

# Introduction

## When the Nation's Eyes Were Watching Them

In January 1965, the citizens of Craven County, North Carolina, were not accustomed to attracting national news or attention. The county seat, New Bern, a coastal town founded by Swiss merchants in 1710, had drawn considerable statewide recognition six years earlier with the successful restoration of Tryon Palace, the former home of one of North Carolina's last royal governors.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in general, the black and white inhabitants who made up this predominately rural community lived in relative solitude and obscurity even within their own state. Located 120 miles east of Raleigh and 275 miles east of Charlotte, Craven County was far removed from the state's major metropolitan centers both in proximity and total population. With just over fifty-eight thousand residents in 1960, Craven County was considered moderate to large in size for Eastern North Carolina, but its population was less than one-fifth the size of the largest county in the state.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps because of its size and location, little had happened in Craven since the mid-nineteenth century that sparked interest outside its immediate boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the county was swept by a variety of feelings ranging from pride and awe to concern and suspicion when national reporters arrived to investigate antipoverty efforts in the area by Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA).<sup>4</sup>

Just a few months prior, in November 1964, Craven Operation Progress, Inc. (COP) had become the nation's first rural-based Community Action Agency (CAA) to receive federal funds as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty.<sup>5</sup> Its first sponsor was not the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), however, but the North Carolina Fund (NCF), a private, nonprofit initiative of Governor Terry Sanford designed to address the roots of poverty in the state. Officially announced as one of eleven NCF sites in April 1964, COP's antipoverty programs both predated and, in some ways, helped to inspire the design of the national War on Poverty. As

a NCF staffer recalled, "They were sort of ready, they were off and running and had been working for a while."<sup>6</sup> Headquartered in New Bern, COP primarily served Craven County and the adjoining counties of Jones and Pamlico.<sup>7</sup>

In 1964, North Carolina's First Congressional District, comprised of nineteen eastern counties, including Craven, Jones, and Pamlico, was not only one of the poorest in the state but also one of the poorest in the nation. With a median family income of \$2,662, it ranked 430th among the nation's 435 congressional districts.<sup>8</sup> Although most CAAs would be based in large urban areas (especially after the eruption of riots in inner cities across the North and West in the summer of 1965), the Johnson administration was aware that almost half of the nation's 30 million poor lived in rural areas and that poverty was frequently most dire within those communities. At least in the very beginning of the War on Poverty, federal officials gave rural and urban poverty comparable attention.<sup>9</sup>

Given this backdrop, the comprehensiveness of COP's programs soon earned the praise of OEO director Sargent Shriver, who hailed COP as a model for all other antipoverty agencies. In September 1965, Shriver invited the biracial COP board of directors to attend a national news conference in Washington, D.C., convened to publicize the progress of America's rural CAAs. COP board members were not just impressed with the positive reception they received; many of them were taken aback by how much the press already knew about their antipoverty initiatives. Board member Frank Efird, for one, was surprised by a *Chicago Tribune* reporter's familiarity with COP's strawberry marketing program to encourage crop diversification among tobacco farmers. "You would have thought that the reporters were from Craven County," voiced board member Catherine Berry. "They seemed to know so much about us," she said.<sup>10</sup> Jim Hearn, the first executive director of COP, took the attention in stride: "Thus far, Craven has been a leader not only in the South, but in the whole nation. The eyes of the nation are, indeed, on Craven County."<sup>11</sup>

Hearn's statement was not merely wishful thinking. Embedded in President Johnson's declaration of "an unconditional war on poverty" on January 8, 1964, was a forthright belief (most prominent at the time among moderate and liberal Democrats) that the federal government had the ability and, therefore, the responsibility to cure and even prevent the most pressing forms of need in America. Among these were unemployment, improper housing, malnourishment, inadequate access to health services, lack of education, and lack of job training.<sup>12</sup> As sociologist Michael Harrington

