

**Professional Organizations Looking at the Past to Envision a Future:  
A Historical Note About the American Reading Forum (ARF)**

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Literacy professionals join professional organizations to engage and share with colleagues about their work. Those organizations bring professionals together to advance knowledge about and the practice of literacy instruction and research. Yet, each professional organization offers a unique focus, mission, and culture, which prompts some professionals to join more than one organization. For instance, many Literacy Research Association (LRA) members are also members of the American Reading Forum (ARF). Dual membership in both organizations has been common for decades, long before the National Reading Conference (NRC) became LRA in 2010-11. The two organizations share an interesting, overlapping history dating to the late 1970s when ARF was founded, and that history may offer some insights into challenges facing LRA today. However, longtime members of both organizations may not be fully informed about that history. Many have inaccurate or incomplete understandings of how ARF came into existence, which may lead to misunderstandings and misconceptions about the formation of ARF and about what insights might be learned from their entwined histories.

Specifically, a common belief is that the reason ARF emerged as a separate organization was a disagreement among NRC members about Florida's failure to pass the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the US Constitution. NRC did pass a resolution in December, 1977<sup>1</sup> to no longer hold the conference in Florida and to meet only in states that had passed the ERA. The resolution was to take effect in 1979 with the 1978 conference held in Florida "under protest." An interesting footnote is that, although Florida did not pass the ERA, its house of representatives overwhelmingly voted in favor of it four times (1972, with a vote of 91 to 4; and again in 1975, 1979, and 1980). However, on all 4 occasions the vote in Florida's Senate did not reach the threshold for passage. Further, NRC's resolution was short lived with the conference returning in 1984 to the well-liked Don Caesar Hotel in Florida, after conferences in Texas and California, and subsequently in other non-ERA states.

Nonetheless, both primary and secondary sources demonstrate that the situation created by the actions of the Florida legislature and the policy adopted by the NRC Board of Directors did not prompt the formation of ARF. Documents in the LRA archives and oral data offer a degree of proof that ARF was not founded by a group of NRC members who thought meeting in Florida was more important than the ERA. Historical documents available in LRA's current archives reveal a more accurate and more complex, interesting, and informative picture. Those documents include a published history of ARF's origins authored by Bob Jerrolds, then a professor at the University of Georgia. Another is a 1980 memo written by Harry Singer, then NRC president, and a letter to him from Albert Kingston. Both were luminaries in the field, with the latter still honored and remembered today within LRA through the annual award of the Albert Kingston Award for lifetime service to a deserving LRA member.

The correspondence touches on the formation of the American Reading Conference (the first name for ARF). The letters indicate that the formation of ARF and the consequent threat of losing many disgruntled NRC members to another organization was only a problematic and unwelcome complicating factor for NRC. The real issue for NRC was the expected decline in attendance at the annual meeting for logistical and financial reasons created by moving the conference to San Diego in 1980. The formation of ARF only exacerbated that decision and created an existential threat to NRC. As the memo from President Singer to the NRC Board of Directors clearly indicates, he believed that the decision to move NRC out of Florida to the West Coast was a mistake and that the Board should reconsider that decision. Perhaps ironically, given the dominant narrative about the formation of ARF as a reaction to the ERA issue, Estes, on NRC Letterhead, stated "the issues of ERA and Florida vs not Florida are surely not the problem."

So, if it was not the ERA and consequent move out of Florida, what were the reasons ARF formed as an alternative to NRC at the time? The answer to that question is evident in these documents. For several years prior to 1980, a dissatisfaction with and a concern about the direction of NRC was percolating among its members, including many of its founders, leaders, and past presidents (e.g, George and Evelyn Spache, Wayne Otto, Betty and Al Raygor, and Gordon Gray). Even Kingston, one of the founders and stalwarts of NRC, acknowledged in his letter to Singer the essence and reasonableness of those concerns and his ambivalence about them when he stated, "I certainly have done a great deal to help NRC develop to be the viable organization it is today. [But,] I find myself agreeing with both the NRC leadership and those who hope to create an organization like NRC used to be." His memo also refers to his discussions with those who had decided to form their own organization and their own conference. He pointed out their frustration that their concerns had been ignored by the leadership and that they rejected the notion that they had "stabbed NRC in the back." Jerrolds claimed that there were even some threats of professional retaliation against those who did not remain loyal to NRC.

