

From Cooperative Commonwealth to Yardstick Capitalism



MIDLAND'S EVOLVING VISION of COOPERATION in MID-CENTURY MINNESOTA

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WHEN JOE GILBERT, former socialist newspaper editor and Nonpartisan League leader, joined Midland Cooperatives in 1933 to edit its new newspaper, the *Midland Cooperator*, he received a tongue-in-cheek warn-

ing from Midland's secretary, Frank Osborne: "Let's don't have any of that Russian stuff." While Gilbert did not have communist "Russian stuff" in mind, he did capitalize on the economic discontent of the 1930s to champion the idea of a cooperative society distinct not only from social-

ist and communist economic systems but also from corporate capitalism. Gilbert's first issue of the *Midland Cooperator* proclaimed that it would print the kind of "news the capitalist press does not dare print." Cooperation, for Midland, would no longer be solely about saving farmers' money,



but also about challenging corporate capitalism itself by reinvigorating an economic democracy in which all players had a voice. The aim: to build a “cooperative commonwealth” for everyone’s benefit.¹

MIDLAND COOPERATIVE Wholesale, a farmer-owned federation that sold gasoline and automotive supplies wholesale to cooperative oil associations, sprang up in the Midwest during America’s farm recession in the 1920s. Struggling with skyrocketing production costs, farmers organized to purchase their supplies collectively. Farmer-owned and run on a democratic, one-member, one-vote basis, the Midland federation included hundreds of cooperatives throughout the Midwest that had joined Midland to challenge the primacy of corporations. In addition to cheap gasoline and related products that farmers needed, Midland offered its members a cooperative way of life that strove to build a society based on good will.

In the 1930s, Midland stood out for its promotion of a citizenry that exercised economic as well as political citizenship. By the time it peaked in the 1970s, prior to its 1982 merger with Land O’ Lakes (another cooperative), Midland was one of the largest farm-supply cooperatives in the United States. It claimed 300,000 members among its federation of more than 700 cooperatives. During its history, competing ambitions arose. Definitions of cooperation changed tremendously over the course of the twentieth century, and Midland, in part, reflected this greater transformation. In its early days, Midland aspired to creating a “cooperative commonwealth,” a loose term

FACING: Midland Cooperative Wholesale main office building at 739 Johnson St. NE in Minneapolis, 1932.



Joe Gilbert, editor of Midland Cooperator newspaper, ca. 1935.

in which cooperatives represented much of the economy and would serve as beacons for social and economic democracy. By the 1950s, it saw itself chiefly as a yardstick, serving its members best by measuring overpricing and other corporate excesses. Throughout its history, Midland succeeded in giving its farmer-members a better deal. But over time, the earlier idealistic visions of the meaning of cooperation lost out.²

Today in Minnesota we can see the relics of several cooperative traditions, including consumer cooperative grocery stores, or worker collectives. Few Minnesotans know, however, that these traditions represented separate ideological movements that battled over the meaning of cooperation during the twentieth century. Midland’s story serves to remind us of an older tradition that saw cooperation as a way of life to be practiced socially as well as economically. The transformation of its vision away from this model of cooperation partially accounts for why the older vision is rarely found today. Midland’s history also remains instructive for another reason: it offers an example of citizens envi-

sioning and practicing democracy beyond electoral politics by focusing on economic institutions.³

MODEST BEGINNINGS

In the 1920s, the rise of internal combustion engines and mechanized agriculture meant that farmers needed a regular, affordable supply of refined fossil fuel. Troubled farmers met in Cottonwood, Minnesota, on July 7, 1921, to form the first petroleum consumer cooperative in the country, the Cottonwood Oil Company, as an alternative to the exorbitant hikes in petroleum prices imposed by oil companies. Prices were rising just as farmers faced a severe recession that followed their European counterparts’ return to work after World War I. Members made decisions on a one-member, one-vote basis. The Cottonwood Oil Company purchased a small filling station and sold petroleum at cost, thereby distributing savings to its members.⁴

Cooperatives were already popular in Minnesota. The Equity Cooperative Exchange, a grain-marketing organization founded in Minneapolis in 1908, had expanded across the Midwest and provided a strong example of rural organizing. In 1914, 40 percent of Minnesota’s farmers patronized cooperative creameries. Federal legislation, such as the Capper-Volstead Act of 1922, made the cooperative model attractive by protecting farmer-controlled marketing co-ops from antitrust laws. As “old line” corporate oil companies (as cooperators called them) priced petroleum below the cost of production in an attempt to put cooperatives out of business, farmers throughout the state and country soon followed the Cottonwood cooperative’s path of collaboration with other cooperatives. The number of petroleum

