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**Prairie Connections  
and Reflections**



# **Prairie Connections and Reflections**

**The History, Present, and Future  
of Co-operative Education**

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in co-operation with  
**Association of Cooperative Educators**



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## **Contents**

Introduction	1
Prairie People and Co-operation	2
Beginnings	3
Some Enduring Myths	5
A Few Insights about Co-operation	7
ACE's Prairie Roots: The Saskatoon Connection	10
A Permanent Association	12
The Context of the Times	15
The First Formal Meeting	17
Early Programmes	18
Reflections on Agents and Agency: The Future of Co-operative Education	19
The Content and Purpose of Co-operative Education	21
Endnotes	23



## Introduction\*

**T**HE PURPOSE OF THE FOLLOWING IS TO DRAW SOME connections in space and time surrounding the general theme of co-operative education. The connections I wish to draw have to do with my own place—the Canadian Prairies, one of the many homelands of the co-operative movement—and with a particular time in the evolution of North America’s large co-op systems. And I want to reflect on where we are going, figuratively: the trajectory and the possibilities of co-operative education.

In drawing connections, and in reflecting on changes, there are two themes that I want to stress. One is *trust*. The other is *agency*. By trust I mean the relations among people who are at the heart of co-operative activity. Trust means transparency; trust means predictability; trust means having something in common. And by agency I mean the assumption of important jobs by particular people and institutions. Co-operative education is one of those things that the co-operative movement delegates to educators, to agents such as the Association of Cooperative Educators (ACE) and its members.

But that’s where I want to end up. Where I want to start is with Saskatoon, and why the city has seen four international meetings of co-operative educators in the last forty-three years (1956, 1965, 1987, and now 1999). The programme of the first of those meetings—the 1956 School on

\* This paper is a modified version of a speech first presented to the Association of Cooperative Educators meeting in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, 30 April 1999.



Co-operative Education and Organization—had the following to say:

Co-operative growth in Saskatchewan, which in many respects is unequalled elsewhere in North America, has long excited interest... The extraordinary degree of co-operation among co-operatives of many types, the widespread acceptance of a co-operative philosophy, the role of the Provincial government's Department of Co-operation and the services of the University combined to make Saskatchewan an ideal place in which to hold the 1956 School.<sup>1</sup>

So according to the programme, it was the strength and unity of the co-operative movement in Saskatchewan, together with the supportive roles of government and university, that attracted international educators here. One should also add that another reason for the earlier meetings was that Saskatoon was home to an exceptional group of co-operative educators, who eventually contributed to the Co-operative College of Canada that existed in the city from 1959 to 1987. But what was it about the Prairies, what was it about Saskatchewan, what was it about Saskatoon that made the region such a centre of co-operation? To put it crudely, why were there so many co-ops around here?

## Prairie People and Co-operation

**S**ASKATCHEWAN IS OFTEN IDENTIFIED, A LITTLE MISLEADINGLY, as "Canada's Co-operative Province." I say misleadingly because, proportionate to population, the co-operative movement is certainly as strong in Québec as it is here. But it is true that co-operatives play a large role in Saskatchewan. A study of the social and economic importance of co-operatives in Saskatchewan, conducted in 1997–98 by the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, revealed the continuing co-operative presence in this province. In 1996, there were more than fifteen hundred co-operatives, which reported revenues of nearly \$7 billion and assets of more than \$9 billion. Remember that this is in a small province of just one million people, whose gross domestic product is \$29 billion (1998). In all, two-thirds to three-quarters of the households in the province likely have co-

op memberships; the sales of co-ops steadily amount to over one-fifth of the gross domestic product.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, the revenues of co-operatives in Saskatchewan are greater than the provincial government revenue from all taxes and royalties; greater than the spending on all government line departments.<sup>3</sup>

### *Beginnings*

Saskatchewan's largest co-operative systems developed in two great waves in the first half of the twentieth century. First, from about 1905 to 1925, came the large marketing organizations in the grain trade associated with the agrarian populist movement. The Grain Growers' Grain Company, organized in 1906 (ancestor of United Grain Growers, UGG), and the co-operative elevator companies organized in 1911–13 (later taken over by UGG and the wheat pools) were part of this movement. The culmination came with the commodity pools of the 1920s, and above all, the three provincial wheat pools organized in 1923–24. This first stage had several notable features. First, the co-operatives that were created tended to be as large, as centralized, and as powerful as farmers could make them. This reflected an attitude of "agrarian trade-unionism," as some co-operative leaders called it: a determination by farmers to gain strength in society and in the economy through unity. Second, this movement was based on political and reform movements that were similar to those in other parts of the Great Plains. The Prairie Provinces in these years had many populist organizations, including a Society of Equity, a Nonpartisan League, a Progressive Party, and Farmers' Union or United Farmers' organizations, all enriched by radical-democratic and reformist ideas similar to those in comparable organizations south of the border. Even specific forms of co-operative activity were common, as evidenced by the Sapiro-style marketing pools of the 1920s that were based on the advice and personal involvement of California lawyer Aaron Sapiro. This phase can be seen in many ways as part of a single, Great-Plains-wide agrarian movement.

