

The Farm Women's Market

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On busy Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda, in the shadow of a modern, high-rise office building, stands a low, white building which, in its almost 80 years, has become a Bethesda institution. This building is the home of the Montgomery Farm Women's Cooperative Market, Inc., one of the remaining vestiges of the agricultural community that was Montgomery County.

In 1930, at the time of the Great Depression when the farmers of Montgomery County were already hard hit by decline in farm prices, a drought brought further disaster. Mortgages were being foreclosed, plumbing was rusting, roofs were leaking, and taxes were going unpaid. As the bad times got worse, a group of farm women sought some means of alleviating their plight. These women belonged to Home Demonstration Clubs sponsored and operated by the Extension Service of the University of Maryland in cooperation with Montgomery County and the United States Department of Agriculture. Miss Blanche Corwin, the Home Demonstration Agent for Montgomery County, met regularly with these clubs to provide information on new developments in agriculture and home economics, and to demonstrate crafts and sewing methods. Miss Corwin took the women's problem to the Council of Home Demonstration Clubs. This group, together with the Extension Service, decided that the farm women might be able to sell their farm produce to the residents of the District of Columbia and its growing suburbs as a way of generating an additional source of income.

For two years the women worked to prepare themselves and their products for the market place. At their club meetings, the women, with the help of specialists in nutrition, poultry, dairy products, and animal husbandry, worked to standardize their products. Potential products were brought to the meetings to be checked and graded. The first sale day finally took place on February 4, 1932, in a vacant store in the 6700 block of Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda. Nineteen women participated during the first market, each providing her own display counter – which was usually a card table. The women sold meat products from their farm; cakes, pies, and cookies from their ovens; and canned fruits, vegetables, jellies, and jams from their cellars and pantries. Advertisements were placed in Washington, D.C., and county newspapers and handbills were distributed in near-by residential neighborhoods. When the day was done, almost everything had been sold!

The market became so successful that by June it was being held twice a week on Wednesdays and Saturdays. For most of the summer the market was in a building leased by Corwin located at 4606 Leland Street. After the lease had expired, and with a growing number of women wanting to sell goods, the market moved in September to a tent at the corner of Leland Street and Wisconsin Avenue. Soon it was obvious that a more effective organization and a more permanent home were needed. The attempts to find a site for a permanent market, however, stirred up controversy. The women were anxious to secure a site at Edgemoor, a community west of Wisconsin Avenue. However, the citizens of Edgemoor strongly opposed the market.

As all of this was happening, the future of the market faced another battle. Blanche Corwin's superiors at the Extension Service felt she was devoting too much time to the market at the expense of other parts of her job and she was fired. As a result of the controversy, the farm women split into two factions. One group chose to continue working with the Extension Service and the new Home Demonstration Agent, Miss Edythe M. Turner. This faction formed the cooperative that still operates the Farm Women's Market today. The other group was composed

of women protesting the dismissal of Miss Corwin, and for a short time formed a competing farm market.

Politics notwithstanding, the market in Bethesda continued to bring in a profit. However, the first autumn at the market was still difficult due to the conditions imposed by operating from a temporary, outdoor location. The tent the market used was 45 feet by 90 feet and was put in place by some of the husbands. Sawdust was spread on the ground and the first purchase by the Market was for an icebox that held 600 pounds of ice. Miss Turner used to carry this ice in her own car on market days. Sometimes the block of ice would drop off her front bumper and splinter into a thousand pieces. Since there was no water available in the tent, she also brought a tea kettle of hot water to scald and clean the inside of the ice box at the beginning of each market day. The fall of 1932 was relatively mild but there were chilly days when it was difficult to operate outside. Miss Turner used to keep an extra supply of overshoes and mittens handy but she insisted the best method for staying warm was to simply keep moving.

Despite these and other trials, the Farm Women's Market continued to thrive in Bethesda. By December the number of members had increased significantly and it became obvious that larger and more permanent quarters were necessary. The building, which the market still occupies today, was built in late 1932 especially for the association by Leon Arnold, one of the owners of the property at Wisconsin Avenue and Willow Lane. The new building, which the co-op rented for \$125 a month, opened on Friday evening, December 2, 1932, and drew a crowd of 1000 people.

In a few years the owners of the building received a good offer for the property and wanted to sell. The women decided they did not want to move again so they took the bold step of trying to borrow money to purchase the building and land. Mrs. Julian B. Waters, then president of the market, described the attempt to borrow money:

"When I went over to the cooperative Bank in Baltimore and asked to borrow \$50,000 the bank officials thought I was crazy. They told me that was a lot of money. They didn't believe a group of farm women could make that amount in a market. The president said he would take it up with his board and I would hear from him. This was in September, 1935. Two weeks went by and we didn't hear anything. I spoke to the president again. This time it was another excuse, and more time slipped by. I contacted him once more. Finally a man was sent out to look the place over. I had previously told the president that all I wanted him to do was pay us a visit himself some Saturday and see the business we were doing. I was beginning to be a mite discouraged when one Saturday just before Christmas, I looked up and there he was in person. After a cheery greeting, he said, 'You may have the money.' By Christmas the property was ours. Within 10 years, in 1945, at their annual meeting in Rockville, the Board of Directors burned the mortgage."

The building itself has remained much the same throughout the years. The 105 feet by 45 feet building is a simple rectangular frame structure on a concrete foundation. Located at 7155 Wisconsin Avenue, it is surrounded by a parking lot and shaded by two giant sycamore trees. Each member of the cooperative sells her own goods, conducts her own sales, and disposes of anything left over at the end of the day. As a matter of policy Wednesday's leftovers are not brought to market for sale on Saturday, and customers must arrive early to be sure that the items they desire are not sold out. The money the farm women have earned from the market has paid

off mortgages, modernized kitchens, and put many farm children through college. The women also set up a scholarship fund from which children of members could borrow money for their education.

To learn more about the Farm Women's Market visit their website at www.farmwomensmarket.com.