

PRINCIPAL EMERITUS OF JONES SCHOOL:

LELIA MOREHEAD CONTE

Mamie Ruth Stranburg Abernathy

An appropriate title for a dedicated, conscientious and loyal devotee of public school education, "Principal Emeritus of Jones School," was properly bestowed upon Lelia Morehead Conte by the Board of Education, Hot Springs School District #6 upon her resignation as Principal of Jones School at the end of the 1955-1956 school year. Mrs. Conte had major surgery in 1955 and her declining health was a major factor in her decision at the time. She had served faithfully as Principal of Jones School for thirty-eight years.

Born in Memphis, Tennessee on May 12, 1890, Lelia Morehead was one of five children born to Turner and Sallie F. Morehead. The family moved to Hot Springs and settled on property adjacent to the Pleasant Hill School property on Higdon Ferry Road. This school should not be confused with the former rural school, Pleasant Hill School, in the Pleasant Hill community on Highway 70 West. Other children in the Morehead family were Robert Felder, Turner Jr., Louise and William.

Lelia Morehead attended Pleasant Hill School (later named Daniel School in 1910 by the Hot Springs Board of Education) as a grammar school student and was one of sixteen graduates in the Class of 1907, Hot Springs High School. She sought higher education by attending the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, where she received the A.B. Degree in 1910. In the fall of 1910 she was elected as a cadet teacher at the Hot Springs High School for a salary of \$15.00 a month. Records in the administrative offices of the Hot Springs District show that she was elected to teach for the school years 1910-1911, 1911-1912, 1912-1913, and 1913-1914. There was no record of her employment for the year 1914-1915. It is assumed that it was during this time Lelia Morehead was married to John Conti (his spelling of the name: Mrs. Conte later changed the "i" to "e") and gave birth to a son, Leroy J. Conte.

She was elected again in the fall of 1915 to teach the fourth grade at Jones School. In 1916 she was elected Principal of Ramble School (now Park School), a position she held for two years before being named Principal of Jones School in the fall of 1918, as successor to Houston Emory.

Mrs. Conte continued her pursuit of higher education with the completion of requirements for the Master of Science Degree from the University of Arkansas, which was conferred on June 7, 1943. She also attended summer sessions at the University of Missouri (1916), Peabody College, Nashville, Tennessee (1918),

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State Teachers College (1939), and Henderson State Teachers College (1940).

Dolphus Whitten (later Dr. Dolphus Whitten), at one time the Director of Field Services and Extension for Henderson State Teachers College (now University), once told a story of his first experiences in organizing classes in Hot Springs. Most applicants wanted particular courses they could take to apply toward degree requirements after the state law was passed requiring a college degree for a person to be certified to teach in the public schools of Arkansas. But, Mrs. Conte always agreed to take any course---just any course that was offered. Whitten thought that she probably did not have a degree and could count most any course he offered toward that goal. He later learned that this Hot Springs Principal held the Bachelor's and Master's degrees and was not expecting to advance academically. These courses would keep her in touch with new ideas and methods, and the example she set would encourage teachers under her supervision to continue their professional growth.

While serving as Principal of Jones School, Mrs. Conte taught a second grade class for half a day, a practice which continued until 1944. She was relieved of the teaching responsibility so that she might devote all of her time to supervision of the school, the teachers, and attend to other administrative duties. She did have secretaries who were able to attend to routine office duties by answering the phone, attending to the daily records, lunch reports, correspondence, etc., while she was teaching. Some of the secretaries during Mrs. Conte's administration were Gertrude Cole (Mrs. Leonard Brazil), Laura Gillen (Mrs. Melbourne H. Trubey), Mary Edythe Fox (Mrs. James L. Finley), Dorothy Foley, Helen Bibb Bell, Wilma Hilliard (Mrs. Jess Brown), Marjorie Westfall, and Mrs. John Hamer.

Mrs. Conte was a professional in every sense of the word and participated in professional organizations by membership in the Hot Springs Education Association, the Arkansas Education Association, and the National Education Association. She could always be found at attendance at the annual meetings of the Arkansas Education Association. She also attended several of the conventions of the National Education Association, having traveled on the AEA bus and by other modes of transportation as well. She could also be found in attendance at the Garland County Teachers' Institutes, conducted by County Superintendent Garnett Braughton. These institutes were held to assist any county teacher in learning new ideas and methods for the classroom.

When administrators, supervisors and classroom teachers belonged to the one local professional organization, the Hot Springs Education Association, Mrs. Conte and her faculty were in the front rows, center, during the monthly meetings at the

old Hot Springs High School. It was a well-known fact that her entire faculty "always" attended the meetings and sat with their principal.

At a Day District meeting of the Arkansas Education Association in the spring of 1954 in Hot Springs, Mrs. Conte was honored with the presentation of a Life Membership in the Arkansas Education Association, a gift of the Hot Springs teachers. This honor was given to Mrs. Conte for holding the record of longest teaching service in the Hot Springs schools at that time. Gladys Watts, Principal of Oaklawn School, made the presentation. In presenting the award, Miss Watts said of Mrs. Conte that she

. . .was one who wears a halo in her heart. . .a halo that reflects the good and the truth that she has built into the lives of those whom she has served. . .and our community is better for her serving."

