

Dr. Bessie Moore: Doyenne of Economic Education

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They called her Miss Bessie. To have known her was to have witnessed a master. She was a lady; a steel magnolia; a southern belle. Her passion for children was unquestionable; her ability to charm the staunchest adversary was unparalleled; her determination, steadfast. In library and economic education circles, she is a legend. She traveled Europe with Eleanor Roosevelt, served on United Nations' committees, visited more than one president in the White House. The word "no" was simply not a part of her vocabulary. It was filed under, "try again," or "later" or "back to the drawing board." Former Senator Dale Bumpers said he knew that any argument that he thought he had won with her was simply not yet finished.¹

The first time I met her, I thought she reminded me of my grandmother – hair in a bun, corseted, support stockings and corrective shoes. When she entered the room, the energy-level automatically rose. Her smile reflected the graciousness and hospitality of the finest southern lady; the layers of wrinkles were like rows of military ribbons honoring the sacrifices won on the battlefields of her life.

She lived over ninety years and was involved, in some way, in education, for most of those. Although remembered by social studies professionals for her work in supporting economic education, one must first grasp that she came to that mission late in life, i.e., after 60. To understand why she had the passion she did for economic education, it is important to first know the rest of the story.

Early Life

Dr. Bessie Grace Boehm Moore came into this world fighting. In the woods of Kentucky, August 2, 1902, Bessie was born early and weighed only two-and-one-half-pounds. Her mother died shortly thereafter. So began the life of a woman who never stopped fighting for what was good, who never dwelled on the negative, who accepted adversity as an indication that everything worth having always challenges us to work harder, be more creative, and be open to different pathways.

By the time she was twelve, Bessie's father had moved her to a farm, near Mountain View, Arkansas, where he had gone to homestead. In order to attend school, she boarded with the Brewer family in town, where she did chores and helped with the younger children in payment for her room and board. Nettie Case Brewer described her as "a whirlwind of energy, fun-loving, fearless, and intellectually insatiable." Ms. Brewer also recounts how she engaged in a teasing war with the Brewer's son, who was about her age. He got into trouble. She did not, since she was, technically, a guest. Like a bear sharpening its claws, she was merely preparing for battles to come.¹

The only real role models in her life were teachers. Therefore, it was no surprise that, after completing the tenth grade, Bessie took, and passed, the Teacher's Exam. She was hired for her first position at St. James, Arkansas, a small town between

Batesville and Mountain View. She was 14. The year was 1916.

At the end of the school year (three months in the summer) it was customary for the teacher to treat the students. Miss Bessie decided she would make it a really big event. After reading in a local paper that the Agricultural Commissioner was running for re-election, she wrote him and asked him to come to her "closing." It was the first time that a state official had ever visited Stone County while in office, and people came from all around. Thus began a lifetime of Bessie's achieving her own goals by taking advantage of what politicians adore, i.e., a captive and interested audience.

Recognizing that she had never acquired a high school diploma, Miss Bessie used every school break to upgrade her own education, including stints at Peabody College in Nashville, Tennessee and the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, as well as Arkansas State Teachers College in Conway. In a summer course taught by visiting professor, Emily Wood Epstein of Columbia University, she became convinced that everyone who was to teach children, should have a course in children's literature. Her effort led to the first such course being required in Arkansas teacher education programs, circa 1930.

The implication of requiring such a course was that there were books available for children to read, both at home and at school. That was a major assumption in rural Arkansas, as it was in many other parts of the nation. She convinced the local ladies group to ask the County Judge for some money to start a public library. The judge thought it was ridiculous to divert money intended to build roads to such foolishness. Miss Bessie and her friends showed up at his court (the county governing body) to plead their case. Expecting them, the judge made sure there were only enough chairs for the members of the court. As the meeting was beginning, he declared, "Clear the room of all the by-standers!"²

Giving the judge a dirty look and using her quick wit, Miss Bessie was offered, and accepted, a seat on the knee of one agreeable member of the court. The judge, grudgingly, agreed to allow her to stand and state her case. She got enough votes to buy books and sought a way to house them. The member of the court who supported her had to ride a horse to town for supplies for two years because. For some reason, the county road crew did not get around to maintaining the road to his house.

