

LEILA A. RUSSELL & RURAL SCHOOLS

By
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Rural schools were in deplorable condition in 1902. David Bancroft Johnson, the president of Winthrop College who had a creative mind and loved a challenge, met the problem in a characteristic way.

Johnson talked with the future teachers of the senior class and convinced 32 members of the class to take a pledge dedicating themselves to improving rural education in South Carolina.

The 33 seniors took it a step further. They formed the "Women's Association for the Improvement of Rural Schools" and invited others to join them with the cooperation of Winthrop's Alumnae Association. Dr. Johnson secured funding and that summer three graduates were hired to go out to rural communities and organize at the grass roots.

Leila A. Russell (1871-1963) tackled the situation in her home county of Anderson. She kept a journal from which she gathered information to send back to Dr. Johnson. Her journal is now housed in the Winthrop Archives. Her first entry demonstrates the apathy and desperate conditions she found: "After driving thirteen miles to Oak Dale and finding not one soul present, my ardor was somewhat cooled. The school house is a frame building, containing two rooms, both of which are unceiled." She found desks that were uncomfortable and heavily carved with jackknives. The small blackboard was worn almost white.

Two years later Dr. Johnson had seen to it that Leila Russell became York County's first supervisor of rural schools. She found similar scenes in York County. No longer was she shocked to find pupils seated on benches of rough slabs or blackboards less than a yard square. But, if anything, she was more determined to improve school facilities, to train better teachers (some of the rural teachers had never set foot in college), and to convince the voters (all male) to raise needed funds by increasing taxes.

In 1912, her hard work and determination shows in her annual report. She was both a teacher at Winthrop and county supervisor of rural schools. She had Winthrop student teachers placed in country schools around Rock Hill—Catawba Junction, Lesslie, Friendship, Oak Ridge, Ebenezer, Ogden, Smith's Turnout, Tirzah, Smyrna and Riverside, the last school in Lancaster County. The schools were all situated on railroads so that the Winthrop students could have transportation.

She had persuaded eight York County school districts to vote a special tax levy for physical improvements. She organized the parents into clubs and cajoled them into providing the needed labor.

One community reported, "We have scrubbed the floors and oiled them, washed the windows and bought new shades and purchased two new maps." She helped them organize entertainments designed to raise money for supplies.

In addition, Leila Russell persuaded schools to set up their first libraries, to ceil unceiled rooms, to plant trees and shrubs for beautification, to place pictures in each classroom. School boys were formed into Corn Clubs and the girls into Tomato Clubs. The best ears of corn and the finest jars of tomatoes were displayed at the county fair.

Rural teachers participated in Winthrop institutes with prominent speakers of national stature. "Mr. Kerr" and Miss Russell took a stereoptican lecture over the county

and on County School Day at Winthrop in April 1912, 33 schools came to Winthrop. There were present over 1500 men, women and children and Miss Russell could boast of having established 15 York County chapters of the "Women's Association for the Improvement of Rural Schools." There were no dues for women but men could be associates for 25 cents a year.

Leila Russell soon left her position of supervisor as rural schools to become head of the Winthrop Alumnae Association but she never gave up her advocacy for improved rural education.