The presentation was made before the 600 teachers and administrators in attendance at the meeting.

Lelia Morehead Conte was one of several prominent educators in Arkansas who united their efforts in the founding on May 8, 1935, of the state chapter of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International, a women educators' professional organization. Some other well-known Arkansas educators were also charter members include Willie Lawson, Frances Bailey, Dr. Florence Gillentine, Dr. Bessie Moore, Edna Rudolph and Beryl Henry. She was also the principal organizer of the Hot Springs Chapter of the Delta Kappa Gamma Society International on May 7, 1938, and served as its first president from 1938 to 1941. Other local educators who were charter members of the Hot Springs chapter were Hattie Lewis, Annie Neary, Jewel Nickels, Eva Pittman, Merle Wood, Kathleen Schaer, Ella Goza and Edna Rudolph.

Mrs. Conte's leadership abilities extended into the community: she was an early member of the Altrusa Club and the American Association of University Women. For many years she taught the Barbara Heck Sunday School Class of the Oaklawn Methodist Church where she had been a member for many years.

Loyalty and dedication to educating the children in the community were evident in her faithfulness to her position. Most any morning Lelia Morehead Conte could be found at her school by 7:00, remaining at her tasks until 5:00 P.M., or until the custodian had completed the cleaning of the building for the day. Not only was she concerned about educating the children, but she often taught "opportunity" classes for adults in the evenings, teaching some who had quit school before graduation in order to go to work, or for some of the soldiers stationed at the Army and Navy General Hospital. Held during the 1920s and 1930s, the classes were primarily for teaching adults to read

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and write. At other times Mrs. Conte taught classes in teacher training for the Arkansas State Teachers College Extension Department (now the University of Central Arkansas). Extension classes were often taught in the school districts in the evenings or on Saturdays so that teachers might earn credits toward their college degrees.

During the thirty-eight years as principal of Jones School, Mrs. Conte, by virtue of her position, became a part of many changes in the community, state and nation, as well as the teaching profession. Beginning at Jones School as principal in 1918 found the principal, the faculty and students at the end of World War I with necessary adjustments with fathers coming home from the war, and for some whose fathers did not make it home safely. The years of the Great Depression found Mrs. Conte and some teachers at Jones School working in the summer, stringing beans which were canned under the supervision of Annie Trussell, Home Demonstration Agent at the time. Miss Willie Sims, Sue McKeehan and Daisy Miles used to delight in telling how they helped "can a cow" by stirring beef being cooked in a big iron pot on the playground one summer. The beef had been donated by Ed Sullivan, Sr. and was also canned under Mrs. Trussell's supervision. These foods, plus commodities such as raisins, currants, beans and rice, issued by the United States government, helped feed needy children during the period of economic depression. During World War II, Jones School, as were other other schools, was used for the registration of men for the Selective Service Program, and war ration books for sugar, gasoline and shoes. During these war years the students crocheted afghans and knitted socks for soldiers, folded bandages for the Red Cross, conducted waste paper drives and sold defense stamps. Then came the Korean conflict. After these military conflicts and wars, stamps were still sold at the school as "savings stamps" and bonds.

During the early years of Mrs. Conte's administration, children usually went home for their lunch hour and a five-minute warning bell was rung on the big bronze bell so that children could get back to school on time after the lunch hour. Mrs. Conte saw this custom change to school-operated lunches. She served as the manager and employed ladies to sell the hamburgers, hot dogs, potato chips, cold drinks, ice cream and candy bars. Eventually the medical profession and dentists succeeded in the removal of some of the sweets and soft drinks from the schools. Then came the government-subsidized balanced meals at noon at a reasonable cost. By this time, meager and very basic kitchen equipment gave way to more modern cooking facilities and a steam table for serving.

Mrs. Conte was a part of changes from the horse and buggy of earlier days to the T-Model Fords and on to the newer, more modern air-conditioned cars. There were no air conditioners in the schools, and oscillating fans were used which were the personal possessions of teachers or had been brought by a

parent. Another change during Mrs. Conte's administration was the conversion of the coal furnace to the use of gas about 1930, according to the late Leonard Barrentine, long-time maintenance worker for the district.

During Centennial Week, 1932, Hot Springs celebrated the 100th birthday of Hot Springs National Park, and Jones School participated in the celebration with the placement of a bronze marker on the northeast corner of the building to memorialize the gift of the site for the construction of a school by Mrs. Jennie A. Ward Jones (later Mrs. James A. Smith). Mrs. W. E. Massey, Chairman of the Historical Committee for the centennial celebrations, made the principal address. The marker bears this inscription: "Mrs. Jennie Jones Smith, who generously gave this site for the construction of a public school, 1883." Jennie A. Ward Jones and husband, James A. Smith, sold the school house, property and fixtures to the Hot Springs School District #6. Up until this time, Mrs. Jones Smith had owned the property and operated the school. A deed was executed at this date, 1883, according to Mrs. Massey in her address (see the 1983 RECORD, p. 3).

A box-like "moveable stage" was constructed in 1932 at the end of a double-sized room on the second floor of the school and was used for programs and meetings. This was no longer needed when a new and modern auditorium with a sizeable stage, footlights and blue velvet curtains and gray back-drops, was constructed on the south end of the school property in 1950. The folding doors between the two rooms on the second floor were removed and the large area was divided into three permanent classrooms.

