





SOMETHING OF OUR OWN

part I



In the Spring of 1965, a group of small farmers in Batesville, Mississippi got to talking about how they were tired of not being paid a good price for their okra.

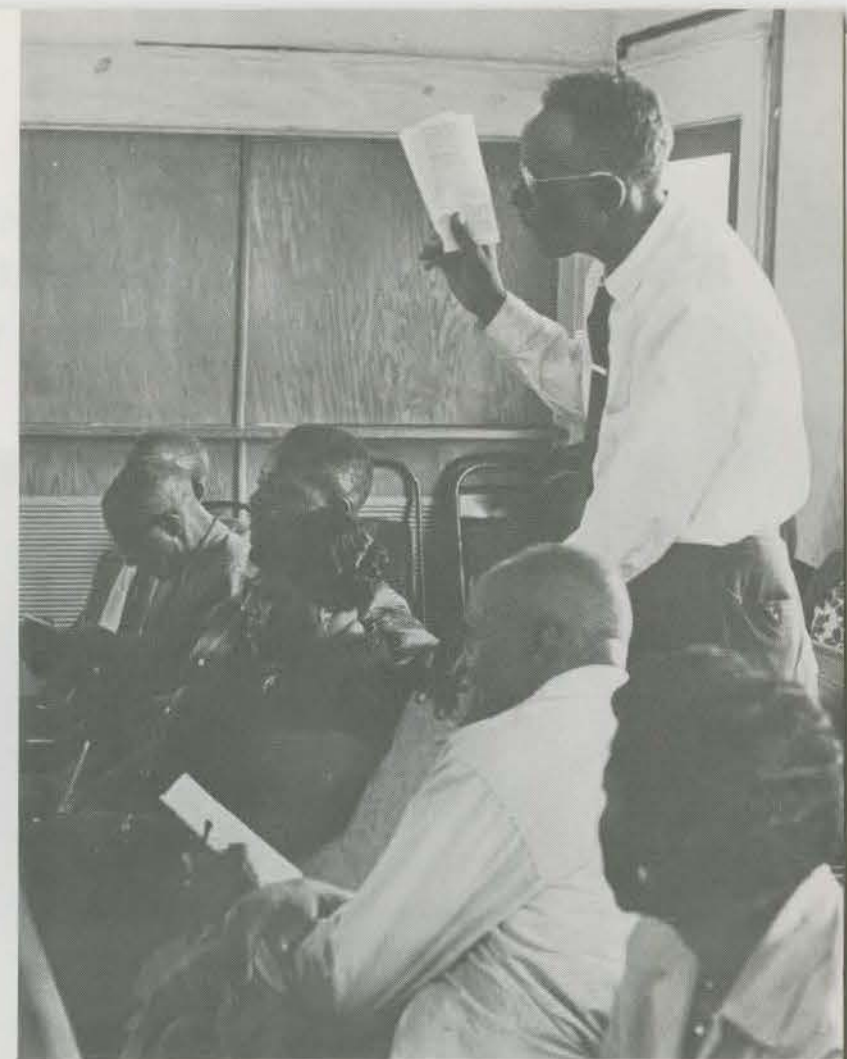
When they finished talking they had decided to sell their okra for themselves instead of for the white buyer.

That summer they formed the WEST BATESVILLE FARMERS COOPERATIVE.

By fall of that same year, the West Batesville Farmers Co-op received a \$113,000 FHA loan (under the poverty program) which went to purchase cotton pickers and bean combines.

"We think farmers in other counties should start co-ops. It's time we quit depending on Mr. Charlie for so much. You ain't going to make a whole lot of money on this, but you will have something of your own.

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Mary E. Varela. Published by H.J.K.
Publishing Co., Jackson, Mississippi.



This is the way our story goes.

We met at our church one night and began to talk about the price of okra we were getting from the white okra buyer in town.

None of us were satisfied with what we were getting.

We wanted more than four cents a pound for our okra.

We decided to get all the okra farmers to sign a petition to the white okra buyer, Mr. Jacobs. We call him "the buyer."



We said in the petition that we wanted eight cents a pound.

We knew we would not get eight cents but we thought we could up him to five or six cents a pound.

We got sixty names on the petition. That is about two-thirds of the Negro okra farmers around here.

We were going to read the petition to Mr. Jacobs at a farmers meeting over at the courthouse. But he didn't show up.

So we mailed the petition instead.

A few days later we got a letter back from the buyer saying,



**“WE WOULD APPRECIATE
IT IF YOU WOULD NOT TRY
TO RUN OUR BUSINESS.”**

That made us mad.

That was what set the fire under us.

So we called a meeting of the okra farmers to talk about this letter.

