

## Natalie Beard-Dent – Beard Propane

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

The fleet of oil company service trucks is being converted, to operate not on gasoline, but on propane. The conversion of those vehicles from gas to propane fuel was completed by an innovative, diversifying company in rural southeast Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Natalie Beard-Dent is owner of Beard Propane Heat and Air near Erie, Kansas. She has seen this business grow and change through the years.

Natalie's grandfather, Hobart Beard, founded Beard Oil Company in Erie in 1939. For decades, he operated a true full service gas station, where attendants pumped your gas, cleaned your windshield, and checked your oil. (That is a lost art.) Hobart's son Paul Beard grew up in the business, and then Paul's daughters as well. "I remember climbing up to wash windows on the big milk trucks," Natalie said.

In 1956, Paul Beard added a new line to the business: Propane, for home heating. Natalie also remembers riding in the propane delivery truck with her father. After she grew up and married, she had the opportunity to ride in those trucks again. "My baby was two weeks overdue, and Dad teased me that he should take me on a bumpy road in one of those delivery trucks to get that process going," Natalie said. Eventually she had two children, without the use of trucks.

Over time, the propane business grew and the service station was phased out. Beard Propane still specializes in bulk propane delivery, installation and service for home, agricultural, and commercial heating customers.

In 1995, Natalie bought the company from her father. Beard Propane was solely a propane supplier at the time, but in recent years under her leadership, the company has diversified in a remarkable way.

Today, Beard Propane Heat and Oil is a full line dealer for RUUD heating and air conditioning products, including diagnostic work and repair and maintenance plus new installation. Furthermore, the company is selling a line of instant water heaters and 99 percent fuel efficient ventless heaters while doing automotive heating and air conditioning service.

The company fills utility cylinders for everything from forklifts to barbecue grills – and speaking of grills, the company even offers a smoker and a line of rubs and spices known as JB's Fat Boy BBQ Seasonings.

Another innovative initiative is an LP auto conversion service. Beard Propane installs conversion kits to convert vehicles from gas to LP operation. "We've converted service trucks for two companies and several individuals," Natalie said. LP conversion can lower operating and maintenance costs for these vehicles.

What are the keys to success in this business? "Service," Natalie said. "I can't remember a holiday when Dad spent the whole day at home. If somebody needed something, he would go," she said. "We have taught our employees to treat people the way you want to be treated.

"I'm surrounded by fabulous people," Natalie said. It is very much a family business. Natalie's daughter Tonya Wiles has joined the business as office manager, and

Tonya's husband Andy is a delivery driver. Their two sons, ages eight and three, would be the fifth generation in the Beard business.

In 2000, Beard Propane Heat and Oil built a new office building on the Beard family farm located on Highway 59. The Beard Propane office is in a rural location, situated south of Erie, population 1,191 people; west of St. Paul, population 663; and east of Galesburg, population 149 people. Now, that's rural.

"I love it," Natalie said. "People become fast friends. If you need something, people will be there for you. We can provide a more personal touch in a small town than is possible in a big city," Natalie said.

For more information, go to [www.beardpropane.com](http://www.beardpropane.com).

It's time to leave this fleet of trucks which has been converted from gas fuel to propane, thanks to this innovative company in rural Kansas. We salute Natalie Beard-Dent, Paul Beard, Tonya and Andy Wiles, and all those involved with Beard Propane Heat and Air for making a difference with service and diversification. Such innovation can fuel even more change in rural Kansas.

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