

SOMETHING OF OUR OWN

part II

SOMETHING OF OUR OWN; Copyright 1965
Mary E. Varela. Published by H.J.K.
Publishing Co., Jackson, Mississippi.

Some of us farmers in Batesville, Mississippi got together last summer when the white okra buyer wouldn't give us a good enough price on our okra.



We started a co-operative called the West Batesville Farmers Co-op and decided to sell our okra for ourselves.

Once we got started, we got ourselves a \$113,000 loan from the government.

This went for heavy farm machinery.

We bought



three
two-row
cotton
pickers,

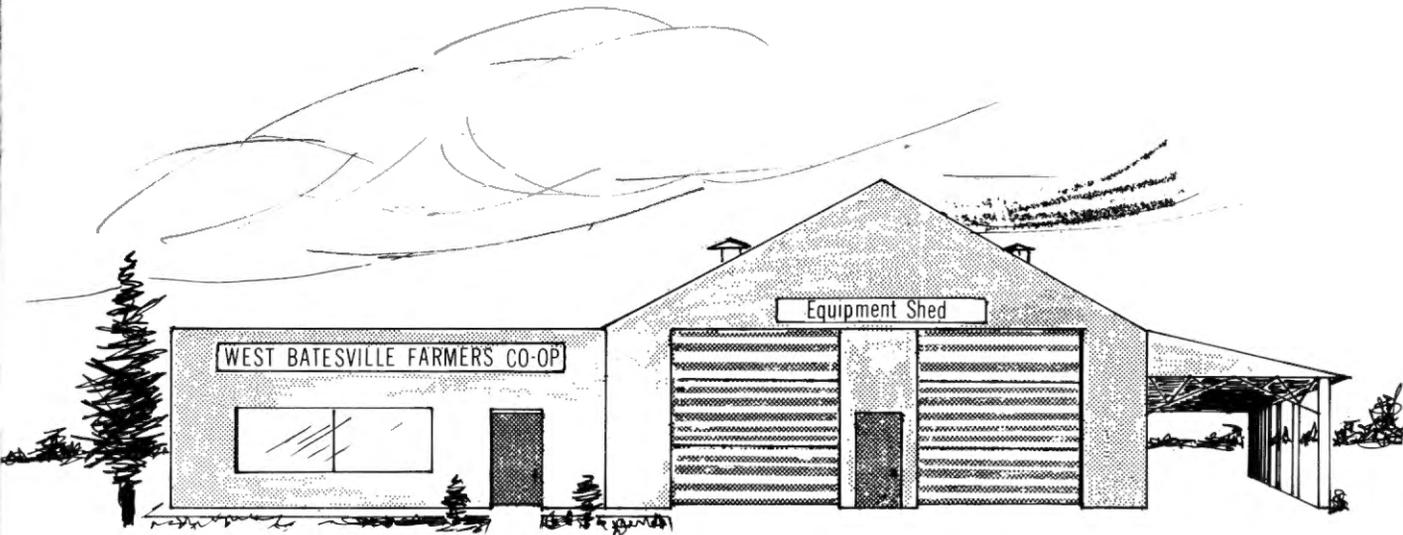


three combines.

four trucks.



and we got enough money to build an equipment shed and office building for the co-op.



We have ten years to pay off this loan. And the interest is almost half what the white banks would have charged.

The way we got started thinking about buying all this equipment was when our children started going to school in September.

In Panola County, Mississippi our children used to go to school split session.

They would go some in the winter and some in the summer.

It seems like the white man holds all of us, even our children, responsible for picking his cotton.

