

Sue Smith – Emma Chase

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

Australian guitarist Nick Charles is performing in New Zealand. He's playing an original song called "Down at the Emma Chase." The song refers to a remarkable small town café, far away in rural Kansas. How did this come about? It's today's Kansas Profile.

Sue Smith is the owner and operator of the Emma Chase Café in Cottonwood Falls, Kansas. The café is just the beginning of the entrepreneurial initiatives which she has helped spawn in this community.

Sue Smith was raised in Cottonwood Falls and was trained as a nurse. She moved to Texas and eventually met a rancher named Monty who she married and brought back to Kansas, where she became director of nursing at the local nursing home.

One of the local landmarks in Cottonwood Falls is the Emma Chase Café, which was founded by Linda Thurston (who went on to a career in academia at K-State) and Linda Woody. In 1998, Sue leased the Emma Chase.

The Emma Chase Café offers country home cookin' in downtown Cottonwood Falls. Then Sue and her mother started making homemade fudge and decided to sell it in the building next to the café. That building is now the Emma Chase Country Store which features homemade jams and jellies and assorted merchandise.

Along with good food, Sue was also seeking good entertainment. On October 1, 1999, the Emma Chase started holding Friday night musical jam sessions on the street in front of the café. Those jam sessions attract fans and musicians.

One of those is the famous Australian acoustic guitarist, Nick Charles, of whom Sue Smith has long been a fan. "One day I was taking a nap when the phone rang," Sue said. "A British-sounding voice said, 'Hello, I'm calling on behalf of Nick Charles.'" "Yeah," Sue replied, "and I'm Queen Elizabeth."

Eventually she was convinced that the call was legitimate. Nick Charles was to perform at the Walnut Valley Bluegrass Festival in Winfield and had learned about the Emma Chase.

Ultimately, he came to Cottonwood Falls and performed at a Saturday night concert. He came back in subsequent years and even wrote a song titled "Down at the Emma Chase."

Meanwhile, a large building came available down the street from the café. Through the years, this building had been a skating rink, dance hall, Duckwalls store, armory, and municipal building. "The building had good acoustics and was perfect for music," Sue said. "We also knew that there were wonderful craftsmen in this area."

The two ideas came together. The building now contains both the Emma Chase Music Hall, which is a space for performances in the center of the building, and an area called Prairie PastTimes which displays local artisans' products around the walls.

"We have 45 artisans with products for sale," Sue said. These include blacksmiths, woodworkers, quilters, stained glass artists, blown glass artists, fiber artists, and musicians. Organized as an artisans cooperative, their products are displayed for sale along with such products as baby clothes, doll clothes, and antique musical instruments and furniture.

“Everything in here but the antiques and books were made in the Flint Hills by people who live here,” Sue said. The artisans themselves take turns manning the store. Monty does the books.

A remarkable variety of visitors have come here. People who have signed the guest book come from places from California to Maryland and as far away as Japan, Italy, Denmark, and China. Wow.

That’s impressive for a rural community like Cottonwood Falls, population 962 people. Now, that’s rural.

Sue is also involved with ongoing festivals put on by the community. These include a Statehood ball in January, the Prairie Fire festival in April, Folklife festival in June, Broomweed Festival in September, and more.

For more information on these events and the café itself, go to www.emmachasecafe.com.

The Australian guitarist is in New Zealand, performing a song about the spirit of a small town café halfway around the globe. We commend Sue Smith of the Emma Chase Café for making a difference with her various enterprises. These initiatives are helping keep the small town spirit alive, “Down at the Emma Chase.”

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