Originally there was a large wooded area across Hobson Avenue on the north end of the school where children played "house" under the trees, or were able to swing around on swings where a child held to the swing by the hands; the swingers ran around the circle and feet lifted off the ground as if they were "flying." This block gradually lost trees to make space for children to play. During the 1948-1949 school year, the area was bull-dozed to the level of School Street on the west side of the playground, providing a more flexible playground area. During Mrs. Conte's last year as principal, elm trees were planted by the P.T.A. on the inside of the playground to provide some respite from the hot sun during recess periods.

Mrs. Conte saw countless changes in curricula, materials, and teaching aids during her administration: guidebooks were developed by publishing companies for the various subject areas to aid teachers in instruction; visual aids changed from the stereoscope (an instrument for blending two pictures of an object into one image) to slide projectors, opaque projectors, movie projectors, and required courses for teachers in the use of audio-visual aids; simple calisthenics in a classroom moved outside for classes in physical education and city-wide track

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meets; one victrola which had to be "wound up" to play for marches, flag drills or a maypole dance was replaced with electric record players. Throughout the many changes, Mrs. Conte was always open-minded to new methods in the curriculum, but cautioned her "girls" not to throw away all the old teaching methods, but to try out the new methods and give them a fair chance. It was her opinion that teaching methods were like a woman's hat: keep it long enough and it will come back in style. This was just one example of her wisdom.

Mrs. Conte always encouraged the parents to participate in the P.T.A. and support the school's efforts in educating the children. During Mrs. Conte's administration, the Jones School P.T.A. received many awards for their goals and activities on behalf of the children.

Until a major operation in April of 1955 forced Mrs. Conte's absence from school, she had missed only three days because of personal illness. The near-perfect attendance record, Mrs. Conte said at the time, actually extended beyond her forty-five years in the Hot Springs School District. It went back to her own first day in the first grade and extended through her own education and subsequent professional career. She was away from school on some days for funerals of family members. Just how far the record extended, Mrs. Conte did not state, but a Jones School teacher and long-time friend at that time estimated the time to be fifty-eight or fifty-nine years.

Because of the nature and prognosis of Mrs. Conte's illness, many of her associates thought that there should be a special day for the community to honor her, pay their respects and express their appreciation for her many years of dedicated service to the Hot Springs School District and the community. On Friday, January 13, 1956, "Lelia M. Conte Day" was proclaimed by Mayor Floyd Housley of Hot Springs in honor of the long-time service of the Principal of Jones School.

Throughout the day, greetings were delivered to Mrs. Conte from former teachers, administrators, students, patrons, P.T.A. presidents and friends from all parts of the United States in the form of telegrams, letters, cards, calls, floral remembrances and gifts. A local news commentator, Walter Ebel, devoted his popular noontime radio program to telling the "Lelia Conte Story" so her many friends could honor her and wish her many more happy days as Principal of Jones School.

The day was climaxed with a program in the Jones School Auditorium. Greeting the hundreds of guests who attended were the faculty members of the school and other patrons. Mrs. A. B. Jeffries, Hospitality Chairman of the P.T.A., registered the guests in a handsome white leather guest book, bearing Mrs. Conte's name, embossed in gold.

The invocation was given by the Rev. Maynard Miller, pastor of the Orange Street Presbyterian Church. Mrs. Glen Bellinger, president of the Jones School P.T.A., welcomed the guests; Municipal Judge M. C. Lewis, Jr., a former Jones School student, responded. Master of Ceremonies for the evening was another Jones School alumnus, Arkansas State Representative Ray Smith, Jr., who later became Speaker of the House. Delightful musical selections sung by Dora Jane Ledgerwood (now Mrs. Trice Ellis, Jr.) were "The Hills of Home," "It's a Grand Night for Singing," and "Bless This House." Miss Ledgerwood and her accompanist, Sue Plumlee (now Mrs. Sue P. Taylor) were also former Jones School students.

Special guests who were presented by Representative Smith were L. A. Westmoreland, President of the Hot Springs Board of Education; Dr. Imon E. Bruce, Superintendent of the Hot Springs School District; the faculty of Jones School; former administrators; former members of the Jones School faculty; former Jones School P.T.A. presidents; former Jones School students; and members of the Barbara Heck Sunday School Class of the Oaklawn Methodist Church.

Highlights of Mrs. Conte's life and her administration as Principal of Jones School with interesting and amusing incidents were related by Representative Smith in his address. Snapshots of Mrs. Conte, class groups and faculty members through the years were projected by an opaque projector. The snapshots were compared to automobiles and changes in the models through the years, ending with "Don't you like the latest models the best?"

Mrs. Conte was the recipient of several honors and a gift. Mayor Floyd Housley, a former Jones School student, read the proclamation of the day and announced the naming of a new street by the City Council to honor her: Conte Drive, in the vicinity of her home on Woodlawn Avenue. Claude Carpenter, Jr. of the Executive Department of the State of Arkansas, represented Governor Orval Faubus in presenting an "Arkansas Traveler Certificate" to Mrs. Conte. Mrs. Bellinger, on behalf of the P.T.A., presented the school a handsome trophy case, custom made of natural birch. It carried a gold plaque on which is inscribed: "Lelia M. Conte Trophy Case. . . In appreciation of her years of devotion and unselfish service to Jones School and the community." Miss Mary V. "Miss Mamie" Henderson made the presentation of a console television set which was a gift from the students, patrons, professional associates, and friends.

