

## CORA WILSON STEWART

## FOUNDER OF THE MOONLIGHT SCHOOLS

Cora Wilson Stewart was born at Farmers, a small village in Rowan County, Kentucky, January 17, 1875. Her parents were Dr. Jeremiah and Anna Eliza Wilson. Cora received her early education at the Morehead Normal School, located at the county seat, a school which had much to do with eliminating the feud spirit growing out of the "Rowan County War" of 1882-1887, and which prepared the way for the present Morehead State College. Later she attended the University of Kentucky at Lexington, and the National Normal University at Lebanon, Ohio.

After serving for sometime as principal of the public schools of Morehead, she became County Superintendent of schools in Rowan County and served from 1901 to 1905, and again from 1909 to 1913. During these years of service "Miss Cora" saw a great need and went about in the most direct way to meet that need, and in doing it opened the door to a world-wide movement in education.

She tells the beginning in her book, Moonlight Schools:

"When I was superintendent of Rowan County Schools, I acted as voluntary secretary to several illiterate folk—a mistaken kindness—I ought to have been teaching them to read and write. Among these folk there was a mother whose children had all grown up without learning save one daughter who had secured a limited education, and when grown, had drifted away to the city of Chicago, where she profited by that one advantage which the city possessed over the rural district—the night school . . . Her letters were the only joys that came into that mother's life, and the drafts which they contained were the only means of relieving her needs. Usually she would bring those letters to me, over the hill, seven miles, to read and answer for her . . . Once after an absence of six weeks, an unaccustomed period, she came in one morning fondling a letter. I noticed an unusual thing—the seal was broken.

"Anticipating her mission, I inquired, 'Have you a letter from your daughter? Shall I read and answer it for you?'

"She straightened up with more dignity and pride than I have ever seen an illiterate assume . . . as she replied, 'No, I kin answer hit for myself. I've larned to read and write!'

"Learned to read and write!" I exclaimed in amazement. "Who was your teacher, and how did you happen to learn?"

"Well, sometimes I jist couldn't git over here to see you," she explained, "'an' the cricks would be up 'twixt me an' the neighbors, or the neighbors would be away from home . . . ; an' anyway hit jist seemed like thar was a wall 'twixt Jane an' me all the time, an' I wanted to read with my own eyes what she had writ with her own hand. So I went to the store an' bought me a speller, an' I sot up at night 'til midnight an' sometimes till daylight, an' I larned to read an' write.'

CORA WILSON STEWART

Founder of Moonlight Schools and the Illiteracy Commission

DELTA KAPPA GAMMA

PROJECT PIONEER WOMEN TEACHERS

Inez Faith Humphrey  
420 Second Street  
Morehead, Kentucky

Epsilon Chapter

At the end of the day, it was estimated that an average of three would attend each rural school, a maximum of one hundred and fifty in the entire county.

Mrs. Stewart says:

"We waited with anxious hearts. The teachers had volunteered, the schools had been opened, the people had been invited, but would they come? They had all the excuses that any toiled people ever had. They had rugged roads to travel, streams without bridges to cross, high hills to climb, children to lead and babes to carry, weariness from the hard day's toil; but they were not seeking excuses, they were seeking knowledge, and so they came. They came singly or hurrying in groups, they came walking for miles, they came carrying babes in arms, they came bent with age and leaning on canes, they came twelve hundred strong!" (2)

Mrs. Stewart said it was a fortunate thing that "the first experiment was made among mountain people of fresh, keen minds, ambition and eagerness that could not fail to make of the pioneer experiment a success; and it should be a matter of pride to educators that public school teachers first answered the challenge." (3)

Her faith in people—the common people—remained an outstanding incentive throughout her constantly expanding program of work, and doubtless the overwhelming response to the first call of the Moonlight Schools did much to develop and justify her faith.

Of the twelve hundred who enrolled that first night, there were all ages, from the robust youth of eighteen to the grayhaired woman of eighty-six. Their reasons for coming were varied: "Just to learn to read my Bible," "Just to write to my children with my own hand, and to read their letters with my own eyes." "Just to escape from the shame of making my mark." "Just to have a chance with the other folk—to be something and do something in the world!"

There were no readers in existence for adult illiterates, so resourceful "Miss Cora" evolved a plan that enabled adults to learn to read without the humiliation of reading from a six-year-old's primer. She published a little weekly newspaper which not only served as a reading text but also stimulated curiosity through news of their neighbors' activities, and developed the desire to make similar civic improvements in their own district.

