

Sherrie Conklin – Forgotten Item Market

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

"Oh, darn, I forgot. There's one more thing I need." Have you ever had that experience - where you started on a project and found you had forgotten one essential item? It happens all-too-often when cooking in the kitchen or doing a project around the house. Today we'll meet a young woman who had that experience and turned it into a business opportunity for her family and her community. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Sherrie Conklin is the owner of Forgotten Item Market in Burden, Kansas. Sherrie grew up at Burden, lived at Winfield and studied at Cowley College. When she met her husband Scotty, they decided they wanted to raise their child in a small town environment like the one they had grown up in, so they moved back to Burden – a rural community of 536 people. Now, that's rural.

Scotty worked for Morton Buildings. Inspired by watching barbecue on television, he wanted to open a barbecue restaurant in Burden. He and Sherrie bought an old building on Main Street which he remodeled for their barbecue place.

As customers came into the restaurant, they would ask, "Who did your remodeling work?" When they learned that Scotty had done it, they asked if he would do remodeling work for them. When the demand for his carpentry work exceeded the demand for barbecue, they closed the store and Scotty formed his own business called Conklin Carpentry.

Meanwhile, Sherrie was working fulltime herself. Due to Medicare cuts, she lost her job. It happened at the worst possible time, just before Christmas. One day she was doing her Christmas baking when she found that she needed some powdered sugar. She had all the other ingredients, but she was out of that one item. Unfortunately, her home is 25 miles from stores in Winfield and 55 miles from Wichita.

"We need to do something about this," Sherrie said to her husband. "We need a store so we can get the supplies we need locally." Scotty was reluctant, but she made her case.

"We asked some friends to commit to prayer about this," Sherrie said. "We also sent out a poll to the community and got a good response." On March 26, 2013, they opened a new store in Burden. Sherrie asked friends for suggestions to name the store, and someone suggested Forgotten Item. The name stuck.

Today, Forgotten Item Market operates in 500 square feet in the former barbecue restaurant on Main Street in Burden. "We started in a smaller building across the street but then we moved into the front third of our old barbecue place. Now we've already outgrown that," she said.

Forgotten Item Market offers produce and other grocery supplies plus household goods, pet food and gift and craft items. In other words, a customer can get milk and bread – and powdered sugar – plus other staples, but the store also offers custom-made items from local artisans. "We have things that were made by a local woodworker, a quilter, and a jewelry maker," she said.

Sherrie also offers a custom shopping service for her customers. "We have some elderly people in town so I go grocery shopping for them," Sherrie said. "They will give me a list on Friday or Saturday and I will shop for them on Saturday afternoon or Monday when I purchase supplies for the store." On Tuesday, their goods are picked up by the elderly families or delivered to them.

"I'm a couponer," Sherrie said. "I'll scour the ads, clip coupons and find the very best prices on supplies," she said. She then drives to Wichita and restocks her store, while buying what the elderly families want.

"We've been blessed that my husband has always been able to find work locally so he's available to help," Sherrie said. "It's a God thing."

Forgotten items. They happen when we start a project or recipe and find that something is missing. Sherrie and Scotty Conklin are making a difference by using this experience to help create a business that would serve their community in this way. Such entrepreneurial ideas can serve other communities as well – don't forget.

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