The spontaneous singing of "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow" was, without a doubt, a fitting climax to the evening's program. The benediction was given by the Rev. Mr. Harry Weed, pastor of Oaklawn Methodist Church, of which Mrs. Conte was a long-time member. Relatives of Mrs. Conte who attended the festivities for the day were her brother, Turner Morehead, Jr. and daughter, Robin M. Green.

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Members of the 1955-56 faculty of Jones School and the last group to teach under Mrs. Conte's administration were Willie V. Sims, Velma D. Holder, Pearl Farr, Mamie Ruth Abernathy, Dorothy Robbins, Ruth Matthews, Clarice Cooksey, Nellie Merriott, Julia Dalton, Sue McKeehan, Ethel Glenn, Helen Matkin, Mary V. Henderson, Ruth Henderson, Cephia Harris and Bill Lane. William J. "Bill" Lane had been transferred from Hot Springs Junior High School in the fall of 1955 to Jones School to assist Mrs. Conte in her duties and to be "groomed" for assuming the principalship of Jones School at some time. During the year he taught Physical Education and Social Studies to fifth and sixth grade students in the departmental plan of exchanging classes, which had been a practice for many years at Jones School.

Mrs. Conte completed the year as Principal of Jones School and submitted her resignation on April 30, 1956 to Dr. Imon E. Bruce, Superintendent of Schools, and the Board of Education. At the May 29, 1956 meeting of the Board of Education the following resolution was adopted:

May 29, 1956

Resolution concerning the resignation of Mrs. Lelia M. Conte

The Board accepts the resignation of Mrs. Lelia M. Conte, effective June 1, 1956, with a statement of appreciation for her many years of faithful and effective service as teacher and principal of Jones Elementary School.

The School Board and Superintendent of Schools would like to call to the attention of the public her long and effective service of 45 years, all of which have been given to the Hot Springs City Schools. 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 one to leave. She has been cooperative with her fellow teachers, administrators, and parents. Furthermore, she has always been able to get the cooperation of everyone with whom she was associated.

We recognize that the salaries which Mrs. Conte has received through the years do not represent the value of her services to our community. However, we believe the high esteem in which she is held by the men and women and boys and girls who have been to school to her is further reward for services well rendered. We are confident that we express for the people of Hot Springs our best wishes for a pleasant vacation ahead.



LELIA M. CONTE DAY --- JANUARY 13, 1956

LEFT TO RIGHT: CLAUDE CARPENTER, JR. PRESENTED AN "ARKANSAS TRAVELER" CERTIFICATE ON BEHALF OF GOVERNOR ORVAL FAUBUS; MARY V. "MISS MAMIE" HENDERSON PRESENTED THE TELEVISION; LELIA CONTE, THE HONOREE; AND MRS. GLEN BELLINGER, PRESIDENT OF JONES SCHOOL P.T.A., PRESENTED THE CUSTOM-MADE "LELIA M. CONTE TROPHY CASE" ON BEHALF OF THE P.T.A.

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DURING THE ORIGINAL MUSICAL, "JONESTOWN KIDS GO PLACES" BY MAMIE RUTH ABERNATHY ON FEBRUARY 23-24, 1956 AT JONES SCHOOL, ONE SEGMENT SALUTED MRS. CONTE AND THE JONES SCHOOL FACULTY FOR HELPING FORMER AND PRESENT STUDENTS "GO PLACES" BY PREPARATION FOR CAREERS IN THEIR EDUCATION. THE FACULTY WAS CALLED TO THE STAGE FOR THE EXPRESSIONS OF APPRECIATION AND PRESENTATION OF CORSAGES. THE FACULTY, LEFT TO RIGHT: MAMIE RUTH ABERNATHY, DOROTHY ROBBINS, CEPHIA HARRIS, MARY V. HENDERSON, EVELYN HILLIARD, PEARL FARR, LELIA M. CONTE, SUE McKEEHAN, ETHEL GLENN, VELMA D. HOLDER, EFFIE SULLIVAN, RUTH HENDERSON, JULIA DALTON, RUTH MATTHEWS, WILLIE SIMS.

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We do not propose that Mrs. Conte become entirely disassociated with our schools. For that reason we elect her Principal Emeritus of Jones School without any responsibility or salary, but with the privilege of advising and counseling with the new principal, attending any faculty meetings, and all school affairs.

Following the closing of the 1955-56 school year and the closing of Mrs. Conte's thirty-eight years as Principal of Jones School, five years as a teacher and two years as Principal of Ramble School, she went to New Mexico to visit her sister, Louise Morehead Hare. Her health declined and her death came on July 26, 1956. She was laid to rest at Tranquil Cemetery (also known as Rowe Cemetery) off the Higdon Ferry Road following her funeral service.

Mrs. Conte's son, Leroy J. Conte, was an Arkansas Sergeant of the 1505 AAF Base Unit in World War II. His death came in California on December 31, 1946. He is also buried in Tranquil Cemetery.

