



## Snapshots in Time

**Clockwise from top right:** Christe Peterson competes in a public speaking contest in 1979. Melanie Burgess became a national FFA vice president in 1981. Evadale, Texas, member Chrystal McDaniel poses with the 3 millionth FFA jacket. Sharon Staley of the White River FFA Chapter in Washington, models the first official girl's FFA jacket. American Farmer Degrees are first awarded to women in 1973.

# THE FIGHT FOR FEMALE MEMBERSHIP

**It's been 50 years since the 1969 National FFA Convention when women gained full membership. Let's celebrate the decades of courage, diligence and relentlessness that paved the way.**

BY BEV FLATT

**I**n 1942, D. Gilson was a successful member of the Port Royal FFA Chapter in Pennsylvania by every definition. Gilson was an engaged agricultural education student, led successful projects on the family farm, and received the chapter's coveted Carpentry Award as a senior.

When the United States entered World War II, Gilson temporarily left college and worked as a welder, using the skills developed growing up on a farm and in agricultural mechanics classes in high school. After the war, Gilson completed college and went on to become a teacher and farmer. Unfortunately, you won't find the successes and stories of Dorothy Gilson-Baker (D. Gilson), or thousands of other women like her, among any national archives. It wasn't until 1969 that women were officially allowed membership into the National FFA Organization. However, in the 50 years since the formal acceptance of female membership, women have become an integral part of the organization. Women have achieved significant milestones, and they continue to shape the future of agricultural education and the industry of agriculture.

The push for female membership wasn't an effort led during a single business session of a single National FFA Convention. Rather, it was a feat that required incredible energy and efforts that began

more than 30 years earlier. In the morning session of convention on Oct. 23, 1935, a Massachusetts delegate, Alfred Vaughan, was the first official member to broach the subject that women be allowed full membership at the national level. However, the question of female membership during this convention was resolved as follows:

*"That when officially found that any State Association in a Future Farmers of America has girl members on its rolls, such State Associations shall be denied participation in all national Future Farmer of America contests and national F.F.A. awards. And no funds from the national treasury shall be available to such State Associations for the purpose of transporting delegates to the national conventions until such time as the names of the girl members are removed from the official rolls of the State Association and local chapters in accordance with the constitution."*

**—Eighth National Convention Proceedings Report**

**F**or the next 30 years, state and local chapters integrated female membership at varying levels. Some females enrolled in agricultural education classes but were not allowed to become FFA members. Some women were added to rosters using initials that didn't reveal their gender, like Dorothy Gilson-Baker.



Women members participate in a horticulture demonstration in 1980.

And other females were identified as “social ambassadors” for the chapter and received the coveted Sweetheart jacket.

### IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED ...

**T**he issue received little attention until the 1964 National FFA Convention. During the 37th convention, Paul Miller from Connecticut proposed an amendment to open national membership to women. Despite Miller moving

was formed to review various impacts of membership. The following August, the National FFA Board of Directors proposed constitutional changes based on this committee's work, including the recommendation to remove the word *male* from the constitution. During the morning and afternoon business sessions on Oct. 13, 1966, delegates took part in intense debate and discussion on multiple sections of the ad hoc report. By the end of the convention, the

to accept the amendment and a second by Irving Torres of Puerto Rico, the motion was defeated once again. Despite the amendment's initial defeat, the delegates succeeded in bringing the topic back into the spotlight.

In January of 1966, an Ad Hoc FFA Organization Study Committee

delegates accepted all recommendations of the committee except for two, one of which was to drop the word *male* from the constitution.

### CHANGING TIMES, BUT NO CHANGES

**D**uring this time, the Vietnam War continued to rage overseas, Apollo 4 launched into space and Twiggy made her fashion debut. The climate and culture toward women's rights throughout America continued to shift, as well, and in 1967, the Affirmative Action Policy was expanded to cover discrimination based on gender.

As political and legal environments adapted and changed, the National FFA Organization sought legal counsel for the obligation to accept females as members on the national level. Despite receiving legal interpretation that declared excluding females from membership was discriminatory, amendments could not be made to the constitution that year. Instead, the delegates of the 40th National FFA Convention were informed of the legal ruling concerning female members, instructed to take the

## The Female FFA Pioneers

It was 1969 that marked the first official year for female membership into the National FFA Organization. However, the following 50 years truly revealed just how much of an impact women could have in the organization. While names like Alfred Vaughan, Paul Miller and Donald Shinn are remembered for their contribution toward achieving female membership, there are countless other names today that inspire women who wear the blue jacket. Some of those names include:



### Anita Decker and Patricia Krowicki

Just one year after female membership was secured, Anita Decker from New York and Patricia Krowicki from New Jersey served as the first female delegates at the 43rd National FFA Convention.



