



# Wil Lou Gray: The Making of a Southern Progressive from New South to New Deal

*Mary Macdonald Ogden*

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In *Wil Lou Gray: The Making of a Southern Progressive from New South to New Deal*, Mary Macdonald Ogden examines the first fifty years of the life and work of South Carolina's Wil Lou Gray (1883-1984), an uncompromising advocate of public and private programs to improve education, health, citizen participation, and culture in the Palmetto State. Motivated by the southern educational reform crusade, her own excellent education, and the high levels of illiteracy she observed in South Carolina, Gray capitalized on the emergent field of adult education before and after World War I to battle the racism, illiteracy, sexism, and political lethargy commonplace in her native state.

As state superintendent of adult schools from 1919 to 1946, one of only two such superintendents in the nation, and through opportunity schools, adult night schools, pilgrimages, and media campaigns--all of which she pioneered--Gray transformed South Carolina's anti-illiteracy campaign from a plan of eradication to a comprehensive program of adult education. Ogden's biography reveals how Gray successfully secured small but meaningful advances for both black and white adults in the face of harsh economic conditions, pervasive white supremacy attitudes, and racial violence. Gray's socially progressive politics brought change in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Gray was a refined, sophisticated upper-class South Carolinian who played Canasta, loved tomato aspic, and served meals at the South Carolina Opportunity School on china with cloth napkins. She was also a lifelong Democrat, a passionate supporter of equality of opportunity, a masterful politician, a workaholic, and in her last years a vociferous supporter of government programs such as Medicare and nonprofits such as Planned Parenthood.

She had a remarkable grasp of the issues that plagued her state and, with deep faith in the power of government to foster social justice, developed innovative ways to address those problems despite real financial, political, and social barriers to progress. Her life is an example of how one person with bravery, tenacity, and faith in humanity can grasp the power of government to improve society.

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