

Who was Marge Karker, anyway?

The Marge Karker story illustrates both the strength of Farm Bureau membership and a cautionary tale for those who would reverse its grassroots ethic.

Women played a vital role in Michigan Farm Bureau long before it hired **Marjorie ‘Marge’ Karker**, but few galvanized, motivated and inspired them more assertively than the woman whose 20-year career remains an axis around which the organization’s public outreach programming revolves.

Begun in 1923, the organization’s original Home and Community Department grew steadily in popularity and sought more official status in 1944, when its members asked for a full-time program coordinator in Lansing.

Already an active member for 17 years, Karker was hired the following year to lead the new Department of Women’s Activities, which rapidly became one of Farm Bureau’s most vital organs. It ran parallel to and somewhat separate from MFB, with its own annual meeting and policies for steering county-level programs. That separation shrank in 1953 when three of its representatives joined MFB’s state-level resolutions committee.



Marge Karker

Beyond their longstanding priority on health and safety projects and building rural-urban relationships, the Farm Bureau Women sparked tremendous growth among Community Groups. In her 1994 sequel to Clark Brody’s *In Service of the Farmer*, **Donna Wilbur** wrote:

“It was a broadly recognized fact in the 1950s that without the wife of the Farm Bureau member family being interested in the Community Farm Bureaus, it would have been impossible to build and maintain the strong program that had become the envy of other state Farm Bureaus.”

By 1958, there was a Women’s Committee in every county Farm Bureau, building local programs and tackling community improvement projects, fundraisers, and championing healthcare.

Two years later it was under Karker’s leadership that the Farm Bureau Women launched MFB’s inaugural Washington Legislative Seminar — an annual highlight on MFB’s calendar ever since. Documenting its fifth iteration in 1964, Wilbur described Karker as one of “the most dynamic individuals on the organization’s staff... Marge Karker was ‘electricity.’ She could charge people up just by walking into a room, but when she took the podium, she inspired them to action!”

But a change in leadership higher up the Farm Bureau pecking order didn't share Wilbur's high opinion. In Karker MFB management saw a threat: "She was too strong, too independent," Wilbur documented. "She held too much power over a very significant portion of the membership."

When the state-level Women's Committee narrowly elected a new leader in 1963, Karker's supervisor **Delbert Wells** took it as a sign the program was split between two opposing factions. In a memo to new Women's Chair **Maurine Scramlin**, Wells wrote, "Pull the Farm Bureau Women together, and if you cannot, other plans will need to be made."

On Aug. 17, 1964, Karker came to work to find a termination notice on her desk.

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Fired by memo after 37 years of passionate, increasing Farm Bureau involvement, Karker's firing sent shock waves through the organization and sparked a grassroots revolution. Members' letters protesting the move were soon flooding the home office in Lansing, most of them addressed to President **Walter Wightman** and Secretary-Manager **Clarence Prentice**.

One county president wrote: "It must be assumed she is being made the victim of personal jealousies and animosities... It appears to be a test as to whether this organization will be run by the members and for the members, or whether their wishes will be disregarded and the organization run from the top down."

Hundreds of members expressed anger at Karker's dismissal and sincere concern for the integrity of the organization they helped build. It was *their* organization and they wanted it back.

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District directors failed to convince angry county leaders that Karker was fired on legitimate grounds of "insubordination and lack of cooperation," opposition to new ideas, resistance to change, a tendency to build "kingdoms" for herself and opposition to the insurance company serving non-members.

Determined member "revolutionaries" refused to accept what they felt was MFB's destructive direction, with Wightman and Prentice managing from the top down, counter to the organization's grassroots ethic. Two dozen agitated members met that summer in Mt. Pleasant to essentially plot an overthrow of the state board.

They drafted a resolution curtly reminding the state board of its authority under the bylaws, and launched a concerted effort to rally candidates to oppose board members they felt needed replacing. That included pressuring Vice President **Elton R. Smith** to challenge Wightman.

