

Cora Wilson Stewart and the Moonlight School

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

That same year she launched an experimental adult education program to combat illiteracy in her home county. The "Moonlight School" was a night school program because the majority of illiterates 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 program enjoyed spectacular success. The first year, with the teachers expecting 150 students, 1,200 arrived. The second year 1,600 enrolled. At the end of the third year, by Mrs. Stewart's count, illiteracy in Rowan County had dwindled from 1,152 to 23.

The "Moonlight School" became a model for adult education throughout the world, 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 also presided over the illiteracy section of the World Conference on Education.

Success and recognition brought prizes and honors. In 1924, for example, 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 made to her Appalachian homeland and her nation as a result of her crusade against illiteracy. She died in relative obscurity in 1958. Her accomplishments, like those of many Appalachian people, deserve greater scholarly attention and public recognition.

To commemorate her efforts in the state, national, and international crusade against illiteracy, in 1973 Morehead State University acquired and restored the "Little Brushy School" where Cora Wilson Stewart began her teaching career. Renamed the Cora Wilson Stewart Moonlight School, it 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.