"They are building new steps to the school-house at Slab Camp and putting up hemstitched curtains;" (4) was the item that caused Bull Fork moonlight school to build new steps, put up hemstitched curtains, and paint the school-house besides. Other improvements followed, in the effort not to be outdone.

While the chief emphasis in the Moonlight Schools was placed upon learning to read and write, elective drills were given on history, civics, English, health and sanitation, geography, home economics, agriculture, horticulture, and good roads. Four of these were chosen in each term, the ones most suited to the needs of the district, and only the very most important and practical points were stressed.

(2) Cora Wilson Stewart, Moonlight Schools, p. 16.

(3) Report of Illiteracy Commission in N.E.A. Proceedings, 1928, p. 247

(4) Cora Wilson Stewart, Moonlight Schools, p. 24.

"To verify her statement, she slowly spelled out the words of that precious letter. Then she sat down, and under my direction, answered it—wrote her first letter—an achievement which pleased her immeasurably, and one that must have pleased the absent Jane still more.

"A few days later a middle-aged man came into the office, a man stalwart, intelligent and prepossessing in appearance. While he waited for me to dispatch the business in hand, I handed him two books. He turned the leaves hurriedly like a child handling its first books, turned them over and looked at the backs and laid them down with a sigh. Knowing the scarcity of interesting books in his locality, I proffered him the loan of them. He shook his head.

"I can't read or write," he said. Then the tears came into the eyes of that stalwart man, and he added in a tone of longing, "I would give twenty years of my life if I could."

"A short time afterward, I was attending an entertainment in a rural district school. A lad of twenty was the star among the performers. He sang a beautiful ballad, partly borrowed from his English ancestors, but mostly original, displayed his rare gift as a composer of song.

"When he had finished, I went over and sat down beside him. 'Dennis,' I said, 'that was a beautiful ballad. It is worthy of publication. Won't you write a copy for me?'

"His countenance, which had lighted up at my approach suddenly fell, and he answered in a crest-fallen tone, 'I would if I could write, but I can't. Why, I've thought up a hundred of 'em that was better'n that, but I'd fergit 'em before anybody came along to set 'em down.'

These were the three incidents that led directly to the establishment of the moonlight schools. I interpreted them to be not merely the call of three individuals, but the call of three different classes: the appeal of illiterate mothers, separated from their absent children father than sea or land or any other condition than death had power to divide them; the call of middle-aged men, shut out from the world of books, and unable to read the Bible or the newspapers or to cast their votes in secrecy and security; the call of illiterate youths and maidens who possessed rare talents, which if developed might add treasure to the world of art, science, literature, and invention." (1)

Mrs. Stewart at first thought that the day schools might be opened to the adult illiterates, but these schools were already overcrowded with children; besides, the adults had to work on their farms, in lumber camps, and in the mines during the day. Then she thought of opening the schools at night, but bad roads, high hills, and fear of feudists kept the people at home on dark nights. Finally, it was decided to have the schools on moonlight nights, and let the moon light them on their way to and from school.

From the beginning, Mrs. Stewart showed the clear-sighted wise judgment that has characterized all her activities. She called the teachers of Rowan County together, explained the plan, and asked for volunteers. All the teachers responded, even though it would mean doubling their work and teaching extra hours at night without pay after long weary regular hours at very low pay.

Following the plan, the teachers celebrated Labor Day, September 4, 1911, by going to every farm house and cabin in the hills and the valleys, inviting both the educated and uneducated to attend the Moonlight Schools.

(1) Cora Wilson Stewart, Moonlight Schools, pp. 9-13



education was aroused, practical improvements were made. One school trustee wrote:

"We had not had a night school but three weeks until we got together right. We papered the house, put in new windows, purchased new stove pipe, made new steps, contributed money and bought the winter's fuel."

In many districts good-roads clubs, fruit clubs, agriculture clubs, home economics clubs, and Sunday schools were organized. People learned to work together in a greater degree of harmony, instead of letting strife and friction keep them apart in fear, distrust and stagnation.

In fact, Mrs. Stewart, whose spirit of progress and enthusiasm, permeated all the movement, was developing that so-called "new" method of our day in which we endeavor to make the school reach into the whole life of the community and lift it to noticeably higher levels.

Even in the second year the contagion of moonlight schools began to creep over the borders of Rowan into the surrounding counties. By the third year there were classes all over Kentucky and in many sections of Tennessee, Alabama, and South Carolina.

