

Randy Kemp – Eskridge Lumber

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

It's been called a "step back in time," a local resource for hardware and materials, and a lifesaver when somebody is in a jam. It's a small town Kansas lumberyard which now has new life under local ownership. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Randy Kemp is the manager of Eskridge Lumber LLC in Eskridge, Kansas. Eskridge has had a lumberyard for a long time. Eldon Roberson and Dean Miller had owned the lumberyard since 1970.

Randy Kemp came to work at the lumberyard in 1981. He is a local, having been born and raised here. “I tell people that I’ve never gotten off the main street of Eskridge,” Randy said. “My dad ran a gas station and shop here and we lived down the street.” Randy continued to live on main street when he finished school and started going to work on construction projects. After he got married, his wife didn’t want him to travel so much so he took a job at the lumberyard, right there on main street. In 2004, he took over as manager.

“We’re a small town lumberyard,” Randy said. “We have hardware, building materials, lawn and garden supplies, home furnishings, and other things.” When a local farm store closed, the lumberyard added barbed wire and related fencing supplies. Paint, keys, and some appliances are offered by the store. “We have everything from wooden matches to water heaters,” Randy said.

Because of the old counters and wooden floors, some call visiting the store a step back in time. Randy strives to maintain old-fashioned customer service.

But by 2015, the future of the store was in doubt. Owners Eldon Roberson and Dean Miller were in their 80s and they decided it was time to sell. In fall 2015 they put the store on the market, but no firm buyers came forward. They finally set a deadline of March 16, 2016: The store would either sell or close.

One night a group of people got together and decided to organize an LLC and look for investors to purchase the lumberyard. Randy Kemp was one, and he was ultimately joined by about thirty other people who were local or had ties to the area. They bought the lumberyard and now operate it as Eskridge Lumber LLC.

“Those people remained committed through the whole process,” Randy said. “And it’s not just older people. Some of our investors are in their 30s,” he said.

How can a small town lumberyard compete in today's economy? Service and friendliness are two keys identified by Randy. "We have really good loyal customers who support us," Randy said. "We get to know our customers, and when somebody's well or furnace quits in the middle of the night, they know how to reach me. It's just being a good neighbor."

Competing with the big chains is always an issue. "One guy showed me an ad for some really cheap sewer pipe at a big box store," Randy said. "Sure enough, he would have been able to get the sewer pipe cheap, but all the fittings he needed to use it were a lot more expensive there," he said.

There was a couple who lived in Kansas City and bought a home at Lake Wabaunsee near Eskridge, so they stopped in at the lumberyard. They were so thankful for the service they received there that they sent Randy a gift certificate in appreciation. When Randy tried to return it, they said, "You don't understand. We go in those big box stores in Kansas City and there's nobody to help us." Now they are bringing their grandson to the store.

Randy believes that personal service can be a hallmark of rural communities. Eskridge is a community of 582 people. Now, that's rural.

Some say that visiting Eskridge Lumber is like a step back in time. Others call it a wonderful local resource, or a lifesaver when their furnace or well isn't working. We salute Randy Kemp and all those involved with Eskridge Lumber LLC for making a difference with local ownership of a small town lumberyard. It's good to find a small town lumberyard with big service.

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