

Lawrence Horse-Drawn Parade

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

I love a parade. Imagine a big city parade with only horse-drawn vehicles. There are very few of those in the nation and only one in the Midwest – and that parade happens right here in Kansas. The twentieth annual Lawrence Old Fashioned Christmas Parade is the first Saturday in December. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Connie and Don Werner of Horton, Kansas are owners of Werner Wagon Works, which we have previously profiled. Connie and Don are an integral part of this parade in Lawrence.

In 1992, they met Rob Phillips at a draft horse sale in Iowa. Rob was manager of the Eldridge Hotel in Lawrence at the time, and he is also a western enthusiast. He went to the horse sale in Iowa and bought a horse-drawn carriage, but had no way to transport it back home. He met Don and Connie Werner who agreed to transport it back to Kansas and a friendship began.

The Werners told Rob Phillips and his wife Beverley about an upcoming wagon train reenactment along the Oregon Trail from Westmoreland to Marysville. Rob ultimately joined in. When the wagon train arrived at Marysville, Rob was impressed at the interest shown by community members. It inspired the idea of putting on a parade of horse-drawn vehicles in his town of Lawrence.

Rob took the idea to the Lawrence Convention and Visitors Bureau director at the time. She was skeptical. "Do you know how much work it is to organize a parade?" she said.

But the idea would not go away. Rob continued to work on it. In fall 1993, he announced that the Eldridge Hotel was going to have an all horse-powered event, including Santa Claus, on the first weekend in December. His first call went to Don and Connie Werner who agreed to help. They and others worked hard to pull together a parade, and it was a success. Twenty-three horse-drawn vehicles rolled down Massachusetts Street and Santa rode in on a stagecoach.

"While I was talking with a reporter and being complimented by many people on a great parade," Rob said, "Beverly was sitting in the street in her buggy trying to control a horse in which the bit had fallen out of its mouth." Fortunately a local veterinarian intervened and controlled the horse, saving the day.

The parade generated much interest. In April 1994, the Eldridge Hotel was recognized by the Lawrence Chamber of Commerce for organizing the parade and it became an annual event.

After the Eldridge Hotel sold in 2004, other sponsors stepped up to support the parade. In 2009, the lead corporate sponsor became none other than Wells Fargo. This old west freight company now has a financial investment subsidiary, Wells Fargo Advisors, which is the lead sponsor. In fact, the company sends the actual Wells Fargo Stagecoach through the parade each year.

On this 20th anniversary, the Werners give thanks for founder Rob Phillips and the original participants in the parade. For that first parade, horse-drawn vehicles and outriders came from several states and from communities around Kansas. They came from larger communities such as Salina and Topeka, but also rural communities such as

McClouth, population 865; Waterville, population 664; and Oketo, population 86 people. Now, that's rural.

A group of horse-loving volunteers come together each year to help put on this event. For several years, Connie made enough chili and potato salad to feed more than 100 people on the night before the parade.

Don and Connie Werner and their covered wagon will be in the parade, as they have for all twenty years. A friend from Bern, Kansas, Chuck Streit -- a mere 85 years old -- brings his team to pull the Werner wagon.

People come from all over for the Lawrence Old Fashioned Christmas Parade. This year, some ten thousand people are expected. Wow.

It's time to leave the Lawrence Old Fashioned Christmas Parade. We commend Connie and Don Werner, Rob and Beverley Phillips, Chuck Streit, and many others who make a difference by giving of their time and talents to make this dream become a reality. I love a parade.

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