

Georgia Good Stories



Rural Advancement Fund of the National Sharecroppers Fund Executive Director Georgia Good with her two children, and her colleague and children celebrating 50 years of the health clinic these two single moms, 23 and 21; their children and several other young people founded to assure all residents of Orangeburg, SC had access to basic health care. October 2017.

2017 - This year the Rural Advancement Fund/ National Sharecroppers Fund celebrates its eightieth anniversary as an advocate for family farms and rural communities. Initially formed as an annual "National Sharecroppers Week," co-sponsored by the Workers Defense League and the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the formal organization began without a paid staff and served as the non-profit, funding

Rural Advancement Fund and National Sharecroppers Fund -- Commemorating 80 years of Service to Family Farmers and Rural Communities

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¹Citation.

arm for the fledgling Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

National Sharecroppers Week evolved into the National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF) in 1943 and in 1966 created the non-profit Rural Advancement Fund to receive donations from supporters. Through the years RAF/NSF has grown in both scope and



influence to become an award-winning organization with an international program and a staff that continues to argue forcefully for the rights of small farmers around the world.

In 1937, NSF's focus was the South. While the nation as a whole was still mired in the depths of the Great Depression, the South and its predominantly rural population were faring worse than most. Agriculture was being revolutionized by mechanization,

chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and big business, with the result that millions of sharecroppers, tenant farmers and farmworkers were displaced or forced to work for less-than-minimal pay. The estimated annual income for sharecropper families of the period was only \$300, and the substandard living conditions contributed to diseases like pellagra, hookworm, syphilis and malaria. Educational opportunities for sharecroppers were nonexistent and the illiteracy rate was the highest of any occupational group in America.

Against this backdrop of misery and exploitation, eighteen men--black and white--met in July 1934, in a schoolhouse in Tyronza, Arkansas, to form the STFU. They were led by H. L. Mitchell [See *Southern Changes*, March 1987] and Clay East, admirers of Thomas. The union's goal was to work collectively for better working conditions and greater benefits for farmworkers hard hit by the labor-reducing Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933.

While the goals seemed simple, the union had the weight of history and culture against it. The union was interracial when Jim Crow was still law. Further, STFU's constituency worked outside the typical industrial setting and often viewed themselves as independent producers. Finally, the union's leaders, Mitchell, East, J.R. Butler and Isaac Shaw were Southerners who had been heavily influenced by and eventually gravitated to socialism, the kind of socialism that had incubated in the immigrant ghettos of the urban Northeast and been practiced by many of this country's industrial labor unions.

By 1936 the union had a Southwide membership of over two thousand and a continual shortage of cash. In an effort to ease the cash crunch, Sidney Hertzberg, a young staff member of the Workers Defense League who had worked with STFU during

the summer, came up with the idea of a National Sharecroppers Week. From 1937 to 1944, this educational and fundraising event was held annually in New York. The week of manuscript and print auctions, concerts and plays eventually included as sponsors such celebrities as Fiorello LaGuardia, John Steinbeck, Margaret Bourke-White, Eleanor Roosevelt, Upton Sinclair and A. Philip Randolph.

The changes in agriculture begun during the thirties had radically altered the lives of small farmers and farmworkers. Many abandoned their native South in search of industrial jobs in the North. Others, lucky enough to own land, stuck it out in the face of increasing competition from their better-equipped and better-financed neighbors. Still others, landless and without marketable skills, became a new class of farmworkers whose work was restricted to the planting and harvesting of crops. NSF chose to work with the last two groups--the small farmers who had opted to stay and the migrant farmworkers who had little choice.

- In 1950 NSF established the National Committee on Agricultural Life and Labor. NCALL pressured state and federal governments by distributing information and focusing the collective efforts of over forty individual organizations working with rural issues. The establishment of NCALL signaled a more direct role in politics for NSF and a recognition that the problems of farmworkers are sometimes solved away from the fields.
- NSF was guided in this period of transition and growth by Fay Bennett and Frank Porter Graham with active Board members including A. Philip Randolph. While NSF broadened its range of political activities, it continued funding like-minded organizations working directly with rural people.

- In 1953, NSF sponsored the formation of the Migrant Children's Fund, an organization devoted to addressing the health and educational needs of migrant families, and throughout the fifties NSF supported organizing efforts by the National Agricultural Workers Union (formerly STFU).
- In 1962, the year of NSF's 25th Anniversary, NSF sponsored the Bricks Conference, a three-day meeting on rural affairs which was widely attended by government officials, ministers, farmers and community leaders and represented another change in direction for NSF. In the past NSF had worked in opposition to most government agencies, but now, because of the influx of federal monies and NSF's reputation as an advocate for rural people, the organization was asked to work with government.
- NSF began work on the first of many contracts with the U.S. Department of Labor and the Office for Economic Opportunity. Offices were opened in Atlanta and Knoxville and programs implemented on illiteracy, job training and placement for displaced farm workers, the construction of self-help housing and the formation of rural cooperatives. With funds generated by NSF's new tax-exempt subsidiary, the Rural Advancement Fund (RAF), NSF set up day-care and education centers, housing programs and a rural credit union. A Washington office was opened during this period to increase NSF's lobbying efforts and to take better advantage of new federal programs.
- The late sixties and early seventies brought new internal changes to RAF/NSF with the departure of Fay Bennett and the death of Frank Porter Graham. Father A.J. McKnight was a board member, and current Federation of

Southern Cooperative and Rural Coalition leaders John Zippert and Wendell Paris served as field representatives. RC Board member emeritus John Bloch served for a time as Washington, Representative.