In 1913, Mrs. Stewart appealed to Kentucky's Governor James B. McCreary, in behalf of her movement, which had spread to twenty-five counties. He made prompt response and early in 1914 appointed the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission with Mrs. Stewart chairman, first of its kind in the United States. There was no appropriation and no literature, but the usual scoffers to say, "You'll never get anywhere."

However, Mrs. Stewart was never one to be intimidated by enemies, nor halted by difficulties. She rallied the public school teachers to her aid. The Kentucky Federation of Woman's Clubs, the Colonial Dames, and many speakers headed by the Governor and other state officials went out over the state at their own expense fighting illiteracy and urging the establishment of moonlight schools (now meaning any classes which taught adult illiterates). Among the most effective of these speakers was Cora Wilson Stewart herself one of the most powerful women speakers America has ever produced, powerful because she was the mouthpiece of a great cause, she knew how to make it interesting, and she was absolutely sincere. Furthermore her enthusiasm was contagious, and response was hearty. She writes:

... "editors agitated through editorials and news items on illiteracy; ministers celebrated 'No Illiteracy Sunday' in the churches and attacked the evil in sermon, song and prayer; bankers were on the alert for illiterates who made their mark on checks and made a campaign to teach each to read and write; jailers put their prisoners to the book; traveling salesmen carried the slogan of the crusade as stickers on their baggage and talked 'no illiteracy' as enthusiastically as they talked dry-goods, notions, boots, and shoes; college students placarded the walls of the colleges with illiteracy statistics, used illiteracy as the theme for their finals, and each pledged to go home and teach someone to read and write." (6)

(6) Cora Wilson Stewart, Moonlight Schools, pp. 63-64

The subjects in which memory was most essential were most difficult for the adults, as most of their memorizing, if any, since childhood had been confined to ballads, folk lore, and recipes. However, these schools clearly demonstrated that an adult beginner could cover in a course of twenty-four lessons (forty-eight hours) as much as a child could cover in any one of the first four years of the elementary grades. As an example of the practical nature of her project we note that Mrs. Stewart did not wish "to plaster a certain selected group of a thousand words onto the minds of the illiterates, but to build the word content to suit their environment, interests, and life activities." Her teachers drilled on the words commonly mispronounced in the community, such as "seed", "crick", "kiver", "git", "hit"(it), "hyeard", "tuck", "fust", "haint", and "skeered". A beginning was thus made toward improving bad English long before the crusade for better speech in America was inaugurated with its "National Better Speech Week."

While the Moonlight Schools paid due attention to practical learning, it did not neglect nor ignore the literature which trains the spirit and inspires growth from within. For the most part brief memory gems were learned. The first one was from Whittier's poem, "Our State." It was the motto at the head of the little newspaper which they used for a reading text:

"The riches of the Commonwealth  
Are free, strong minds and hearts of health,  
And dearer far than gold or grain  
Are cunning hand and cultured brain."

And these lines from Longfellow's "The Ladder of St. Augustine" might well have been the motto of the Moonlight School itself:

"The heights by great men reached and kept  
Were not attained by sudden flight,  
But they, while their companions slept,  
Were toiling upward in the night."

Another favorite gem was taught by a Louisville club woman, who at the age of seventy-five came and traveled over the hills at night, inspired by a desire to see and help these men and women who had heroically begun their education late in life:

"He prayeth best, who loveth best  
All things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us,  
He made and loveth all."

Only one complete poem was to be memorized during the session. Mrs. Stewart felt that the choice was important. She says, "The one who introduces the first poem to students like these stands on holy ground, and should prayerfully make the choice. As literature, the selection made might be criticized by some, but as the needed inspiration, the choice was one that met the test." (5) It was Longfellow's "Psalm of Life", and it must have met the need, for during twenty-five years or more it was the best known and most quoted poem in Rowan County.

The people themselves took the initiative and clamored for the moonlight schools to open the next year, and the teachers co-operated heartily. They enrolled sixteen hundred students, and taught three hundred and fifty to read and write for the first time. But other things were accomplished too. Community interest in

(5) Cora Wilson Stewart, Moonlight Schools, pp. 29-31.

it was disclosed that they were illiterate and did not know of the registration or the draft, and some did not even know that the country was at war. The campaign against illiteracy of soldiers should have been carried on in all the states, but there had been no Cora Wilson Stewart to prepare the ground for such a crop of service. The records revealed that 700,000 men between the ages of 21 and 31 in the United States registered by mark.

