

2020

## Owen Cooper (1908-1986): Businessman, Devout Southern Baptist, and Racial Progressive

Charles M. Dollar  
*University of British Columbia*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh>

---

### Recommended Citation

Dollar, Charles M. (2020) "Owen Cooper (1908-1986): Businessman, Devout Southern Baptist, and Racial Progressive," *Journal of Mississippi History*. Vol. 82: No. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh/vol82/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Mississippi History* by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [aquilastaff@usm.edu](mailto:aquilastaff@usm.edu).

## Owen Cooper (1908-1986): Businessman, Devout Southern Baptist, and Racial Progressive

*By Charles M. Dollar*

In 1961 Owen Cooper, a member of the executive committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, was angry at the Christian Life Commission for calling on Southern Baptists to apply Christian principles in everyday life, which included race relations. He told Foy Valentine, executive director of the Commission “I think the greatest contribution I can make to the life of Southern Baptists is keep you from getting another dime.”<sup>1</sup> Two decades later, the Christian Life Commission gave its Distinguished Citizen Award to Owen Cooper, citing him as an individual who “stands for all that’s best in Baptist life.”<sup>2</sup> Accepting the award on behalf of Southern Baptists who had changed their views about the teachings of Jesus on race relations, he declared, “I had changed from a person of prejudice to a person who accepts that God is no respecter of persons.”<sup>3</sup> He joined a minority of “progressive” Southern Baptists<sup>4</sup> who had recanted their segregationist views.

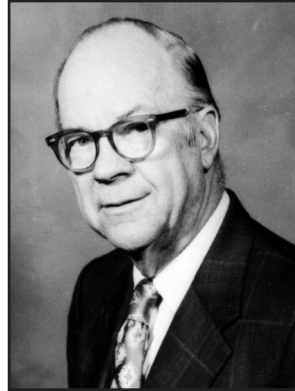


Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

*Owen Cooper*

Lawrence Owen Cooper was born to W. S. Cooper Jr. and Melina Cooper on April 19, 1908, in Warren County, Mississippi, about eight miles northeast of Vicksburg. His father owned an 800-acre farm and ran a dairy, so Owen and his two brothers learned about hard work, chopping cotton, and milking cows. Regular attendance at Bethlehem

---

<sup>1</sup> Foy Dan Valentine “Oral History Memoir, May 30, 1989,” Baylor Institute of Oral History (Baylor University, Waco, Texas), 62.

<sup>2</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me, A Book About Owen Cooper* (Nashville: Fields Communications & Publishing, 1992), 10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Mark Newman describes these Southern Baptists as “progressives” who challenged racial discrimination and inequality in *Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945-1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001), ix.

---

CHARLES M. DOLLAR is a retired historian, archivist, and archival educator at Oklahoma State University, the National Archives and Records Administration, and the University of British Columbia.

Baptist Church was also part of growing up, as was racial prejudice. Many years later, he recalled that in school he was assigned to read *Up From Slavery* by Booker T. Washington but had refused because "I wouldn't read a book by a Negro."<sup>5</sup> Despite attending the small Culkin Academy where the senior class included only Cooper and another boy, he displayed leadership skills as boys from other county schools elected him chairman of a student Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), thus beginning his long association with the work of the YMCA.<sup>6</sup>

Following Cooper's graduation from Culkin Academy, he enrolled at Mississippi A&M College (now Mississippi State University) in September 1924 to major in agriculture. His father encouraged Cooper and his siblings to be what they wanted to be, but if they wanted to go to college they had to help pay the costs. Cooper delivered the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* and swept sidewalks to help pay his costs. Nonetheless, he had time to participate in the campus Baptist Student Union (BSU) and YMCA. Moreover, he managed to spend a week each summer at a YMCA and BSU camp, where his speaking skills and dedication were rewarded with his election as president of the Mississippi Baptist Student Union.<sup>7</sup>

After graduating from Mississippi A&M College in 1929, he worked for a year in the university's alumni association, primarily to lay the groundwork for a future run for governor.<sup>8</sup> In 1930 he moved to Leland, Mississippi, where he taught "vocational arts" and coached the girls basketball team at the high school. An active member of the First Baptist Church, he served as Sunday School Superintendent and a member of a pastor search committee.<sup>9</sup> Although he derived great satisfaction from teaching, he believed he should pursue another career path that would enable him to better use his analytical and problem-solving capabilities. In 1935 he enrolled in the graduate school of the University of Mississippi to work on a master's degree in public planning. After completing the M.A. degree program, he moved to Jackson to work at the State Planning Commission, where his problem-solving, organization,

---

<sup>5</sup> Jo G. Prichard, *Making Things Grow: The Story of Mississippi Chemical Corporation* (Yazoo City: Mississippi Chemical Corporation, 1998), 126.

<sup>6</sup> "Oral history with Mr. Owen Cooper, president, Mississippi Chemical Corporation, retired," University of Southern Mississippi Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage (1973), 5, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me*, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Jo G. Prichard, *Making Things Grow*, 115.

<sup>9</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me*, 3-4.

and planning skills were put to good use. His work led to an expansion of his network of friends and coworkers who recognized that his business acumen along with his capability to develop and implement new approaches and initiatives augured well for his future.

Between 1936 and 1938 while holding a full-time job, Cooper devoted considerable time to working at the First Baptist Church in Jackson. He also served as volunteer director of the Baptist Student Union at both Millsaps and Belhaven colleges in Jackson.<sup>10</sup> At the same time he took night classes at Jackson Law School, completing the degree program in two years, passing the bar exam, and becoming a member of the Mississippi Bar Association.

In 1938 the twenty-nine-year-old bachelor met Elizabeth Thompson when she came to Jackson to attend a Baptist Student Union convention. She was the director of the Baptist Student Union at Louisiana Tech in Ruston, Louisiana, and this shared interest quickly grew into romance. On their fourth date, Owen Cooper knew he had found his soul mate; they were married on September 2, 1938. Two months before their marriage, Cooper was terminated as assistant director of the State Planning Commission and replaced by a political ally of Governor Hugh White. Cooper then joined the U. S. Housing Authority as a consultant. This transition was an easy one for him because he had been the liaison between the Planning Commission and the Authority for low-income housing and had analyzed proposals for low-income housing projects from every county and worked with local officials to finalize their proposals. His public visibility among local county officials and other community leaders across the state, created a relationship he would draw upon in the future. In December 1940, Cooper informed the U. S. Housing Authority that he had learned about a job opportunity that he would pursue at the Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation (MFBF), which represented 250,000 farmers and rural families.<sup>11</sup> Several weeks later, he was named director of research and organization at MFBF.

Shortly after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the MFBF postponed several initiatives to focus on ensuring that Mississippi farmers supported the war. A year earlier, enactment of the Selective Service and Training Act of 1940 (Burke-Wadsworth Act) required all able-bodied men between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five to reg-

---

<sup>10</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me*, 2.

