

Northern Illinois University Document
Delivery



ILLiad TN: 278556

Journal Title: Reading psychology

Volume: 9

Issue: 3

Month/Year: 1988

Pages: 251-257

Article Author: Bob Jerrolds

Article Title: A posthumous interview with
Nila Banton Smith

Imprint:

Call #: BF456.R2 R34

Location:

Item #:

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LEADERS IN READING RESEARCH
AND INSTRUCTION

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A POSTHUMOUS "INTERVIEW" WITH NILA BANTON SMITH

By Bob W. Jerrold

August 8, 1988

Since I became associated with the feature, "Leaders in Reading Research and Instruction" I have repeatedly thought how sad it is that I cannot interview Nila Banton Smith. Out of a discussion of that point with Editor Jay S. Blanchard came the idea of reconstructing an "interview" for this feature out of the notes I have from the approximately 12 hours of interviewing Nila in 1973 and 1974 on the topic of the history of the International Reading Association.

Nila Banton Smith (graduate of Mount Pleasant Normal School, now Central Michigan State University; Ph.D., Columbia University) began her teaching career at the age of 16 in 1905. The record of her teaching is incomplete because Nila "lost" a few years along the way, apparently to avoid mandatory retirement. She was an elementary teacher and supervisor in the Detroit Public Schools. She became a critic teacher, reading supervisor and research supervisor at Detroit Teachers College, now Wayne State University. She became chairman of the Education Department at Greensboro College. She was Dean of the

School of Education at Whittier College. She taught at Indiana University, University of Southern California, and New York University.

She was virtually unretireable. After formal retirement from NYU at the age of 74, she continued as Distinguished Professor at Glassboro State College in New Jersey and at San Fernando Valley State College in California; finally she returned to USC (Courtney, 1986, p.6).

During my interview Nila took me to see the Nila Banton Smith Room at the University of Southern California. It is a beautiful oak-paneled room. Nila said her dean had collected all of her publications that he could find. Only books and journals containing her publications were in the room, and the room was filled.

Nila Banton Smith has an incredible record of service to the reading field. She served in a host of offices for the professional organizations, including the presidency of IRA and one of its parent organizations. She helped to launch several of IRA's major publications. She bought and presented to IRA the land upon which its headquarters building was to be built. She left her estate to IRA.

Her student, colleague and friend, H. Alan Robinson said of her contributions 30 years ago:

But most important of all would be what Nila Banton Smith has been able to do for her students throughout the years. She is a vibrant teacher able to inspire the graduate students, mainly teachers who come to her to learn about reading instruction. And, beyond inspiration, she is able to see eye-to-eye with these teachers in pointing to ways in which they can apply modern research and psychology in meeting their classroom needs. Nila Banton Smith, above all, is a teacher's teacher! (Robinson, 1958, p.332).

You are widely acknowledged to be one of the foremost leaders of our field. One of the marks of leadership is being able to identify and encourage other leaders or potential leaders. Who are those you identified and encouraged?

I hope there were many. I am perhaps most proud of the part I played in influencing three editorships. I remember being at a NCTE meeting in Chicago when I found a note in my box to meet someone for breakfast. She said she was the editor of children's magazines and that I would be interested in hearing about them. I accepted the invitation and met a charming young woman with a wonderful store of information about children and teachers--Nancy Larrick. In 1950 I recommended her for the editorship of the *Bulletin of the International Council for the Improvement of Reading Instruction*. The board agreed, and I urged Nancy to accept. She accepted, and under her direction the *Bulletin* became *The Reading Teacher*.

I remember another meal function. Albert J. Harris was President of IRA, and I was chair of the Publications Committee. He asked me to take the lead in finding the editor for *The Reading Teacher* in 1958. I felt that Russell G. Stauffer was the best person for the job, and the board agreed. Russ did not agree to our draft. I had to become temporary editor, and that enhanced my motivation to find a permanent editor. I telephoned Russ to take the position, and he refused. I wrote to him, and he refused. I called him to ask him to meet me for lunch one day in New York. I finally persuaded him to accept the editorship. He kept it for ten years. That was my most significant lunch.

The only significant and recurring complaint about *The Reading Teacher* in the early 1960's was that it published too few articles dealing with secondary reading, and so many of its articles on readiness and early reading were of little or no interest to secondary reading teachers. Several of us talked about the need for IRA to have a secondary/post secondary level journal. We all knew how difficult it is to begin a new journal. Also, there was a little bit of competition out there because the Developmental Reading Staff of the English

Department at Purdue had developed a journal devoted to developmental reading at the college level. This was the *Journal of Developmental Reading* with a circulation of 2000 copies. There were also some who were afraid a second journal would cut deeply into the number who subscribed to *The Reading Teacher*. They were wrong, of course.

