

# News

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SPECIAL TO BACK HOME IN KENTUCKY - *on Cora Wilson Stewart*

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MOREHEAD, Ky. --- The modest, white clapboard one-room schoolhouse looks as out of place with the brick and glass buildings around it as an adult in a one-room classroom.

But the structure, known as the Cora Wilson Stewart Moonlight Schoolhouse, is a familiar sight on the Morehead State University campus and one that serves to remind those visiting the University of one of the area's most famous inhabitants.

Cora Wilson Stewart was a woman with the dream of eliminating the curse of illiteracy in her county, her state, her nation and the world. She sparked a crusade known as the moonlight school movement, which, while it did not completely accomplish that feat, reduced adult illiteracy and, perhaps more importantly, the ignorance sustained by stifled communication.

In her home state of Kentucky, her efforts and those who shared her vision and volunteered their time and effort to teach and recruit for the schools reaped a greater reward. Their common goal united the people of the mountains, promoting community development and personal rejuvenation.

Cora Wilson was born January 17, 1875, in Powell County to Dr. Jeremiah and Annie Eliza (Holley) Wilson. The Wilsons ran a general store in Cross Roads (now Farmers) in Rowan County and Dr. Wilson also had an active medical

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Cora Wilson Stewart  
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practice. In 1890; the family moved to nearby Morehead where the seven Wilson children could attend the Morehead public schools.

Cora, who had announced at the tender age of four she intended to be a teacher, began teaching in the Morehead public schools at the age of 15 while attending Morehead Normal School. Morehead Normal, a teacher's college, was the nucleus of what is known today as Morehead State University.

In 1892, at the age of 17, she received her teaching certificate. At this time she was attending the National Normal School in Lebanon, Ohio and teaching at Morehead Normal.

By 1895, she had joined the Rowan County school system. She attended the Commercial College of Kentucky University in Lexington in 1899. The following year, Cora Wilson became the first woman instructor at CCKU.

Setting aside her teaching career, she returned to Morehead to care for her mother, who soon after died of tuberculosis. Vowing her brothers and sisters would complete their education, Cora took a job as a secretary in a local office.

But, in 1901, she returned to the field of education and was elected the first woman superintendent of Rowan County schools. Since women would not earn the right to vote for another 18 years, the magnitude of this accomplishment is even greater. She served until 1905 and was re-elected for a second term from 1909-1913, by the end of which her crusade to eliminate adult illiteracy was well under way.

Cora Wilson married Alexander T. Stewart, a teacher in the county schools, in 1904. Six years later, she sued for and was granted a divorce, although she kept his name.

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How could a woman achieve such success in a time when women enjoyed few of the opportunities they do today?

She was a "graceful, forceful speaker with a direct, clear message... a rich vocabulary, and... an easy and attractive manner," according to E.C. McDougle of Eastern Kentucky State Normal School.

Willie E. Nelms Jr., in his article "Cora Wilson Stewart and the Crusade Against Illiteracy" published in the January, 1976 issue of "The Register," said "She was a master propagandist, and this was her major function."

Ms. Stewart was well-known and respected in her community and one of the tasks she had taken upon herself was to act as secretary to many of the illiterate adults who lived in the area. Later, in her personal account of her crusade, "Moonlight Schools," she dubbed her voluntary assistance as a "mistaken kindness."

"I ought to have been teaching them to read and write," she lamented.

It was during this time that she was struck with the inspiration that led to her crusade. Among the many who came to her for help in reading and writing were three people who represented for Ms. Stewart three classes of people: the illiterate mother separated from her children not only by physical distance, but also by an inability to communicate across that distance; the middle-aged man "shut out from the world of books," unable to read his Bible or cast his vote in secret; and the illiterate young balladeer with rare talents who might add to the world if those talents were developed and his songs preserved.

Despite the advice of those who told her adults would be too embarrassed to attend school, she devised a plan to offer them a chance to learn. Fueled only with her enthusiasm and creativity, she decided to put to use the

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county's one-room schoolhouses that sat idle after day school was dismissed and open them to the adults during the evenings when their work was done for the day. Classes would be held on moonlit nights to allow safe travel over the treacherous mountain roads. Hence the name "moonlight schools."

Ms. Stewart met with local teachers and enlisted their aid as instructors and recruiters. She and her colleagues canvassed the area and urged all to attend the classes which would begin the following evening.

"On September 5, 1911, the brightest moonlight night, it seemed to me, that the world has ever known, the moonlight schools opened for their first session," she said in "Moonlight Schools."

Prepared only with their blackboards, boxes of chalk and magazines, Ms. Stewart and her teachers expected about 150 students, or three per school, that first night. They were nothing short of amazed when 1,200 students, the oldest of whom was 86 and the youngest 18, leaning on canes and bearing "babes in arms," appeared, eager to learn and improve themselves.

That first evening many learned to write their own names.

"Some were so intoxicated with joy that they wrote their names in frenzied delight on trees, fences, barns, barrel staves and every available scrap of paper," she wrote in her book.

This first lesson was part of a conscious effort to make learning meaningful and dignified for her adult pupils. Although some day-school primers were used in the moonlight classes, she eventually published her own newspaper, "The Moonlighter," which carried news of other communities and schools, lending dignity to their lessons and encouraging pride in their accomplishments, both in school and in the community.

