

Berrien Junior FB members reconvene at annual reunion

A reunion of Berrien County Junior Farm Bureau veterans saw surviving members reconvene to reminisce about the group credited with forging lifelong friendships — and a few marriages — among its number.

By Jeremy C. Nagel

If there lingers any doubt as to the enduring legacy Farm Bureau involvement can impress upon its members, alumni of the Berrien County Junior Farm Bureau can handily dismiss the skeptical.

The precursor of today's vital Young Farmer program, Michigan's Junior Farm Bureau thrived from its inception in 1935 until the 1957 update that retired its name. It set the template for its successor program, smuggling leadership training into young people's hard-wiring by disguising it as simple fellowship and camaraderie.

Michigan Farm Bureau's 2019 centennial project unearthed a number of Junior Farm Bureau scrapbooks from a handful of counties, but in one of those counties "The Juniors" are still active and meeting, if only annually.

Members of the Berrien County Junior Farm Bureau reconvene every year at venue holding special value to the group's remaining members. The Youth Memorial Building, center stage at the Berrien County Fairgrounds, may be the most visible legacy of those who gathered inside it Sept. 24.

"How many of you were in attendance at one of our \$10 dinners to raise money to pay for this?" **Bob Norris** asked his gathered peers, causing more than half the group's hands to reach toward the bentwood roof beams.

Originally devised to provide a practical community resource — and honor the more than 75 Junior Farm Bureau members who fought in World War II and Korea — the building took shape in 1953 and hosted its own mortgage-burning celebration only eight years later.

"I recall so well: Right where we're seated, we pulled a semi in here loaded with these blocks in the walls," Norris said. "All of these blocks were seconds, so we were able to buy them for a little over nothing.

"And look at what this building has done for the community and the area since it was built and dedicated."

This year's reunion took place two days shy of member **Helen Morlock's** 96th birthday.

"I worked with the co-op in Buchanan when I was a younger," Morlock remembered like it was yesterday. "Katherine Blackman was there and said, 'Come to this meeting with me,' and I said 'I'm not a farmer — I live in town.'



Inside the Youth Memorial Building their group built and paid for 60 years ago, Carol (Shrave) Sonnenberg and Bob Norris held court over the 2022 reunion of the Berrien County Junior Farm Bureau.

“She said, ‘You don’t have to be a farmer,’ but I became one, though — I met my husband through Junior Farm Bureau.”

It’s a recurring theme. Of the 30 in attendance roughly a third them met their future spouses through involvement in Junior Farm Bureau. Another Berrien alum, **Barb Radewald**, affirms upwards of 60 Berrien County farm couples owe their love connections to the organization.

While the Junior Farm Bureau’s matchmaking power may elicit more warm fuzzies, it’s not the only enduring stamp made on its members.

Mistress of Ceremonies **Carol (Shrave) Sonnenberg** struck a theme that resonated with several others in attendance.

“I belong to a club house in Florida and, first time they had a meeting, they didn’t know how to do a meeting!” she said. “How to run a meeting was one of the first things we learned in Farm Bureau, and most people have no idea.”

“You went to a meeting and you had to do it properly or you weren’t heard at all,” added **Millie Wendzel**. “I go to meetings now at my age and people still don’t know how to make a motion. I still use it to this day.”

Kathleen Walter remembered lessons learned managing concessions at the major summertime fairs in Ionia and Detroit.

“We had a big variety of different things that led us to learning different skills. I learned a lot of things that didn’t end up being my career, but I still used those skills my whole life — not just farm activities.”

Radewald added that the leadership training Junior Farm Bureau members took away from the program often served them well throughout their adult lives.

“Many of our Junior Farm Bureau people became very involved with county commissions, school boards and other organizations,” she said. “As adults they were so well grounded and knew how to get things done, they can be relied on.

“When you go to state Farm Bureau functions today and you see all these young people involved, it really makes you proud.”

On the lighter side, several of The Juniors shared fond memories of square-dancing competitions and friendly rivalries between neighboring groups.

“There was a little bit of competition” between Berrien County’s central, north, south and west Junior factions, remembered **Carolyn Umphrey**. “I think north was the best, of course, but it seems like the Niles group — central — they had a lot of good dances and we went and got to know all of Berrien County.

“We kept square dancing alive for a long time.”

And if you believe its emeriti, not a single one of them ran afoul of the authorities.

“I remember the square dancing, and we went to Chicago once,” remembers **Don Payne**. “We went to the Ionia fair and we were busy in the cafeteria but we had fun and nobody got into trouble.”

...to which one of his unidentified peers muttered, “We covered each other’s asses!”

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At its peak in the mid-1950s, Junior Farm Bureau membership numbered more than 1,500 across 60+ groups in almost 50 Michigan counties.

While its most visible programs remained food and beverage concessions at the Ionia and Michigan State Fairs, ongoing behind the scenes there continued training in leadership skills, member recruitment, parliamentary procedure, program planning and on-farm safety checks conducted across 20 counties in coordination with the Grange, FFA, FHA, and 4-H.

1957 bought a name change — from Junior Farm Bureau to Farm Bureau Young People — but no alteration of the mandates on leadership training, education, recreation and community service.

As advances in communication and transportation eroded the isolation of farm life, so evolved Farm Bureau’s programming for its youngest members. Another name change in 1966, to Farm Bureau Young Farmers, indicated the segment’s increased interest in integrating its programming into the organizational mainstream.

In later years, the change struck longtime MFB President Elton R. Smith as deeper than semantic.

“When they changed from the Young People to Young Farmers and ‘went professional,’ that really *made* Farm Bureau,” Smith said. “Leadership development is what it’s all about.

“All you’ve got to do is analyze other organizations where the leadership today is the same as it was 20 years ago to appreciate what the Young Farmer program has done for Farm Bureau.”