

# CORA WILSON STEWART AND THE CRUSADE AGAINST ILLITERACY IN KENTUCKY

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According to the 1910 United States census, 14.5 percent (171,928 people) of Kentucky's population over twenty-one years old was illiterate.<sup>1</sup> For these citizens there was little hope of ever learning to read and write. Advances in public education helped prevent future illiteracy, but most people believed that attrition was the only means of reducing the number of uneducated adults. In September 1911, however, Mrs. Cora Wilson Stewart began a campaign to teach adult illiterates in mountainous Rowan County, Kentucky. By 1914 she had enlarged this work into a statewide program which attracted the attention of the entire nation, and which eventually won for her recognition as one of the leading authorities on adult illiteracy in the United States.

Cora Wilson was born on January 17, 1875 in Powell County Kentucky. Her father, Jeremiah, was a doctor, and her mother, Anne, served at various times as a teacher and a storekeeper, as well as a housewife.<sup>2</sup>

An interest in education and a desire to lead were the two qualities first displayed by the young Cora. She was so impressed by her parents' educational experiences that by age four she had declared her intention to become a teacher.<sup>3</sup> At the age of five, according to her mother, Cora was conducting

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<sup>1</sup> U. S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States (1920) Population*, Vol. 2, p. 366. The Bureau of the Census classified as illiterate all persons unable to write, regardless of ability to read. People were asked if they could write in any language, not necessarily in English. An affirmative answer was required to be declared literate. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States (1910) Population*, Vol. 1, p. 1185.

<sup>2</sup> Untitled autobiographical notes, January 17, 1924, Biographical File, Cora Wilson Stewart Papers (Special Collections, Margaret I. King Library, University of Kentucky). Hereafter cited as Stewart Papers.

<sup>3</sup> "Data Furnished by Public Library, Morehead, Kentucky"; untitled autobiographical notes, January 7, 1924, both in Biographical File, Stewart Papers.

mock classes in the Wilson's backyard and demanding that her students address her as "Miss Cora." Her father was so amused by his daughter's activities that he dubbed her "the General."<sup>4</sup>

In 1880 the Wilsons moved to the small village of Cross Roads in Rowan County, Kentucky. Mrs. Wilson taught school while Dr. Wilson began his medical practice and opened a general store, which his wife helped to operate. Cora began her formal education at Cross Roads in a typical country schoolhouse with one room, a dirt floor, backless benches, and a cutout for a window. The school was in session only three months in the year and offered only the most rudimentary education.<sup>5</sup>

Few mountaineers who scratched a living from the soil of Rowan County felt the need of training beyond the one-room schoolhouse; but Cora's parents created a home atmosphere that encouraged learning. As she later recalled: "We had pictures on our walls while other children had none. We had stories. We had books. The difference between our lives and most of the other children in the community was that our parents were educated."<sup>6</sup>

Because Dr. Wilson's medical practice often caused him to be away from home, his wife often had to be both a father and mother to her children. Needing help, she turned to her eldest daughter, Cora, who readily accepted her new role. She assumed responsibility for her four brothers and sisters, washed clothes, and often cooked. Cora learned the necessity of self-sacrifice, and she developed a deep respect for her mother by working side by side with her.<sup>7</sup>

Cora was especially influenced by Mrs. Wilson's piety. The mother sprinkled her daily conversations with quotations from the Bible, and urged her children to follow the teachings of Christ. By her daily actions, Mrs. Wilson set an example for Cora, who later cited her mother as the greatest influence

<sup>4</sup> "Data Furnished by Public Library, Morehead, Kentucky"; untitled autobiographical note, January 17, 1924, both in *ibid*.

<sup>5</sup> Author's interview with Norman Welles, September 2, 1972, Morehead, Kentucky.

<sup>6</sup> Untitled autobiographical notes (n.d.), Biographical File, Stewart Papers.

<sup>7</sup> "The Founder of the Illiteracy Movement," Stewart Papers (Box 52).

on her life. In fact, at the age of eight the young girl had already started regular pilgrimages into the woods to pray, and she continued this practice until she reached maturity.<sup>8</sup> This sense of piety increased as Cora grew older, giving her the drive she needed to conduct her educational activities.

In 1890 the Wilsons moved to Morehead. Dr. Wilson knew that the largest town in the county was the best location for his medical practice, and he wanted his children to attend Morehead Normal School.<sup>9</sup> After the family moved, Cora, now fifteen, began her teaching career as an assistant primary instructor in the Morehead public schools. At this same time she also started attending classes at the Morehead Normal, where she learned new and useful classroom techniques.<sup>10</sup>

After receiving her teaching certificate at age seventeen, Cora continued her training at the National Normal University in Lebanon, Ohio. She attended classes during 1892 and 1893, between the sessions of the Morehead public schools.<sup>11</sup> When she left for the northern institution in 1892, she was no longer the frail mountain girl of her youth. She was five feet five inches tall and had dark brown hair and eyes. Although not beautiful, Cora is described by a contemporary as having been a "handsome" woman. She enhanced this appearance with attractive clothes and careful grooming.<sup>12</sup> These personal habits were continued by her for the rest of her life.

