

**Oscar Causey and Albert Kingston  
Two Founders of the National Reading Conference:  
A Retrospective**

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*"The first annual meeting of the Southwest Reading Conference [later to become the National Reading Conference] for colleges and universities was held as a result of interest expressed in college reading programs by persons cooperating in a survey of reading programs in colleges and universities in the Southwest" (Causey, 1952, n. p.).*

*"He [Oscar Causey] visualized an annual conference which would promote a free exchange of ideas concerning the reading process and worked selflessly to achieve this goal. He thus established the conference, the tone, and structure, which encouraged everyone, regardless of his level of professional competency or professional orientation, to feel free to participate. By deed and example Professor Causey served to inspire others, particularly young men and women, to the pursuit of knowledge in the field of reading. Many of these young people have grown to professional maturity as a result of his example and aid. Similarly, the National Reading Conference which he nurtured during the shaky years and throughout its first ten years has developed as an organization of national repute" (Kingston, 1961, pp. 75-76).*

*"The conference [National Reading Conference] is unusual in many other ways. It is not an annual meeting or convention of any formal organization or group. There are no membership dues, requirements, or qualifications. Anyone who is interested may participate. The group has no formal charter or constitution and the closest approach to "officers" are the members of the Executive Committee. Their job has been made easy by the willingness of all to participate" (Causey & Kingston, 1955, n. p.).*

Among the heralded events that occur at the annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, two have a unique historical significance by virtue of their connection with the organization's founders. The first is the giving of the Oscar S. Causey Award for distinguished research in literacy education, and the second is the granting of the Albert J. Kingston Award for outstanding service to NRC. While the literacy community holds these awards in the highest regard, it would probably be accurate to note that most of the current membership of NRC has little if any knowledge concerning the two reading pioneers whose names are associated with these honors. Kingston, writing in 1961 about Causey's legacy, which incidentally would also apply to his own, noted that "Professor Causey's name has been inseparably linked with the

National Reading Conference. It will be impossible to think of this group without thinking of Oscar S. Causey" (p. 76). Yet, unfortunately, these two individuals as distinct personalities have gradually slipped from our consciousness into the vagueness of the past.

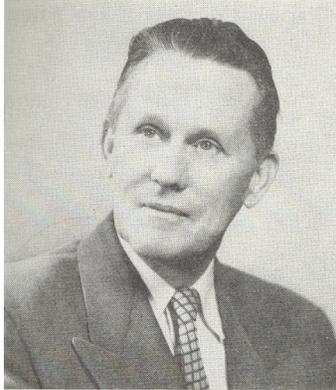
It is the intent of this paper to provide information on both Oscar Causey and Albert Kingston. The focus is on their professional teaching and research backgrounds as well as their seminal role in the early history and development of the National Reading Conference. Included with this article are research bibliographies of both men. Of particular note is the professional writing record of Causey, which, as far as I am aware, has never before been published. This particular listing is based on traditional historical search procedures as well as a brief vita (Causey, n. d.) provided through the archives of Texas Christian University.

### **Founding of the National Reading Conference: A Brief Overview**

The past history of the National Reading Conference has been extensively reported in the literature (see Singer & Kingston, 1984; Smith, 1959; Smith-Burke, 1995; Stahl & Smith-Burke, 1999; Van Gilder, 1970; Willowby, 1954). Thus, the purpose of this brief discussion is simply to position the genesis of NRC in relation to the seminal work of Oscar Causey and Albert Kingston as early founders of this important literacy organization.

The end of World War II brought with it major changes in the characteristics of America's college and university students. Whereas prior to the war many of the students in higher education could have been characterized as privileged and affluent, this was not the case during the years following 1945. Returning servicemen and women, as well as a more diversified student population in terms of age and cultural background, presented new academic challenges to the traditional curriculum found in advanced education. Of particular note was the increased student need for various forms of study and literacy skills, especially those associated with reading and writing. Despite the fact that there was an increased demand for these types of educational services, many college and university faculty considered them to be "remedial or corrective instruction" and thus below the traditional academic levels of their institutions. Primarily for this reason, college reading programs in the early 1950's tended to find themselves fragmented and of relatively low priority in terms of resource allocation and faculty involvement and support (Singer & Kingston, 1984).

It was in this setting that Oscar Causey, initially, and Albert Kingston shortly thereafter, recognized the need for an organized approach to college reading instruction. In his preface to the *First proceedings of the Southwest Reading Conference* (1952), Causey noted the results of a survey concerning university programs of reading instruction. Of 150 institutions surveyed, 31 reported some type of reading assistance provided to their students. Characteristic of the replies to this survey were comments like these: "It is high time we got together to clarify our philosophies and methods," "By all means let's get together and discuss our problems," "Please give us information relating to successful procedures," and "Why not have a newsletter so information can be exchanged" (Causey, 1952, n. p.). Thus, out of this pressing post-secondary educational need was born what was to become the National Reading Conference.



Oscar S. Causey

### **Oscar S. Causey**

Born in 1892, Oscar Causey graduated from Howard College [now Samford University] in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1914. Following his service in the First World War, he attended a number of graduate schools, including the University of Chicago in 1926. (It is interesting to speculate whether he took courses under William S. Gray or was a fellow student of Helen Robinson. I have not been able to discover if either was the case.) After returning to Howard College in 1927, he received his M.A. in 1928. During most of this time he also held a variety of teaching and administrative positions, including those of high school science teacher and secondary principal. He also taught at the college level at Western State College in Colorado and Highlands in California. From 1926 to 1950 he taught at his alma mater, Howard College, during which time he first became interested in reading and study skills instruction for college students. In 1950 he moved to Texas Christian University, where he established one of the first reading clinics in the country.