Delta Kappa Gamma

In 1934, a group of women educators, sought to begin a chapter of Delta Kappa Gamma in Arkansas and Miss Bessie was invited to become one of the twelve founders. When I joined in the early 1980's, she was there to affirm my membership, as she had been for hundreds of young women educators throughout her career. I remember thinking at the time, "Is there any phase of education this women is not involved in?" Our paths had recently crossed at the annual meeting of the American Association of University Women (AAUW). I thought that only accidental. By that time, well into my teaching career, I had attended numerous

economic education workshops and had come to the realization that this was one powerful female. It was not until I began talking to those who knew her better than I, and preparing this paper, that I realized that power was not an attribute she cherished. Success was all important. She believed that intellect, combined with imagination and determination, along with cooperation, could lead to success in any endeavor worth pursuing and where children were concerned, the possibilities were endless.

Nursery Schools

During the Depression years, Miss Bessie stumbled upon the idea of nursery schools. She had been sent to a national meeting where the care of young children was the primary topic. She returned to the state determined to use what she had learned to benefit the children living in abject poverty. She approached a retired army man. Together they forged a plan. As a result, out-of-work carpenters and plumbers were engaged to build thirteen model schools across the state. They were for children, aged three to five. Two were established for blacks students. Within a year, out of work teachers were being paid with Works Progress Administration money and the schools were running smoothly. Physicians examined the children for disease; nurses were on the staff to minister to the students and give courses on basic hygiene for parents; dieticians prepared wholesome meals. A modest amount of money was acquired from other New Deal agencies. With it, furniture was built and playgrounds were constructed. The program was featured in national magazines and newspaper articles.³

Democratic Party

In 1936, Miss Bessie was elected to represent Arkansas at the Democratic National Convention. On their way to Philadelphia, the delegation stopped by Washington, DC, and had a private visit with President Roosevelt. The president asked her about the nursery schools she had started in Arkansas (Eleanor had prompted him.) and Miss Bessie gladly shared. It is no accident, I suspect, that the nursery schools Mrs. Roosevelt established for working women during the war resembled Miss Bessie's in Arkansas.⁴

Bessie Meets Mr. Right

Just as she knew how to work, so she knew how to play. Many a young man entertained Miss Bessie, but she knew the minute her eyes fell upon him that Merlin Moore was to be her husband. By the 1930's they were operating a cafeteria in downtown Little Rock. Merlin was an enterprising entrepreneur, but it was Bessie who knew how make the most of a dollar. She preserved and froze her own fruits and vegetables and was always on the lookout for new ideas and methods of preparing food. Moore's Cafeteria's famous breakfast cost 17 cents, circa 1930.⁵

A frequent diner was R. A. Cox the newly selected Superintendent of Schools of the North Little Rock School System. He confessed to Bessie that the situation in the elementary schools was deplorable. He convinced her to take on the job as supervisor of these schools for a grand salary of \$125 a month. After surveying the situation, she reported to him that the solution was quite simple. There were no books. It is difficult to teach children how to read, or keep their interest in reading, when there are no books for them to read.

She organized the community to raise money for children's books. It was a great success. There were eight white and four black schools. For Miss Bessie, they were all to be the same. She convinced the administrators that the black children deserved the same books as the white children. She also noticed that some of the black teachers excelled in ways the white teachers did not. One black lady was particularly good in teaching handwriting. Miss Bessie asked the white teachers if they minded learning from this lady. They did not object. What she did next was unprecedented in the late 1930's in the South. She invited the black teacher to do in-service training for all the teachers in the district.⁶

Arkansas Library Commission

Back in the 1920's when Bessie had helped to start a public library in a small rural county, she knew that local resources would not be enough. She needed to know more. She had heard of the American Library Association, a small struggling group of some 200 interested people. Her interest led to the passage of legislation in 1935 creating the Arkansas Library Commission. Homer Adkins, the county sheriff, who regularly enjoyed those \$.17 breakfasts at Moore's Cafeteria was elected governor in 1941 and one of his first acts was to appoint Miss Bessie to head the State Library Commission.