### Julie Smiley

In 1976, Julie Smiley from Washington became the first woman to serve at the national level as the western region vice president. Since then, more than 80 women have been elected to the National FFA Officer Team.



### Karlene Lindow

Karlene Lindow shattered another glass ceiling for women in FFA in 2002 when she was named the American Star Farmer. She raised hogs in Chili, Wis., and her jacket now hangs in the Smithsonian National Museum of American History.



### Jan Eberly

In 1982, Jan Eberly from California was elected to serve as the first female national FFA president.

information back to the local level, explore the situation and return to Kansas City in one year with the views of the members in order to provide appropriate discussion.

At that time, approximately 3,300 females were enrolled in vocational agricultural classes nationwide and an increasing number of states accepted women as members. By many accounts, acceptance of female members was inevitable during the following convention.

On Oct. 17, 1968, Donald Shinn from New Jersey declared on the business floor, "Any student who is regularly enrolled in vocational agriculture is entitled to become an active member of any chartered FFA chapter." The motion was quickly seconded by Richard Posthumus from Michigan, yet only a smattering of applause followed. The motion was defeated.

Yet, the spirit of the motion was not to be ignored. Howard Schrinar from Wyoming immediately stood before the delegate body and moved that each state appoint a committee to explore membership for women. Massachusetts once again made its stance known with a second from Donald Bridges. But again, the motion was defeated.

### BREAKING GROUND IN 1969

**F**inally, one year later, on Oct. 15, 1969, Paul Bankhead of California moved and Robert Craig of Michigan seconded once more to strike the word *male* from the constitution. The motion carried.

On the morning of Oct. 17, Johnny Holland from Tennessee stood before the delegation and read the following resolution:

*"WHEREAS, we, the delegates, to the Forty-Second annual convention have voted to allow all students of vocational agriculture to become members of the FFA;*

*"WHEREAS, we therefore have expressed our belief that all individuals are created equal and should have equal opportunities;*

*"WHEREAS, we also feel that only those who have competed on an equal basis and earned national recognition should be highly honored at our national convention; be it therefore*

*"RESOLVED, that we, the delegates, gathered here today, feel that the introduc-*

*tion of the first active female members to participate in the national FFA activities and the atmosphere and publicity thus associated with these events, be recognized as over-dramatized presentations and should not be taken as precedence set for following female participation, that instead FFA members, girls and boys, should be treated and honored equally."*

John Comegys from Delaware seconded the adoption of the resolution. The motion carried by a two-vote margin.

More than 12,000 days had passed since the initial idea was brought before the organization to the final acceptance of female FFA members.

### THE AFTERMATH

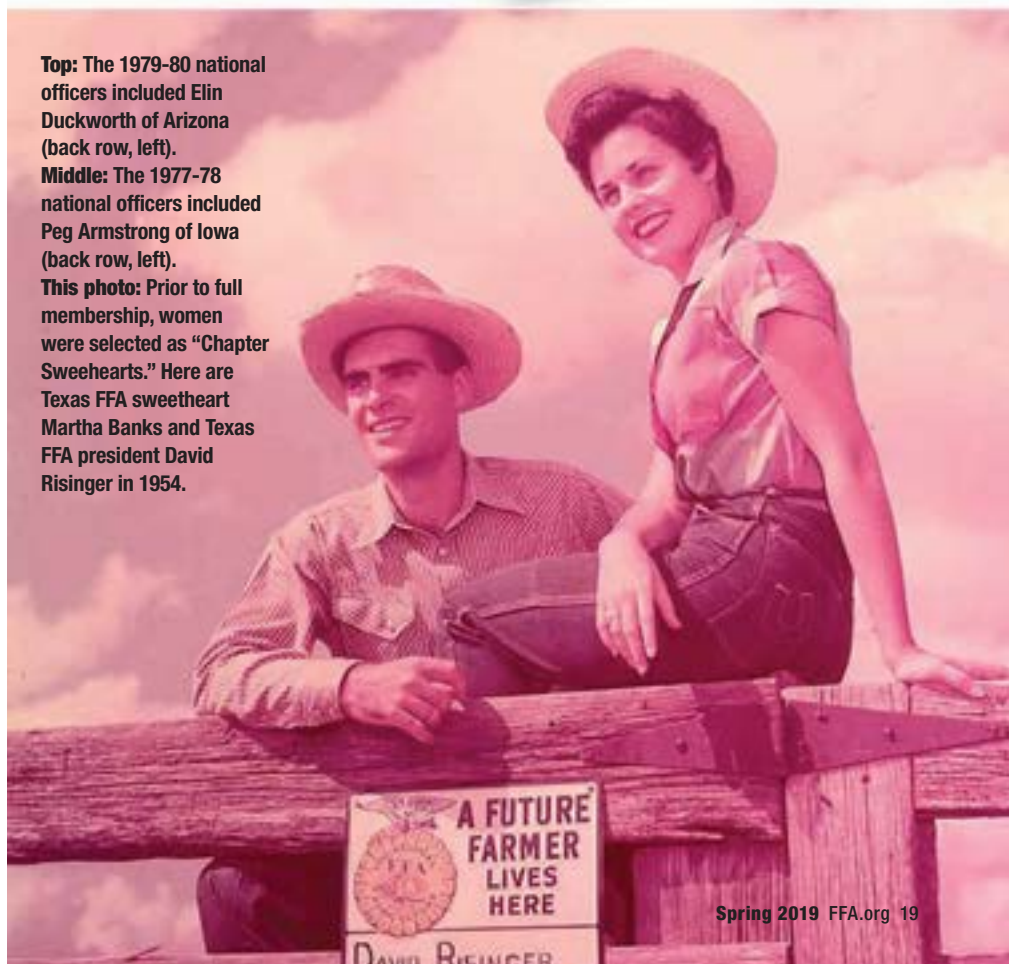
**S**ince 1969, women have served as convention delegates, national officers and even been named as the American Star Farmer. Nearly half of all FFA members are women, and females hold approximately 50 percent of state leadership positions. In fact, if you peek into the archives once more, you might find a familiar name. Dorothy Gilson-Baker's legacy continues through her granddaughter Libby Baker-Mikesell, the 2016-17 Pennsylvania state president. •



