

1979 Tractorcade to Washington D.C.

Interview with Karen Miller

August 28, 2012

Conducted in the Miller home, Lewis, Kansas

Interviewers: Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff, Kinsley Library

Also present: Darrel Miller, spouse

Joan: Karen, I know that Darrel was the one that got involved in this and you were a farmer's wife. What can you tell us about that?

Karen: I don't remember which came first, the meeting in Kinsley or the meeting in Great Bend. But he told me he was going to that meeting in Great Bend, then he came home and told me how slick all those guys were and how intelligent. Then they had a meeting here in Kinsley and he and my dad went. That might have been first, but I remember after my dad told my mom all about it and she said, "You know, my dad always talked about the government and farming. I thought he was just a radical old guy!" She said, "Maybe he was right." But then my dad passed away, so he wasn't involved. Of course I went right along with it. We bought a little trailer and pulled it there.

Joan: You bought the trailer specifically for this trip?

Karen: Yes we did, and we sold it the minute we got home.

Joan: So before the Tractorcade, Darrel was quite involved in the organization and getting people excited. What was your role?

Karen: We went to a lot of meetings. Jeff Meade did a lot of the driving to these meetings because Darrel couldn't do the driving, then speak, and drive home late at night. I went along some; I know we had this agreement. We were at Hoisington, and he said, "When you think I've talked long enough, will you please stand up?" So I was sitting probably with Zelma, a friend, and we were wondering who this person was over there, so I stood up to see her. Darrel said, "You mean I've talked too long already?" I said, "Oh no, no. Forget it. Forget it."

Joan: And you had children at this time? What were their names?

Karen: Sherry was a junior at Fort Hays, and Bryan was a freshman at K State. I know Darrel was always gone doing a meeting, and Sherry said, "I'm coming home this weekend. Do you think Daddy will be there?" And I said, "I think." But he wasn't. But she said, "When I got up Sunday morning, he wasn't there, but I knew he hadn't died because they weren't bringing the casseroles in." And I thought, "Bless her heart. She thought she was going to get to see her Daddy, but he was gone." But it worked out.

Joan: Were you as excited about this protest, this movement?

Karen: As it got started, yes I was. I thought we were pretty well received in Washington, and I had fun doing it. I helped in the office, answered the phone and whatever they needed me to do. People would call from everywhere wanting to know what was going on up here. I told them to the best of my ability. And then they got this idea to stimulate some interest by having fortune cookies made with a farm fact in each one. This friend of mine, Leatrice Benson (who was a "shy person") we took them everywhere. We weren't the only ones (*we took them to*) all the offices, the Federal Reserve, just anyplace. We took

them a sack of those fortune cookies. I even drove in D.C., just around the area. I wasn't real brave.

Joan: Okay, what can you tell us about the trip out there, the camping in the trailer...any good stories?

Karen: Well, of course the snowstorms were just overwhelming, you know. We were in this one town, and we were trying to follow another car, and they kept going faster than we were going. I looked ahead, and there was a tractor (it was Jim Titus') and he was going off the ramp into the little town. We just let him go! We couldn't do anything about it; we couldn't hardly see. But mostly it was just the receptions we got and how people fixed meals for us and they wanted to hear all about what we were doing and why. Darrel got his fingers frostbit, but I can't think of anything really. It was just all fun, and some hard work.

Joan: What was the general schedule of the day? You would get up at what time and...?

Karen: Daylight, I suppose to start out. We ate cereal. I can't remember what we did for lunch; it's been too long ago. But we had our little house right with us, so I'm sure we ate lunch right in the trailer.

Joan: And you were ahead of the tractors?

Karen: Most of the time.

Joan: ... making the way, so you could sort of stop.

Karen: Yes, we could.

Joan: You could travel a little faster than the tractors.

Karen: We traveled with them for a little while, but then they got sort of desperate because they needed someone to figure out where they were going to go. I thought they way they lined us up on this big long hill, Lester Derley came along with his fuel truck and fueled everybody up, and they sent us on our way. I don't remember any wrecks or anything like that, but I might just not remember. But I do remember something funny about Lester. He had people ride with him, but he also had Oreo cookies, always. So, if you wanted a cookie, you would find the fuel wagon.