A second wave of co-operatives and a distinctive new character for the Prairie co-operative movement came in 1925–55 with the widespread devel-

opment of rural consumer co-operatives and rural credit unions. (Consumer co-operatives had existed since the early days of the farm movement, but became more numerous and better organized beginning in the late 1920s.) These co-operatives were relatively small and decentralized, much closer to what were understood as “Rochdale” principles of co-operation: geographically limited, tied to a specific community, cultivating a high degree of local autonomy and involvement. It was no accident that such co-operatives spread during the bitter days of the Great Depression of the 1930s. When farm prices collapsed and many other farm organizations were financially crippled, co-operation in consumption and in credit were the only real means of organization left for rural people. Most importantly, each type of co-operative was helped by the previously established organizations. The field staff of, especially, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool helped create hundreds of new consumer co-operatives at elevator points throughout the countryside, often beginning as simple buying co-operatives with no or few facilities. Pool elevator agents often acted as the first (unpaid) managers for groups of local farmers who wanted to form such a co-op. Later, pool field staff and consumer-co-op managers and staff worked together to help create credit unions, many of which, at first, were administered out of the desk drawers of local co-op managers.

By the 1940s, co-operatives had become a Prairie-wide community-development movement in their own right, involving not just farmers but rural communities as a whole. Co-operative annual meetings, educational events, and community picnics were integrated into social life in rural areas. The movement was broad, diversified into several mutually complementary sectors, and was deeply rooted in each individual community. Important, too, was the fact that the widely scattered consumer and credit co-operatives built up strong federations and central economic organizations (ancestors of today’s Federated Co-operatives Limited and Credit Union Central) that supported the scattered local co-operatives.

So since the 1930s, Saskatchewan has been notable not only for the size of its co-operative sector, relative to the population, but also for the diversity and unity of it. Saskatchewan still has exceptionally strong co-operative systems in agricultural marketing, in retailing, and in credit. It also has extensive systems of recreational, childcare, and preschool co-ops. And

there are some significant though less numerous models such as our consumer-owned, health-service-delivery co-operatives, or community clinics as they are known. These different types and sectors of co-operatives worked together in an integrated system. Newer types of co-ops were developed through planned initiatives, through investment of paid and volunteer time and resources, on the part of the older and more established organizations.

In general, co-operatives heeded no particular geographic divides, no rural-urban boundaries, no class distinctions between farmers and consumers. They paid relatively little regard to ethnic differences, even though Saskatchewan society was divided according to an ethnic hierarchy. Up to the mid-twentieth century, co-operatives were also relatively advanced in bridging the gender gap, and provided a platform from which several of Canada's most notable women public activists launched their careers. (After the 1940s and 1950s, co-operatives generally failed to build on this promising foundation.) At its height, the co-operative movement in Saskatchewan was an integrated, expansive movement for social reform and economic development, and one that crossed social and sectoral boundaries.

### *Some Enduring Myths*

All of these developments have given rise to some powerful and enduring myths about Saskatchewan and its co-operatives—myths that are in some cases more inaccurate than others. In general, the relative degree of unity and comprehensiveness in the co-operative movement concealed and has led people to overlook real differences and divisions. For example, we often use vague language about co-operatives having developed here to champion the cause of the poor, the powerless, the oppressed. That's true and it isn't. Co-operatives developed here as part of a process of colonialism, in which Europeans obtained the vast majority of the land from the aboriginal populations and set about using it in whatever way they saw fit. Co-operatives in the Prairies were, originally, tools of the colonizers, not of the colonized. But one needs to draw a distinction between types of colo-

nizers. The ordinary people who came west to take a quarter-section of land did not experience their place as that of an elite; rather, they quickly felt subjected themselves to bigger and more powerful interests, to railroads, banks, merchants, and eastern-based governments. Prairie co-operatives, initially, were part of a revolt of the small colonizers against the elite colonizers, to borrow some language from Albert Memmi.<sup>4</sup> Only later did they find, in fact only now are they perhaps finding, some foothold around the colonized peoples themselves. ACE members Harold Chapman and Terry Phalen were involved decades ago in early attempts to develop aboriginal co-operatives in northern Saskatchewan, some of which still exist. In many cases, however, only now are co-operatives being formed that take account of the needs and perspectives of First Nations and Métis people. The aboriginal angle is one part of the Saskatchewan co-op myth that is rarely told.

