

**Robert M. Wilson**

**CRA President 1970-1971**

Written by Karen Bromley, Binghamton University, SUNY

My first memory of Bob Wilson is that of a tall man with a shock of white hair that accented a tanned face. It was October in Cumberland, Maryland, when Bob and several doctoral students, led a series of Friday seminars for Title 1 reading teachers in Allegany County. I was one of those fortunate reading teachers. My good luck was partly due to what I learned that made me think in new ways about how students learn to read and how I might be a more effective reading teacher. My good fortune involved the fact that Bob and his students challenged my assumptions about phonics, comprehension, and teaching struggling readers. This series of monthly half-day workshops helped me pose more questions about the reading process and best practices in reading. However, in much larger ways my good fortune had to do directly with meeting Bob and with the direction he helped me establish in my professional life. Eventually it led me to where I am today.

Within a year, I entered the doctoral program in reading at the University of Maryland. Like others graduate assistants in the reading center, I came to know and love Bob Wilson. From the beginning I remember his “FOS” philosophy. “Focus on Strengths” was a strategy Bob and Linda Gambrell, a former doctoral student, created at a time when diagnosis and remediation of reading problems focused on deficiencies in the reader. “FOS” targeted a reader’s strengths first and used these strengths or established behaviors as avenues to develop areas of need. It resulted in their book *Focusing on the Strengths of Children* (1973). Bob didn’t use the term “weaknesses” and he practiced this philosophy with approximately 80 doctoral students he

mentored at the University of Maryland, College Park. Bob said, “They all went on to distinguished careers. I’d rather not pick any of them as more distinguished than others.”

### **Mentors and Teaching Experiences**

No doubt, Bob also practiced this positivist philosophy as an educator in Pennsylvania where he held several different teaching positions. With his typical directness and modesty, Bob attributed his mentors and varied teaching experiences to “...helping me do a good job as a professor later on.” What follows are descriptions of some of the highlights Bob remembered as he reminisced with me, and some of my own memories.

During high school in California, Pennsylvania, Bob was on the debate team where he polished his elocution, logic, and sense of humor. He also was the lead character in a play during his senior year, but said he was not very good at it, which seems hard to believe. Bob was a leader then and served as President of his senior class.

Bob’s father, a psychology professor at California State College in Pennsylvania, was an important mentor for him. “He had a strong, positive influence on my life. He was a no-nonsense guy who was always encouraging.” Because of him, Bob attended California State where he also participated on the debate team. Bob graduated with a bachelor’s degree in speech therapy and elementary education. His father was his professor for some of the psychology courses and Bob reflected, “My dad was my favorite teacher in those undergraduate years.” Bob then taught sixth grade at West Mifflin Public Schools near Pittsburgh. A four-year stint in the Air Force

following his enlistment during the Korean War interrupted Bob's time at Mifflin. He returned to West Mifflin after the war however, and taught sixth grade there for the next five years.

Bob remembered one boy in particular named William who could not seem to learn to read or do anything Bob wanted him to, and was a bit of a behavior problem. Bob said his own handwriting was not as legible as it should have been, but William had good penmanship skills. "So, I had him put everything I needed on the blackboard for me. Then he became a 'hot shot' in the classroom because he was doing important work that was useful to us, and he wasn't a behavior problem anymore." As well as teaching sixth grade, Bob taught reading to struggling secondary level students at Kiski Preparatory School for three summers.

These experiences with students who had problems with reading and learning prompted Bob to enroll in a master's program at the University of Pittsburgh. He said, "I had ambitions to be credentialed. But more important, I had no idea what to do with the kids in my class who were having trouble reading." His first master's course was with Professor Don Cleland, and from him Bob learned how little he knew about reading. During the commencement ceremony, Bob remembers seeing doctoral candidates walk across the stage to obtain their degrees. He had known some of them and the realization hit him that "If they can do it, I can do it too." Therefore, he enrolled in the doctoral program at the University of Pittsburgh with Don Cleland as his major advisor. Bob said, "Don took an interest in me and I took a shine to him." One of Bob's vivid memories from his doctoral work was that "Don got all his students very involved in reading center activities and it wasn't long before you didn't feel like a student. You were a

participant and you felt like a colleague.” Bob’s dissertation research involved evaluating the effectiveness of the university reading clinic at the University of Pittsburgh using case studies of children who attended there.

After obtaining his Ed.D., Bob took a position at Edinboro State College in Pennsylvania where he was a faculty member in the teacher education program for five years before joining the faculty at the University of Maryland at College Park. While at Maryland, Bob spent 28 years as a Professor and Director of the Reading Center.

