

Molli Esping – The Old Grind 1

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

“Well, it’s back to the old grind.” That might sound like something we say reluctantly on Monday morning, but in this case, going to The Old Grind is a wonderful thing. The Old Grind is the name of a marvellous coffee shop, and it is located in a rural Kansas community that has been recognized as one of the best small towns in the entire nation. This is today’s Kansas Profile.

Molli Esping is the owner and manager of The Old Grind coffee shop in Lindsborg, Kansas. The shop is located downtown in the Swedish community of Lindsborg.

Lindsborg is nicknamed Little Sweden because of its rich Swedish heritage which it celebrates in various ways. The community was settled in 1869 by a group of Swedish immigrants led by Pastor Olof Olsson. In 1890, Bethany College was established here.

Lindsborg is decorated with traditional Swedish dala horses. The downtown resembles a Swedish village and features lots of related shops and boutiques. Bethany College hosts an annual performance of Handel’s Messiah on Easter Sunday. Every other year the community celebrates Svensk Hyllningsfest, a festival designed to puzzle the spell check on any computer – I mean, to celebrate the town’s Swedish heritage.

Molli Esping is very much a part of the Swedish tradition. “My family came here from Sweden in the 1860s,” Molli said. Molli’s parents moved to Colorado for a time, but when Molli was born, they moved back to the family farmstead. It is situated between Lindsborg and the rural community of Marquette, population 537 people. Now, that’s rural.

As a child, Molli was one of the girls who did the traditional Swedish dancing at Hyllningsfest.

Molli’s family also loved coffee. “My dad was a pilot who flew jets for Cessna,” Molli said. “He flew to Italy where he drank espresso and found he loved fine coffee.”

Back in Lindsborg, a woman named Becky Anderson opened a coffee shop downtown called The Old Grind, which seems like an appropriate name for a coffee shop. She later sold it to Jan and John Rathlef. Molli’s family and the Rathlefs got well acquainted. In addition to regular and specialty brewed coffee, The Old Grind offers a small breakfast and lunch menu, plus homemade pastries such as scones and, of course, Swedish almond cake.

Molli was offered a job at The Old Grind when she turned 16. She liked it so well that she and her family had an opportunity to move into ownership. “When I started working here, it was just a job,” Molli said. “But I became really impressed with the business owners downtown. Everyone gets involved in trying to make the community better for everyone,” she said.

This spirit of community improvement has earned the community recognition. Livability.com is a website which uses specific methodology to annually rank the best, most livable communities among towns of less than 20,000 people. To arrive at this ranking, the researchers examined more than 40 data points for more than 12,000 communities between 1,000 and 20,000 in population and weighted those scores based on

a market survey. The goal was to identify the best small town living coupled with amenities which might be found in larger cities.

In 2015, Lindsborg was selected as one of those 100 best small towns in America. In fact, it is number 31. The only other Kansas small town on the list, number 71, is Merriam in the Kansas City area.

“Lindsborg is an amazing community,” Molli Esping said. “We get tons of visitors. It’s a lively community, and every single storefront is full downtown.”

Well, it’s time to get back to The Old Grind. No, not back to work, but rather to a lovely coffee shop in the downtown community of Lindsborg. We salute Molli Esping and her family in Lindsborg for making a difference by honoring their Swedish heritage and serving their community. It is great to find a community that is so well grounded.

And there’s more. The Old Grind is preparing for a new transition that will combine it with a coffee roastery. We’ll learn about that next week.

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