

# **Roots of ATRA**

**By Glen E. Van Andel, Re.D., CTRS**

The contemporary history of the Therapeutic Recreation profession really emerges from two philosophical positions that developed in the 40's and 50's. One position promoted the use of recreation as a therapeutic tool for treatment while the other position held that recreation was an end in itself and as such met a specific human need for those persons who were institutionalized. In the early 50's the term "therapeutic recreation" was coined to bridge the semantic gap between "recreation therapy" and "hospital recreation". Further attempts to merge the professional organizations that embodied these two positions were unsuccessful, however, until 1966 when the Hospital Recreation Section of the American Recreation Society (1948); the Recreation Therapy Association of the American Association of Health, Physical Education, and Recreation (1952); and the National Association of Recreation Therapists (1953) joined forces to become the National Therapeutic Recreation Society (NTRS), the fourth branch of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA). The association with the 15,000 plus members of NRPA brought with it the promise of greater visibility and potential for influence and growth as a viable professional organization.

The early history of NTRS was marked by continued discussion and debate on the true nature and identity of the profession. At the same time NTRS was attempting to define its role and identity within NRPA. NRPA was established as a lay organization while NTRS was primarily focused on promoting professional issues. Although NTRS enjoyed some degree of autonomy, the organizational structure of NRPA was highly centralized and bureaucratic. There were constant struggles between NRPA management staff and the NTRS Board of Directors on spending priorities and strategies for providing needed services to NTRS members. A key aspect of these conflicts was the fact that that NRPA executives and others in the Association did not accept NTRS's contention that it was a unique organization that represented a group of professionals who were engaged in the specialized application of recreation services as a therapeutic tool in the treatment and rehabilitation of persons in need of these services. Through the years the lack of support for the "treatment" aspect of therapeutic recreation seemed to be the most discouraging and frustrating to NTRS members and leaders. Thus, the philosophical conflict over the true nature of therapeutic recreation continued to be a major issue in the assimilation of NTRS with NRPA.

These differences became even more marked in the mid 70's as NRPA lost significant financial support due to the oil embargo and resulting stock market reversals (Note: NRPA was receiving as much as 70% of its funding from the National Recreation Foundation whose resources were heavily invested in the stock market). Financial instability lead to increased belt tightening by NRPA, which exaggerated the differences between the two organizations. From a high of two full-time professional staff plus several support personnel, the NTRS management team dropped to one half-time professional and one support staff. The late 70's and early 80's were thus marked by decreased services from NRPA and increased dependence on the volunteer efforts of professional NTRS members.

During this same period the health care industry was changing rapidly. Everything from the nature of the delivery system, the standards of care, the structures for payment for services, and

collaborative relationships with other health care professions were in transition. Yet NTRS, as a branch of NRPA, found it difficult to systematically address these issues because of the financial constraints and the Boards inability to convince NRPA management that interaction with the health care industry was of supreme importance to the profession. NRPA's management seemed unwilling or unable to understand the critical nature of the "therapy" component of therapeutic recreation and its implications for the profession. It was this on-going struggle and a recognition on the part of a number of the leaders of NTRS that the goals of the two organizations were not totally compatible that ultimately lead to discussions of alternative structures and organizations. The question was, "Do we continue to try to change NRPA or do we accept the differences and go from there?" After over fifteen years of dialogue and debate the answer seemed obvious.