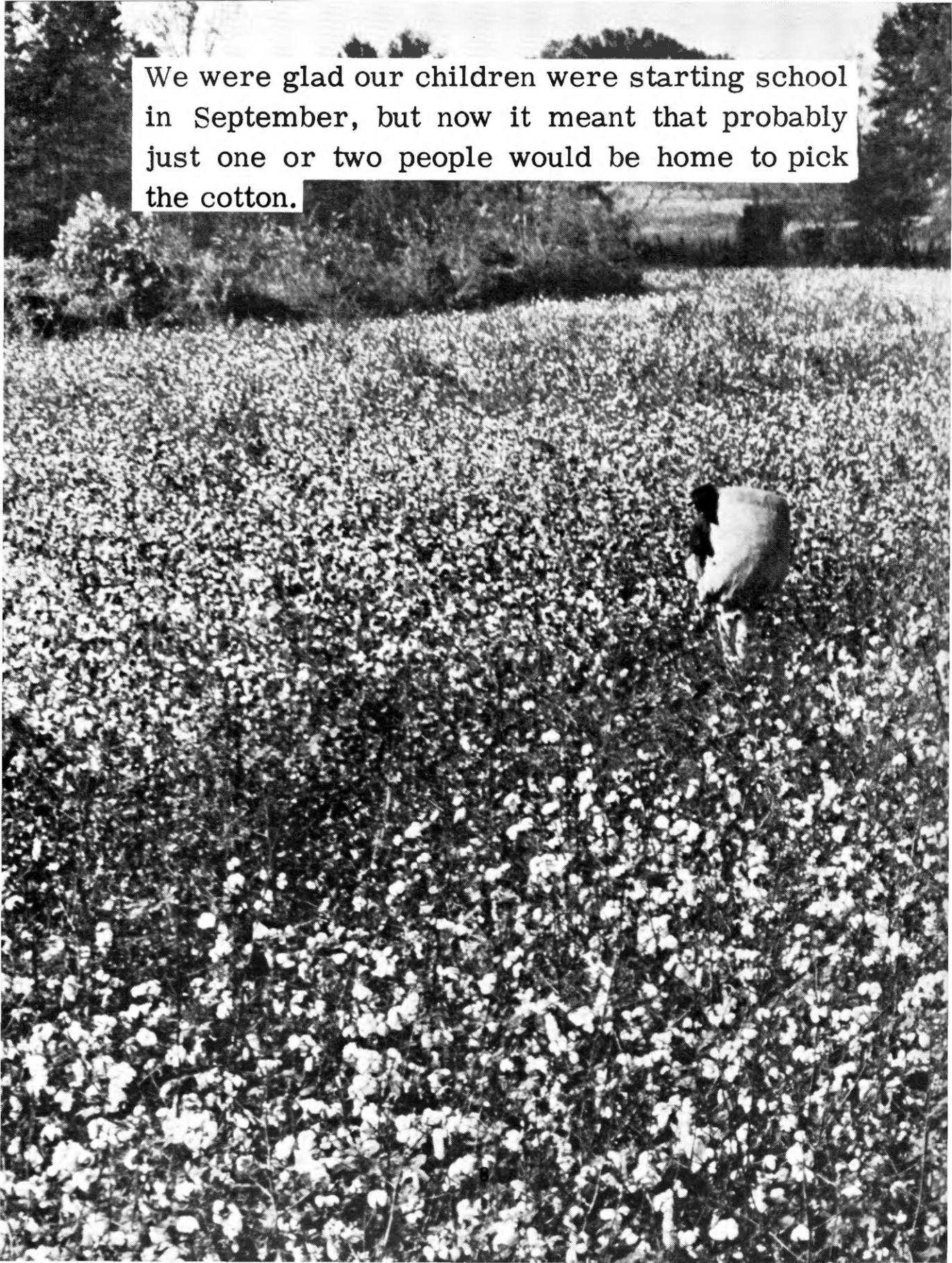


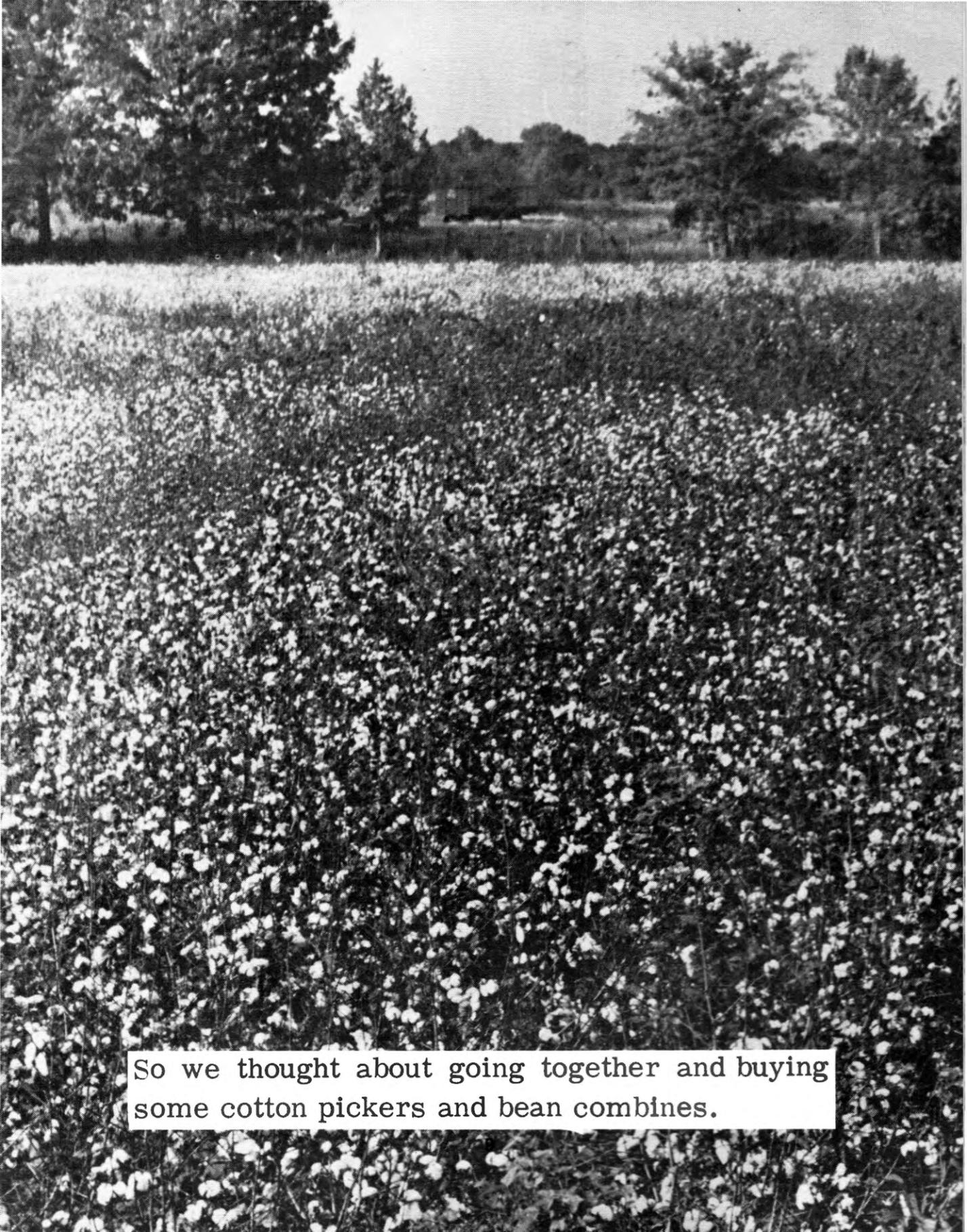
Why else did our children have to split up their schooling and go in the hot summer while white folks children started in September.

A lot of parents didn't like the idea of split sessions. What can you learn when your schooling is all split up?

So this year the school board finally decided to have our kids start to school in September.

We were glad our children were starting school in September, but now it meant that probably just one or two people would be home to pick the cotton.





So we thought about going together and buying some cotton pickers and bean combines.

We had already started working for ourselves during this past summer. We had sold our okra for ourselves and started the West Batesville Farmers Cooperative.

We didn't make a lot of money, but we had something of our own.

That's the good thing about a cooperative.

Everybody makes the decisions, not just one boss man.

And everybody shares the profits. There's no one person getting all the money.

And, of course, everybody shares the losses. But somehow it's a little easier when you are sharing a burden.

