

CORA WILSON STEWART, FOUNDER OF  
MOONLIGHT SCHOOLS AND THE  
ILLITERACY COMMISSION

The founder of the Moonlight Schools is dead, but the movement she started for adult literacy and education moves on, joined in its flow by several other streams of effort to make democracy effective in all human lives.

When Mrs. Cora Wilson Stewart was County Superintendent of School in her native Rowan County, Kentucky, she acted as voluntary secretary to several illiterate adults who could neither read nor write. Among these folk was a mother whose children had all grown up without learning, except one daughter, who, after moving to Chicago, had added to her small store of learning by attending night school. Her letters were the only joys that came into that mother's life, and she came seven miles over the hills to have "Miss Cora" read them to her and pen the answers. Then there came to her office a stalwart, intelligent man who declared, "I can't read or write. I would give twenty years of my life if I could."

While attending an entertainment in a rural school, she heard a boy twenty years of age sing a beautiful ballad, partly borrowed from his English ancestors, but mostly original, displaying his rare gift as a composer of song. When Mrs. Stewart asked him for a copy, saying it was worthy of publication, he replied that he couldn't



write, and added, "Why, I've thought up a hundred of 'em that was better'n that, but I'd fergit 'em before anybody came along to set 'em down."

These are only three of the incidents that led directly to the establishment of the Moonlight Schools. The schools for adults had to be held at night because the day schools were already overcrowded with children, and the teachers were free only at night. Besides, the adults had to work on their farms, in the mines, and in lumber camps during the day. Bad roads, high hills, and fear of feudists kept the people at home on dark nights. Finally, it was decided to have the schools on moonlight nights, and let the moon light them on the way to and from school.

All the teachers in Rowan County volunteered to help, and after a survey they expected about 150 in the entire county.

Mrs. Stewart says:

"We waited with anxious hearts. The teachers had volunteered, the schools had been opened, the people had been invoted, but would they come? They had all the excuses that any toiled people ever had. They had rugged roads to travel, streams without bridges to cross, high hills to climb, children to lead and babes to carry, weariness from the hard day's toil; but they were not seeking excuses, they were seeking knowledge, and so they came...1200 strong!"



There were no reading books in existence for adult illiterates, so resourceful "Miss Cora" evolved a plan that enabled adults to read without the humiliation of reading from a six-year-old's primer. She published a little weekly newspaper which not only served as a reading text but also stimulated curiosity through news of their neighbors' activities, and developed the desire to make similar civic improvements in their own district.

In many communities good-roads clubs, fruit clubs, agriculture clubs, home makers clubs, and Sunday Schools were organized. People learned to work together in a greater degree of harmony, instead of letting strife and friction keep them apart, in fear, distrust and stagnation.

In 1914, in response to the appeals of Mrs. Stewart, Kentucky's Governor McCreary appointed the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, with Mrs. Stewart chairman, the first of its kind in the United States. Later some appropriations were made to help further the movement to stamp out illiteracy, and in 1920 a law was passed to employ regular attendance officers to prevent illiteracy in the oncoming generations.

In the meantime, it was found that in the first army draft in the United States for World War I, nearly 25% could not read ordinary English nor write a letter home. 30,000 men in Kentucky signed their registration cards by mark. They were scattered throughout every county in the state and were mostly white. Again Cora Wilson Stewart and the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission arose to the emergency, and teachers volunteered their services to try to teach the men to read and write before they went to camp. These men would have vital need to know how to read instructions and to be able to take tests, and



they would to read and write letters.

Mrs. Stewart in the past had prepared Country Life Readers, and a reader for men in prison. Now she produced the Soldier's First Book, and Soldier's Tablet. Here is a sample lesson:

"Why are we at war?

To keep our country free.

To keep other people free.

To make the world safe to live in.

To stop the rule of kings.

To put an end to war."

The men would need an introduction to camp life with its crowds and complexities. Many would not even know what a bulletin board was nor be able to use it unless he had learned something like this:

"Let us read this.

What is it?

It is a bulletin board.

What is it about?

It tells when one is on detail.

What is that?

It is one's duty for the day.

Am I on duty today?

Yes, you are on guard duty.

Are you on?

Yes, I am on kitchen police."



Among the many important developments that grew out of Mrs. Stewart's fight against illiteracy was the success of the "moonlight schools" in the state reformatories and penitentiaries in Kentucky, especially with the new impetus after the war. Wardens looked with pride upon the fact that during a period of more than ten years an average of 385 prisoners each year learned to read and write.

The movement against illiteracy was always hampered by lack of funds. Teachers served without pay. Money that came in from Mrs. Stewart's lectures and books (if any profit) went right back into the project. After careful study of the project in 1929, the Julius Rosenwald Fund in Chicago appropriated \$200,000.00 to advance the work.

In 1919 Mrs. Stewart was appointed chairman of the Illiteracy Commission of the National Education Association, and she held regional conferences throughout the country. In 1923 she became chairman of the World Illiteracy Commission, and presided over conferences in Edinburgh, Geneva, Toronto, San Francisco, and Denver. In 1926 she was made Director of the National Illiteracy Crusade with headquarters in Washington, D.C. In 1929 President Hoover delegated the Secretary of the Interior to appoint a National Illiteracy Commission with Mrs. Stewart as executive head.

Although her work was national and ever international in scope, "Miss" Cora kept in close touch with local work in numerous schools. In 1930 she was still visiting as many schools as possible - on opening night or as soon after as possible. And she received large numbers of letters from individuals. One of the first activities of



nearly every adult, when he leared to write, was a letter to Mrs. Stewart.

Cora Wilson Stewart was oneof the most interesting and dynamic speakers in America. She lectured in every state in the Union and addressed mahy of the state legislatures as well as committees in Congress. She was the recipient of several national and international prizes and award in recognition of her great work. In 1925 she received the Pictorial Review award for the greatesthumanitarian service rendered by an American woman. She received the Ella Flagg Young medal for distinguished service to education, and the Clara Barton medal for humanitarian service. In 1941 she was given an award by the General Federation of Women's Clubs, at their Golden Jubilee Convention, for pioneer work in combatting illiteracy in the nation.