Midland's belief in the oppositional relationship between consumer cooperatives and corporate capitalism remained strong for the next two decades.



cooperatives in the state grew from one (Cottonwood) in 1921 to 40 just five years later.⁵

From a modest creation of a few farmers in a single small town in southwestern Minnesota, the Cottonwood Oil Company had grown sufficiently by November 1925 to be renamed the Minnesota Cooperative Oil Federation. In 1926, when the federation began to purchase oil to supply petroleum to its members, it was renamed the Minnesota Cooperative Oil Company. Member cooperatives invested in the cooperative oil company, which then sold petroleum at market prices to its members and returned the savings from bulk purchasing to co-op members at year-end. Membership in the Minnesota Cooperative Oil Company leapt from 25 cooperatives in 1927 to 40 in 1929, including some in Wisconsin. To account for its multistate membership, the organization soon renamed itself the Midland Cooperative Oil Association.⁶

The founders of Cottonwood Oil Company (and its successor pre-Midland iterations) offered pragmatic rather than ideological justifications for their cooperative approach. As farmers without extensive capital, they pooled their money to make purchases collectively. A 1928 pamphlet published by the organization pledged to advance the “co-operative oil association movement on a sound, conservative, business-like, true co-operative basis.” Many farmer-members held socially conservative views. They did not seek alliances

with groups that envisioned broader economic or social change. Joel Torstenson, a former Midland employee who in 1958 wrote a dissertation about the organization, suggested that an “ideology of thrift” defined the early years.⁷

A change in perspective was soon to come. In 1927 and again in 1928, oil companies lowered their prices—from one to three cents per gallon below cost—in a renewed attempt to put rural cooperatives out of business. The oil companies’ effort failed when the Federal Trade Commission and the Minnesota State Department of Agriculture stepped in to protect consumers. The event jolted Midland into an explicit adversarial stance against corporate capitalism. In 1930 Midland joined forces with the Cooperative League of the USA (CLUSA), founded by socialists and radicals in 1916 to provide members with educational materials, cooperative and related news, and later, political lobbying support. Midland joined CLUSA’s regional affiliate, the Northern States Cooperative League, led by radical Finnish cooperatives from Wisconsin. Northern States connected Midland to future leaders such as Joe Gilbert and George Jacobson, who helped Midland articulate the social change aspects of cooperation. The alliance between Midland and CLUSA, which included Midland leadership on the CLUSA board, also strengthened Midland’s belief in the oppositional relationship between consumer cooperatives and corporate capitalism, a belief Midland remained

strongly committed to for the next two decades.⁸

A CHALLENGE TO CORPORATE CAPITALISM

In the 1930s, Midland aspired to transform the economy through a cooperative commonwealth using three key tactics: education, alliances, and membership growth. Through education, Midland leaders believed they could achieve widespread citizen engagement and give farmers an economic voice. To organize new cooperatives and recruit members across the Upper Midwest, Midland hired 29 full-time and 40 part-time “field men,” who were chosen for their passion and knowledge of cooperatives, not for their business expertise. As they reached out to their base of former Nonpartisan League members, Farmer-Laborites, socialists, and liberals, the field men “preached cooperation as if engaged in ‘a religious crusade,’” wrote cooperative historian Steven Keillor.⁹

Midland’s massive education effort throughout the 1930s and 1940s included movie showings, picnics, and schools. The four-week cooperative training schools taught employees the history of cooperation, labor, and economics. Midland also sponsored member discussions in community councils. In 1938, 7,600 people attended co-op discussion groups in 47 locations (primarily in Minnesota and Wisconsin), 1,358 participated in “neighbour night” meetings, and nearly 10,000 attended

large meetings to hear speeches and watch movies on cooperatives. The fuel cooperative distributed pamphlets and articles on a wide range of topics and maintained a library containing literature written by its own staff as well as CLUSA staff and cooperators worldwide.¹⁰

In addition, members automatically received a subscription to the *Midland Cooperator*, though not everyone read it religiously. Midland's message of cooperation, however, likely made an impression on its audience. The *Midland Cooperator* kept members abreast of news from

Midland "field men" organized new cooperatives and recruited members; training school, 1934.

international politics to the latest cooperatively produced farm equipment. The newspaper published articles on "international economic imperialism" and "industrial profits" while encouraging the cultivation of "better citizens and better cooperators."¹¹

