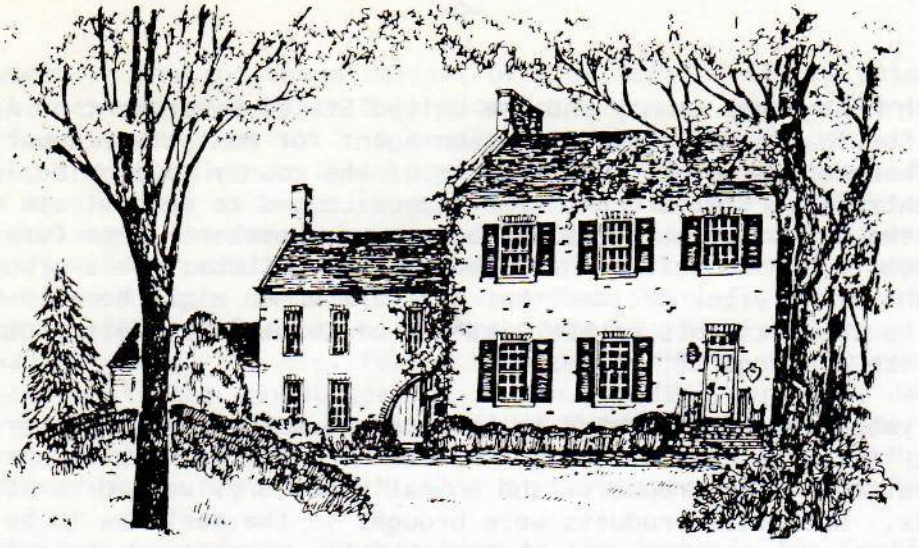

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THE MONTGOMERY FARM WOMEN'S COOPERATIVE MARKET

by Mary Charlotte Crook

On busy Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda, in the shadow of a modern, high-rise office building, stands a low, white building which, in its 50 years, has become a Bethesda institution. This building is the home of the Montgomery Farm Women's Cooperative Market, Incorporated, one of the remaining vestiges of the agricultural society that was Montgomery County.

In 1930, at the time of the Great Depression when the farmers of Montgomery County were already hard hit by the decline in farm prices, a drought brought further disaster. Mortgages were being foreclosed, plumbing was rusting, roofs were leaking, and taxes were going unpaid. 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 co-

operation 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 in various sections of the county to provide information on new developments in agriculture and home economics and to demonstrate crafts, sewing methods, and the use of such things as the pressure cooker. 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 and thus realize a 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. This process went on until the women fully understood the required standards for top quality.

The first sale day finally took place on February 4, 1932, in a vacant store in the 6700 block of Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda. The women had also been thorough in alerting the community to their enterprise. Advertisements were run in Washington, D.C., and county newspapers, and handbills were distributed in near-by residential neighborhoods. A letter was sent to each club member asking her to bring any food products of her farm or kitchen which she thought city residents would buy. Each woman also had to provide her own display counter - usually a card table. Nineteen women came on opening day with meat products from their farms; cakes, pies, and cookies from their ovens; and canned fruits, vegetables, jellies, and jams from their cellars and pantries. When the day was done, almost everything had been sold.[1]

The next sale day was February 20, but sales were such a success that they were held weekly thereafter. By June, a Wednesday and Saturday schedule had evolved. For most of the summer the market was in a building at 4606 Leland Street which Miss Corwin had leased. When the 19 original sellers had grown to 81 by June, a tent was erected outside of the building. After the lease had expired, the market moved, on September 3, 1932, to a tent at the corner of Leland Street and Wisconsin Avenue.

By now 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. The citizens of Edgemoor strongly opposed the market. While county officials approved the principle of a farm market, they were disturbed by the continuing effort of the leaders of the farm women to secure the Edgemoor site in spite of citizen opposition.[2]

As a result of this controversy, the farm women split into two factions, and Miss Corwin, whose superiors felt was devoting too much time to the market at the expense of the program of the Extension Service, was fired. The two factions held meetings in Rockville on Monday, August 22, 1932. One group met in the Courthouse with Dr. T.B. Symons, Director of the Maryland Extension Service, to meet Miss Edythe M. Turner, the new county Home Demonstration Agent. The other group,

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1. Otis T. Weaver, "Farm Women Operate a Cooperative," *News for Farmer Cooperatives*, Farm Credit Administration, Washington, D.C., Vol. 4, No. 9, December 1937, p. 10.

