

Cooper Is Mayor of a City that Has Heart

By Bill Hankins, *The Paris News*

Reprinted with permission from the September 29, 2008, edition of *The Paris News*.

Few jobs are as challenging as being mayor of a small town.

Jimmy Cooper was raised in Roxton, grew up there, and graduated from Roxton High School in 1961. He went on to East Texas State College, now Texas A&M University-Commerce.

He met his wife there, and “just like everybody else, we wanted to go to a big town,” he said. “Naturally, the biggest town was Dallas, and I got my first coaching and teaching job at Dallas Independent School District (DISD).”

He coached and taught 22 years in DISD before heading for DeSoto, where he finished out his 35-year coaching and teaching career.

His wife Shirley taught 35 years in the DeSoto school district.

“Back in those days a husband and wife were not allowed to teach at the same time in the Dallas school district,” Cooper said.

Through those 35 years, Cooper never even thought of becoming a mayor anywhere.

When the Coopers retired in 2000 and moved back to Roxton, they jumped right into community affairs.

She is now president of the Roxton Community Development Committee, and he decided to run for the Roxton City Council.

He won and served as a councilmember before finally deciding to run for mayor.

He is serving his third term, and this week said the job has more challenges than he expected but he loves it.

Shirley has gone back to work, this time in the Dallas Independent School District, where she is teaching in the newly created all-girls school.

The couple now resides in the largest home in Roxton, a 5,600-square-foot house with an 1,800-square-foot basement, that Cooper said his wife just had to have.

“My wife talked me into buying the house, but she didn’t have to twist my arm too much,” he said.

Being mayor of a small but rapidly moving town keeps Cooper busy.

“When I retired, I thought of doing a little of this and that, but I don’t have much time to do much of anything except being mayor,” he said. “It surely keeps me busy and there is always plenty of something to do. A person does not get bored.”



Jimmy Cooper, Mayor of Roxton

Cooper said as mayor he does a lot of traveling back and forth to Austin to appeal for grants or other things that affect small towns, off to Ark-Tex Council of Government (ATCOG) meetings, or just a trip to Paris to get parts for city equipment. He is on the board and on the financial committee of ATCOG, and said that is a big help in getting grants and loans for Roxton.

“We have received a \$250,000 grant to replace water lines in the city, and we are working on a \$350,000 sewer grant, plus another \$250,000 water grant and a \$1 million loan to replace an aging sewer system,” he said.

His trips to Austin sometimes take two days.

“When you go down there and deal with state agencies and apply for grants, sometimes you have to put up a presentation about why you are asking for money, and sometimes they just want to ask you questions,” he said. “Looking for grants is one of the things I started on when I first got on the city council. We knew if we ever were going to get the things we needed in Roxton, we had to go after grants. The water situation and the sewer situation required us to go after grants.”

Cooper said: “The biggest situation in Roxton is there are not many businesses, and our biggest setback is our tax base. We did not have a property tax until 2001, and one of the reasons we enacted it is a town cannot get these grants without a property tax. Before you can get grants, you have to help yourself.”

Cooper said the old water pipes in Roxton are metal, rusty, and break easily, and many of the sewer pipes are old clay pipes and have collapsed.

“The costs of the new materials are sky high, but we have to have them to ensure the quality of life for everyone in the city,” he said.

“When we get the new water lines in, we are going to get all new fire plugs, and that will give us a better chance to fight fires and cause the insurance rates to go down,” he said. “We have an excellent volunteer fire department and great ones in communities around us, and they jump in there and help. There also are paramedics that may have already saved lives.”

Cooper said as mayor there are a lot of tough things that have to be done.

“Every day I get up there are problems—water lines broken, sewer problems, or I get a letter from the state saying another mandate has been enacted that we have to comply with and, of course, they never give you any money to do it.”

“I get frustrated sometimes because our roads are in bad shape, but we have all these water and sewer lines we are putting in, and we can’t repair the roads until we finish the water and sewer lines,” he said. “We are constantly trying to figure out ways to make the roads as smooth as we can. I think the people of Roxton understand the situation, but it does get frustrating at times.”

The city wrestles with the budget each year trying to make everything fit.

“Sometimes you have to rob Peter to pay Paul,” Cooper said.

“You can’t make everybody happy,” he said. “But I think we are growing, adding new people, and there are several reasons for that. One of them is people want to come to Roxton because of the small school system and because of the organizations we have here such as the Garden Club, Roxton Community Hope Chest, and the Community Development Committee. We have to continue to promote Roxton, attract people here through the many events we have in our city. If people come, they will like the city and come back. We have a lot to offer.”

Cooper said there are good sides, such as the home and money left to the city by Dr. Lura Gregory for a public library.

“That seems to be a big success, and a lot of people are using it,” he said. “And the late J.T. Landers, longtime drug store owner, left money to the fire department and the Baptist Church. And there is a trust fund left to the city that helps us buy equipment every year.”

The Old City Drug Store Museum was set up after Landers died, and his niece is helping the city preserve the museum.

Two museums are helping attract people to Roxton.

“A lot of people grew up here and remember the old drug store and the old blue bridge at Rock Falls and the railroad bridge that is part of the city’s history,” he said. “People go to the old blue bridge and shoot pictures and have weddings there. I am happy to see my grandchildren get the same enjoyment out of Rock Falls as I did when I was a kid.”

“We always have a wish book, and one of mine would be to see the old railroad trail made into a walking trail through Roxton,” he said. “We are trying to do something about that again, but it would help to have money.”

Events like the annual Hog Waller and Roxton Saturday Night bring in scores of people.

Some come back to live.

Cooper said new Roxton residents have come from all across America, including a family from Alaska.

“Many of them saw homes on the Internet and bought them.”

“When we got ready to retire, we looked around and then came the grandchildren, so we settled on Roxton to be close,” she said. “We have two grandchildren in Allen and two in Rockwall.”

His son, Chris, owns a roofing company in Rockwall. His daughter, Tami, is a teacher in Allen.

Cooper coached and taught Tom Landry’s daughter in high school and the Dallas ISD’s superintendent, whom he later helped get a coaching job.

“I also coached former SMU coach Hayden Fry’s five children,” he said. “I got some of my best advice from Hayden Fry’s wife, who told me a coach should get just ten plays and run them well.”

“I guess I will hold onto the mayor’s job until they kick me out,” Cooper said. “Sometimes I am frustrated, and sometimes I feel pretty good about what is going on. A person is never really satisfied.”

Cooper said the reason he likes his job is the city has heart.

“I don’t think you could ask any more from the citizens of Roxton,” he said. “They come together about as well as any group I know, and we are fortunate to have great city employees who do a superb job. I learned long ago if you surround yourself with quality people, you will be successful.”

“I have never regretted returning to Roxton.” ★

Editor’s Note: *Mayor Cooper is an example of the hundreds of hard-working, dedicated officials serving small cities in Texas. We think it’s important to profile these public servants from time-to-time.*