Perhaps the most general version of the myth is that Saskatchewan people are somehow inherently co-operative. I would put it to you that nothing could be further from the truth.

In reviewing the development of Saskatchewan co-operatives, I often use a three-step model to explain how co-operation took root. First, when people had a problem—an economic problem usually to do with the structure and operation of markets—they most often tried to solve it by working harder, learning new techniques, trying new technology. Farmers were never short of advice from agronomists, government extension agents, and university professors about how they should farm better, and they typically tried following this advice. Usually this advice had to do with greater specialization, more mechanization, higher production and yields—especially in the early years, by the way, this advice was not infrequently wrong. In any case, hard work and a spirit of improvement were not always enough to deal with the harsh realities of dryland farming in a semi-arid and remote region. So when problems did not go away, the next thing Prairie people did was to demand that the government fix it for them. The early years of grain farming in Saskatchewan were full of mounting demands for government regulation of railroads, government ownership of grain elevators, government marketing of farmers' wheat. But our governments rarely responded sufficiently to satisfy farmers. They were influenced by ortho-

dox, noninterventionist, liberal economic policy; perhaps they were also prudent. Whatever the case, the failure of governments to respond to problems is what led farmers, in particular, to large-scale co-operation, the third step in my explanation. So here is my conceptual model for why we formed co-ops in Saskatchewan:

If at first you don't succeed...

1. Try harder!
2. Ask the government!
- (and if all else fails...)*
3. Co-operate!

So, the reason there are so many co-ops in Saskatchewan is that there have been so many problems that could not be solved by more obvious and direct means. Markets and governments failed Prairie farmers so many times that they gave up and co-operated with each other.

Far from being naturally co-operative, I would say that Prairie people are naturally individualistic. It is through and out of their individualism, under certain ecological and cultural conditions, that Prairie people arrive at a deep, almost intuitive understanding of co-operation. There is a complicated and difficult relationship between individual and collective identity, individual and collective action. Such relationships constitute culture and are mediated by language, by writing, by speech and discussion, as well as by experience.

### ***A Few Insights about Co-operation***

No one captured the Prairie perspective better than the twentieth-century American writer Wallace Stegner, who spent part of his youth on a farm just this side of the Canadian border, in southwestern Saskatchewan.

Stegner's book about this region of his youth is called *Wolf Willow*, and centres on the southern Saskatchewan town of Eastend, which Stegner fictionalizes in the book as Whitemud.<sup>5</sup> Here is one of Stegner's memorable passages about the experience of the Prairies:

There was never a country that in its good moments was more beautiful. Even in drouth or dust storm or blizzard it is the reverse of monotonous, once you have submitted to it with all the senses. You don't get out of the wind, but learn to lean and squint against it. You don't escape sky and sun, but wear them in your eyeballs and on your back. You become acutely aware of yourself. The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, as enigmatic as a question mark.

It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones. At noon the total sun pours on your single head; at sunrise or sunset you throw a shadow a hundred yards long. It was not prairie dwellers who invented the indifferent universe or impotent man. Puny you may feel there, and vulnerable, but not unnoticed. This is a land to mark the sparrow's fall.

There is an important insight here about co-operation. The settlers who came to Saskatchewan stood out, like exclamation or question marks on a page. They did not, by and large, know each other. They did not have a history of co-operating. But they were all in the same boat together, so to speak. And they could observe each other's actions and choices. In the flat, open prairie, though your neighbour may have been a total stranger, you could observe how your neighbour lived, where she delivered her eggs or shopped or socialized, where he drove his sacks of grain. It was not just that this was physically a land to mark the sparrow's fall, but socially as well: a blank slate, a society with its hierarchies and differences, but with only superficial institutions and factions and structures, a society where all who owned land had legitimacy and autonomy. Only the landless agricultural labourers, only the First Nations people on their reservations, were invisible in this society. Most others cast the same hundred-yard shadow.

In a land to mark the sparrow's fall, your neighbours' actions are ob-

servable, their motives transparent; though they are autonomous and independent of you, you can begin to predict how they will behave. This is the beginning of trust, and of co-operation.

But it is not just that trust leads to co-operatives, though that is true; I would argue that the reverse process is the more important one. Co-operatives are systems designed to help members trust each other. After all, if everyone co-operated spontaneously and with full trust, you wouldn't need a co-operative: people would just do things in common. Formal co-operatives arise where people have trouble working together, where there are issues of trust and transparency and predictability to be resolved. Members discipline themselves with structured ownership, voting, patronage, and surplus allocation, in order that they can better judge their own costs and benefits, and better predict the choices of their fellow members. If a co-operative makes sense and promises defined material benefits to me, I can have some confidence that numbers of my neighbours will feel the same way, that together we will achieve some effectiveness and scale, and that I will not be left holding the bag for a failed business. Every members' decision is made in the context of looking sidelong at other members. In the land to mark the sparrow's fall, co-operation is a social, not an individual choice. A co-operative is a solution to a problem of collective action. In a certain sense, then, one could say that Prairie people formed co-ops because they had so much difficulty co-operating. They had to formalize it to make it work.