When she returned from Lebanon in 1893 Cora was given a job at the Morehead Normal, but she left this position in 1895 to take up duties in the county school system. From here she went to Lexington in 1898 to study at Wilbur R. Smith's Commercial College of Kentucky University, where she became the first woman instructor one year later.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*; Cora Wilson Stewart to Homer Wilson, February 12, 1940, Stewart Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Cora Wilson Stewart to Homer Wilson, February 12, 1940, Stewart Papers.

<sup>10</sup> Diary of Cora Wilson Stewart, January 17, 1923, Stewart Papers (Box 51); *Advance Kentuckian* (n.p., n.d.), Stewart Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Cora Wilson Stewart, "Autograph Books" I & II, Biographical File, Stewart Papers.

<sup>12</sup> Welles Interview, September 2, 1972.

<sup>13</sup> "The Founder of the Illiteracy Movement," Stewart Papers (Box 52).

Less than twelve months after taking the position in Lexington, however, Cora was called home when her mother became desperately ill. Mrs. Wilson had endured tuberculosis for a dozen years and was unable to further bear its corrosive influence. She died soon after Cora came home. Although grief stricken by her mother's death, she recognized her responsibility to her brothers and sisters. Cora vowed to help them finish their education. To fulfill this promise, she left teaching and took a secretarial position with the Standard Lumber Company of Huntington, West Virginia. She soon gave up this job, though, when she was elected superintendent of the Rowan County school system.<sup>14</sup>

Miss Wilson served two terms as school superintendent. From all available evidence, she was a dynamic and forceful leader, who trumpeted the value of education throughout Rowan and the surrounding counties. She also became active in civic organizations, and became one of the most requested speakers in eastern Kentucky.<sup>15</sup>

Although numerous suitors called on Miss Wilson during her tenure as superintendent, she never seriously considered matrimony until 1904, when she married Alexander T. Stewart, a Rowan County school teacher. It is uncertain why Miss Wilson married this man. Their mutual interest in teaching could have been the reason; more probably, however, she feared the ignomy of being labeled an old maid school teacher. She was twenty-nine and he was twenty-six when they were married.<sup>16</sup>

The marriage was not a happy one for either party. Mr. Stewart began to drink heavily and his wife increased her community activities. Conditions deteriorated to a point that in 1910 Mrs. Stewart sued for and was granted a divorce.<sup>17</sup> The

<sup>14</sup> Undated and untitled newspaper clipping, Stewart Papers, (Box 29).

<sup>15</sup> For an account of Mrs. Stewart's career as superintendent of Rowan County Schools, see Willie E. Nelms, Jr., "Cora Wilson Stewart: Crusader Against Illiteracy," (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Kentucky, 1973), pp. 12-26.

<sup>16</sup> Rowan County Marriage Bonds, Book 7, p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Cora Wilson Stewart vs. Alexander Stewart, "Petition in Equity," March 23, 1910, Biographical File, Stewart Papers; "Deposition of Mrs. E. B. McGlone," May 26, 1910, Stewart Papers (Box 29).

failure of the marriage gave her a great sense of guilt. She did not feel that the divorce was her fault, but she could not understand what had gone wrong. She found emotional release in her public activities, however, becoming one of the leaders in the Kentucky Education Association (KEA). She was eventually elected president of the body in 1911, being the first woman to hold that position.<sup>18</sup>

All of her past experiences helped prepare Mrs. Stewart for the greatest part of her career which began in 1911.

Mrs. Stewart's life in the Kentucky hills convinced her that the mountaineers' lack of education was caused by a lack of opportunity, not by mental deficiencies or laziness. While serving as superintendent of schools in Rowan County, she often acted as a secretary for illiterates, and she was impressed by their native intelligence. In 1911 three of these uneducated adults expressed to Mrs. Stewart a strong desire to learn to read and write.<sup>19</sup> Inspired by these individuals, she went through the county interviewing other illiterates, and found that many of them wanted to go to school. Knowing that it was impossible for the adults to attend the already crowded day schools, she thought of holding classes at night; but she knew that the roads were bad and that people were reluctant to venture out at night, because Rowan had once been a feuding county and the fear of violence still existed. Not to be deterred, Mrs. Stewart decided to hold classes on moonlight nights when the students could see their way to school. Because of this circumstance, the classes were labeled "Moonlight Schools."<sup>20</sup>

After deciding on her course of action, Mrs. Stewart called the county teachers together and asked for volunteers. All of

<sup>18</sup> Kentucky Educational Association, *Proceedings of the Fortieth Annual Session* (Louisville, 1911), p. 9; Mattie Dalton to Cora Wilson Stewart, May 15, 1911, Stewart Papers.

<sup>19</sup> *Detroit Journal*, September 23, 1915, Stewart Papers; Cora Wilson Stewart, *Moonlight Schools* (New York, 1922), pp. 9-13. There were 1,152 illiterates over ten years old in Rowan County in 1910. U.S. Census Bureau, *Thirteenth Census of the United States (1910) Population*, Vol. 2, p. 749.

