

GIVE ME THIS HILL COUNTRY

Ola (Shipp) Cox came to West Virginia with a rich background of experiences in prayer, teaching, witnessing and counseling. Mrs. Cox allowed God to continue to use her happy, loving, enthusiastic personality in His service in her new State. Her great love and concern for West Virginia are reflected in her suggestion of the theme for the organizational meeting of the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists in 1970. At Mrs. Cox's suggestion the theme of the organizational meeting was Caleb's request, "Give me this hill country." (Joshua 14:12, New English Bible).

In 1973 the West Virginia State Mission Offering was named for Ola (Mrs. Elmo) Cox. A new generation who did not know Mrs. Cox has now begun to ask who she was. This article is written to (1) review the route of Ola's life on her way to West Virginia, (2) follow some of the paths she walked in West Virginia and (3) attempt to help new generations to know what the greatly loved Christian woman, Ola Cox, was like as a person.

Ola was born in Little Rock, Arkansas on December 19, 1912. She attended schools in Little Rock and graduated from high school with honors. In high school she was a cheerleader and active in the drama department. Enthusiasm and the ability to express herself well before an audience were gifts that Ola used effectively all of her life.

At an early age Ola accepted Christ as her Savior. She attended Central Baptist Church where she was a leader in youth activities and trombonist in the church band. She met Elmo Cox in Training Union (BYPU at that time) activities of the association. They were married at Central Baptist Church on July 3, 1934. Mr. Cox was in the banking business, eventually to become a vice president at Charleston National Bank in Charleston, West Virginia.

Mr. and Mrs. Cox became members of Second Baptist Church in Little Rock. Mrs. Cox was active in young people's activities and taught a class of working and college girls in Sunday School. She did much counseling and witnessing to the lost while teaching that class, and actively participating in WMU and BYPU.

The Lord blessed the Cox family with two sons. Michael E. Cox who is currently pastor of Georgia Avenue Baptist Church in Wheaton, Maryland. Formerly he served as Director of Missions for Howard Baptist Association in Maryland, Rural-Urban Department of the Home Mission Board and was pastor of two churches in Texas and a minister of education in Maryland.

The younger son, Paul L. Cox, his wife and two children reside in Collierville, Tennessee. Paul is head coach for the high school where he also teaches history, economics and current events. Paul is active in his church and the city of Collierville.

Soon after moving to Memphis, Tennessee in 1947, Mrs. Cox again began teaching a Sunday School class, the Euzelian Women's Class at Bellevue Baptist Church. She was loved and respected by the class as a "superb Bible teacher" and "dear personal friend." The class grew from the 137 members at the time Mrs. Cox began teaching to about 227 in 1961. The first six months that she taught, the class increased by 16 members. The growth was due not only to the fact that Ola was a gifted teacher, but to the fact that Ola and the class visited weekly. Each class president was expected to spend at least one day a week visiting with Ola from 9:30 in the

morning until 4:30 in the afternoon. Christians were strengthened by these visits and the lost were won to Christ. During one week the class made over 1200 phone calls and 300 visits, in addition to cards and letters that were sent. Ola and the class cared about one another, ministered to needs and demonstrated their love in actions. Of course the class grew with that spirit and the hard work of visitation.

During her busy days in Memphis, Mrs. Cox also worked as a librarian with Memphis Public Library and for a time in a children's clothing store. For five years she taught a weekly Bible class at the telephone company. "Her influence led many to see further experience in the religion of their choice," according to a Bible class member. Mr. and Mrs. Cox became charter members of Second Baptist Church in Memphis and served faithfully through that church also.

Because of Ola's great love for West Virginia and its people, many people thought she had always lived in this State. The Cox family did move to Charleston, West Virginia in 1964. They attended Calvary Baptist Church for about a year then became members of Highland Avenue Baptist Church. Again Mrs. Cox began teaching a women's Sunday School class, and supporting and working in other church programs.

Mrs. Cox found work with the Union Mission Auxiliary also gave her other opportunities of service. As president of the auxiliary, one year she led in refurnishing the girl's shelter living room, sewing for the children, baby-sitting at the emergency shelter and assisting at the girl's shelter and clothing store.

