A class of adults who have learned to read, the legacy of Cora Wilson Stewart's "Moonlight Schools."

By Jean Howerton Coady

The name of Cora Wilson Stewart probably does not ring a bell with many people these days.

But in her time, she was "Mrs. But," in education, particularly in the field of adult illiteracy, where her "Moonlight Schools" became internationally known. Mrs. Stewart is among the pioneers mentioned in the book, "Women in Kentucky," by Helen Deem Lewis, which is the subject of another story on this page.

The first Moonlight School was founded by Mrs. Stewart in Rowan County in 1911. The school, which soon spread to other Kentucky counties and then to other states, got its name from being held on moonlit nights.

The school cost nothing - no donations, no tax money. Regular Rowan County teachers volunteered for unpaid duty in the night program. The first year, 1,200 adults were enrolled and in 1913 there were 1,500 night pupils.

"A letter written to Mrs. Stewart in 1914 by a Carrollton woman tells the story of Moonlight Schools in perfect grammar under the most primitive conditions for twenty-three years.

"I wish to thank you for the Moonlight Schools. I have been going at nights and have learned to read and write. I am forty-three years old and have written my first letter to my mother; the next in-you, I have learned many things I never thought I would know..."

Yours, Amanda McKinney.

The Rowan schools were so successful that the Kentucky Legislature in 1914 created the Kentucky Literacy Commission, headed by Mrs. Stewart, until 1936, to expand the program to other counties. Soon Alabama and Mississippi took up the idea and by 1916 there were Moonlight Schools in 12 states. In Kentucky, 40,000 men and women learned to read and write in 1914-15.

Mrs. Stewart; the founder of all this, was born at Farmers, Ky., in 1875. After attending Morehead Central School and the University of Kentucky, she became a teacher in Rowan County. In 1901, at the age of 26, she was elected county school superintendent, and was reelected in 1909. She was the first woman president of the Kentucky Educational Association.

Mrs. Stewart wrote simple letters that would not insult the "moonlighters," to help them learn. Her work drew national attention and in 1919 she was named director of the National Literacy Crusade, with headquarters in Washington, D.C.

She carried her message to meetings across the country, all over the United States and in Canada and Scotland. From 1939 to 1935, she was chairman of the executive committee of President Herbert Hoover's Committee on Literacy.

In 1925, Mrs. Stewart was awarded the $5,000 Pictorialist Review prize for the greatest contribution by an American woman in the advancement of man-welfare. That contribution is shown in the photograph above; made at a moonlight school somewhere in Kentucky in the early years of the program.

Twenty-eight, obviously poor, girls wearing their Sunday best, are seated on wooden benches or standing before the wall of a primitive schoolroom with a coal-oil lamp and heated by a wood stove. There is a picture of George Washington on the wall. One woman holds a baby. Several of the group hold book sheets of paper, as if to prove they can read. A man with a long, drooping beard holds two pairs of corn.

This photograph is Cora Wilson Stewart's monument.