Given the organization's increasingly important role in midwestern political discourse, it is hard to imagine Midland's efforts falling on deaf ears. The cooperative not only provided access to better-priced products but also spoke to market forces, which worked against farmers' and workers' interests. Nevertheless, Midland's success in cultivating an active and critical membership and in functioning as a vibrant democ-

racy is unclear. Cooperative structure does not necessarily mean members will participate in the governance of these economic democracies. Cooperative leaders, rather than ordinary members, wrote most editorials in the *Midland Cooperator*, and voting records and meeting minutes are not well documented. More research is needed into the lives of individual members of Midland's member cooperatives.¹²

Midland also attempted to bridge the gap in understanding between some farmers and urban wage laborers. Although unionization at Midland in the 1930s sparked some internal resistance, Midland and urban labor unions followed the Farmer-Labor Party and CLUSA by



recognizing farmers' and workers' shared experiences as producers and consumers. By 1944, Midland held conferences with representatives from the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) and supported the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Cooperative Council's effort to "expose and defeat attempts of the forces of reaction and exploitation to put the farmer against the laborer, and the laborer against the farmer." Midland also helped establish cooperative grocery stores in Minneapolis during the late 1930s, to advance cooperation into cities.¹³

Educational efforts and a growing alliance with labor took place as Midland grew exponentially. Midland membership expanded from 62 cooperatives in 1930 to 201 by 1939, spurred in part by a doubling in the use of tractors. As Midland showed its success through member savings, it proved its viability as an alternative to untrustworthy corporations. Its development of new departments such as insurance and credit union programs during the 1930s and its direct support for new cooperatives, such as electric cooperatives, increased its worth in farmers' eyes. Midland's message of mutual aid, self-help, and economic democracy, was attractive.¹⁴

US entry into World War II did not stop Midland's expansion. To secure a steady supply of petroleum during wartime scarcity, Midland invested in a petroleum refinery and later in oil wells. With newly acquired capital, Midland's members decided to diversify its products in other ways, expanding into tires, fertilizer, and seed. Midland professionalized its bureaucracy and created new departments and roles to address its

increasing size and responsibilities, moving from its informal beginnings into a more stable and efficient organization. Field men became less like co-op evangelists and more like district managers. Membership doubled, and business volume ballooned from \$4.4 million in 1940 to nearly \$15.8 million in 1946.¹⁵

With all this expansion, Midland felt confident in its future. Coop-

eratives across the United States experienced similar bursts of growth that appeared remarkable in comparison to their humble beginnings. By 1950, marketing and purchasing cooperatives boasted more than 20 million members and customers nationwide. Rapid growth furthered the belief that cooperatives could become a substantial portion of the American economy and could play



During WWII, Midland expanded its product line to include tires, fertilizer, and seed.

Midland began to present the ideal cooperative as a pragmatic yardstick, holding corporations accountable for their prices.



a key role in reshaping the postwar world.¹⁶

Cooperative success did not go unchallenged, however. From the 1930s to the 1950s, corporate leaders attacked cooperatives as tax evaders, communists, or both. One 1936 article in the conservative *Minnesota Journal*—“True and False Co-ops”—labeled the cooperative movement “communistic” and claimed that it was linked to the Soviet Union. Midland manager E. G. Cort replied that the cooperative movement did not encourage Soviet-style communism, but rather sought to “eliminate the private profit system . . . and strengthen the essential features of a democratic form of government.” His clarification did little to mollify corporate critics. In 1943, business leaders established the National Tax Equality Association, attacking cooperatives for tax evasion in an organized and forceful fashion throughout the decade. As cooperatives repeatedly insisted, their largely tax-exempt status existed because their members’ income tax filings included their cooperative savings. By the mid-1940s, however, these tax-evasion accusations put Midland and CLUSA on the defensive. Midland had to justify that it paid its fair share, and it even engaged briefly in partisan politics to safeguard its tax status.¹⁷

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Midland and CLUSA supported the war effort, but they also stipulated that free speech remain unfettered and that American democracy be upheld lest “Hitlerism” triumph on

the home front. The *Midland Cooperator* exposed how Southern poll taxes obstructed African American voting and urged readers to pressure their representatives to take action. Like Midland, CLUSA fought undemocratic practices at home. When radio companies discriminated against cooperatives by refusing them airtime in 1943, a cartoon in CLUSA’s *For Study and Action* pamphlet compared the act to those promulgated by Hitler.¹⁸

