Moonlight Schools Come to Western Kentucky

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Cora Wilson Stewart was anxious the afternoon of September 5, 1911, there was so much at stake. That evening, by the light of the full moon, she would learn if her grand plan to reduce illiteracy in her beloved hometown would work. Cora, the Rowan County school superintendent, was opening moonlight schools—night schools to teach adults to read and write. She hoped that 150 adults would show up in various locations around the county that night. But Cora's estimate was wildly wrong: 1,200 adults, eager to learn, arrived at the first session of Kentucky's moonlight schools. It was a turning point in education in the commonwealth.

Education in Early Western Kentucky

When pioneers began establishing cabins and putting out crops in far Western Kentucky in the early 1820s, educating their children was not a high priority. That remained the case for nearly 100 years. At first there were no state regulations regarding public education, nor was there any financial support for the few schools that did exist during this era. Records from the territory indicate that what little education there was would have been held in church buildings or private homes with students paying a fee.

Funds from the Federal Surplus in 1837 are credited for the development of the common school system in Kentucky. The 1838 State School Law established certain conditions to be met by every county in Kentucky before the county could receive state financial aid. Initially, each county set aside land for a seminary and students would pay tuition. This caused poor children to be excluded, and in time, the schools failed due to local corruption and general disregard for public education. In 1848, supporters of common schools mobilized to pass a referendum for a statewide tax of two cents on every $100 worth of taxable property. This popular vote was the first acknowledgment by average Kentuckians that a public school system was needed. Legislation following the 1850 Constitution made schools free for all White children in the state.

Black children had little opportunity for education. While Kentucky did not prohibit the education of enslaved persons before emancipation, it was not generally accepted. This situation

changed in 1874 when state law created a racially segregated common school system for Black children. Districts were managed by White trustees and the schools were structured like the White schools. The source of funding was not substantial, and the method of funding the schools was unequal as taxes were collected only from Black property owners to support Black schools. When a federal lawsuit threatened to integrate schools, the Kentucky General Assembly adopted a bill in 1881 intended to equalize school funding among Black and White schools.[1]

In the era of Reconstruction, communities in the Purchase like Columbus and Paducah received an overwhelming number of Black refugees. For a few years, the Jackson Purchase became one of the few areas in Kentucky to house a branch of the Freedman's Bureau. Building schools was one of the first efforts of the bureau, and schools for Black children were established in Paducah, Columbus, and Hickman.

Early efforts to educate the Black population in the Purchase area were met with contempt by Whites. Resenting what they perceived to be another phase of federal government occupation, they displayed "great prejudice and hostility," according to Chief School Superintendent John Donovan. In reporting to his superiors about the situations the schools faced, Donovan wrote, "Scholars were assaulted . . . the windows broken in and the teachers compelled to flee." Similarly, when efforts were made in 1867 to build a school in Mayfield, fifty Klansmen appeared and ordered the teacher to leave town. Reports of freed persons being mistreated and abused were common in all eight Purchase counties.[2]

Regardless of such treatment, some inroads in education were made over the next forty years. In some areas, locals pushed to establish academies of learning in their communities, including the Murray Male and Female Institute (1871), Clinton College (1873) and the Marvin College (1884) both in Hickman County, Blandville College in Ballard County (1876), the St. Jerome School (1881) operated by the Sisters of Charity in Fancy Farm, and the West Kentucky College in Mayfield (1884). However, education was not regarded as a priority by most residents.[3]

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[1] The Kentucky Heritage Council, *Kentucky Historic Schools Survey: An Examination of Kentucky's Older School Buildings* (Frankfort, Kentucky: Cabinet of Education, Arts, and Humanities, 2002).

[2] Patricia A. Hoskins, "'The Old First Is with the South': The Civil War, Reconstruction, and Memory in the Jackson Purchase Region of Kentucky" (PhD diss., Auburn University, 2008).

[3] J. H. Battle, W. H. Perrin, and G. C. Kniffin, *Kentucky: A History of the State*, Part II: *Histories and Biographies of Ballard, Calloway, Fulton, Graves, Hickman, McCracken, and Marshall Counties* (Louisville, Chicago: F. A. Battey Publishing Company, 1885).

