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The Early Years, 1901-1927

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In the panorama of Kentucky political greats, no star shines brighter for Republicans than that of John Sherman Cooper (1901-91). For most of the period ranging from the 1920s to the 1980s, Cooper held either elective or appointive office. His credits included a seat in the lower house of the Kentucky General Assembly (1928-29), two terms as Pulaski County judge (1930-38), a failed attempt at the 1939 Republican gubernatorial nomination, a term as circuit court judge (1945-46), three short terms (1946-48, 1952-54, 1956-60) and two full terms (1960-72) as a United States senator, special service to the U. S. State Department (1950), two ambassadorships (1955-56, 1975-76), and several appointments to the U. S. delegation to the United Nations (1949-51, 1968, 1981).

Yet Cooper’s career seems a paradox: he was a liberal in a conservative state, a Republican where Democrats dominated two to one, an open-minded progressive who could be, at times, incredibly partisan. Unlocking the secret to his story leads down many labyrinthine and circuitous paths. But some answers are discernible; closer inspection yields some clues to the mystery of his mind and soul. Examining the early influences on his life — such as his upbringing, his education, and his environment — cracks open the door to better understanding.

Heritage and environment seemed to provide a good beginning for Cooper. He entered the world on August 23, 1901, the first son and second child of John Sherman and Helen Gertrude Tartar Cooper. Making their home in Somerset, the seat of Pulaski County, Kentucky, Cooper’s parents could

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Accompanying photographs appear courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, University of Kentucky Libraries.
trace the arrival of their respective families in Kentucky to the late eighteenth century, the Coopers coming from South Carolina and the Tartars from Pennsylvania and Virginia. Similarly, both families were actively engaged in the civic and political affairs of their community, a reality clearly apparent to all.¹

Cooper’s father and namesake came from a small farm about fifteen miles west of Somerset. Called Sherman, he was born February 26, 1866, to parents Isaac and Mary Cooper, both staunch Baptists and patrons of the nineteenth-century antislavery movement. They manifested these parallel devotions by naming their twin sons after heroes of the Christian Bible and the Union military cause: John Sherman and Levi Grant Cooper.²

Sherman Cooper attended Pulaski County’s public, or common, schools and the so-called Masonic College in Somerset, the latter roughly equivalent to a high-school academy. This background gained him admittance to the law program at Kentucky University, then the name of old Transylvania University located in Lexington. Although he did not complete the requirements for his law degree, he obtained an apprenticeship with an established lawyer in Somerset to prepare for legal practice.³


³Allen, “History of Somerset, Kentucky,” 127; Cooper interview, JSC-OH Project,
Passing the bar examination made one a lawyer then, regardless of academic accolades, and in 1899 Sherman Cooper was admitted to Kentucky legal practice. But by that time, he was already busily occupied in pursuits outside of his chosen profession. In 1896, at age thirty, he received a three-year appointment as superintendent of the Pulaski County schools. A superintendent’s post was a powerful position because of the number of jobs it controlled. Those seeking work in the Pulaski school system now sought the blessing of Sherman Cooper.

If the diverse geography of Pulaski County had been unfamiliar territory to the elder Cooper before, his role as superintendent changed that circumstance forever. Annual horseback visits to over sixty schools familiarized the young educator with Pulaski County’s smaller variation on the Kentucky geographical theme. Riding south or east from Somerset’s central location, he viewed cliff-edged rivers and streams situated in great stretches of forest. Turning his mount north or west, he beheld rolling farmland similar to that in central Kentucky’s Bluegrass region. In time, the superintendent’s eldest son also became familiar with this same environmental center that forever remained his geographic point of reference and departure.4

Following his term as school superintendent, Sherman won election in 1899 as Pulaski County judge. This was another office of great local power and control, holding sway over the disposition of county money and county jobs. But in 1903, just before completion of his four years in this powerful elective office, he resigned to accept President Theodore Roosevelt’s appointment as collector of internal revenue in Kentucky’s eighth congressional district, a far more influential and important position that he held until 1909. From this posting he could know the financial affairs of his whole con-

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gressional district and once again dispense patronage jobs.

Afterwards, Sherman’s attention turned more and more to his lucrative business ventures in farm property, white oak staves and timber mills, and coal mines. Timber and coal were especially valuable commodities during these years of rapid national industrialization and modernization. Sherman’s holdings were spread across portions of Kentucky and Tennessee, and included smaller investments in Arkansas. Banking also proved to be an early interest, as he demonstrated when he became a founder and first president of the Farmers National Bank in Somerset, a position he held from 1901 to 1914. But his diversified business enterprises and adherence to the gospel of progress were not Sherman’s only concerns in the Progressive Era. Politics continued to occupy a place of importance, as evidenced by his chairing the Republican Party for his district and later in his chairmanship of the Kentucky State Railroad Commission.5

Standing tall on his six-foot-three-inch frame, the slender, blond-haired senior Cooper was an impressive physical specimen. Not only handsome, he was often referred to as the “wealthiest, most powerful, and most respected man in Somerset.” Nor had such qualities and characteristics gone unnoticed, particularly by Helen Tartar, a pretty young school teacher with a slight stutter, who was twelve years his junior. But age seemed to matter little to the couple; on June 29, 1899, they were married.6

In many ways Helen was an ideal mate for Sherman Cooper. She, too, was deeply rooted in Pulaski County, where she was born on August 31, 1878, near a place alternately called Cains Store or Caitown, a hamlet twelve miles west of Somerset. The daughter of Jerome Terrell and Margaret Weddle

5Allen, “History of Somerset, Kentucky,” 127; Cooper interview, JSC-OH Project, 6-7; unidentified newspaper clippings, September 30, 1946, Box 859, Cooper Papers; John Whiteclay Chambers II, The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1900-1917 (New York, 1980), v, 16, 37, 47; Ronald D Eller, Miners, Millhands, and Mountaineers: Industrialization of the Appalachian South, 1880-1930 (Knoxville, 1982), xix, xxi, xxiv.

After fifteen years of marriage, Helen and Sherman Cooper were the parents of seven children, four girls and three boys. Their eldest son, John Sherman, was born in 1901. Here, young John is wedged between sisters Margaret (left) and Faustine.

Tartar, Helen was instructed in the beliefs and traditions of the Baptist church and the Republican Party. As the sole member of Somerset High School’s second graduating class, she reaped great pleasure from touting herself as class valedictorian. After
high school she attended Centre College in nearby Danville, the state teachers college in Richmond that would become Eastern Kentucky University, and the Agricultural and Mechanical College in Lexington that would become the University of Kentucky.  

Helen received her political indoctrination long before women gained the right to vote. Her father tutored his children in politics both in words and by example. But Judge Tartar’s political career was cut short in 1888 by tragedy, when he drowned while attempting to cross rain-swollen Pitman Creek. It would be up to Helen’s two brothers, Chris and Roscoe Conkling Tartar, to assume the family mantel in local Republican politics.  

It was downhill from there.