

## Steve Showalter – Fireworks - 1

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

South Bimini Island. It's New Year's Eve. A beautiful fireworks display is underway to celebrate the New Year in the Bahamas. But who is putting on this fireworks display? Would you believe, a family from the middle of Kansas? Today we'll learn about a rural Kansas family which operates a leading fireworks business. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Steve and Peggy Showalter are the founders and owners of Showalter Fireworks near Inman, Kansas. They live on Steve's family farm near Inman. Steve served in the Army and attended K-State before coming back to Inman.

Steve has always loved fireworks. Each year the Showalters would invite family members over for a big Fourth of July celebration. Steve would set off the biggest fireworks assortment he could find.

The Showalter home is located near the McPherson-Reno County line. McPherson County would allow fireworks to be set off while Reno County did not. One day in 1987, a guy from Reno County asked if he could set up a fireworks stand in one corner of their alfalfa field and then asked if his customers could set off some fireworks. When Steve saw the huge crowd that showed up, he realized this was a real opportunity.

So the next year, Steve decided to put up his own fireworks stand for the public. He built a 20 x 20 lean-to shed with a dirt floor and bought a thousand dollars worth of fireworks. It was a big success. "The idea grew exponentially," Steve said. By the mid-1990s, the building had tripled in size. "We would have a thousand cars full of people coming out to buy fireworks and then shoot the fireworks right here. They would shoot from dark till one or two in the morning," Steve said.

In 1995, the Showalters had wanted to put on a special fireworks show as a thank you to their customers and neighbors, so they approached an older man who sold display fireworks. Again, it went really well. "If you ever want to retire, let us know," the Showalters told him. Within a year, that call came. The Showalters bought his business and expanded it through the years.

Today they have two companies: Showalter Fireworks, which sells fireworks to consumers, and Rainbow Fireworks which sells display fireworks. Those require special licenses to purchase and operate.

Rainbow Fireworks is a major source of fireworks supplies and shows. From the period of June 30 to July 5, they will be involved in 208 fireworks events in five states. Wow.

About a third of Rainbow Fireworks' business is the direct sale of fireworks. Another third is from providing the fireworks equipment to someone else to operate, and the final third consists of the turnkey shows where the Rainbow Fireworks crew operates the equipment themselves.

Town festivals are a popular venue for fireworks displays. "What fireworks will do for a small town festival is hold everybody in town until dark," Steve said. "That's good for the vendors and helps these towns keep a crowd."

What is the key to success in the fireworks business? "We grow the business through service," Steve said. He believes in the personal touch. "I give out my cell

phone number to customers,” Steve said. “We don’t keep business hours. My cell phone is always open.”

Such service has generated customers as far away as Bimini Island. Each year Steve sends a crew to the Bahamas to do a fireworks show on the Fourth of July and again on the tenth of July to celebrate the Bahamian Independence Day. Then in late December, he and Peggy make the trip to the Bahamas to put on a New Year’s Eve show. Not bad for a fireworks company from the rural community of Inman, population 1,139 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information, go to [www.showalterfireworks.com](http://www.showalterfireworks.com).

It’s time to leave the Bahamas, where Steve Showalter is making a difference by sharing these fireworks displays with others. For him, this business has been a blast.

And there’s more. Fireworks aren’t just for the Fourth of July any more. Next week we’ll learn about another side of the Showalters’ fireworks business.

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