<sup>11</sup> Owen Cooper to Walter Cook, November 22, 1940, Box 4, Folder 37, Owen Cooper Papers.

ister for military service. Thirty-two-year-old Owen Cooper received a deferment from the Hinds County Selective Service Board because of his age and because his work at MFBF was essential to the war effort. As the director of research and organization and managing editor of the *Mississippi Farm Bureau News*, he promoted Mississippi farmer support of the war effort. He used the *Farm Bureau News* as a “bully pulpit” to encourage Mississippi farmers to increase by ten percent their planting of long-staple cotton, which was essential in the production of military supplies and equipment. He also promoted a “buy a war bond campaign” in which county Farm Bureau organizations competed in selling war bonds. This initiative raised more than \$3 million that paid the cost of manufacturing nine B-17 “Flying Fortresses,” each of which was given a name associated with a county in Mississippi.<sup>12</sup>

In November 1945, Cooper was named executive director of MFBF.<sup>13</sup> He quickly revived four initiatives that had been postponed during the war. The first problem was the shortage of rural hospitals. In 1946 Cooper persuaded the legislature to establish the Mississippi Commission on Hospital Care and to match federal funds available under the Hill-Burton Act for rural hospitals. Cooper was chairman of the commission, and under his leadership it approved construction of more than one hundred rural hospitals across the state.<sup>14</sup> To address a second problem that involved a shortage of doctors and nurses, Cooper chaired a MFBF committee on health that advocated an increase in the number of doctors and registered nurses. The third problem identified by MFBF was the need for pre-paid health care and hospitalization through Blue Cross-Blue Shield programs. By 1947 MFBF sponsored a Blue Cross-Blue Shield program to offer low-cost, pre-paid health insurance for Mississippians.<sup>15</sup> Cooper would serve on its board of directors for more than two decades, much of that time as chairman.

Cooper also was concerned about the high cost of life and property/casualty insurance for farmers. In 1946 he received approval to create both types of insurance companies with the Farm Bureau underwriting

---

<sup>12</sup> Edward L. Blake, *Farm Bureau in Mississippi* (Jackson: Mississippi Farm Bureau Federation, 1971), 138-140.

<sup>13</sup> *The Mississippi Farm Bureau News*, Volume 23, No. 10, November 1945, 2, 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 141-143.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 147.

the initial reserved fund requirements.<sup>16</sup> Both companies were immediately successful, and today are multimillion-dollar insurance companies located in Jackson.

In 1947 W. B. Andrews, a researcher at the Mississippi Agricultural Experiment Station, demonstrated that direct application of anhydrous ammonia could increase yields of cotton and corn from twofold to tenfold. Cooper immediately recognized the value of Andrews's research and began planning how to get this fertilizer to farmers at affordable prices.<sup>17</sup> Some companies were producing it, but demand exceeded the available supply, and the price increased dramatically, preventing many farmers from purchasing the greatly-needed fertilizer. Believing the MFBF could form a non-profit farmer co-op to fund construction of a chemical plant to produce this fertilizer, he and several farmer leaders persuaded the legislature, the Mississippi Bankers Association, and the voters of Yazoo County to support the project. Their success was based on strong grassroots endorsement of the project by members of the MFBF, county agriculture agents, and high school and college vocational agriculture teachers.<sup>18</sup> Mobilizing the support of county agents, Cooper organized a team of salesmen to visit farmers and their bankers across the South to persuade them to buy shares of stock in the cooperative and to agree to buy a specific amount of fertilizer annually at a cost basis. At the end of the year, any profit would be returned as "patronage refunds." By the end of the summer, more than 5,000 farmers had purchased shares of stock valued at more than \$2.5 million.<sup>19</sup>

Called Mississippi Chemical Corporation (MCC), the farmer owned co-op located the new chemical plant on the northern outskirts of Yazoo City, forty miles north of Jackson. The site was centrally located, had the abundant supply of water and natural gas essential to production, and had good railroad and highway connections. In 1948 the directors of MCC named Cooper as the first CEO. Under his leadership, additional funds from investors and a \$3,349,000 loan from the Reconstruction Finance

---

<sup>16</sup> Jo G. Prichard, III, "Owen Cooper 1908-1986: Business Leader and Humanitarian," 3, *Mississippi History Now* (Mississippi Department of Archives and History), available at <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/239/owen-cooper-1908-1986-business-leader-and-humanitarian>.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 3-4

<sup>18</sup> Jo G. Prichard, *Making Things Grow*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> "Oral History with Mr. Owen Cooper," 7; Jo G. Prichard, *Making Things Grow*, 32.

Corporation enabled completion of a \$10 million chemical plant.<sup>20</sup> MCC produced its first bag of nitrogen-enriched fertilizer on March 10, 1951, which marked the beginning of a financial venture that returned millions of dollars to farmers throughout the South over the next fifty years.

Beginning in his college days at Mississippi A&M, Cooper believed there should be no difference in his business life and his faith as a Southern Baptist. He was committed to balancing his career with a strong and active leadership in his church, in the Mississippi Baptist Convention, and in the Southern Baptist Convention. He was a deacon at the First Baptist churches in Jackson and Yazoo City, taught a Sunday School class, and participated in weekly church evangelism visitations. He had leadership roles in the Mississippi Baptist Convention, including serving as president. In 1959 he became a member of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) Executive Committee, managing the convention's programs and implementing decisions involving the Cooperative Program – the SBC's comprehensive funding initiative for missions and ministries.

Between 1960 and 1963, he began rethinking his views about race relations. A key factor in this process was his daughter, Nancy, who while a teenager in Yazoo City questioned segregation after she witnessed a car accident that injured a black man. She put the man in her car and drove to the emergency room at the nearest hospital where she was told, "You'll have to take him over to Afro," the black hospital.<sup>21</sup> After she spent her junior year in a college in Germany, she realized the prejudice she and others had about blacks was unfounded. Segregation, she believed, was unchristian and she wanted no part of a church that promulgated and practiced segregation in worship.<sup>22</sup> Years later, Nancy Cooper Gilbert explained that her father gave her and her siblings too much credit for persuading him to change his views about race because few people persuaded him to change his mind on any topic. Rather, she said, he thought deeply about important matters, including race, and would consult with people about their views but would then internalize

---

<sup>20</sup> "Statement by Owen Cooper, executive vice president, Mississippi Chemical Corporation, Yazoo City, Mississippi, to Senate Finance Committee on Banking and Currency, May 26, 1953," Box 54, Folder 50-B, The John C. Stennis Collection, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mississippi State University, Starkville, Mississippi.