In recognition of the need, the state established normal schools for teachers in Bowling Green and Richmond in 1906, providing teachers with the training they needed for the job. In 1908, Kentucky law made tremendous changes in education. In the past, county government was the primary unit of school administration. Under the new structure, a county superintendent and county board of education assumed responsibilities. This law was also intended to professionalize school administration and license teachers.

Another huge change from the 1908 law was the requirement that each county provide one or more high schools by 1910. Before this measure it was common for students to complete their education in the eighth grade. Students desiring further education were often forced to attend private academies or a high school in another community. This new law mandated that all Kentucky children have access to a high school education. The only exception was in the Black school system. Many county systems refused to create high schools for Black students, arguing there were not enough Black children in their districts. This caused many Black students to be transported long distances to attend segregated schools.

At the time of the 1910 United States Census, citizens were asked if they could write in any language, not necessarily in English. An affirmative answer was required to be declared literate. The bureau classified as illiterate all persons unable to write, regardless of their ability to read.[4] The results revealed there were 208,084 illiterate people in Kentucky (12.1% of the population), a slight improvement over 16.5 percent in 1900.[5]

Progressive educators and lawmakers were concerned about the effect of an undereducated workforce on the state's economy and culture. The census confirmation of Kentucky's high level of illiteracy led to the 1912 legislative provision mandating school attendance for all school children ages six to sixteen. Local school systems levied a small tax on each $100 worth of personal property to pay for teachers' salaries (both Black and White), new buildings, equipment, and transportation.[6] This action led to numerous one and two-room schools dotting the countryside in every county. Most were made of logs and some served as church buildings as well as schoolhouses. In a 1921 survey of Kentucky schools, the Kentucky Education Commission reported:

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[4] U.S. Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States (1910) Population, Vol. I, 1185.

[5] Department of Commerce and Labor Bureau of the Census (1910), *Statistics For Kentucky*, 1913, 590.

[6] Kentucky Heritage Council, *Kentucky Historic Schools Survey*, 22.

> Nine out of ten are one-room boxlike structures. Cloakrooms are rare and additional rooms for agriculture, cooking, or fuel are nonexistent. Approximately 50 percent are painted. A pot-bellied stove stands in the middle and the fire is lit by the first one arriving at school. A galvanized bucket with a common drinking cup takes the place of a sanitary drinking fountain. Lavatory facilities are nonexistent. Outdoor toilets are provided. Half the schools have wells or cisterns. The others are furnished water by hauling.[7]

Education became a bit more attainable for Black children living in the Purchase when businessman and entrepreneur Julius Rosenwald established the Rosenwald Fund to help build schools for African Americans across Southern states, including Kentucky. The schools were designed by faculty at the Tuskegee Institute (now University) and reflected the latest ideas about school design. There were twenty such schools in six of the eight Purchase area counties—Ballard, Calloway, Fulton, Hickman, Graves, and McCracken.[8]

Jackson Purchase children were required to be educated, but efforts were often meager. This was not only Western Kentucky's problem, but it was true across the entire Commonwealth. The lack of laws regarding child labor and mandatory school attendance had left Kentucky with hundreds of thousands of illiterate people of all ages. As dire as the situation was, change would come. Few could have imagined it would come about in part from a young woman growing up in the hills and hollers of Eastern Kentucky.

Cora Wilson Stewart

Cora Stewart Wilson grew up during the 1884 Rowan County War, and was familiar with murders and fighting all around her. The fights resulted from tightly contested political campaigns among neighboring families. Though not as prolonged as the Hatfield and McCoy feud, the Martin-Tolliver feud was centered in Morehead.

Cora's father, Dr. Jeremiah Wilson, was the local doctor, and he treated people on both sides of the fighting. Cora saw firsthand the devastation caused by the infighting of an uneducated population. Many of their neighbors and friends left the area out of fear for their safety or to search for jobs.

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[7] Department of Education, *H. L. Peters History of Education in Kentucky 1915–1940*, 7.

[8] Kentucky Heritage Council, State Historic Preservation Office, *Rosenwald Schools in Kentucky 1917–1932* (Frankfort: Kentucky African American Heritage Commission, 1997, reprinted in 2005).

