

Negro Farm Co-op: Progress in Mississippi

BATESVILLE, Miss.—A group of 75 Negro farmers here have just received a \$113,000 loan from the federal government. The loan, approved by the farmers home administration of the department of agriculture, is paying for three mechanical cotton pickers, three combines, four trucks, some land and the construction of a machine shed.

The farmers, chartered by the state as the West Batesville Farmers association, are buying and using the machinery co-operatively to pick their crops, to take the cotton to the gin and the vegetables directly to markets in Memphis and St. Louis.

This co-operative venture by small land owning Negro farmers had its beginning in their failure last spring to get a better price for their okra crop from the local white man to whom they had been selling. The success or failure of this co-op may foretell the future rural Negroes in Mississippi will have.

Small Farms Fail

Mechanization is replacing hand labor in the delta and surrounding areas of Mississippi. Even at traditional wages of \$2 and \$3 a day for chopping (weeding) and picking cotton, machines are cheaper than people and more efficient. As a result tens of thousands of Negroes are without employment at even starvation wages.

But mechanization is not only replacing hand labor, it is also making the small farm uneconomical to operate. These farms cannot compete with the large farms by using hand labor. Nor can they afford machines.

The few Negroes who do own land have very small farms, most of them bought from the federal government which had possessed the land during the depression. Co-ops may be able to save some of these small farmers.

Negro farmers in Batesville have been

The formation of Negro co-operatives in the south to operate and obtain financing for farming and other small businesses is a growing trend, and regarded by some leaders as very important economic groundwork for further progress of integration. It is seen as a means of freeing Negroes from economic fears and pressures that have kept many from claiming their civil rights under the new federal racial equality laws. Here is a report from Mississippi on what is said to be the largest such co-operative in the state.

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growing okra for almost 10 years and during that time have always sold their crops to a white man in town who, in turn, marketed it in the large cities to the north. He had been paying them 6c a pound but in recent years had gone down to 4c. Last spring he offered them 4 1/2c. Hoping to get him to go to at least 5c, the Negro farmers petitioned for 8c. He asked them scornfully if they intended to run his business.

Irritated by this response, the Negroes went to near-by Madison county where Negroes had formed a cotton gin co-op and returned with the idea of forming their own co-op. People from the Madison county venture helped them get started.

The co-op received its state charter in April. It bought okra seed for the farmers and rented a building to which farmers brought their okra last fall to load for the trip to market. Members were paid by the co-op to drive the crop north. In the summer, the farmers also decided to buy equipment for the co-op and began applying for the loan.

However, organizing the co-op and getting the loan wasn't easy. As a group of Negroes who were trying to act independently, their actions at first were not assisted or approved by local whites.

The co-op owes its success thus far mainly to the persistence of Robert James, its secretary and assistant manager. James majored in business administration at Mississippi vocational college but had to drop out because of

lack of money. He and his wife went to Chicago, where he hoped to make enough money to return to college. But a child was born and he never was able to.

James returned to Batesville in summer of 1964 for a visit. He found that things had changed. The civil rights movement had come and had its effect. So when his father asked him to come back and run his farm, he and his wife and child returned. This was last March.

"A man asked me to come to the first meeting of the farmers," he explains, "and I've only missed one since."

The farmers were at first told that they couldn't set up a co-op and couldn't market the okra themselves. But James kept pressuring the county FHA agent.

"The hardest thing," commented Chris Williams, a civil rights volunteer in Batesville, "is finding out what to do to take advantage of government programs. No one knew what to do and no one would tell them."

Bias Among Members

Some Negroes signed contracts to sell in Batesville as in the past, but most held out and they won. James, besides his work for the co-op, also got a part-time job in the local FHA office. He soon helped a local sharecropper obtain an FHA loan to buy land and build a house. He thought of other ways in

which the co-op could help sharecroppers. He would like to see the co-op rent 60 acres next year and give it to sharecroppers to grow okra during the off season, selling it through the co-op.

"The co-op would do this as a public service," he explains. "Sharecroppers can't afford to rent the land themselves."

However, other members of the co-op do not take such a kindly attitude toward sharecroppers. Their attitude seems ironically similar to that of southern whites toward Negroes or at least, of middle class persons toward members of the lower class: That they are where they are because of laziness, not lack of opportunity. It remains to be seen whether Robert James can help them change their minds.

Despite such problems, the co-op will be busy next year. Already it is the largest co-op of low income farmers in Mississippi. And the FHA will now permit it to add as many more members as it likes.

The co-op also plans on increasing the variety of crops. This year its members grew cotton and okra. Next year they plan on planting also tomatoes, green beans, peas and possibly corn, butter beans and black eyed peas.

Spurred by the civil rights movement, which has tried to get Negroes to act for themselves on economic problems, co-ops have sprung up throughout Mississippi. Among them are the cotton gin co-op, a quilt making co-op in Meridian, a garment making co-op in Jackson, and there are plans for a co-operative brick factory. But none involves as many people as the West Batesville Farmers association.

The success of this co-op would do more than help its own members. It would show other Negroes with land a way out and it would give antagonistic whites some second thoughts.