Joan: Were there other wives that went?

Karen: Yes, from Lewis there were the Scheuflers and Bev.

Joan: Now Beverly went alone?

Karen: Yes, she did. And after Wolf's trailer was sideswiped, I don't know where she stayed. I imagine she stayed with Scheuflers.

Joan: You didn't have anybody staying in your trailer?

Karen: No. It was pretty small with room for two. When the kids came, we put them up there too, in the little trailer. I kind of missed home, and I bought me a little plant so I could put it on the table. We had friends staying in their trailers after we got to Washington, in parking lots of motels, and they didn't have electricity or anything. They put grape juice on their cereal! When I was working in the office, we

usually made lunch in the office. You know, a sandwich or something. Then after finishing at 7:00 at night, we would go home to the trailer, wake up the next morning and do it all over again. At that time Darrel was doing talks at the schools in the area. They would call and want someone to come and talk.

Joan: In Washington D.C.?

Karen: Yes, in Washington.

Joan: From the elementary schools?

Karen: The high schools. I don't believe he did much on the way. You know we were just plugging down the road. It was almost like "The Blackboard Jungle," because you just wouldn't believe...

Joan: And you went with him for the lobbying and the meetings?

Karen: I did, and sometimes just the some women would go. I wasn't very good at that, but you could tell them why you were there. That was kind of fun to do, because some of the people weren't used to talking at all. And I'm sure they just went in and said, "We want parity!" and left. That's about what I did, maybe.

Joan: And you went to the congressmen from all the different states, you weren't just lobbying Kansas.

Karen: It was mostly Kansas, but they went everywhere.

Joan: So everybody went to their own states.

Karen: First.

Joan: What was the camaraderie with the women?

Karen: It was good. You kind of became instant friends. We didn't have any problems.

Joan: How about the hubbies? Did they get a little testy on some of this stuff? Or did they do pretty good?

Karen: I think they did OK.

Joan: They were diplomatic.

Karen: They were better than me; I'll put it that way.

Joan: Well, it's a long hard trip.

Karen: Well, you know, we made some friends. There was a gal that worked for Associated Press, and she wanted to take us out to some country club to eat, and that was fun. I had one dress to wear!

Joan: Back then, women still wore dresses, didn't they!

Karen: Yes. And my sister lived not too far away, so she came up for a weekend to see all the stuff.

We were out there in Maryland and it was just too exciting down on the Mall, so I think all of us Lewis people went down to the Mall and stayed at the Mall.

Joan: You were barricaded in.

Karen: And I wish I could remember how many days we were there. Then we moved the trailer out to Alexandria, and I don't know how far that was from the office. Half an hour maybe?

Joan: And you drove back and forth?

Karen: Yes, every day.

Darrel: Parking was a big problem.

Joan: Did you do any sightseeing in Washington?

Karen: I did a lot; Darrel didn't do any. I got to see everything.

Joan: Did the women go and do that? Or did...

Karen: Yes, sometimes I'd go by myself. I wasn't afraid.

Joan: Were you going to tell us something about an incident?

Karen: They decided they were going to let so many tractors out to go to the White House. Evidently they had some kind of protest planned. So I got to drive a tractor, but of course I wasn't used to it! Darrel was in the one ahead of me, and some fellow broke out of line and was causing trouble. So the police just converged, and one got in my tractor, a policeman. Darrel came running back there and said, "Now wait, she's driving a tractor she's not used to, and she's not going to do anything!" He didn't say anything. He didn't handcuff me and lead me off!

Joan: Then you were allowed to continue?

Karen: From then on, yes. And you know, I really can't remember why we went there. But we had a purpose, I know. Maybe Bev could remember. (Don't put that in!)

Joan: It's in. And then, your kids were in college, but then they came for spring break.

Karen: Yes. We'd closed our house, drained the water and everything. So they flew up there, and they just had a grand time for five days. They stayed in the trailer with us. We went to visit my sister. But one nice thing our local office did for us was they helped finance it for the three months that we were there. They sent us some money to pay the trailer rent or something. Which was very nice. Useful.

Joan: I would think! How do you think the kids felt about Darrel's involvement and yours?