The cooperative made it easier for us to think about buying harvesting equipment.

With the children being in school we were worried about the crops being harvested late or left in the fields.

No one of us could afford to buy harvesting equipment by ourselves.

When you have a co-op, the co-op can buy the pickers and combines and whatever else you might need.

That way no one man has to stand the weight of paying back the loan.

All of us cooperate and get it paid back together.

In order to get a loan, we needed to get a charter from the state to make us a legal cooperative.

To do this, we needed ten people who we could name on the charter as members of the board.

We elected a couple of farmers from each district in our county to the board.

A charter in Mississippi costs \$25.00. So we all chipped in together to pay for it.



We found out from our civil rights workers that we could get a loan from the federal government's poverty program.

The poverty program will lend money to a farmer's co-op if over half of its members are poor or low-income farmers.

The federal government loans this poverty money through the local FHA office.



We went down there to ask them about it and found out they didn't know any more about it than we did.

After we got them straightened out, we filed our application for poverty money saying we wanted two cotton pickers, two combines and a bulldozer.

In addition to this we needed money to pay our drivers and operators a dollar and a quarter an hour.

We also needed money for an office building and an equipment shed.

After we put in this application, the county agent came to our meeting one night and tried to discourage us.

He said our idea was too big.

He said we had to crawl before we could walk and that we were asking for too much equipment and too much money.

He tricked himself though. He told us we had to take a survey of how many acres of cotton and how many acres of beans we would be harvesting with these machines.

We plan to pay off the machines by hiring them out to co-op members and other farmers.

We charge \$25.00 a bale to pick cotton and five per cent of the beans we harvest.

The county agent was thinking we wouldn't have enough acres to qualify us asking for two pickers and two combines.

