

The Cooper Family of Salinas

In *Travels with Charley*, John Steinbeck praised the Cooper Family of Salinas. Patriarch Alex Cooper, known for his solvency, his industry, his kindness, and his remarkable memory for sports facts, was widely respected. He and his wife Sarah Virginia, a “warm and friendly woman,” lived “just around the corner” from the Steinbeck family.

Their sons (William) Leonard and (Strother) Ignatius, and their nephew Ulysses Cooper, attended Salinas High School with Steinbeck and often played together. Steinbeck recalled their gifts with envy: Ulysses’ smooth and perfect timing in sports; Ignatius’ mathematical ability, and Leonard’s musical talent. He also remembered them as friends. But who were the Coopers of Salinas?

Strother Alex Cooper

Alex Cooper’s family, some of whom were former slaves, came to the local area in the 1880’s. Alex was born in Watsonville. As an adult, he moved to Salinas to work for Spreckels Sugar, but found private enterprise more appealing. He purchased the boot-cleaning stand by the Abbott House and later moved it to the Pickwick Stage office. When he died unexpectedly in 1923 at 48, Alex Cooper had been in business for more than twenty-five years. A popular figure, his funeral was well attended. He was buried in the I.O.O.F. Cemetery in Salinas under the auspices of his lodge, Pacific No.3442, Grand United Order of Odd Fellows. He was not, however, the first Cooper to be buried in the I.O.O.F. Cemetery.

Ulysses Randolph Cooper

Ulysses R., age 20 years, 8 months, and 26 days, son of William E. Cooper who lived at 301 Natividad Road, died either of acute (newspaper account) or chronic (death certificate) pneumonia at 5:35 or 5:31 on the morning of September 5th, 1918. Ulysses had been a star athlete at Salinas High. In the year of his graduation with honors in 1916, he was among the principal point winners at the Coast Counties Athletic League annual meet.

Like a number of Salinas High graduates, including John Steinbeck, Ulysses went to work for Spreckels Sugar when he left school. He worked there until his untimely death that was attributed to a neglected cold. Had Dr. Parker not been called in to treat the young man on July 1, 1918 one might think the illness to be among the first cases of Spanish Influenza in Salinas.

Acute pneumonia was a common and deadly outcome of this flu that caused heavy mortality among young and healthy adults. In the month following Ulysses' death, the *Salinas Daily Index* reported sixty-one cases of the disease, and offered advice on how to stay healthy: avoid crowds, use a handkerchief, and refrain from spitting on floors or sidewalks.

William Leonard Cooper

William Leonard Cooper, cousin of Ulysses, is remembered in Monterey County as a talented musician, composer and artist. A 1917 graduate of Salinas High, he went on to study at the University of the Pacific. After his studies, he taught music to many Salinas residents. He also created and produced a number of musical comedies.

Besides his musical talents, he was a gifted watercolorist. He was listed in *Artists in California*, and his works were exhibited in Santa Cruz, at the Oakland Art Gallery, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A 1999 *Herald* article called Leonard the best-known African American artist to come out of Monterey County, praising the jewel like tones and loose impressionistic style of his work. William Leonard Cooper died July 25, 1948, at the age of 48, while visiting his cousin Gene Cooper in Los Angeles. The funeral was held at Muller Mortuary and internment was in the family plot at the Garden of Memories.

Strother Ignatius Cooper

Ignatius was the third Cooper mentioned in *Travels with Charley*, and the only one still alive when the book was published in 1962. Long a bachelor, he lived at 119 North Main Street with his mother and brother even after he bought a house on Maple Street.

His life changed when he joined the U.S. Army during World War II. During those years he married a woman from Seattle and they returned to Salinas after the war. He found work as a postman and later a bank security person. After his marriage, Ignatius decided to move to his house on Maple Street. It would be a distressing experience.

In first half of the twentieth century, Salinas had few African Americans and newcomers felt the lack of fellow African Americans. Salinas was better than many places. The stores were open to all, and there were no segregated public schools. True, they might not be welcome in some restaurants and most hotels, and buying a house was usually difficult, but when the Salinas Chapter of the N.A.A.C.P. opened in 1939 it was only able to do so with signatures of white residents, a clear indication of respect for families like the Coopers.

So it was with shock and dismay that Mr. Cooper learned of a petition signed by his future Maple Street neighbors asking him not to move into the house he'd owned for so many years. It was a bitter moment. Eventually he did move into his 114 Maple Street home with his wife, and stayed there until his death. In a 1962 interview, he declined to discuss racial problems, saying only "We didn't have anything like racial prejudice when we were kids. That comes when you're older."

After *Travels with Charley* was published as a book in 1962, Alton Pryor, editor of the *Californian's Western Ranch Home* supplement, interviewed Cooper in October 1962. During the interview, Ignatius remembered not his own academic prowess but his athletic gifts. He was on the track team with Steinbeck, and his pole vaulting was featured in the *El Gabilan* yearbook in 1919. As for the author, Ignatius remembered him as forthright and a good student, interested in government and politics, but not much of an athlete.

Strother Ignatius survived even his friend John, dying on July 3, 1976. Besides belonging to the Masons and the Eastern Star, he was president of the Salinas N.A.A.C.P. for ten years. He was also an assistant pastor with St. James C.M.E. Church, and well known for his work with youth. He is buried in the Garden of Memories.

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