

Tracy Hett – Trace of Copper

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

As the wheat in a Kansas field ripens, it turns from green in color to a rich gold, tan, and brown – accented with just a trace of copper. Today we'll meet a Kansas craftsman who creates beautiful works of art representing Kansas symbols such as wheat, using actual copper, brass and steel. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Tracy Hett is owner of Trace of Copper in Marion, Kansas. "My grandfather started this whole thing," Tracy said. "He was a very creative man." It seemed he could fix anything on the farm, and in the winter months, he would tinker in his shop.

"He would weld together nuts and bolts and make a figurine or a windmill," Tracy said. Then people wanted to buy them.

"I was close with my grandpa," Tracy said. "As a little kid, I wanted to do what he was doing. I learned by watching him as he cut out designs and welded them together."

One of his favorite designs was a head of wheat. If someone was visiting his shop, Tracy's grandfather would build a metallic head of wheat, and then give it to them.

Tracy worked in his father's grain elevator business. In 1985, he started to make these metallic creations of art himself. Like his grandfather, he created these hand-crafted metal sculptures by welding or brazing pieces of brass, copper or steel together and selling them. As a play on his first name Tracy, he called the business Trace of Copper.

In 1993, he opened his building along Highway 56 on the north side of Marion, where it is today. Tracy lives in Marion with his wife and daughter. He builds his products in the back room which is visible from the front through a large glass window. The front room is covered in wood paneling with hundreds of his products on display.

Tracy custom-makes designs. Most of his products have a rural or Kansas theme, using such symbols as wheat, sunflowers, windmills, nails, horseshoes, crosses, and more. "We find new ideas and make changes through the years," Tracy said. Foreign exchange students like to take home his products that have an outline of the state of Kansas.

Stalks of wheat are hugely popular, complete with leaves on the stem and a head of kernels with long beards on each one. The beards are typically made of gold-colored brazing rod. Tracy has also created a unique series of miniature models of farm equipment.

Perhaps his most impressive creation is a three-dimensional seal of the great state of Kansas. The seal is nearly two feet in diameter, complete with everything including the lettering.

Today, Trace of Copper's products are sold at his shop, craft shows, Kansas Originals at Wilson, and through the Kansas Kollection stores at the state's travel information centers to people from all over the country. Tracy's products have gone as far away as Germany and Australia. It's an impressive record for someone from the rural community of Marion, population 2,103 people. Now, that's rural.

“I have gotten to the point that I can make a head of wheat in less than a minute and a half,” Tracy said. “Through the years, I figure I have made more than 300,000 heads of wheat.” Wow. That’s quite a wheat crop.

Some of his creations include moving parts. “Like my grandpa, I like to make things that work,” Tracy said. For example, the fan on top of the windmill might really turn or the grain auger will swing out on the combine, or the booms on the ag sprayer will fold in. This adds a touch of realism to the beauty.

Another tradition has continued from Tracy’s grandfather. When a guest comes to visit, Tracy might invite them to watch, build a head of wheat, and then give it to them.

As the wheat in a Kansas field ripens, it turns from green in color to a rich gold, tan, and brown – accented with just a trace of copper. We commend Tracy Hett and Trace of Copper for making a difference with Kansas craftsmanship. We wish this entrepreneur a bountiful harvest of success.

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