Cooperatives generally joined many corporations in calling for the purchase of war bonds and equating production on the home front with victory overseas. Still, crucial differences existed. Unlike corporations, Midland and other cooperatives saw themselves as promoters of peace and had initially advocated neutrality. For them, cooperatives offered antidotes to the causes of war: profits, poverty, and racism. Midland attacked oil corporations for shipping petroleum to Japan and Germany and chastised the stockholders of interconnected American, British, and German arms manufacturers. These instances reinforced Midland’s view that the profit motive was a corrupting force. Only cooperation could prevent such malfeasance.¹⁹

A SHIFT IN TONE

While in many ways strengthening the resolve of Midland and CLUSA in their cooperative crusade, World War II nonetheless moderated their tone. Both organizations attacked capitalism less frequently and spoke more

carefully of cooperation. Whether this reflected a true change in vision and practice or simply a shift in rhetoric is unclear. It is apparent, however, that the climate of World War II and the conservative postwar period made attacks on corporate capitalism “embarrassing if not disastrous.” In a time of intense patriotism, the public only tolerated so much criticism, and cooperators worried that their prosperity might be affected.²⁰

The disintegration of the labor alliances of the 1930s and 1940s was another factor that contributed to moderating Midland’s tone. Urban cooperatives faltered as they tried to keep up with a changing economy and political culture. As a result, the coalition of forces around cooperation began to disintegrate. In addition, organized religion’s enthusiasm for cooperatives faded out. Politically, third parties had fallen apart or merged with others, becoming more centrist.²¹ (See sidebar story.)

A 1946 CLUSA report recommended “that there be no more ‘indiscriminate’ criticism of capitalism, for that . . . aroused hostility and misunderstanding.” The report further suggested that the term “cooperative commonwealth” be abandoned. Acknowledging the contrast between cooperation and corporate capitalism, an article published a year later in CLUSA’s *Co-op Magazine* stressed that few could now denigrate corporate capitalism and still receive much “support from an average American audience.” Another article in the same issue

questioned how cooperators could both celebrate free enterprise and distinguish themselves from the “ruthless struggle” of competitive business. Meanwhile, key personnel who had led the charge for cooperation, including E. G. Cort and Joe Gilbert, left Midland in the 1940s and early 1950s due to health reasons. Their replacements did not replicate their fiery assertiveness. Midland’s membership growth also accounted for its change in tone; it now had to reflect a membership with a broader range of ideological views. Midland began to present the ideal cooperative as a pragmatic yardstick, holding corporations accountable for their prices. Nationwide, cooperatives no longer positioned themselves

Extensive advertising campaigns replaced education as a way to promote Midland’s burgeoning product lines.

in opposition to corporate capitalism, but worked within a narrower landscape.²²

Like cooperatives generally, Midland’s postwar story has been largely unexamined. But its trajectory is crucial to understanding Midland and the cooperative movement. Immediately after World War II, Midland continued to press for economic democracy, civil rights, and citizen participation in reconstructing a peaceful postwar world. As with the Great Depression, the end of World War II left space for cooperatives to imagine how society could operate differently. Midland published “The Counsellor,” a mid-1940s pamphlet series for community discussions. Midland’s educational service director, Harry J. Peterson, asserted that he knew “no better way to meet our obligations as citizens than to spend an evening with neighbors” discussing

how to improve local and international conditions.²³

Midland’s pamphlets in the late 1940s continued to address cooperative concerns and wider social questions: Were certain races inferior? Did we need more government regulation of business? Did elementary teachers need more training? One issue warned of an oligopolistic news industry and its consequences for democratic debate. Another issue’s cover depicted the dwindling number of newspaper owners. CLUSA, meanwhile, in 1945 founded the Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe (CARE), dedicated to sending food to Europe (and later to other continents) to alleviate starvation. This organization, which as of 2018 still survives, became an important way for cooperatives to engage in global issues. Midland enthusi-

(continues on p. 15)



Co-ops: “remarkable ideological diversity”



Cooperation has been important to many groups in US history. It was the economic basis for the populists of the late nineteenth century and for rural socialists and members of the Nonpartisan League in the early twentieth century. The term “cooperative commonwealth” was even used by the radically inclined Industrial Workers of the World to denote a Marxist form of cooperation. Finnish American communists of the early twentieth century utilized cooperatives as a tool for class struggle and revolution. This period also saw the beginnings of the black cooperative movement, with W. E. B. Du Bois as its spokesperson, to address the intertwined issues of racism and poverty. Generally, this period often had a much more pronounced class element, which gradually disappeared over the course of the twentieth century as a more consumer-oriented and middle-class cooperative movement took hold.

