

Joe Edmunds – Kaw Valley Greenhouses - 2

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

Growing a greenhouse business is not an easy proposition. Today we'll learn about an innovative family which has developed their greenhouse business so that it can sell millions of plants across the Midwest. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we met Terry Olson, owner of Eastside and Westside Markets in Manhattan. Today we'll learn about the greenhouse business started by her father, Dr. Leon Edmunds, who was a K-State plant pathologist that began Kaw Valley Greenhouses near Manhattan in 1967.

For his greenhouse, Dr. Edmunds and his wife Pat had a built-in labor force: Their nine children. Daughter, Terry, eventually opened her own separate retail market. Four of her siblings now own and operate Kaw Valley Greenhouses: Joe, Chris, Pete, and Knute.

The greenhouse began in one small building near their home in the Kansas River valley outside Manhattan. A set of railroad tracks went down the valley directly behind their home. "The train used to stop next to our house and buy tomatoes," Joe said.

Eventually the railroad line was abandoned and the land reverted to the previous property owners which opened up space for the Edmund family to expand their greenhouse operation. Family members continue to grow the business.

"Each of us contributes to the business in different ways," Joe said.

Today, Joe Edmunds is the President of Kaw Valley Greenhouses. He is a self-taught engineer who designed and built all of the greenhouses. He has even built unique equipment that wasn't available on the market. Joe's wife Robin served as office manager for a number of years.

Sister Chris specializes in development of the growing plants themselves. She selects all varieties of plants for the greenhouse, researches trial gardens across the country, and manages the Kaw Valley Greenhouse's own extensive trial garden. To be sold, all plants have to successfully pass through her trial garden first.

Pete Edmunds is known as a "jack of all trades." During the season he manages plant inventories and deliveries to stores, and assists in various ways throughout the year.

Knute Edmunds is the Production Manager. He manages a staff of approximately 80 people during the production season and oversees all phases of production: Seeding, transplanting, growing and finishing. Knute's children are now involved, marking a third generation involved in this remarkable business.

A key factor in the growth of this business has been expanding outlets for their products. Kaw Valley Greenhouses has developed a network of temporary locations called Garden Centers across the Midwest where plants are sold during the April through June season. In addition to Eastside and Westside Markets in Manhattan, these Garden Centers are found in Kansas, Nebraska, and Missouri.

In Kansas, these outlets are found in larger cities such as Kansas City, Wichita, Topeka and Lawrence; several mid-size towns; and more rural communities such as Concordia, Clay Center, and Marysville, population 3,202 people. Now, that's rural.

Setting up retail outlets in these communities – and taking them down after the season - is like moving a small city. The Garden Centers are typically set up in a

convenient parking lot. Big display areas, cash registers, and watering systems are moved in each year for the season.

During the remainder of the year, Chris works on evaluating the plants so only the best are selected, while the crews work on expanding and improving their buildings. For example, Joe has designed and installed a computer-controlled water and precision fertilization system. The company uses industry and university research along with its own trial gardens to select the best varieties acclimated to local conditions.

That single greenhouse in which Dr. Edmunds began in 1967 has grown into more than half-a-million square feet of greenhouse space. Today, Kaw Valley Greenhouses employs some 400 people at peak and sells about 12 million plants every year. Wow.

For more information, go to www.kawvalleygreenhouses.com.

Growing a greenhouse business is not an easy proposition. We commend Dr. Leon and Pat Edmunds; Joe, Chris, Pete and Knute; and all those involved with Kaw Valley Greenhouses for making a difference with horticultural entrepreneurship. I hope their business continues to be green and growing.

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