Edwina Whitmer – Zenda parade

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

The Christmas parade is about to start. The flag is in front, trucks and horses are lined up behind, and Santa Claus is in the back. Many communities have Christmas parades, but is there any town of fewer than one hundred people which has conducted a Christmas parade annually for 40 years? That's a remarkable achievement for a small Kansas town. This is a special holiday edition of Kansas Profile.

Edwina Whitmer is the primary organizer for the annual Christmas parade and other parades in the Kingman County town of Zenda.

"I am the parade person in Zenda," Edwina said. "I've done it lots of years."

Edwina is a native of California. "I was working in southern California and this meat grader came by my office every day," Edwina said. The meat grader, Monte Whitmer, is a Kansas native and K-State graduate.

"He was always saying that he was going to come back to Kansas," Edwina said. "I was like, `Yeah, what's Kansas? Is that in northern California somewhere?'"

But the two did indeed get married and come back to Kansas where Monte's family farmed. "I had horses (in California) so I figured it would be okay," Edwina said. They moved to Kansas in 1980. For Edwina, it was a bit of culture shock. "What do you mean, there's no stores in Zenda?" Edwina said.

But she settled in and made a home. She and Monte had three children and now have grandchildren.

One thing Zenda does have is a Christmas parade on the first Saturday of December. When Monte was in high school here, he marched in the parade with the school marching band. In more recent years when the citizens of Zenda needed a person to organize the Christmas parade and keep it going, the person they turned to was Edwina Whitmer. She organizes the big centennial and sesquicentennial parades for the community as well.

But how in the world can a town this size put on a parade every year? After all, Zenda is a rural community of 90 people. Now, that's rural.

"We just all work together," Edwina said. "The parade lines up north of the Lumber Yard and that there's a nice noon meal from 11 to 1," Edwina said. "People from the neighboring communities come in." Parade entries are judged at 1 p.m., with prizes for the winners, and the parade starts at 1:30. The Lumber Yard, by the way, is the name of Zenda's only restaurant.

Edwina still has horses. Many of her horse-riding friends will ride in the parade too. "We'll have tractors and fourwheelers, trucks and pickups and lots of kids," Edwina said. The Zenda Telephone Company will be represented in the parade and the Methodist Church will have a float. Some years there has been bingo and a craft show.

For years, the same man has carried an American flag to lead the parade. His name is Wayne Dick and he is a proud veteran, still wearing the same uniform that he had while in the service. Wow.

At the end of the parade is a firetruck carrying Santa Claus who will go to the community center and hand out treats after the parade. For years, Paul Conrady served as

Santa Claus at this parade and throughout the region. He hoped to make it to 50 years, and he did so in 2011. "He was the best Santa anyone could have," Edwina said.

"For a small town, it is a nice parade," Edwina said. "A few weeks ago I went back to California," she observed. "I was so glad to get back home to Kansas."

So let's head downtown for the annual Zenda Christmas parade. We salute Edwina Whitmer and all those who participate in this parade for making a difference by maintaining this holiday tradition and celebrating the community. Is there any town this size which has put on a Christmas parade for 40 years? One could search for such an accomplishment through the entire alphabet of Kansas towns from A to Z – and when you get to Z, you've found it: Zenda, Kansas.

Wishing you happy holidays, for the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.