<sup>20</sup> Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, p. 14; U.S. Bureau of Education, *Illiteracy in the United States and an Experiment for its Elimination* (Washington, 1913), p. 28; Williamsport, Pennsylvania Grit, February 2, 1913.

them agreed to serve without remuneration. On Labor Day, September 4, 1911, while the teachers traveled through their districts telling the people that school would begin the next evening, Mrs. Stewart printed a small newspaper to use as a text. It contained simple sentences about county affairs and was entitled *The Rowan County Messenger*. By using a newspaper, Mrs. Stewart hoped to avoid the humiliation that adults might feel from reading a primer.<sup>21</sup>

Mrs. Stewart expected a maximum attendance of 150 students (three adults for each of the county's fifty school buildings) the first night of classes. To her amazement, however, over 1,200 men and women, ranging in age from 18 to 86 years, were enrolled the initial evening. They came from all parts of the county, and they all seemed eager to learn. Mrs. Stewart was delighted; the first night of "Moonlight Schools" had confirmed her faith in the Rowan mountaineers.<sup>22</sup>

The first session of school lasted for eight weeks. Classes were held from six to eight each Monday through Thursday evening, and were attended by both illiterates and semi-literates. Although elementary lessons were taught in numerous subjects, including history, civics, and health, the primary goal of the schools was to teach adult illiterates to read and write, and students did not receive a complete primary education. In fact, one contemporary recalls that many students, especially older men and women, cared about nothing more than learning to sign their names; but another observer says that most adults did learn the rudiments of reading and writing in the schools.<sup>23</sup>

To stimulate interest in the night classes, Mrs. Stewart presented small Bibles to former illiterates who wrote a letter of thanks to her. She also tried to promote a sense of competition

<sup>21</sup> Williamsport, Pennsylvania Grit, February 2, 1913; *Lexington Herald*, February 18, 1912; *Louisville Courier Journal*, February 18, 1912; Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, pp. 16-18; U.S. Bureau of Education, *Illiteracy*, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup> Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, p. 26; James R. Reynolds, "Moonlight Schools in Rowan County" (unpublished seminar paper, Morehead State University, 1958), p. 8; Welles interview, September 2, 1972, Morehead, Kentucky; *Louisville Courier Journal*, December 29, 1912.



among the schools by dividing the county into four districts and publishing the educational achievements of each area in *The Rowan County Messenger*. Mrs. Stewart's personal leadership was probably the greatest factor in the success of the schools. According to one source:

She would appear at one school at the opening to encourage the teachers and spur the students on. Then she would mount her horse and ride over the mountains to reach another school in time to say goodnight and tell the people how splendid they were and how certain they were to win their battle for knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Her activities were so intense that she was often exhausted and her family worried that she would permanently impair her health. One concerned kinsman noted: "My sister is killing herself. She performs duties during the day then rides until two o'clock at night keeping the teachers and pupils in the 'Moonlight Schools' in good spirits and leading the fight on illiteracy."<sup>25</sup>

This devotion characterized all of Mrs. Stewart's work with the illiterates. She was beginning to view her work as a great crusade, and she was determined to see that it was successful.

Mrs. Stewart was quite willing to risk her health for the "Moonlight Schools." The illiterates were learning, and news of her work was spreading across the state. George W. Chapman, Superintendent of Paris public schools, noted: "What a great thing for Kentucky it would be if every county in the state would do as you have done and you have demonstrated that it can be done!" E. C. McDougale of the State Normal School of Richmond wrote: "I'm indeed proud of you. That Rowan County idea will surely spread."<sup>26</sup> Most Kentuckians correctly believed that Mrs. Stewart's work was novel and innovative because it focused on adult illiterates; but many others wrongly assumed that the schools were the first night classes

<sup>24</sup> Louisville *Courier Journal*, December 29, 1912; Reynolds, "Moonlight Schools in Rowan County," p. 5; Williamsport, Pennsylvania *Grit*, February 2, 1913.

<sup>25</sup> "Information Sheet," (n.d.), Biographical File, Stewart Papers.

<sup>26</sup> George W. Chapman to Cora Wilson Stewart, October 30, 1911; E. C. McDougale to Cora Wilson Stewart, October 31, 1911, both in Stewart Papers.

organized in the United States. In reality, evening courses for educated adults had been an established feature in most northeastern states since before 1900.<sup>27</sup> Although Mrs. Stewart did not copy the procedures of the northern night schools, she was doubtless aware of their existence.

In early December 1911 Mrs. Stewart addressed the Southern Educational Association in Houston, Texas. Although her assigned topic was "The Education of the Mountain Child," she also discussed the illiteracy work. The group was so impressed by her speech that it endorsed the "Moonlight Schools" as "the most practical plan for abolishing illiteracy in the South." Representatives from other states were interested in her story, and many of them asked her to speak before their state educational associations.<sup>28</sup>

During the first half of 1912 Mrs. Stewart answered many of these requests and carried the story of the "Moonlight Schools" to Alabama, Virginia, West Virginia, and Arkansas. Couching her arguments in eloquent prose and armed with illiteracy statistics taken from the 1910 census, she convinced many teachers of the plight of Southern illiterates. One Alabama educator observed: "I feel sure that the things you have done, which were so beautifully told to us, will prove an inspiration to many an Alabama teacher. Your visit will be long remembered by us."<sup>29</sup>

In early April 1912 Mrs. Stewart again received regional attention when she spoke to the National Conference of Education in the South, in Nashville, Tennessee. As before, the audience was captivated by her story of the work against illiteracy. R. H. Wilson, Superintendent of Public Instruction

<sup>27</sup> Malcolm Knowles, *The Adult Education Movement in the United States* (New York, 1962), pp. 52-54.

