

Sharolyn Wagner – Linger Longer

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

Remember the days when you could linger a little longer down by the old soda fountain? That sounds like the carefree days of yesteryear, but it is still possible to find an old-time soda fountain in rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Sharolyn Wagner is owner of an old fashioned soda fountain in the rural community of Bennington, north of Salina. Sharolyn's parents were teachers at various schools so she moved around Kansas as a child. After graduating from Hays, she went to KU where she met Jay Wagner from Bennington.

Not long after they started dating, Jay had a birthday. Sharolyn, the typical broke college student, racked her brain for a special yet inexpensive gift which she could get for her new boyfriend. She had learned that he loved Dr. Pepper, so she bought him a sixpack of it. It was a hit and Sharolyn started collecting Dr. Pepper memorabilia.

Jay and Sharolyn were married. They moved back to his hometown of Bennington to help on the farm during the summer and stayed in an apartment above a pharmacy downtown. Then they moved back to college where Jay graduated in the top of his class at law school and Sharolyn became a manager at Hallmark.

In 1989, they moved to Bennington permanently to farm and raise their three children. Then the doctor in town closed his office, followed by the pharmacist. In 1996, Jay and Sharolyn bought the historic building which had housed the pharmacy – the very same building where they had lived as newlyweds. It also contained a soda fountain and a beautiful back bar.

They wanted to reopen the soda fountain. "The kids need a place to gather, and this would be good for the community," Sharolyn said. But by then the building had fallen into major disrepair.

"Everything was wrong with the building," Sharolyn said. "It should have been demo'd, but the structural engineer said it was okay." Sharolyn and Jay went to work. "Almost everything in here has been replaced, repaired, or repointed," Sharolyn said.

New plumbing and electricity were installed, along with new walls, coverings, some of the tin ceiling tiles, and floors. Wood came from the gym floor at the Bennington High School gym, although the lines from the basketball court had to be cut out. After years of work, the soda fountain reopened in 2010.

What to call this new venture? In the 1920s, there had been a recreation hall in the area named The Linger Longer. That historic name became the name of this new business.

"Marci Penner says there are 39 operating soda fountains in Kansas, but less than a handful that make their drinks the way we do," Sharolyn said. The Linger Longer makes drinks from scratch, blending syrup, soda water, and other flavorings. That makes it possible to get a chocolate Coke or a strawberry Dr. Pepper or a butterscotch Green River.

What is a Green River? It's a lime-flavored drink that was popular over 100 years ago, but it's a big seller at The Linger Longer. Along with other hand-mixed fountain drinks, there is wonderful ice cream, malts, shakes and sundaes as well as cookies and hot meal specials.

Remember that collection of Dr. Pepper memorabilia? It is on display at The Linger Longer, featuring some of the 2,000 Dr. Pepper items which Sharolyn collected through the years. Especially interesting is the collection of cans of Dr. Pepper imposters, including such knock-offs as Dr. Topper, Dr. Perky, and Dr. Becker.

There's a toy train, an electric shock machine, pool and ping pong in the back plus an outside patio and more. All this has given new life to the downtown of the rural community of Bennington, population 627 people. Now, that's rural.

For more information, go to www.thelingerlonger.com.

Remember when you could linger for a little longer down at the old soda fountain? It is still possible in Bennington, Kansas. We salute Sharolyn and Jay Wagner for making a difference by preserving this historic 100 year old building and keeping this heritage alive. You're invited to stop by for a handmade Green River or a strawberry Dr. Pepper. If you're lucky, you can linger longer.

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