

CORA WILSON STEWART: A CASE STUDY IN THE TRIUMPH OF  
THE APPALACHIAN SPIRIT

The American media, which has created and perpetuated many unattractive stereotypes of Appalachian people, has shrouded mountain women in a unique and sadly inaccurate mythology. The women portrayed in "The Dukes of Hazzard," "Lil Abner," "The Beverly Hillbillies," "Snuffy Smith," "Hee Haw," Deliverance, many novels, and scores of X-rated drive-in movies appear as stereotyped sisters in an informal sorority of ignorance, reticence, and naivete. In recent years, however, the prideful truth of the female experience in Appalachia has begun to replace the worn-out stereotypes, because the scholarly community and the general public are both becoming more aware of the great contributions that Appalachian women have made to their region, state, and nation.

For example, mountain women have spearheaded much educational progress. Some fairly well-known, early twentieth-century, educational heroines of Southern Appalachia include Alice Lloyd, Olive Dame Campbell, and Martha Berry. One of their equally successful contemporaries, who has since received little historical recognition, was Cora Wilson Stewart of Rowan County, Kentucky, who won national and international fame for her crusade against illiteracy.

Cora Wilson, later Cora Wilson Stewart, was born in 1875 and reared near Morehead in Rowan County, Kentucky. She trained for a career in education at Morehead Normal School and, later, at the National Normal University in Lebanon, Ohio and began a teaching career at the age of twenty in a one room school in Rowan County. Her great abilities and tremendous dedication brought rapid professional advancement. In 1901 she was elected county school superintendent.

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She was re-elected in 1909, and two years later she became the first woman president of the Kentucky Educational Association.

That same year she launched an experimental program to combat illiteracy in her home county. The "Moonlight School" was a night school for illiterate adults, because the majority were employed during the day. Armed with both the unanimous support of faculty who performed this great community service without pay and with special reading books that Mrs. Stewart developed for adult learners, the "Moonlight School" enjoyed enormous success. In 1911, the teachers had expected 150 students, and 1,200 had arrived. The second year 1,600 had enrolled. By the end of the third year, according to Mrs. Stewart's count, the number of illiterate adults in Rowan County had dwindled from 1,152 to 23.

The "Moonlight School" soon became a model for adult education programs throughout Kentucky. During the 1920s, her program spread throughout America and Europe, and Cora Wilson Stewart achieved national and international prominence. In 1923, she was elected to the executive committee of the National Education Association, and six years later President Herbert Hoover chose her to chair the Executive Committee of the National Advisory Committee on Illiteracy. She frequently presided over the illiteracy section of the World Conference on Education.

Success and recognition brought prizes and honors. In 1924, she received Pictorial Review's \$5,000 achievement prize for her "contribution...to advance human welfare," and in 1930 she accepted the Ella Flagg Young medal for distinguished service in the field of education.

Cora Stewart retired from public life in 1936--justifiably proud of the contributions that she had made to her Appalachian homeland and her nation. She died in relative obscurity in 1958,

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To commemorate her efforts in the state, national, and international crusade against illiteracy, in 1973 Morehead State University acquired and restored the one-room school where Cora Wilson Stewart began her teaching career. The "Little Brushy School" stands on the University campus today as a museum and monument to her work and a constant reminder to the educators who continue her mission of educational service in the mountain regions of Kentucky.

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