

CONVERSATION

# “IT CAME FROM THE BOTTOM UP”

UNDERSTANDING THE FEDERATION OF  
SOUTHERN COOPERATIVES

*As told to Lora Smith by Ralph Paige*



THE FEDERATION OF SOUTHERN COOPERATIVES was founded in 1967 to address issues of black land loss, land control, and rural wealth creation in the American South. Civil rights movement leaders knew that without economic justice, there could be no true racial justice.

Black land loss—and the attendant loss of wealth, assets, and opportunity for rural African American communities—has been a major but underreported social-justice struggle. In 1910, approximately one million black farmers in the United States made up 14 percent of all American farmers and owned over 15 million acres. By 1969, black farmers controlled only 6 million acres. Today African American farmers represent less than 2 percent of our nation’s farmers and cultivate fewer than 3 million acres. The highest concentration of those remaining farms are located in the Southeast. Mississippi boasts the largest concentration of African American farmers of any state.



Over the last forty-seven years, the Federation has helped minority farmers hold onto family land, develop markets, and foster community-owned businesses in some of the South's poorest counties. It has also successfully fought and won settlements for black farmers who faced discrimination from government loan agencies and has helped win policy changes in support of minority farmers.

Today the Federation of Southern Cooperatives continues to support existing and new African American farmers—especially small-scale and organic producers—through cooperative development, access to credit, land stewardship programs, and the creation of local food economies in low-income communities. There are signs of hope and progress springing from their work. In 2012, census data showed a total of 33,000 black farmers across the country, an increase of 9 percent over the past five years. More people are returning to the land to farm. The Federation remains the largest African American cooperative development group in the United States, serving many of those farm families.

Ralph Paige, the executive director of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, joined the organization in 1969 as a field officer. Paige has dedicated his life and career to helping black farmers fight discrimination and attain economic independence. During his time as director, the Federation has received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award, a United Nations award, and the first Fannie Mae Excellence in Low Income Housing Development Award.

The words of Ralph Paige follow.

## HISTORY

WE GOT STARTED OUT OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT. Farmers, landowners, and rural people were having a hard time. They were struggling with economic development, with saving land, and with basic needs like access to housing and markets that the white farmers had. At that time, the black farmers didn't have anything. So after the Voting Rights Act was passed, some of us were trying to figure out a way that farmers and rural people could survive and stay on the land. We looked at a lot of different models and started thinking about cooperatives.

Our director at that time, Charles Prejean, led the work. We looked at groups across the South that were farming or producing food together. In Louisiana it was Acadian Delight, a baking cooperative. In Mississippi it was the Grand Marie Sweet Potato Cooperative. Everyone got together and said, “We need to federate these groups into some kind of larger organization.” Sure enough, we were formed from twelve different groups in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina. Those early groups were trying to start credit unions, doing farm cooperatives, marketing cooperatives, and worker-owned cooperatives. They formed what became known as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund.

It came from the bottom up. It has always been a grassroots, bottom-up organization. It took civil rights leaders from across the country to help get it going, but it came from community.

Since inception, we have worked in 100 of the poorest counties in the South. In southwest Georgia, the Black Belt, the Delta. That’s where we chose to work: in the communities that had the greatest needs.

## COOPERATIVES & CREDIT

FARMERS HAD TO BORROW MONEY from a loan company or a predatory lending outfit because poor folk, and especially African Americans, could not go into a local bank or their Farm Service Agency office and borrow money. They didn’t have access to credit—there were many barriers.

This whole concept of cooperatives gave them a means to start their own financial institutions by starting credit unions throughout the South. Those credit unions made it possible for them to pool their funds and make loans to their neighbors. They could get access to loans without putting up their land.

Now, were these run with a big storefront? No, most of them were volunteer. Many of them met in churches and barbershops. It wasn’t a matter of if they had a million dollars in deposits or a hundred thousand dollars or fifty thousand dollars. This was the strength of it: *It was their money*. It was their decision to make loans to their neighbors and operate it. The success here is people owning it. The purpose of it, beyond lending money, is people can make decisions for themselves, they can save, they become better citizens. There are many entrenched values there.

## CURRENT WORK

WE NOW HAVE OUR RURAL training center in the Black Belt in Epes, Alabama. We work with about 1300 acres of land to host trainings on sustainable agriculture. We also provide training for everything from cooperative development to management and leadership to helping people develop feasibility studies. African Americans lost close to 15 million acres of land in the last century. One of the things we saw is that a lot of that land that was accumulated was lost because people didn't have basic documents like wills. The land would become heirs' property and families would lose it. A lot of land is still tied up in heirs' property, so we've developed land retention programs to help families save their land.



## CHALLENGES

IMMEDIATELY THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE IS THE ECONOMY. Unemployment has really hurt our membership. As people begin to suffer because of the economy, as people get poorer, we have more people call on us for services. When things get bad, a normal organization would say, "Cut back." But my question is: Why would you exist as an

organization to provide these services if you cut back when things get bad? When things get bad, people need you more. Through each crisis, the Federation has been there to fight the battle. We don't have the luxury to say anything is over as long as folks are poor.

## VISION & REWARDS

IF WE ARE SUCCESSFUL, we will restore the 15 million acres of land or more that was owned by African Americans. We will have more democratically controlled and run communities. I would like to see more young people return to farm. I'm seeing that already: young folk coming back to farm, or people coming back to claim the land that their parents had. I'm seeing a lot of women coming back to make viable businesses out of their family's farm operation.

We are committed to being here. I'm trying to transition the organization to younger folk now. We want to have the longevity to last another forty years. To young people who are interested in sustainable agriculture and cooperatives, I say, "Do it. You'll never regret it." The satisfaction you get from this work, you can never top it. You can become a leader. You can create economic development for your community. The reward from the work is in the people you'll love. You won't get rich doing it, but you'll gain wealth in another way. 🍵

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*Lora Smith is a program officer at the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation. Visit [southernfoodways.org](http://southernfoodways.org) for a video clip of Ralph Paige at the Federation of Southern Cooperatives rural training center in Epes, Alabama, produced by the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.*

PHOTOS, PAGE 17 & 21, by Jerry Siegel.

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