<sup>28</sup> Undated and untitled newspaper clipping; M. A. Cassidy to Cora Wilson Stewart, August 17, 1911; J. B. Hobdy to Cora Wilson Stewart, December 10, 1911; Mary H. White to Cora Wilson Stewart, January 17, 1912; A. C. Monahan to Cora Wilson Stewart, April 22, 1912, all in Stewart Papers; Louisville *Courier Journal*, February 18, 1912.

<sup>29</sup> J. B. Hobdy to Cora Wilson Stewart, April 13, 1912; J. P. Womack to Cora Wilson Stewart, April 26, 1912; Charles G. Mapin to Cora Wilson Stewart, July 10, 1912, all in Stewart Papers.

in Oklahoma, expressed the feeling of many other delegates: "I appreciate your address very much and I feel that it had a wonderful effect on the audience and that the good you have done in your country is an example of what others may do and will do, and by this act of yours you have placed your name in history."<sup>30</sup>

As the beginning of the second year of the Rowan night schools approached, Mrs. Stewart organized a "Moonlight School" institute at Morehead. Methods of seeking out and teaching illiterates were discussed, and many teachers from surrounding counties attended. After the institute, Mrs. Stewart spoke before several county teachers' meetings and urged the educators to open "Moonlight Schools." Because of her efforts, schools were begun in several other Kentucky counties, including Johnson, Mercer, Garrard, Boyle, Martin, and Carter. Although they were not as well coordinated as the Rowan schools, good results were achieved. For instance, Jay O'Daniel, Superintendent of Lawrence County Schools, wrote: "I am very pleased with the manner in which my schools are progressing so far and I think you were of immense benefit to us. Several night schools are already under way, and are doing splendid work."<sup>31</sup> In Rowan the 1912 enrollment surpassed that of the previous session, with over 1600 students.<sup>32</sup>

During 1912 and early 1913, Mrs. Stewart continued her duties as Superintendent of Rowan County schools and President of the K.E.A. She also gave speeches for civic organizations, contributed to school journals, and remained active in church. Yet her strenuous schedule caused her much physical strain, and she was forced to sacrifice some activities for the "Moonlight Schools." She did this reluctantly; but by early

<sup>30</sup> R. H. Wilson to Cora Wilson Stewart, April 16, 1912; Wallace Lund to Cora Wilson Stewart, March 20, 1912; Paducah *News Democrat*, March 30, 1912, all in Stewart Papers.

<sup>31</sup> Jay O'Daniel to Cora Wilson Stewart, August 4, 1912, Stewart Papers; Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, pp. 32-37; Louisville *Courier Journal*, December 29, 1912.

<sup>32</sup> Louisville *Courier Journal*, December 29, 1912; U.S. Bureau of Education, *Illiteracy*, p. 29; Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, p. 38.

1913, she had become totally committed to the work against illiteracy and refused to let anything take priority.<sup>33</sup> By this time Mrs. Stewart was convinced that illiteracy could be wiped out in Kentucky, and she pictured herself as the leader of a state-wide crusade to save the uneducated.

Many educators had scoffed at the "Moonlight Schools" in their early days, but by the beginning of the 1913 session of the Rowan night schools, the critics were being silenced. Thanks to Mrs. Stewart's leadership, the movement had passed the experimental stage and schools were opened in the states of Tennessee, Arkansas, South Carolina, and Washington. In Kentucky, twenty-five counties had adopted the idea. One state newspaper reported:

In the Sandy Valley hundreds have enrolled, 400 in Lawrence County alone. In one district in Boyd County the people responded to the number of 60. In Madison a school was conducted among the tenant class, and was thronged with eager students. At the close of a two weeks' session all these tenants could read and write.<sup>34</sup>

At the end of the 1913 session, Mrs. Stewart claimed that all but twenty-three of Rowan County's 1,152 illiterates had been taught to read and write. Although this was an exaggeration, the schools did achieve definite results.<sup>35</sup>

After seeing the spread of the "Moonlight Schools" to other counties and states, Mrs. Stewart concluded that the state of Kentucky should take an active part in educating adults. On December 16, 1913, she suggested to Governor James B. McCreary that a state illiteracy commission be established to study and encourage the eradication of illiteracy. McCreary responded favorably and subsequently asked the state legislature to form an illiteracy commission. Both Mrs. Stewart

<sup>33</sup> Nat Sewell to Cora Wilson Stewart, May 6, 1912, May 10, 1912; Nellie McCabe to Cora Wilson Stewart, March 3, 1912; Sue B. Scott to Cora Wilson Stewart, February 3, 1912; J. B. Ferran to Cora Wilson Stewart, August 15, 1912, all in Stewart papers.

<sup>34</sup> Williamsport, Pennsylvania *Grit*, February 2, 1913; Flemingsburg *Times Democrat*, October 15, 1913, both in Stewart Papers; Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, p. 124.

