

## Cooperation

The Great War brought boom times to farming families across the Tobacco South. Driven by the wartime demand for cigarettes for soldiers, tobacco prices skyrocketed to previously unseen highs, and farm families who relied on bright tobacco for their incomes celebrated their newfound prosperity. “Farmers can be seen hugging each other over the amazing prices they are getting, and pinch themselves quite frequently to see if they have been dreaming,” one observer reported from the markets in 1917. Having finally seen tobacco pay off, farm families, black and white, rushed to buy consumer goods they had long been denied; they purchased everything from automobiles to indoor plumbing. Many also bought land. “The farmers . . . have made good in growing tobacco,” the black Extension Service agent from Mecklenburg County reported in 1917. “It has sold extremely well and many have paid some of their debts which have been standing for years.” One extension agent reported that he found it “very hard to talk cooperative warehouses to these farmers” because they were doing so well.<sup>1</sup>

The good years did not last long. In 1920, farm families planted record amounts of tobacco just as wartime demand evaporated and prices plummeted. Discontent followed the opening of the markets. “Tobacco prices have declined from \$5.00 to \$10.00 on the [Oxford] market during the week,” creating “some local agitation” for the markets to be closed, one official reported. In Virginia, farm families were “very much wrought up over the low price of tobacco.” While prices were higher than they had been before the war, they were much lower than farmers had anticipated and only got worse as the marketing season wore on.<sup>2</sup>

The shock of low prices renewed calls for cooperation. Leading growers arranged meetings in numerous market towns throughout the fall to discuss

the problem; in December, representatives from the states where bright tobacco was grown met in Richmond to form the Tobacco Growers' Cooperative Association, which became better known as the Tri-State because it organized growers in Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Farmers sometimes just called it the "Co-ops." Like the Farmers' Union, organizers of the Tri-State hoped to pool members' tobacco and resell later at better prices. Advised by cooperation guru Aaron Sapiro, who had helped organize the Sun-Maid raisin cooperative in California, organizers hoped eventually to control enough production to set their own prices. The Tri-State never did; by 1926, it was in receivership, leaving thousands of farmers embittered.<sup>3</sup>

The Tri-State nevertheless marked a turn in farmers' challenge to the auction system. Probably more than any organizers that came before them, the Tri-State's leaders understood the nature of tobacco farm work by the 1920s and pushed their message not only to black and white men, including landowners and tenants, but to their families as well. Its leaders' demand that the cooperative focus on tobacco alone echoed farm families' demands, while the scale organizers proposed sought to correct the localism that had long hampered farmers' efforts. Its use of federal resources such as the Extension Service and its reliance on new law that enabled farmers to create their own "trusts" pointed to the future, too, establishing a pattern of farmer-state cooperation that would continue long after the Tri-State's demise.<sup>4</sup>

The Tri-State's charter required that 50 percent of the growers agree to market their tobacco through their warehouses for it to be binding, and organizers began canvassing growers immediately. By 1921, 64,000 farmers from Virginia and the Carolinas had agreed to market their tobacco through the Tri-State. In addition, organizers recruited the support of a number of business and political leaders, including *Raleigh News and Observer* editor Josephus Daniels and Virginia senator Claude Swanson, who signed up his own tobacco crop in 1921. Support was especially strong in the Old Bright Belt.<sup>5</sup>

The Tri-State had a relatively strong, centralized bureaucracy, but building support among average tobacco farmers required hard work on the local level. Leaders traveled the Old Bright Belt organizing meetings, arranging speakers, and passing out literature. To gain support, organizers turned largely to traditional methods of publicity, including enrollment campaigns that resembled religious revivals or political rallies. "They had big all-day meetings with picnic dinners and barbeque suppers and brunswick [*sic*] stews all over that neighborhood," a witness to one of the campaigns remembered. "We used to go to all of them and listen to the speeches. I don't

remember what that man's name was that came to our neighborhood, but he was a natural-born orator. The farmers just stood there with their mouths open to listen to him. It sounded like a good revival sermon before he got through and it went home the same way."<sup>6</sup>