To clean up the reputation and stabilize the area, the Kentucky General Assembly established the Morehead Normal School (1887), a teacher training facility that eventually became Morehead State University. The school was administered by the Christian Woman's Board of Missions, an organization in which Cora's family was involved.

Cora obtained her teaching certificate by the time she was fifteen years old and began teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in Morehead. She was frequently called upon to help neighbors and friends who could not read. Most often, she was asked to read letters from former residents who had left the area because of the feuds.

Married and divorced by 1895, she eventually moved to Lexington and completed her studies at the Commercial College of Kentucky University. When her mother died in 1901, Cora returned to Morehead, ran for, and won the seat of Rowan County school superintendent. With fifty-two schools in her district, Cora came to understand that there was a stigma among people about getting a better education. Sentiments such as "not getting above one's raising" were frequently cited. Cora realized the problem was deeper than teaching children; she needed to reach adults.[9] To make her point, Cora used the data from the 1910 U.S. Census—the immense numbers of illiterate people painted a dismal picture. In one article, "The Mission of Moonlight," she promoted her idea this way:

> The moonlight school did not spring out of a theory; it grew out of a human need. It was established through the appeal of the illiterates themselves. When it started, it was assured of this patronage of three—the mother, whose daughter "had gone out West"; the middle-aged man, who "would give twenty years of his life if he could read and write"; and the boy, who would "forget his ballads before anybody come along to set 'em down." These spoke for the world of illiterate mothers and men and song-inspired lads, when told of the shame and burden of illiteracy, and expressed a burning desire to read and write.[10]

Cora was well-versed and shared her views broadly about the importance of education. She began to build relationships outside of the county with other superintendents, teachers, and administrators and learned that the problems of illiteracy were rampant across the state. As she formulated her plan, she knew she had to present literacy as a way to improve prosperity.

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[9] Robbie Clark, "Enlightenment by Moonlight," *Kentucky Monthly* magazine, July 24, 2014.

[10] Cora Wilson Stewart, "'The Mission of Moonlight," *The Journal of Education* 86, no. 13 (October 1917): 343–344.

Cora came up with the idea to offer evening hours for adults to learn to read starting in her own county. Using her position as superintendent, she convinced teachers to volunteer and obtain space for the classes. Once teachers were on board, she reached out to others in the community to help promote the idea. Newspaper editors were very interested as more people reading meant more papers would sell. Pastors were also interested as more people could read the Bible.[11]

The year after the moonlight schools opened, attendance rose to 1,600 students. Cora became concerned that adults might be insulted by young adult reading material and began writing primers for adults focused on household maintenance, farming activities, and chores. This enabled adults to learn new skills in addition to reading and writing. With verified success at home and lessons in hand, Cora set out on a statewide campaign, touting the concept of moonlight schools in other counties. The concept was so successful in Rowan County the Kentucky Legislature created the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission and put Stewart in charge.[12]

Moonlight Schools in the Jackson Purchase

Cora traveled to Western Kentucky in March 1914 to explain how moonlight schools worked for illiterate adults. A blistering schedule found her leaving Louisville on the eleventh headed to Owensboro, then making stops in Henderson, Paducah, Fulton, Hopkinsville, Madisonville, Bowling Green, Franklin, and Glasgow, and returning to Elizabethtown by the twentieth.[13]

During her presentations, she used a stereopticon machine to provide visuals and data on illiteracy as documented by the census. The whirlwind trip was also a fundraiser to help pay teachers for their work. Cora's expenses were sponsored by the State Federation Committee on Education. With such a rigorous travel schedule, Cora suffered an illness following the presentation at Paducah and had to cancel the remainder of the trip through Western Kentucky. She was taken to Louisville where she was hospitalized for a few weeks at the St. Joseph infirmary.[14]

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[11] Clark, "Enlightenment by Moonlight".
[12] Jean Howerton Coady, "Cora Stewart Battled Illiteracy," *Courier-Journal*, September 6, 1979.
[13] "Notable Woman to Lecture Here," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, March 2, 1914.
[14] "Cora Wilson Stewart," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, March 17, 1914.