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Cora Wilson Stewart  
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Other types of encouragement were offered also. At first, students who wrote a letter to Ms. Stewart demonstrating their ability to write, would receive the gift of a Bible. Later, medals were awarded upon fulfillment of certain criteria. Competitions between the schools, the results of which were published in "The Moonlighter," were also successful inducements to learn.

The movement thrived, blossomed, set forth runners and spread. The second year began with an institute for night teachers, the first ever of its kind.

By the end of the third year of the moonlight schools in Rowan County, Ms. Stewart and her workers claimed to have taught every adult in the county to read except for 23 who were incapable for various reasons.

By this time, Ms. Stewart had penned the "Country Life Reader," a primer for adults that taught good citizenship and health habits as well as how to read and write. It is believed to have been the first text written expressly for adult illiterates.

It was in 1913 that she contacted Governor James McCreary about appointing a state commission to combat illiteracy. Cora Wilson Stewart was appointed to the board and elected president. Also in 1913, schools modeled on her plan were instituted in Tennessee, South Carolina and Washington. In 1914, she went to Washington, D.C. to testify before the House education committee on a national illiteracy bill. By this time, the moonlight school program was statewide in Kentucky and Alabama had become the second state to organize a statewide campaign. Then World War I broke out.

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While work continued to reduce all adult illiteracy, it became evident there was a pressing need for the education of soldiers who were being trained and sent to war. In the first army draft for World War I, nearly 25 percent of the men could not read or write. Ms. Stewart organized a special six-week session for all those Kentuckians who registered "by mark."

Ms. Stewart wrote a text specifically for soldiers, "The Soldier's First Book," which incorporated her belief in maintaining a sense of dignity in her pupils as they learned about matters that directly affected and applied to them.

Armed with this book, the American soldiers spread the word overseas, setting up schools in their camps to pass along the joys of knowledge and communication to those who had yet to learn to read and write. The YMCA adapted the book for this use, and 50,000 copies of the "Country Life Reader" were also sent overseas as moonlight schools were begun in England, France and Germany. The good word even spread to Russia where the moonlight school concept was adopted.

Ms. Stewart won many awards and honors in her illustrious educational crusade before her death Dec. 9, 1958. She chaired the Illiteracy Committee of the National Education Association, received a vote---only the second woman to do so--- of nomination for president at the Democratic National Convention, chaired the World Illiteracy Commission, was appointed by President Calvin Coolidge as Director of the National Illiteracy Crusade, received the Pictorial Review award for the greatest humanitarian service rendered by any American woman and received the Ella Flagg Young Medal for distinguished service to education.

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Today, education has changed in Kentucky. Illiteracy is no longer considered one of the most serious issues confronting the state. According to the national statistical abstract, illiteracy rates in Kentucky have dropped from 18.1 percent in 1900 to 1.6 percent in 1970.

The Morehead Normal School Ms. Stewart attended and taught in has evolved into Morehead State University, a modern facility where more than 7,000 students pursue knowledge and training in many fields. And it is there that the modest white schoolhouse, renamed in her honor, stands as a monument to her contribution to education and the development of personal and community relations.

The building was once known as the Little Brushy Schoolhouse. It was constructed in 1910 when Ms. Stewart was superintendent of the county schools and was used for 52 years. But it was standing empty by the bank of Little Brushy Creek on Route 32, almost eight miles north of MSU when it was discovered by MSU administrators Russell McClure and Ray Hornback. McClure, Hornback and current MSU President Morris L. Norfleet, then vice president of research and development, were responsible for the reincarnation of the schoolhouse to the MSU campus.

Donated by William Dailey of Morehead, the building was moved on a large flatbed truck.

"They moved it one night," remembered Glen Boodry, director of MSU's physical plant. "The permit let them start moving it when the traffic was least." The roof was removed to get the building under wires during the trip and the little schoolhouse looked like a bedraggled orphan upon its arrival on campus.

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Elwood Tackett, a maintenance carpenter at MSU, helped renovate the building, using sections of the original building and parts of an addition which MSU carpenters had torn off before the move.

The building was dedicated Sept. 23, 1973 as part of a two-day observance of the beginning of Morehead State's second fifty years as a state institution.

Inside, three rows of desks face the stove and the teacher's desk. The bell rope hangs near the front door and water cups and lunch buckets rest on shelves nearby as if class might begin any moment. Only a glass display case, containing old texts and memorabilia of the moonlight school era, would make a visitor realize he or she hadn't actually taken a trip into the past. The building is available for group tours upon special arrangement through MSU's Camden-Carroll Library.

There are other remembrances of Ms. Stewart and her work at Morehead State, also. Dr. James Gifford, assistant director for Appalachian Studies at MSU's Appalachian Development Center, has written a study and compiled a slide show of photographs from the moonlight school era. Dr. Gifford has made this presentation at MSU's annual Appalachian Celebration for numerous school and civic groups.

"Future plans include a drama about the moonlight schools and a Moonlight School Volunteer Corps," Dr. Gifford said. "The volunteer corps will be a group of teenagers who would help us with projects including the drama and the collection of Appalachian artifacts and memorabilia and the annual Celebration in June. This will give them positive things to do to help their educational progress and to help their community."

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Dr. Gifford, who has devoted much time to study of Ms. Stewart and her efforts, believes she did more than reduce adult illiteracy.

"The impact of her program was more than just teaching people to read and write," he said. "She helped people change their self-image and helped them make positive progress in their lives. Collectively, those individual successes played a significant role in advancing the quality of life in Appalachian Kentucky.

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