

CORA WILSON STEWART

Kentucky History Lives In Chautauqua Characters



BY Nanci P. Gregg

Miss Cora, the Moonlight Lady, had a vision of turning "moonshine and bullets" to "lemonade and Bibles," according to the research of Laura Lee Duncan O'Connell. The story of Miss Cora's Moonlight School in Rowan County is a romantic one that Ms. O'Connell and her husband Michael are presenting this year across Kentucky as part of the Chautauqua program.

Born in Farmers, Kentucky, Cora Wilson Stewart was the daughter of a physician. Her love for reading is well documented, according to O'Connell, who reports she read her father's medical texts and "wore a path to the home of the only other family in the community that had books." Even as a child, she enjoyed playing the role of "Miss Cora" the teacher while other children pretended to be her students.

As an adult, she became a teacher and in 1901 was elected superintendent of Rowan County schools. During the next few years she was divorced twice and lost an infant to tuberculosis, giving rise to much controversy about her "unwomanly" behavior.

But it was on September 7, 1911 that Cora Wilson Stewart's real vision came to light—moonlight, that is. In her role as superintendent of schools, Miss Cora was called upon to read and answer letters for local people who couldn't read or write. Inspired when one of them learned to read and still more expressed a longing for an education, she began a crusade to end illiteracy.

Her vision called for classes on moonlit nights for adults who worked by day. In two years, the schools reduced the number of illiterate in Rowan County from 1,152 to 23.

Answering her call, county teachers volunteered to instruct these adults. Some 150 students were expected that first night, but 1,200 students, ranging in age from 18 to 86, turned out. Many carried lanterns, and most walked rough roads and forded streams to reach the 15

school houses. Many were accompanied by children too young to be left at home. A weekly newsletter served as the first textbook, while later Miss Cora wrote adult readers that included information about parenting and farming.

Six-week classes ended with graduates receiving a Bible. The volunteer teachers, in what may have been the first vacation giveaway, were awarded a group trip to Niagara Falls paid for by money donated in support of the Moonlight School program.

Miss Cora left Morehead in 1913 and became part of the state education program. But in 1920, when the state education department began emphasizing early childhood education she left Kentucky and began working for adult literacy on the national level. She later received one vote for president of the United States at the 1920 Democratic convention and her work still forms the basis for many adult literacy programs.

The Moonlight Lady didn't return to Kentucky in her retirement, and in fact died, blind and in relative obscurity, in 1958.

It is the romance of Miss Cora's story that enamors her to Ms. O'Connell. "She's an unsung heroine," says O'Connell. "Her story should be known nationally. She's been left out of so many history books. Her concepts are still used nationally and internationally."

With a lifelong interest in theater and drama, Ms. O'Connell has a degree from East Michigan University in Ypsilanti, where she met her husband. Michael O'Connell joins her in presenting "Miss Cora." Ms. O'Connell, a Rowan County native, and her husband contracted with Morehead State University to research Miss Cora and produce an interpretive production based on her life story.

Following extensive research that included poring over Miss Cora's personal papers at the University of Kentucky and interviewing 30 individuals who

remembered Miss Cora, the O'Connells wrote the production and portray all the characters. She explains that there is quite a lot of action in the presentation, and that it is not a monologue, as are most of the Chautauqua presentations.

"Miss Cora" was introduced in late 1990 at Morehead State University, and since that time the O'Connells have introduced her to school groups across Kentucky, literacy groups, women's groups, General Education Diploma groups, and others. The couple, which at one time thought they would have to seek careers in New York in order to find theatrical work, are now Performing Artists-in-Residence at Morehead State University and have formed the traveling Buster & Belle Theater which performs "Miss Cora" and other plays.

Performing in a rural atmosphere, Ms. O'Connell says, is "a very special experience. Presenting theater to children in Eastern Kentucky schools is so rewarding. They treat us like celebrities—they ask for our autograph and our phone number. They call and talk with us. We've found great joy and success touring in the Appalachian area."

Editor's Note: Chautauqua: Webster's New World Dictionary defines it as a town on the lake of

the same name in southwest New York; "[the summer schools inaugurated at Chautauqua in 1874] an educational and recreational assembly with a program that includes lectures, concerts, etc."

During the summer months, presentations by 10 Kentucky Chautauqua characters were made available to each county in the state. It was the Kentucky Humanities Council's 200th birthday gift to the Commonwealth, made possible in part by the Kentucky Bicentennial Commission. For more information about the Chautauqua program, contact the Kentucky Humanities Council at 606/ 257-5932. ☞



PROFILE

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