2. *Montgomery County Sentinel*, August 19, 1932.

composed of women protesting the dismissal of Miss Corwin, met to voice their indignation. The next day the State Extension Service drew up its plan for the operation of a Farm Women's Market.[3] A meeting the following Monday at the Courthouse failed to bring the opposing factions together. The *Sentinel* reported: " A large group decided against the cooperative plan backed by the Maryland Extension Service and left the meeting. The remainder stayed to organize a cooperative marketing body." [4] The five incorporators of the cooperative organization, named The Farm Women's Cooperative Market, Incorporated, were Miss Pearl E. Marlow of Beltsville, Mrs. Elizabeth Graybill of Spencerville, Mrs. James D. King of Germantown, Mrs. Rosa C. Jones of Gaithersburg, and Mrs. Forest King of Gaithersburg. Directors who were elected to serve until the annual meeting in January 1933 were Mrs. James D. King, Mrs. Rosa C. Jones, Mrs. Francis S. Gladhill of Monrovia, Mrs. Chester F. Clagett of Rockville, Mrs. Albert J. Cissel of Gaithersburg, Mrs. Forest King, Mrs. Augustus D. Oursler of Spencerville, Mrs. Edwin M. West of Germantown, and Miss Pearl Marlow. [5]

One of the purposes of the organization as set forth in the Certificate of Incorporation was "To buy, sell, handle, market, and deal in, in any manner permitted by law any and all of the products of the farm, the farm home and garden, including among other things, poultry and poultry products, milk and milk products, cereals, fruits and vegetables, and products whether fresh, dry, preserved, or otherwise processed and combined with other materials for human consumption, needlework, rugs, and other handicraft produced on the farm or in the farm homes..."[6] Any woman member of a homemaker's club as conducted by the Extension Service who lived on a farm and whose family received the larger part of its income from the farm was eligible for membership.

Capital stock consisted of $12,000 divided into 400 shares of preferred stock with a par value of $25.00 and 1000 shares of common stock valued at $2.00 a share. Article IV states that "The common stock of this Association may be held only by and transferred only to producers of the products handled or to be handled by it and then only with the consent of the Board of Directors. Any stockholder who shall cease to be such a producer shall lose the power to vote while not a producer." The 29-member Association was to have a nine-member board of directors elected by the members from their own number. The Board was to choose from its members a president, one or more vice presidents, and a secretary-treasurer, who need not be a director. Annual meetings were to be held in Rockville on the fourth Monday in January.[7]

Edythe Turner's recollections of that first fall reflect the difficult conditions imposed by a temporary, outdoor location. "The tent... Miss Turner remembers as being 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 was an icebox that held 600 pounds of ice. Miss Turner herself used to carry this ice in her car on market days. ... Sometimes, she says, it would drop off her front bumper and splinter into a thousand

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3. *Ibid.*, August 26, 1932.

4. *Ibid.*, September 2, 1932.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Montgomery County Corporation Records, Book CKW 1, p. 92.

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 93, 94.

pieces. Since there was no water available, she used to bring a tea kettle of hot water to scald the ice box each time. The women stayed in the tent until December when they moved into their present home. That fall was relatively mild but there were many chilly days when the going was rugged. Miss Turner used to keep an extra supply of overshoes and mittens handy but the best method, she says, to keep warm was to keep moving."[8]

By December the number of members had increased to 42 with 30 on a waiting list. Larger and more permanent quarters were obviously necessary. The building which the Association still occupies 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 Association rented the building for $125 a month. The new building opened on Friday evening, December 2, 1932, and drew a crowd of 1000 people.

The next order of business was the hiring of a manager. The duties of the manager were defined as employing and discharging all employees and agents not employed by the Board of Directors; securing and developing information relative to markets and market conditions; and receiving, handling, grading, and inspecting products, brands, and labels. As it evolved, the position also included the keeping of financial records, building maintenance, and advertising. Mrs. Lillian Shillinger was hired as the first manager. She began work on November 30, 1932, at a salary of $70 a month.

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 buy the building and the land on which it stood. Mrs. Julian B. Waters, then president of the Association, described the attempt to borrow money thusly: "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."[9, 10] Within 10 years, the women had paid off the loan. That event was celebrated on Monday, January 22, 1945, when, at their annual meeting in Rockville, the Board of Directors burned the mortgage.[11]

The building itself has remained the same throughout the years. The 105-foot by 45-foot building is a simple rectangular frame structure on a concrete foundation.

