

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

“1 Kansas farmer feeds more than 155 people + You!” Signs proclaiming this message are frequently seen along the highways and byways of Kansas. These signs demonstrate the passionate advocacy for agriculture which is found in an innovative farm family in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Jeanne and Harold Mertz are the farm couple who initiated this farm sign project and other projects to benefit agriculture. Harold grew up on a farm southeast of Manhattan. He was a charter member of the Zeandale 4-H club. During his last year in 4-H, he showed the Grand Champion Steer at the American Royal.

Harold attended K-State where he met Jeanne, who was born in Kansas City, Kansas and had grown up in Oskaloosa. They married and moved back to his family farm, which was named River Creek Farms because it was situated in the Kaw River valley between the Kansas River and Deep Creek.

The Mertz family were grain farmers and producers of cattle and sheep. Harold would feed thousands of lambs in a typical winter. The Mertz family also raised five children: Joe, Tom, Bob, Jane, and Jon.

Harold and Jeanne were both strong leaders. They were named Master Farmer and Master Farm Homemaker in 1987. Harold served on state and national sheep association boards, farm co-op boards, and the school board. He also served as a long-time community leader for the Zeandale 4-H Club. Jeanne was a state and national president of farm women organizations now known as Kansas Agri-Women and American Agri-Women.

Both were strong advocates of agriculture. In the 1970s, Jeanne suggested a way to inform the general public about the benefits of farm production. She proposed, and the farm women's organization agreed, to put up signs along the highways. These signs depicted a sack full of groceries with the wording “1 Kansas farmer feeds 55 people + You!” When the first signs were erected, the number fed per farmer was 55. As agricultural productivity grew through the years, the number increased and the signs were updated.

Maybe that is like the way McDonald's used to put on its signs the numbers of hamburgers it sold. Anyway, the most recent Kansas Agri-Women signs now say “more than 155 people + You!”

This sign project generated lots of visibility. At one point, some 60 signs were located around Kansas. Someone observed that Harold enjoyed working with Jeanne on this project, but at the time he didn't realize that he would become the chief project manager in charge of erecting the signs all across Kansas roadways!

In more recent years, Kansas Agri-Women is working with a sign company to have the signs produced on vinyl and has adopted those signs into magnets, smaller metal signs and posters. One such sign was put on display at the Flint Hills Discovery Center and more than 18,000 people viewed the sign there.

On National Agriculture Day in 2016, Jeanne arranged to have these magnets placed on the statehouse desks of every Kansas representative.

Over time Harold and Jeanne's sons Joe and Bob came back to join the family farming operation, along with Joe's wife Kim and Bob's wife Mary and the next generation of children.

Harold passed away in fall 2015 and Jeanne passed 14 months later. At the time of her death, she had 11 grandchildren, two step-grandchildren, seven great grandchildren, and five step-great grandchildren. Those great grandchildren would be the sixth generation to farm in this fertile Kansas River valley. That also makes for a big family photo.

These family ties are deeply rooted at River Creek Farms, located just east of the rural community of Zeandale which has a population of perhaps 50 people. Now, that's rural.

"1 Kansas farmer feeds more than 155 people + You!" That message conveys the importance and productivity of Kansas farmers. We salute Jeanne and Harold Mertz for their family farm and their advocacy of agriculture. We are lucky to be so well-fed.

And there's more. The next generation of the Mertz family is carrying on this agricultural tradition and moving it up to another level. We'll learn about that next week.

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