Karen: I think they were kind of proud of him, and they had a really good time in Washington! ~~Michael Schnoebelen was there. Of course he was a little bit younger than our kids, not much. (He was not there; mistaken for when Michael was in Topeka Tractorcade.)~~ But there were young people there... from little kids on up. I got kind of homesick, and I was glad when we got home three months later.

Joan: Had you done much traveling before this?

Karen: Yes, well some. Most of it was done afterwards, I guess. Three months is a long time though.

Joan: How do you feel about the impact that you made?

Karen: Oh, I felt like we made an impact. We were there, and we wouldn't go away.

Joan: Yes, usually today a protest is a weekend. They get a lot of people to descend for a weekend, but you were there for three months.

Karen: And a lot of other people were, and there were a lot of people coming and then going home.

Joan: Changing out?

Karen: Yes, going back and forth. Some states had an apartment rented and people would just rotate in and out.

Joan: Pretty good idea! And you said that when the trailer was in the Mall, you didn't have electricity hooked up, and water.

Karen: No, we didn't.

Joan: Tell us, when you are in a trailer, did you carry your potty with you. What did you do for that?

Karen: We used it, and then they opened the manholes (or something) and then drained it out.

Joan: How about other female duties, like washing the clothes? How did you do that?

Karen: Oh we had to go to a Laundromat somewhere.

Joan: And you pretty much ate out for dinner?

Karen: We ate breakfast and lunch, and then we'd go out for dinner. They got to know us well at some of the restaurants!

Joan: You found inexpensive ones!

Karen: Yes.

Joan: Does anything else stand out in your memories? Anything special? The snowstorms?

Karen: We went to a meeting. I'm sure Carter wasn't there. I don't remember who was running the meeting, but they wanted to know what we did at home. And I said we farmed, we'd never had a new car, ever. You know, they couldn't believe that. We met in churches every evening to bring the day together, to find out what everyone had done. Then we'd go out and eat after that. It made a long day.

Joan: And we said that we were going to have you talk about the Baptist lay preacher, what was his name? Alvin Jenkins. Tell us a little bit about him because we have a picture of Alvin.

Karen: Alvin was a wild man. He was sincere about wanting to get this going, but he didn't always have his facts straight. Like, "No, we feed all the world and half the foreign nations!" And I don't know what's happened to Alvin Jenkins. He ran a service station in Campo, Colorado, which is just south of Springfield where all this started.

Joan: Did you go to church?

Karen: Yes, we did.

Joan: Do you remember where?

Karen: We went to... I think it was a Presbyterian Church. We didn't go every Sunday but we went. At one time, we parked out... Oh no, that was a different trip. We didn't take the trailer that time.

Joan: We asked Darrel what he thought the reaction was from people back home about your going on the trip. What was your impression?

Karen: Some people thought it was terrific, you know, and some didn't. But I didn't personally feel any repercussions from it. But I remember that I asked a gentleman about my age once if he didn't want to come to an AAM meeting, and he said, "Do you think I need it?" And I said, "No." He thought I said an AA meeting! And I said, "No, no. That's not right."

Joan: Did any groups ask you or Darrel to talk about your trip after you came back?

Karen: My extension group wanted to know, but I don't think (*there were any others*).

Joan: Because it was interesting that he spoke to the school children there, but not...

Karen: (To Darrel) Did you ever go to any of the schools around here after we got home?

Darrel: They asked me to come up to Lewis... whoever was teaching history. I can't remember who it was. And they asked me to explain what it was about and what was going on. So I went in there and typical high school kids, they were all yakking and yakking when I got started talking. They weren't paying no attention. Finally, I just stopped, and it got quiet. And I said, "All right. I want your full attention. I don't want it very long, but I want all of it, and I want it now." And they all shut up.

Karen: Did they ask you very many questions?

Darrel: You know, I can't remember. That's so long ago. But tell them about those UAW guys.

Karen: Oh, I had a bunch of caps and buttons, and they bought every one I had.

Joan: UAW guys in Washington?

Karen: They were having a convention.

Darrel: The UAW also represents anybody that's building farm machinery....there are in the UAW. Anyway, I don't know, we just got to talking to these guys in the hotel, and they said, "We want you to come down in the morning and address our group. They asked me to give a talk. And I said, "I don't

know what to say, but I'll get somebody down there." We got Bud Bitner. He went down there. He told them what we were up to. When he got done, the president of the UAW looked at Karen and said, "This lady has a lot of caps and a lot of buttons that she is selling, and I want everybody in here not to leave until they are gone!"

