

Dr. Cooper Clifford Kirk

— In Memoriam —

How do you describe a man like Cooper Kirk? Several good words that testify to his character immediately come to mind.

Integrity, dedication, diligence, among others, describe his career as Broward County Historian. He never wrote an article or prepared a speech on guess work or hearsay. Every account he produced was thoroughly researched and documented. He spent not days, but weeks or months, gathering information from primary sources such as personal letters, military records or newspapers. Pouring over old maps, old documents and countless rolls of microfilm was one of his greatest pleasures.

Cooper was born in Tyler, Missouri, February 6, 1920, to John and Martha Rebecca Kirk. He was the ninth child, the seventh son. From Missouri the family moved to Arkansas, then to Georgia. When Cooper was six years old, the Kirk family finally settled in Fort Lauderdale, arriving shortly after the devastating 1926 hurricane. Here Cooper attended South Side School and worked after school delivering newspapers. He also worked for Western Union, and in later years liked to tell of the time he delivered a telegram to Hugh Taylor Birch. On June 2, 1939, Cooper graduated from Fort Lauderdale High School. Shortly afterwards he enlisted in the army. He had returned to Fort Lauderdale to care for his invalid parents when the war broke out. Enlisting in the navy after his parents' deaths, he served as a Yeoman Second Class until he was honorably discharged on January 8, 1946.

His carefree years as a bachelor ended after he went to church one Sunday morning and met Nella Houseward, a visitor from New Jersey. After a year of courtship the couple married on December 27, 1949. Their first baby, a boy, died in infancy, leaving them broken-hearted but determined to have a family. The years passed, bringing Cooper Kirk four children, a lawn service business, and an itch to go back to school. Although he was



Dr. Cooper Clifford Kirk

Broward County Historian

February 6, 1920-August 30, 1989

actively engaged in church work and in organizing a Christian school, he found time to take a course in philosophy at the University of Miami. Combining his love for history and philosophy with an insatiable appetite for learning, he decided to go to school full time at the age of thirty-eight. After receiving his Bachelor Degree, he went on to earn a Masters and then a Doctorate in history. Now he was ready to sell the lawn service and begin full-time teaching.

In 1972, Dr. Kirk's longtime friend and fellow Broward County pioneer, Circuit Judge L. Clayton Nance, urged him to accept the post of the county's first official Historian, to work in conjunction with the newly-created Broward County Historical Commission. Although Dr. Kirk was well-versed in Florida history, having written his Ph.D. dissertation on the history of the Presbyterian church in the state, his academic specialty had been in intellectual and religious history. His knowledge of Broward County's past, he readily admitted, had been limited to his own observations of people and

events during his long residence there.

Nevertheless, Dr. Kirk accepted the appointment, and plunged into the task with his characteristic energy and determination. Working at first as a volunteer, and later on a small part-time salary, he devoted virtually all of his spare time to ferreting out long-forgotten facts from Broward's past and bringing them vividly to life for an ever-expanding audience. Especially after his retirement from the Broward County school system in 1983, he consistently gave well over standard full-time hours to his work as Historian.

His research into such early nineteenth century personalities as New River settler William Cooley and Seminole War officer William Lauderdale opened a new dimension of knowledge about the county, and helped lay to rest a tangled web of legends and misconceptions about Broward's past. His work on Major Lauderdale, for whom the City of Fort Lauderdale is named, was published in book form in 1982 as *William Lauderdale: General Andrew Jackson's Warrior*, and earned him wide acclaim and membership in the Maitland Clan, the Scottish ancestral organization of the Lauderdale family.

In addition to his writing, Dr. Kirk was in demand throughout the county to lecture on subjects ranging from the Seminole Wars to how Fort Lauderdale High School's "Flying L's" got their name. With his congenial personality and commanding presence he regaled countless school classes and civic, social, and business groups with fascinating accounts of the past, delivered in a dynamic, riveting style, but always with the goal of education and not merely entertainment. No group was too large or too small, too impressive or too humble. He treated everyone the same; rich or poor, high or low, they were all his friends.

To encourage public awareness and appreciation of the hard-

(continued on page 44)