It was during this period that Causey began to realize the need for an organization that would address the needs and interests of college and university educators who were working with reading and study skills (Fiehler, 1952; Singer & Kingston, 1984; Stahl & Smith-Burke, 1999). What began as a regional conference, designed to meet the rather narrow needs of a small group of educators, was destined to grow into one of the most important literacy research organizations in the world.

### **Legacy of Oscar Causey**

Although decades have passed since the death of Oscar Causey, his influence on the National Reading Conference is still evident in many ways, both obvious and subtle. Following is a brief and far-from-exhaustive list of some of ways in which Causey's legacy continues:

He helped establish a climate at the annual meeting that encouraged a wide range of viewpoints on literacy issues from professionals representing all levels and backgrounds in education. While there would be formal presentations of various types at the annual meetings, Causey also saw to the establishment of times for informal discussion and debate as well. Of particular importance was the encouragement of contributions from graduate students and from those new to the profession.

He led the early organization in dealing with fundamental decisions, such as whether to broaden its scope or to continue targeting college and university study skills and remedial reading issues. Causey also wrestled with related issues involving the relative importance of various types of research.

Out of necessity, Causey contended with the early pragmatic problems of a developing organization, including issues of committee structure, publications, membership requirements, dues, etc.

He engineered the basic decision to hold the annual meetings in the fall rather than in spring, as was true of the first meeting.

He established Vital Issues as an informal opportunity to meet each evening with others attending the meeting.

He served the longest tenure of any president of the National Reading Conference, from 1952 through 1959.

In summary, it is perhaps safe to say that at a time when many organizations falter and fail in their initial development, Oscar Causey took on the leadership responsibilities of this new association and was unquestionably the guiding architect of what was to become the National Reading Conference. As Stahl & Smith-Burke (1999) noted about Causey, he was indisputably "[a] pioneer, a leader, and a tireless worker in the service of NRC" (p. 56).



### **Albert J. Kingston**

In many respects, the involvement of Albert Kingston with the National Reading Conference closely parallels that of Oscar Causey. His name first appears on the program (Kingston, 1952) as part of the second meeting of the newly formed Southwest Reading Conference. Thereafter, his presence was most in evidence as a program participant at subsequent annual meetings (see selected references that follow), but he also served on a variety of committees and in several administrative positions. Gradually, the roles of Causey and Kingston moved apart. Causey was much more involved with administrative issues confronting the young organization while Kingston was to become one of the

leading researchers in literacy education. (It is an amusing irony that the awards now bearing their names are essentially reversed insofar as they reflect their contributions.)

Albert Kingston was born in New York City and lived most of his youth in the Buffalo area. He attended the State University of New York at Buffalo as an undergraduate and, following his service in the Second World War, attended Cornell University, where he earned both his master's and doctoral degrees. Following graduation, he taught at Texas A&M, where his primary teaching responsibilities were in the area of study skills and basic reading development. As was true of other programs throughout the country, Kingston found that many of his fellow faculty felt that this type of instruction should not be a part of the typical university curriculum. It was this fundamental problem – as well as related concerns, such as the specific content and techniques to be used in study skills and reading instruction – that brought Kingston and Causey together for the first time. Their collaboration was to lead to the formation of the Southwest Reading Conference, the forerunner of the National Reading Conference.

In later years, Kingston moved from Texas A&M to the University of Georgia, where he was to spend most of his career as a faculty member in the Department of Educational Psychology.

Albert Kingston compiled a long and noted research record in the area of literacy education. Especially significant was his early work in the area of college reading improvement programs, a line of inquiry reflective of the initial goals and objectives of the Southwest Reading Conference. Of particular note were his substantive contributions, along with a number of other prominent members of the National Reading Conference, to research in the development and use of the cloze procedure (Rankin, 1969, 1970; Robinson, 1972; Tuinman & Blanton, 1971; Weaver, 1970). Kingston was also an early leader in research related to literacy skills and the aged.

### **Legacy of Albert Kingston**

Albert Kingston's contributions to the founding and development of the National Reading Conference were many and varied. Several of the most notable include the following:

He participated in many of the decisions made in the early years of the National Reading Conference, decisions that established its fundamental goals and procedures, many of which are still in evidence at this writing.

He encouraged the development of a rigorous research agenda at each annual meeting of the National Reading Conference, an exacting standard that enabled the organization to become one of the most respected in the field of literacy research.

He served in various administrative roles; he was a member of the first Executive Committee, formed in 1960 (Van Gilder, 1970) and served as President of the National Reading Conference from 1964 to 1965.

Kingston also acted as editor and was a frequent contributor to various Yearbooks of the National Reading Conference (see selected references that follow).

## Conclusion

Oscar Causey and Albert Kingston played pioneering roles in the field of literacy research. Their insight and leadership during a period when few precedents were available to guide them were remarkable. It is altogether fitting that the National Reading Conference honor their contributions each year with two of its most prestigious awards. These distinctions provide a means not only of acknowledging the contributions of present-day members but of remembering two of the organization's founders, individuals characterized by far-sighted innovation and enduring influence.

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