MFB's 1964 Annual Meeting saw the 'revolution' triumph — in part. Their resolution was adopted, as was another praising Karker for her service and contributions to the organization. A week later, at the board's reorganizational meeting, came the election of Elton Smith as MFB's new president, ending Wightman's tenure.

Parallel with that same annual meeting, the Farm Bureau Women celebrated the program's 20th anniversary with a ceremony that packed the MSU Union. That event concluded with a carefully orchestrated "statement" involving comments from previous program leaders followed by the appearance of a surprise guest.

Dubiously terminated only months earlier, Karker attended the bittersweet event "as a parting gift to her loyal supporters."

“She needed to be there because this party was her party,” said **Maxine Topliff**, then vice chair of the Women’s Committee. “It would have been awful for the women if she had left without a farewell. It was a great day, but a difficult day, for all of us.”

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Mourning the death of “their” organization, many ‘revolutionaries’ dropped out of leadership positions, leaving others to pick up the pieces and begin healing. Without staff support in Lansing, Women’s Committee Chair **Maurine Scramlin** attended each district meeting on her own.

“There were some women still fighting for Marge Karker’s reinstatement who thought I should just walk away, but that didn’t seem to me the kind of thing the women had elected me for. If I had walked out then, that may have been the end of the Women’s program,” Scramlin said.

Topliff agreed:

“Maurine... was the healing ointment that was needed then. You have to believe something good can come out of every bad situation and I think we did get Farm Bureau back on track.

“I learned a lot from Marge Karker. She taught me not to be afraid of change — that we shouldn’t hang onto things that no longer served a purpose. It was time for us to move on.”

In April 1965, **Helen Atwood** was hired to succeed Karker, and was in many ways her opposite: quiet, shy and reserved where Karker was effervescent, assertive and gregarious. But Atwood also proved imminently likeable — a genuinely nice person and a hard worker who would soon earn acceptance among Michigan’s Farm Bureau Women.

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Karker was granted Michigan Farm Bureau’s 1965 Distinguished Service to Agriculture Award, lauded for her service to the organization and her stature as “one of, if not the most, outstanding Women’s Program Coordinator in the United States.”

She was not present to accept the award.

With the same enthusiasm she’d brought to Farm Bureau, Karker built a second career at the Michigan State Medical Society, embodying the same ethic she instilled in Farm Bureau Women: *Don’t hang onto what no longer serves a purpose.*

In 1966 she wrote to one of her ‘revolutionary’ partisans: “Give up the fight; pass the baton on to the next runner and start yourself a different race.”



Women’s Activities Coordinator Marge Karker with MFB Secretary-Manager Dan Reed and Regional Representative Burton Richards at AFBF’s 1960 Annual Meeting in Washington D.C.

That same year saw the resignation of both MFB Secretary-Manager Clarence Prentice and J. Delbert Wells, the supervisor who carried out the directive to sever Karker's employment, and was ruthlessly rebuked by the grassroots members for doing so.

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Three years after her termination there came a final commemoration of Karker's legacy: the 1967 launch of the Marge Karker Farm Bureau Scholarship, awarded annually to young people pursuing ag-related careers at Michigan State University.

But the impact she made on the organization continued well into the future and echoes still today.

1980 brought several 'firsts' for Farm Bureau Women: Jackson County's **Janis Sanford** became the first woman to serve as the Young Farmer representative on the state board. **Marsha Brook** of Clinton County became the first woman to win the Young Farmer Discussion Meet.

And **Margaret Kartes** of Ogemaw County became the first woman to win a district director's seat on the MFB Board of Directors. Her involvement began in 1951 when she and her husband joined a Community Farm Bureau Group. That led her to the Women's program and its coordinator Marge Karker, whose familiar challenge, "Are you satisfied with the status quo?" spurred Kartes up the leadership ladder.

Kartes:

"Marge Karker is the reason I'm involved in Farm Bureau today. She convinced me that when you live with the status quo, you start sliding backwards and become complacent — that you've got to move forward and you've got to keep building."

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Most of this article was extracted and compiled from Donna Wilbur's 1994 In Service of the Farmer II.