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George Wolfford/Dorothy Gallagher, editors

'Moonlighter' recalls school for new book

By PAM HOLBROOK
City News Staff

Mrs. S. D. Foster has vivid memories of her years as a teacher in Appalachian Kentucky's rural school districts, but of all the experiences she had during those five years, perhaps the most rewarding and interesting ones occurred when she served as a "moonlight school" instructor.

"Teaching in the moonlight schools was one of the most interesting things I've ever done in my life," said Mrs. Foster, 87, of 2504 Lexington Ave. "It was a genuine community service."

The moonlight school was a night school for illiterate adults, the majority of whom were employed during the day. The experimental program to combat illiteracy was launched in the early 1900s by the late Cora Wilson Stewart, a two-term Rowan County superintendent who became the first woman president of the Kentucky Education Association. The Rowan educator won national and international fame for her successful adult program.

Mrs. Foster was one of 40 teachers involved in the moonlight school movement in Rowan County. The movement was so named because the adult classes were taught at

night. The moonlight allowed the students to travel safely over rough roads.

"There were 40 classes going on when the moon was shining bright," recalled Mrs. Foster. "We got the mothers and fathers in the district to come to school. It was a wonderful idea for the county to have it. I loved being a part of it."

The teachers involved in the adult education program were not paid for the extra services. After a full day of teaching youngsters, they returned to their respective schoolhouses in the evening to teach the youths' parents. The instructors, who had between 25 and 35 adult students in each class, were furnished with special reading books Mrs. Stewart developed for adult learners.

Mrs. Stewart's campaign was a tremendous success. In that first year (1911), 150 adult students were expected, and 1,200 were enrolled. The second year, 1,600 were registered. By 1913, Mrs. Stewart reported the number of illiterate adults in the county had dwindled from 1,152 to 23.

The moonlight school soon became a model for adult education programs throughout the state. As Mrs. Stewart's program spread throughout the nation and Europe during the 1920s, she gained national and international recognition.

In 1923, the Rowan Countian was elected to the executive committee of the National Education Association, and six years later President Herbert Hoover chose her to chair the executive committee of the National Advisory Committee on Illiteracy. In addition, she also frequently presided over the illiteracy section of the World Conference on Education.

Mrs. Stewart, who began her teaching career at age 20 in a one-room school in the county, received Pictorial Review's \$5,000 achievement prize in 1924 and in 1930 accepted the Ella Flagg Young medal for distinguished service in education.

The educator retired from education in 1936 and died in 1958.

Mrs. Stewart's efforts are recalled in a paper by Dr. James M. Gifford,



ADI — Phil Benton

MEMORIES IN PRINT—Mrs. S. D. Foster of Boyd County peruses a book on Appalachian culture and lore recently released by the Appalachian Studies Conference. She is one of the surviving teachers of

"Moonlight Schools," which brought literacy to the mountains of Eastern Kentucky in the first decades of this century.

Morehead State University's coordinator of Appalachian studies and assistant director of the Appalachian Development Center. His paper was published in *Appalachia-America*, the proceedings of the 1980 Appalachian Studies Conference.

Gifford's paper culminated six months of research on Mrs. Stewart and the "moonlight teaching" concept. He said the educator left behind much written material, which is presently in the University of Kentucky's Margaret King Library.

But the human interest part of his work on the subject came from Mrs. Foster and Glenna Flannery Gearheart of Grayson, another

former moonlight school teacher in Rowan County.

"Mrs. Foster was my best source," Gifford said. "She can remember so much about her days as a 'moonlight school' teacher. She's a fine person. Teachers like her are just as much heroines as Cora Stewart."

Gifford said photographs for the project were contributed by Grace Yoder and Lolabelle Blair. He is presently developing a slide program on the educational movement.

Mrs. Foster said the teachers' efforts were appreciated by the adult learners. She recalled a 29-year-old man who attended her class during the day.

"He called me 'little teacher.' I was 18 and weighed 98 pounds when I got my first school," said the long-time Ashland resident.

Gifford is hopeful Mrs. Stewart's work in illiteracy will never be forgotten by area residents. Toward this end, MSU in 1973 acquired and restored the one-room school in which she began her teaching career.

Gifford said "Little Brushy School," located on the college campus, stands as "a museum and monument to her work and a constant reminder to the educators who continue her mission of educational service in the mountain regions of Kentucky."



Cora Wilson Stewart