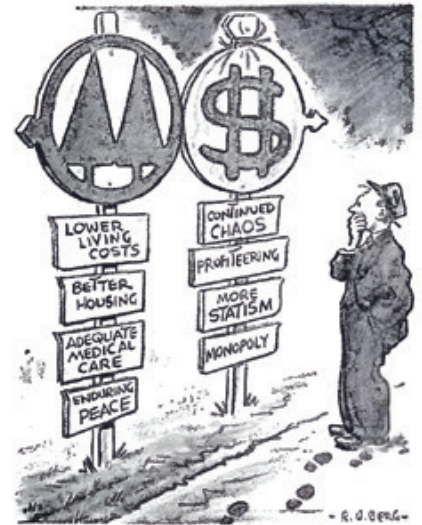
The tumultuous period following the stock market crash of 1929 saw both deterioration in living conditions and flourishing radical activism. Throughout the country, organized labor expressed itself in militant strikes, notably the 1934 Teamsters Strike in Minneapolis. Consumers exerted their power through boycotts and parades. Many believed the economic devastation of the Great Depression merited a restructuring of the nation's economy and saw a solution in cooperatives. Cooperatives of every type sprang up across the country. Midland's challenge to corporate capitalism in the 1930s reflected these national trends.¹

Consumer cooperation relied on the independent action of citizens and was based in the ethic of mutual self-help. This philosophy appealed to many who were tepid about labor tactics such as strikes or state intervention in the economy. Cooperative members and supporters represented a remarkable ideological diversity. A 1936 *Literary Digest* survey found that more than 20,000 ministers, priests, and rabbis—88 percent of those surveyed—endorsed a cooperative commonwealth approach to the economy. Visiting the United States in 1936, the Japanese minister and labor activist Kagawa Toyohiko spoke of cooperatives as a model of “brotherhood economics” and the embodiment of Christian ethics. Many American cooperators were themselves deeply religious. Often, editorials in the *Midland Cooperator* or speeches at meetings called on religious themes, imbuing cooperation with a decisively moral character.²

Public figures and political officials also lent their support to cooperation. W. E. B. Du Bois, John Dewey, and Eleanor Roosevelt all suggested that cooperatives offered a solution to the Great Depression. Soon after his 1933 inauguration, President Franklin Roosevelt established the Bank for Cooperatives as part of his economic recovery program. In 1936 he dispatched a

C'mon,
Mister

Let's start
the
New Year
Right . . .



These pine trees in the circle stand for

Cooperative Economic Action

—The Balance Wheel of a Free Economy—

For more information, and what to do
about it, contact the co-op nearest you,
or write National Cooperatives, 343
South Dearborn Street, Chicago 4, Illinois.

(Local co-ops: Retire this ad to suit for your local newspaper. Not of illustration available.)

This ad from January 1947 promoting cooperation's social benefits appeared in the magazine of the Cooperative League of the USA (CLUSA).

commission to Europe to study cooperative movements there. Third parties in the Midwest tended to support cooperative organizing at the state level. Many of Midland's staff reciprocated support for these third parties. In 1934, Floyd B. Olson, the Farmer-Labor governor of Minnesota, expressed his hopes for a cooperative commonwealth—a hybrid economy consisting of cooperatives and nationalized industry—while declaring that corporate capitalism had failed. Governor Philip La Follette of Wisconsin's Progressive Party created a co-op week in his state and spoke at a Midland annual meeting in 1939. To cooperators and their supporters, cooperatives appeared to be a viable, even essential, model for alleviating poverty and countering corpo-

rate avarice. It was in this context that Midland embraced the expanding cooperative movement in the 1930s.³

However, ambitious views regarding competition divided cooperators. Fractures existed within and among cooperatives in Minnesota and nationally. Some, most prominently cooperative theorist E. G. Nourse, held that cooperatives acted as yardsticks to capitalism, injecting competition, ethics, and democracy into the marketplace while avoiding a total overhaul of the economy. Marquis Child's influential 1936 book, *The Middle Way*, posited that cooperation offered a middle way between capitalism and socialism; between fascism and communism. Instead, Child proposed a Scandinavian-style mixed economy. Others rejected capitalism outright. Some advocated for enough cooperatives to keep corporations accountable. Figures such as E. R. Bowen, Cooperative League of the USA's executive secretary, went further: only cooperation could resist the "evolution of capitalism . . . toward monopolism," as well as the totalitarianism spawned by communism. His 1953 book predicted that corporate capitalism would wither away and a cooperative economy would rise, echoing perspectives from the 1930s. Bowen was increasingly isolated in his views. Meanwhile, others simply sought affordable goods. At times, these differences manifested as a tense relationship between more conservative marketing cooperatives, in which farmers sold their products collectively to achieve higher prices, and consumer cooperatives, which sought lower purchase prices. As historian Steven Keillor notes, "cooperation was an ambiguous idea whose ideological coloring lay in the eye of the beholder."⁴

