

# Entrepreneurial Community of the Month

## Winston County, Mississippi

<b>Organization:</b>	Winston County Self-Help Cooperative (WCSHC)
<b>Location:</b>	east-central Mississippi
<b>Population:</b>	17,900 in Winston County; 7,000 in Louisville, Mississippi
<b>President of WCSHC:</b>	Frank Taylor
<b>E-mail:</b>	<a href="mailto:ftaylor@bellsouth.net">ftaylor@bellsouth.net</a>
<b>Phone:</b>	601-291-2704

## Rural Mississippi Group's Motto: Saving Rural America

In the 1930s, Frank Taylor's grandfather Maben Austin worked in Louisville, Mississippi, for a large plantation owner. He and his family toiled for two and a half years at bits a day to purchase 40 acres and a mule.

Today, Taylor, 49, stands tall as president of the Winston County Self-Help Cooperative (WCSHC). With a strong sense of purpose and a big heart, Taylor – born and raised in Winston County -- heads a community based-organization of African Americans who have banded together to create opportunities in a place hit hard by unemployment and a down-spiraling rural economy.

But Taylor and company face their challenges with conviction and high-spirited determination. The mission and motto of the WCSHC is nothing shorting of "Saving Rural America" by helping small and under-served landowners.

With awards from Heifer International, the NAACP and the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, WCSHC is moving forward in a quest to make this county in Mississippi a rural success story.

### Origins of WCSHC

Located in the rolling foothills of east central Mississippi, 95 miles northeast of Jackson, Winston County is characterized by its Southern charm, warm climate and wealth of natural resources.

This area was first settled by the Choctaw Indians at least 1,500 years ago, and a sacred mound still marks the birthplace of the tribe. Officially formed in 1833, Winston County is also marked by the scars of slavery. In 1837, county population was 2,193 whites and 959 slaves.

Today, the county's total population is 17,900. Unemployment is at 9 to 10 percent. Rather than dwell on the negative, citizens of this county see a bright future for their children – because they are creating it, through organizations such as WCSHC.

In the mid-1980s, a group of African American citizens began meeting to discuss ways to uplift their community and combat low employment rates. They'd seen several large companies desert the area, taking a high number of jobs with them.

“The devastating part of (the companies’ departure) was that they employed 75 percent females, meaning that we now have our mothers and sisters having to drive 50 to 100 miles per day for their jobs,” Taylor said. “That just put so much stress on our families.”

To address the loss of jobs as well as high losses in the agricultural sector, citizens continued a conversation that would culminate in the creation of the WCSHC.

“These community members just started by chatting back and forth about equipment they needed, things they could use to help them,” said Taylor. “Then they were introduced to the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives (MAC).”

Established in 1972 as an affiliate of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, MAC serves farmers, their families and communities in increasing economic security and improving quality of life. Building from a tradition steeped in the Civil Rights Movement, MAC provides technical assistance and advocates for the needs of its members in the areas of cooperative development and networking, sustainable production, marketing and community food security.

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives is the only organization in the southeast U.S. that’s primary objective is the retention of black-owned land and the use of cooperatives for land-based economic development.

Historically, African Americans have had a difficult time acquiring and maintaining land, facing crippling obstacles along the way. According to a PBS publication, in 1920, blacks owned 14 percent of the nation’s farms; today, there are only 18,000 black farmers, representing less than 1 percent of all farms.

With this perspective, the Winston County Self-Help Cooperative was chartered in 1988 with 10 members and has grown today to 40 members, involving 31 area farms.

They pool their resources to purchase equipment, feed, seed, animals and other farm tools and products. However, beyond collective purchasing, the WCSHC provides education, enrichment and a strong youth program to help members and the entire community learn together.

Funded primarily by member dues, the WCSHC has received several grants through the years, including those from Heifer International and Southern Echo, a leadership training and development organization. Members of the WCSHC must pay \$100 to join as well as yearly dues of \$140. They must attend at least 75 percent of monthly meetings.

Over the years, Taylor has been a cornerstone of the Cooperative.

After graduating from Kentucky State, where he played on a football scholarship, Taylor was drawn back to his hometown to head the WCSHC.

“My Aunt Omerio Dotson told me about the Self Help Cooperative,” Taylor said. “I told her, ‘I think I really like that,’ and I agreed to stay on for a year. That was back in 1989.”

Working tirelessly for almost 20 years, Taylor is highly touted by those he works with. He recently won a Small Farmer of the Year award from the National Organization of Black Professional Natural Resources Conservation Service Employees.

Looking every bit like a star athlete, with brawn and a broad smile, Taylor is at home in a three-piece suit at a USDA meeting as he is on his Aunt’s farm in his signature overalls.

With sincerity, Taylor added, “I just do what I love and love what I do.”

### **Many Programs for an Active Community**

“We look at things from a holistic perspective,” Taylor said, explaining that the WCSHC casts a broad net with its programs and initiatives that aim to use resources wisely and enhance their natural resource base.

