

Jim Armstrong – Havensville Living History Day

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

The little girl's eyes grew big as she pumped the foot pedal and fed yarn into the loom. As the loom moved back and forth, the little girl gazed in amazement. For the first time in her life, she was creating a rug before her eyes. It is the type of wonderful experience which one can find at the annual Living History Day in Havensville. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Jim Armstrong is the person who told me about Living History Day. Jim grew up and went to school in Havensville and worked for years in Topeka. He always appreciated the small town values in his hometown.

In 1937, the school building was built to house Havensville Rural High School, or HRHS. The high school closed in 1961 and the grade school moved in a couple of years later.

In 1984, the principal at Havensville Grade School, Sharon Goodwin, decided that she wanted an event to educate schoolchildren and bring local history to life. She and her secretary, Jim Armstrong's wife Paulette, identified sources of local history and organized craftsmen and volunteers to conduct the day. It was so successful that it became an annual event. Many of the kids would wear old time clothing, such as Indian costumes or long pioneer dresses for the girls.

"The first one was done around Kansas Day," Jim said. "After a few years, they decided to move it to later in the spring so they could have better weather. Of course, the first year that it was held in April was the year it got snowed out." That's Kansas for you.

Eventually Jim and his family took responsibility for organizing the event. In 2002, the grade school at Havensville closed. The school building was purchased by a group of local citizens, including Jim, which called themselves the HRHS Association.

Living History Day continues at the Havensville schoolbuilding every spring. Each April, a group of volunteers – including Jim's grandkids - and hundreds of schoolchildren convene at Havensville to celebrate and learn about our state's rich history. 2014 marked the 30th anniversary of Living History Day.

There is a remarkable diversity of activities demonstrated at Living History Day. Kids can do everything from churning butter to weaving rugs to making candles. The saddle club provides horseback rides. The U.S. Cavalry unit from Fort Riley demonstrates old time uniforms and artifacts. There is a model railroad display, Indian arrowheads, antique toys and much more.

A local buffalo rancher showed buffalo hides and discussed the uses of this magnificent creature, known as the Monarch of the Plains. A local beekeeper told about bees and honey. Kids could see a covered wagon and Indian tipi, ride the railroad pump car, see the Native American spirit dancers and learn about these vanishing crafts of yesteryear.

Living History Day is absolutely free for anyone to attend. Ladies of the community prepare a meal and concession stand. In some years, they have had as many as 800 schoolchildren attend the event. Wow. Bob Cole, the Pottawatomie County Economic Development director, called it the "best kept secret in northeast Kansas."

This is a remarkable achievement for a rural community like Havensville which has a population of 145 people. Now, that's rural.

Jim Armstrong, under the pseudonym Red E. Ornot, also writes a humorous column titled The Upper Crick which appears in the Onaga Herald newspaper. In his countrified Red E. Ornot persona, he wrote about Living History Day: "I've had folks ask "why do we do this program?"...My answer would have to be that it's a tradition in the Upper Crick area to give back to our kin, some of the things we've been blessed with."

The little girl's eyes got bigger as she watched the rug she was weaving take shape on the loom before her. It's an example of the hands-on activities which children can experience at this event. We salute Jim and Paulette Armstrong, Sharon Goodwin, and all the volunteers who are making a difference by conducting Living History Day. They are giving back to their community and helping bring Kansas pioneer history to life.

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