

History of Reading News

Vol. XXXVII No. 2

Spring 2014

A BRIEF SNAPSHOT OF A PIONEERING LITERACY RESEARCHER: GERTRUDE HILDRETH

BY RICHARD M. OLDRIEVE

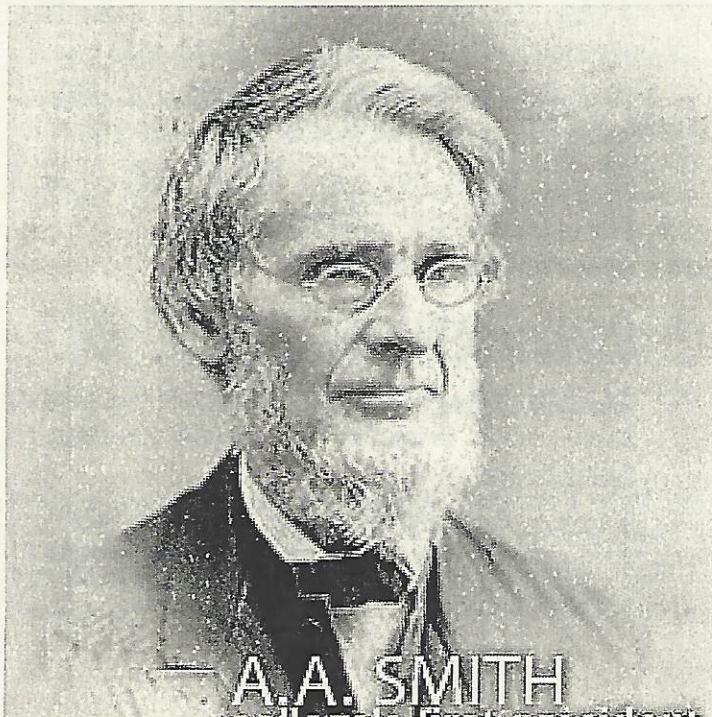
My impetus for researching the history of Gertrude Hildreth came when Susan Israel twice invited me to write a chapter for a book on "Women Pioneers in the Research of Literacy." Because Israel knew that my own research focused on phonics and literacy assessment, she suggested that I research Gertrude Hildreth.

The first time Israel asked, I said "No. I don't have the time." The second time, I decided that I needed to make the time because investigating women matched my own personal history with pioneering women. One example would be my mom, Rosalie Oldrieve, who founded the Sandusky, Ohio chapter of the American Association of University Women (AAUW). A second would be my wife, Susan Oldrieve, who was a member of the first class of women who graduated from Princeton University. The third would be my father, Robert Oldrieve, who when he heard three Episcopal bishops had ordained the first women Episcopal priests in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and then heard they were



coming to Oberlin, Ohio, he decided to take us on a 45 minute trip along country roads to celebrate Eucharist with them. On future Sundays, my sister and I then went back to serving as acolytes at the Episcopal Church that was a bike ride from our house. In contrast, until he died my dad kept journeying to Oberlin to share communion with the "renegade" members of Christ Church who had invited the "Philadelphia 11" to their small rented hall.

As is evidenced by my first two paragraphs, I tend to side with the school of thought that "All Research is Autobiographical." Consequently, my first step in the journey to learn more about Gertrude Hildreth was to head to Naperville, Illinois, to visit the archives of her college alma mater, Northwest College—which has become North Central College (NCC).



One reason why NCC continues to maintain Gertrude Hildreth's personal letters and diaries is that Hildreth's maternal grandfather, Augustine Austin (A.A.) Smith was the first president of Northwest College. As the NCC website attests: Throughout his tenure, Smith worked for the education of women as well as men: "Woman needs substantially the same education as man; the same physical, intellectual and moral training. She needs it for the same reason that man needs it, for the perfection of her own being, and for preparation for usefulness... I have no fears that woman, if thoroughly educated, will wander far from her proper sphere. I would have her prepared to fill any station she can well fill, and to perform any service which she can well perform.""

