The People Speak
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First Convention Marks Progress of Co-op

By Peggy Siegmund

"We should speak up; we should speak often; we should be heard, because our message is the message of a dream." With these words Dr. T. T. Williams, economist from Southern University, Baton Rouge, opened the First Annual Convention of Southern Consumers Cooperative last week. The convention itself offered a visible witness of what happens when people speak up, speak often and are heard. Southern Consumers Cooperative, a self-help association of people united to better their economic and educational position, began in 1968 in the mind of a small group of people in Kaplan who felt that the poor themselves should speak up and be heard. Today, with over 6,000 members throughout the state, this cooperative has assets of $100,000 and is working closely with the Office of Economic Opportunity in Washington, D.C.

The co-op's "story of hope" began with a dream by Father Albert J. McKnight, C.S.S.P., who saw the need for low-income families to organize their efforts into a big business in order to be heard. From this idea has sprung S.C.C.C. with three areas of action: The People's Enterprise, a loan company for members; the bakery in Lake Charles, which received the first small business loan from Southern Economic Opportunity, was principal speaker. Others pictured are co-op members.

The convention's theme was "The People Speak," an appropriate slogan for this self-help program. Taking the member's pledge are officers in the cooperative, center picture, left to right, Dr. T. T. Williams, agricultural-economic from Southern University, Baton Rouge; James Primeaux, Kaplan, and Father McKnight, recalled the early meetings of the co-op when the idea of organizing in order to have a greater voice was just getting off the ground.

"When people unite they have strength. When people cooperate with each other they are enriched," McKnight added.

FATHER MCKNIGHT congresed members present for progress thus far in the cooperative and urged local groups to become involved in their community action programs on a local level. He also suggested the possibility of the cooperative branching out with the help of the federal Office of Economic Opportunity to various franchises on a local level, according to the needs of the area.

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Making of a Dream

Extra cherries are added to the fruitcakes being made at Southern Consumers Cooperative bakery in Lake Charles. Wrapped in a "cotton ball" container, the fruitcakes are being sold throughout the country. From small beginnings with fruit cake production last year the bakery has expanded its products to include donuts, pralines, brownies, toasted pecans and other pecan delicacies.