

# History of Reading News

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## A Life in Reading: Part II By RALPH C. STAIGER

The growth of the International Reading Association for a decade from its formation in 1956 was remarkable. In numbers, members and subscribers grew twelvefold. Its influence was more difficult to measure. Most of the leaders in reading were personally involved, even when they disagreed on some aspects of theory. Their work was selfless, for their motivation was the prestige of the profession.

I shall never forget how Nila Banton Smith, Morton Botel and I sat in a room in the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia and planned, in one evening, the first Miami convention. Mort was President-elect at the time.

The contributions of these leaders were typified by Nila Banton Smith. She was a tireless worker whose ideas and projections were far-reaching. She had been editor of *The*

*Reading Teacher* for the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction (ICIRI), and was primarily responsible for starting the IRA's general publications program. She planned three "Perspectives" conferences during her presidency, and the papers given became the three *Perspectives in Reading* volumes, one for elementary teachers, one for secondary school, and one at the college level. Their success led to other publications. The next year, Ted Clymer and I planned the *Reading Aids* series on an airport bus in Detroit. The IRA general publications program was off to a good start.

Nila Banton Smith donated the cost of the land for the IRA headquarters building; she also willed her considerable estate to the IRA with no strings attached, except that it be used for the good of the profession. It is now the Nila Banton Smith Endowment Fund.

In the early days of IRA, the biggest problem was to provide what the membership wanted, and to anticipate the directions the field would take. From the very beginning, children's tradebook reading outside the classroom was considered



## STAIGER'S LIFE IN READING (continued)

important. Nancy Larrick saw to it that a Book and Author Luncheon was a feature of the first IRA Convention. (In a recent Toronto convention, there were two such luncheons, and many other authors of children's books on the program.)

### Publishers Help the New Association

From the first, publishers were supportive of the new Association. Through Dr. Gray's intercession, Scott, Foresman provided its mailing list of teachers throughout the country to the Membership Committee, of which I was chair. Bert (Albert) Harris wrote a letter of invitation to join, and the cost of postage just about depleted the treasury. Membership dues were \$2.50. Fortunately, the letter started a surge of membership which continues to this day.

Random House hosted the meeting (in Bennett Cerf's private office) that brought together the leaders of the National Association of Remedial Teachers (NART) and the ICIRI to talk about a merger. Nancy Larrick, who was working for Random House at the time, made the arrangements for the meeting. She also telephoned a printing firm which had done work for Random House, the Paul-Art Press, and asked for a bid on the IRA journal, *The Reading Teacher*. Sol Klein, Paul-Art's president, later told me that he was certain that since the IRA had connections with Random House, it must be a good credit risk. Little did he know how perilous the IRA financial situation was.

Scholastic Magazine was also of great help in the early days. They warehoused and distributed the *Proceedings* of the annual convention, then a slim volume, but destined to become so large that it had to be printed on Bible paper. Jack Lippert, now Vice-Chairman of the Board Emeritus, was our chief contact at Scholastic. After we had moved to a rented office in Newark, and had advised members who ordered them that some of the early volumes were out of print, Jack would apologetically telephone me that they had found another box of twenty-five in the huge Scholastic warehouse! He, and the other publishers who helped IRA get on firm financial footing by exhibiting at our conventions, were true friends of reading.

### International Aspects of IRA

The international aspects of IRA began, of course, with the ICIRI at Temple so that we could accommodate Canadian members who studied there. But William S. Gray's interest in worldwide reading was the greatest stimulus to my international activities. While he was writing *The Teaching of Reading and Writing* for UNESCO he reported on his studies at American Educational Research Association (AERA) and National Conference on Research in English (NCRE) meetings. The book turned out to be the most popular ever published by UNESCO, reflecting the great interest internationally in reading.

After Gray's death, I was invited by UNESCO to update it, and contributed a new chapter, "Developments in Reading



Photograph: Courtesy of the International Reading Association

and Literacy Education 1956-1967." As I gathered international materials for the chapter, Leo Fernig of the UNESCO Secretariat told me that he had been much impressed by the almost seventy-year-old Gray, who had flown overnight to Paris, taxied to Fernig's office and immediately started to discuss his plans with the staff. Gray worked all day, and returned full of energy the next day. Jet lag never entered his mind.

President George Spache encouraged IRA to participate in the work of the World Confederation of Organizations of the Teaching Profession (WCOTP). This opened many doors, worldwide. The first IRA Congress was held in Paris at UNESCO House. WCOTP arranged for a 50% discount for the use of the facilities, making this new undertaking less risky financially. In addition, the first World Congress held in Australia was scheduled immediately after the WCOTP in Sydney.

During her IRA presidency, Dorothy Kendall Bracken enlarged the international program by organizing overseas travel programs. IRA Studytours provided international experiences for reading teachers in many countries, long before these became popular. The resulting contacts with overseas reading specialists helped build National Affiliates when IRA was relatively unknown throughout the world.

### A Telephone Call and the IRA Literacy Award

The International Reading Association Literacy Award, now presented each year through UNESCO, has given tremendous impetus to IRA's recognition throughout the world. When the Shah of Iran left his country, I wondered whether the Mohammed Reza Pahlavi Literacy Prize would continue, for it was financed by his sister. It was given at the same time as



## **Staiger's Life in Reading (continued)**

the Nadezhda Krupskaya Award, named for Lenin's widow, and financed by the Soviet government.

I telephoned a friend in Paris who had organized the 1972 International Book Year program at UNESCO. His immediate reaction was negative, for an American-based professional organization in competition with the Soviet Government was an awkward concept. After making some calls, however, he telephoned back that the Director General would be pleased to consider a literacy prize offered by the International Reading Association! Today, the Nila Banton Smith Endowment provides \$5,000 annually, which has been worth that many times over in worldwide public relations. My telephone call was good investment.

### **IRA Headquarters**

The furniture we used at IRA Headquarters in the early days was gray war surplus U.S. Navy desks, chairs and file cabinets, bought very cheaply by Bert Harris and James M. McCallister when IRA Headquarters was at the University of Chicago. When the desks were moved to Newark, the entry door to our first office was so narrow that we had to saw off the inside pedestal legs to get them inside the office. Some of these desks are still in use.

In the early 1970s past-president William D. Sheldon, who had done an outstanding job in raising funds for Syracuse University, was asked to help set up a building fund campaign for our new IRA building. His first comment was, "IRA is coming of age. Building our own headquarters is a true sign of maturity."

Bob Jerrolds' comprehensive history of IRA, *Reading Reflections*, published by IRA in 1977, is an accurate compilation of IRA's history and of movements within the field of reading from 1956 to 1974. A close reading of Jerrolds' book will be profitable for those interested in the history of reading.

### **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 and of the organizing committee planning for the 1990 IBBY congress in Williamsburg, Virginia.

This essay completes his "A Life in Reading," the first part of which was published in the *History of Reading News* 12 (Fall 1988): 2-3.