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Panola County

Okra Co-op



"We used to sell our okra for four cents a pound to Mr. Jacobs (a local white man) until this year. Then we wrote him a petition asking for eight cents a pound," says Mr. Clyde Webb of Macedonia, Mississippi.

"He wrote us back telling us that we should not try to run his business and if we didn't want to sell him okra, that was OK with him. We got together and set up our little cooperative and before you know it Mr. Jacobs wrote us back again asking us to sell him the okra.

Some of us sold it to him but most of us stuck together. We really have something growing now."

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Mr. Webb is a member of the Panola County Okra Cooperative. Like most of the 120 members of the coop, he plants most of his land in cotton. But government acreage allotments restrict cotton growing, and in recent years okra has become a popular second crop.

Sitting in the shade of oak trees near Macedonia, Mr. Webb watches the pick up trucks drive up loaded with bushels of okra. The coop members dump the bushels onto a loading table and coop graders pick out over-size (four inches) pods and fling them into a special basket.

Mr. Jacobs didn't check the okra so carefully, one farmer explained. "He allowed us to dump our baskets and sort it out ourselves. We want to be more careful being a new coop that's just getting started and all."

The Panola County Coop would not be unusual except for one thing: all its members are Negroes. In the Deep South, Negro farmers traditionally have been intimidated from starting cooperatives or any other form of economic organization.

"The white man made us think we couldn't do anything for ourselves. He made us think we were stupid, and we went along with him," Mr. Robert Miles, another coop member explained.

Mr. Chris Williams, an FDP volunteer who has been helping the coop get started, predicts that Jacobs will lose what little business he has in the county next year. Further, Williams thinks that more Negro farmers in the area will join the coop after their contracts with Jacobs expire this year. Few people expect that Jacobs will "come around."

Next year, coop members hope to branch into other cash crops such as tomatoes, butter beans, strawberries and turnips. Fall crops like turnips would provide money for the farmers at a time when they don't normally have it. Yet okra, which appeals to more and more housewives, will pro-



bably be the main coop crop.

Although Memphis - only 60 miles from Macedonia - is the main market for okra now, Williams says that the coop is planning to transport some of the crop to St. Louis and Chicago. In Chicago, okra sometimes sells for twice as much as it does in Memphis.

However, it takes a refrigerated truck to drive the highly perishable vegetables up North. And it costs \$120 plus five cents a mile to rent a truck for the two - day trip.

Because of a shortage of funds recently, the coop voted to hold up checks to its members so that money would be available to rent a truck to Chicago. This caused some members who weren't present when the voting occurred to worry. Word got around that the coop didn't make good on its payments. But at the next week's meeting, the majority of the unhappy farmers went along with the decision.

The okra season stated in July and lasts through September. During the three month harvest season, farmers pick each plant three or four times a week. When the heat lingers on through the night (okra farmers pray for hot, muggy nights) the okra pod (the part you eat) grows almost two inches in 24 hours. It is one of the fastest growing crops imaginable.

The average acre yields nine bushels, or 240 pounds, of okra. The coop pays five cents a pound so members can gross \$12 per acre four times a week. That's \$48 a week or \$360 for the 12 week season. Cotton will gross about half that but it takes half the time to work.

Okra farmers don't anticipate getting rich quick. But the experience from this year's cooperative is spreading through-out Northern Mississippi. Farmers appreciate the one cent a pound increase (20 per cent) the coop pays over the four cents a pound Mr. Jacobs paid.

The coop grew from meetings in Batesville initiated by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), the Panola County Voter's League and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party

A local minister, Rev. Walter Nash is credited with getting most people interested.

Last February, Rev. Nash was instrumental in getting farmers to sign a petition to Jacobs demanding eight cents a pound for their okra. "We

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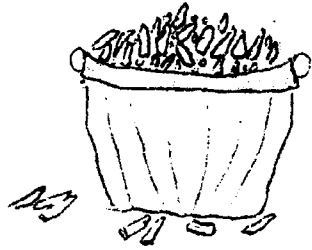
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really didn't expect to get eight cents a pound, but we thought he might have given us at least five or six cents," one member explained. From then on, the coop grew.

The coop members average about \$300.00 gross every time they go to Memphis. The profits after salaries, insurance, and truck expenses are placed into a bank account.

The members will decide later whether to give themselves dividends or purchase more machinery for the coop. Just recently, the coop arranged a \$75,00 loan from the Farmer's Home Administration for pick-up trucks, cotton pickers and combines.

The coop has not yet changed the life of the average Panola County farmer. Yet their merely getting together has had an important psychological impact on people in the county. They are growing to trust each other and learning that trust can pay.



A favorite story around the county concerns a meeting between Mr. Bob James, the secretary of the coop and Mr. Jacobs. Jacobs came to the loading station in Macedonia just as the coop got started. He repeated this offer of four cents a pound. James refused. Then he told James, "You know, you're doing this all the hard way, you know that don't you?"

James hesitated for a moment and spoke up so all the people could hear: "Mr. Jacobs, we might be doing it the hard way, but we're the ones who is doing it."

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