But, what were the specific concerns? The answer to that question, too, can be found in these documents. Those who were dissatisfied thought NRC was becoming too large and too much like other organizations, such as AERA where the program was packed with presentations with little time for extended dialog. They thought NRC was moving away from its roots aimed at creating a relaxing venue and atmosphere where professors interested in reading and their doctoral students could informally have serious discussion and dialog. According to Smith in his

letter to Jerrolds and Dinnan, students and younger scholars wanted “to present their research and ideas . . . in a forum that could be helpful and rigorous without . . . savage attacks . . . and to meet and talk with some of the leaders in the field without being cast as sycophants. Further, the more senior NRC members saw the original intent of NRC was to get away from the stresses of a university environment “where administrators and tenure, promotion, and merit-pay committees counted products in terms of instructional hours generated, number of scholarly publications made, and number of articles published.” There was also a concern that NRC leadership at the time had not been well-managed financially. These themes emerge within and across the archived documents.

Another question that might be asked, is ‘What does the decision of NRC to move out of Florida for the sake of the ERA, and its timing, say about the role women played in our professional organizations of that era?’ There is little doubt that the gender balance of the professoriate in our field (and most others) of that era favored males. However, despite that imbalance, a number of women were directly involved with both NRC and the formation of ARF in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For example, Jerrolds recounts, “as best I remember” an informal dinner at NRC, attended by “three women and four men,” as the start of the conversation about forming ARF. And, Sylvia Hutchinson, a faculty member at the University of Georgia, served on its first Board. Harry Singer’s 1980 memo on letterhead lists NRC’s officers, including Trika Smith-Burke as Treasurer and Jane Larson as Secretary. Irene Athey was a member of the board, and Priscilla Drum was Publications Chair. And, NRC had elected 3 women Presidents before the end of the 1980s (Irene Athey, Lenore Ringler, and Trika Smith-Burke). More importantly, the fact that a decision was made in 1977 to move out of Florida in support of the ERA suggests either a rising voice of women in NRC at the time, greater enlightenment among their male colleagues, or both.

There may be more general lessons or reminders for us today as LRA members looking back at the historical events surrounding ARF’s origins. Foremost, to us, it makes clear the fragility of professional organizations in achieving a delicate balance between honoring the past, accepting the present, and moving toward an uncertain the future. When profound shifts in that balance occur quickly, there is potential for tensions and frustration, which can escalate to turmoil, personal stress, divisiveness, and conflict. That escalation may be more likely when tensions and frustrations are ignored or sublimated.

The antidote may be open and respectful dialog. Without it, there is a risk of backdoor politics, disenfranchisement, and, in extreme cases, a separating of ways. What might have happened if the individuals who felt the need to form ARF and those who remained faithful to NRC had engaged in more dialog with a commitment to bridging the ambivalence that Kingston expressed? What if both groups had been more reflective about the limitations of their own views and more willing to see the viewpoints of others. Winning arguments, with the winners imposing their views on others, is not a formula for an open and welcoming, indeed viable, organization.

Another lesson is that a balance needs to be carefully maintained between our passionate commitments and strongly held views and the pragmatics of acting on them and bringing them to fruition. A well-intentioned move to support the ERA amendment created existential threats to the organization, while being essentially symbolic, and was soon abandoned. Perhaps there were means, less disruptive to the organization and more effective

in a larger sense, to show that support. Put more colloquially, we have to think equally with our hearts and our heads.

Although both NRC/LRA and ARF have evolved to be much different today, reflecting important changes in the socio-cultural context and vast changes in virtually all aspects of our field and its work, some vestiges of these historical differences remain today. For example, ARF still meets every year in Florida. It has a Chair of an elected Board, not an elected President. The ARF program, although much more formalized and typical than its founders envisioned, still has a session format labeled “Problems Court,” which allows for extended discussion, and there is an “Advancing Literacies” format to create critical dialogue between participants and audience. ARF has remained a smaller, more intimate group, with fewer sessions, all of which never start before 9am and are finished precisely at 5pm, followed by much time for socializing, networking, and informal discussion, as well as a leisurely walk on the beach to watch the morning sunrise. In a sense ARF is a time capsule of NRC/LRA’s origins.

As members of both LRA and ARF, we find those respective memberships to fulfill somewhat different, but essentially complimentary, needs in our professional lives. Both organizations address and serve a commitment to advancing literacy as a means to better and to enrich the lives of all people. We think the field is well served by having both organizations.

<sup>1</sup>Minutes and all other documents referred to in this article are available in LRA’s online historical archives. The authors wish to thank Dixie Massey, LRA’s current historian, for providing access to the archives. We also thank all members past and present who have contributed to this valuable resource. Readers interested in examining the documents we cite, as well as other interesting historical documents, should contact Professor Massey.