At Moore's Cafeteria there were two kinds of pies that were quite famous, both Miss Bessie specials. Once, when the Arkansas House Appropriations Committee failed to recommend badly needed funds for a state library, Miss Bessie delivered one of each to the home of the Chairman of the Committee. The gentleman was amused and invited her to dinner. The hearings were reopened and the library's budget was not only restored, but received a significant increase.⁷

In 1955, Senator J. William Fulbright, invited Miss Bessie to testify before the House Subcommittee on Education and Labor. They were contemplating a bill he had sponsored to provide funds to rural areas to improve library services. Miss Bessie typed out a copy of her speech and asked her brother-in-law to casually drop it off, along with appropriate background material, at some local newspapers. The news was picked up by the state newspaper's Washington bureau and on May 28, the papers carried the story complete with picture of Miss Bessie waxing eloquently before the Congressional committee. In her speech, she made a strong appeal for some "new-fangeled" concoction called Bookmobiles for servicing rural areas. The Library Services Act passed both Houses of Congress and Miss Bessie was asked to serve on the national advisory board.⁸

In her position, she traveled from coast to coast giving speeches to Jaycees, library trustees, politicians, and various clubs. Her speeches were full of humorous tales and creative ideas of how to empower local communities to fulfill their dreams of having free libraries. She told them they needed mission statements, dedicated volunteers, well-trained and well-paid librarians, and regular in-service training for everyone involved. Her speeches were also inspiring. The theme, reminiscent of Bessie's life, was to never underestimate what one person can do, as is illustrated by this excerpt from her speech in Roseberg, Oregon in May, 1958.

...let us not discount what one vote can do.
One vote made France a republic in 1789.
One vote elected Thomas Jefferson president.
One vote beheaded Charles I.
One vote defeated a state senator in Mississippi last summer.
One vote saved the Selective Service in 1940.
One vote defeated the Bricker amendment in the last Congress.

...Never underestimate your stature as a citizen.
Remember the old saying, 'I cannot do everything, but I can do something.'

...As Albert Schweitzer said: Reverence for Life ...does not allow the scholar to live for his science alone, even if he is very useful to the community in so doing. It does not permit the artist to exist only for his art, even if he give inspiration to many...It refuses to let the business man imagine that he fulfills all legitimate demands in the course of his business activities. It demands from all that they should sacrifice a portion of their won lives for others.⁹

The Arkansas Library Commission was in a building that, at best, was a glorified warehouse. In the 1970's Miss Bessie began a campaign to find it a new home, preferably a new building designed especially for it, built on Capitol Hill. Marcus Holbrook, Executive Secretary to the Legislative Council, the body that runs the state in between General Assembly sessions on alternate years, remembers Miss Bessie fondly.

She had vast training. More than anyone else in the state, I put her with prominent women like Frances Perkins and Eleanor Roosevelt. 'She took on the old pros and lectured them on values. It was a rural and agrarian type of legislature; their academic achievement not so great. She called on something better in them, for the young people who would hold the future of the state in their hands. ...The old pros respected her.'¹⁰

Disappointment, however, was, and is, a way of life when working with the legislature, and the building that Miss Bessie had fought for was reassigned to become the new home to the Fish and Game Commission. In front of architectural drawings with reporters and photographers looking on, Miss Bessie cried, "No way!"

A new governor was elected in 1974, David Pryor. Pryor had known Miss Bessie all of his life and he loved her dearly. She knew his family and had supported Governor Pryor's other ventures into political life. New committees were set up; a larger building was purposed. The Fish and Game Commission got to occupy a small portion of it – the part furthest from the capitol building.

In 1978, Bill Clinton was elected governor at the tender age of 28. He was responsible for finishing the building and moving the various groups into it. He began to replace long time employees with his own people and he planned to eliminate the library commission. Miss Bessie made an appointment to see him. After all, he was very young, and needed to have some educating about the history of the commission. In the end, the state library was situated on the fifth floor of the new building in a floor space of some 44,000 square feet (not counting additional space for the

archives). After 38 years of service under nine governors, Miss Bessie's tenure on the library commission ended.

A footnote to this series of events is apropos. Dale Bumpers, the former governor, and by the 70's U. S. Senator, called his young protégé and suggested he had made a "baaaaad mistake" in angering Dr. Bessie Moore. She was someone he wanted and needed on his side. The new governor decided that the statistics showed a growing number of elderly people in the state and ordained that Arkansas needed a Commission on Aging. His first appointee was Miss Bessie.¹¹

Economic Education

On January 6, 1959, Merlin Moore died. Bessie became despondent and was given to lachrymosity. She received an Honorary Doctorate of Laws Degree from the University of Arkansas that same year. It was not long thereafter when Bessie decided she best get back to work. She went to visit another one of those guys who had enjoyed the \$.17 breakfasts, Arch Ford, then State Commissioner of Education. She wanted a job. Mr. Ford appointed her as the first Director of Elementary Education.¹²

