

Budenbender (grocery) – part 2

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

“Well, if I had a grocery store, here's what I would do...” That statement on the part of one Kansas woman may have been prophecy, as she has become the owner of an innovative grocery store serving rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we met Paul Budenbender who operates a floor coating business while living in rural Kansas. His wife Pam has strong opinions about grocery stores, and she recently had the opportunity to put those opinions to work.

“I was a military brat, from everywhere and nowhere,” Pam said with a smile. Along with other duty stations, her dad served at Fort Riley and Fort Leavenworth near Kansas City. While working on a construction job in Kansas City, Pam met Paul Budenbender and they ultimately were married. Paul's family came from a farm in northern Pottawatomie County. Pam and Paul would frequently come to the farm on the weekends. The nearest store was in Onaga, but it was small and limited.

“If I had a grocery store, this is what I would do,” Pam would occasionally say to her husband. Then in 2010, the old grocery store burned down and the owners left the business.

Pam realized that Onaga needed a store, and she had an opportunity to use her ideas. She and Paul worked with the city of Onaga, carefully considered many floor plans and designs, and ultimately built a new building and opened the store with the support of the city. On December 1, 2011, the Onaga Country Market opened for business.

“I love the store,” Pam said. The new, energy-efficient building has colorful, accessible displays. As one might expect when considering her husband's business, the floors look terrific. “I married a floor guy,” Pam said with a smile.

Beyond the physical infrastructure, the bottom line is serving customers. “It's all about customer service,” Pam said. “Our staff is courteous and friendly, and we provide old-fashioned service with a smile.”

For example, the Onaga Country Market staff carries out the customer's groceries. “I go to big box stores in Kansas City where I see senior citizens and moms with kids, struggling to get their groceries in the car,” Pam said. In Onaga, store staff will carry out the groceries for you.

High quality meat and produce are also priorities for Pam. “Charlie is my meat cutter,” she said. “All our meat is cut and packed fresh. And every little kid who comes to the meat counter gets a balloon.”

Onaga Country Market has a deli and sandwich shop, where the staff custom makes sandwiches. The store also offers \$6 grab-and-go meals. On Grill Days, the store offers a \$5 lunch special. Pam also has a smoker in which she makes hot ribs, which are then placed in the warmer with the rotisserie chicken.

“We offer delivery to senior citizens,” Pam said. The store does video rental, postage stamps, floral arrangements, and more. Promotions include free milk or a free turkey after a certain number of purchases.

“My passion is produce,” Pam said. “When I pack the produce counter full of fresh fruits and vegetables, I get more sales.”

K-State's Rural Grocery Initiative, led by the K-State Center for Engagement and Community Development, recently featured Onaga Country Market at the fifth annual National Rural Grocery Summit. The Onaga store and K-State Research and Extension – Pottawatomie County participated in a recent federal grant project to educate consumers on the benefits of healthy nutritious eating, including lots of fresh fruits and vegetables in the diet.

Speaking at the rural grocery summit, Pam Budenbender shared ideas and advice with other rural grocers. Her bottom line: “Be a good neighbor,” she said. That’s especially important in a rural community like Onaga, population 697 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information, go to www.ocountrymarket.com or www.ruralgrocery.org.

“If I had a grocery store, here’s what I would do...” said Pam Budenbender to her husband Paul. In 2011, those words came true. We salute Pam and Paul Budenbender and all those involved with the Onaga Country Market for making a difference with hard work and customer service, making this dream a reality.

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