THE NEW URBAN COOPERATIVE movement that arose during the 1970s, often associated with environmentalism, feminism, or Marxism, continued Midland's earlier tradition of linking democracy and economic action. The new cooperative movement, found in a variety of industries, also tried to reinvigorate cooperative democracy by rejecting corporate enterprise and focusing on bringing democracy into the workplace. These efforts ranged from collectives—entities of workers without any management—to consumer cooperatives. One estimate notes that between 5,000 and 10,000 consumer cooperative grocery stores emerged nationally in the 1970s alone.⁵

At this point, Midland had moved to a more moderate mindset. *Midland Cooperator* editor Erick Kendall in 1970 wrote disdainfully of the "fanatical ideologues" in this new movement who eschewed what he described as practical business matters. Some new cooperators responded in kind. They saw a striking resemblance between the older cooperative movement and large, hierarchical corporations. Writing about Minneapolis's North Country Co-op, Betsy Raasch-Gilman observed that the old wave of consumer coops like Midland and Land O' Lakes "seemed . . . very much like any other capitalist enterprise."⁶

Eventually, some cooperatives from the old and new factions struck up a more amicable relationship. Like Midland, many of these new cooperatives ended up expanding under the market pressures of the 1980s, when they professional-

ized themselves to remedy their lack of capital, training, and business consistency. However, in the Twin Cities, which had experienced a resurgence of cooperatives, many ceased to exist. In 1981, 72 collectives and cooperatives operated in the Twin Cities metro area; in 1993 the number had dwindled to about 30. Of those, some remained committed to economic democracy and others only nominally so. As had Midland, the new wave of cooperation faced its own crisis of organization and principles.⁷

Notes

1. Joel S. Torstenson, "The Development of an Institution," (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1958) 92; "A System Stripped Naked," *Twin City Cooperator* 1, no. 5 (Oct. 5, 1939): 6.

2. Tom O'Connell, "The Commons Wasn't Born Yesterday," *On the Commons*, Dec. 8, 2009, <http://www.onthecommons.org/commons-wasnt-born-yesterday#sthash.znFSYhw1.dpbs>; Torstenson, "The Development of an Institution," 294.

3. Joseph G. Knapp, *The Advance of American Cooperative Enterprise* (Danville, IL: Interstate Printers & Publishers, 1973), 265, 301, 307, 310, 385, 387; Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 25, 49; Keillor, *Cooperative Commonwealth*, 311; Co-op League News Service, "Co-ops May Be the Way Out, Says Anti-Monopoly Committee," *Midland Cooperator* 9, no. 6 (Oct. 22, 1941): 1; "The Blind Side of the Press," *Midland Cooperator* 2 (July 1935): 4; Joe Gilbert, Iver Lind, and Davis Douthit, "What Profiteth It A Man?" *Midland Cooperator* 6, no. 14 (Mar. 22, 1939): 4; Joseph Gilbert and Iver Lind, "Critics of Cooperation," *Midland Cooperator* 4 (Jan. 1937): 4; Torstenson, "The Development of an Institution," 231.

4. Thomas P. Schomisch, "Edwin G. Nourse and the Competitive Yardstick School of Thought," paper presented at Graduate Institute of Cooperative Leadership, Columbia, Missouri, July 16, 1979, 8; Torstenson, "The Development of an Institution," 132, 399; E. R. Bowen, *The Cooperative Road To Abundance: The Alternative to Monopolism and Communism* (New York: Henry Schuman, Inc., 1953), 44, 62; Joe Gilbert and Iver Lind, "What Will Prevent Wars?" quoting E. R. Bowen at the Senate Committee on Unemployment Relief, *Midland Cooperator* 5 (Feb. 1938): 4; Torgerson, "Farmer Cooperatives"; "Leaders Predict Progress For Cooperative Movement: The Function of Cooperation" quoting J. P. Warbasse, *Midland Cooperator* 3 (Oct. 1935): 1; Walter E. Rasmuson, "Letter to the Editor: Displeased by Gilbert," *Midland Cooperator* 13, no. 12 (Jan. 23, 1946): 2; Joseph Gilbert, Iver Lind, and Davis Douthit, "Some Queer Thinking," *Midland Cooperator* 6, no. 15 (Apr. 12, 1939): 4; Steven Keillor, *Cooperative Commonwealth* (St. Paul: MNHS Press, 2000), 337.