More important reasons include Hildreth's many accomplishments:

- Earning a doctorate in Educational Psychology from Columbia Teachers' College in 1925.
- Working in John Dewey's lab school.
- Being hired by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to help construct reading tests such as the *Metropolitan Readiness Tests* and then having her work at ETS archived by Princeton University.
- Having written over 200 published articles.
- Having written numerous books including, *Child Growth Through Education*, *Educating Gifted Children*, *Learning the Three R's*, *Better Schooling for Beginners* and *Teaching Reading, Metropolitan Achievement*. (North Central College website, 2014).
- Being elected president of the American Psychological Association (APA)'s Educational Psychology Division in 1949.
- Being inducted into the International Reading Association's Hall of Fame.

In a personal correspondence, fellow IRA Hall of Fame member, Yetta Goodman, explained where she thought Hildreth fit into the 20th century history of reading:

Hildreth represented for me a more traditional approach to literacy teaching and learning that I believed in. She was not skills oriented but had what some might call an approach that focused on skills within the context of reading, writing and art. She supported readiness programs and the teaching of handwriting and spelling but not isolated from uses of literacy to learn. I enjoyed

her work and thought she was beyond the skills/drills folks for sure.

With these bullet point factoids and Yetta Goodman's sense of Hildreth, I delved into the archives of North Central College. There I gained a good sense of Hildreth's background and personality. Some of her favorite activities as a teenager were playing basketball at the YMCA on Saturday mornings, and then sewing in the afternoon. She was an officer in her church youth group, and every summer attended a church camp located amongst Indiana's dunes on the southern edge of Lake Michigan. In the summer of 1915 she wrote, "I am champion of running and quickness of the camp," and she noted that Russ gave the girls some of his left-over popcorn.

Most of her "diaries" were small yearbooks that her often absent father, a railroad man, gave her. These yearbooks were small enough to fit into a shirt pocket, and thus many of her comments were quite cryptic. For example, in early 1916, when she was attending Northwestern Academy, a college preparatory school right across the street from Northwestern College, Hildreth wrote:

- Monday, Jan 3rd. No school today. So did some sewing.
- Tuesday, Jan 4th: "Backs [sic] to school again and very glad to get there.
- Wednesday, January 5th: "Did not go to basket ball game this evening.
- Thursday, January 6th: "Down to Myrtles this evening. She + Lydia wrote in my memory book.
- Friday, Jan 7th: "Forgot to go to an exam in physiology this AM.
- Saturday, Jan 8th: "Went to Academy Wheaton game this evening we beat by very much [sic]
- Sunday, Jan 9th: "To S.S. + Church + Church at night. Revival meetings begun

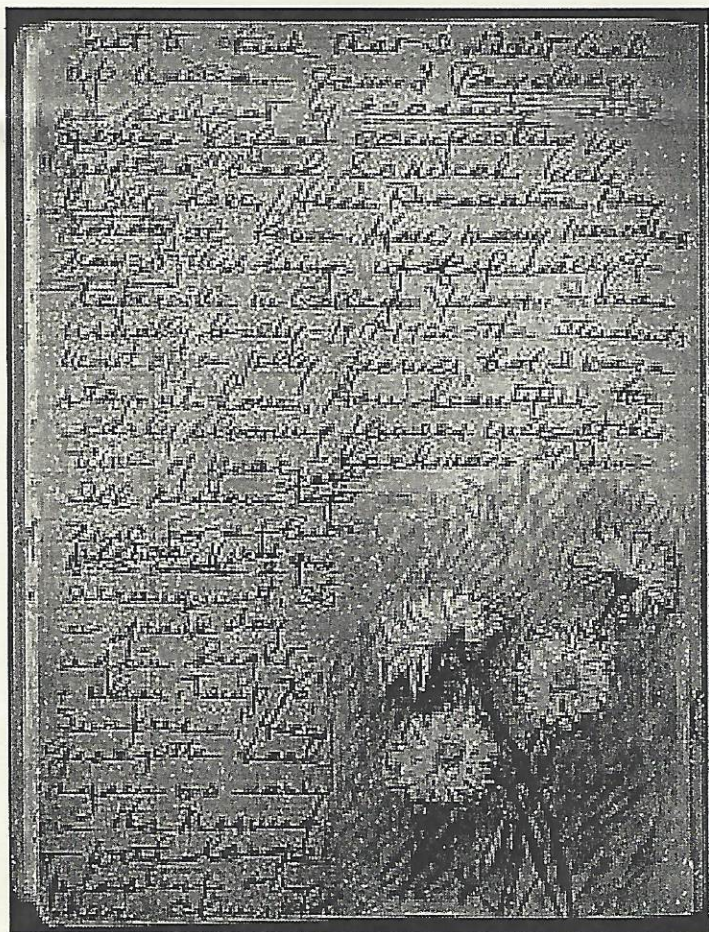
Then a few weeks later she wrote:

- Sunday, January 30: "Church and chapel meeting today. Dad not here, In Florida instead.
- Monday, January 31: "Waited on invite from Marv. Witte today for the Leap Year party. Some better.
- Tuesday, February 1: "Debate blowout tonight + Jr. year girls entertained the debators and their coach in debating rooms.

- Thursday, February 3, My invite accepted. *Oh*, exciting to say the least—to go with a senior.
- Sunday, February 6 To S.S. + church. Papa came back from Florida today. So glad to see him.
- Friday, April 14th: “Physics experiment trip to today. Very Thrilling.
- Wednesday, April 19th: “Won Declauratory contest today.
- Thursday, April 20th: “left for T.H [Terre Haute] at noon today. Arrived at 5:30 Egg accompanied me.
- Wednesday, May 10: “Play this evening. Went off fine. Was Old Maid

A year and a half later, when she was a freshman at Northwestern College, she wrote:

- Monday December 10: fellows left to day to go to war. Very gloomy on the campus.



Even before reading Hildreth's diaries, I knew that she would be heading off to Columbia Teacher's college in

1922. I also knew that later in the 1920s, another Midwesterner, F. Scott Fitzgerald would write *The Great Gatsby*. Thus, I found that the journal that most foreshadowed Hildreth's future, and where her personality and school girl giddiness came out, was Hildreth's full-size paper notes of her trip to the East Coast with her father and sister Gladys. They took the train from Chicago to Grand Central Station. There they were picked up by their Aunt who took them to a Park Avenue Hotel where their father let a room. Shortly thereafter she describes visiting her aunts and uncles living in Brooklyn. She also describes going to Macy's and draws pictures of the Statue of Liberty.

She then devotes several pages to describing their trip to Long Island and drawing pictures of the fauna. There, while visiting other aunts and uncles, they had lemonade and she noted that cars were as "common as farm implements." She also describes going up to Boston where they saw the Harvard and Yale crew teams battling it out on the river and where they rode a Packard out to Concord and Lexington.

After graduating from North Central College, she went on to earn a Master's degree from the University of Illinois, Champaign. She writes in her journal:

- Monday, May 16, 1921: Conference tonight. I was the only woman there but enjoyed myself.

From Champagne, she moved to Oklahoma to conduct some assessments. Her loneliness was apparent. And based on her journals from the summer of 1913, it made sense to me that by the Fall of 1922, she would be off to New York again to earn her doctorate at Columbia Teachers' College.

My time in Naperville was only a couple of days, and thus my reading of her Hildreth's diaries stopped somewhere between Oklahoma and Columbia. Not finishing was particularly disappointing, because even before visiting Naperville, I had been informed by Susan Israel that the book about Women Pioneers had been cancelled. Thus not only couldn't I afford the time or money to go back to Naperville to read through her adult diaries, I had to cancel my preliminary plans to visit Princeton to read through Hildreth's academic notes concerning the assessments she designed for ETS.