The Soldier's First Book, by Mrs. Stewart, was revised and turned over to the Y.M.C.A., which carried on educational work for the Government, under the condition that the book be provided to every illiterate soldier free, as had been done in Kentucky in the early years of the War. Some classes were conducted overseas, through England and France and finally to the army of occupation on the Rhine.

After the Armistice, the plans were immediately shifted to an emphasis on things of peace and reconstruction. The Government sent 50,000 Country Life Readers overseas for illiterate soldiers detained on foreign soil. The lessons on the clean ballot, just taxation, soil conservation and cultivation, good roads, and the prevention of disease were all part of the reconstruction program, which would require no less courage, energy and patriotism than even the War itself." (9)

Interesting developments grew out of the "moonlight schools" in the state reformatories and penitentiaries in Kentucky, a movement which took increased impetus after the end of the War. Here illiterates were grouped and easy to reach. It was felt that whatever education they acquired would doubtless serve as a deterrent from future crime, and might cause many to attempt worth-while achievements after release. The Prison Board passed a resolution requiring inmates to be able to read and write before their application for parole would be considered. Wardens looked with pride upon the fact that during a period of more than ten years (as far as the record is available) an average of 385 prisoners each year learned to read and write. In fact, the men themselves revealed that many of them were in prison because they had had so little to fill their lives, and many could say, "I never had no chance." Thus, Mrs. Stewart's movement led to a keener realization than ever before that education would help to prevent crime, as well as poverty, sickness, and other ills, and that the whole system of education, including attendance of children in the existing schools, must be improved.

To her we owe the fact that the very term illiteracy became clearly defined. The Federal definition, on which the national census was based, was simply that "A person is not illiterate if he is able to write." Mrs. Stewart said, "Clearly from a practical social point of view an illiterate is one who has not mastered the arts of reading and writing sufficiently to use them in daily life. And this implies ability to read the newspaper and to write at least family letters." (10)

Furthermore we owe to Mrs. Stewart and her movement the clarification of the broader social implications of illiteracy. It was not merely the ignorance and narrow life of the individual that was to be deprecated, but the entire social structure was weakened and endangered in large areas.

(9) Cora Wilson Stewart, Moonlight Schools, p. 104.

(10) Report of Illiteracy Commission in N.E.A. Proceedings, 1925, p. 166.

In 1916 the Kentucky State Legislature appropriated \$10,000 to apply on the fight against adult illiteracy, a sum which was supplemented by a grant from the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs. Thus Kentucky was the first state to wage a campaign to wipe out illiteracy, first to create a State Illiteracy Commission and first to secure an appropriation for the removal of adult illiteracy. (7) In 1918 the Kentucky legislature appropriated \$75,000, and state and county illiteracy agents were employed during a two-year period (1918-1920) to act as organizers of moonlight schools, and as attendance officers, preparing the people for the passing of a law to employ regular attendance officers to prevent illiteracy in the oncoming generations. Such a bill was passed in 1920. Also school work in the State reformatories was to be lifted to a professional basis by employment of a trained school man for superintendent.

In the meantime, in the first army draft for World War I, of more than 1,500,000 men examined in the United States, 24.9% could not read ordinary English nor write a letter home. Thirty thousand men in Kentucky signed their registration cards by mark. They were scattered throughout every county in the state and were mostly white. Again Cora Wilson Stewart and the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission arose to meet the emergency, and again the teachers volunteered their services even some from outside the state, to try to teach the men to read and write before they went to camp. These 30,000 men would have vital need to know how to read instructions and to be able to take tests, and they would want to read and write letters.

Mrs. Stewart in the past had prepared Country Life Readers, and a reader for men in prison. Now she produced the Soldier's First Book, for reading, and Soldier's Tablet, for writing. Here is a sample lesson:

"Why are we at war?  
To keep our country free.  
To keep other peoples free.  
To make the world safe to live in.  
To stop the rule of kings.  
To put an end to war.

The men would need an introduction to camp life with its crowds and complexities. Many would not even know what a bulletin board was nor be able to use it unless he had learned something like this:

"Let us read this.  
What is it?  
It is the bulletin board.  
What is it about?  
It tells when one is on detail.  
What is that?  
It is one's duty for the day.  
Am I on duty today?  
Yes, you are on guard duty.  
Are you on?  
Yes, I am on kitchen police." (8)

In spite of the vigorous campaign, many men were missed, and often when men were arrested for failure to register and brought before Federal officials,

(7) Report of Illiteracy Commission in N.E.A. Proceedings, 1925, p. 148.