Don Cleland’s mentoring was one of the things that influenced the way Bob operated later at the University of Maryland with his graduate assistants and other doctoral students. Bob included everyone and welcomed all to join the regular “brown bag” lunches held at the large seminar table in the Reading Center. There, professors and doctoral students alike debated everything from the difference between comprehension and learning, to nuclear war and the most recent editorial by William Raspberry in the *Washington Post*.

One example of Bob’s sense of humor with both colleagues and graduate students stands out in my mind. I remember an over-sized screwdriver that might mysteriously appear in your mailbox one day if you by chance did something embarrassing, made a faux pas, or blundered in some way. However, it was always helped us laugh at ourselves. I think we even had occasion to put it in his mailbox a few times. That screwdriver helped keep the atmosphere light in the Reading Center.

Bob said he thoroughly enjoyed his work at the University of Maryland. He specifically discussed how a doctoral competency program was developed in which all doctoral students were given opportunities to demonstrate skill in such areas as professional writing, conducting research, writing proposals for grants, teaching, advising, working with children, professional speaking, etc. He said since all his doctoral students were carefully selected, it was no surprise to him that they all performed in an outstanding manner in each of these areas.

Another of Bob's major interests was teaching the struggling readers in the Reading Clinic. An experience teaching in the clinic was part of coursework requirements for all graduate students, master and doctoral. The clinic at Maryland featured the notion of focusing on the strengths of all readers. Results were encouraging for both the readers and their teachers.

In addition, still another of Bob's satisfactions while at the University of Maryland was the 15 off-campus graduate programs he began with Dick Jantz, a Professor and colleague in social studies education at the University of Maryland. Bob said, "It occurred to me that there were a lot of people who wanted to get a degree but lived too far away to drive to the university. So, we started an outreach program that took our masters and doctoral programs to the field." Bob, Dick, and their doctoral students drove to all corners of the state where they taught evening and summer courses that allowed many Maryland teachers and administrators the opportunity to study and extend their professional development. As the university shifted its focus to research and writing as criteria for promotion and tenure though, it became increasingly difficult to interest new faculty in keeping these programs going. For many years, Bob and a few others

provided the outreach that had a huge impact on the instruction in classrooms and schools beyond the usual scope of a university.

### **CRA Memories**

While Bob was at Edinboro State College, he had an opportunity to attend a CRA conference held at Gannon College in nearby Erie, Pennsylvania. He recalled, “I was hooked” and remembered attending CRA conferences in Philadelphia, Bowling Green, Jersey City, and Rochester. At that time, he said CRA meetings occurred in Pennsylvania, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York, and he remembered how it was “a big deal” to some members when the conference moved one year to Nashville, Tennessee. Recently, CRA met in Salt Lake City, Utah and there are plans to meet in Omaha, Nebraska in the future. Bob is pleased to see that the geographic reach of CRA is continuing to expand.

I reminded Bob that he was the eleventh president of CRA and we talked some about his experiences as President. He remembered one huge satisfaction, and that was initiating the A.B. Herr Award. Bob said A.B. Herr passed away just prior to one CRA conference and his death had an emotional effect on many CRA members. Bob said A.B. Herr was an unselfish contributor to CRA. Bob said,

He was the one to pile all the CRA materials into his car each year and drive to wherever the conference was being held. He set up registration, saw that rooms were available for presentations, and made sure all the hotel accommodations were ready for us.

The A.B. Herr award (begun in 1972) is presented annually for distinguished service in reading. It recognizes a professional educator who has made outstanding contributions to the field of reading. The award is determined by an Awards Committee chaired by the Past President of CRA. The winner receives an engraved plaque and funding to attend the conference. In 1973, Bob was surprised when both he and Jerry Weiss, a Professor at Jersey City College, New Jersey and his good friend, received this award. Bob's award was most probably due to his contributions to the field through his writing for educators, presentations at conferences, and exemplary service to CRA.

### **Mentors and Professional Writing**

Bob was and continues to be a prolific writer. A selected list of his impressive publications is included here because it shows the breadth and depth of his writing and its impact on the field of reading and classroom instruction in general. Bob credited Arthur Heilman with helping him begin his professional life as a writer. He said he met Art at the 1963 International Reading Association (IRA) conference by chance when he and a colleague, Joe Nameth, hosted a cocktail party for colleagues and graduate students. They invited a few "big names" in the field because Bob wanted his doctoral students to meet some of the well-known people in reading, and Art came to the party. After IRA, Bob invited Art to speak at a conference at Edinboro State College and Art accepted. Bob remembers Art telling him then that Bob had a choice. He could stay at Edinboro and be happy or he could move on to a larger institution and increase his outreach in the field. Art told him "You can stay here and enjoy it or you can move on. If you

want to move on you have to write.” Art offered to read anything Bob might send him and give Bob honest feedback.