Remembering Mrs. Conte, the Woman

Many people could give descriptions and observations of the woman, Lelia Morehead Conte. There could, possibly, be as many different characteristic traits named as the number of people interviewed, simply because people respond to others in many different ways. Yet, throughout interviews with people about the person, Lelia Morehead Conte, there seemed to run a common thread of opinion characterizing her which showed strength, dedication and loyalty.

Always well-groomed and neat, her very appearance and the carriage of her body reflected strength. Dark red hair framed her face of many freckles: her solemn mood could change quickly to a radiant smile over some amusing and unexpected incident. The tone of her voice was bristly and abrupt to parents, children, and sometimes, teachers, but this was apparently her nature. There is no doubt that many former students will tell of their mortal fear of her while attending the school, yet they certainly had awesome respect for her and her position. Underneath this sometime bristly nature was compassion, concern and care for children and for those with whom she worked and was associated. The following accounts of happenings, observations and insights might aid others in seeing the nature of this respected educator and long-time principal of the beloved Jones School.

Gertrude Cole (Mrs. Leonard) Brazil was Mrs. Conte's secretary for three years (prior to her marriage to Leonard Brazil). Mrs. Brazil has the utmost respect for Mrs. Conte, remarking that Mrs. Conte treated her like a daughter. She recalled that Mrs. Conte was a strict disciplinarian and was very dedicated to her position as Principal.

One of Mrs. Conte's secretaries, Laura Gillen (Mrs. Melbourne H.) Trubey, talked of the familiar sights in Mrs. Conte's office: the switchboard for phones in the classrooms, which many children came to believe was the "electric paddle"; the bookcase with pull-down glass doors over each shelf (simple medications for skinned knees, etc. remained on top of the tall bookcase out of the reach of children); the beautiful mirror and mantel with natural woods and the colorful tiles of the fireplace which held gas logs; the small telephone table in the corner of the room by the office window; and the "deacon's bench" for those who had to "wait." Laura also noted that Mrs. Conte worked the way she talked---"hard and fast"---and she "went by the book." When a parent brought a complaint about a child in a certain classroom, Mrs. Conte was faithful to visit the classroom, observe the child and perhaps invite the parent to visit the classroom with her. "Having that child work at the blackboard with others often satisfied the parents in knowing Mrs. Conte took the complaints seriously and would help the parents understand that the Principal and teachers were truly concerned about the welfare and education of the children," Mrs. Trubey stated.

Lessie (Mrs. Roy) Bales, whose beauty shop was on Hobson Avenue near Third Street for many years, was Mrs. Conte's hairdresser. There were times, Lessie recalled, that Mrs. Conte might be late for her appointment because of a meeting, yet she always called to let her know she would be late. Lessie and husband, Roy, often took her home, should it be dark by the time the hair care was finished. Mrs. Bales talked about her dark red hair (her hair dresser was not the only one to know!) and the style she preferred over the years. As Lessie worked on Mrs. Conte's hair, interesting and amusing stories fell on Lessie's ears. Mrs. Conte told how children would often come into the office rubbing their posteriors when they had been sent to the office, expecting application at the seat of the problem. She often talked with the children and tried to reason with them. She told of two boys who were caught fighting on the playground one day and she made the boys go for some switches and whip each other, rather than have her administer a paddling. The boys did not want to do this, but they did obey. She said they cried and it actually hurt them worse than her paddling would have. Lessie said that Mrs. Conte told how she watched

and encouraged the children to drink their milk and many were reluctant. Then she would use the expression "down the hatch" and the milk was soon consumed.

Mrs. Conte was a very perceptive person and able to "read" people quite well. Elizabeth and Margaret Finch, identical twins, taught at Jones School under Mrs. Conte's administration and married identical twins in 1952. When Mrs. Conte had major surgery in the spring of 1955, the author (Mamie Ruth Abernathy), who had always kept in touch with the twin teachers, wrote to tell them of Mrs. Conte's illness. In her reply, Elizabeth asked Abernathy to share, when no one was around, the news that she and her husband Melvin were expecting a baby. Upon relaying the message to Mrs. Conte, she said, "Well, Margaret must be expecting, too."

"No," the author replied, "she didn't mention anything about Margaret too."

Mrs. Conte promptly said, "She probably is expecting, too. Elizabeth always told Margaret what to do."

Whether or not Mrs. Conte's evaluation of the twin teachers was correct, Margaret did indeed give birth to a daughter about three months after the birth of Elizabeth's daughter.