Someday circumstances may lead to me traveling these Roads Not Taken, but until then, I'll mention that Yetta Goodman told me of the Hildreth's book that she found most provocative:

What fascinated me most what the book I list below. This was a longitudinal research study. I think Howard Gardner refers to this work too.

Hildreth, Gertrude Howell (1941) *The child mind in evolution a study of developmental sequences in drawing*. New York: King's Crown Press.

Yetta goes on to describe the book:

Hildreth documented the drawing sequences of a train longitudinally of a boy for almost a decade from preschool on. She was interested in the drawing which is great but I loved seeing how this young learner began to incorporate writing in his drawings over time too. Neither Hildreth nor Gardner paid much attention to this. Hildreth also thought he was a gifted child. But in the days of her research, generally it was gifted kids whose reading and writing was being studied since the educators of Hildreth's paradigm believed that gifted kids learned differently than other kids. We now know that all kids develop in similar ways in writing and reading although not necessarily at the same ages.

My own interest in the history of phonics education led me to read Gertrude Hildreth's 1958 book entitled: *Teaching Reading: A Guide to Basic Principles and Modern Practices*. I wanted to read this book, because in 1958 she would have been nearing the end of her career as a member of the reading "establishment," and in 1955 Rudolph Flesch had written his provocative bashing of that same establishment: *Why Johnny Can't Read*.

As I expected, Hildreth defended the establishment by defending the *Look/Say* method that Flesch had railed against. What I didn't fully expect, but what also didn't surprise me, was that she still harbored some negative stereotypes from her Ed Psych training of the 1920s. This training undoubtedly would have included the Stanford-Binet IQ testing that came out of World War I. Thus, over thirty years later, she still referred to students with low IQs as "retards" and individuals from third world countries as "savages."

Yet, just like Yetta Goodman had noted, I found that Hildreth had some prescient ideas:

- Advocated "individualized instruction" and "thematic units."
- Suggested beginning readers should first be taught the language of books and sight vocabulary words, before they are taught phonics on an as-needed basis in order to see the phonetic relationships between words.
- Argues controlled vocabulary basals would still be useful for students reading at a first or second grade readers...

- ...yet predicts that for older readers "Trade Books" from the early 1950s would revolutionize reading by sparking interest motivation
- Suggests that students with speech problems might benefit from more intense phonics. (which from my dissertation's literature review is exactly what is at the root of much of the research in the 1960s, 70s, 80s concerning learning disabilities related to phonological processing disorders).

Though, I may never finish a more historical biography of Gertrude Hildreth, what I learned helped me better understand the history of phonics instruction in the 20th Century, and led to me writing an article describing how I teach phonics from a historical approach (Oldrieve, 2011). I believe teaching them a long-term history—as opposed to focusing only on article published in the last 5 years—helps my students better understand the slow evolution of pure research and research-based teaching methods.

REFERENCES

- Flesch, R. (1955). *Why Johnny can't read: And what you can do about it*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Hildreth, G. (1958). *Teaching Reading: A Guide to Basic Principles and Modern Practices*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- North Central College website (retrieved on May 3, 2014):
<https://northcentralcollege.edu/feature/gertrude-hildreth>
- Oldrieve, R. M. (2011). Standing on the shoulders of giants: Balancing old and new in literature reviews for a graduate phonics course. *Journal of Reading Education*, 36, 41-46.

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP SEEKS ARTICLES AND NEWS FROM THE HISTORY OF READING AND LITERACY

BY JOSEPH ZIMMER, EDITOR

The *History of Reading News* is seeking articles, book reviews news and other materials for its 38th volume set to publish in Fall 2014 and Spring 2015. If you would like to write for this newsletter, please contact Dr. Joseph Zimmer, Editor, at jezimmer@sbu.edu.