<sup>21</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me*, 201.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-203.

the problem or issue and eventually would reach his own decision.<sup>23</sup>

Three pivotal events track the evolution of Owen Cooper's views on race. The first was the riot at the University of Mississippi after James Meredith's enrollment on September 30, 1962. The next day Cooper worked with Billy Mounger, president of the Lamar Life Insurance Company, to persuade influential business leaders to sign a strong public statement deploring the violence on campus, advocating law and order, and calling for the arrest of the rioters.<sup>24</sup> As a member of the Mississippi Economic Council, Cooper was concerned that the riot and the determination of Governor Ross Barnett to preserve segregation at all costs would slow down industrial development. Fostering industry, Cooper believed, was critical to the state's efforts to build up its economy.

Barely a year later Cooper delivered an extraordinary commencement address to the graduates of Mississippi Baptist Seminary in Jackson marking another pivotal step. After preliminary remarks about the importance of the role of the seminary in the education of black ministers, he explained that recent events relating to race impelled him to address this topic. Race was an ancient and universal problem not limited to the South or to the United States, but it was an inherited problem, especially in the South, because "it was a grievous sin to capture men like wild animals and sell them into slavery. The consequences of this sin are now being visited on us, the third and fourth generations." This inherited problem, he believed, could not be solved by federal legislation because "it is impossible to legislate emotions, feelings, and love. Legal force will not compel anyone to like, accept, or respect anyone."<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, he believed it possible to create an atmosphere in which progress and improvement could be achieved.

Cooper urged white Mississippians to recognize that race relations were a serious problem and to stop placing the responsibility on others, previous generations, or people outside the state. What would contribute to a solution, he said, was to recognize the dignity of all people created in God's image, which included extending common courtesies and niceties of human relationships to all blacks and whites in Mississippi. He asked that all Mississippians avoid being party to violence or supporting

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Jo G. Prichard, *Making Things Work*, 124.

<sup>25</sup> Owen Cooper, "Address by Owen Cooper, Yazoo City, Mississippi at the Commencement Exercises, Mississippi Baptist Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi, May 31, 1963," Box 25, Folder 10a, Miscellaneous Articles, Owen Cooper Papers.



activities that could lead to violence.

Cooper believed it was important for Mississippians not to surrender to the leadership of outsiders because Mississippi's race problem "can best be solved among ourselves."<sup>26</sup> Like many of his white contemporaries, he believed outsiders coming into Mississippi were creating confrontations that served no useful purpose. He did not identify these individuals and organizations, but he probably was thinking about the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), among others. Years later, he was less certain about the negative role of outsiders, suggesting that without their militancy his conscience might not have been pricked.<sup>27</sup>

Cooper believed all the concerns he had identified in his speech were important, but the most fundamental one was the need for a crusade to change the hearts of people in "Mississippi and outside the state and throughout the world through the power of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." This was the core of Cooper's belief that the sinful nature of man could only be transformed through the saving grace of God. As individual transformations occurred, he believed race relations in Mississippi would improve.

For Cooper, 1964 was another pivotal year. A revived Ku Klux Klan initiated a reign of terror and intimidation by burning black churches whose members supported voter registration drives and Freedom Schools that COFO had organized. He could not understand how people could undertake such dastardly actions, so he organized the Mississippi Religious Council that spoke out against the burnings. He also strongly supported the work of the Committee of Concern, led by the Reverend William P. Davis, a white Baptist preacher. Davis's organization raised more than \$125,000 to rebuild forty-two churches.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Cooper introduced a resolution at the Mississippi Baptist Convention that declared, "Serious racial problems now beset our state . . . It is our conviction that churches and Christians must lead the way in finding solutions to these problems." The resolution included the caveat that a "final and satisfactory solution" would not come through federal intervention and the actions of outsiders coming into the state.<sup>29</sup>

Events during and after the 1964 Southern Baptist Convention tem-

---

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> "Oral History with Mr. Owen Cooper," 11.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Newman, "The Mississippi Baptist Convention and Desegregation, 1945," *Journal of Mississippi History*, Vol. 59 (Spring 1997), 14.

<sup>29</sup> *New York Times*, November 13, 1964.

porarily slowed the evolution of Cooper's views about race and Southern Baptists. In September he sent an angry letter to Foy Valentine in which he charged that the activities of the Christian Life Commission were dividing the SBC convention into two contending groups or into two conventions."<sup>30</sup> Owen's solution for preventing such a split was for the Christian Life Commission or a special committee composed of former presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention to submit a statement on race relations at the next convention that would be debated and possibly modified. After approval, it would be the established position of the convention for at least five years, thus removing acrimonious debate from proceedings that could split the convention. The notion that one convention could tie the hands of succeeding conventions for five years by removing race as an agenda item was naïve and impractical, and his proposal never gained traction.

After passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Cooper supported the Mississippi Economic Council's position that it was the law of the land and all Mississippians should obey it. Moreover, at hearings of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission in Jackson in February 1965 he said, "Following passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, many responsible citizens of Mississippi began an agonizing period of reappraisal in which we have recognized that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is the law of the land . . . and the habits of yesteryear had to be cast aside."<sup>31</sup>

Cooper's strong support of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill was an implicit rejection of his earlier position that Mississippians were best able to solve race relations on their own without the intrusion of external forces. He went beyond this support by asking the MCC board of directors to approve a resolution that supported the goals of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and stated the company's intention to abide by it. This meant elimination of separate white and black restrooms and adherence to Title VI fair employment practices that prohibited discrimination in hiring, promotion, and terms of employment. Cooper was personally involved in meeting with company supervisors to ensure they understood and conformed to these practices. He acknowledged later that MCC had many black employees who worked in operations and maintenance

---

<sup>30</sup> Owen Cooper to Foy Valentine, September 17, 1964, Box 27, Folder 5, SBC Executive Committee Records, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>31</sup> "Testimony of Owen Cooper," *Justice in Jackson, Mississippi, Hearings Held in Jackson, Miss., February 16-20, 1965. U.S. Civil Rights Commission, Vol. II* (New York: Arno Press & *The New York Times*, 1971), 377.

departments and “we didn’t treat them right”:

Many of them were just as competent as the white mechanic but the black person was paid only as a helper. I don’t know why I wasn’t more conscious of that and of what we should have been doing, but for a long time I wasn’t. And I’m sorry for it. After I began to catch on, there wasn’t any problem making the transition.<sup>32</sup>

As Freedom Summer wound down in 1964, civil rights activists, leaders of the Delta Ministry, and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party began discussing how to build on their success. They decided to submit a proposal to the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to fund a multi-county Head Start program for disadvantaged pre-school children. OEO funded the proposal that created the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) to administer the Head Start initiative that began in the summer of 1965. From the outset, the goal of CDGM was to expose disadvantaged pre-school children to an educational and health care environment that offered a better future than their parents had experienced while at the same time mobilizing poor blacks to organize politically and economically to work for equality and social justice. Mobilizing poor black adults to seek institutional changes that assured the full benefits of citizenship and a pathway out of poverty was a critical component of the CDGM Head Start initiative.