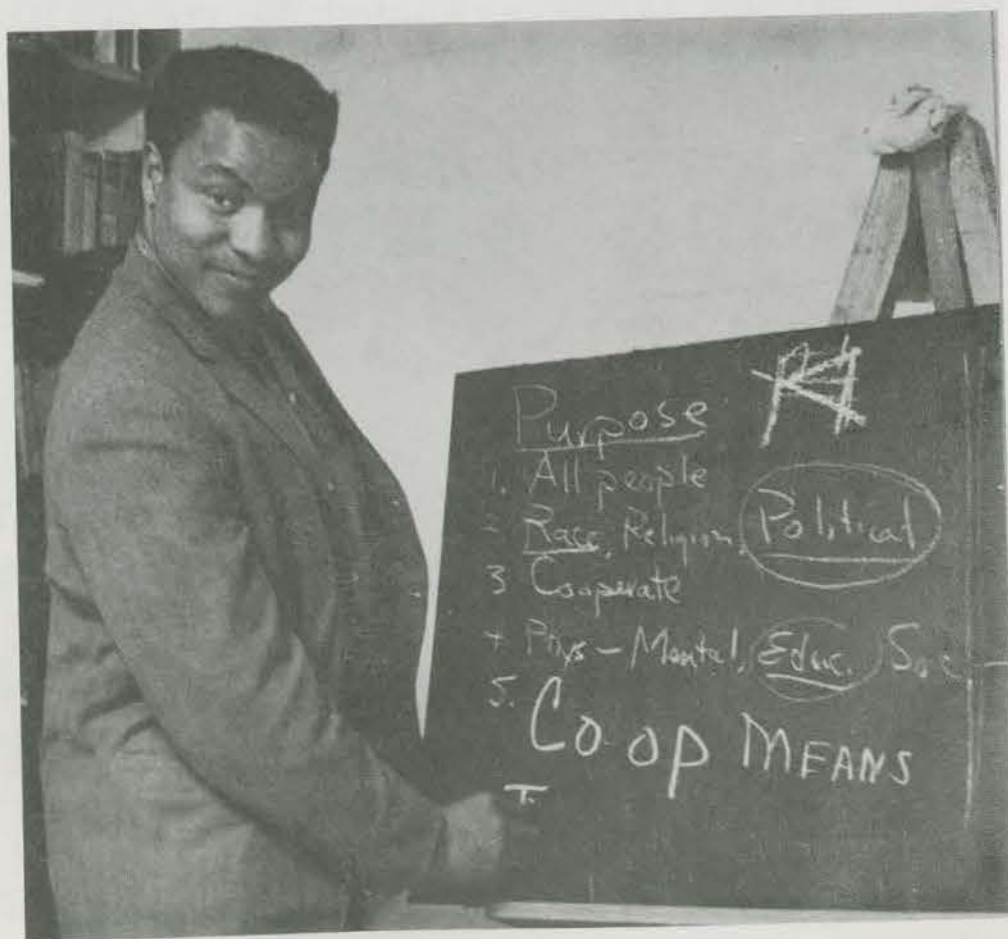
Some of the farmers wanted to go on like they were and sell to the buyer.

Some of us said, “It’s better not to plant at all than to raise okra for the buyer to get rich.

Let us see if we can do something for ourselves.

We decided we would try and sell our okra for ourselves and see if we could get a better price for it.

Then we found out about cooperatives from some of our civil rights workers and from



Mr. James Mays of the National Sharecroppers Fund.

A co-op is like going into business for yourself, except there is no one big boss.

If the co-op makes money, everybody shares the profit.

If the co-op loses money, everybody shares the loss.

And everybody who is a member of the co-op makes the decisions about the money.

So we went into the okra business.



The first thing we did was to get together to buy seed.

When you go to buy seed just for yourself, you have to pay whatever the seed store charges for its seed.

It's much cheaper if everybody can get together and buy a whole lot of seed wholesale.

We bought all our seed wholesale, the same way the seed store buys its seed.

The difference is that the seed store will charge a higher price for its seed so the owner can make a profit.

We sold our seed to the co-op members for just what it cost to buy it wholesale.

Everybody in the co-op profited because they didn't have to pay as much for their seed.

When it came time to pick the okra, we had to learn how to get it ready for market.



