HE CRUSADED FOR EDUCATION

BY JOE S. COHEN

Fifty years ago, few people believed every child in the Mississippi backwoods was entitled to a real education... especially in the poor-land regions. Wealth was measured by horses. If you had two, you were well-to-do. The poor had one, a mule, a donkey... or an ox.

Laurence C. Jones has changed all this. A humble colored man, he came into the area around Braxton, Mississippi in 1909. He had no money, knew nothing about the region or no one in Braxton. But he had desire. He wanted to start a school for those of his race who had the least.

He was a crusader from Iowa... for education. No one asked why a graduate of the University of Iowa would come to backwoods Mississippi to teach readin' and writin'. Not too many cared. But he cared. He was young and he had a dream that had to materialize.

He put together a few acres of poor land, a tumbledown cabin and began teaching all who wanted to learn to read and write.

Laurence Jones, by his very day-to-day philosophy, convinced all that there is a way of life far better than the one identified with the environment inherited by the persons he was willing and able to serve.

His struggle over the past 50 years has been told often. He has had national recognition. Today, his Piney Woods School has fairly adequate classrooms, dormitories and shops. These are important.

But of much greater significance is that his influence and hard-working example have changed the entire attitude of the region in which he works.

Now, children are getting an education. Ignorance is not glorified, as it once was. Tractors have replaced oxen and dairy cows are scientifically pampered, not permitted to wander the open fields for “catch-as-catch-can” milking when available or convenient.

Today, a college education is a goal for the sons and grandsons of the illiterate children Laurence Jones found near Braxton 50 years ago. He has erased forever the “im”—from im—possible.

"What is education, or civilization itself for that matter, but a form of saving? We harvest and keep the best of the world’s ideas and inventions so that we may pass them along to the generations that follow."

Laurence Jones