At first, white leaders in some counties ignored CDGM, but as its funding increased and it began to acquire local political muscle, state and local leaders became alarmed at the prospect of having little or no influence on how the funds were spent. Other established white leaders viewed CDGM as a wedge to promote integration, and they demanded that Senators John Stennis and James Eastland defund CDGM. As a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Stennis had influence over funding of federal programs, including OEO. Claiming there was widespread politicization of Head Start, he initiated an investigation of allegations that CDGM had mismanaged funds, ignored government regulations, and supported extremist groups. Eastland charged that some of the extremist civil rights groups “have definite connections with

---

<sup>32</sup> Jo G. Prichard, *Making Things Grow*, 69, 124-126.

Communist organizations.”<sup>33</sup> Sargent Shriver, the head of OEO, wanted to continue Head Start programs in Mississippi, but he recognized he had to work out an arrangement that satisfied Senator Stennis. His solution was to defund CDGM and fund a second Head Start program headed by a biracial board of directors who had established track records of financial integrity and would ensure adherence to federal funding procedures.<sup>34</sup>

Shriver invited Hodding Carter III and Aaron Henry to come to Washington to meet with him to help jump start the program. Henry had tremendous visibility among blacks across the state as a stalwart supporter of civil rights. His involvement in the newly established program, Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP), gave it a credibility that no other black leader in the state could provide.<sup>35</sup> Hodding Carter III was the editor of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, widely recognized as a progressive on social change, and played a prominent role in the Loyal Democratic Party of Mississippi. Recognizing that Owen Cooper was widely respected across the state, Carter and Henry recommended Shriver appoint Cooper as chairman of MAP’s board of directors. Cooper, Carter, and Henry were authorized to select other directors that included two prominent blacks, Reverend R. L. T. Smith from Jackson and Charles Young from Meridian.<sup>36</sup> Cooper’s decision to accept the appointment to MAP<sup>37</sup> and to serve as its unpaid chairman was not easy for him because he knew that his lifelong “aspirations for Governor would go out the window.”<sup>38</sup>

The first challenge Cooper faced was the hostility of disgruntled CDGM supporters and local white opponents of Head Start. The former

---

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times*, March 7, 1966.

<sup>34</sup> John Dittmer, *Local People, The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 375.

<sup>35</sup> Minion K. C. Morrison, *Aaron Henry of Mississippi, An Inside Agitator* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 163. In *The Promised Land: The Great Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 326 Nicholas Lemann states that Henry’s civil rights credentials “were so unassailable that no organization he lent his name to could be convincingly portrayed as a mere tool of the white power structure.”

<sup>36</sup> This contradicts Emma J. Folwell’s claim in *The War on Poverty in Mississippi: From Massive Resistance to New Conservatism* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), 132 that Harry McPherson, an aide to President Lyndon Johnson, recruited members of the MAP Board of Directors.

<sup>37</sup> Owen Cooper had a penchant for developing descriptions of projects that were distinctive and easy to remember, so he (with the assistance of his wife) created Mississippi Action for Progress that clearly identified it as a Mississippi project that focused on actions designed to bring progress to the state. Email from Spencer and Nancy Cooper Gilbert, August 1, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> “Oral History with Mr. Owen Cooper,” 10.

threatened parents and children enrolled in a competing Head Start Program while the latter, including the Ku Klux Klan, believed it was a cover for integration. In one instance, a center was burned. In Wayne County local whites threatened the staff and parents of children attending the Head Start Center. Cooper requested Governor Paul Johnson Jr. to provide assurance that the personal safety of MAP staff, parents, and children in Wayne County would be protected.<sup>39</sup> The governor forwarded Cooper's letter to T. B. Birdsong, Commissioner of Public Safety, who informed Cooper that protecting individual citizens was not part of the mission of the state police. Local law officials, he wrote, were responsible for law and order, and he advised Cooper to work with them.<sup>40</sup> Cooper believed this would be futile in areas where white opposition to Head Start was strong. Nonetheless, he issued a press release in which he urged municipal, county, and state officials to "curb offenses against the personnel, property, and pupils at MAP projects."<sup>41</sup> Historian Emma Folwell describes Cooper's actions as "backing down,"<sup>42</sup> when the only "compliance lever" he had was to recommend OEO withhold funds to local Community Action Boards to pressure them to obtain the cooperation of law enforcement officials. Of course, withholding funds would have played into the hands of whites who opposed the Head Start program.

The second challenge he faced was to ensure that Senator Stennis and Governor Johnson did not view MAP as a revived CDGM. Quickly establishing the independence of MAP, Cooper declared it was not affiliated with, nor directly related to any organization, and "is not and will not become related to, subservient to or dependent upon any organization, be it political, social, economic, or sectarian."<sup>43</sup> Although he did not specify what groups he had in mind, it is likely he would have included COFO, SNCC, the Delta Ministry, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, advocates of black power, and some former staff members of the Child Development Group of Mississippi.

Recognizing that MAP lacked the resources to vet its 1,400 employees, Cooper asked the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission

---

<sup>39</sup> Owen Cooper to Governor Paul Johnson, February 17, 1967, SCR ID 2-42-0-33-1-1-1, Series 15, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records (Mississippi State Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, T. B. Birdsong to Owen Cooper, February 20, 1967, SCR ID 2-42-0-35-1-1-1.

<sup>41</sup> Press Release, Box 1, Folder 15, Patt Derian Papers, Mississippi State University Special Collections and Archives (Starkville, Mississippi).

<sup>42</sup> Emma Folwell, *The War on Poverty in Mississippi*, 93.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, November 5, 1968.

to identify people who had politicized the anti-poverty program and therefore would be a liability as MAP employees.<sup>44</sup> According to Erle Johnston, executive director of the Sovereignty Commission, Cooper prefaced his request for assistance with the statement that he wanted to “weed out agitators and revolutionaries.”<sup>45</sup> As recently as 1963 Cooper had publicly expressed concern about outside agitators, but he had never described them as “revolutionaries,”<sup>46</sup> so Johnston’s attribution of “revolutionaries” to him was another instance of the Sovereignty Commission’s embellishment to demonstrate that progressives like Cooper were on the same page with the commission. Nonetheless, Cooper’s request served two purposes. First, it enabled MAP to block employment of anyone who would be a potential liability. Second, believing that Johnston was likely to share this request with Senator Stennis and Governor Johnson, Cooper could cleverly demonstrate due diligence in preventing the politicization of MAP.

Ensuring transparency and integrity in all MAP financial and personnel decisions was the third challenge Cooper faced. He declared that MAP must conform to OEO procedures, including one requiring the award of bids for local services to the lowest bidder, assuming comparable quality. His decision angered blacks in Port Gibson where the lowest bid was from a white-owned business that was the target of a community-wide black boycott to end discriminatory practices. In another instance, he declared MAP would not support a NAACP-sponsored economic boycott of white businesses in Greenwood because it would politicize MAP.<sup>47</sup>

The most controversial instance of Cooper’s insistence on MAP compliance with OEO regulations and public transparency involved Helen Bass Williams, who succeeded Walter Smith as executive director of

---

<sup>44</sup> Jo G. Pritchard to Owen Cooper, October 5, 1967, Security Clearance. In Sovereignty Commission-MAP, Folder 8, Owen Cooper Papers.

