



Prospects

"So we beat on," as F. Scott Fitzgerald observed, "boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." Wherever the system grows too burdensome, wherever it breeds alienation or powerlessness or poverty, there one finds cooperatives.

I began this report with an account of an instant rent-a-car co-op that four stranded airline passengers and I slapped together in haste and frustration at the New Orleans airport. As we sped down the dark Louisiana highway, which for a time shadowed the Mississippi River, I told them something of my researches into cooperatives. Everyone, it developed, had a passing acquaintance with the subject. The two sisters in the group were former members of the Hyde Park Co-op, Chicago's only cooperative supermarket; the man belonged to a credit union in Dayton, Ohio; his mother remembered hearing "some talk about cooperatives in Louisiana when I was a little girl."

She may have been remembering the ill-starred venture of a man named Nelson—Nelson Olson Nelson—who came down from St. Louis in 1915 to organize a chain of cooperatives among poor people. He had spent most of his life promoting profit-sharing schemes for workers and evangelizing for cooperatives.

Now he was determined to transform the stagnant backwaters of Louisiana into sparkling cooperative freshets. As Horace M. Kallen notes in *The Decline and Rise of the Consumer* (1936), "Believing the bayou region . . . to be one of the most impoverished in the United States, [Nelson] undertook to establish there, with his own money, a chain of stores which could eventually pass into control of the customers."

He called it the Nelson Cooperative Association, and for a time it flourished: 61 retail stores, four meat markets, a large bakery, a milk pasteurizing plant, a coffee factory, a condiment factory and a 1,500-acre farm. But by 1918 the operation was sinking fast. Nelson's working capital had dried up, and the customers never accumulated enough money to take over the ballooning business. He filed a personal petition for bankruptcy, went back to St. Louis and, at the age of 78, died.

The Good Fight

Nelson's disastrous Louisiana purchase typifies much of cooperative history; the literature is clogged with failures. Yet one gets the feeling at times that if cooperatives lose many of the battles, they may nevertheless be winning the war. The cooperative impulse in America is strong and genuine. For a century it has sur-

vived every setback (and every victory). It will not go away.

In Lafayette, where we five were headed, a relatively poor people's cooperative is again fighting the good fight. The Southern Consumers Cooperatives is a fragile framework of enterprises—a bakery, a credit union and a sweet potato growers' co-op—all nourished by the nickels and dimes of poor blacks in northern Louisiana. Over the past eight years it has suffered every imaginable catastrophe: The sweet potato growers have been nearly wiped out by hurricanes; the bakery has gone deep into debt, a victim of mismanagement and embezzlement; the credit union has made too many loans to people unprepared or unable to pay them back. But there it is, stubbornly afloat in the bayous, near Nelson's old dreaming grounds.

The morning I reached Lafayette I called upon Father Albert McKnight, a black priest from Brooklyn who in 1964 founded the Southern Consumers Cooperatives. "Right now," he told me, "our morale is very low. We need some successes." Just staying alive in Louisiana, where the illiteracy rate runs as high as 75 per cent in some places, is success of the highest order—testimony both to the strength of McKnight's leadership and to the hardiness of the cooperative idea.

"The salvation of the black man in America is in the South," Father McKnight said. "There's no hope for blacks in the North except a black-migration. But first we need a strong economic base, a cooperative base." It was the old capitalist-cooperative vision—that of the Grangers, the EPICites and the Rochdale weavers—transported to the Louisiana bayous.

10 Days' Sunshine

Alfred McZeal, a co-worker with McKnight, was a dishwasher for 15 years at a five-and-ten store. "As a dishwasher I thought I had it made," he recalls. "Man, if that store hadn't closed down, I'd be there yet." Soon after McZeal lost his job, a friend invited him to a meeting of people trying to form a new cooperative. "I didn't know anything about it. So I asked a lady sitting there to tell me what was going on. She read it off a book, what a co-op was—how everybody owned it and how everybody had an equal vote. I'd never heard such beautiful words. To me it was the Lord's Prayer."

The co-op, he says, is "the best thing that ever happened to me. What was there to life before? Come home and have another baby." Today McZeal manages the bakery and helps out in the credit union. "We've made a lot of mistakes," he says, "but so did Lockheed." One of McZeal's responsibilities is to collect from credit union borrowers who have gotten behind on their payments. Recently he called on a carpenter who owed \$1,000.

"It's the rain," the man told McZeal. "I can't make no money when it rains. Give me 10 days of sunshine, then I'll start paying you back." The carpenter was true to his word.

"You see," McZeal says, "that's what everybody needs. Those people at Lockheed, they messed up even with all that money, and the government helped them out. What if the government did the same thing for co-ops? What if they said, 'OK,

from now on every co-op gets 10 days of sunshine?'"

Unlike Lockheed and the powerful aerospace industry, however, co-ops lack the clout that comes from unity. Traveling around the country, one finds there is really no such thing in America as a "cooperative movement." Rather, there are thousands of separate co-ops and communes, each sailing a brave and lonely course, each trying to make headway against a swelling sea of corporate wealth and power. Co-ops are ships that pass in the night. But the old do not signal to the young; neither do the affluent reach out to the poor. For the most part, cooperatism's largest beneficiaries remain ingrown and narcissistic.

