

Larry Winkler – Paxico Meatloaf Festival

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

“My meatloaf is better than your meatloaf.” “No, my meatloaf is better than your meatloaf.” This type of culinary debate creates lots of discussion. In this case, it led to the creation of a remarkable community festival. Get your fork, it's today's Kansas Profile.

Larry and Peggy Winkler are antique store owners and organizers of this festival in Paxico. Larry and Peggy both have rural roots. Larry grew up near Riley, population 848, and Peggy comes from Centralia, population 518. They met at K-State. Larry went on to a career in accounting and Peggy recently retired from the university.

“We bought antiques for our home,” Larry said. “In fact, we still have the first piece which we acquired.” Through the years, Larry and Peggy enjoyed searching for vintage items. With early retirement approaching, they started selling some of these treasures.

The Winklers rented space. Then in 2010 they purchased a store in Paxico. In 2012, they expanded into the building next door. Today, Aunt Peg’s Antique Mall features a variety of antiques and collectibles. Their historic limestone store building has ornate tin ceilings, classic wood floors, a tin storefront overhang, and more.

Because Paxico has several antique stores and is located close to the interstate, it has developed a significant antique business. Aunt Peg’s Antique Mall has sold items to people from coast to coast and as far away as Australia and Sweden. Wow.

“We enjoy it,” Larry said. “Most of all, we enjoy meeting the people.”

One activity which brings lots of people to town is a relatively new event called the Paxico Meatloaf Festival. What in the world is a meatloaf festival?

“There were two restaurants in Paxico at the time,” Larry explained. “One of them started serving a meatloaf dinner, so the other one had to do the same. They started arguing over who had the best meatloaf so they finally had a contest to decide which one was best.”

One thing led to another. The Great Meatloaf Debate developed into a community festival. The two original restaurants have closed, but Paxico merchants have formalized the contest and built a festival around it. Cooks from around the region now enter their meatloaf and compete for the top prize. Entries have come from as far away as Minnesota.

The meatloaf is evaluated on taste, texture, and appearance or presentation. There are cash prizes for the winners plus gifts from the Kansas Beef Council and Grandma Hoerners. The winner serves as King or Queen of the parade.

That's right, I said King or Queen. It's not just women who enter. "Last year our top three winners were men," Peggy Winkler said. One of those had seen his wife win the previous year.

These artisans of the kitchen get really creative. In addition to the traditional meatloaf recipe, there has been a German meatloaf with sauerkraut, meatloaf with bacon woven in a lattice pattern on top, and a Mexican flavor meatloaf with taco flavoring. I never knew this dish could be so versatile.

For 2013, the event is expanding with a flea market and a pie bakeoff. (Great! That means there's dessert to go with the main course.) Antique cars and tractors will be on display plus the parade and lots of family fun. There is no admission charge.

"It's a family event," Larry said. "The Paxico Merchants Association coordinates the festival, but we've had outstanding community support and sponsorship from many area merchants." Last year some 400 to 500 people attended, which is especially remarkable when one considers that Paxico is a rural community of only 210 people. Now, that's rural.

New additions have come to the community recently. Two art galleries, a winery and a museum recently opened. For more information, go to www.paxicomerchants.com.

“My meatloaf is better than your meatloaf.” “No, my meatloaf is better than your meatloaf.” The great debate continues in fun as the community benefits. We commend Larry and Peggy Winkler and all those involved with the annual Paxico Meatloaf Festival for making a difference with this community celebration. It looks like they have a lot on their plate.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.