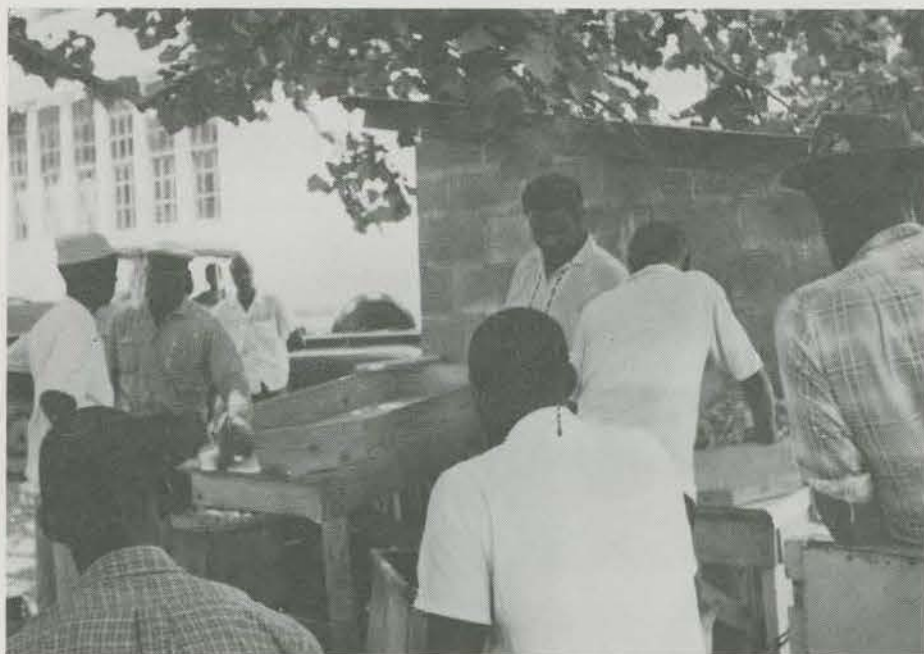
For example, this curved okra won't be accepted by an okra buyer.



And this okra is too long for market.



All the okra has to be between two and four inches long.



Everyone brings their okra into the co-op's loading station. We grade the okra and then weigh it.

The manager keeps a record of how much each member brings in.



Then each member gets a check at the end of the week for the amount of okra he brought in.

We made the decision that on each pound of okra sold, the co-op would keep back a cent for itself.

The money the co-op keeps for itself goes to pay rent on the trucks taking the okra to market.

If any money was left over, it would go to pay our manager \$35.00 a week.

The manager has a full time job keeping the co-op's records. He also has to manage the loading station.

Our biggest problems came in trying to market the okra.

We had to sell on the open market in Memphis, Tennessee most of the summer.

This means you might sell or you might not, according to how the market is that day.

You might get six and a half cents a pound one day and only get two cents a pound the next day.

When we started our co-op it was too late to make contracts.

Contracts with okra buyers and frozen food plants would have given us the assurance that our crops would have been sold at a good price.

Because we didn't have contracts we had to sell at whatever price the open market was giving for okra.

We called all over the south trying to get contracts.

They all said the same thing.

They had already contracted with the buyer and they didn't need any more okra.



We found out later that the buyer was staying just a step ahead of us all the time.

He was trying to get contracts with all the buyers we were contacting in order to block us out.

This was because he was losing his supply of okra.

At one time we were paying farmers five cents a pound and he was only paying four cents.

A lot of okra growers went with us rather than him.

We had everybody with us when we were paying five cents a pound.

But when we had to cut back and pay four cents a pound later in the summer, some of our people left us to go with the buyer.

Those farmers were not willing to suffer in case there was a loss.

They were only in it for the money.

But the rest of us were in the co-op for more than money.

The buyer came to the loading station one day and offered to buy all the co-op's okra. He still only wanted to give the farmers four cents a pound.

The co-op turned him down.

So he said, "You know, you are doing this all the hard way. You know that don't you?"

One of our members spoke up and said,

"Mr. Jacobs, we might be doing it the hard way, but we're the ones who is doing it."

The co-op was something of our own.

We didn't make a lot of money this year but we did learn.

We'll be better off next year because of our experience.

Next year we'll start around the first of the year calling frozen food plants and okra buyers for contracts.

The County Farm Extension Office is supposed to help co-ops in getting contracts to market vegetables.

Some people have asked us do we think it is a good idea for small farmers to get together into cooperatives.

We would like to say this.

You ain't going to make a whole lot of money when you start,

but you'll have SOMETHING OF YOUR OWN.

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

For more information on the farmers cooperatives and farm programs, write to:

Mr. James Mays
National Sharecroppers Fund
2243 Whitfield Mill Road
Jackson, Mississippi

This book is part I of SOMETHING OF OUR OWN. Part II tells the story of the \$113,000 loan the co-op received for heavy farm machinery.

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:

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Tougaloo, Mississippi

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.

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Bennie Jackson, CDGM
Mary Varela, SNCC

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