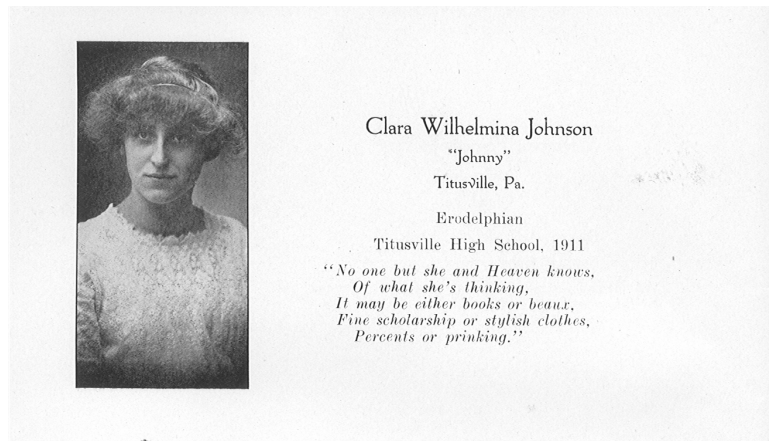


# Coal Culture

## Clara Johnson: Labor Educator

IRWIN MARCUS



Clara Johnson, a graduate of Titusville (PA) High School, attended Indiana Normal School in 1913-14. As a student she took a wide variety of courses, displayed academic competency, and excelled in foreign language courses. Along with many other of her classmates, she became a public school teacher.

However, her distinctiveness is reflected in the description of her as "the fighting school teacher of Sagamore." This description was not in recognition of her "proficient pugilism", but rather reflected her role as a labor activist and a labor educator.

To understand the initiation of her long term role in this field, some background information is essential. Under the leadership of John Brophy, president of District 2 of the United Mine Workers, several valuable programs emerged. Labor education, coordinated by Paul Fuller, District 2 Labor Education Director, became the signature undertaking of this progressive initiative. The labor education program featured classes, talks by labor leaders, and

labor chatauquas. The chatauquas combined speeches by labor figures and performance of local entertainers. Clara Johnson assisted Fuller and organized women's auxiliaries, established classes, and coordinated singing events with her activity peaking in 1926.

At the 1926 labor chautauqua in Nanty-Glo she organized a women's auxiliary composed of the wives and daughters of local miners. She delivered a talk at a political meeting held in Sykesville. Johnson also coordinated the performances of the Sagamore Chorus, a singing group composed of the wives and children of coal miners. In addition, she composed songs which uplifted the spirits of the striking miners while they raised the ire of managers.

Although the labor education program attracted crowds and press attention between 1924-26, the "victory" of John L. Lewis over John Brophy in the election for president of the United Mine Workers ended District 2 labor educational programs. However, the demise of this undertaking did not end Clara Johnson's role as a labor activist and labor educator.

Paul Fuller accepted a post as education director for the United Textile Workers in the Passaic (N.J.) area. Clara Johnson taught classes and married Paul Fuller while in the Passaic area. In 1929 Fuller undertook a new assignment and he organized and provided educational programs for southern textile workers and their families. Clara Johnson Fuller organized labor classes and delivered talks to labor and women's groups. The peak of her involvement occurred in Portsmouth (Ohio) in 1936-37. She once again organized classes and gave talks but she also directed a women's choir and wrote a column for the Portsmouth Labor Review. Her articles described the union's successful organizing campaigns and their labor education programs, especially a successful labor chautauqua. Although she continued to champion labor's causes, her education role lessened from 1938-40, as Paul Fuller's focus shifted to administrative posts.

Clara Johnson's career spotlighted the important, but virtually unknown, activities of a prominent labor educator. She used knowledge and skills, some which were a product of her Indiana experience, to pursue advancement for workers and the creation of a good society. In remembering the life of Clara Johnson Fuller, we not only recall a special person, but begin to recognize the significance of the "golden age" of workers' education in the United States.