Even though her trip into Western Kentucky was cut short, Cora had accomplished her intended goal—the concept of moonlight schools was planted in fertile soil. Cora resumed her speaking engagements with a bit more strategic planning. This time she spoke at the statewide Kentucky Press Association meeting held at Dawson Springs on June 10, 1914. Getting her message in front of editors from across the state was brilliant. Before long, several Purchase counties began organizing their own moonlight schools.[15]

Interested participants came together at the Graves County Courthouse on September 2, 1915, to learn more about the idea of moonlight schools. At the end of the presentations made by *Mayfield Messenger* editor J. R. Lemon and S. P. Green, who was leading the illiteracy initiative in Bowling Green, 75 teachers volunteered to teach students of all age groups. At the same time, Dr. A. S. Mackenzie, who was leading the efforts in Hickman, addressed a large audience in Fulton County, where 37 volunteers came forward to participate.[16]

Later in the year when pupils would not attend the sessions scheduled in Paducah, many of the volunteer teachers began going to the homes of students. McCracken County Superintendent M. V. Miller attributed the absence of students to the "pride of illiterates who do not desire to appear at public school houses to obtain an education." Even though some White people were not attending, Black students were enthusiastic about learning to read and write.[17]

By 1916, the concept of moonlight schools to teach adults to read was introduced at Temple Hill and Hazel in Calloway County. Lois Waterfield was appointed by the state to direct the local organization there to teach every man, woman, and child to read and write.

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[15] "Press Association Holds the Boards at Dawson Springs," *Paducah News-Democrat*, June 10, 1914.
[16] "Many Hear Addresses," *Courier-Journal*, September 3, 1915.
[17] "Teachers Work with Illiterates," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, November 25, 1915.

World War I Creates Urgency

In 1917, 30,000 Kentucky men registered for military service by making their mark rather than signing their names. These young men couldn't read their orders, their arms manuals, or their letters from home. Stamping out illiteracy began to be promoted as a patriotic duty. Classes got underway in July in Paducah with Mrs. Edmund M. Post and William R. Scott in charge of the plans. Their goal was to reach all 261 draftees from McCracken County and teach them to read and write before they were deployed.[18]

As chairman of the Kentucky Illiteracy Commission, Cora Stewart outlined the aims of the commission when she spoke at the annual conference of the Kentucky Institute of County Agents. Their goals were to teach 50,000 illiterate people to read and write; to teach soldiers to read and write; to have each community cooperate with war work; and to increase the daily attendance of the public schools of the state. In selecting the county agents to carry on the work, Cora took into consideration their qualifications and experiences. Most of the agents were college graduates and a number of them had served as school superintendents or supervisors.[19]

To encourage participation in all the counties, a competition was established, pitting the Eastern Normal District against the Western Normal District. According to the 1910 Census, the eastern had 112,810 residents who could not read or write and the western had 95,274. Each district was presided over by a field agent. Jessie O. Yancy was over the east and Lucile Grogan Jones led the west. Together, they encouraged the county agents, teachers, and citizens to rally people to learn to read and write by encouraging attendance in both day and night schools.[20]

On June 29, 1918, the *Courier-Journal* publicized the target number of illiterate individuals for each county in the state and identified a field agent for many of the counties. The information for the eight Jackson Purchase counties included: Ballard 250; Calloway 600; Carlisle 250; Fulton 400; Graves 700; Hickman 800; Marshall 300; and McCracken 400.

By July 11, 1918, Lois Waterfield announced 60 teachers had signed up in Calloway County to help teach adults. The aim for the county was to teach 600 residents to read and write and increase

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[18] "Working Out Plans to Teach Drafted," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, July 19, 1917.

[19] "No Illiteracy in 1920, Motto of Educators," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, June 26, 1918.

