

National Academy of Arbitrators  
HISTORY COMMITTEE INTERVIEW

Walter J. Gershenfeld

NAA President, 2003

Interviewed by Mollie Bowers

October 28, 2005

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Marriott Waterfront, Savannah, GA

*Walt, Please tell me about your early background - your education and your work experience before you became an NAA member. Who were your mentors? And how did you develop an interest in labor arbitration?*

I was born in Philadelphia and attended both Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania. I received a Ph.D. from Perm. At Temple, I took a course with Walter Powell, an Academy member, who as an outstanding professor and mentor. Powell urged me to study with industrial relations giant George Taylor at Perm.

With Taylor's assistance, I landed my first job with the Shipbuilder's Union. My knowledge of labor relations led to an appointment to the Wage Stabilization Board during the Korean Conflict. After that, I went to work for the International Resistance Company, where I served as Assistant Director of Industrial Relations under Walter Powell. Then I became Director of Industrial Relations at the Lighting Corporation of America.

After getting my doctorate from Perm in 1964, I taught at Arizona State University and then took a teaching post at Temple University in 1966. I taught a full range of industrial relations courses and received the Lindback Award for outstanding teach. I was also president of the Faculty Senate. I retired from Temple to enter full-time arbitration in 1992. I've had teaching/research assignments at the University of the West Indies, Oxford University, Rutgers University, University of Hawaii, and the University of Groningen (Holland). With both a practical and an academic background in labor relations, I began arbitrating, a practice which continues to occupy a good portion of my time to this day.

Along the arbitration trail, I met Lew Gill, who encouraged me to apply for membership in the Academy. I've long been a devotee of Lew Gill's humorous and incisive remarks about arbitration. In 1969, while I was teaching at the University of the West Indies, I received a call from Lew telling me I had been admitted to the Academy.

*Tell me about your admission to the National Academy of Arbitrators and the impact of admission. Please talk about your Academy committee assignments and the impact they had on your work*

I've served on a large number of regular and special committees for the Academy. I've chaired Public Employment Disputes Settlement and Designating Agencies Liaison and Executive Committees. I worked to address problems of and created by the appointing agencies during my tenure as chair of the Designating Agencies Liaison. Nels Nelson and I did a follow-up on the changes in the workload of appointing agencies between 1980 and the early 2000s.

In 1986, I co-chaired the Arrangements Committee for the Philadelphia annual meeting with Gladys. Attendees will long remember the conga-like line which trailed through the hotel following a performance by a Mummies Band.

*During your term as president, what were your major goals and your major problems ? What major project did you undertake as president? Why was that of interest to you, and what impact do you feel you made with this project?*

I created the Professional Organizations Liaison Committee, which is often referred to as the "Sisters Committee." Under the leadership of Dan Nielsen, an ongoing mechanism was created for organizations with interests similar to our own to meet with each other regularly. These groups include the Association for Conflict Resolution, Labor and Employment Relations Association, Association for Labor Relations Agencies, International Society for Labor Law and Social Security, and the American Bar Association. One achieved goal is improved communication and coordination of meeting planning. Joint session at some meetings have taken place, and the future may bring a broader role for such activity.

I was involved with training activity at both the AAA and the FMCS. The AAA introduced a required training program for labor arbitrators in 2003 and 2004. John Kagel and I suggested that the AAA count the NAA meetings as substitutes for the training. AAA did not adopt that suggestion, but I was able to arrange that the AAA would provide its program at our meeting with no cost to attendees. The FMCS wanted to have our members assist new arbitrators and was looking for a mentor-like arrangement. I was successful in making a counter-proposal for the telephone support system which is now in place at the FMCS and is likely to be adopted by the AAA.

During my presidency, an important activity was my support of the Organizational Planning Committee, which was created during Rich Bloch's presidency. I realized the importance of the Committee's work, and I helped to move it toward decision points which have resulted in a New Directions Committee (NDC). The NDC is addressing some major concerns, notably employment arbitration. In this connection, I have called for a major study of employment arbitration as part of the process of deciding who we are and where we want to go.

Along with George Nicolau, I have sought to create interest in the possibility of an Unfair Dismissals Act.

I was pleased to honor Dave Feller's memory by naming the 2004 Distinguished Address for him and having that address given by an outstanding colleague of Dave's, I. Michael Heyman. Heyman has served as a Chancellor of the University of California. I had also planned to bring the Elkouris to that meeting, but that did not occur because of Frank's illness. All present will remember the great tape the Elkouris sent of the remarks they would have made. The meeting was particularly eventful because of Gladys' introduction of me and the presence of our three sons, who enjoyed interacting with Academy members.

It's always good for an Academy president to look for doors which need to be opened. For example, I recommended a change in the eligibility for Academy membership to include individuals who work full-time in academia and in government. They may do less than ten cases per year, but a number of them contribute significantly to the field and/or to valuable research may well be the equal to fifty cases over a five-year period.

*What do you feel is the most important qualification needed for NAA President?*

There have been two types of presidents: (1) Those with an agenda who are looking for new approaches and directions for the Academy; (2) those who want to do a good job with the status quo. These are difficult times for labor arbitration and for the Academy, and the skills of both types are essential for success as Academy President and for the Academy. It is important to both maintain the inner integrity of the Academy - rapport with members - and handle complex interrelationships with external agencies. Both internal and external needs of the organization have to be addressed in equal measure and with great care.

*Is there anything else you would like to discuss that you have not been asked?*

I was pleased to receive the prestigious George Taylor Award from the American Arbitration Association and to be honored by LERA for Distinguished Lifetime Achievement.

*Would you like to comment on your relationship with Gladys?*

Being married to someone who is a delight to be with and who has been a vice president in the Academy and an officer in other organizations in the field,... the only words are that it's wonderful.