

LELIA MOREHEAD CONTE

By Delta Chapter

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Kappa State

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A wonderful person to know, yes, a fine true friend, indeed, and an excellent, dedicated teacher, if ever there was one. These are a few attributes of Lelia Morehead Conte.

Every ability and talent she possessed was put to work to make her teaching a success. Lelia had the qualities that count-- a keen mind, a dynamic personality, a zest for living, and an enthusiasm for her school, her friends, and her family.

When a person was in trouble and in need, just call Lelia and she was ready to lend assistance.

On May 12, 1890, Lelia was born to Turner and Sara Frances Morehead, the oldest of five children, in Memphis, Tennessee.

One sister and three brothers later arrived in this family. Mrs. Louise Hare is a high school teacher of Las Cruces, New Mexico, and brothers Will, Turner, and Felder, who are deceased.

The Morehead family moved to Hot Springs, Arkansas, in December, 1896, during the Christmas Season.

They lived on a farm a few miles from the city on the Higdon Ferry Road.

Mrs. Conte was educated in the Hot Springs Schools. Her first grade teacher was Mrs. Lula Speer Frink, a prominent citizen of Hot Springs.

Lelia graduated from High School, then known as Central School, in 1907, with the highest honor, as valedictorian of her class.

She attended the University of Arkansas and graduated in 1910.

In the fall of the same year, 1910, Lelia Morehead started her life's career of teaching in the Hot Springs High School. This career lasted for forty-five years. Little did that young, slender, auburn haired girl, with sparkling hazel eyes, dream that she would affect and mold the lives of thousands of boys and girls to come.

Mrs. Conte was assigned to the teacher training course in the High School, the training of Cadet Teachers. There were only three such courses in Arkansas at that time, in Little Rock, Fort Smith, and Hot Springs. As there was an overflow of Latin Classes, she was given a freshman Latin Class to teach, which she did with knowledge and ease.

Lelia was elected principal of Ramble School in the year 1915-1916. She was one of six elementary teachers with an A. B. Degree and the only principal in Hot Springs with a degree at that time.

Although Lelia was a student, an avid reader and a hard worker, she found time to enjoy the companionship of John J. Conte, an association which terminated in a marriage in 1914. To that union was born one son, Leroy, who passed away in 1946.

The year 1919 found Jones School in South Hot Springs, with a new principal, Mrs. Lelia Conte, who served there until two months before her death. The original Jones School, built on the same ground, was one of the two first public schools in Hot Springs.

Since Lelia was the executive type person, it is not surprising that she held her position for many years. Even as a child she liked to organize the other children into play and she was usually the teacher, who told them what to do and how. They did what she told them to do.

Mrs. Conte received her Masters Degree from the University of Arkansas in 1943. While at the University she was a member of Kappa Delta Pi, an honorary education society. Before Mrs. Conte received this degree, she had attended many summer school sessions at Henderson State Teachers, Arkansas State Teachers, West Tennessee Normal, and the University of Missouri.

It would be impossible to name all of the people of interest that Mrs. Conte had taught in Hot Springs. A few are: former Governor Sidney McMath, Dr. Driver Rowland, Dr. George Fotioo, Dr. Lawrence Akers, Municiple Judge M. C. Lewis, Jr., and State Representative Ray Smith, Jr.

Mrs. Conte was well known in Arkansas Educational Circles. She had served on many state and national committees, especially curriculum building.

Also, Lelia worked with all the charitable groups in town, as she was familiar with many needy cases: Many organizations asked her to help distribute their contributions. She often took children to town to fit them with shoes.

Mrs. Conte's sister, Louise Hare, tells this interesting story. One day while she was vacationing at Christmas, she wore Lelia's coat to town. She suddenly realized that a little boy was walking with her, holding her right hand.

He suddenly looked at Louise and said, "You aren't Mrs. Conte,

but you're wearing her coat !"

Louise told the little boy that was true. He then told her he was to meet Mrs. Conte, so that he could get new shoes.

Lelia Conte was a life member of the Arkansas Educational Association, having received this membership from the Hot Springs teachers, for her unusual record as a teacher in the public school system here. Prior to April, 1955, she had a perfect attendance record as a teacher and principal.

Just how many more teachers anywhere could surpass this record? A very few !

Not only was Mrs. Conte interested in the teaching of young Americans during the day, but she was also never too tired to teach opportunity classes in teacher training.

Lelia Conte was a tireless worker in the Oaklawn Methodist Church where her family held membership for many years. She taught adult classes, one the "Barbara Heck" Class, for eighteen years.

This great teacher was active and interested in many organizations. She was a charter member of the American Association of University Women in Hot Springs, one of the earliest members of the Altrusa Club, and helped to organize the present Young Women's Christian Association.

Also, Lelia was a life member of the Arkansas Educational Association, a life member of the Parent Teachers' Association, a member of the Association of Childhood Education International, Elementary Principals for over thirty-three years, and a member of the National Education Association since 1912. Mrs. Conte was not just a paying member of these organizations, but she was a strong and active worker in each, trying to interest others in them

and striving for their advancement.

She had attended all annual state conventions and many of the national conventions of educator's professional organizations.

Another organization dear to the heart of Mrs. Lelia Conte was The Delta Kappa Gamma Society. In March, 1935, she was an Arkansas State Founder of this society. She was the first state treasurer of Kappa State. As a charter member, three years later she assisted Dr. Flora Gillentine in organizing Delta Chapter. She served as the first president of Delta Chapter in Hot Springs for four years from 1938 to 1941. Added to this honor was the receiving of a Delta Kappa Gamma Service Award.

Like all busy people, Lelia had a number of hobbies. Her work, travel, flowers, sewing, and last but not least, children.

Humor was another side of Lelia and she enjoyed repeating some of the funny sayings or happenings of the children. One of these was: The pupils of Jones School thought Mrs. Conte had a "whipping machine" in her office, which was in reality an electric switch board.

One time she was almost arrested for teaching folk dancing at Jones School. A minister, who did not approve of the word "dancing" had a warrant sworn for her arrest.

One morning the schoolboard, the law, and the newspaper reporters arrived. Mrs. Conte gave a demonstration of the "vicious" dancing she was teaching.

A group of first graders in fluffy little dresses executed a few dance numbers for an operetta that had been planned.

Result: Mrs. Conte didn't go to jail and the minister was convinced. Everybody had a good laugh.

A big day in Mrs. Conte's life was "Lelia Conte Day", when the Jones School Faculty and P. T. A. surprised her in the school auditorium with a program, a packed audience, noted pupils, and many lovely gifts. This surprise was given to honor her before her retirement.

In accepting her resignation the school board issued the following statement in appreciation of her many years of "faithful and effective" service as teacher and principal of Jones elementary school: Quote

"Throughout this time, she has continuously sought and put into practice the best ideas and methods which have been developed. She has been untiring in her efforts as a teacher and school principal, and as a usual practice she was the first one to school and the last to leave.

The high esteem in which she is held by the men and women, boys and girls who have been to school to her is further reward for services well rendered." Unquote.

Mrs. Lelia Morehead Conte, devotedly called "Boss" by her teachers, passed away July 26, 1956, in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Her body rests in the family lot in Hot Springs, her beloved hometown where her influence as an educator and superior teacher will be felt as long as one student from Jones School lives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mrs. Mamie Goodwin
Mrs. Louise M. Hare
Mrs. Dorris Hull

Mrs. Pearl Farr (deceased)
Hot Springs School Board
Mrs. Rhea Humphreys