The Cooperative serves a variety of community members – young and old. In the early years, the WCSHC served primarily as a way for farmers to increase their buying power through cooperative purchasing agreements. While it still provides that function, the Cooperative has expanded its programs to include leadership development, financial literacy, technical training and a youth program.

They provide education and information on topics such as nutrition, home-buying, animal husbandry, marketing, business planning, computer training and a host of other topics that feed into their holistic goals.

Partners of WCSHC include Mississippi State University Cooperative Extension. Monthly meetings take place at the Extension office in Louisville. The Cooperative also works closely with Alcorn State University, a land-grant institution established in 1871. It was the first state-sponsored institution for blacks set up under Congress' 1862 Morrill Act, even before the 1890 land-grant act called for creation of several institutions for African Americans.

In the Alcorn State Community Voices leadership program, participants attend 15 training sessions to enhance leadership skills. They are putting together strategies to identify and plan for economic opportunities in the natural resource sector, focusing on the potential of agri-tourism.

Winston County offers beautiful natural vistas of rolling hills and historical farms.

“We have farms here that are operating in excess of 100 years,” Taylor said. “We’d like to use our place-based knowledge to encourage people to come here and witness historical places.”

Members of this program also hope to develop a trail between Choctaw and Winston counties that will draw in visitors to enjoy the landscape.

In 2002, the WCSHC received a grant from Heifer Project International. With a mission to “work with communities to end hunger and poverty and to care for the earth,” Heifer’s strategies include giving families and communities the gift of animals as a source of food to create self-reliance. The WCSHC received 40 bred heifers and in turn shared them with eight co-op members, responsible for their care and breeding them to pass on offspring to others. Today, 100 heifers are spread among 17 families in the Cooperative.

“My Aunt Omerio Dotson started with five animals and now has 21,” Taylor said, with a sense of pride. Families use the animals as their own meat source as well as sell them to local sale barns for profit.

Roger Jones of Heifer International said that Winston County’s Cooperative is successful because they have strong leadership and an active community.

“Through Frank Taylor’s leadership, this group is well on its way to becoming self-sustainable,” Jones said. “Frank has done an outstanding job.”

Taylor’s enthusiasm is evident as he talked about his group, and it was obvious that he sincerely meant it when he added, “We are committed to help save rural America.”

## **The Future of Winston County**

Winston County citizens know who holds the keys to the future.

“The Crown jewel of our Cooperative’s programs is our youth component,” said Taylor. “We are committed to the next generation of leaders.”

Just as his grandfather escaped plantation life to buy land and a mule, Taylor and his community continues to look ahead at what their children will inherit.

They set up a community garden lovingly cared for by a group of about 25 young people, ages 5 to 18. A small core in the group visits the garden weekly, if not daily, to check on crops of okra, corn, squash, cucumbers, turnips, mustard greens, broccoli, butterbeans, rutabagas, kale... whatever they can fit in their one-acre plot behind the Mount Moriah Baptist Church.

Taylor credits a dedicated youth coordinator, Dorothy Harper, with keeping enthusiasm and participation high around the gardening project. Students plant, care for and harvest the crops, selling some to eager community members and taking some to their families for delectable Southern home cooking.

They are learning not only about agriculture, teamwork and nutrition, but also about self-respect and self-discipline.

“All we’re trying to do is to make them feel like everybody is somebody,” Harper said.

The garden has become more of a community center, a place where intergenerational learning is the norm and children can learn about their food and their culture while enjoying a laugh over garden pests or the size of a turnip.

In November of 2006, the WCSHC held its first Youth Agricultural and Training conference featuring speakers and workshops. Sponsored by various USDA agencies as well as local businesses and organization, the conference highlighted rural opportunities for youth in agriculture.

Winston County has seen tangible benefits from businesses strengthened and started by the Cooperative. Tax receipts in the county have increased, and Taylor said there are ongoing improvements in clean air and water, wildlife habitat and reducing erosion.

“Having the Cooperative is a win-win situation for Winston County,” he said.

However, for Taylor and members of the WCSHC, it’s still all about the children. He’s most enlivened when talking about his wife and their four daughters, one granddaughter and one grandson.

“We (the Cooperative) are all about the community and the children,” he added. “These two things keep us motivated and keep the hope alive. We want our children to inherit something good.”

*-By Lisa Bauer, 09/07  
Center for Rural Entrepreneurship*

**For more information on...**

... the Center for Rural Entrepreneurship, go to [www.energizingentrepreneurs.org](http://www.energizingentrepreneurs.org)

... Heifer International, go to [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)

... Alcorn State University, go to [www.alcorn.edu](http://www.alcorn.edu)

... Mississippi State University, go to [www.msstate.edu](http://www.msstate.edu)

... Winston County, Mississippi, go to [www.winstoncounty.com](http://www.winstoncounty.com)

... Mississippi Association of Cooperatives, go to [www.mississippiassociation.coop](http://www.mississippiassociation.coop)

... Federation of Southern Cooperatives, go to [www.federationsoutherncoop.com](http://www.federationsoutherncoop.com)

... Southern Echo, go to [www.southernecho.org](http://www.southernecho.org)