Karen: I think Judy McKinney and Bev Snyder had a button making machine, and they'd made all kinds of buttons.

Joan: With the slogans on them?

Karen: Yes. I had forgotten all about that.

Joan: So you had fortune cookies, you had caps and buttons, did you have anything else?

Karen: I don't think so.

Darrel: Bumper stickers. You couldn't go up the street without seeing a farm bumper sticker on a light pole or somewhere.

Karen: But years after this, our neighbor boy out on the farm, Mitchell Kettrel heard about it, or his folks were talking, so he wanted to see the scrapbook, all the pictures, and hear all about it. He was really interested. He couldn't believe it.

Joan: Well, it is quite a remarkable trip.

Karen: When you think about it, it really is. I didn't realize that when we were doing it, but you know...

Joan: Just the idea of driving a tractor 100 miles is far enough for me.

Karen: And I don't know if it is in here...

Joan: Oh, how long did it take to get there... I think I have that date because the newspaper covered it.

Darrel: And all the TV coverage. They said a hundred miles a day, but some days more and some days less. Another thing that happened, we got to talking to these two gals and they were from Hutchinson, and they were back there with the Communications Workers of America Union. They both worked for Bell Telephone in Hutchinson, and one of them was (~~Dave Titus' mother in law...I mean, not his mother in law... David's daughter was married to this gal's husband.~~) *Sandra Titus, Bill Titus' daughter*. They said, "We're living across the street in this big hotel, and we want somebody to come over and talk to our convention. We'll get you a time slot." Then they said, "Who can you send?" And I said, "I guess me!" So basically I went over and gave the same speech that Bud Bitner had given before to the U.A. W.

Joan: So you stayed very busy one way or another, talking to legislators, aides, groups, school children. One way or another, you didn't have a lot of free time.

Karen: No. Darrel had none, but I did. So he didn't see all the sights I saw.

Joan: And in the office you answered the phone. Did you do mailings?

Karen: Whatever needed to be done.

Joan: How many people were working in this office?

Darrel: The ones who were really working weren't too many.

Karen: With people coming and going, there were probably six or eight.

Joan: Did you have regular hours?

Karen: No.

Joan: You just sort of signed up? Or showed up?

Karen: I just told them I'd be there.

Darrel: The media was calling all the time, wanting an interview with somebody.

Karen: A pat, little speech, you know, I gave to them. I don't think there is anything in any of the history books about this, or I wonder if there is anything in the history books about this?

Joan: Probably not. Probably not. And that's why we're doing this.

Karen: We are glad you are doing it.

Joan: Can you think of anything else to ask, Rosetta?

Darrel: PBS did a documentary thing. I never did get to see it, but they interviewed this guy (*Darrel*).

Joan: This is in Washington?

Darrel: Yes, it was some independent group, but they were doing it for PBS. They talked to me and they talked to a lot of other people. The main thing they were looking at right there was foreign land investment was a big deal, U.S. foreign land, that's what they wanted to talk about. And they kept asking, "Why are you against it? Why are you against it?" And I said, "Well, when you think about the Japanese and the Chinese pirating your video tapes and all this stuff. I mean they started connecting their dots and all. They ran this thing on PBS out of Wichita, but we never did get to see it. But the media contacted just about everybody. I had a list that long of people that I talked to.

Joan: Did the Kansas media follow it up there too? They kept up with you while you were out there?

Darrel: That gal from the Hutchinson News was there.

Karen: Becky Tanner. She might have been there part of the time.

Darrel: She was working, I don't know if she's still there. She went to the Wichita Eagle Beacon and I think she was working for the Associated Press. But she was following everybody around for a long time.

Joan: Well, can you think of anything else?

Karen: Tomorrow! I think our office here probably kept our information and gave it to the papers.

Joan: Now, did you work in the local office before you went?

Karen: I did some, helping out there.

Joan: Was Marj doing about the same thing?

Karen: Zelma worked in it, and Mary Ellen Schinstock. We didn't have any hours or any schedule. We'd just go in and help out.