The board of IRA authorized exploratory talks. Ralph Staiger and I went to Purdue. The Purdue people were eager to have the journal remain just as it was, but to be supported by the IRA. We wanted major changes--title, editorship, and an expanded coverage especially to include secondary school reading and adult reading. We negotiated more than half the night and could not agree. Offers and counter offers were made for months. Finally we bought the *Journal of Developmental Reading* for \$2600. We changed its name to the *Journal of Reading* and jumped the subscriptions almost immediately to 9000 copies. They got to keep their editor, but I pushed for H. Alan Robinson as associate editor. He, of course, did not readily accept the position of associate editor, but I had some influence with him; he had been one of my students. Through Alan, the IRA was able to have the *Journal of Reading* become what the IRA wanted it to be.

You have been enormously successful in this field of reading. What advice would you give to a young person entering our field today?

Work.

Undoubtedly work is a key to success, but could I persuade you to elaborate?

Let me give you a very simple and straightforward piece of advice for your hypothetical young person and then elaborate with all I can tell you--what I, personally, have done.

First, it is important to negotiate with your employer for an office that is large enough for file cabinets and two desks. Keep everything filed except two projects--one for each desk. It is important to have very different chairs for each desk and to keep two very different projects going on the two desks. When you become physically weary of working at one desk, get up and go to the chair of the second desk. Or, when you become mentally weary of the task on one desk, get up and go to the task on the second desk.

Next, I consider it critical that you should have a home office. That home office must be large enough to accommodate filing cabinets, two desks, and two very different chairs.

(Apparently Nila did even better than she advised. Brother Leonard Courtney, in his fascinating Prologue to the 1986 edition of Nila's *American Reading Instruction*, states

... she had three writing stations in her home, each with a different chair or desk angles, a different writing project in progress, and surrounded by mountains of journals and reference books. She moved from one station to another in regular rotation, sustaining herself on instant oatmeal and Hershey bars. (Courtney, 1986, p. 7))

Your young person might, or might not, take the road that I have taken. Throughout my career I got up at 4 a.m. Now that I am retired I don't always get up at 4, but it is seldom after 5 when I arise. I work until time for breakfast. I try to have a breakfast at home consisting of something that requires little or no time for preparation. Then I would go to the office. I would work until class time grading papers or preparing for my classes. I would try to arrange a working lunch. Sometimes that would be a graduate student; sometimes it would be with a colleague. I tried to devote my afternoons to my professional writing, unless I had classes to teach. I would often have a working dinner, sometimes with my publisher, sometimes with visiting lecturers, or with IRA people who might be in town. After dinner I would usually work in my home office writing books and articles or

preparing speeches. Although I am not always able to do so, I try to stop work at about 10 p.m., otherwise I am not at my best the following day.

The people of our field are generally familiar with *American Reading Instruction, Be a Better Reader, Reading Instruction for Today's Children*, your gifts to IRA, and your honors and titles, but what are some of the contributions that you have made that are not generally known?

I know that I have writings in books and journals that even I have lost track of, so I know most people do not know about them.

I invented the work pad. Others might disagree, but I believe that those work pads evolved into today's reading workbooks. Some might not see workbooks as a contribution.

I was instrumental in getting *The Reading Teacher* indexed. Students and researchers did use, and some did not even know about *The Reading Teacher* because it was not included in *Education Index*. I could not get others to see that the lack of indexing was a problem. I felt like mine was a voice crying in the wilderness. I was told by the head librarian at New York University that the indexing decision was made by a committee and their decision was based on the amount of demand librarians had for the journal. Obviously if people did not know about the journal they would not ask for it. I tried to get IRA people to make their librarians repeatedly aware of their use of *The Reading Teacher*. Finally, after years of seeking the indexing it came in the early 1960's.

You have very graciously but very successfully avoided all my questions about you as a person. Will you tell me something about yourself or your family?

Your readers will care nothing about my personal background, and I have no family save some distant cousins. My mother was a Banton. Her

ancestry was French. I have a third cousin in France. I went to see him and his family one time when I was in Europe. There was a major language barrier, and he appeared to be suspicious of my motives in visiting him, so I did not go back. I am an only child, but I have for many years considered reading teachers to be my family, especially when I can be of service to them.

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