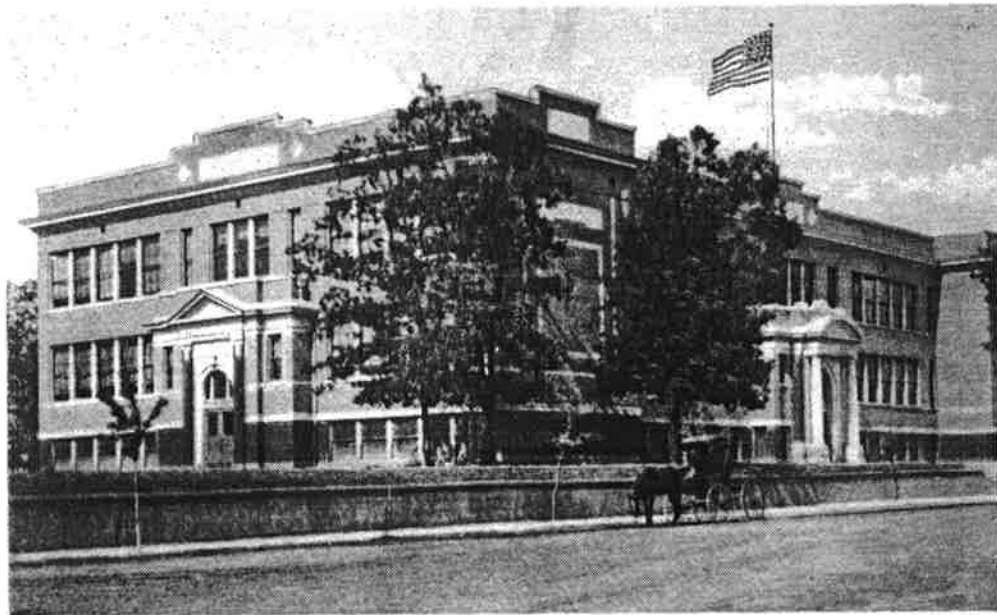
For many years during the Christmas season, Mrs. Conte had a party for her faculty after school hours in the cafeteria, furnishing refreshments at her own expense. She would have a small gift for each of the teachers. One summer she visited New York City and while at Macy's, selected small paper mache serving trays for the teachers. Another year, a tiny glass goblet held Christmas candies or nuts and each teacher kept her goblet. Another remembrance from Mrs. Conte was a small china Christmas bell to hang on a Christmas tree. Each time the author hung the bell on her Christmas tree, fond memories came back of her thoughtful administrator. At the end of the school year, Mrs. Conte would often provide picnic fare for the faculty.

Going after candy at the wholesaler's and running the candy store were two things Mary Edythe Fox (Mrs. James) Finley recalled as duties she performed other than clerical as Mrs. Conte's secretary. She had a distinct recollection of Mrs. Conte's making sure the teachers were "out on the north forty" on duty at recess time. Most any teacher could tell you that it could be very hot or very cold on the "north forty," depending on the season.

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Fletcher Renegar was building custodian for several years after his discharge from the Marines at the end of World War II. Renegar was a skilled person tools and machinery. He told how he had to check the furnace every hour on the hour each day when the furnace was in use. One day the building was very warm and Mrs. Conte took it upon herself to go to the basement to do something about the heat. Apparently, she thought she had taken care of the situation. The State Gas Inspector happened to come soon afterwards and it was fortunate indeed, that he arrived. She had turned everything off except the gas. The inspector was considerably upset. They rectified the situation safely and from then on, the custodian managed the controls.

Dorothy Pittman Robbins, widow of the late Guy Robbins, long-time Business Manager/Financial Director of the Hot Springs Schools, knew Mrs. Conte as a student at Jones School and then taught under Mrs. Conte's administration for several years. She recalled how Mrs. Conte habitually stuck a pencil through the back of her dark red hair. She also recalled that we teachers dared not leave our classrooms during class time. One of the most vivid recollections for Dorothy was the last faculty meeting on the last day of school as final records were turned in. If some teacher's door card was out of balance, the entire faculty had to sit and wait until everything cleared---even to making up a student to make the totals balance. The "door card" was kept daily showing attendance, new students, and transfers of students to schools in or out of Hot Springs. Mrs. Robbins later became Principal of Jones School and retired in 1977 after eight years in that capacity.



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Velma D. Holder, long-time first grade teacher at Jones School stated:

During my teaching years at Jones School, I found Mrs. Conte and her faculty to be a very close-knit group. Few changes in personnel occurred over the years and the teachers there were all so friendly, it was almost like a family gathering at times. On occasion we would get together on picnics or down in the cafeteria after hours. Mrs. Conte was always the 'life of the party' at these times. She had a well-ordered and well-run school with a definite program and goals to attain. But, when she left the office, she closed the doors on her cares and problems and enjoyed life with those around her. . . She had a great capacity for enjoying life and a distinct ability to cope with the many problems that came her way. . . I never saw her in any situation that she couldn't handle. . . from a troubled child to a cantankerous parent. She seemed to have the right words and the ability to set things straight. . . She had a unique personality and one of the brightest minds I have ever known. Her place in Jones School history is a most prominent one and she will live forever in the memory of those associated with her.

For several years a carnival company wintered here and would take their elephant, "Ruth," to schools to perform for the children. Each child paid ten cents to see the elephant do tricks in the roped-off area of Hobson Avenue. At the end of the tricks, children could ride the elephant for ten cents. One day Ruth came to Jones School and this was a big treat for children, parents and faculty. The author sidled up to Mrs. Conte and said, "I'll pay for your ride if you'll ride."

She quickly replied, "I'll ride if you'll ride." So, principal and teacher rode the circus elephant to the delight of a lot of children!

Following Mrs. Conte's resignation and departure from Jones School, one person reported that a metal bar lay under the large blotter on her desk. It was assumed that this could have been her "weapon," if needed. On one occasion she was working late at the familiar large roll-top desk which always seemed to hold finished and unfinished business. The back of the desk faced the door to the office and in her peripheral vision, she saw two questionable-looking men appear in the doorway. "Yes, what do you want?" she asked in an abrupt manner.

