at the University of Georgia. (The ballot had been secret, in accordance with the accepted procedure of the University of Georgia at the time.) Jim had this strange notion that the secret ballot was a pillar of American freedom and refused to tell how he voted.

The judge decided that a basic American right and a major factor in English Common Law was less important than his authority as a federal judge. He ordered Jim to reveal his vote or face contempt-of-court fines of \$100 a day until he did reveal the vote. Jim refused and started paying \$100 a day. Then Jim's friends started contributing \$100 a day. A Methodist Women's Sunday School Class in Atlanta paid \$100, and Jim is Jesuit by training and disposition. Former Secretary of State Dean Rusk paid \$100. Some of you in this room paid \$100. The case was on television and in the papers every day, and Jim was on his way to becoming a folk hero.

The judge decided that his strategy was not going to work. He told Jim that he would tell how he voted or go to prison. Jim went to prison, but he went dressed in full academic regalia, saying that it was the University of Georgia and college and university governance everywhere that were being imprisoned and held hostage.

But Jim was worried about the program for the new organization. Sylvia Hutchinson and I said, "Oh, that's all right, we'll take care of the program while you are gone. Go ahead; go to prison; have a good time."

We can joke now, but that was a horrible time for Jim, his family and his friends. Jim spent the summer in prison. The judge said that he would again order him to tell how he voted and send him back to prison until he did. Jim's family and friends knew something the judge did not know, that when Jim Dinnan said he would not be a party to the violation of a basic American freedom he would not be, and he wasn't. As the case dragged on, a member of Congress wrote an article in *Reader's Digest* about the arrogance of the federal judge in the Dinnan case. The *Wall Street Journal* wrote editorials in favor of Dinnan; Jim appeared on a national television talk show and was invited to others. People wrote protests to the judge, the media, and to President Jimmy Carter. As time went on the judge and the plaintiff became the villains of the piece, but the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the first judge. Finally the University of Georgia bought out the case for a nominal fee. Meanwhile the plaintiff had become a lawyer.

The first meeting of the newly formed reading association was a startling success, even to those who initiated the organization. Some members of NRC protested our name, which at that time was the American Reading Conference, saying that people would confuse us with them. Since we did not want that to happen we decided to change our name. Several names were suggested. The idea of a forum held sway, but we could not get an agreement. Finally the name, American Reading Forum, was put forward, and some bulldog fan from Georgia yelled, "arf, arf, arf" and our fate was sealed. I hated the acronym and have tried for the past ten years to get people to use Forum as the association's short name, but you can see how well people listen to me.

To minimize any future politicking and egotripping that might revolve around the leadership of the new association, we decided not to have a president, vice president, and other such officers except as required by law for incorporation as a non-profit organization. All officers of and to the Board of Directors would be elected by the Board. Presiding at the general sessions of the conference would be a task divided among members of the Board.

Sylvia Carter (Hutchinson), Gordon Gray, Bob Jerrolds, Tony Manzo, Wayne Otto, Al Raygor, and George Spache were elected as the first Board of Directors; my ten pages are used up, and the rest is history.