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8. *Montgomery County Sentinel*, May 31, 1956.

9. *The Record* of Bethesda-Chevy Chase, Vol. II, No. 4, January 26, 1945, p. 10.

10. Montgomery County Land Records, Book 612, p. 360.

11. *The Record, op.cit.*, p. 1.

Located at 7155 Wisconsin Avenue, it is surrounded by a gravel parking lot and shaded by two giant sycamore trees. Today modern green and white aluminum awnings grace the 10 windows on the front and back. Double doors in the center of both the front and back of the building welcome customers. Golden oak and glass slant-top display cases are arranged along the four exterior walls and in an island in the center of the building. The market is open on Wednesdays and Saturdays throughout the year from 7 A.M. to 4 P.M.

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. Thus customers must

Farm Women's Market, circa 1968

arrive early to be sure that the items they desire are not sold out. Members pay into the cooperative a commission of five percent of gross sales and a monthly rent for their stand, currently $16 a month. At the end of the year, the earnings after taxes are divided among the members in proportion to the amount of the sales for the year. The money the farm women have realized from the market has paid off mortgages, modernized kitchens, and sent many a farm youngster through college. The women also set up a scholarship fund from which children of members could borrow money for their education.

For some years a strict dress code was enforced. At the opening of the new building on December 2, 1932, the women wore white dresses. From then on they wore white dresses or white uniforms. When uniforms began to be available in thin nylon, the Board of Directors objected to the wearing of a white uniform over a dark dress; it didn't look good. In later years the Board ruled that all sellers must wear stockings if they were over school age and that sellers would be fined if they wore a dress without sleeves.

Annual meetings, originally scheduled for January, have been held in April since the meeting of January 1948, when the temperature was zero. Meeting were held for many years at various locations throughout the county in private homes, churches, and restaurants, and usually included lunch and a speaker. Since 1972, the annual meeting has been held at the market. At each annual meeting three new directors are elected. Following the meeting, the Board of Directors elects its officers. The following persons, with the dates of their election and reelection, have served as president: Mrs. James King (August 1932), Mrs. Chester Clagett (January 1933), Mrs. Julian Waters (February 1935), Miss Pearl Marlow (January 1947), Mrs. Nannie K. Ray (May 1951), Mrs. Russell Watkins (April 1952, 1963, 1969, and 1973), Mrs. Leo Clagett (April 1955), Mrs. Brice Renn (April 1957, 1966, 1970, and 1974), Miss Marie Boland (April 1958), and Mrs. Carl Cline (April 1960). Mrs. Renn is the current president.

Heralded as the only farm women's cooperative of its kind in the world, the market soon drew national and international attention. Several national periodicals carried stories on the Farm Women's Market. The *Woman's Home Companion* of October 1937 said: "In Bethesda, Maryland, on the fringe of Washington, stands an institution as distinctively American as the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, but it is not included in the list of sights worth seeing in the capital. Yet thousands of Washingtonians visit it every week and hold it in warm regard."[12]

An article in the *Readers Digest* pointed out the impact of the market's success on the county: "In the opinion of the county agent, the most significant results from the profits of the cooperative are to be seen in the farm homes of the community. In many homes the first earnings go into the purchase of an electric refrigerator. Then follow labor-savings mechanisms and reorganization of the farm kitchen and modern plumbing, new electric plant, or oil burner.

"The modernizing movement has proved to be contagious. 'The example of the women in the cooperative,' the agent told me, 'has put the county 50 years ahead in its agricultural ideas. It is no longer necessary to argue for up-to-date farm practices. Even more important, we are proving to the youth of the county that

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12. Anna Steese Richardson, "Gourmets Gather Here," *Woman's Home Companion*, Crowell Publishing Company, Springfield, Ohio, October 1937, p. 27.

farming can be made to pay and farm life can be made attractive.'[13]

The market's fame also brought visitors from around the world to observe the market in operation. The Visitors' Guest Books not only record visits from Home Demonstration Agents from across the United States but also visitors from around the world. A special Open House Day was held in November 1955. Invitations to the embassies and legations in Washington, D.C., to visit the market brought people from more than 22 countries to get acquainted with American farm women and to savor the flavor of an American Thanksgiving. Some of the countries represented were Australia, Burma, Cambodia, Canada, Costa Rica, Cuba, Denmark, Ecuador, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Guatemala, Holland, Hungary, India, Italy, Ireland, Indonesia, Japan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Syria. The farm women stood ready in their white uniforms to answer questions and make sales. To their guests on the world's day at the market, the farm women served coffee, cider, cookies, and doughnuts. As Mrs. Lillian Matson, then manager of the market said: "Here at 7155 Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda we do indeed meet the world on our doorstep."[14]

