

The “Moonlight Lady” who led the Nation Toward Literacy

While serving as the superintendent of Rowan County Schools, Cora Wilson Stewart (1875-1958) established an adult literacy program which became a national model and encouraged literacy in thousands of individuals in Kentucky and the nation. Born in Farmers, Ky., Stewart became the schools’ superintendent in 1901 at the age of 26.



Witnessing a need for education outside of the traditional classroom, Stewart enlisted the help of area teachers, who volunteered their time and school rooms to tackle prolific adult illiteracy in the county. Classes were held on moonlit nights so students could easily find their way to the schools. When the first “Moonlight School” was held on Sept. 5, 1911, 1,200 adults ranging in age from 18 to 86 showed up at the 50 Rowan county schools offering the literacy program. The program continued to grow, enrolling 1,600 students the next year. By 1915 it had expanded to other Kentucky counties, and an estimated 40,000 Kentucky adults had learned to read and write in moonlight schools, including African-Americans at 15 colored moonlight schools. By 1916, 18 other states had similar programs.

Soon Cora Wilson Stewart had gained a national reputation as an education reformist and in the 1920s was appointed chairwoman of President Hoover’s Commission on Illiteracy. She also chaired the Illiteracy Section of the international World Conference of Education Associations five times and was elected the first woman president of the Kentucky Education Association. In 1920 and 1924, Stewart was nominated to the Democratic Party for president of the U.S.

Oral histories about the moonlight schools and other areas of education in Kentucky can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>. Image courtesy of the University of Kentucky Archives.

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