

Gary Shorman – Eagle Communications 2

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

Welcome to the company. Let's meet the owner. But if you're expecting to walk into one big office with a fancy desk and chair, think again. This is a company where every one of the certified employees is also an owner. Such an innovative ownership model has been part of the success of this remarkable communications company. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Gary Shorman is President and CEO of Eagle Communications in Hays. Last week we learned about how this company grew from its beginnings as a single radio station in 1948. Its company slogan is "Our Community...Connected."

Gary has rural roots, having grown up on a family farm south of Clay Center. He went to a one-room country school and then went to middle school at the rural community of Wakefield, population 841 people. Now, that's rural. Gary graduated from Clay Center, went to KU and began a career in broadcasting.

First he came back to his hometown of Clay Center and helped start a local radio station. His career then took him to KTOP and KDVV in Topeka.

In 1985, Gary was hired by Bob Schmidt, CEO of Eagle Communications, to run a group of radio stations in North Platte, Nebraska. In 1988 Gary moved to Hays and became head of the radio division. The company changed its name to Eagle Communications in 1992.

In 1998, Bob Schmidt retired as President and CEO. The person selected to replace him was Gary Shorman.

Eagle Communications has now grown to become a broadband services and media company operating 28 radio stations in Kansas, Nebraska and Missouri as well as cable tv and broadband Internet systems in 30 Kansas and Colorado communities.

The company serves thousands of rural customers including two who are especially significant: namely, Gary Shorman's mom and dad. "My parents still live on the family farm," Gary said. "They only had a slow dial-up connection until we came in with 3 meg wireless Internet service."

The wireless service to rural customers has been a significant benefit. The company's transmitters are often located on top of community grain elevators so they can reach a long distance. In June 2013, Eagle Communications' rural internet service was highlighted at the national cable show in Washington DC.

“Our services allow our customers to connect beyond their local circle of families and friends,” Gary said. “We strive to provide the best connections in the communities we serve. Our goal is to make our communities and the lives of our listeners and customers better every day.”

“Gary Shorman literally grew up in Kansas broadcasting and has always understood the importance of localism in community media,” said Steve Smethers, associate director of the A.Q. Miller School of Journalism and Mass Communications at K-State.

“The motto of Eagle Communications is ‘Our communities connected.’ That’s a value that Gary has stood for throughout his career.”

In 1998, when Bob Schmidt retired as CEO, the company also adopted an Employee Stock Ownership Plan or ESOP. Under the ESOP, employees become owners and receive stock in the company as it grows and prospers.

The ownership transition began in 1998. On October 1, 2002, the ESOP purchased majority ownership from founder Bob Schmidt. Now the company has a celebration each year on October 1. In 2012, the ESOP purchased the remaining shares of stock so the company is 100 percent employee-owned.

The company takes many steps to engage its employee-owners, from special events to the Eagle challenge coin which bears the company and ESOP logos. The company has a “100/0” goal, meaning that employee-owners must take 100 percent of the responsibility for the company’s success and there are 0 excuses for not providing the best products and customer service. In 2013, the company was named the Heart of America ESOP Company of the Year.

For more information, go to www.eaglecom.net.

Welcome to the company. Let's meet the owner. No, not one big owner, but 271 employee-owners. We commend Gary Shorman, Bob Schmidt, and all those involved with Eagle Communications for making a difference with rural service, advanced technology, and employee ownership. That's a lot to own up to.

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