

LEILA A. RUSSELL, RURAL SCHOOL SUPERVISOR

By
Louise Pettus

Leila A. Russell, an 1889 Winthrop graduate, was destined to become one of the college's most distinguished alumnae. Her potential was evident as an undergraduate when she organized the campus YWCA and became its first president.

Leila spent several years teaching in Anderson County and then was hired as York County's first supervisor of rural schools. Soon she was also teaching at Winthrop. She combined the two jobs neatly. Leila Russell was resourceful, creative and very persuasive. Problems abounded but she thrived on the challenge.

No student teacher had an automobile (students weren't even allowed to have cars on campus until 1953). How would they get to the rural schools? Miss Russell arranged for the girls to be placed in country schools on, or near, train depots. Among others, York County schools that fitted the bill were at Blairsville, Catawba Junction, Lesslie, Friendship, Oak Ridge, Hickory Grove, Ebenezer, Ogden, Glendale, Oakley, Smith's Turnout, Tirzah and Smyrna. Riverside elementary school in Lancaster county was also used.

How would the student teachers be housed? Miss Russell found parents who were willing to give the Winthrop students room and board.

Many of the regular teachers had never been to college. Miss Russell diplomatically dealt with that problem and saw to it that the regular teacher's skills were upgraded.

Most of the schools were in terrible condition. How could the money be raised to make needed improvements? Miss Russell had a plan. She organized the parents into clubs and persuaded them to hold benefits of any kind that would raise money. By 1912 she had persuaded 8 school districts to levy school taxes for improvement of existing facilities and in other cases persuaded communities to build larger and better schools.

She started a newspaper column which was printed weekly in the Yorkville Enquirer. After a paragraph or two of suggestions for improving the schools she added letters from students (having asked the students in each school she visited to send her letters that told what their school was doing).

A typical Leila Russell item in the Enquirer: "Are you boys and girls making use of the libraries in your schools? And if you have no library in your school can you not manage in some way to raise ten dollars to secure one? Having done this, ask your trustees and Mr. Carroll for ten dollars from the school fund, and Mr. Carroll will see that the state gives you ten, so that you will have thirty dollars to put into good books."

She promised all the boys and girls who read at least six books to have their name read on County School Day and to have the name published in the *Enquirer*. She formed the boys into Corn Clubs and the girls into Tomato Clubs

and saw that the best ears of corn and finest jars of tomatoes were displayed at the county fair.

Walter Kerr, an 8th grade student, wrote that before Miss Russell came and talked to the Oak Ridge students that his school was unpainted except for a place that was painted black for a blackboard. There was only one classroom and the little stove could not heat it. Water had to be brought a long distance from a house in the community.

Writing in November 1912, Walter said that now that his school was new and built according to one of the Clemson plans. The school was painted white; the windows were screened. A large Old Dominion stove heated the room and they now had a bell, a clock, two large maps and a piano. They had not had a library before, now they had 148 books.

The trustees had seen to it that Oak Ridge had a "deep bored well" and a shady play ground. All of this for \$1,500 and a great deal of contributed labor.

Leila Russell personally prodded at least 15 rural communities to build new and better schools in the years 1911-13. With that accomplishment behind her she accepted an appointment as executive secretary of the Winthrop Alumnae Association, a position she held until 1945.