<sup>35</sup> Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, p. 55; "Census of Persons over Twenty years of Age who cannot Read or Write (1918)," Stewart Papers (Box 64).

art and McCreary agreed that the commissioners should receive no salary but should serve voluntarily.<sup>36</sup>

On February 11, 1914, Mrs. Stewart reached one of the high points of her career when she spoke before the Kentucky General Assembly meeting as a committee of the whole to consider the establishment of a state commission on illiteracy. Primed with figures and offering personal experience as illustrations, "she completely swept the Legislature off its feet with her eloquence." After the speech, in an action that one source said was "unprecedented in Kentucky's history," the House of Representatives lifted the illiteracy bill from deep down in the calendar and rushed it through with a unanimous vote. Less than a week later the Senate passed the bill, and the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission (K.I.C.) was established.<sup>37</sup>

During the weeks following her speech before the legislature, Mrs. Stewart received congratulations for the establishment of the K.I.C. from citizens throughout the state.<sup>38</sup> Governor McCreary was especially impressed with her dynamic leadership, and he proposed making her assistant superintendent of the State Reform School. But Mrs. Stewart already had a mission to fulfill. She wrote the governor:

I thank you sincerely for your consideration of me in connection with the Reform School as Superintendent and feel that it is a work next in importance to the one to which I have concentrated myself — wiping out Kentucky's illiteracy. I am sorry that my obligation to this self-appointed task prevents my acceptance of the offer.<sup>39</sup>

The above statement clearly indicates the zeal with which Mrs. Stewart carried out her work. She was coming to believe that she had a mission ordained by God to eradicate illiteracy. The

<sup>36</sup> *Journal of the Regular Session of the Kentucky Senate* (1914), Vol. 1, pp. 42-43; Stewart, *Moonlight Schools*, pp. 57-60. See Roscoe C. Cross, "Public Life of James Bennett McCreary" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Kentucky, 1925), pp. 78-79, for McCreary's view of the illiteracy work.

<sup>37</sup> *Lexington Herald*, February 12, 1914; *Frankfort State Journal*, February 14, 1914; *Journal of the Regular Session of the Kentucky Senate* (1914), Vol. 1, pp. 575-580.

<sup>38</sup> John F. Smith to Cora Wilson Stewart, February 12, 1914; T. J. Coates to Cora Wilson Stewart, February 23, 1914, both in Stewart Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Cora Wilson Stewart to James B. McCreary, February 18, 1914, Stewart Papers.

piety of her youth had been maintained intact, and was deepening as the success of her work increased.

Although McCreary would have preferred having Mrs. Stewart in the Reform School position, he respected her interest in the K.I.C., and less than two months after the passage of the illiteracy bill he named her to the Commission. Dr. John Grant Crabbe, Dr. Henry Hardin Cherry, and Ella Lewis were also named members of the K.I.C., and Superintendent of Public Instruction Barksdale Hamlett was made a member ex-officio. At its first meeting on May 1, 1914, the other members of the Commission paid tribute to Mrs. Stewart's leadership of the Kentucky illiteracy work by selecting her as their president. At the same meeting, Dr. Crabbe and Mrs. Stewart were chosen as a finance committee to solicit funds, and the Commission decided to set as a goal the complete eradication of illiteracy from the Commonwealth by 1920.<sup>40</sup>

The setting of a goal which seemed at the time to be unreachable was typical of Mrs. Stewart. She convinced the members of the Commission that a far-reaching objective was necessary if the people were to be inspired to action.

Soon after the initial meeting, Mrs. Stewart proved herself worthy of the faith expressed in her by the other members of the Commission. During May she devoted most of her time to soliciting funds from the leading organizations of the state. She spoke before the K.E.A., the State Federation of Women's Clubs, the Kentucky Society of Colonial Dames, and the Kentucky Press Association. All four groups endorsed the Commission and pledged their support.<sup>41</sup>

Between her speaking engagements, Mrs. Stewart began the tiresome but extremely important process of distributing to local newspaper editors statistics on the number of illiterates in each county. Many schoolmen challenged the validity of her figures

<sup>40</sup> Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *First Biennial Report, 1914-1915* (Louisville, 1916), p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Otis G. Wilson to Cora Wilson Stewart, February 10, 1914, Stewart Papers; *Frankfort State Journal*, July 12, 1914.



and resented the publishing of statistics on their communities.<sup>42</sup> Indignant at the questioning of her veracity, Mrs. Stewart decided to silence these critics by securing the names of every one of Kentucky's 208,084 illiterates recorded by the 1910 census. Such an effort had never before been made; but, with the aid of General W. H. Sears, a former assistant to Clara Barton, Mrs. Stewart persuaded the U.S. Census Bureau to allow a few names to be copied. Having gained a foothold, she got Congressman William Jason Fields and United States Senator Ollie M. James to push the matter until the names of all of Kentucky's illiterates were in the K.I.C.'s possession.<sup>43</sup>

Having secured the names of all Kentucky illiterates during May, Mrs. Stewart eagerly looked forward to beginning the statewide crusade. Although a brief illness delayed her from opening K.I.C. headquarters in Frankfort until June 30, 1914, she began developing comprehensive plans for a coordinated illiteracy campaign soon after the offices opened.<sup>44</sup> She also continued to speak at teachers' institutes, soliciting many volunteers for "Moonlight School" duty. In early September she asked Governor McCreary to issue a proclamation requesting all citizens to help in the fight against illiteracy. McCreary obliged and delivered his statement on September 21, 1914.<sup>45</sup> When not actively engaged in planning the Kentucky work, Mrs. Stewart traveled across the country giving speeches about the "Moonlight Schools." By the end of 1914 she had spoken in Iowa, Minnesota, Michigan, and West Virginia. The national press carried stories of her work, and the public wanted to learn more about the originator of the "Moonlight Schools."