"We're looking for some change," was the reply.

"I don't keep change here. Go across the street to the drug store," was her further abrupt reply. The custodian was on the same floor, working, and the two men departed, knowing, perhaps, that they didn't stand a chance of getting any change from her.

Mrs. Conte had many close friends through the years who were gracious to her in providing transportation, invitations into their homes, and helping fill many hours of friendship and leisure time with her. Some of these families had a parent who was an active volunteer in P.T.A. or any school activity, or served as a volunteer in the office at busy times.

One family who endeared themselves to Mrs. Conte was the Marion Anderson family. Mrs. Anderson frequently had Mrs. Conte come to their home for the evening meal. If she had to attend a meeting and might be late, she would let Mrs. Anderson know and would often say to her, "Don't forget to peel an onion for my supper." Mrs. Conte's niece, Cortez Morehead, stayed with Mrs. Conte for some time and attended the Hot Springs schools. If Mrs. Conte had an obligation after school hours, Mrs. Anderson would pick up Cortez at the school and take her where she needed to go, or let Cortez stay with them until Mrs. Conte was ready to go home. Mrs. Conte, likewise, endeared herself to the Marion Anderson family: all of the Anderson children, Marion, Jr., Sam, Nancy Joy, and Clara attended Jones School.

Another close friend of Mrs. Conte's was Mrs. W. P. Demby, wife of the Business Manager of the schools and, at another time, Mr. Demby was a member of the School Board. During this time Central Avenue was alive with activity and people. Mrs. Demby, daughter June, and Mrs. Conte often drove downtown after school and parked on Central Avenue to watch the people. This was a big pastime for people---before parking meters!

The Clyde McMahan family was especially helpful to Mrs. Conte during her surgery and recovery. Mrs. McMahan had been President of the Jones School P.T.A. and spent many volunteer hours at the school. In fact, Mrs. Conte often introduced Mrs. McMahan as her "assistant" because she was around to be so helpful. Five McMahan children attended Jones School which gave Mrs. McMahan a good span of years to be helpful to Mrs. Conte,

also. They are Jack, Rex, Major, Joe, and Clyda. Clyda (Mrs. Gary Sexton) has a rocking chair that came from Mrs. Conte's home, and the chair is one of her cherished possessions. She remembers Mrs. Conte as a kind person, capable and distinguished, even though she was in the primary grades when Mrs. Conte resigned.

Ask almost any faculty member who ever taught under Mrs. Conte's supervision and she or he will tell you that it was very difficult, if not impossible, to "pull the wool" over her eyes. However, the story was told and sworn to be true that one teacher overslept after being out late on a date and was not in her classroom when school started for the day. The teacher was able to slip up the north stairs and into her classroom, grateful for her fellow teachers who covered for her until her late arrival. The teacher who related the story in later years declared that Mrs. Conte never said a word to the teacher and it was believed that Mrs. Conte knew absolutely nothing about the late arrival.

Willie Sims, a teacher for forty-three years at Jones before her retirement in 1975, was recently asked at the nursing home where she is a resident what she remembered about Mrs. Conte. In her weak and almost inaudible voice, she replied, "She was just great. . .she liked the kids."

Ethel Glenn remembered taking Mrs. Conte to Gartenberg's Department Store. Ruth Henderson and Christine Stranburg (Mrs. W. L.) Steuart used their cars to take bank deposits for the school during the noon hour. Miss Ruth and Christine are deceased. Miss Kathleen Schaer taught under Mrs. Conte's supervision as Principal of Ramble School and considered her an excellent principal. One person had always observed how much Mrs. Conte seemed to adore her son, LeRoy. She taught him to have good manners and he was always very polite to her friends and associates.

Blanche (Mrs. Henry) Murphy served several years as Attendance Officer for the Hot Springs School District during Mrs. Conte's administration. She recalled that Mrs. Conte was such a lovely person and loved working. Mrs. Murphy and her family became good friends with Mrs. Conte outside school hours, also. Mrs. Conte always felt welcome to spend the night in the Murphy household if she wished. She was "lots of fun" to be with, according to Mrs. Murphy.

LELIA CONTE

Reader's Drug Store was across Linwood Avenue from Jones School and was a convenient place for children to buy school supplies as well as ice cream and candy. Sue Reader, widow of the late Hubert L. Reader, recalled the convenience also, for Mrs. Conte and her needs.

Dorris Elleman (Mrs. Leland) Hull taught under Mrs. Conte's supervision in 1918 and three months of the following school year when she was asked to move to the high school to teach music. Mrs. Hull remembered Mrs. Conte as being a very capable person and just a "great person in my book." Mrs. Hull had attended Jones School as a high school student while the new high school was being built and later worked in Jones School as Supervisor of Music for the Hot Springs Schools. She became a volunteer at Jones School when daughter Ida Lou attended Jones, also serving as President of the Jones School P.T.A. During her year at Jones as a teacher she even taught art. Since this was during World War I, she said the boys and girls knitted mufflers for soldiers during the art period. Mrs. Hull has a well-known trait of loving everybody---and she loved Mrs. Conte, too, as a friend.