It was Mrs. Cox's work with Woman's Missionary Union in West Virginia that earned for her the rare honor given in November, 1973, when the State Mission Offering was named the Ola Cox Offering for State Missions. She began serving as a volunteer WMU worker in 1966, following Mrs. Irene Alexander who had been starting WMU organizations over the State since 1958. Mrs. Cox prepared the first program for State Missions Week of Prayer, did much teaching, and helped in organizing the State WMU. More of her State activities are described below. For five years Ola worked as a volunteer receiving expenses only. She became a paid staff person shortly before her final illness.

Observing Ola's gift for teaching, Francis Tallant, Director of Religious Education, recruited Ola as a special worker in Sunday School, Church Training, Baptist Student Union and library work. She helped with worker training in these areas as well as in WMU in several states, in addition to West Virginia.

All of those who worked on the State staff with Ola Cox loved and respected her. Tom Lang, a Religious Education Director, said, "It was in her selfless service within our denomination that I personally knew and appreciated her most. Mrs. Cox provided the necessary drive and consistency for Woman's Missionary Union through her leadership. Mrs. Ola Cox won a place in the hearts of people wherever she went. She possessed an unusually fine spirit and had the rare ability of always providing the special note of inspiration people needed."

John Snedden, Executive Secretary of the State Convention wrote, "She was an encourage -- one who inspired confidence in people with whom she worked. She was an

inspiration in many ways: helping people overcome their discouragements and encouraging people to serve the Lord through the particular program or method she might be organizing or promoting at the time.”

Mrs. Cox became paralyzed by cancer in July, 1972. She was in the hospital in Charleston until her death 28 months later on November 27, 1974. She was buried in Sunset Park Cemetery in South Charleston, West Virginia. Even while in the hospital Ola continued to be a witness for the Lord she loved so dearly and was an inspiration to many. She expressed thanks for opportunities to witness even while in the hospital.

Alma Hunt, long time Executive Secretary of Woman’s Missionary Union, SBC, said of Ola: “To me Ola Cox was a paradox -- a combination of humility and strong will. That she was an humble servant of the Lord is attested to by the fact that she sought no acclaim for herself, and by the triumph of her spirit during long and painful suffering. At the same time, her life was motivated by strong will, evidenced in her commitment to Jesus Christ, her personal dedication to missions, and her determination to lay a firm foundation in the West Virginia Convention of Southern Baptists for significant missions support. Her triumphs stand as living testimony to her faith and undying strength to our Christian witness.”

In 1972-73 Mrs. Cox continued to serve as WMU Director working from her bedside and by telephone. Many people over the State were happy to assist the beloved Ola. Mrs. Shirley Gillespie, as State WMU President, was a major helper.

We have reviewed the events of Ola Cox’s life. Now we turn to looking more in detail at the work she did in West Virginia with Woman’s Missionary Union. We will not have space to tell of her work with Bernice Elliott in other pioneer areas and with Bernice Kirkwood in Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

Beginning in 1966, Mrs. Cox served as volunteer State WMU Director. She received only expenses until 1972. Mrs. Cox led in the official organization of West Virginia WMU at East Williamson Baptist Church in 1971. Mrs. Cox spoke of the new WMU, “ we need your prayers and help in this formative period of our work. We are anxious to be in the will of God in all we do. We only want to do what cannot be explained, except by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Mrs. Cox did a lot of traveling over the State of West Virginia as she was invited to speak for prayer meetings and the Sunday night services or lead in organizational meetings to begin new groups. Joyce Irons of Fairmont, remembers Mrs. Cox coming to talk with their group about WMU while they were still a mission meeting in the YWCA. Joyce appreciated Mrs. Cox’s graciousness although they were not able to begin WMU organizations yet.

Mary Mann of Hillcrest Baptist Church, Spencer, said, “Ola Cox came to help us start our WMU in 1970. She came in her warmth and love and helped a handful of us get started off. I think there were 4 or 5 of us then. She gave us a wonderful message and helped us see that great numbers weren’t important. She told us to start by doing what we could--even small things to help others. You could tell her main purpose was to glorify God.