1 Two-row
Cotton Picker

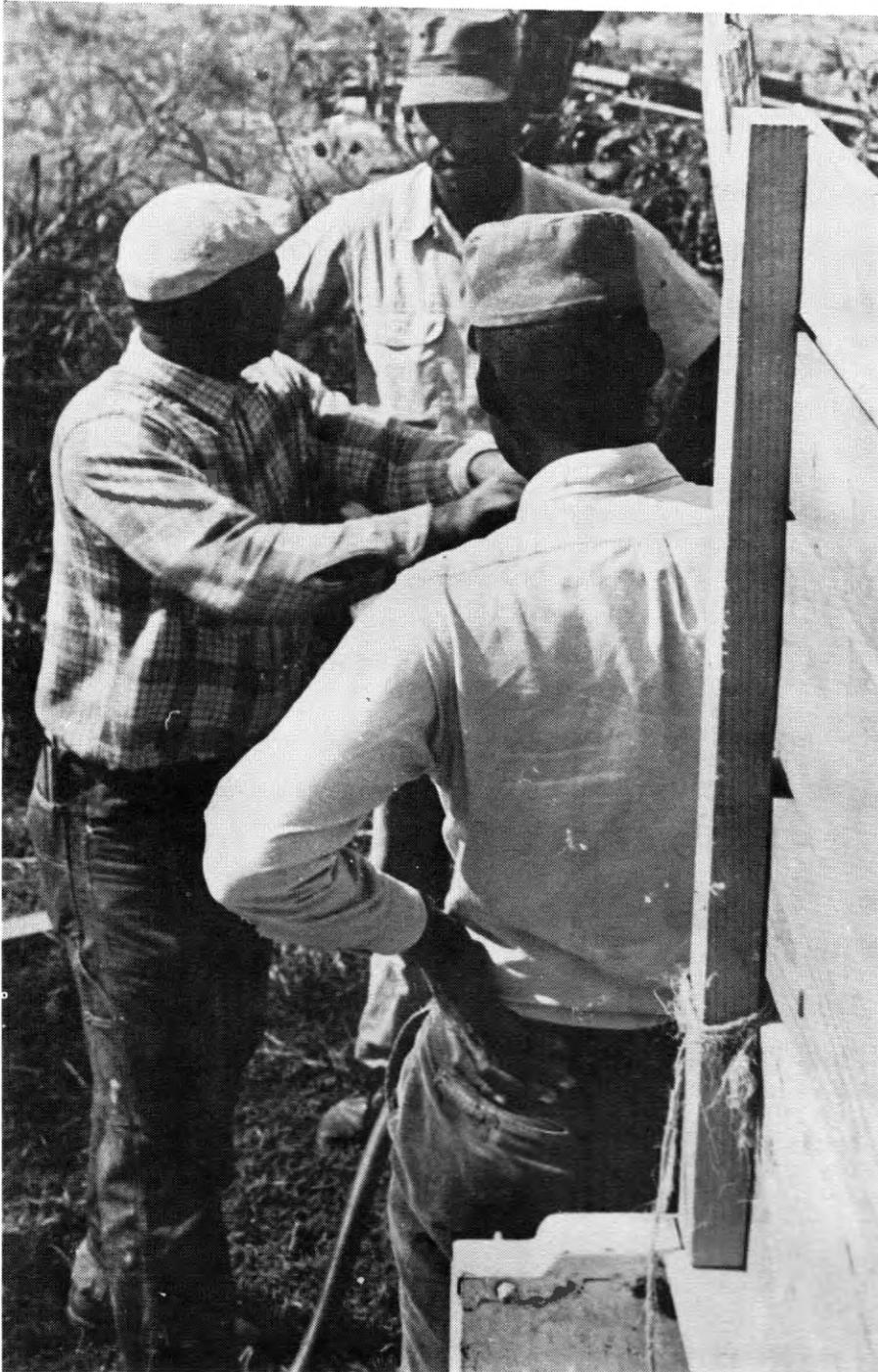
EQUALS

250
Acres of Cotton



He said it would take two hundred and fifty acres of cotton to qualify us to buy one two-row cotton picker.





We organized
ourselves
to run
this survey.

Running a survey means you go to a farmer and ask him how many acres of cotton does he have. Then you ask him, how many acres would he let you pick with the co-op picker.

It took us awhile to run the survey, but we all shared the work.

It meant we had to lose time out of our crops to go all over the county. And that meant buying gasoline too.

But in the end we proved the county agent wrong.

When we came back from taking this survey, we had fourteen hundred acres of cotton and fourteen hundred acres for beans.

The county agent had to swallow his words and say that we needed six cotton pickers instead of the two we had asked for and three combines instead of two.

He couldn't put us off anymore.

We came out of it all with \$113,000 loan with ten years to pay at almost half the interest anyone else would have charged us.

When we put our first picker into the field,
it was something to see.