<sup>45</sup> Erle Johnston, “Memo To File,” SCR ID 99-48-0-489-1-1-1, Series 15, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records.

<sup>46</sup> This assessment is based upon the author’s review of the Owen Cooper Papers. Moreover, Cooper’s daughter, Nancy Cooper Gilbert, recalls no instance when her father used “revolutionaries” to describe black activists. Email from Nancy Gilbert, October 11, 2018.

<sup>47</sup> Jackson *Daily News*, May 15, 1968, newspaper clipping in SCR ID 6-45-6-55-1-1-1, Series 15, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Records.

MAP in June 1967.<sup>48</sup> A graduate of Southern Illinois University and holder of two graduate degrees, Williams had been on the faculty of Tougaloo College (1964-1966) and worked briefly for CDGM as a health consultant and as a consultant for OEO before being named executive director. She believed whites and blacks should learn about each other by solving common problems together,<sup>49</sup> which included participation of black parents in the anti-poverty program that she described as an “integrated approach.”<sup>50</sup> Doubtless, her reputation as a bridge builder along with her connections to the black community made her an attractive candidate to the board of directors. However, she had no experience in managing a large organization, and she was sympathetic with those who expected MAP to continue the CDGM involvement to empower black political participation in local communities.

Shortly after her appointment, Cooper sent Williams a letter in which he described acceptable and unacceptable activity of local MAP staff in grassroots civil rights initiatives. Acceptable civil rights activity for MAP staff, he advised her, was to teach citizenship to parents and “tell the people who are eligible to vote, how to register, and where to register,” but MAP staff should “not meet the same group the next morning and lead them to the place of registration.” Moreover, anyone who did not share the goals of MAP or who was unwilling to adhere to the policy and guidelines of OEO and MAP should be terminated.<sup>51</sup> The message to Williams was clear; the primary role of MAP was to work with local communities in establishing a program for the growth and development of underprivileged children. Promotion of the empowerment of black adults to challenge their second-class citizenship status was unacceptable.

Erle Johnston viewed the appointment of Williams with suspicion and concern. He believed Aaron Henry had promoted her candidacy and under his influence she would ensure that MAP addressed civil rights issues. Furthermore, she had made public statements that implied she

---

<sup>48</sup> At the time of Smith’s appointment, questions were raised about his lack of experience in managing a large organization such as MAP. Toward the end of his first year it was clear he did not have the administrative skills the job required, and he was reassigned to a non-administrative job. Eventually, he resigned from MAP. “Daily Report” (OEO), no date, Box 1, Folder 1, Patt Derian Papers (Mississippi State University Special Collections and Archives, Starkville, Mississippi).

<sup>49</sup> Mary O’Hara, “Let It Fly: The Legacy of Helen Bass Williams” (PhD diss., Southern Illinois University, 2004), 200.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>51</sup> Owen Cooper, “Confidential Map File, June 13, 1967,” Owen Cooper Papers, Box 76, Folder 5.



supported some aspects of the focus of CDGM. From the very beginning of her appointment, Johnston worked to discredit her and force the MAP Board of Directors to terminate her. He copied memos to file regarding his concerns and actions to Nathan Glazer, a special assistant to Governor Johnson, to undermine her leadership. He claimed he had documents that incriminated her, and he would turn them over to Senator Stennis if Williams was not terminated.<sup>52</sup> Williams was never terminated as executive director nor was she demoted.

By January 1968, Cooper and the board of directors had concluded that Williams was a micromanager whose decisions were creating severe programmatic and staff morale issues. Cooper recommended the board create an Administrative Committee, which he would chair, to investigate these issues and make recommendations to correct them. The Administrative Committee reviewed Williams's tenure as executive director and identified sixteen problem areas that required immediate correction.<sup>53</sup> Among the problem areas were her prohibition of MAP central staff communication with Head Start Centers, OEO officials in Atlanta, and MAP Board of Directors without her explicit approval, hiring six consultants without approval of the board of directors, ignoring OEO requirements for official position descriptions when hiring new employees,<sup>54</sup> and presenting incomplete and inaccurate reports to the board of directors. She had failed to follow employment and dismissal procedures, thereby exposing MAP to lawsuits, ignored directives issued by the board of directors, refused to delegate authority to the deputy directors of personnel and administration, and routinely used vulgar and demeaning language in dealing with staff. Except for the problem areas associated with the deputy director of administration, staff use of the WATS line, and incorrect reports, she did not directly challenge the remaining thirteen problem areas. She quickly drafted policies and

---

<sup>52</sup> Erle Johnston, SCR ID 6-2-30-0-71-1-1-1. SCR ID 2-13-59-1-1-1, SCR ID 6-45-6-35-1-1-1, SCR ID 6-45-21-1-1-1, SCR ID 48-0-182-1-1-1, SCR ID 99-48-0-185-1-1-1, SCR ID 99-0-45-0-453-1-1-1, and SCR ID 99-48-0-457-1-1-1.

<sup>53</sup> Owen Cooper to Mrs. Helen Bass Williams February 7, 1968, Box 86, MAP #4 Folder, Owen Cooper Papers.

<sup>54</sup> Williams's disregard for OEO regulations was evident when she hired six consultants and described their duties as "Report to the Executive Director." The MAP Finance Manager returned the contract to her with a note explaining that OEO regulations called for a more detailed explanation of the duties to be performed. Williams wrote on the memo in large letters "NUTS! The same as on all others." "Memorandum," Nat Thomas to Helen Bass Williams, October 6, 1967, Box 86, Map Folder #4, Owen Cooper Papers



procedures that addressed these areas and submitted them to the Administrative Committee for approval.<sup>55</sup> A few weeks later, she had a gall bladder attack and returned to Illinois for surgery. While recuperating from surgery she learned that Purdue University had created a new position as the academic advisor to black students that was of interest to her. Subsequently the university offered the position to her, which she readily accepted. On August 31, 1968, she resigned as executive director of MAP effective September 9, 1968.<sup>56</sup> Years later Patt Derian, a consultant hired by OEO to monitor the activities of MAP, recalled her impression of Owen Cooper and the board of directors, "I thought I was going to be dealing with a bunch of closet racists, and I found that wasn't true."<sup>57</sup> She had high praise for Cooper because, she said, he loved children and did not care what color they were and because he was committed to ensuring Head Start delivered the services it was supposed to deliver.<sup>58</sup>

Emma Folwell, however, has a radically different assessment of both Cooper and Williams in which Cooper was the aggressor and Williams was the victim.<sup>59</sup> Under Cooper's leadership MAP limited the progress of poor blacks by funding segregated Head Start Centers and allowing Community Action Boards to practice discrimination with impunity.<sup>60</sup> He deprived Williams of her authority by having the Administrative Committee of the board assume some of her responsibilities and demoted her to the position of deputy administrator for program and training.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, Cooper blocked Williams's promotion of meaningful poor black participation at the grassroots level, which further fractured the

---

<sup>55</sup> Helen Bass Williams to MAP Board of Directors, February 12, 1968, Executive Director to Staff, Board of Directors, MAP, February 12, 1968, Box 78, Most Current Folder, 4C, Owen Cooper Papers.