This is not to say there aren't ethics and values of co-operation. But those ethics and values result *from* co-operative action just as much as they contribute *to* it. Co-operative values are values one learns, by and large, through participating in a co-operative or a closely related organization. Values lead to co-ops; co-ops lead to values. You learn what you live, and live what you learn. The key is to see this as a *process* in which people react to one another—to see it as a question of culture.

There are many sophisticated concepts that can be applied to these processes. In allowing people to develop trust in each other and work together, Prairie co-operatives were building what Robert Putnam has called "social capital."<sup>6</sup> Mutual relationships of trust, expectation, loyalty, and obligation served, in economic terms, to reduce the "transactions costs"



of forming and operating businesses. People's attitudes and values had real economic effects. But what I want to stress is that it all came down to relationships among people, to social situations in which people found themselves, in two words: to the *culture* and *values* that evolved in a particular time and place through the interplay between people's choices and their environment. One of the lessons I would draw is that the most important function of co-operative education is to help co-op members to understand and trust one another. But before I talk about the nature and future of co-operative education, I want to weave the history of the Association of Cooperative Educators (ACE) into the history of Prairie co-operatives.

## **ACE's Prairie Roots: The Saskatoon Connection**

**T**HE ORIGINS OF ACE GO ULTIMATELY BACK TO THE EARLY circumstances of North American co-operative movements. Struggling co-operatives discovered a powerful need for education, and from the beginning, this education was of two sorts, what I would call conceptual and technical.

By conceptual education I mean that members, managers, and directors needed to develop a shared idea of what it was they were engaged in, of how society and the economy worked, and what co-operatives were for. For this they needed, in the first place, social-economic analysis. It is striking that the earliest co-operative adult-education programmes in Britain involved education in political economy and education about the nature of industrialization. The earliest programmes in the Prairies usually had sections on agricultural trends, the place of agriculture in society, and the like. Farmers also needed information about other co-operatives and other places, they needed discussions of principles and philosophy, or what in those days people unselfconsciously called co-operative ideology. It wasn't simply that there were many incorrect or partly correct ideas circulating about co-operatives, though that was certainly true. It was also that

members needed a *shared* understanding of co-operatives and a common language for talking about co-operative action. Such a common language is what builds a common culture. Shared understanding builds trust and predictability and confidence—the things that sustain co-operatives.

There were also pressing needs on the other side for technical education: for training in how to manage, how to keep books, how to do inventory, how to merchandise and market. These needs also arose from a basic feature of co-operatives, for co-operatives everywhere and always require people to assume new and unfamiliar roles. Farmers, and this in a day when tilling the soil was in large part semiskilled manual labour, had to learn to run commercial businesses. The result was a dual programme of co-operative education—conceptual and technical—both springing out of the basic nature of co-operatives.

That co-operators felt a deep need for these kinds of education is evidenced by the fact that during the worst days of the Depression in the 1930s, they organized institutes and short courses for themselves. Usually in the summer, in June or July, often sponsored by a university or an extension agency, these institutes conveyed the basic concepts and also skills of co-operation. They developed independently on both sides of the border, in Canada and in the United States, and by the 1940s were a fixed feature of growing social movements.

Now, such institutes were not the only focal points for co-operative education. Here in the Canadian Prairies we also had Wheat Pool field agents, and later, field agents of other co-operatives; we had government and university extension personnel; we had the co-op press, which was the earliest educational organ of all; and we had the women's co-operative guilds, which from the 1930s to the 1960s conducted some of the most important grassroots-level leader and member development of anyone at the time. The point was that the institutes were the places where people from these different kinds of agencies came together around co-operative education. This role of meeting place is one that ACE has inherited.

ACE is ultimately the result of two decisions: the decision to bring Canada and the United States as well as all kinds of co-operatives together by crossing national boundaries; and the decision to formalize education by forming an association. Of these two aspects, the first—the creation of

a multisectoral, multinational organization dedicated to co-operative education—is the easiest to understand.

It was in 1952 that the Cooperative League of the USA invited Canadian participants to a conference at the University of Minnesota in Duluth. This was the first step towards the formation of ACE. Then after meetings in Illinois, Minnesota, and Iowa, the institute was held for the first time outside the United States in 1956, at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. That meeting was held in the Agriculture Building at the university, and was addressed by leaders of Saskatchewan co-operatives and the Co-operative Union of Saskatchewan, and by Woodrow S. Lloyd, a cabinet minister (and later premier) representing the provincial government. Most of the agenda, back in 1956, was taken up by case studies of Saskatchewan co-operatives, presentations by Saskatchewan co-operative leaders, and by an ambitious day-and-a-half study tour of co-op facilities.