There was apparently some question during World War II about patriotic practices in Jones School. In an interview with William J. "Bill" Lane, Assistant Superintendent for Student Support Services and Personnel for the Hot Springs School District #6, he reported that in Mrs. Conte's file was a statement she signed, verifying that all the children in Jones School saluted and pledged allegiance to the flag each day. The statement was dated February 9, 1943. There was no explanation giving cause for this statement. Lane, as an administrator, could examine the file for any information that could be useful for this article about Mrs. Conte. He was the successor to Mrs. Conte in 1956 as Principal of Jones School and served until 1960 when he was transferred to Central Junior High School as Principal.

There were many years in which a "No Smoking" sign was in all the public schools. As rules were relaxed later, Mrs. Conte told the very few teachers who smoked that they could smoke in the teachers' lounge, but she would rather that they didn't. The teachers respected and honored her request, and did not smoke at school as long as she was their principal.

Cephia (Mrs. Barney) Harris thought Mrs. Conte was a "wonderful person. . .strictly herself. . .sensitive. . ."

responded well to people. . .expected the best from students and the teachers and was for quality education."

Ruth (Mrs. J. C.) Matthews "admired Mrs. Conte very much and thought she was a wonderful principal." Miss Evelyn Hilliard appreciated Mrs. Conte's "understanding ways and her willingness to help when a teacher needed help."

There is no way that a simple statement could sum up the personal qualities which characterized Lelia Morehead Conte. From the personal glimpses and human interest stories which have been related here, it is apparent that Lelia Morehead Conte was a unique person, intelligent, compassionate, strong, loyal, dedicated, thoughtful, and a woman of whom Hot Springs and the Hot Springs School District #6 could be proud. It is believed that the thousands of students who attended Jones School and the many teachers who taught during her administration would join the writer, if they could, in a proud salute to this "PRINCIPAL EMERITUS OF JONES SCHOOL---LELIA MOREHEAD CONTE."



FACULTY PICNIC ON WEST MOUNTAIN - MAY 1951

LEFT TO RIGHT: PEARL FARR, ELIZABETH FINCH, SUE McKEEHAN, CLARICE COOKSEY, CEPHIA HARRIS, MARGARET FINCH, AUDREY CORNER, HELEN BIBB BELL (Secretary), HELEN MATKIN, LELIA CONTE, RUTH HENDERSON, HELEN HOLDER, EVELYN HILLIARD, WILLIE V. SIMS, MARY V. HENDERSON, AND MELLIE MERRIOTT.

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FLORENCE LEIGHTY (MRS. JAMES) CASE OF PENNSYLVANIA, FORMER TEACHER AT JONES SCHOOL (2nd from left), POSES WITH FORMER ASSOCIATES: RUTH HENDERSON, MRS. CASE, EFFIE SULLIVAN, MARY V. HENDERSON, SUE McKEEHAN, AND LELIA CONTE. THE PHOTO WAS TAKEN AT THE P.T.A. APPRECIATION DINNER FOR JONES SCHOOL TEACHERS AT THE SMORGASBOARD IN THE SPRING OF 1952.



JONES SCHOOL FACULTY, MAY 28, 1955, IN FIRST GRADE ROOM IN WHICH PEARL FARR TAUGHT. FRONT: CEPHIA HARRIS, MARY V. HENDERSON, LELIA CONTE, MAMIE RUTH ABERNATHY; SECOND ROW, ETHEL GLENN, JULIA DALTON EFFIE SULLIVAN, WILLIE V. SIMS, HELEN MATKIN, VELMA HOLDER, RUTH MATTHEWS; THIRD ROW, DOROTHY ROBBINS, MELLIE MERRIOTT, CLARICE COOKSEY, RUTH HENDERSON, EVELYN HILLIARD, SUE McKEEHAN, LILY TRUE (substitute teacher while Pearl Farr was ill).

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abernathy, Mamie Ruth Stranburg. "History of Hot Springs School District #6 of Garland County," THE RECORD, No. 26 (1985).

Abernathy, Mamie Ruth Stranburg. "Jones School: So Rich a Heritage, So Abundant Her Traditions," THE RECORD, No. 24 (1983).

Abernathy, Mamie Ruth. Personal collection.

ARKANSAS GAZETTE. February 18, 1956.

JOURNAL OF ARKANSAS EDUCATION. February 1956.

SENTINEL-RECORD. January 14, 1956.

Interviews with the following: Nancy (Mrs. Marion) Anderson; Lessie C. (Mrs. Roy) Bales; Gertrude Cole (Mrs. Leonard) Brazil; Mary Edythe Fox (Mrs. James) Finley; Ethel (Mrs. Elmer) Glenn; Louise Morehead (Mrs. Clifford) Hare; Cepha (Mrs. Barney) Harris; Evelyn Hilliard; Velma D. Holder; Dorris Elleman (Mrs. Leland) Hull; William J. "Bill" Lane; Judy Martin; Ruth (Mrs. J. C.) Matthews; Blanche (Mrs. Henry) Murphy; Sue (Mrs. Hubert) Reader; Fletcher Renegar; Dorothy P. (Mrs. Guy) Robbins; Kathleen Schaer; Clyda McMahan (Mrs. Gary) Sexton; Willie Virginia Sims; Ruby (Mrs. A. W.) Small; Ruby Smith; Ed Sullivan, Jr.; Laura Gillen (Mrs. Melbourne) Trubey.