[20] "Moonlight Schools to Open September 16," *News-Democrat*, August 20, 1918.

attendance in the day schools by 20 percent. Six-week sessions were held and, in addition to spelling, reading, and writing, history, and arithmetic were also offered.[21]

Nearby in Marshall County, Lucy Foust organized the effort among twelve schools. The teachers and schools were Dewey Collie, Union Ridge; Emma Johnston, Griggs; Garfield Cope, Liberty; Ethel Stringer, Clark; Genora Filbeck, Pinnacle; Reba Gillihan, Davis Chapel; Ida Gillihan, Canada; Metta Mathis, Phipps; Elise Stringer, Tennessee Ridge; Zera and Maud Grubbs, Olive; Emma Johnston, Oak Valley, and Della Clark, at her home.[22]

Bardwell also offered night classes starting in October 1918. Two-hour sessions were held each night from Monday through Thursday, taught by Professor Noah J. Parsons. Like all the other schools, there was no cost for tuition, books, or materials.[23]

The campaign to reach draft-aged men, their mothers, and their families carried on even throughout the 1918 influenza pandemic. While all daytime schools were closed, the moonlight classes continued in individuals' homes, demonstrating the significant need and desire for such services. The Western District triumphed in the competition between the East and West Normal Districts, which began in August and ended in November. Logan County came out on top among western communities and Pulaski among the eastern.[24]

In what came to be known as the Progressive Era, Cora Stewart had gained statewide and national attention with the success of her moonlight schools. She was a sought-after speaker and carried a great deal of influence as she became renown for her tireless efforts to further the cause of adult education. She was well-known among Kentucky politicians, frequenting the speaking circuits as she sought funds to support teachers and pay for books.

Politics being politics, some state leaders saw her efforts as taking meager resources away from day schools. Others grew tired of her portrayal of Kentuckians as being illiterate. When newly elected Governor Edwin P. Morrow swept into office in 1919 with the largest margin of victory for a Republican gubernatorial candidate in Kentucky's history, Cora's world shifted.[25] Cora had

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[21] "County Illiteracy Campaign," *Murray Ledger*, July 11, 1918.

[22] Leon Lewis Freeman and Edward C. Olds, *The History of Marshall County, Kentucky*. (Benton, Kentucky: *The Tribune-Democrat)*, 1933.

[23] "Moon-School in Carlisle," *Paducah Sun-Democrat*, October 13, 1916.

[24] "Logan County Winner in Illiteracy Campaign," *Courier-Journal*, November 6, 1918.

[25] James C. Klotter, *Kentucky: Portraits in Paradox, 1900–1950*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 233.

rallied women from across the state to attend the state legislature during the session on March 11, 1920. Their presence was intended to urge the passage of Senator Newton Bright's bill to provide $75,000 to continue support of moonlight schools. However, on March 9, the *Paducah News-Democrat* revealed how Bright's bill was derailed:

"The Republicans did this in one of the most peculiar parliamentary procedures ever seen. It was done when Senator J. L. Early of Daviess County moved to take the bill out of the hands of the rules committee and put it up for immediate consideration. The rules committee did not resist this action. Chairman Harris stated that he and other members of the committee were ready to vote on the bill at any time, but in deference to the author of the bill, he asked that consideration be put off until today at 2 o'clock. Those backing the move to take the bill out of the orders of the day insisted on their motion which prevailed 15 to 12."[26] With the bill voted down by the state legislature, funds ran out and the movement eventually stalled. In time, moonlight schools ended.

Summary

Moonlight schools emerged during an incredible moment in our collective history. In addition to the feuds in the east and the tobacco wars in the west, Kentuckians everywhere were faced with economic hardships. Coming out of Jim Crow into the Progressive era, life slowly began to change in rural Kentucky. As antitrust laws and labor rights were codified, economic reform was on the horizon. Women were finding their place through the suffrage movement. On top of all these issues on the home front, Kentuckians were called into war in Europe.

It is difficult to know specifically how successful moonlight schools were on a statewide scale. Rather than debate the nuances of moonlight educations versus what other academic measures were being applied, it may be best to observe the outcomes in relation to the original goal: to teach rural people to read and write. Whether due to moonlight schools, other levels of education, or a combination of both, the results are in the data. The 1920 U. S. Census revealed that the total number of illiterate Kentuckians had dropped to 155,014 (8.4 percent) since the 1910 census.[27]

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[26] "Moonlight Schools Killed," *News-Democrat*, March 11, 1920.

[27] U.S. Bureau of the Census, Thirteenth Census of the United States: 1920 Bulletin, 4.

Perhaps the greater outcome is to recognize the significance of how one individual with a desire to improve the lives of her neighbors can indeed make a difference. Not in just one small mountain town, but across a nation.