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ADULT EDUCATION IN ALABAMA SOUTHERN STATES IN WARFARE AGAINST ILLITERACY

By CLUTIE BLOODWORTH, Director Exceptional Education, State of Alabama

(Special for The United American)

ALABAMA'S SCHOOL census report of 1914 placed a highway marker on the State's road to literacy. The state superintendent of education, M. F. Feagin, made a departure from the customary school census records by classifying all persons from seven years of age to twenty-one as literate or illiterate. He states that:

The execution of the plans was entered upon with a remarkable degree of enthusiasm in the hope that accurate findings and a detailed study of the same might make it possible to devise ways and means for erasing the dark stain of gross ignorance which beclouds many regions and enshrouds many individuals in Alabama.

This hope was realized. When Alabama was shown that if the State continued to travel by the round-about way it was pursuing that it would take sixty-five years to reach school opportunities equalized for all, the State led by the teachers began the campaign for better ways of educational progress.

The executive committee of the Alabama Education Association, at its annual meeting in November, 1914, adopted as a campaign slogan for the year "Illiteracy in Alabama—Let's Remove It" and set apart Friday night, April 2nd, during the 1915 meeting of the Association to be observed as Illiteracy Night. On February 9, 1915, prior to the above named date, a bill authorizing the creation of a commission for the removal of adult illiteracy, having been passed by both houses of the Legislature, was signed by Governor Henderson. On March 25, 1915, the governor appointed a Commission of four members, of which a former governor, Mr. Wm. D. Jelks, became chairman, and the state superintendent, ex-officio member, secretary-treasurer.

The Alabama Education Association made Illiteracy Night a feature of its annual meeting April 7, 1916. On this occasion Mr. G. W. Johnson, a man 57 years old, made a remarkable speech. Perhaps no man has ever stated more clearly the reasons for native white illiteracy. His response to educational opportunities

shows vividly the spirit and ability of the thousands of native white illiterates of the State. He said:

I am slow to think and very awkward spoken; am an uneducated man raised up in the woods right after the Civil war. Three families lived in five miles of us and I was raised up almost wild, grewed up and married quite young; raised eleven children but had ambition enough to give them an education; and the way I managed to give them an education, if there wasn't public schools I hustled around and gave part of my earnings to a teacher to teach them!

The speech of Mr. Johnson was taken verbatim by a stenographer. He told how the county superintendent of education and his wife persuaded him to go to school and in the following words he related his own realizations of his condition and to an extent became the spokesman for a large percentage of our citizens:

I started out and as I started out I thought this: Well all this fifty-seven years is past and I have raised eleven children and the baby boy now in the fifth grade, and here I am, can't write my name, and I went on to the school house. This was as dark to me as midnight and no moon and me blind.

The illiteracy commission served four years and waged a vigorous and successful campaign. It was to some extent due to the work of this commission that the Legislature passed an act in February, 1919, providing funds for an educational survey of the State. This survey was made under the direction of Dr. P. P. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education.

A new school code became the aim of the educational forces, and the emphasis given to education by the war and by the findings of the Education Commission made its enactment possible. The Department of Education was re-organized and the work classified into ten divisions with a head for each division. The division of exceptional education with a director was provided for with a definite appropriation of \$12,500.00 for the work. By the new code the powers and duties of the State Board as to illiteracy are defined as follows:

The State Board of Education shall be charged with the responsibility for the removal of illiteracy in Alabama. It shall have the power to make research and to collect data,