Why Saskatoon? Co-operatives had always been strong in the northern part of Saskatchewan, particularly the rural consumer co-operatives and credit unions that were numerous in the parkland belt of the province. Because of this, Saskatoon was home to Federated Co-operatives Limited, a regional co-operative wholesaler, which at that time operated extensive educational programmes employing its own field staff. The University of Saskatchewan was also here, and particularly important was its College of Agriculture, which had an active Extension Department supportive of co-operative development. Equally importantly, a new Co-operative Institute was put together in Saskatoon in 1955, ancestor of what would become, a few years later, the Western Co-operative College.

### *A Permanent Association*

Following ACE's first foray into Saskatoon, institutes and schools were held in varying locations in the midwestern US, and once in Winnipeg, Manitoba, during the years that followed. The next new departure came at the 1964 meeting in Kansas City, Missouri. The participants in Kansas City made a key decision: they would institutionalize co-operative

education in a permanent association, and they decided that the founding meeting of this new association would be held in 1965 in Saskatoon. The key figure behind the decision appears to have been Jerry Voorhis, the long-time head of the Cooperative League of the USA, who was at that time nearing the end of his twenty-year term as executive director. Voorhis was a five-term congressional representative from California, a religious man, and in his day a dominant figure in the American co-operative movement. The following is an excerpt from his 1964 speech, the speech that motivated the formation of ACE.

**Needed: A Professional Association  
in the Field of Cooperative Education**

*(For consideration by the 1964 Institute on Cooperative Education)*

The unique value in the cooperative form of economic organization lies in the relationship which exists between cooperative members and the businesses which they own. This type of ownership makes possible the democratic control which is essential if it is to remain true to the principles upon which it was founded. It is ownership by the people whose needs it serves, by all of them and by them alone, which more than anything else distinguishes cooperative business from other forms of economic organization.

But this great potential resource of cooperatives is of little value unless it is fully developed. And the purpose of cooperative educational work is therefore the development of such a degree of membership participation, understanding and activity, especially on the part of a core group of members, as to give to cooperative businesses a strength, stability and capacity to engage successfully in competition...

As cooperative businesses grow larger, the need for this development and cultivation of membership activity becomes more and more crucial, and more and more important. It can, if really effective, be of greater sheer economic value to the business success of the cooperative than all of the sales promotion programs of their competitors.

For all these reasons, a professional association of people skilled in the particular type of adult education work, which the cooperative in its relationship with its member owners needs, is one of the paramount

necessities at the present hour if the progress of our cooperatives in the modern day is to be assured.

No group of people does effective work unless those engaged in that work are proud of what they are doing. Few people can work effectively if they feel they are working alone. In all the important professions in our modern society there exists among the persons engaged in that profession a greater or less degree of what we may call “professional pride” or simply “sense of profession.”

...

Those of us who are engaged in the profession of cooperative education should be linked together in a professional association. Such an association should establish over a period of time standards for its members—standards of preparation and training for their jobs, standards of compensation, standards of accomplishment. It should be able to represent in the councils of cooperatives the interests of the educational directors and others engaged in educational work. It should have the function of dramatically demonstrating the central importance of such educational work to the economic success of cooperative businesses. It should be a means of regularly exchanging and sharing experience, successes and failures alike. It should in the course of time gather to itself all those people in North America who are engaged in the profession of cooperative education.

By all these means, such a professional association could reverse present trends towards a de-emphasis on cooperative education work and restore it to its proper place in the very center of every worthwhile cooperative enterprise...

With such a professional association in being we would no longer have simply Institutes or Conferences on cooperative education. Instead we would have annual meetings of a professional association, comparable to the meetings of cooperative editors, or indeed the meetings of social science teachers, vocational agricultural teachers or other recognized professions.<sup>7</sup>

There are four things going on in Voorhis’s speech that I would like to highlight. First, he began by grounding co-operatives in relationships among people, what I have called relationships of trust. Second, he argued that co-operative education was losing out, that it needed to be cham-

pioned, defended, rescued, and elevated. Third, he outlined a strategy of professionalization as the means to do this. And fourth, in order to have the broadest base and the widest perspective, he argued for an inclusive organization covering an entire continent.

