

Does the History of Our Field Matter to Us ADR Types?

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Is history only interesting to humans as they age? Does the impatience of the young, combined with boring high school history teachers, turn us off from history until age provides us a longer perspective?

I have stood in lines, at SPIDR, ACR and other ADR events, listening to new ADR practitioners talking enthusiastically about their field, as if the field started the day they discovered it. They display no awareness of ADR's long history. This blind spot, however, is not exclusive to the new arrivals. Many long time practitioners limit their knowledge of ADR history to their own personal history.

Is either group missing something important? For example, something that would enhance their practice or their understanding of our field, or just something interesting?

President Harry Truman, a serious reader of history, made this declaration about history: "The only thing new in this world is the history we don't know."

I learned an enormous number of things I "didn't know" about the history of ADR as I researched and wrote ***A History of Alternative Dispute Resolution: the story of a political, cultural, and social movement*** (Josseybass 2004)

I began learning more in the early 1970s when I started gathering mediation history as an FMCS mediator. At the time, I had been mediating for ten years. In 1984, I completed a doctoral dissertation on FMCS history. And in 1992, I created the Friends of FMCS History to gather, preserve and publicize the history of FMCS and its predecessor, the USCS.

Today, the Friends history archive occupies almost 500 square feet of historic materials. You can get a sense of the archive by visiting: Mediationhistory.org

So what is the value of knowing ADR history? Consider this: In any ADR activity, a relevant reference, a dramatic distraction or a short story to avoid an awkward moment and/or to allow yourself time to think --- are each extremely welcome when needed. Here are a few examples to fill those moments:

- George Washington wrote arbitration into his Will.

- Thomas Jefferson conciliated (his word) the differences between James Madison and Alexander Hamilton over supper. The resulting agreement linked the locating of the U.S. capital on the Potomac River with the creation of the national debt.
- Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Jimmy Carter both earned Nobel Peace Prizes for mediating an important international conflict.
- Arbitration was used as early as 1800 BC in the eastern Mediterranean.
- Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote positively about the merits of arbitration over the courts.

Another value of knowing ADR history is the pride it generates in being part of a profession with roots extending from antiquity. Such knowledge can provide a current ADR practitioner with a helpful perspective on their work as they struggle with a difficult case. Part of that perspective is the realization that ADR, and ADR precursors, have provided an alternative to war and violence over the centuries since ancient times. It also provides unsung ADR heroes as alternatives to the warriors on horseback in Washington D.C. traffic circles.

Returning to my original question: Does the History of Our Field Matter to Us ADR Types? --- I suggest that there are compelling reasons for our history mattering to us.