**Top:** The 1979-80 national officers included Elin Duckworth of Arizona (back row, left).

**Middle:** The 1977-78 national officers included Peg Armstrong of Iowa (back row, left).

**This photo:** Prior to full membership, women were selected as "Chapter Sweethearts." Here are Texas FFA sweetheart Martha Banks and Texas FFA president David Risinger in 1954.



# Groundbreakers

**MEET SOME OF THE WOMEN WHO  
HELPED SHAPE THE FUTURE OF FFA.**

**THIS YEAR MARKS THE 50TH  
ANNIVERSARY OF WOMEN IN FFA.  
FROM THE MOMENT WOMEN WERE  
FIRST WELCOMED INTO THE NATIONAL  
FFA ORGANIZATION IN 1969, THEIR  
ENTHUSIASTIC MEMBERSHIP HAS BEEN  
INSTRUMENTAL IN SHAPING THE FUTURE  
OF FFA – BUT IT ALL STARTED WITH A  
FEW GROUNDBREAKING LEADERS.  
MEET FIVE WOMEN WHO PAVED THE  
WAY FOR WOMEN IN FFA.**

*Story by Jodi Helmer / Illustrations by Matt Cook*

## ANITA DECKER WRIGHT



**G**rowing up on a farm in upstate New York, Anita Decker Wright raised livestock, helped in the fields and learned how to repair farm equipment.

Wright joined local and state FFA chapters in high school but, at the time, women weren't allowed to join the National FFA Organization. She attended the National FFA Convention in 1969 when delegates voted to allow females into the national organization. The following year, Wright, a newly elected state officer, returned to the convention, where she was one of two female delegates in attendance.

"I didn't realize what a big deal it was [to be one of the first two female delegates to attend the national convention] because girls had been involved at the local and district levels," Wright recalls.

Attending the national convention was exciting, but Wright made sure to follow all the rules so females would continue to be welcomed and respected within the organization. As an FFA member, she competed in livestock judging competitions, attended additional conventions and traveled to Europe to learn about the global importance of agriculture.

Looking back, Wright believes involvement with FFA helped her develop leadership, communication and teamwork skills that were instrumental in several of her achievements, including earning scholarships and serving as student government president during college.

"FFA opened a lot of doors for me," she says.

## Cathie Malison

**A**lthough Cathie Macallister Malison was active in the FFA chapter at Northern Burlington County Regional High School in Columbus, N.J., she was never elected president. "Back then, the boys wouldn't vote for a girl," she recalls.

However, in 1971, while enrolled in Cook College at Rutgers University, she was elected president of the New Jersey FFA

Association; Malison was the first woman to hold the title. One year later, she became the first woman to run for national office and, when she earned her American FFA Degree in 1973, she was among the first woman to earn that honor, too.

"I knew I was breaking barriers but, to me, it wasn't such a big issue," she recalls. "I was someone with an interest who could get the job done and,

like every other FFA youth, I wanted to become a leader."