<sup>56</sup> Helen Bass Williams to Owen Cooper, August 31, 1968, Folder 2, Hodding Carter, III Papers, Mississippi State University Special Collections and Archives (Starkville, Mississippi). I am grateful to Jennifer McGillan, Coordinator of Manuscripts, Mississippi State University Libraries, for her assistance in retrieving documents from the Hodding Carter, III Papers.

<sup>57</sup> "Interview with Patt Derian," John C. Stennis Oral History Project, Mississippi State University, December 17, 1991, 21.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Emma Folwell, *The War on Poverty in Mississippi*, 127-144. Her interpretation is an extension of Joseph Crespino's argument in *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* that in the 1960s and 1970s massive resistance to integration in Mississippi morphed into a race neutral, nuanced political framework in which whites still controlled social, political and economic institutions.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

class division between black members of the NAACP and poor blacks in the state.<sup>62</sup> His actions as chairman enabled whites to retain control of local social, economic, and political institutions, thereby ensuring continuation of the second-class citizenship of blacks. Her most damning indictment was that Erle Johnston duped and manipulated Owen Cooper to secure the resignation of Helen Bass Williams, thereby “forging Mississippi Action for Progress into a mechanism of white control.”<sup>63</sup>

Folwell’s portrayal of Cooper as an aggressor and Williams as a victim is dubious, given the previously referenced sixteen problem areas the Administrative Committee identified that required improvement and Williams’s agreement to initiate immediate improvements. Equally dubious is Folwell’s assertion that he supported MAP funding of segregated Head Start Centers and allowed Community Action Boards to discriminate on the basis of race with impunity. The primary reason why few poor white parents enrolled their children in Head Start Centers was because of their apprehension of being ostracized by neighbors, who believed that Head Start Centers were a cover for integration.<sup>64</sup> Aside from target areas where no whites lived, segregated Head Start Centers were largely the result of the decisions of poor white parents, not Cooper and MAP. The only leverage Cooper had was to recommend that OEO defund segregated Head Start Centers, which would have been counterproductive.

Folwell’s claim that Cooper blocked meaningful participation of poor blacks in improving their lives and further fractured the class division between middle-class black members of the NAACP and poor black plantation workers, sharecroppers and domestic workers in the state is without merit. She does not define “meaningful participation,” but if it is understood as activities that would have politicized MAP along the same lines as they politicized CDGM, it is likely they would have had the same disastrous results for MAP. Even more important is historian Alan Draper’s assessment that the fundamental conflict between MFDP- CDGM advocates and NAACP-MAP advocates was about power

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 128, 149.

<sup>64</sup> “Interview with Patt Derian,” 24.

<sup>65</sup> Alan Draper, “Class and Politics in the Mississippi Movement: An Analysis of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Delegation,” *The Journal of Southern History*, LXXXII, No. 2 (May 2016), 297.

not principle: who would be hired at local Head Start Centers, who would benefit from Head Start Center expenditures in local economies, and ultimately who would speak for black Mississippians in the Loyal Mississippi Democratic Party.<sup>65</sup> These contentious issues were political and outside the parameters that Cooper had established for MAP.

Despite Johnston's stern warnings about the concerns of Senator Stennis and Governor Johnson if MAP did not remove Williams as executive director, Folwell's claim that Cooper demoted Williams to the position of deputy administrator for program and training is without merit.<sup>66</sup> Johnston had no influence on Williams's decision to accept a position at Purdue University, nor did he have any influence in the selection of her successor. It is clear that he greatly exaggerated his influence on MAP and Owen Cooper.<sup>67</sup> Finally, in August 1968, Williams negotiated a contract with a New York City-based Head Start consulting company and authorized an initial payment of \$10,000, both of which violated OEO and MAP procedures. Doubtless, she did this knowing that she would resign shortly. Several weeks later the MAP Board of Directors canceled the contract.<sup>68</sup>

The board quickly named Dr. Aaron Shirley, a Mississippi native and Jackson pediatrician, as the successor to Helen Bass Williams.<sup>69</sup> He resigned a year later to organize an OEO-funded health program for black citizens in Hinds County. Succeeding Shirley was Morris K. Lewis, a former acting executive director of Systematic Training and Redevelopment (STAR). For the first time, MAP had an executive director with experience in managing an OEO-funded statewide anti-poverty program. Doubtless, by the time Cooper retired as Chairman of MAP in December 1975, he was pleased with the progress MAP had made.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Emma Folwell, *The War on Poverty in Mississippi*, 64, 69.

<sup>67</sup> Johnston was so confident of his influence on Cooper and the MAP Board of Directors that he informed Governor Paul Johnson that Williams would be fired after a meeting of the MAP Board of Directors in January 1968. Erle Johnston to Herman Glazier, January 23, 1968, SCR ID 99-48-0-175-1-1-1, Series 15, Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission records.

<sup>68</sup> "Minutes," Executive Committee, September 11, 1968, Box 76, Folder 46, Owen Cooper Papers.

<sup>69</sup> Shirley had served as a medical consultant to MAP and was widely known to Mississippi blacks for his conspicuous support for poor blacks and his willingness to challenge whites who refused to relinquish any political power to blacks. Doubtless, his visibility among blacks in Mississippi made him a strong candidate but this was offset by his willingness to support economic boycotts of some white businesses, which surely must have troubled Cooper, who disdained confrontations, instead preferring for people to talk through issues.

<sup>70</sup> *The Baptist Record*, January 1, 1976.

During the turmoil over Helen Bass Williams's tenure as executive director in the spring of 1968, Cooper was also a member of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee. The committee was struggling with how to address the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy and riots in large cities across the nation. Executives of Southern Baptist Convention agencies, the executive secretaries of state conventions, and Baptist newspaper editors reviewed and recommended that the 1968 Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Houston, Texas, approve the "Statement Concerning Our National Crisis." It declared that the voices of hate and violence and the elevation of cultural values over Christian values deprived millions of black Americans and other minorities of equality in education, employment, citizenship, and housing. This deprivation had created a climate of racism that should be unacceptable to Christians. Because Southern Baptists are one of the largest denominations in the nation, "we have come far short in our privilege in Christian brotherhood." The statement affirmed that as individuals we "will respect every individual as a person possessing inherent dignity and worth growing out of his creation in the image of God, defend people against injustice," and will not be "party to any movement that favors racism or violence or mob violence." Moreover, the statement declared, "We will personally accept every Christian as a brother beloved in the Lord and welcome to the fellowship of faith and worship every person irrespective of race or class."<sup>71</sup>

During the debate, Cooper spoke against an amendment that declared Communist infiltration of the race movement had destroyed hope for racial peace and harmony. He urged the convention to reject the amendment because the reference to "Communist infiltration" ignored other societal forces and undermined the legitimacy of efforts of blacks to achieve their rights as citizens.<sup>72</sup> After rejecting this amendment, the convention approved the statement, which represented a new direction for Southern Baptists.