- Jim Pierce, a labor and civil rights activist, took over as executive director and began building a rural demonstration and training center.
- The Graham Center, located in Anson County, N.C., opened in 1974 based on the idea that "creative approaches to the farm problem could make good and profitable use of marginal land and resources." THE GRAHAM CENTER'S free training program was aimed towards small farmers and their families and offered comprehensive training in all aspects of practical small farm operation and management. Courses in soil management, biological pest control, marketing, and crop and livestock production were supplemented by courses putting agriculture in a social and historical context. The Graham Center also housed a resource center which offered research and public speaking on rural, political and economic issues to church, university and farm groups.
- This fiscal and identity crisis precipitated the phasing out of training programs at the Graham Center in 1981 Kathryn Waller, executive director since the late 1970s, moved RAF/NSF back to its roots by instituting a traditional, grassroots organizing effort in the mold of STFU. Waller, along with program director Cary Fowler, instituted an international program to address Third World

problems and the worldwide loss of plant genetic diversity.

- In 1977-78, RAF worked with other community based organizations to found the Rural Coalition to join diverse voices together to promote just and sustainable development in rural communities.
- Beginning in 1982, RAF sent representatives into the field in North Carolina and South Carolina. The goal was to organize farmers into a cohesive, multi-racial, farmer-led unit that could address issues affecting farmers and rural communities. During the mid to late 80's, leaders including Mr. Billy Harvey and Mr. Leon Crump led organizing efforts.
- From the mid 1980's, to the early 1990's, Harvey annually brought a delegation of farmers to the Congressional Black Caucus meetings, where they raised vocally the growing concerns of African American Farmers and Ranchers. One of these farmers was Timothy Pigford, who became lead plaintiff of the Pigford v. Glickman Black Farmers Class Action lawsuit.

As RAF/NSF celebrates its eightieth year of service to family farmers and rural communities one appropriately recalls words from STFU's Ceremony of the Land:

"In man's greed for gold, he has destroyed the fruitfulness of the earth in his lust for power and dominion he has brought misery upon us all. The land cries out against those who waste it. Thy children cry out against those who abuse and oppress them. Speed now the day when the plains and the hills and all the wealth thereof shall be the people's own and free men shall not live as tenants of men on the earth

RAF Current Work

**“Growing Farmers, Growing Food”
Restoring Agriculture and Food Pathways
in Orangeburg, SC**

*Georgia Good, RC Vice Chair
and Director, with Mr. William Booker, Rural
Advancement Fund of the National
Sharecroppers*

Ms. Georgia Good, Director of the Rural Advancement Fund, co-presented with Mr. William Booker, RAF’s Farm Educator at RC’s 2017 Rural Development workshop. Ms. Good explained that “**intergenerational reciprocity**” or responding to the simultaneous need of kids to be engaged and of young farmers to be mentored is the foundation of “Growing Farmers” projects.



*Mr. Willie Booker, Rural Advancement Fund,
with Carol Zippert, and others in New Mexico in
May 2017*

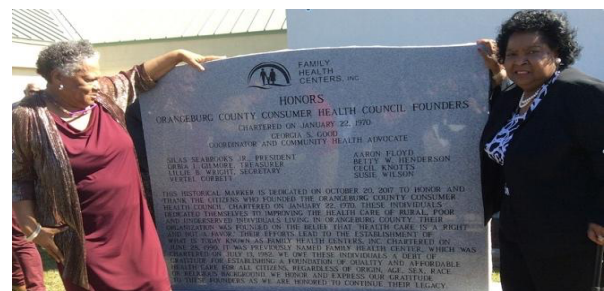
Mr. Booker contextualized RAF’s emphasis on both the transfer of farming knowledge as well as the transfer of farmland to a new generation. The lack of available land is compounded by the shift to large industrial farming, and increasing corporate ownership. The historical recognized lack of access to credit for people of color, women and other marginal groups pushes farming further out of reach. RAF helps elders who own small farm holdings with “succession planning,” to enable the land to change hands. This requires clearing settling any prior heir-property issues and securing titles. He explained that RAF’s

curriculum for young farmers is a “values based education,” teaching small vegetable production, money management skills, and the agricultural roots of their rural economy. He ended with a story illustrating the significance of RAF programs introducing children to the outdoors through farming. He described the amazement of a young boy, who went home with a soil-covered carrot in his pocket and a newfound knowledge of how things grow.

Ms. Good reminded everyone that growing farmers in one of the most impoverished communities in the US has a number of impacts well beyond increasing access to healthy food. Providing stipends for participating young farmers is integral to compounding these impacts. She concluded:

***“this is how we envision food
sovereignty.”***

*Also
inducted
into the
SC Civil
Rights
Hall of
Fame this
year, Ms.*



Georgia Good is shown here with Ms. Betty Henderson. Both were recognized in October 2017 for founding the Orangeburg County Consumer Health Council and the first clinic serving the poor and people of color in Orangeburg, South Carolina.



*RC Co-Chair Georgia Good receives “In the Spirit of Eleanor Roosevelt Award” at Winter Forum. R-
With RAF delegation after presentation of 80 Year Award.*