Later, Bob sent Art a draft of something he had written and Art “tore it apart.” Bob then revised the piece and this process was the start he needed. He began writing in earnest. It was at about that time that Bob had an important insight. He noticed that no one in the field was making the critical link between diagnosis and remediation. He said, “People were doing a test to determine ‘X’ about a student, but stopping there and failing to decide ‘Y’ which is what to do with that information.” This notion became the premise for his well-received book *Diagnostic and Remedial Reading for Classroom and Clinic* (1972). Proof of its popularity is the fact that it went into a fifth edition in 1985. The book went into a sixth edition in 1990 when he co-authored it with Craig Cleland, another of his past doctoral students and Professor at Mansfield State University in Pennsylvania.

Besides writing the books for educators that are included in the list here, Bob also published many articles in refereed journals. He also realized how important it was for his doctoral students to engage in research and begin to write and publish even before they received their doctorate. He felt this would help ensure that his graduate students could obtain a position at a college or university if that was their goal. Bob helped me in this way, and I am convinced it played an important part in my being offered a position in higher education. Later, I learned the publication we had co-authored along with my dissertation research impressed the people who interviewed me. We had done a study together, largely conceptualized by Bob that we co-

authored in an article that appeared in *The Reading Teacher*. Bob really should have been first author but knowing it would be a boost to my resume as I job-hunted, he insisted my name appear first. Bob was an unselfish and wise mentor and guide to many others as well as me.

### **Thoughts on Retirement**

Bob said he retired in 1992 when “I realized I didn’t have a burning desire to work with another doctoral student. I did not want to take on another curriculum project for an off-campus degree. I felt I had done what I could do and it was time to move on.” After Bob retired, he and Dick Jantz took many trips to pursue their interest in the Civil War. Together, they visited and studied almost every Civil War sites east of the Mississippi. These visits sparked Bob to do more Civil War research and this work resulted in a recently co-authored book with another friend, Carl Clair, titled *They Also Served: Wives of Civil War Generals* (2006). Bob mentioned a second related book that is in the works now with Carl called *Sons and Daughters of Civil War Generals*. It is clear that retirement has not slowed Bob down. He has indeed moved on to a new chapter in life.

### **Advice to New Professionals and CRA**

True to his penchant for directness and getting right to the point, Bob had some advice for those entering or leaving graduate work and those working in teacher education. He said, “Don’t forget... if it doesn’t make a difference in the classroom, we’re wasting our time.” Bob has certainly lived this philosophy in his teaching, writing, mentoring, and in service to CRA. About the future of the profession, Bob reflected,

I have always seen the best results when teachers identify needs and develop programs to meet those needs. I call that 'bottom up.' Today most of what I hear is 'top down,' in other words the federal and state governments make rules and regulations for teachers. I doubt that such 'top down' programs will continue to be effective.

CRA was always Bob's favorite of the professional organizations. He was in favor of a name change for CRA:

I like the new name, Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers (ALER). The main reason is that it is more reflective of the membership. The name College Reading Association never really did represent us well except for the very beginning. However, as we grew, our membership broadened and we attracted not only teacher educators, but also researchers, teachers, and graduate students from both colleges and universities.

Bob has a vision for the future "I hope the organization continues to be the research-based but practical professional group that is so badly needed in the field." He has always liked the annual conference for several reasons. He said, "The group is small enough that it is easy to get to know everyone, presentations are useful and practical while based on research and theory, and people are kind and generous with their time and ideas."

Bob helped demystify the profession for his graduate students. He nudged us to attend every CRA conference and often provided funds for those who could not afford to attend. Many graduate students had their first experience at CRA making a presentation to an audience of

college and university faculty. Thanks to Bob, many of us also met some of the “big names” in the reading field at these annual events.

### **In Conclusion**

Talking to Bob on the telephone recently to tie up loose ends for this chapter, I heard the same strong and energetic voice I knew thirty years ago when I graduated from the University of Maryland. Despite the time that has gone by, Bob remains a curious, vibrant, warm, and thoughtful person. Bob was and continues to be a wonderful role model, mentor, and friend to many. In addition, we in CRA have much to thank Bob for as one of the original creators of this vital professional organization.

### **Books by Robert M. Wilson**

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