Notwithstanding Cooper's opposition to the above amendment, Emmanuel McCall, director of National Baptist Work for the Home Mission

---

<sup>71</sup> *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention 1968*, 67-69, available at [http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC\\_Annual\\_1968.pdf](http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_1968.pdf).

<sup>72</sup> I am grateful to Bill Sumners, retired director of the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, for locating the audio tape containing a recording of the discussion and vote on the amendment.

Board, believed Cooper opposed “Concerning Our National Crisis.”<sup>73</sup> This opposition seems unlikely because Cooper strongly supported his pastor, Reverend James Yates, who delivered a sermon shortly after the convention in which he discussed the statement and suggested ways his church could begin to implement its call for action.<sup>74</sup> Under Reverend Yates’s leadership and with the support of Cooper, the First Baptist Church of Yazoo City adopted an Open Door Policy that welcomed all who came to worship without regard to race, religion, or dress.

Recognizing that some Southern Baptist churches probably would remove pastors who supported the statement and wanted to implement its recommendations, Cooper called for greater involvement of Baptist laymen in championing social justice. With the assistance of Emmanuel McCall, he and William P. Davis invited black and white Mississippi Baptist laymen to attend a conference in February 1969 to discuss ways they could champion social justice for blacks and support pastors who accepted “Concerning Our National Crisis” and its recommendations. During the 1970 Southern Baptist Convention, Cooper introduced a resolution on race, which the convention approved commending the growing number of Baptist churches where “people of other races are welcomed in all areas of church life and fellowship.”<sup>75</sup>

In 1973 as president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Cooper hosted a dinner in Jackson for a black pastor, L. Venachael Booth, president of the Progressive Baptist Convention. Cooper told his dinner guests, “Twenty years ago I wouldn’t have had a part in this,” and added, “If I can change anybody can change.” He attributed this to the “grace of God, the changes of time,” and the influence of his family.<sup>76</sup>

In 1978 Broadman Press published *Not Our Kind of Folks?*, which includes essays and sermons by five Baptist preachers (one black) and one Baptist layman, Owen Cooper, in which they bared their souls about race prejudice. Cooper’s article, “My Pilgrimage from Racism to Equality,” reviewed the evolution of his views about race, explaining that he grew up in a religious value system that touted the brotherhood of man without ever applying this value system to civil rights. Gradually,

---

<sup>73</sup> Emanuel McCall, *When All God’s Children Get Together* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2007), 73-75.

<sup>74</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me*, 50.

<sup>75</sup> *Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention 1970*, 80, available at [http://media2.sbhl.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC\\_Annual\\_1970.pdf](http://media2.sbhl.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_1970.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> *Baptist Press*, September 7, 1973.

he began realizing he had been “proof texting” his views on race and started examining the works and teaching of Jesus in their entirety. He explained, “When I considered the cumulative impact of his teachings and ministry in the light of my then existing attitude toward race, I concluded I was wrong.”<sup>77</sup>

In addition to the evolution in his beliefs about race, Cooper had a growing humanitarian vision of improving the life and well-being of people around the world. In 1965 the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) asked MCC to host a team of leaders from India who wanted to discuss how southern farmers had helped themselves through construction of a farmer-owned chemical plant. During the meeting Cooper learned of the poverty and starvation of children in India, and it spurred his imagination.<sup>78</sup> He persuaded the heads of three American farm fertilizer cooperatives to support the construction of a farmer-owned chemical plant in India. Moreover, the MCC board of directors agreed to donate \$300,000 to the project and to send two staff members to oversee construction of the plant. USAID agreed to pay a substantial portion of the estimated construction cost of \$150 million. In 1967 Cooper traveled to India to persuade government officials and farmers to form the Indian Farmers Fertilizer Cooperative that would manage the plant once it was completed. He made several other trips to India to help solve critical issues. It was clear to everyone that Cooper held the project together until completion of the plant in 1973. The plant was so successful that a second plant was built.

In June 1972, Cooper was elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention, the fourth layman to serve in this capacity. Cooper’s successful career as president of Mississippi Chemical Corporation and his work, in his local church, the Mississippi Baptist Convention, and as a member of the executive committee of the convention, had made him a strong candidate. During his tenure as president (1972-1974), he was a strong promoter of evangelism, world missions, and improved race relations.

Cooper’s retirement in 1973 as CEO from Mississippi Chemical Corporation allowed him time to promote his vision for helping India that always included more than a chemical plant. He wanted to promote Christianity in India. There were few Southern Baptist mission-

---

<sup>77</sup> Jo G. Prichard *Making Things Grow*, 128.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-129.

aries in India because the Indian government would only issue visas to missionaries sent by the Foreign Mission Board if they had a skill that met India's physical needs. Cooper developed a concept he called Universal Concern that employed local Indian evangelists as church planters, typically at a greatly reduced cost compared with that of Southern Baptist missionaries. Pooling together his resources along with contributions from others, Universal Concern was able to employ eighteen Indians as church planters, whose success caused the Foreign Mission Board to gradually take over the Universal Concern initiative, beginning in 1980.<sup>79</sup>

Based on his travels to India, Cooper believed there was a great need for books in English. Learning that many U.S. publishers had books left over from promotions and had unsold stock in warehouses, he invited them to send their unsold books to MCC where they would be stored in a warehouse and shipped at no cost to India and other developing countries by Books for the World, an entity he created. By the early 1990s, Books for the World was shipping more than one million volumes each year. Another new project, Book-Link, which involved shipping used books dealing with religious topics to India, began as an initiative to support the work of church planters employed by Universal Concern by making biblical commentaries and other religious books available to them. The used books came from libraries of retired preachers and religious educators and were made available at no cost to church planters. Later Book-Link was expanded to encompass indigenous religious leaders in other developing nations.<sup>80</sup>

Owen Cooper's last hurrah for the state of Mississippi came in 1986 after the legislature adjourned without funding the State Highway Department for the fiscal year beginning July 1, 1986. The prospect of 3,000 state highway staff losing their jobs along with cancellation of highway construction projects already underway galvanized supporters of Mississippi highways to urge Governor Bill Allain to convene a special session of the legislature to fund the Highway Department. One of these supporters was Sam Waggoner, Central District Highway Commissioner, who was in Yazoo City in early April to dedicate a section of Highway 49E as Jerry Clower Boulevard. At this event Waggoner saw Cooper

---

<sup>79</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me*, 93.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 173-175.



and mentioned his concern about the Highway Department.<sup>81</sup> Cooper asked him if he could help, and Waggoner suggested that Cooper could form a committee of prominent business and industry leaders across the state to ask the governor to convene a special session of the legislature to fund the Highway Department. This committee met on May 7 and issued a strong public statement that urged Governor Allain to convene the legislature to address the problem.<sup>82</sup> In late May, the legislature in a special session approved a highway appropriation bill that Governor Allain signed into law.

