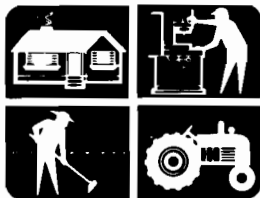


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The sign outside the co-op echoes the belief of the members inside.

"We Ain't No Big Thing But We're Growing."

The farmers were gathered on a brisk November morning at the headquarters of their co-op, the Southern Agricultural Association of Virginia (commonly called SAAV) in rural Halifax County. During the three years of the co-op's existence, they had swallowed down many setbacks. But they had also tasted hope. Now they met to consider participating in the most dynamic grass-roots program in the history of the National Sharecroppers Fund and its Rural Advancement Fund.

If SAAV approved the program, both the cooperative and RAF/NSF would turn a critical corner. The two organizations had worked side by side for three years in Halifax, one of the poorest counties in the nation. Before that, NSF had carried on a lonely struggle for more than three decades on many frontiers in rural America and in Washington on behalf of impoverished farmers and farm workers, black and white. Out of this combined experience, a new concept evolved that in 1971 would be tested in the fields of Halifax County, Virginia, and Burke County, Georgia.

The keystone of the concept was concentration of RAF/NSF's efforts in a small number of key areas. The design was to place major emphasis on communities where people of

vision and determination had already started co-ops, where intensive development could bring about permanent change, where the struggle to save people bypassed by progress could be won.

Halifax and Burke were selected by the NSF Board as the places where the new approach would first be demonstrated. Concrete methods of operation were formulated by James M. Pierce, veteran of countless labor and civil rights campaigns in the South, who became NSF executive director in the summer of 1970.

He came to the co-op meeting, bearing his ideas and some of the money to implement them. Previously, NSF had brought technical assistance to many projects but had never been able to lend more than \$5,000 to any one of them. Now, by concentrating its major resources on only two areas at a time, NSF could make available to each of the communities twenty times that amount in interest-free loans, to be repaid as conditions permitted.

"But money alone is never the answer," Pierce said. "People have to believe in their co-op. And they need a total approach that doesn't just fix up a few farms but rehabilitates a whole community. That means creating co-op connected jobs, housing, and health services that can give the farmer a new lease on life and clear him from being mortgaged perpetually to second-class citizenship."



When Pierce arrived, fifty farmers were already there, sitting on folding chairs under a galvanized roof in the walled grading and loading shed of SAAV headquarters. Few were young. Virtually all the faces were black, and there was not one that did not reflect the lifelong struggle to make a good life from the dwindling tobacco crop. Repeated government cutbacks of tobacco acreage allotments had sentenced them to poverty as surely as a court sentences men to jail. Farewells to children fleeing what their parents endured showed in those faces, too. They came from the communities of Nathalie, Java, Virgilia, Scottsburg, where 80 percent of the houses had no running water or indoor toilets. George Forster voiced a common sentiment.

"A farmer ain't too hard to please," he said. "When he puts his money in the ground, he's just lookin' for a fair return. We worked mighty hard to get the co-op started, and if it don't succeed the blacks here won't ever realize nothin'."

Last year and this, Forster and the others had grown good crops of cucumbers and sweet potatoes in fields that for centuries had known only tobacco. A few, like him, had made more money per acre with less effort than tobacco ever required. But very few acres were planted, planning and supervision were inadequate, and marketing was handled through a jobber whose excessive profit-taking reduced the farmers' profits to almost nothing.

Still, they could see physical evidence of progress all around. The co-op's headquarters — a combination office, grading shed, and loading platform — had doubled in size in a year and now could handle heavy volume. There was a \$20,000 credit union, vital for small loans in an area where banks couldn't see past tobacco loans. With RAF/NSF help, land had been purchased for future development. There was talk of sewing cooperatives, youth programs, feeder pig projects. Three years before, there had been nothing but hard times.

James Lewis, head of OEO's local Community Action

Agency, which has helped SAAV enormously with money and moral support, said:

"Any way you look at it, without the NSF this co-op will go down the drain. Jim Pierce here has walked these fields and talked to the people, and he knows your needs."

Pierce had chalked plans and figures on a big blackboard. He told the farmers of SAAV:

"The market is the secret to the whole thing, and being big is the secret of the market. Raise the right crops in the right quantity, pick them right, and get them to market at the right time and, gentlemen, no matter what your past experience, the returns will amaze you."