(8) Cora Wilson Stewart, Soldier's First Book, p. 12.



In 1918 Mrs. Stewart had been appointed Chairman of the Illiteracy Commission of the National Education Association and she held regional conferences throughout the country. In 1923 she became chairman of the World Illiteracy Commission, and presided over conferences in Edinburgh, Geneva, Toronto, San Francisco, and Denver. In 1926 she was made Director of the National Illiteracy Crusade with headquarters in Washington, D.C. In 1929 President Hoover delegated the Secretary of the Interior to appoint a National Illiteracy Commission with Mrs. Stewart as executive head.

Although her work was national and even international in scope, she kept in close touch with local work in numerous schools. In 1930 she was still visiting as many schools as possible—on opening nights or as soon afterward as possible. And she received large number of letters from individuals. One of the first activities of nearly every adult, when he learned to write, was a letter to Mrs. Stewart.

She has lectured in every state in the Union and has addressed many of the state legislatures as well as committees in Congress. In 1925 she received the Pictorial Review \$5,000 award for the greatest humanitarian service rendered by an American woman. She has also been awarded the Ella Flagg Young medal for distinguished service to education, and the Clara Barton medal for humanitarian service. In 1941 she was given an award by the General Federation of Women's Clubs at their Golden Jubilee Convention for pioneer work in combatting illiteracy in the nation.

Note from a letter of Mrs. Stewart to Miss Inez Faith Humphrey, June 5, 1950:

"There is one thing that has not appeared in any article, and that is that I never received a salary or even my expenses for any of my work in the moonlight schools."

THE END

In her report to the National Education Association in 1924, she summarized the chief social evils of illiteracy. "Illiteracy begets illiteracy," she says. Parents with no education could not appreciate what education could do for their children, hence the lowest attendance records in the schools were in the states with the highest percentage of illiteracy. Commerce was limited by illiteracy. Probably most serious in this respect was the fact that books, magazines, and newspapers had no part in the lives of five million people who bought only the coarser commodities of life. Labor was seriously affected. Illiterate laborers could not read instructions and warnings. Neither were they in line for advancements that could come only to the educated. Health conditions and even life itself, were endangered by illiteracy. Sanitation was neglected, the death rate increased, and important health publications lost on millions who could not read and write. She adds further: "Preventable diseases make illiterate localities their breeding places and thus endanger the health of the educated, despite their enlightenment and protection. Sickness is prevalent and infant mortality high in all sections where education is lacking. No health program can succeed and no child is safe where illiteracy exists." The state that leads in literacy leads also in the health of its school children.

Elsewhere, Mrs. Stewart calls attention to the fact that "law is less respected and law violations are more common where illiteracy flourishes, and the court costs are heavy in such communities as compared with those of education and culture." Serious also is the ignorance of illiterates in voting. "With over four million voters who cannot read their ballots, is the body politic sound, healthy, or even safe?" (11)

Mrs. Stewart early realized that "moonlight" schools were an emergency measure, an attempt to remedy in adults the lack of education in childhood. She says, "We regard the illiteracy movement as the Red Cross work of education, as first aid and rescue work, and urge immediate succor rather than leisurely training." (12)

The newspaper with which she stimulated the early schools, the annual course of study for the Moonlight Schools of Rowan County, and the various readers she prepared (County Life Readers, Mothers First Book, Soldier's First Book, Indian Reader, and the reader for prisoners) are evidence of the fact that she could grasp essential and basic needs, and make them simple, attractive, and practical. Farmers studied such things as practical values of good roads, tested seeds, rotated crops, better poultry and livestock, and matters of planting and harvesting. Mothers learned about correct foods for babies and young children and how to prepare wholesome, well-balanced meals for the family, the evils of flies, and the necessity for cleanliness. All learned about laws and the reasons for obeying them, and other matters relating to citizenship.

The movement against illiteracy was always hampered by lack of funds. Teachers served without pay. Money that came in from Mrs. Stewart's lectures and books (if any profit) went right back into the project. About 1929 Julius Rosenwald became interested in the war against illiteracy and asked the Rosenwald Fund in Chicago to study the progress of the movement and its future needs. They did so, with the result that \$200,000 was appropriated to advance the work. (13)

(11) Cora Wilson Stewart, Moonlight Schools, pp. 170, 181.

(12) Report of Illiteracy Commission, in N.E.A. Proceedings, 1928, p. 248

(13) J.A. Benschoten, "Just to Read and Write," World's Work, 59: 77-80, Dec., 1930

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