

A Life in Reading

By RALPH C. STAIGER

"How did you ever get into the field of reading?" The question came (in the deep end of our neighborhood pool) from a lawyer acquaintance during last summer's heat wave. A retiree likes to reminisce, and so I did, for him. It seems to be a good way to start this essay.

An excellent fellow teacher who had taken some courses at the Temple University Reading Clinic, Ernestine Andrew, had touted its program, and the idea of learning more about reading appealed to me. As a teacher and supervising principal of a small twelve-grade rural school, I had encountered pupils with reading problems. They had puzzled me, for each was intelligent and should have been able to read more efficiently. And so I investigated, enrolled, and my wife found a job teaching at Chestnut Hill Academy.

Temple was not a disappointment. Emmett Betts was in his prime, and was a stimulating teacher. He was also a hard taskmaster. For example, the diagnostic course description suggested that it met three times a week; actually we spent all day, every day, working in the Reading Clinic. Other courses were held in the evening and on Saturday morning! It was a full schedule, and a rewarding one for those who lasted.

The habit of systematically evaluating readers and their reading, as well as the habit of working long hours, was instilled by our experiences. The students who completed the graduate course became competent reading specialists.

Since virtually all of us had been teachers, the transition from clinical practice to school use of the things we learned was not difficult, for we subconsciously drew upon our classroom experiences as we worked with Emmett Betts, Russell Stauffer (who headed the diagnostic service) and Elona Sochor in the Clinic. Later we taught small groups of severely retarded readers in the Laboratory School on the grounds of the Oak Lane Country Day School.

The students who had not previously taught, but came to graduate school directly from college, were at a disadvantage. While clinical observation and diagnosis in a one-to-one situation was valuable to them, many could not function well in a large class, which requires additional skills and organizational abilities.

Basic to our observation-training was the Informal Reading Inventory (IRI). First we used the "official" IRI, and eventually we created our own, in itself a valuable exercise. The power of the IRI was that it stimulated our powers of observation in all reading situations: reading at sight, silent reading, skimming and scanning to reread materials read silently, and, of course, factual and inferential comprehension of what had been read. Marjorie Seddon Johnson, who was in our group, and Roy Kress later wrote a bestselling booklet, *Informal Reading Inventories*, for the International Reading Association's publication program. John Pikulski (also a Temple alumnus) joined them for the enlarged second edition. As with other clinical tools, there is no substitute for intensive supervision when a beginner works with the Informal Reading Inventory.

The IRI was not the only diagnostic tool we used, for we saw hundreds of poor readers and held hour-long summary

"case studies" in which case histories, standardized and psychological test results as well as observations were organized into a "syndrome" from which decisions and recommendations were made.

Although the emphasis was on remediation in the clinical program, the improvement of all reading programs was never far from us. Not all of our time at the University was taken up with classes and clinical work. The Temple University Reading Conference brought us into contact with teachers and leaders in reading from many other places in the United States and Canada, which provided us with a broad view of the reading field.

The first time I met Nancy Larrick, much later to become the second president of the IRA, was on Broad Street outside the Temple buildings during a Reading Conference. We engaged in a lively conversation, which we still talk of when we meet. She was then the editor of the *Young America Readers*, a student newspaper which competed with *The Weekly Reader*.

Emmett Betts encouraged us to become involved with reading specialists outside Temple, too. Toward that end he encouraged his students to join the National Conference on Research in English. The two dollar membership dues, he said, were affordable and would be more than repaid when we received the research bulletins issued by the NCRE.

NCRE breakfasts, often held in conjunction with the American Educational Research Association in Atlantic City, gave us the opportunity to become acquainted with many important people in the field. I first met William S. Gray, Arthur Gates, Arthur Traxler, Donald Durrell, Helen Murphy, Albert J. Harris, Constance McCullough, Nila Banton Smith, Guy Bond, Helen M. Robinson, Edgar Dale, Paul Witty, Gerald Yoakam, Gertrude Whipple, David Russell, Marian Anderson and Ruth Strang at those meetings. They were reporting their research, and were interested in what the others were doing.

Their intellectual concern with reading and its problems was, I believe, what attracted me to these people and reinforced my feelings that I had made the right choice. They examined, pondered, wondered, and theorized about reading, and were critical about their own creative endeavors. It was a joy to learn from them. In a small group at an AERA meeting, Arthur Gates described his beginnings in reading and reading research. His humility in approaching the many puzzles in reading was impressive, and left a lasting impression on me.

Once, after Bert Harris and Blanche Serwer had presented a study of the "worrisome influx" of Puerto Rican immigrants into the New York City schools, the aged B.R. Buckingham, returning to the NCRE breakfast for the first time in years, commented, "As I listened to this report, I could not help but think that when I was principal of the experimental Speyer School in 1910, people were saying the same thing about the new German immigrants." New arrivals have always presented language and cultural challenges as teachers of our Southeast Asian immigrants are finding.

Dora V. Smith once proudly introduced a shy young graduate student at the University of Minnesota at an NCRE breakfast. He was to become the seventh president of the IRA, Ted Clymer.

History of Reading News

Later, I became closer to many of these people through the IRA, first as committee chairman, then as a member of the Board of Directors, and later as Executive Secretary. Their deep concern for the field was evident in their discussions, for they left personal differences and ambitions behind when they exercised their Board responsibilities. Without their intellectual and professional leadership in those early days, the IRA would not have gained the respect of the professional community as quickly as it did.

The founding of the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction took place on the tenth floor of Temple's Mitten Hall, in the Reading Clinic which we graduate students inhabited almost constantly. Eventually, the ICIRI was merged with the National Association of Remedial Teachers, which had its beginnings at the University of Chicago.

The NART also included remedial arithmetic teachers, and the merger was opposed by Professor Leo Brueckner of the University of Minnesota, a leader in the teaching of mathematics who correctly predicted the demise of remedial arithmetic as a field if the two reading groups came together as one organization. Only recently, articles decrying the lack of remedial arithmetic programs have appeared in the press.

It would take much more space than I have been allotted to describe the days of my stewardship at IRA. These are scheduled for a future newsletter.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Dr. Ralph C. Staiger, author of over 75 publications in reading, was born in 1917 in New York City and attended public schools there. He received his B.A. and M.A. from Teachers College, Columbia University. He earned an Ed.D. from Temple University in 1952, and was director of the University of Southern Mississippi Reading Clinic from 1952 to 1962. From then until 1984 he served the International Reading Association as Executive Director. He is currently chair of the International Book Committee.