

Julie Roller – Sampler Festival

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

“Can I have a sample of that one?” It sounds like something I would say at the ice cream store, bad grammar and all. Today we'll learn about a special event where people can get a sample – a sample of attractions, communities, foods, and entertainment from across the state. It's happening in rural Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Julie Roller is development associate of Pottawatomie County Economic Development and director of the 2014 and 2015 Kansas Sampler Festival. The festival was founded by our friend Marci Penner 25 years ago to highlight tourism attractions and Kansas products in communities across the state. Every two years, the festival location rotates to different host communities across Kansas. The festival, held annually on the first weekend of May, is a project of the Kansas Sampler Foundation whose mission is to preserve and sustain rural culture.

Julie Roller loves rural Kansas. She grew up at the rural community of Woodbine, population 205 people. Now, that's rural. After attending K-State, she was director of the Main Street program in Augusta before joining the Pottawatomie County Economic Development Corporation in 2008.

In 2009, she attended her first Kansas Sampler Festival. “We had one little table to promote all the various attractions in Pottawatomie County,” Julie said. “I thought, we have a whole lot more things to promote than that.”

At the next year's festival, Pottawatomie County had a 40 x 60 foot tent. Wow.

The festival began on the Penner farm near Inman and was held there eight years. Since 1998, the festival has been hosted in communities across the state. These include Pratt, Ottawa, Independence, Newton, Garden City, Concordia, Leavenworth and Liberal. Pottawatomie County won the award to host the festival in Wamego in 2014 and 2015.

That makes Wamego the smallest town ever to host the sampler festival. Depending on the weather, it might turn out to be the biggest festival yet. This year's festival has received 270 exhibitor registrations, including 19 food vendors, 37 Kansas product vendors, and 16 entertainers. Exhibitor registration has filled up and been closed, which has never happened before in the history of the festival.

Twenty-two exhibitor tents have been ordered for the festival, including one which is 6,000 square feet in size. There will be three entertainment stages plus tents for Kansas products, tents for members of the Kansas Department of Agriculture's From the Land of Kansas program, and beyond. Historical reenactors will be there, along with the mobile aquarium from the Kansas Department of Wildlife, Parks and Tourism plus much more.

“(Hosting this event) speaks to what a small town can accomplish,” Julie Roller said. “We don't have the resources of bigger cities, but we've had excellent support from nearby counties.” For example, Wamego would not have been able to meet the required minimum number of hotel rooms without the city of Manhattan nearby. Surrounding counties have also offered financial and volunteer support for the festival. “It is regionalism at its best, a feel-good event that everyone can support,” Julie said.

The entire region is gearing up for the event, which will be held May 3 and 4, 2014 in Wamego City Park. The end of May also happens to mark the retirement of

Julie's boss, Bob Cole, the director of the Pottawatomie County Economic Development Corporation. Bob is regarded by a number of observers as one of the best county economic development directors in the state.

Julie Roller expects more than 150 communities to be represented at the festival. An estimated eight to ten thousand paid admissions are expected. "An event like this couldn't work without volunteer support," Julie said. "I'm so thankful for the hundreds of volunteers who are helping make this happen."

For more information, go to www.kansassampler.org/festival or www.facebook.com/SamplerFestival.

"Can I have a sample of that one?" No, not a sample of tutti frutti almond apricot pistachio mint ice cream, but a sample of the many attractions around Kansas. We commend Julie Roller, Bob Cole, Marci Penner, and the many volunteers who are making a difference by hosting the Kansas Sampler Festival. It demonstrates that Pottawatomie County is an excellent example.

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