### *The Context of the Times*

This analysis and this response need to be seen in the context of their times. By the 1960s, co-operatives were becoming large and complicated organizations, with elaborate management structures and skilled workforces undreamed of in earlier eras. At the same time, farmers continued to struggle; places like Saskatchewan became acutely conscious of rural depopulation and structural adjustment in agriculture. The pervasive tension between organizational size and member needs, the climate of unsettling social and economic change, and growing technical complexity form the background to Voorhis's speech. It was a time of crisis, of sorts, for large and well-established, rurally based co-operatives. One of the reasons Voorhis's speech found a resonance was that many people, in many places, including here on the Canadian Prairies, were struggling with the same issues.

In Saskatoon, the university had at that time a Centre for Community Studies, which undertook social-science research concerning co-operatives and rural development. The centre, under its head, Bill Baker, did a study in 1963 of the importance of co-operative education. Baker concluded that as co-operatives grew larger and more complicated, they were coming to rely on "technical, impersonal, rational, efficient types of problem-solving skills, with fewer people involved in making the decisions which shape their future destinies."<sup>8</sup>

Harold Chapman of Saskatoon, a founding member of ACE, talks about the problem of social movements such as co-operatives losing their sense of direction after "a generation and a half." The idea is that the founding generation—in this case, people who struggled through the organizing battles of the 1920s and the Depression of the 1930s—internalizes and advocates the values of the movement. The following generation is

affected by these founders and follows them out of loyalty. But after a while, as the founding generation retires, those who did not share their formative experiences drift away. The focus on members, the loyalty of members, may begin to decline if nothing concerted is done after a generation and a half.

Perhaps one could say that, of the original programme of co-operative education pursued in the early days of the schools and institutes, co-operatives had succeeded by the 1960s on the management and technical side, but were doing less well in the propagation of the movement to new generations.

The founding of ACE was one of a number of educational initiatives of the 1960s that should be seen as efforts to address this problem, to win new generations and new audiences for co-operation, to reproduce the movement from generation to generation. Within Saskatchewan, these included efforts by existing organizations such as the Co-operative Union of Saskatchewan and the Women's Co-operative Guilds, the growth of the new Co-operative College, the Centre for Community Studies at the university, and experiments with innovative organizations such as regionalized public relations federations of co-operatives within areas of the province.

Thus there was a widely shared perception in the 1960s that education was central to dealing with the problems facing co-operatives. But what to do about it? Voorhis went on, in his 1964 address, to identify professionalism as the strategy for advancing education. A professional organization would help make educators more effective by training them in modern, scientific methods. Moreover, modern approaches would help demonstrate the effect of co-operative education in developing member loyalty and boosting co-operative sales performance. But also, as Voorhis's words show, the new organization was intended to be a collective advocate for the importance of education within the co-operative movement. Summing up these roles, one could say Voorhis proposed an ACE founded on ideas of modernism, science, and professionalism, incorporating leading research and new techniques. Education would become a matter of "special skills... particular training and experience," applied by "persons who are capable of developing certain relationships with those with whom they work."<sup>9</sup> With special skills would come status, proven effectiveness, and recognition

within co-operatives. Now, in many ways, these ideas parallel the ways in which management within co-operatives had been and was being improved. Educators were trying to follow a path of professionalization similar to that which managers had followed, and they were doing so, in part, to obtain recognition from managers for what they did.

As Voorhis recognized—and this is the fourth thing I want to highlight from his address—these problems were international in scope, and the solution was to create an international organization. People could share information and learn from the experiences of co-operatives abroad, perhaps better, in some cases, than they could learn from those close to home. Appreciation of differences and a sense of learning and experimentation were built into ACE as a multinational project.

### *The First Formal Meeting*

All of these ideas and more lay behind that first, formal meeting of ACE in Saskatoon thirty-four years ago. The 1965 meeting was held, of course, at the Co-operative College, a self-contained, state-of-the-art co-operative education campus in a residential neighbourhood of the city. The college had been founded in 1959 and was built around principles of group learning derived from studying European and other adult-education movements. Its principal, Harold Chapman, was influential in the formation of ACE and became vice-president on ACE's founding board. It is undoubtedly in large part because of Chapman and the Co-operative College that ACE chose to hold its founding meeting in Saskatoon.

On 25 June 1965, the new organization elected its first board of directors, which consisted of the following individuals:

Glenn Anderson, secretary, Wisconsin Association of Co-operatives  
 Harold E. Chapman, principal, Western Co-operative College  
 Ramon Colon-Torres, secretary, Co-operative League of Puerto Rico  
 Cecil Crews, educational director, Michigan Credit Union League  
 Dr. D.J. Miller, director, CCA School of Co-operation, Kansas City  
 Mrs. Bernice Olliff, board member, Co-operative Union of Ontario and  
 Co-operative Medical Services Federation of Ontario



• PRAIRIE CONNECTIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Emil Sekerak, educational director, Consumers Co-operative Society  
of Berkeley, CA

Victor Smith, director of member relations, Greenbelt Consumer  
Services Inc., Washington, DC

Rt. Rev. F.J. Smyth, director, Coady International Institute,  
Antigonish, NS

The board represented co-operative organizations from east to west and north to south. Glenn Anderson was president, Chapman vice-president, Smith was treasurer, and Olliff the recording secretary. Hayes Beale, director of Peace Corps projects for the Co-operative League of the USA, was appointed executive secretary, and ACE was run at first out of the league offices in Chicago. Other charter members with Canadian connections included J.T. Phalen and Alexander Laidlaw.