Believing the time was right for bold action, supporters of expanded highway construction asked Waggoner to prepare a highway map that identified the number of miles that could be built using the department's existing bond authority but without new taxes. He prepared this map and shared it with Cooper at a meeting in early June. Cooper liked the map but suggested that the number of miles could be increased. Six weeks later, after returning from an overseas trip, Cooper convened a meeting with about seventy-five business and industry leaders, whose enthusiastic support for Waggoner's map prompted Cooper to request a new highway map that would put every citizen within thirty to forty minutes of a four-lane highway.<sup>83</sup>

Cooper proposed creation of a steering committee to manage a strategy to build statewide support for the four-lane highway expansion. The steering committee adopted the name, Advocating Highways for Economic Advancement and Development (AHEAD) and advocated a five-cent-per-gallon vehicle fuel tax to fund construction giving birth to the motto, "A Nickle Will Do It."<sup>84</sup> Buoyed by this solid base of grassroots support, Cooper advised Governor Allain that it was time for Mississippi to undertake a major four-lane highway construction program funded by a gasoline tax. Turning his attention to obtaining legislative support for AHEAD, he began discussions with legislative leaders. He rejected suggestions that this was not the time to raise taxes, saying that the favorable momentum for AHEAD must be maintained.<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> William M. Cash and R. Daryl Lewis, *AHEAD: From Grassroots Movement to Four-Lane Highway System in Mississippi* (Brandon, MS: Quail Ridge Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>83</sup> Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: A Struggle for Power, 1976-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 188.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.

<sup>85</sup> William M. Cash and Daryl Lewis, *AHEAD*, 40.



Then seventy-eight-years old, Cooper had complained of not feeling well during the summer, but medical exams disclosed no significant health issues. On October 18 while in Peoria, Illinois, on a speaking engagement he became ill. His daughter, Nancy Gilbert, met him at the airport and took him immediately to the Emergency Room at the Baptist Hospital in Jackson. Exploratory surgery revealed his stomach was filled with inoperable cancer.<sup>86</sup> On November 6, 1986, he died peacefully.

Shortly before his death, Cooper told Gene Triggs, his trusted colleague at MCC and one of the founders of AHEAD, "Mississippi needs that highway program so give all you've got."<sup>87</sup> Triggs and other AHEAD leaders did just that. By the end of January 1987, the legislature had approved the highway bill, and then overrode Governor Allain's veto with just one vote to spare in the House. The AHEAD vision was now a reality. Over the next fourteen years, 1,077 miles of four-lane highways would be built at a cost of \$1.6 billion.<sup>88</sup>

Throughout his adult life Cooper had viewed himself as a successful businessman whose Christian values permeated his business dealings. He was most comfortable with the Southern Baptist expression of Christian values, which included evangelism as witnessing to Jesus Christ as his savior. His forthright profession of faith thrust him into positions of leadership as a deacon in his own church, president of the Mississippi Baptist Convention, president of the Southern Baptist Convention, and president of the Baptist World Alliance. LeRoy Percy, a good friend and business associate who did not share Cooper's religious beliefs, once said, "Business wise if you add up all of the things that Owen envisioned and put into being, you're talking about billions of dollars of activity in this state. And you're talking about providing jobs for thousands of people." He added, "I hope that any biography of Owen Cooper won't picture him only as a big religious leader."<sup>89</sup>

Percy was right that Cooper's legacy included billions of dollars of investment in Mississippi that created thousands of jobs. The crown jewel of his economic legacy, Mississippi Chemical Corporation, was sold in the early 2000s, but operates today as CF Industries. In addition, also

---

<sup>86</sup> Email message from Nancy Gilbert to Charles Dollar, June 5, 2019.

<sup>87</sup> "Transcript of Oral History Interview with Gene Triggs (2004)," Jere Nash and Andy Taggart Collection, University of Mississippi Special Collections and Archives.

<sup>88</sup> Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 193.

<sup>89</sup> Don McGregor, "Owen Cooper: Chemical Corporation CEO and Bi-vocation Missionary," Vol. 29 (January 1994), *Baptist History & Heritage Journal*, 26.

going strong today are Mississippi Blue Cross and Blue Shield and Farm Bureau Insurance, which are multimillion dollar businesses. Mississippi Action for Progress, which Cooper helped create and led for nine years, has persisted for more than five decades and touched the lives of more than 200,000 preschool children through Head Start Centers across the state. Equally as impressive was his leadership in establishing AHEAD, which eventually built an extensive network of four-lane highways that on a day-to-day basis dramatically improved the lives of Mississippians.

One of Owen Cooper's great strengths as a business leader was his bold vision of a future that could be achieved through a careful analysis of problems and designing solutions in accordance with legal requirements and high ethical/moral standards. His passion for and confidence in success enabled him to persuade skeptics who believed a project could not succeed because "it has never been done before" or "it won't work because it is too complicated." Ultimately, the success of most of his projects can be attributed to his low-key approach of building a consensus on a solution or set of solutions. He was neither a cajoler nor a fist pounder in getting people to agree to cooperate. Speaking with clarity, conciliation, and confidence, he encouraged people to focus on a higher value and vision that would benefit many people. This approach was not always successful, especially when dealing with segregationists on Community Action Boards and assertive advocates of poor blacks. Nonetheless, Cooper persisted in trying to work with all sorts of people to improve race relations.

Owen Cooper enjoyed a full life and received numerous honors recognizing his contributions to the state and people of Mississippi. In an obituary after Cooper's death, Mississippi political columnist Bill Minor described him as "having made the progression from a success-oriented businessman with conservative views to a highly successful businessman who cared about human rights and racial justice."<sup>90</sup> A more nuanced assessment of Owen Cooper would have described him as a devout Baptist layman and widely acknowledged successful businessman whose evolving views on social justice and civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s inspired other Mississippians to follow his example. His friend and business associate, LeRoy Percy confirmed this, explaining "I think more than any other Protestant layman that I knew, Owen . . . [made]

---

<sup>90</sup> Jackson *Daily News*, November 11, 1986.

whites realize that their position needed to be changed.”<sup>91</sup>

---

<sup>91</sup> Don McGregor, *The Thought Occurred to Me*, 114.