

Night school offered for workers

Mill owners sent teachers into villages to reach housewives

In 1910 there was not a single public high school in York, Lancaster or Chester counties that, after investigation, met the state standards for a "proper high school."

Illiteracy rates ran about 45 percent. Only Louisiana had a higher percentage of illiterates than South Carolina.

The 1910 study of school conditions headed by William Hand came five years after the cotton mills were forbidden to hire workers under the age of 12. The low level of state funding for schools meant most primary and secondary schools only operated 90 days a year.

The Hand study placed more pressure on legislators to increase funding and to extend the school year. It took a while, but in 1916 the state elected a progressive

governor, Richard Manning, and he appointed an illiteracy commission, which was chaired by Alexander Long, a Rock Hill cotton mill owner.

The legislature appropriated the pitifully small sum of \$35,000 to fund an adult education program. Rock Hill and Winthrop College received \$5,000 to implement night schools and continuation schools.

Rock Hill became the first S. C. town to have a regularly organized department of night schools as a part of the public school system. This was accomplished through the leadership of Alexander Long, Mary Frayser of Winthrop and R.C. Burts, the progressive superintendent of Rock Hill's public schools.

Continuation schools were set up in the mill villages for workers who dropped out of day school at age 14. These students were taught at night by day-school teachers who were permitted to teach on alternate nights. The teachers were paid by the state for their day teaching and by the mills for the night teaching.

COMMENTARY

Louise Pettus



Other teachers went from house to house in the mill villages teaching illiterate mothers and, at night, teaching day workers.

In 1914, Burts persuaded the Rock Hill school board to appropriate money for adult education, a system that lasted until 1919, when the state made money available.

In 1919 Alexander Long personally financed a special school for adults in his Aragon Mills and persuaded W. J. Roddey, head of Victoria Mills, to join him in paying for a full-time teacher in his two villages. Roddey hired Kate Woody to teach at the Arcade and Victoria Mills.

In 1921 Superintendent Burts hired Mary Eva Hite, a Winthrop graduate, to teach adults in Aragon Village three days a week and to supervise the continuation schools for three days.

There were four continuation schools for the blacks of Rock Hill, another innovation of Burts'.

By 1921 Rock Hill had 34 teachers with 637 students enrolled in adult education programs.

In addition, many Winthrop student teachers participated in the programs, which included kindergarten training for the children of mill workers. Roddey furnished a mill house in each of his mills for use as a kindergarten.

Leroy Springs, owner of the Lancaster Cotton Mills and after 1911, of the Fort Mill Manufacturing Co., was a strong supporter of the schools. He also supported education for blacks and personally financed a building for the black school known as Lancaster Normal and Industrial School.

In 1921 Chester modeled an adult education program after the Rock Hill system, which was then considered one of the top programs in the state.

Louise Pettus is a retired Winthrop University history professor. Her column appears Sundays.