Well all right, the faces said. Amaze us.

Pierce sketched out his program in broad strokes. To grow the volume that would induce buyers (like supermarkets) to back their big trailer trucks up to the SAAV loading sheds, a larger acreage must be planted. In 1970, they had planted fewer than 100 acres. Now, he said, a minimum of 500 — and preferably a thousand — should be in production. A murmur of surprise rose from the group. How?

Step by step, Pierce then outlined a coordinated ten-point program for Halifax and Burke Counties, carefully worked out by NSF. Ultimately, the marketing program will include a chain of low-income farming cooperatives, ranging all the way from Virginia through the deep South, to extend the growing season and increase the volume of production.

Each of the ten points is dependent on those preceding it, with checkpoints all along the way — all to be closely supervised by the co-op. The most important is to develop an assured market by guaranteeing enough produce at the right time. The other points plan for a task force for training (Virginia Polytechnic Institute has promised full support), locating and preparing the land, planting, cultivating, harvesting, processing, packing, and shipping. Every last detail is covered.

The blackboard filled with dollar signs as Pierce pointed



out the three basic options open to cautious farmers who wanted to choose how far they would go in the new program.

1. A farmer could raise crops by himself if he wished, buying seed and fertilizer at a discount through the co-op, marketing through the co-op, and keeping all net income less SAAV processing and shipping charges.

2. If he didn't have enough money or credit, he could donate land to the co-op for the growing season; the co-op would hire labor, including himself if he chose, and split the profits 50-50 with him.

3. He could lease his land to the co-op, which would pay him rent, pay him and others for labor, but keep all profits in the co-op.

The co-op itself would operate a demonstration farm beside the headquarters where lucrative specialty crops like strawberries and tomatoes could be tested in the rich Virginia soil. It would also experiment with organic methods, to make the use of harmful pesticides and fertilizers unnecessary.

The figures gleamed on the blackboard. Were they real? Could it all work now when so much they had bent their backs to and put their hearts in hadn't worked too well in the past? Hands rose with questions. Could the co-op keep machinery purchased by NSF? (Yes, but SAAV would repay the purchase price from profits as it could.) How would we know some jobber wasn't tricking us on market prices like before? (SAAV would monitor the market, and the farmers would have contracts assuring them the going rate for their produce.) Where can we find a thousand or so harvest workers?

"I've been wondering about that too," Pierce conceded, and there was laughter over a problem mutually acknowledged. "Much of it can be local, from right here in Halifax. SAAV will pay decent field wages, and the money can stay right here in the county. Your teen-age children can earn clothing money for fall and winter, tuition money for school. Maybe if they see that farming can pay, some will leave off going away and set their roots here. That's what a co-op is all about — total community effort for total community gain."

Well, it sounded good. Maybe too good.

"Mr. Pierce," an older man said. "We know what tobacco can bring us, bad as it is. But has this new plan ever been tried?"

"I'm not going to try to talk you out of planting your cash crop of tobacco now," Pierce said. "After two or three years with the new program, I think you'll be talking yourselves out of it. And no, this plan never has been tried by a co-op like SAAV, because there never was enough capital to try it. Now we have some of the money to start with and faith that we can raise enough to keep going till SAAV can stand on its own feet. Then NSF can move on to another community with proof that what happened here can happen anywhere."

Do the farmers want to try? This is the crucial moment. The question is put to the membership, and every hand is raised.

"What I heard today changed my thinkin' right much," one man says. "I'm gonna be in there, pluggin' and pitchin'."

"I think we've turned a corner," Jim Pierce said after the meeting. "Here and in Burke County, too. The Eastern Georgia Farmers Co-operative, down there in cotton country, produced a small cucumber crop this past year, and now they'll be starting an expanded program same as here. Their co-op service station is paying its way, and the Newburke Housing Corporation is all set to begin building. But it all takes time — and money."

Yes, money is needed. Money for machinery, for portable irrigation equipment, for trucks. Money to hire men with skills to manage, coordinate, and market this complex effort. Money that will be used over and over as the program expands and multiplies.

The men and women of Halifax and Burke are struggling, in a real sense, for their lives and the lives of their children. The people of the fifty states who have supported RAF/NSF over the years are in a position to share with them in a humanitarian vision that is on the verge of becoming reality. And in that sharing, they will become brothers under the banner planted firmly in the earth of Halifax:

"We Ain't No Big Thing But We're Growing."