<sup>42</sup> Jackson *Times*, April 24, 1914; Corbin *Times*, July 17, 1914; Lexington, *Herald*, April 26, 1914; Frank L. McVey, *The Gates Open Slowly: A History of Education in Kentucky* (Lexington, 1949), p. 212; Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *Report, 1916-1920*, (Louisville, 1920), pp. 6-7.

<sup>43</sup> Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *Report 1916-1920*, pp. 6-7; Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *First Biennial Report*, p. 18.

<sup>44</sup> Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *First Biennial Report*, p. 9; Otis G. Wilson to Cora Wilson Stewart, February 10, 1914, Stewart Papers; Frankfort *State Journal*, July 12, 1914.

<sup>45</sup> Mrs. Lee M. Campbell, February 8, 1914; James B. McCreary to Cora Wilson Stewart, September 9, 1914, both in Stewart Papers; Stanford *Interior Journal*, July 14, 1914; Lexington *Herald*, September 24, 1914.

The hectic schedule which she followed often left Mrs. Stewart fatigued and irritable. She sometimes lost patience with her fellow workers, but she was quite willing to risk the loss of a few friends in the fulfillment of her life's work.<sup>46</sup>

After carefully laying the groundwork for the Kentucky drive against illiteracy during the last half of 1914, Mrs. Stewart began the new year by vigorously working on her program. Through contacts in the Kentucky Federation of Women's Clubs, she organized the Woman's Forward Kentucky Movement, which raised \$8,000 for the K.I.C. in a five-week campaign. She made sure that county illiteracy commissions were established to coordinate local efforts and that the state press supported the work with editorials and feature stories.<sup>47</sup> She also organized local rallies and fairs to arouse the public. A Kentucky newspaper noted that at one of the fairs in Hyden "Hundreds of Moonlight School pupils, old and young, were in attendance and from an educational standpoint it is certain that a long step forward has been made in Leslie County." A remarkable feature of the 1915 effort was the interest demonstrated by many businessmen and politicians. Local merchants often awarded prizes at "Moonlight School" fairs, and Mrs. Stewart persuaded the state's leading political figures to offer rewards for the best teachers and pupils.<sup>48</sup>

One might assume that because Mrs. Stewart could not offer financial remuneration, few people volunteered for "Moonlight School" duty during 1915. On the contrary, many day school teachers, members of women's clubs, and local businessmen assisted in the classes. Letters of thanks poured into Mrs. Stewart's office from teachers and former illiterates. Many teachers took literally her advice that classes should be

<sup>46</sup> James B. McCreary to Cora Wilson Stewart, October 15, 1914; Cora Wilson Stewart to M. E. Taylor, October 12, 1914, both in Stewart Papers.

<sup>47</sup> Franklin *Favorite*, June 28, 1915; London *Sentinel*, June 28, 1915; Whitley *Republican*, June 30, 1915, all in Stewart Papers; Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *First Biennial Report*, pp. 11, 18.

<sup>48</sup> Somerset *Weekly News*, November 30, 1915; Ashland *Independent*, November 19, 1915, both in Stewart Papers; Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *First Biennial Report*, pp. 17-18; Lexington *Herald*, December 3, 1915; Louisville *Courier Journal*, August 29, 1915.

taught wherever illiterates were found. They opened schools in local jails, in the state penitentiary, and the state reformatory. When adults were unwilling or unable to attend classes, teachers often went into their homes to tutor them.<sup>49</sup>

One of the most important duties performed by Mrs. Stewart during the 1915 drive was coordinating a statewide speakers' campaign. Numerous prominent leaders in the Commonwealth, from the Governor and United States senators to local ministers and schoolmen, took part. Mrs. Stewart not only directed the participants, she also took a leading role in the canvass. From Ashland to Paducah she traveled, citing local illiteracy statistics and challenging people to reach and teach uneducated adults.<sup>50</sup>

Another of Mrs. Stewart's contributions to the work against illiteracy was made during mid-1915 when she began writing the first of a three-volume set of readers especially for uneducated adults. Throughout the latter half of the year, when she was not engaged in the Kentucky drive, she worked on the text. This was a very difficult financial period for her, since she was no longer superintendent of Rowan County schools, and she received no salary from the K.I.C. The only money she earned was in the form of tuition fees for conducting county teachers' institutes, and this was barely enough to cover expenses. The strain of K.I.C. duties, combined with worries over money, took a heavy toll. She became irritable, often lost her temper, and found work on the reader exasperating. Unable to complete the book in Kentucky, she finally left the state and went to Richmond, Virginia, where, after a brief rest, she finished the work.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Luther Hatton to Olin Green, January 3, 1915; Miss Sarah F. Lee to Cora Wilson Stewart, May 17, 1915; J. V. Harris to Cora Wilson Stewart, January 1, 1915; undated and untitled newspaper clipping, all in Stewart Papers; Louisville *Evening Post*, October 20, 1915; Kentucky Illiteracy Commission *First Biennial Report*, pp. 10, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *First Biennial Report*, pp. 13-16; Elizabeth-town *News*, August 13, 1915.

