

NOSTALGIA



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

Cora Stewart battled illiteracy

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

But in her time, she was "Mrs. Big" 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 Deiss Irvin, 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 1912 there were 1,600 night pupils.

A letter written to Mrs. Stewart in 1914 by a Carrollton woman tells the story of Moonlight Schools in perfect grammar and perfect spelling except for two uncrossed t's.

"I wish to thank you for the Moonlight Schools. I have been going six 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 to you. I have learned many things I never thought I would know ... Yours, Amanda McKinney."



Cora Wilson Stewart

The Rowan schools were so successful that the Kentucky Legislature in 1914 created the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, headed by Mrs. Stewart until 1920, to expand the program to other counties. Soon Alabama and Mississippi took up the idea and by 1916 there were Moonlight Schools in 18 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 Normal 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 re-elected in 1909. She was the first woman president of the Kentucky Education Association.

Mrs. Stewart wrote simple texts that would not insult the "moonlighters" but would help them learn. Her work drew national attention and in 1928 she was named director of the National Illiteracy Crusade with headquarters in Washington, D. C.

She carried her message to meetings on illiteracy all over the United States and in Edinburgh, Toronto and Geneva. From 1929 to 1933, she was chairman of the executive committee of President Herbert Hoover's Commission on Illiteracy.

In 1925, Mrs. Stewart was awarded the \$5,000 Pictorial Review prize for the greatest contribution by an American woman to the advancement of human welfare. That contribution is shown in the photo above, made in a moonlight school somewhere in Kentucky in the early years of the program.

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

This photograph is Cora Wilson Stewart's monument.