The Tri-State also benefited from work of Extension Service county agents. Created by the 1914 Smith-Lever Act, the Extension Service employed county agents to educate farmers about the latest agricultural innovations. The Extension Service also employed home demonstration agents, who encouraged farm women to purchase modern household conveniences and aspire to an urban middle-class standard of living. By 1920, both male and female agents had begun to make inroads in communities throughout the Old Bright Belt. Defining their work broadly, the Extension Service directors of Virginia and the Carolinas dispatched county and home demonstration agents to sign up farmers for the Tri-State; the directors saw this as an opportunity to help farmers while expanding the influence of the Extension Service. The work generally followed the gendered division of labor constituted in the organization of the Extension Service; county agents largely worked to sign up male farmers while home demonstration agents approached women for support. These agents worked long hours to convince farmers and their families of the benefits of selling their tobacco cooperatively, and their labor clearly helped the fledgling organization get off the ground. "I . . . put my shoulder to the wheel," one agent boasted in 1922, "and went to work with the farmer, doing what he asked, going where he requested, driving night and day, getting up meetings, making talks, familiarizing myself with cooperative marketing; and preaching cooperation, organization and loyalty."<sup>7</sup>

Clarence Poe, the region's leading agricultural journalist, also lent his talents to the Tri-State's cause. As editor of *The Progressive Farmer*, Poe had been trying for years to convince farm families to organize and he saw the Tri-State as their salvation. While Poe's editorial page preached to those outside the Tri-State, the cooperative's leaders shepherded the flock through the pages of the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower*. Both used producerist rhetoric that appealed to farm families' sense of the value of their own work, albeit often in ways that resonated best with white male farmers. "Surely our sturdy Anglo-Saxon Southern white farmers are not going to be content with industrial slavery . . . [or] to acknowledge somebody else as 'master' in fixing a price on the product of [their] own labor," Poe implored in 1921. "Every real Big Man in the United States is in favor of cooperative marketing," the *Tri-State*

*Tobacco Grower* trumpeted the following year, “Only ‘pinhookers’ and men who make money out of the ‘auction’ system are against it.”<sup>8</sup>

Despite the use of race-based language by prominent supporters, the Tri-State broke the pattern of segregation that marked the Farmers’ Union and reached out to black and white tobacco farmers alike. Black farm families were central to the bright tobacco economy, especially in eastern North Carolina and South Carolina, where sharecropping was more prevalent, and organizers understood that excluding African Americans would simply be counter-productive. Black Extension Service agents led much of this work and held meetings for black farmers across the region. The Tri-State’s organizers also reached out to black farmers through the journal published at Hampton Institute, *The Southern Workman*. “The small tobacco grower who is now exploited—whether he be black or white—will be protected under the co-operative plan,” Virginia Tri-State secretary Sydney D. Frissell wrote. He openly acknowledged the talents and hopes of black farmers. “Sixty percent of our tobacco growers—white and black—are burdened with crop mortgages, he wrote, expressing an astonishing level of solidarity. “But victory in their drive for economic independence means that our farmers stand to gain that independence which they dreamed they had, the hours which their children lost from school while hoeing in the fields, the kind of homes of which their wives have dreamed, and comforts which their toil has fairly earned.” He concluded, “Here is inter-racial cooperation earnest and unquestioning, effectively at work to bring about a better day for white and black alike.”<sup>9</sup>

Efforts to recruit black farmers proved successful. “Both White and Negro Farmers in this County are successfully demonstrating that Tobacco can be marketed cooperatively,” one Extension Service agent reported in 1922. The cooperative’s openness to black farmers had its limits, though: most met in segregated locals and no black members rose to any sort of leadership in the organization. Nevertheless, its openness sets the Tri-State cooperative apart as one of the few biracial rural reform organizations between the demise of the Populists in the 1890s and the rise of groups such as the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union in the 1930s.<sup>10</sup>

The leadership of the Tri-State was most effective in convincing families who owned small to medium-sized farms to join. The 1920 price crash affected these farmers as much or more than any other group, in part because the low prices threatened to erode the gains they had made during the war years. The Tri-State had less success convincing large landowners to join. Landlords, in fact, regularly barred their renters and sharecroppers

from joining the Tri-State despite court judgments defending their right to sell their shares however they pleased. Virginian E. A. Jackson reported that his landlord told him not “to deliver any . . . tobacco to the ‘Co-ops’ until he was paid.” Jackson ignored his landlord’s order and sold to the Tri-State, but others had little choice but to deliver their crops as their landlords or other creditors directed.<sup>11</sup>