Mrs. Cox capably represented West Virginia at national meetings of Woman's Missionary Union. Miss Bernice Elliott expressed the feeling shared by those who met Ola at national meetings when she said, "Every remembrance of Ola is one of great pride and joy. I appreciate the opportunity of working with her through the years. I have great admiration for her courage and good spirit."

Plans and promotion of the special weeks of prayer and offerings were also a part of Ola's WMU work. As mentioned above she prepared the first State missions program. Ola was much in demand to teach the graded series mission books because she was such a gifted teacher. She was also called upon often to conduct WMU leadership courses in the State. John Snedden speaks of the results of that work, "We can still feel the impact of her wonderfully optimistic outlook and her positive approach to her work ... as she traveled the length and breadth of our state to visit and work with the churches and associations."

Mission and prayer retreats seemed to bring special joy to this lady who loved missions, prayer and people. Mrs. J.B. Doss of Calvary Baptist Church, Bluefield, told of what it was like to spend a week rooming with Mrs. Cox at Ridgecrest: "We shared a room, prayed together, read our Bible together and also shared God's blessings in our lives. I came away spiritually fed, not only by the conference, but by being with this great lady God had sent my way."

Mrs. Doss also spoke of the love of young people for Mrs. Cox. Ola loved young people and enjoyed being with them and they loved her. She established the State camps and house parties. Ruth Campbell, pastor's wife at Altizer Baptist Church, was a camper during the time Mrs. Cox was WMU Director. Ruthie said Mrs. Cox had such a good time at camp and was always in the middle of everything with the young people. One boy invited Ola to play tennis with him. She came out in a few minutes with a crutch and bandages telling him she was ready to try to play. Large numbers of young people accepted Christ as Savior at the camps. Mrs. Cox once said she had "heard someone say he had never seen a great moving of the Holy Spirit. He should have attended camp." As always she gave proper glory to God for accomplishments.

Associational meetings were another time of enjoyment for our busy Mrs. Cox. She reported once that it had been "a busy year, but we rejoice for we are never alone." Shirley Gillespie remembers that Mrs. Cox often encouraged the women as they reported on their work by saying, "I'm just so sure the Lord is happy with what you are doing here."

The reader probably already has a picture of the person, Ola Cox. Now color in that picture a little brighter by listening to things said about Ola by those who knew her well. (the majority of these reports came from women who were members of the Euzelian Sunday School Class of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis, Tennessee. We regret that space did not allow the names to be put with quotations.)

TEACHER

Mrs. Cox spoke extemporaneously. She had a gift for remembering what she had read. Before 1968 she had already completed 73 church study course books. She always came to teach

prepared by much time spent in study of the Bible. "Ola was a superb Bible teacher, and I can never recall her not being in class every Lord's day." "At church camp, of course, she was the

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Bible teacher." Children loved her and looked forward to her telling Bible stories. She was often called on to teach WMU and missions books because she was such a good teacher. "She taught us to love, serve and worship with our hearts and hands also." Ola had "a natural gift for teaching. Through her teaching and counseling many were led to know the Lord."

WIFE AND MOTHER

"Ola could not have done what she did had she not had a Christian husband who, too, loved the Lord and served in many phases of church work." In good humor, "Someone once sent a sympathy card to her husband because she was busy with church work so much, instead of with him." "On visitation we stopped by the school to pick up Paul and Mike and take them with us." Ola liked working with RA's that were then under WMU because she had boys.

VISITOR

"She started my going on visitation ... by coming by and picking me up in her car. I still go on visitation when possible." Our church used to visit so much on Tuesday that one woman said, "I didn't know anyone could be saved any day but Tuesday." "The reason our class grew was visitation. We visited one day each week from 9:30 to 4:30."

SOUTHERN BAPTIST

"She was loyal to the convention and its principles and never deviated from the scriptures." Once after moving to West Virginia, Ola was in Memphis to visit her son, Paul. Two class members skipped Sunday School to eat breakfast with Ola. She took them to her room for prayer and Bible study. One of the women said, "She didn't let us skip Sunday School."

WOMAN OF PRAYER

A woman's brother was seriously injured in a wreck. The woman called Ola at 9:10 to share the bad news. Ola said, "Let's pray about it right now." They did pray and later learned that the man's heart had been stopped and he revived at 9:10.