5. Craig Cox, *Storefront Revolution: Food Co-ops and the Counterculture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 2–5, 10–11; Joshua L. Carreiro, "Consumers' Cooperation in the Early Twentieth Century: An Analysis of Race, Class and Consumption" (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2014), 3; David and Elena French, *Working Communally: Patterns and Possibilities* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1975), 105–7, 112–13.

6. Erick Kendall, "Critique of Co-ops' Techniques," *Midland Cooperator* (May 4, 1970): 11; Betsy Raasch-Gilman, "A History of North Country Co-op," 1994, 2, 17–19.

7. Patricia Miller, "Old, New May Form Co-op Wave of Future," *Midland Cooperator* (May 21, 1979): 5; Raasch-Gilman, "A History of North Country Co-op," 17–18; Anne Meis Knupfer, *Food Co-ops in America: Communities, Consumption, and Economic Democracy* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 4, 6, 8, 12–13.



As Midland expanded, it professionalized its bureaucracy and created new departments. Main office, 1935.

astically supported CARE and other cooperative efforts abroad. To deal with the challenges of returning to a peacetime economy, many cooperatives established postwar committees. Extending their advocacy well beyond cooperative business concerns, Midland and CLUSA urged citizens to grapple with contemporary issues and decide the fate of the postwar world.²⁴

ADAPT OR FADE AWAY

In the postwar period, Midland also underwent changes that began to mirror the practices of large corporations.

Structural expansion started to take priority over education, and advertising replaced grassroots engagement. As corporations and farms grew during the postwar period, so too did cooperatives, in order to stay competitive. Cooperatives had to prove that, like corporations, they also offered a diversity of products that were affordable and reliably available. The increasingly mechanized agricultural industry called for fuel, fertilizer, and other products—demands that cooperatives sought to meet with extensive advertising campaigns that highlighted their burgeoning product lines. Midland could no longer rest

on ideological pronouncements. It needed to grow and adapt—or fade away.²⁵

The full force of this realization hit home when Midland suffered its first financial loss, in 1949. Oil prices and farm incomes had dropped, causing the organization's gross margins to plummet from nearly \$5.1 million to \$2.8 million. Midland brought in a managerial consulting firm to restructure the organization, elevating hierarchy over democracy and scale over engagement. By 1951, Midland had spent 150 percent more on advertising than the previous year. Increasingly, the promotion of

school institutes and neighborhood discussions diminished. Mirroring a national trend, Midland also shifted its attention from helping organize cooperatives to helping maintain them via technical assistance to member-managers. Historian Clarke Chambers observed that in the national movement “practical considerations [took] precedence over ideology” and “education often subtly gave way to advertising.”²⁶

The concern with growth did not completely subsume the loss of cooperative principles. Most cooperators, of all ideological shades, welcomed cooperative expansion. Divides existed, however, between those who expanded in the name of advancing economic democracy and those who expanded solely in the name of achieving cheaper goods and higher farm commodity prices. The American Institute for Cooperation, an educational forum for cooperatives, reflected this divide in its 1953 conference. One speaker extolled the economic benefits of cooperatives but claimed they had no broader social or political significance. Midland’s representative, Seth Fisher, rejected this view as “apologetic,” stating that cooperatives helped members “be active as citizens in their respective communities.” Even though one member was “getting more and more suspicious that *Midland Cooperator* is pink-tinged,” after reading Gilbert’s and other’s editorials, many more expressed their appreciation for Gilbert and his ideas. Despite a national conservative turn politically, many cooperative members still appreciated the social and political implications of cooperation. Generally, however, narrower visions of cooperation began to dominate. Midland’s publications lost their expansive and sometimes idealistic tone.²⁷

Midland’s entrance into fertilizer production, oil exploration, and refin-

Gas and oil, food, and farm supplies were processed and distributed for Midland member-owners at far-flung facilities.

