

# Grady Cooper Campaigned For More Diversity

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Grady Cooper of Dobson was an important figure in area agriculture during this century, but his involvement was more unusual than that of most prominent farming people.

While he operated successful dairy, beef and tobacco operations during his long life, it was Grady Cooper's years of campaigning against the "green gold" that area folks might remember most.

In fact, Cooper was waging a private war on tobacco products even before most of the rest of the nation even recognized their dangers. His battle began in 1915 and didn't stop until Cooper passed away at the age of 98, when he was recognized as the oldest person in Dobson.

Despite his advancing age, Cooper remained an outgoing, friendly man who was still driving well into his 90s and was known for vast generosity, whether the gift was vegetables or flowers from his garden or contributions of vast material worth.

But it is a good bet that deep down Grady Cooper believed his biggest contribution to his fellow man

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revolved around his preaching on the ills of tobacco. He did this over the years in the face of the fact that the "green gold" is one of the most important farming and economic commodities in Surry County.

Cooper always credited a bit of divine intervention and guidance for launching his campaign in the early part of this century, he once told a reporter while relying on his razor-sharp memory.

"I began reading the Bible in the fall of 1914 and in March 1915, I joined the church," Cooper said during a 1983 interview. "But ... something still wasn't right about the whole thing. God helped me to understand that I needed to give up tobacco to have the full satisfaction."

On a May evening in 1915, Cooper, then a young tobacco farmer, laid

down his smoking and chewing tobacco permanently. "I took them out of my pocket and got rid of them, because I knew I would probably want them the next day."

The basis of Cooper's stance on tobacco was that it was damaging to the body, which is detrimental to religious principles. This was years before statistics on tobacco's relationship to lung diseases and oral cancer and when the term "secondhand smoke" was a far cry from being uttered.

Though he quit using as well as growing tobacco, Cooper wasn't through with agriculture. He grew vegetables as a replacement for the leaf and also was known for running a successful dairy farming operation at one time as well as a beef enterprise. In his later years, Cooper was

involved in the development of land for residential use. He always maintained that God provided him with a livelihood that didn't depend on tobacco — and if this could work for him it could for others.

Cooper, who had been born in 1889 in the county seat, was one of four children of John Cooper, who owned a large farm in the area. His father kept a livery stable and young Grady used to take a horse and buggy to a train station at Rockford and pick up people to take to court, according to local historian Hester Jackson. "Court was the biggest thing around here and he grew up in front of the courthouse," the historian said.

His early life set the stage for Cooper's occupational life that weaved in and out of the agricultural and transportation industries.

After giving up tobacco farming, he established a freight business hauling items from Dobson to Mount Airy. Included were items as wide-ranging as ice and laundry — but no

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tobacco.

"The people over there at Dobson just thought I was off my rocker when I quit the tobacco, and everyone said I'd go broke," he recalled in '83. Instead the freight business thrived, and Cooper expanded his transportation interests by starting an operation in which he transported groups of people on trips to various points of interest in the United States using a large bus.

This included visits to Niagara Falls, Chicago and other scenic locations and trips to the coast, for which Cooper was sometimes to charge only a few dollars to customers — a small fare even in those days. His bus was laden with signs professing his religious feelings, including those on tobacco.

His low-cost travel business was but one example of the generosity people who knew him say was representative of Grady Cooper. He was known as someone who was extremely considerate of others, and was known for bringing flowers to many around town.

He donated land for the construction of Dobson United Methodist Church and was one of the pillars of the church. One of the most vivid memories of Grady Cooper among the members is of him standing in the back of the church, surrounded by children, while passing out candy and chewing gum.

Cooper had five children of his own, three daughters and two sons.

His offspring carried on the agricultural heritage of their father, who lived on Blessing Drive in Dobson in

his later years.

Son Grady Jr. is retired from the N.C. Milk Commission, while Cooper's other son, John, is retired from the extension service in Pittsboro. One daughter, Carolyn Comer, resides in Dobson, while another, Mary Dobbins, lives in Dobson. His third daughter, Eleanor Cooper, died July 4, 1983 of a heart attack.

Grady Cooper himself never considered the idea of becoming old enough to retire, a family member said, "because he kept saying he wasn't old enough to go to those retirement things."

But death finally claimed Grady Cooper when true retirement couldn't. He passed away Nov. 29, 1987 at age 98, a testament to his vigorous and healthful life.