The 1,000 rural electric co-ops, whose members only a generation ago had to grope through the kerosene gloom, now consistently shun the thousands of black, Indian and Chicano families whose shacks are still dark. Not one black man sits on the board of a single local rural electric cooperative. Similarly, the big farm federations—those young Davids that have grown into gnarled Goliaths—have with rare exceptions turned their backs on true cooperatism. They seem to have abandoned the maxims of Rochdale for those of Rochefoucauld, that worldly wit of the 17th century who observed, "We all have strength enough to endure the misfortunes of others."

Hustling the System

Even the triumphant and progressively inclined urban co-ops—Seattle's GHC, for instance, or New York's United Housing Foundation—appear too weak, too busy and too often at bay to bring the good news to others. Within the next 12 months the Congress will probably initiate a massive subsidy scheme for new group health maintenance organizations, but health cooperatives will be vouchsafed a very thin sliver of those funds, because health cooperatives have few advocates in Washington.

Cooperative housing faces equally uncertain prospects, although for different reasons. The hodgepodge of available subsidies compels co-op sponsors to hustle the system. Through the National Association of Housing Cooperatives, sponsors are continually asking Congress to subtract this from a bill and add that, to amend this section and revise that section. Never have they demanded the total overhaul that is plainly required; never have they protested that the present tangle of subsidies shuts out the poor, drives up housing costs and provides bankers and developers with what amounts to a Federally endorsed blank check.

Need: Organization

Regrettably, few *individuals* participating in cooperatives today appear to understand either the difficulties of their cause or the solutions that are possible; they have not exerted the pressure necessary for change in their organizations. The difficulties arise not only from private competition, which is practically overwhelming, but from the very nature of cooperatives. They rely on such dubious business assets as amateurism and voluntarism; they dream big dreams; they make big mistakes. At the same time co-ops require consummate organizing skills rarely found in private industry. It may be ironic, but it is certainly not accidental that nearly every successful co-op has been the creation of a single organizing genius—a Shadid, a Kazan, or a Kaplan—who has led his people a step or two out of the wilderness.

Such leaders have had to be geniuses because they have had to struggle against gigantic odds: the indifference against government, the opposition of private industry, the time-honored, laissez-faire habits of America. Even today, as consumer and communal currents here and there begin to eddy, few Americans have been encouraged to think in terms of the cooperative commonwealth. To most people Rochdale,

England, is a less familiar name than Carbondale, Illinois; it will doubtless take years of education to turn that around.

In a sense the young, with their new co-ops, communes and "intentional communities," have already begun the educational process. They will need considerable help from established opinion makers—our editorialists, our politicians—who are at present nowhere near the cooperative fold.

Yet now, as in the '30s, we have a chance to nourish the country's cooperative impulse, to develop it as a means of coping with our urban problems just as we developed it to help meet our rural needs. Among other things, this would require establishing cooperative banks capable of providing low-interest loans to new co-ops, setting up a consumer cooperative service in Washington—possibly within the Department of Commerce—and in general making cooperatism an explicit goal on our national agenda.

In other words, it awaits the kind of political rebellion that erupted 50 years ago, when farmers who were determined to have their cooperatives refused simply to "go home and slop the hogs." Unfortunately that political groundswell, which brought us such landmark benefits as Capper-Volstead and the REA,

has no analog at the moment. In fact, many young people take pride in viewing their co-ops as *nonpolitical*—that is, as a disengagement from an unresponsive government. Their disillusionment with politics may be understandable, but it will not revivify the cooperative idea.

Each new co-op and commune tends to make the mistake of looking inward and seeing itself not as a part of a national movement but as a penultimate test case. As one young coordinator of a natural food store in Minneapolis told me, on learning that the Health Department might close down the shop, "If they off this place, I'm through with America." So the natural food stores come and go, talking of Jean Jacques Rousseau. And the buying clubs are not far behind.

National Alternative

From New Harmony and Rochdale down to the present, cooperatism has been essentially a *local* phenomenon, an idea kept alive by people loyal to their land, their neighborhoods and their towns. This provincial quality has been the cooperative's strength and also its weakness. Without it, Co-op City would be just a "project," the Berkeley Cooperative would seem no different from the A&P. With it, cooperatism remains both parochial and

apolitical, an idea that frequently sprouts but too seldom spreads.

To be sure, most cooperatives still operate on a shoestring; they are victims of an economic system that discourages their way of doing business and offers every advantage to their competition, the nation's largest and wealthiest corporations. But cooperatives are victims as well of their own failure to unite politically behind their fractionated cause. Only the farmer, among American cooperators, appears to have understood that the fight is to be won or lost in Washington, and not in Berkeley or Kansas City or Pigeon Falls.

No one can doubt in these troubled times that the cooperative idea is once again capturing the imaginations of many Americans, particularly among young people. Fortunately, it has something to build on. Thanks to a century of painful progress, cooperatism's base today is broader and stronger than ever before; and consumers today, if not exactly organized, are at least tuned in to their grievances and, in many cases, ready to enter the fray. The question is whether cooperatism, with its history of hopes and disappointments, can now coalesce into a movement that offers Americans a genuine alternative to state-corporatism. For all practical purposes, that struggle is just beginning.



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