Although she did a most impressionable job, she was somewhat embarrassed that the people she supervised had more education than she. Taking advantage of the offer of educational leave, Miss Bessie enrolled in the masters program at the University of Connecticut, ostensibly to study reading with Dr. Louis Cooper. When it came time to put together a committee to oversee Miss Bessie's thesis, Dr. Cooper engaged the service of Dr. Philmore Wass, among others. As the committee talked with their student, Bessie explained that she had specific orders from her supervisor back in Arkansas. She was to come back to the state with a plan.¹³

It is no secret what had happened in Little Rock in the fall of 1957. By 1959 the civil rights problem was full-blown. Many conservatives were pressuring the education system to "root out" communists. They questioned text materials being used. They were advocating courses in anti-communism for every student. The Commissioner had told her that she was to return with a plan for dealing with this conservative threat to academic freedom and decorum in the schools of the state.

Still believing that the ability to read was paramount in a child's growth and to the welfare of society, Miss Bessie thought her answer lay in some kind of new reading program or campaign. Dr. Wass looked at her and told her to go back to Arkansas and organize the best possible economic education program, involving people throughout the state, and other places, who were beyond suspicion, i.e., that no one can doubt their integrity. To prepare, she visited in the offices of the Joint Council of Economic Education in New York where she met Dr. George Fersh, who was to become a longtime friend and ally, frequent visitor to the state to conduct workshops, and ultimately the author of her biography.¹⁴

Drs. Wass and Fersh marveled at what unfolded in the following years as the state's economic education program became one of the best in the nation. When she returned to the state in the fall of 1959, she had her plan ready. She invited Dr. Fersh to come to Arkansas to help organize the Council. He went, reluctantly, still skeptical about this elderly southern lady with the enchanting accent.

After meeting him at the airport, she whisked him away for his first visit -- at the mountaintop estate of Winthrop Rockefeller. That evening she suggested Dr. Fersh accompany her to a little dinner at a local hotel. It was a massive banquet and they were seated at the head table, along with both of the state U. S. Senators, J. William Fulbright and John McClellan, Congressman Wilbur Mills and Governor Orval Faubus. The guest speaker, a friend of Miss Bessie's, was Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. As Dr. Fersh took is place, he detected an "I told you so" look on the face of his hostess.¹⁵

Planning for the Arkansas Council for Economic Education

First, she talked to everyone who would listen, e.g., the Elementary School Council, the Secondary School Council, the PTA, the librarians, civic clubs. Very carefully a council was organized and appointed by the Commissioner. Each member had to be an outstanding citizen with an abiding interest in education, someone who recognized the need for economic education, was respected by their peers, and they must be willing to adhere to principles of objectivity and academic freedom.

The following summer, Arkansas teachers experienced their first summer workshops. Miss Bessie sent invitations to nine carefully selected school districts. They were sent to the superintendents and read:

Please read this bulletin carefully. I shall appreciate compliance with all request.

1. Please send at once the names of teachers.
2. Please advance money for your people.
3. Please have a picture taken of teachers with a member of Economic Education Council near you -- not a school person. It is important we have good publicity to help us raise budget for the program. (Names and addresses were attached.) When picture is taken be certain that caption indicates scholarship was provided by State council of which Mr. _____ is a member or contributor, whichever the case. Send 2 copies of story to Moore, and a glossy and story to State Dep't publicity person for release to statewide papers.
4. I beg you cooperation.¹⁶

Dr. Fersh was invited to direct the workshops. By this time he knew he could not deny her logic; ignore her charm or withstand her perseverance. She asked him who the speakers ought to be. He named various cabinet members and business leaders, as well as Congressmen. Miss Bessie wrote their names down with the calm of writing out a grocery list.

The eventual list of presenters was most impressive, beginning with Henry Ford II as the keynote address. He agreed to do this on one stipulation -- that House Ways and Means Committee Chair Wilbur Mills would be there to introduce him, more specifically so he could lobby him about the tax cut he was helping to pass through Congress. Miss Bessie did not see a problem with accomplishing that. The other guests ranged from the president of the World Bank, and the Federal Reserve Bank to cabinet members to over 100 of the state's most competent people in government, the economy, and education.

