

Looking Back: Paying it forward

By Jennifer Boyd | Posted: Monday, May 12, 2014 3:45 pm

BY JENNIFER BOYD

FOR THE LORIS SCENE

It only takes one man to ignite a spark and alter a generation. It only takes one man to show compassion for those in need. It only takes one man to change a community and make the world a better place to live.

This man, Rufus Jefferson Cooper, was born Aug. 30, 1912, to Homer and Sadie Cooper. He and his five sisters and one brother, and grew-up in a modest home on the outskirts of Conway, where he fished and hunted. He was a dashing young man who was also an avid horse rider and a lucky blackjack player.

“Ask not what your country can do for you...ask what you can do for your country.” JFK

On his 17th birthday, he signed-up for the Army, with hopes of seeing the world. He was a hard worker and was also determined to become a man his father could respect. He was immediately shipped to the Panama Canal in 1929 and never looked back.

The soldiers were required to sanitize, operate, and protect the canal, at any cost. The days were hot and humid, and the work was grueling. They worked sometimes 15 hours per day, which gave them ample time to witness true poverty firsthand overseas. Although he would make lifelong friends, the exposure from the underdeveloped society would have everlasting affects upon him.

He returned home and immediately met and fell in love with Gladys Lee Duncan, a native of Loris, 11 years his junior. A few days after her 17th birthday, they eloped and moved into his parent’s home in Conway.

“Do not pray for easy lives, pray for stronger men.” JFK

After his marriage, Cooper was chosen to join the 7th Artillery at Ft. Sill Oklahoma to train the soldiers and Calvary. They packed their belongings and headed out west.



Rufus and Gladys Cooper

Rufus and Gladys Cooper in 1969.

The 7th Artillery and Calvary's motto was "Nunquam Aerumna Nec Prolio Fractum," or "Never Broken by Hardship or Battle."

He helped prepare the assault landing in Algeria as part of Operation Torch. His intense horse training as a child equipped the men with every scenario necessary for a victorious landing. It was during one of these intense training sessions he was thrown from his horse, landing on a cobblestone street. His back was broken.

Although she was pregnant, Gladys Cooper never left his side the two months he was in the hospital. The physical therapy was excruciating, but necessary to get back on his feet. He eventually recovered and welcomed their first child, Gary, the namesake of the famous movie actor on the silver screen.

Determined to never surrender, Cooper accepted a job with the Army in Paris, Texas, aiding the sick and injured soldiers coming home from WW2. He accompanied them to their daily sick calls, which was a lineup of military personnel who required medical attention. He became a mentor and friend to the young soldiers, who were so far away from their homes.

After the victory of WW2, they returned to their beloved Horry County and immersed themselves in the Mt. Vernon community and Pleasant Grove Church. He was voted in as a new deacon and became an adviser for the youth program.

Their family would soon grow with two more children, Linda and Martha. The family farmed, planted gardens, raised chickens, cattle, turkeys, and pigs. Gary and Linda would both attend college, and Martha would marry and move to Germany.

She would remarry Ted Boyd and settle down in Loris. Gary and Linda would also marry and eventually make their homes in Charleston and on Johns Island. They would each rear two children.

While situating cattle into a trailer, Rufus was trampled by a bull, reinjuring his back, forcing him to retire. He spent several months recuperating and healing his second back break.

Again, his true love never left his side or complained about the long hours in therapy. Their bond was unbreakable and their love carried them through the darkness.

"Let's not seek the Republican answer or the Democratic answer, but the right answer." JFK

The couple immersed themselves in the Democratic Party, giving full support to the youthful and brilliant John Fitzgerald Kennedy. They had confidence he would become a significant president because he was a man of great conviction. They ran the local voting polls, and campaigned for Kennedy in their spare time. They were invited to the Democratic National Convention, and eventually to his inauguration.

Tears fell on the dreaded day of Nov. 22, 1963, when Kennedy was assassinated. The entire country and world would stop in their tracks to grieve and mourn the loss of their beloved president and friend.

Their faith in humanity would forever be changed.

“A child mis-educated is a child lost.” JFK

Cooper believed every child deserved a free and quality education. He joined a committee to build an Afro-American school in their small community, with hopes of creating a positive learning environment for the young children. He would oversee the construction of the building and approve the curriculum and teachers. He felt there was nothing more important than educating the future leaders of the world.

“A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.” JFK

Cooper’s health would slowly decline, and he was forced to slow down in 1982. While repairing a bay window on their home, he would suffer his second massive heart-attack and would be rushed to the hospital by his wife and daughter, Martha.

A truck would pull out in front of their car, stopping the flow of traffic. He would die in the car, wrapped in the loving arms of his wife, telling her one last time, “I love you.” They were married more than 40 years.

He taught my family to care more about our fellow man than ourselves. He loved his country and would have gladly given his life for our freedom. There isn’t a day that passes we don’t celebrate his life or discuss how loving and wonderful he was to everyone. He will forever be loved and missed.