Malison wasn't just a leader in FFA. She was also a leader in her career. She taught agricultural education, advised farmers as a county Extension agent and operated a garden center. When Malison moved to Idaho with her husband, John, in 1998, she used the leadership skills she developed in FFA to make connections,



volunteering for fundraisers and serving on the board of a local sporting association.

"So many things have changed in the

last 50 years, and it's nice to see how many women are involved and how many are national officers," she says.



**BREANNA HOLBERT**

**A**s a high school freshman at Tokay High School in Lodi, Calif., Breanna Holbert admits to signing up for agricultural education to help boost her GPA. The self-described “ethnic girl from an urban area” never imagined that the class would change her life.

“FFA kept me anchored,” she recalls. “I worked just as hard as the next person, and I felt like I belonged. It set my heart in motion to pursue leadership.”

Holbert served as chapter officer, section officer and chapter president. In 2017, she became the first African-American woman to serve as the president of the National FFA Organization.

Though Holbert didn’t consider herself “presidential” when she was elected and worried that her skin color was more of a focus than her accomplishments, traveling across the United States to give speeches and meet other FFA members helped her realize the importance of representation.

Holbert recalls speaking to a classroom filled with African-American students at the Arabia Mountain FFA Chapter in Georgia. “One girl sat in the front row, crying. After the class, she came up to me and said, ‘You give so much hope to girls like me.’ It made me realize that other African-American girls are going to follow in my footsteps, and I feel so proud of that,” she says.

## Illinois’ First All-Female State Officer Team

**A**s the executive director of the Illinois FFA Association, Mindy Bunselmeyer has the privilege of working with outstanding young leaders across the Prairie State. This year, the association made state history when the first all-female state FFA Officer Team for Illinois was elected.

Thirteen of the 20 candidates who ran were women. During the state delegate convention, Sophia Hortin, Eliza Petry, Shaylee Clinton, Miriam Hoffman and Taylor Hartke were elected to the state officer team by popular vote.

The historic event attracted a lot of attention and actually made the newly elected officers worry that their gender overshadowed their accomplishments.

“The young women who were elected are all so amazing,” Bunselmeyer says. “It should be known that they were elected based on their leadership abilities, merit and talent – not their gender.”

Although Bunselmeyer knows she’s part of a historic moment in FFA history, she notes, “FFA isn’t about young men or young women; it’s an organization for young leaders.”

## BELINDA CHASON

**I**n 2018, Belinda Chason was inducted into the Florida FFA Foundation Hall of Fame to honor a career as an agriculture advocate spanning more than four decades.

In addition to working as a state FFA advisor, Chason also logged several impressive accomplishments within the organization. She was the first female state FFA advisor, the first female executive director of the Florida FFA Association and the first woman elected to the National FFA Organization Board of Directors.

Although she's proud of all of these roles, Chason believes her role on the National FFA Organization Board of Directors was among the most impactful, explaining, "It was important to the overall operation of the organization to break the barrier and elect a woman to serve in that position."

Chason joined the National FFA Organization Board of Directors in 1996 and was involved in the historic decisions to move both the National FFA Center to Indianapolis and the National FFA Convention & Expo to Louisville. It was

an exciting time to be on the board, she says, and provided opportunities to bring a unique perspective to landmark rulings.

"FFA taught me to look at the big picture, and I hope that was one of the things I brought to the table," she recalls.

Although Chason retired in 2011, she remains active in FFA. "It was such a good learning experience for me, and I want to be sure other females have those opportunities," she says.



## Karlene Lindow Krueger

**K**arlene Lindow Krueger was thrilled to compete for the American Star Farmer award, but she wasn't optimistic about her chances of winning.

"Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to make it to the top four and, when I did, never in my wildest dreams did I expect to win," Krueger recalls.

It wasn't a lack of confidence that made the third-generation farmer and FFA member think the odds were against her. It was her operation's size, the smallest of all of the competitors. Krueger was raising 100 sows, five feeder calves and three beef cattle, while her competitors were managing up to 5,000 acres.

In 2002, Krueger was humbled to be the first woman to receive the American Star Farmer award, calling it, "The last hurdle women had to overcome [in FFA]."

Although Krueger is proud of the prestigious title, awards aside, she believes her participation in FFA helped shape her life. "Being in FFA has a ripple effect," she says.

A former member of the FFA livestock judging team, Krueger is the livestock judging coach in Campbellsport, Wisc. She continues to farm, and she shares her passion for agriculture with her children. Krueger's oldest daughter just entered her first year of FFA.

"It was such an honor to be the first female American Star Farmer," she says. "I hope it gives young women like my daughters something to strive for." •