With the speakers chosen, Miss Bessie turned to the details

of organizing the participants, general scheduling and selecting facilities. From the material sent to participants, Miss Bessie wrote, bring

- a) comfortable shoes for walking
- b) comfortable clothes for classes
- c) dress-up clothes for the banquets
- d) textbooks, particularly social studies, that you are currently using
- e) a happy disposition, a healthy body, and an open mind!¹⁷

She followed the workshop with letters to all of the participants telling them how proud she was of their accomplishments, and listing the people to whom they should write letters of thanks. In addition to the state papers and local papers, Business Week devoted three pages to this phenomena down in Arkansas. She encouraged all the participants to get copies and share them with school officials and businessmen in their area of the state.

Dr. Fersh made over twenty trips to Arkansas to lead various events, along with Miss Bessie. Each year's slate of speakers was more and more impressive. In 1964, the group received a telegram from President Johnson. Over the year's the Council has published numerous pieces of curriculum, as well as educational programming for public television. In addition to the central office, there are three economic education centers on college campuses, the most noted being the Bessie Moore Center for Economic Education at the the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. The Council receives annually a half million dollars from the legislature along with several million a year from businesses and prominent individuals in the state. Arkansas teachers regularly dominate the awards at the national meetings of economic educators.

Dr. Bessie Moore formally retired in May, 1979. Shortly thereafter she was given the Distinguished Service Award by the National Association of Economic Education Directors where one tribute to her (source unknown) went as follows:

We know her as a doer -- not an idler; a mover -- not a fixture; a believer -- not a doubter. She supports more than she opposes; she works more than she plays; and she thinks long before she speaks. Even in retirement, Bessie is active -- never passive. She has retired but the good she has done for education in this nation will continue to abundantly serve generations yet unborn.¹⁸

After visiting Miss Bessie, Eleanor Roosevelt devoted one of her "My Day" columns to telling of her trip and describing what this remarkable lady had done in Arkansas. She ended it by writing, "This is an example of what one woman can do."¹⁹ But no one can outdo the erudite Father George Tribou, longtime leader of Catholic education, in his tribute to Dr. Bessie Moore at the invocation when she was name the Arkansas March of Dimes Citizen of the Year in 1979.

Lord, Woman has come a long way since you took one rib from the side of Adam and created Eve. That first woman did relatively few things beyond whatever mothering and

housekeeping was required to keep things running smoothly in the Garden of Eden.

But if you had decided, Lord, to hold off making Woman for a millennium or two and then decided that her name would be Bessie Moore, you would have had to use at least three ribs...just one would not have been enough.

Dr. Moore has done many things and has done them so well that it is apparent you have a very special love for her because such gifts and talents as are hers could spring only from a unique and generous kind of divine interest. We praise you for all the talents you have given her. We praise her for the generous way in which she has used them for the good of others.

Lord, your prophet has told us that those who teach will shine like stars for all eternity. That's as it should be. But we are very happy that Dr. Moore has this opportunity to do a little shining tonight...well in advance of her shining in eternity.

Amen

Notes

1. Senator Dale Bumpers was governor of Arkansas prior to becoming Senator. He served in the Senate from 1979 until 1996. He is known for his oratory and "dry" wit. Although I have seen this referenced in a number of books, he personally related to me during several conversations and included it in his remarks at the celebration for Dr. Moore's 90th birthday in August of 1992.

2. George and Mildred Fersh, *Bessie Moore: A Biography* (1986).
14. When I started this paper, I inquired at the Bessie Moore Center for Economic Education about archives. Dr. Tom McKinnon, the director and long time friend, said they had not been catalogued, but were merely stacks of boxes. He suggested I depend upon this book as my source since Dr. Moore had been very involved in its publication. It is full of original sources, e.g., copies of speeches, letters, testimonials. Perhaps someday there will be a better archived collection of her papers.

3. Ibid., 26-27.

4. Ibid., 28.

5. Ibid., 55.

6. Ibid., 28.

7. Ibid., 77.

8. Ibid., 65.

9. Ibid., 72.

10. Ibid., 75-77.

11. I have heard the Senator tell this story on many occasions. Although he and Mr. Clinton have had their differences, Senator Bumpers has always maintained party loyalty. Therefore, there have been many occasions for him to "tell stories" on Clinton at

fund raisers, "roasts," etc. Those stories are well known by Arkansans.

12. Fersh, 81-83.

13. Ibid., 83.

14. The story that follows about Dr. Moore's developing interest in, and support of, economic education is detailed at length in the Fersh's book, in particular, Chapter 5.

15. Fersh, 88.

16. Ibid., 89.

17. Ibid., 95.

18. Ibid., 141.

19. Ibid., 79.

20. Ibid., 245.