<sup>51</sup> James B. McCreary to Cora Wilson Stewart, February 16, 1915; Morehead State Bank to Cora Wilson Stewart, March 2, 1915; Cora Wilson Stewart to J. W. Carnahan, December 24, 1915, all in Stewart Papers.

Mrs. Stewart entitled the volume *The Country Life Reader*. It contained simple sentences, which not only taught the illiterates to read and write but also inspired personal and civic responsibility. There were lessons encouraging better health, Christian living, improved farming techniques, and thrift. Because it was the first text exclusively for uneducated adults, it was greeted enthusiastically by the public.<sup>52</sup>

Because of Mrs. Stewart's development of *The Country Life Reader* and her leadership of the K.I.C., numerous states, including Mississippi,<sup>53</sup> Oklahoma, and New Mexico by 1916 became involved in the work to eradicate illiteracy.<sup>54</sup> Although Mrs. Stewart was pleased to see the spread of the movement, she also insisted that proper credit be given to the "Moonlight Schools" origins. For example, she warned one fellow worker:

You Alabama folks must call your schools 'Moonlight Schools.' I do resent them being called 'night schools.' That is a Northern institution and a city affair. The 'Moonlight Schools' are of Southern origin and it [sic] is a rural and small town institution, whose primary aim is to instruct illiterates. There is a difference and all loyal Southerners should call them 'Moonlight Schools.'<sup>55</sup>

Thus, despite her appearance of caring solely about the welfare of the illiterates, Mrs. Stewart was also interested in seeing that she received credit for her activities. In fact, it is extremely difficult to say to what extent she engaged in the crusade against illiteracy for personal attention. One thing seems certain, however, she never admitted such intentions, and it is doubtful if she ever felt herself to be other than an altruist.

In her home state, Mrs. Stewart was beginning to realize that an aroused citizenry alone could not insure the success of the illiteracy campaign that she had hoped for. Realizing that

<sup>52</sup> Cora Wilson Stewart, *Country Life Reader: First Book* (Atlanta, Richmond, Dallas, 1915); Cora Wilson Stewart to B. F. Johnson, December 24, 1915, Stewart Papers.

<sup>53</sup> Mississippi Illiteracy Commission, *Illiteracy in Mississippi: Blot it Out!* (Jackson, 1916), pp. 4-8.

<sup>54</sup> McCreary County *News*, January 29, 1915; Santa Fe *New Mexican*, January 5, 1916, both in Stewart Papers.

<sup>55</sup> Cora Wilson Stewart to Lois Willis, September 15, 1915, Stewart Papers (Box 27).



the public was unwilling to voluntarily support the illiteracy work in the manner she desired, she resolved to ask the 1916 General Assembly for an appropriation. Supported by the press and most of the civic organizations in the state, she got a bill introduced into the House of Representatives that would allow the K.I.C. \$20,000 per year until 1920.<sup>56</sup>

While Mrs. Stewart was busy lobbying for this bill, an ironic twist of events occurred which brought public opinion firmly behind the Commission and which increased the possibility of the appropriation being granted. Augustus Owsley Stanley, who succeeded McCreary as governor in 1915, appointed several assistant attorneys general to examine state agencies. Early in January 1916 one of these investigators, J. D. Duffy, charged that the K.I.C. without authorization had drawn \$1,458.82 from the state treasury. The money was allegedly used for postage, telephone, and telegraphing expenses, and hiring a stenographer.<sup>57</sup> Mrs. Stewart's friends were infuriated by Duffy's charges. They argued that even if the Commission had spent the money, it was a small price to pay for all the good that had been done.<sup>58</sup>

Mrs. Stewart was in Washington when she heard of the Duffy report. Knowing that the appropriation would not be granted by the legislature unless the K.I.C. was cleared immediately, she wisely wired the State Inspector and Examiner, Nat B. Sewell, to begin a full investigation of the Commission. Upon arriving in Frankfort the next day, she went directly to Sewell and urged that the investigation begin as soon as possible.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> William A. Young to Senator Charles D. Arnett, February 5, 1916; James B. McCreary to Cora Wilson Stewart, January 1, 1916, both in Stewart Papers, Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, *First Biennial Report*, p. 21; *Lexington Herald*, January 13, 1916.

<sup>57</sup> *Louisville Courier Journal*, January 6, 1916; *Paducah Evening Sun*, January 8, 1916, Stewart Papers.

<sup>58</sup> R. W. Kincaid to H. M. Logan, January 10, 1916; *Louisville Herald*, January 10, 1916; *Somerset Semi-Weekly News*, January 10, 1916, all in Stewart Papers.

<sup>59</sup> *Somerset, Semi-Weekly News*, January 10, 1916, Stewart Papers; *Lexington Herald*, January 11, 1916.