To strengthen the organization, Tri-State organizers worked especially hard to build fervor among entire farm families, especially farm women. They hired one woman to edit a special page dedicated to women’s activities in the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* and another to travel the back roads to organize farm women. In their efforts, they pointed to the blurry line that separated household economies from the tobacco auction market. “When the farmer fails to get a decent price for his products,” Poe wrote, “he takes it out of his standards of living. He must do so. He has to get along without the improvements he and his wife desire in the way of a better home, lights, paint, waterworks, together with better school advantages for the children.” Organizers used language rooted in the rural progressivism that was popular in the early twentieth century and portrayed women’s involvement as critical to solving the problems facing tobacco farm families. “Tobacco growers have had few chances in the last fifty years to sell at a profit and in fifty years a million boys have left the farms of Virginia and the Carolinas. We have the system, but not the boys to blame,” one editor wrote in 1922. “With cooperative marketing . . . country life [will] become worth living.”<sup>12</sup>

The appeals touched a nerve. Mrs. Ed Carraway wrote to explain that despite the fact that she and her husband owned their land, lived economically, and “worked in the crop rain or shine, early and late,” they had “no fund to carry our children to a higher education.” The market schedule, she argued, put farmers at a disadvantage and even threatened the morality of family members. “Farmers not having the money . . . were forced to eat in cheap places and camp in the camp rooms of a warehouse with hundreds of other men. Now . . . do you think your boy could go to these crowded markets . . . and come back home the boy he was before he left?” The Tri-State, she continued, was the only solution to the problem, as it would make the selling process less time consuming: “As I understand it, a load of tobacco will be unloaded, graded, a bill of sale given with check and receipted at once, and thereby save time.” Time saved and idle hands kept from the devil: a farm mother’s dream come true.<sup>13</sup>

Since the Tri-State counted only heads of households as members, it is

impossible to quantify how many women responded as Mrs. Carraway did, but it is clear that many women did work to support the Tri-State. Women organized meetings; served as secretaries; wrote letters, poems, and songs about the cooperative; and did hundreds of other tasks to build the membership and keep it faithful. “One of the best locals we have has a woman for secretary,” the editor of the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* reported in 1924. “She helps the chairman plan an interesting program for every meeting and members of this local do not break their contracts because they know what it is all about and have their eyes fixed on the goal.” Maude Barnard Browne submitted a meeting program to the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* that included time for community singing, a Bible lesson, and several poetry readings in addition to discussion of regular business. The meeting’s theme, “Love of Fellow-men,” aimed to remind flagging members of their obligation to honor their contracts. A Warren County, North Carolina, farm woman echoed this sentiment in a song entitled “Come to the Co-op Meeting.” Set to the tune of the traditional hymn “There’s a Church in the Wildwood,” the song encouraged farmers to remain loyal to the Tri-State by hearkening to the promise of cooperation: “If the farmers would all pull together / There would be no more mortgage on the mule; / They would be as rich as city people / And could send their girls and boys off to school.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite the Tri-State’s recognition of women’s importance to the organization and the willingness of its leaders to include women in its leadership, supporters of women’s involvement in the cooperative’s activities retained sexist cultural assumptions about the proper channels for women’s work. Although women’s field labor helped see the crop from seedbed to market, their domestic work mitigated the burden of low tobacco prices, and many actually controlled some portion of the crop, leaders of cooperatives saw farm women as secondary, supportive actors in the production of bright tobacco.

The Tri-State’s policy regarding the tobacco grown by the wives and children of members also reflected organizers’ assumptions about women’s and children’s work. Organizers argued that a farm woman or child who controlled a portion of a crop that was signed over to the cooperative was obligated to sell her share at the cooperative with the rest of the crop. “There is no reason why the tobacco sold by the wives and children of our members should be sold other than through the Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association,” the editor of the *Tri-State Tobacco Grower* explained, “and each member will be expected and required to deliver the tobacco grown by his