Down through the years regular customers have included congressmen, diplomats, hostesses of Washington society, and, at times, members of the White House staff. Nowadays they also include office workers from the neighboring high-rise buildings who form long lines on Wednesdays for a carry-out lunch of Chinese food from Judy Lau, sandwiches and salads from the Cox family, or exotic foreign dishes from Joyce Berthoud's "Sin City."

In 1954, Woodward and Lothrop, which had a store on the opposite side of Willow Lane, began to use the market parking lot for its customers on days when the market was not open. Originally the store made a contribution of $25 a month for use of the lot, but, by September 1, 1955, the store began paying rent for the lot. There were also requests for use of the lawn; it was rented each year for the sale of Christmas trees and for the sale of plants. Since 1974, the parking lot and the lawn have been rented to a proprietor who operates a commercial parking lot on non-market days and who leases space on the lawn for a flea market which is open on market days and on Sundays from April through October. The vendors sell a variety of wares including antiques, linens, and jewelry. Money realized from this arrangement helps the Association pay taxes and utilities.

Although the women had depended on husbands and sons for help in bringing their products to market, it was not until May 1968, when Howard England, a retired farmer, was hired as the manager, that a man became an official part of the market operation. The women had considered hiring a male manager in 1932 but instead had hired female managers for more than 35 years. The managers, with date of hiring, have been Mrs. Lillian Shillinger (November 1932), Mrs. Louise K. Mindeleff (October 1933), Miss Laura Ann Wadsworth (March 1935), Mrs. Catherine (Katie) Shaw (April 1937), Mrs. Lillian Matson (June 1952), Mrs. Marjorie Hedges (July 1961), Mr. Howard England (May 1968), Mr. Thomas Raftery (March 1974), and Mr. Leon A. Carrier (February 1978). Today there are also some male sellers.

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13. Stanley High, "Country Kitchen Goes to Town," *Readers Digest*, Reader's Digest Association, Inc., Pleasantville, N.Y., Vol. 36, No. 213, January 1940, pp. 95-96.

14. Catherine E. Hardy, "Women's Market Features Good Food and Good Will," *News for Farmer Cooperatives*, Farmer Cooperative Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., Vol. 22, No. 11, February 1956.

Through the years gradual changes have occurred in the items sold in the market. Now included are ethnic foods, house plants, crafts, and jewelry. However, it has only been in recent years that modern governmental regulations have had an impact. In January 1976, the Maryland State Department of Health and Mental Hygiene adopted regulations for food service facilities and expanded the definition of food service facilities to include retail markets. The sale of home-canned food was prohibited, and the sale of homemade jams, jellies, and preserves was permitted only if the facility in which they were produced was licensed and inspected and the products were properly labeled. Currently the only prepared foods which can be sold are those prepared in inspected and licensed kitchens. Sellers of pork have also had to alter their procedures. The farmers used to handle their own hogs from farm to market. Now they must have the hogs slaughtered at a plant supervised by a state inspector. But the farmer then reclaims and dresses the carcasses to make bacon, scrapple, and sausage in his own traditional way.

Down through the years the subject of selling the market property has come up in annual meetings. In July 1955, the Association was offered $150,000; in November 1969, the offer was for $899,000. Today the property is appraised at over $1,200,000. Each time the proposal to sell was voted down by a large majority. Today the women say, if they sold the property, where would they go to sell their products.

Currently there are 22 stand-holders. Those who sell non-farm products are not eligible to become members of the Board of Directors. In 1981, total sales were $559,286.55. Some of the women have been coming to the market for 40 years or more so the market has become a second home. Market days to them are not only an opportunity to make a good profit on their farm produce by selling directly to the consumer but also a chance to socialize with other sellers and with their long-standing and faithful customers. The current licensing requirements may complicate the prospects for those selling home-prepared food, but there is still a demand for space from prospective sellers. The old customers who come regularly to buy their favorite products from known and trusted sellers hope that the market will long endure in spite of the pressures of modern society.

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