"When we went into homes, Ola always prayed and people always felt better. You could see it on their faces. People knew they had been brought close to the Lord when Ola prayed for them." "Her prayer life was exemplary. It was said she had a straight line to God."

AVAILABLE

"Ola came to the hospital as soon as she heard my mother had died and stayed at the house the next day." "Ola was never too tired or too busy to minister in the name of Jesus." "She went to see the sick immediately." "She did not think about herself. Her love and concern was for others. She was standing by to lend a helping hand to those in need." "She was there ..." "always ready and willing to help." Ola was a "friend, comforter, there when needed."

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COUNSELOR

“She seemed to always know just when I had heartaches and needed to talk to a friend.” She knew us all by name and knew our problems and joys and encouraged all.” “I remember the encouraging notes she wrote me.”

JOYOUS AND WARM

“The years I knew her were some of my happiest years. She had a way of making people feel closer to the Lord. She loved to joke and laughed at our joys and sympathized with our sorrows.” “Ola and I acted silly. We were just as silly as we could be, but we visited a lot and we had a lot of fun.” “She was a kind, humble person, yet full of joy.” “She always had time to laugh with us or cry with us.” “The joy she brought to my heart ... will linger long in my memory. She shared tears, fears, gladness and sadness with a heart full of love, star-studded eyes and a million dollar smile.”

CHRISTIAN

“Ola was an “outstanding Christian.” She really seemed filled with the Spirit of God.” “You knew who had a message directly from God and you wanted to go hear.” “She loved us and we loved her, but most of all she loved her Lord and served Him.” Ola said, “All that I am and have is because of His (Christ) goodness to me.”

West Virginia Southern Baptists can thank God for the life and Christian spirit of the lady for whom our State Mission Offering is named. Among her gifts were those of being a teacher, wife and mother, visitor, Southern Baptist, woman of prayer, available, counselor, joyous and warm servant of God. So many gifts in the life of one person are rare. Her life should inspire us to dedicate fully to His service the gifts God gave each of us.

In her last (1973) WMU Annual Report, Mrs. Cox wrote (from the hospital bed) “Someone had said, ‘The way one walks, the steps a woman takes day by day, the places those steps take her, equals in the end the life she has lived in the world.’” Ola loved and walked close to God and her life was one of eagerness to do God’s work, of prayer and of love and service for others.

It is appropriate that our State Mission Offering be named for one who gave so much of her life. She also gave freely of her means to help others. Robert Wilson, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church, Webster Springs, related that Mrs. Cox gave him and his wife a portable typewriter after showing them how to begin a church library. They were new in the State and serving as US-2 missionaries at the time. She often gave until it hurt, when she became aware of material needs.

The Ola Cox offering time comes during the Week of Prayer for State Missions. This is also appropriate because of her strength in prayer. One woman told about the high regard of her family for Ola’s prayers. They had seen God answer so many of Ola’s prayers that the daughter

called long distance to ask for Ola's prayers when sickness came to the third generation. Ola also prayed, "Give me this hill country," which is our prayer each year during the Week of Prayer for State Missions and the continuing concern of West Virginia Southern Baptists.

Mrs. Cox's nature was not to desire us to honor her, but to encourage us to honor her God and ours. May we continue to give, pray and work that God might "give us this hill country," for His own.

IN APPRECIATION

Many thanks to those who contributed information to make this article possible. Barbara Goforth has been collecting information as State WMU historian for a number of years and thereby saved some valuable information. Mr. Elmo Cox was gracious in lending materials of help and arranging for the writer to meet some of the women in Memphis who knew Mrs. Cox. Mrs. Peggy Pifer and members of the Euzelian Sunday School Class of Bellevue Baptist Church, Memphis was most gracious in gathering and sharing information. A number of people related to West Virginia Southern Baptist churches and convention have also made contributions.

In writing this material I became aware that in the future there will be other questions people may want to know about Mrs. Cox. Interesting stories about what she did or said should not be lost. Those of you who have information might like to send it to the State WMU Office, Number One Mission Way, Scott Depot, West Virginia, St. Albans, West Virginia 25177. It can be filed with other information about Ola Cox for future reference. Things that you thought were missing from this article could also be included.

Mrs. Ida (Floyd) Tidsworth

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