Dissatisfied with the pace of the Sewell probe, Mrs. Stewart seized the initiative by making a public statement on January 13 about the Duffy charges. She admitted that the alleged funds had been spent, but she said that they were disbursed with the full knowledge of then Attorney General James Garnett. Garnett had construed the law providing supplies and services to state departments to include the K.I.C. Mrs. Stewart said that no funds had passed through the Commission and she shrewdly added that she had often spent her own money for the illiteracy work.<sup>60</sup> Her masterful statement convinced the public of the honesty of the K.I.C., and brought new support for the movement.<sup>61</sup> While the Commission was pictured as a totally altruistic organization, Stanley's investigators were cast as petty officials who ignored regular government business to attack a selfless woman.<sup>62</sup>

With public opinion clearly in her favor because of the Duffy incident, Mrs. Stewart on February 17, 1916, appeared before the Kentucky legislature. The galleries were packed, and many ladies, carrying appropriate anti-illiteracy banners, found seats on the floor of the House, which had been opened to the public. With the stage thus set, Mrs. Stewart rose to the occasion. According to one source, she spent more than an hour giving "a detailed account of the work done by the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, emphasizing the necessity of funds to carry out the work and meeting in advance the arguments of suspected opponents." Vigorous applause followed the speech, and only a motion to adjourn kept the bill from rushing through.<sup>63</sup>

The motion to adjourn was probably engineered by friends of Governor Stanley, who feared the large appropriation at-

<sup>60</sup> *Owensboro Daily Messenger*, January 16, 1916; *Elizabethtown News*, January 14, 1916, both in Stewart Papers.

<sup>61</sup> *Elizabethtown News*, January 14, 1916, Stewart Papers; *Louisville Herald*, January 11, 1916; *Frankfort State Journal*, January 14, 1916; *Lexington Herald*, January 16, 1916.

<sup>62</sup> *Versailles Woodford Sun*, January 20, 1916; *Wilmore Enterprise*, January 20, 1916, both in Scrapbook, Stewart Papers (Box 64).

<sup>63</sup> *Lexington Herald*, February 18, 1916; *Lexington Leader*, February 19, 1916; *Louisville Courier Journal*, February 18, 1916.

tached to the illiteracy bill. In any case, the day after Mrs. Stewart's address, Stanley declared his opposition to any new state expenditures unless means were devised to raise the money. He admitted that the campaign to eradicate illiteracy was a noble venture, but said other problems took priority. Although he admired Mrs. Stewart, the Governor adamantly opposed spending more money than the state could raise.<sup>64</sup>

Mrs. Stewart knew that Stanley's opposition would doom the appropriation. Disconsolate, she wrote McCreary that she would give up her work and return to Morehead if no funds were granted, but the former governor assured her that some money would be supplied.<sup>65</sup> McCreary was correct in his prediction, for the legislature appropriated \$5,000 per year for 1916 and 1917.<sup>66</sup> Mrs. Stewart knew that this was hardly enough to carry on the campaign she envisioned, but she reconciled herself to the circumstances. Never one to allow adversity to stand in her way, she merely became more determined than ever to wipe illiteracy from Kentucky by 1920.

Mrs. Stewart did continue her work against illiteracy until 1920, when the state legislature allowed the K.I.C. to expire without renewal. During the last four years of its existence, however, the agency expanded its work and aroused the entire state, claiming to have taught at least 130,000 uneducated adults to read and write.<sup>67</sup>

It is impossible to accurately measure in numbers the effectiveness of Mrs. Stewart's work. Her statement that over one-half of Kentucky's illiterates learned to read and write between 1911 and 1920 does not agree with the U.S. census. The 1920 census indicates that illiteracy decreased by only 53,070 during that period. The Census Bureau and the K.I.C. used two different measures of illiteracy, however, so one can not accurately compare the two sets of statistics.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Lexington Herald, February 19, 1916; Lexington Leader, February 19, 1916.

<sup>65</sup> James B. McCreary to Cora Wilson Stewart, February 23, 1916, Stewart Papers.

<sup>66</sup> Acts of the Kentucky General Assembly (1916), pp. 602-603.

<sup>67</sup> Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, Report, 1916-1920, p. 7; U.S. Census Bureau. Fourteenth Census of the United States (1920), Vol. 3, pp. 10, 366.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

While it is difficult to judge in numbers the effectiveness of Mrs. Stewart's activities, it is much simpler to measure the success of her publicizing of the illiteracy problem. She was a master propagandist, and this was her major function. She brought uneducated adults to the attention of Kentucky and the nation. With her eloquent and forceful speaking style, she traveled the country like a revivalist preaching the gospel of education. For her personally, the fight against illiteracy was truly a crusade, which she led with the dedication of the earlier Christian knights. This intense dedication eventually led her to believe that God had chosen her as his instrument. Her sense of piety deepened, causing her often to be viewed as arrogant by friends and foes.

Understandably, as Mrs. Stewart came to see her work as the will of God, she viewed any attempt to block her as obstruction of God's will. If one did not support her, he was against her; there was no room for the undecided or the lukewarm. She sometimes lost patience with those who opposed her on principle and labeled them "reactionaries" or "opponents of education." This intolerance ultimately cost her the support of many educators who might have helped her continue her crusade against illiteracy.