No more crawling for us

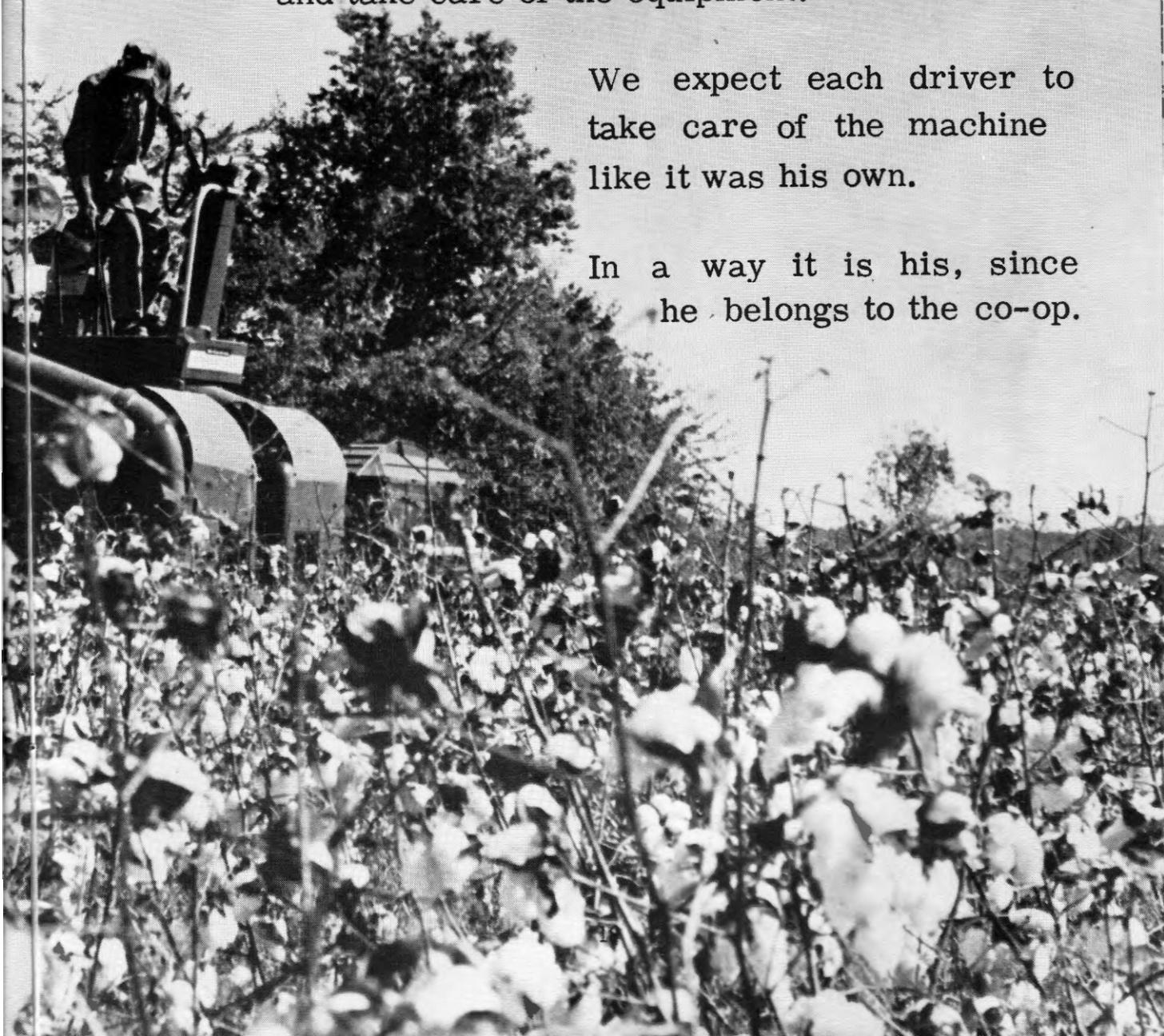


we're riding now.

Our own members were trained to operate and take care of the equipment.

We expect each driver to take care of the machine like it was his own.

In a way it is his, since he belongs to the co-op.







One of our dreams for the future, after we've paid off our loan and gotten a little ahead, is that we'd like to build a gin for ourselves that all the small farmers could own together.

We small farmers can't stand alone much longer and hope to compete with the big farms.

We need heavy equipment to operate our farms efficiently and hope to come out ahead.

No one farmer can afford to buy that equipment alone.

We've got to get together.

Everybody says that farmers are independent and too hard to get together.

Well, there comes a time when you're too small to stand alone.

When that time comes, it's time to co-operate ourselves.

And maybe we'll have something to give our children,



when that time comes.

Note: Photographs on pages 3 and 6 of part I and on pages 7 and 13 of part II of unknown groups and persons are used only for illustration.

Published and edited by

Mary E. Varela of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee under a grant given by the Aaron E. Norman Fund of New York City and the Child Development Group of Mississippi. The grant was received by the United States National Student Association, Washington D.C.

December, 1965.

Photographs: Robert Fletcher, SNCC
Bennie Jackson, CDGM
Mary Varela, SNCC

IF YOU WOULD LIKE A SPEAKER FROM THE
WEST BATESVILLE FARMERS COOPERATIVE

write to:

President
West Batesville Farmers Cooperative
Route 2, Box 20
Batesville, Mississippi

These books go along with a film strip of the same title: SOMETHING OF OUR OWN. The film strip and books are designed to be used as tools in an adult education - literacy program for farmers.

For additional information, write:

Mary E. Varela, Box 109, Tougaloo, Mississippi