Two interesting things about this list are the people named, and their organizations. Many prominent leaders and educators had a hand in the formation of ACE — people who are remembered decades later, and in some cases, such as Laidlaw, known around the world. But second, the list of organizations represented in 1965 gives pause for thought. Some of these organizations, prominent in their day, no longer exist, and many have changed in form, in name, and in structure. This is a reminder that co-operative institutions are not permanent, and that ACE has already outlived some of its original sponsoring organizations.

Incidentally, when ACE was founded, in 1965, in Saskatoon, the acronym stood for Association for Co-operative Education. Both individuals and organizations who wanted to advance the cause of co-operative education were welcome to join. The group took its modern name and form in 1970, when it was reconceptualized and formalized as an association of individual, professional educators. This was closely in line with Voorhis's original idea.

### *Early Programmes*

The early programmes of ACE meetings featured more than ever a systematic, scientific approach to learning. Workshops on techniques of

education, from use of small groups to working with mass media, were commonplace. So were sessions concerned with learning and applying the findings of contemporary social science—of sociology in particular. The question of measuring the effect of co-operative education programmes became a recurring item on the agendas of ACE's early meetings.

After thirty-five years, ACE is approaching its own generation-and-a-half milestone. It is probably inevitable that the association will be examined and questioned and redefined. Historians are notoriously unreliable when predicting the future, but perhaps I can make a beginning by framing some questions, based on the historical trends and events, that might contribute to the discussion.

## Reflections on Agents and Agency: The Future of Co-operative Education

**L**OOKING BACK ON ACE'S HISTORY, WE SHOULD REMEMBER the key elements of Voorhis's proposal: an association founded on an understanding of relationships within co-operatives, focussing on the importance of members; an association founded to maintain the declining importance of co-operative education in a movement increasingly dominated by technical functions; an association dedicated to advancing education through science, research, and professionalism; and a multinational association of educators throughout North America and the Caribbean. Which of these elements have proven most enduring? Which should be reconsidered?

Co-op educators do not need to be persuaded about the importance of co-operative education. Not only is it "still" important today, but perhaps it is important today more than ever. Do we believe, as the founders of ACE believed, that co-operative education is threatened, and if so, by what? Is it declining? Or merely changing?

And what of the strategy for strengthening education? The strategy of professionalization implied regulation, certification, qualifications,

standards. It seems to me that ACE went down that road much less than Jerry Voorhis urged it to do. But ACE clearly did attempt to professionalize in terms of applying scientific standards, in terms of learning from contemporary social research, in terms of developing the knowledge and skills of practitioners. There are probably things to keep here, as well as things to reconsider. After all, ACE has not accomplished everything its founders set out to achieve, but it is still a living organization that keeps alive a vision of co-operative education. This is a record of partial success. Was professionalization a dead end, or did it help co-op education against competing pressures? Should ACE be an association of practitioners of co-operative education, or of supporters of co-operative education? Does it advocate for education within co-operative movements as much as it should? Are we done with applying the results of leading-edge research, or is there more to consider, perhaps even research from fields and sources ACE has not yet tapped?

Such questions are worth mulling over. They are worth talking about among co-op educators, and it is worth engaging co-operative organizations over them. But it is not entirely fair for me to end only with questions, so let me also highlight two personal conclusions that I draw from all this.

First: the success of ACE for almost a generation and a half has been due in large measure to the basic vision of an international, cross-sectoral alliance of co-operative educators. This is the essential character of ACE and the reason some of us, at least, value its work. Where institutions stop at political boundaries or boundaries of economic sectors, the ideals of the co-operative movement do not. Those ideals are one of the things to keep vibrant in an education-oriented organization, and are a reason for ACE to maintain its open and inclusive structure. There are few enough institutions that effectively cross the internal barriers the co-operative movement has built within itself.

Second: ACE is an important example of an organization dedicated to being an agent for education. There are few such organizations, fewer than there used to be. The field is thinner than it was in the 1960s. Perhaps the same is also true of other regions of North America; perhaps these changes over time are something to discuss.