exposed in *The Other America*, a best seller in 1962, as many as 40 to 50 million people lived “below those standards which [most Americans] have been taught to regard as the decent minimums for food, housing, clothing and health.”<sup>13</sup> For Johnson, these numbers were highly concerning if not alarming, especially amid the mounting Cold War. As predicted, Communists in Russia quickly seized upon such information in an attempt to prove that the American capitalistic system was a failure. A successful, all-out war on poverty that would “strike away the barriers to full participation,” Johnson argued, could help the United States “prove the success of [its economic] system” to international critics and, thereby, halt the spread of communism.<sup>14</sup> A lifelong Democrat who had always admired Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal programs of the 1930s, Johnson also envisioned federal War on Poverty programs as advancing Roosevelt’s New Deal agenda, which had only minimally addressed the needs of the black poor.<sup>15</sup> Since the early 1960s, black civil rights leaders had put increasing pressure on the federal government to provide greater economic opportunity for black citizens, particularly in the form of stricter anti-racial discrimination legislation. Like civil rights leaders, Johnson, too, believed reducing black poverty could help to reduce racial inequality, namely in the South.

Although the War on Poverty was the first real attempt by the federal government to cure poverty for whites and blacks alike, President Johnson had no doubt that it could be done. As he saw it, poverty was primarily a problem of male unemployment that resulted from a lack of education and/or skills. With the traditional male-breadwinner family structure in mind, Johnson believed that his War on Poverty programs could help elevate the family wage, especially within the black community, where male unemployment was most stark.<sup>16</sup> However, as a chief executive of a nation experiencing unprecedented economic growth and material abundance at the time, Johnson knew that the War on Poverty had to be sold to white middle-class Americans (the vast majority of voters) as a way of benefiting all, not just the poor. Poverty in the United States for black and white alike had been on a steady decline since World War II. In his first State of the Union address, the president challenged the nation to recognize that even though “our gross national product reached the \$600 billion level—\$100 billion higher than when [my administration] took office,” with new federal programs to bring up the poor “it easily could and it should be still \$30 billion higher today than it is.”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the fanfare surrounding the War on Poverty, a good public relations campaign was essential if these hopes and goals were to be

fulfilled. Not only was an uninterrupted flow of revenue to support the multimillion-dollar antipoverty programs on the line, but so, too, was Johnson's credibility. In order to maintain the approval of Congress and the majority of American taxpayers, both the White House and the OEO trumpeted any evidence of success through as many national outlets as possible. In the words of public policy historian Alice O'Connor, "Nothing seemed too small or too preliminary to report."<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps most important was portraying the Community Action Program (CAP) as appealing and worthwhile. CAP's requirement for the "maximum feasible participation" of the poor in CAAs made them some of the most controversial features of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, the major legislative piece of Johnson's War on Poverty. Nowhere was this more evident than in the South, where the black poor, generally undereducated and without an equal access to power, had played little to no role in the decision-making processes of their communities since the introduction of Jim Crow laws in the late nineteenth century. Many southern whites continued to see this as the natural order of things. As a biracial CAA in the rural South, COP's early promise in reducing poverty in Eastern North Carolina served to show both real and potential critics alike that the goals of the War on Poverty might actually be attainable.

Yet at the same time that COP was gaining wider notoriety and support on the national stage in the fall of 1965, the antipoverty agency had been steadily losing favor among local people for the last several months. This was especially true among whites, who comprised over 60 percent of the population in and around the county seat of New Bern.<sup>19</sup> COP board member L. D. Munn, a local white minister, estimated that close to 90 percent of the white community disapproved of COP by September 1965.<sup>20</sup> The personal philosophy and administrative style of the program's first executive director, Jim Hearn, seemed largely responsible for whites' distrust of COP's efforts. According to most COP board members, Hearn, a former Washington, D.C., legal assistant, "demanded rather than requested," often gave "ultimatums," refused to negotiate or hear "that he was wrong," "involved the board on as few of the decisions and negotiations as he could," and generally "rush[ed] the program."<sup>21</sup> Of course, Hearn's reception in the area was largely dependent on the characteristics of the community. Like many in smaller communities in the United States at the time, Craven residents as a whole were not in favor of rapid social change or of heightened federal involvement in local affairs.