ing in the 1950s prioritized startup capital and maintenance. Speaking at a 1955 meeting between Midland and Central Cooperative Wholesale of Superior, Wisconsin (which later merged into Midland), Midland manager A. J. Smaby stressed that cooperatives needed “to meet the trend in industry toward bigness.” Cooperative ideology no longer attracted members and customers, he said. Increasing scale was the answer. Smaby insisted that “business is forcing the co-ops to act more like other businesses.” His words

increasingly reflected the experience of cooperatives nationwide as leadership realized that many members were becoming less moved by the social aspects of cooperation than by the material benefits in providing goods cheaply. In the postwar struggle to reconcile Midland’s identity as a business that also served as an avenue to economic and social reform, the author of Midland’s fiftieth anniversary publication looked back in time and concluded, “business interests became dominant over social and educational interest.”²⁸

Despite a national conservative turn politically, many cooperative members still appreciated the social and political implications of cooperation.



BRIEF REVIVAL OF IDEALISM

Midland's wider social aspirations revived briefly in the 1960s. The farmer-owned cooperative supported the civil rights movement and Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. George Cerny, Midland's director of education in the 1960s, encouraged buying clubs in poor urban areas, while CLUSA helped found new cooperatives in the South. Midland's newspaper editorials debated how cooperation fit in the context of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the national attempt to end want.²⁹

As Midland's fiftieth anniversary publication noted: "While Midland grew larger, it never lost its identity as a cooperative." Cooperatives still operated differently than corporations in that the member, not the investor, remained central. Moreover, Midland still supported some liberal causes and donated to co-ops abroad. The emphasis on educating members on cooperation remained a feature at most annual meetings. But Midland's own definition of cooperation remained circumscribed. While a few cooperative leaders (as well as some members, no doubt) continued to see cooperation as a model of "brotherhood economics," cooperation generally lost much of its combative and moral character. Furthermore, during the Cold War, communism abroad rather than domestic corporations often became the target. Overall, most cooperatives and their leaders believed the possibilities for cooperation had shrunk.

One scholar noted that cooperatives would likely act only as "antidotes . . . to the excesses" of profit-seeking corporations. In other words, they would serve as a yardstick for corporate capitalism.³⁰

The linking of cooperation to other struggles, the promotion of more intimate educational methods such as community councils, and provocative critiques of existing economic relations gradually became less a feature as Midland's vision of a cooperative society faded. Wealth and individualism had weakened the cooperative movement, commented Midland general counsel M. D. Zeddies in 1971. The rise in living standards, the attacks on cooperatives from the media, and the effort "to emulate big private corporations" also contributed to a cooperative movement that had all the signs of business success but little interest in broader ideological victories. At a 1976 Midland management conference, a speaker noted that, at that time, farmers were "more interested in economics than philosophy, and frequently look[ed] at the cooperative as a marketing alternative." Midland's typical member, he said, "realizes that good management and economics is the name of the game." In fact, what had changed was the way farmers viewed their place in the economy as well as the role of cooperation. Midland's growth in the 1970s, including its ventures into production across the United States, invariably compelled greater focus on business and technical imperatives. Midland's

story ends in 1982, when it merged with Land O' Lakes, with which it shared many members, taking the latter's name and briefly becoming the second-largest cooperative in the country.³¹

FROM 1921 TO THE 1970S, Midland's path from moderation, to social reformism, followed by a return to moderation traces the pattern of many American cooperatives. The pressures that Midland and other cooperatives faced changed the character of cooperation and revealed the precariousness of attaching social goals and politics to businesses. Midland's history nonetheless demonstrates how our notions of democracy and citizenship can be expanded beyond electoral politics. As *Midland Cooperator* editor Joe Gilbert wrote, "Cooperation is democracy applied to making a living." Midland's vision of a cooperative commonwealth provided an opportunity for rural midwesterners to use economic enterprise to reclaim their voice and democratize their world.³²

To be sure, cooperation was not, and is not, the perfect solution that cooperators insisted on in the 1930s and 1940s. Cooperative growth poses challenges to cooperative democratic ideals, and consumer cooperation can all too easily slide into a sole desire for lowered prices, neglecting the importance of producers practicing democracy in the workplace. Worker cooperatives and collectives often require a much more active and creative membership than consumer

cooperatives do. Nonetheless, cooperatives can be sites of democracy. The power of cooperation resides in its connection to other struggles and in applying its approach to economics and beyond. The earnestness and determination of Midland's farmer-members reflected, for a time, a comprehensive spirit of democracy, of people power over the power of capital, and of attempts to democratize the economy that still resonate. ■

Notes

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