This lack of attention to dedicated educational agencies is of some concern, because, despite the myths, co-operatives do not spring up by themselves from below. Usually any group that forms a co-operative receives some assistance from outside, beginning with hearing from someone about the basic idea of what co-ops are and why people need to form them. External agents help new co-ops form. In established co-operatives, organizational development also requires that people negotiate processes of change and learn new roles. This process is supported by educators who have specialized training as well as a broad perspective on co-operatives and contemporary issues. Perhaps these jobs are done well in today's co-operative movements, but do we have the systems in place to ensure that they are always done well? If a function is important, it should be someone's job to do it. Whose job is it in a co-op movement to watch out for the importance of education, to be concerned with how the trainers are trained? Just as co-operatives should employ dedicated trainers, the co-operative movement should have dedicated agencies whose job is to see that education gets done well. ACE is one such institution—one of few such institutions.

### ***The Content and Purpose of Co-operative Education***

There is one last point that I would add as a personal, historian's observation concerning co-operative education: it is important not to forget about the content and purpose of the education. It is fine to master techniques, and certainly one model of the adult educator is that of the disinterested outsider who facilitates a process for others. But historically this is not how co-operative education has been most successful. To go back to Voorhis's speech of thirty-five years ago, education is primarily for the members: the purpose of education is to help members participate and to help co-operatives, their management, and their staff to serve member interests. Every educational experience related to a co-operative should start from this premise. Such education is not neutral or disinterested. A purpose of co-operative education is to develop trust and shared values

among the stakeholders in the organization. Co-operative education, even where it is primarily technical in nature, should embody and convey co-operative values.

Co-operative education should employ language that is appropriate to the values we wish to convey and the culture we wish to foster; language is the basis of culture. Every time we choose to talk about or stress certain things, to leave others out, or to use particular words, we are conveying values and culture. Voorhis, in his 1964 speech, put the members front and centre, and with this simple device made a statement about the values and purpose not only of co-operative education, but of the whole movement.

One of the things co-operative education does is to make sense of the world in which we live, and show the place of co-operation in today's world. Again, this is not neutral, and it means grappling with current issues, current ideas, current research. British workers did this a hundred and fifty years ago by studying the economics and social impact of industrialization. Prairie farmers did it fifty years ago by studying the development of agriculture and the foundations of rural life. Today, we usually conceive of the social, economic, and political changes we are facing using the notion of globalization. Surely the main purpose of co-operative education in today's world should be to help people learn about globalization, to give them an empowering language for discussing it, and to let them know some things they can do about it. Members, employees, and officials need to understand their relation to their co-operative in terms of the pressures of a globalizing world and the needs and interests of the members.

So this would be my own prescription for further enhancing the work of co-operative education: to focus on education that carries direction and values, education with a purpose and in a context, education that carries and reproduces a co-operative culture. In saying this, I know I am saying nothing new, and am merely echoing what was done in the earliest days, what was done by the founders of this organization. It needs to be done in a different world that has different challenges. ACE has endured, and likely will endure, because no matter how much society has changed, the association's basic idea remains relevant and critical for maturing co-operative movements as well as new ones.

## *Endnotes*

1. References to papers of the Association of Cooperative Educators (ACE) and of preceding co-operative institutes are based on materials from ACE's archives supplied to the author by the executive administrator, William J. Nelson.
2. The comparison of \$6.9 billion in co-operative sales (1996) to the gross domestic product (\$28.6 billion in 1998) might be more meaningful if the "double-counting" of transactions between Saskatchewan co-operatives were eliminated, but as it stands the 1996 figure would be greater than one-quarter of GDP.
3. Comparisons are based on figures for the Consolidated Revenue Fund in the Saskatchewan *Budget Speech* presented in March 1999. The consolidated fund does not include the budgets of provincially owned crown corporations.
4. Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Boston: Beacon, 1967). I am indebted to Georgina Taylor for showing me how to apply Memmi's language to the circumstances of early settlement and farm movements in the Prairies.
5. Wallace Stegner, *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* (New York: Viking, 1966; originally published 1955), p. 8.
6. Robert D. Putnam, "The Prosperous Community: Social Capital and Public Life," *The American Prospect* 13 (Spring 1993) (<http://epn.org/prospect/13/13/putn.html>).
7. From the ACE archives courtesy of William J. Nelson: photocopy entitled "Needed: A Professional Association in the Field of Cooperative Education. For consideration by the 1964 Institute on Cooperative Education."
8. Centre for Community Studies, *A Study of Co-operative Education in Saskatchewan* (Saskatoon: Co-operative College of Canada, 1963), cited by H.E. Chapman, "The Change Process through Co-operative Education and Research," in Harold R. Baker, James A. Draper, and Brett T. Fairbairn (eds.), *Dignity and Growth: Citizen Participation in Social Change. Essays in Honor of W.B. "Bill" Baker* (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises, 1991), pp. 81-96.
9. From Voorhis's 1964 speech (footnote 7).

