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STUDENTS IN MOONLIGHT SCHOOLS BURNED MIDNIGHT OIL

By Helen Price Stacy

Speak of Moonlight Schools and you get a dozen responses involving everything from trysting to lessons on how to make mountain moonshine.

Occasionally, the uninitiated might think in terms of one-room schools held at that time of day when illumination was by moonlight. That would be more nearly correct, though Moonlight Schools were for adults and provided color and character to an already unique era.

Mrs. Cora Wilson Stewart was superintendent of Rowan County schools when she became concerned that almost 25 percent of the county population over ten years of age could not read or write. This situation was not exclusive to the one county, for hill counties all the way to the Tennessee and Virginia borders were equally, if not more, uneducated.

Realizing that she had within her influence those things needed to do away with ignorance so far as book learning was concerned, Mrs. Stewart opened night school for adults. Classes were to meet in rural and county schools only on moonlight nights.

In an article in The Rowan County News (now The Morehead News) Centennial Edition of 1956, a writer stated that "mothers bent with age came that they might learn to read letters from absent sons and daughters, and that they might learn to write to them for the first time."

On Labor Day, Sept. 4, 1911, Mrs. Stewart and volunteer teachers made a canvass of the county to explain the program. The following evening 1,200 men and women from 18 to 86 showed up to start their "schooling".

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It was not easy to admit they could not read or write, said Mrs. Stewart, and they mentioned excuses by the dozen. "High hills, bridgeless streams, weariness from the day's toil, the shame of beginning study late in life and all the others. But they were not seeking excuses--they were earnestly and sincerely seeking knowledge. Their interests, their zeal and their enthusiasm were wonderful to witness."

Word spread about the schools in Rowan County and by the following year Moonlight Schools had been formed in ten Eastern Kentucky counties.

A retired Lewis County teacher said many nights at a late hour she would answer her door to find some adult standing there "embarassed, but wanting to learn to read and write so much all they could say was 'Will you help me?'"

If extreme shyness prevented some aged persons from seeking help through the schools, teachers frequently traveled to the homes out in the county and gave private lessons.

The Moonlight Schools continued through World War I. Similar schools spread to many southern states and Mrs. Stewart and her helpers received several awards and honors.

On Sept. 22-23, Morehead State University President Dr. Adron Doran and the university will pay tribute to the Morehead Christian Normal School and Mrs. Cora Wilson Stewart.

On Sept. 23, open house will be held at a one-room school moved to the MSU campus and restored as a "Moonlight Schoolhouse."