



FLORIDA BAPTIST
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

LEGACY

Our Mission: Researching, preserving and promoting the Legacy of Florida Baptists

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LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people, churches and events in Florida Baptist history. During the next several months this newsletter will feature the story of the development and ministry of the state Baptist news journal, *The Florida Baptist Witness*. The *Witness* was officially adopted and served as an entity of the Florida Baptist State Convention from 1884 until 2017 when it was dissolved as a State Convention agency. During its 133-year history the *Witness* had 33 editors (plus a number of associate editors) and its ownership moved on several occasions between private owners to control by the Convention corporation.

NOVEMBER 17, 1983



FLORIDA BAPTIST witness

Edgar R. Cooper 1970 – 1983

In a November 17, 1983 editorial, Edgar Cooper reflected upon his 13 years of managing the *Florida Baptist Witness*. He said he had tried to uphold the tradition practiced by former editors, “to preserve the principle of the right to know or to be informed. And to this principle I have tried to be true.” Additionally, he observed, “The selection of news and subjects covered in editorials never pleases everyone. But the *Witness* through the years has not shunned the printing of the bad along with the good.”



Cooper (b. 1918; d.2010), a native of Ojus, Florida, “did not rest on the merits of his predecessor,” observed Dr. Jerry Windsor, former Secretary-Treasurer of the Florida Baptist Historical Society. “He set to work to improve the paper and to enlarge its influence in the state.” Windsor said. Cooper sought to change the general direction of the newspaper which had been established by his predecessor Guy Stracener. Rather than continuing to operate the *Witness* as “a public relations tool of the convention, with nothing controversial or innovative placed in the newspaper,” Windsor recalled, “until it had been filtered and denominationally sanitized.”

Without question, Cooper was a denominational loyalist and a well-educated and committed Baptist. Consider that Cooper came to the *Witness*’ editorship having most recently served as pastor of the North Jacksonville Baptist Church, with 2400 members, the prior three years (1968 – 1970). His other pastorates had included North Park Baptist Church, Orlando (December, 1959 to January 1968) and the Mayfair Baptist Church, Jacksonville (December 1948 to December 1959). His education had included undergraduate work at Stetson University, followed by study

at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he earned the Bachelor of Divinity (1946), Master of Theology (1947) and the ThD (1949) degrees. His commitment and involvement at all levels of Florida Baptist denominational life resulted in his election to serve from 1966 – 1967 as president of the Florida Baptist State Convention.

Major Changes Implemented

Among the major changes he made to the weekly newspaper was to eliminate the ministry/program department headings for convention information to break what Cooper called the “stereotyped” concept of information found in the *Witness*. This move permitted news from the convention ministry programs and agencies to be screened, interpreted, and evaluated before being dropped under specific convention goal or program promotion. He started the “Hints for Hang-ups” column to encourage teenagers to read the paper. He also added a historical facts section that highlighted State Convention and local church events of 50, 25 and 10 years before.

The most significant change was made in the interest of the free exchange of differing points of view when he inaugurated a “They Say” column for letters to the editor. “Cooper permitted controversial issues to be aired and on ‘The Editor’s Page’ he wrote some of the most insightful editorials in the history of the *Witness*,” Windsor observed.



Practically all of Cooper’s editorials reflected a “pastor’s point of view,” that typically brought the teaching of scripture to the consideration of an issue or general interest subject. He also demonstrated a news reporter ability by covering selected State Convention events and providing a written eyewitness account, as well as photos for readers.

In his first report to messengers at the Florida Baptist State Convention in 1971, Cooper said that circulation must be increased, but the cost of paper and postage were the “main expense” challenges. Despite those issues, Cooper subsequently managed to grow the paper to 94,100 subscribers in 1983 up from the 65,000 subscribers he inherited in 1970. Part of that circulation increase was the result of his successful efforts to enlist 1100 Florida Baptist churches that signed-up for the church budget plan. The plan provided a reduced subscription rate to churches that purchased bulk quantities of the *Witness* being either dropped shipped to a church or mailed directly to the church membership. Another aspect of the plan permitted a church to use the front and back pages of the *Witness* for their respective church news.

Witness Marked 100-Years Serving Florida Baptists

As Cooper was in his final months serving as editor, he published on November 17, 1983, a 100th anniversary edition of the *Florida Baptist Witness*, which had premiered on Thursday, January 17, 1884. In that anniversary edition, Cooper highlighted Florida Baptists’ early struggle to keep a state newspaper and its dependence on the *Christian Index*, Georgia’s state paper, and the *South Western Baptist*, then Alabama’s state paper, which were Florida Baptists’ early sources of denominational news. “No one could adequately express by word or pen the debt we owe to past leadership that refused to give up the idea of establishing a state paper,” Cooper editorialized. “It is impossible to express full appreciation for former editors who sacrificially gave their time, resources and even their lives to preserve the Baptist principle of the right to know or be informed,” he wrote.

Cooper Married Twice

Cooper had married, in 1966, to another Stetson University graduate, Bertie Mae King, who was his partner for 22 years before preceding him in death in 1988, five-years after Cooper retired as editor. A year later, Cooper married Melvyn Mizelle who previously served as an assistant editor of the *Witness* from 1948 to 1984, having worked with Edward Solomon, Guy Stracener, Edgar Cooper and briefly for Jack Brymer. The couple had been married for 21 years up until Cooper's death at age 91 in 2010.

At Cooper's funeral, Eddie McClelland of the Florida Baptist Financial Services, said that Cooper, "was a man of impeccable integrity. He came from that old school. His word was his word." Cooper's longtime pastor, Michael Riley, of Jacksonville's Deermeadows Baptist Church, observed, "When I think about Edgar Cooper, I think about a man who spent his life living with God. He was dedicated to God and people."

-- continued next month --