

Wayne/Millie Horlacher – 1 jeweler

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

Let's go to Alaska, where a gentleman is presenting his wife with a gorgeous one-carat diamond ring. Where do you suppose that ring came from? Would you believe, way down in rural Kansas? It's today's Kansas Profile.

Wayne Horlacher is the retired owner of Horlacher Jewelers in Colby, Kansas. His son Jeff, the current owner, sold this beautiful ring to a friend in Alaska. Wayne and his wife Millie, an author, have served their community for years.

Wayne's father's family operated the Colby Mill and Elevator where they produced Pride of the Plains flour until the hard times of the 1920s. Wayne's father then went to watchmaking school in St. Louis and came back to Colby where he worked for a local jeweler and then bought his business. In 1927, Wayne's father opened Horlacher Jewelers.

"He made it through the years of the Depression when people didn't have any money. Sometimes he would take chickens or beef as payment," Wayne said. "When I was a kid, he showed me how to clean clocks at his shop," Wayne recalled. Wayne went to K-State where he graduated in business administration with minors in accounting and economics. He also played baritone in the marching band, where he met a cute girl who also played baritone. Millie came from a farm in northeast Kansas.

Wayne and Millie were married. He served as a second lieutenant in the Army and was stationed at Fort Lewis before returning to Kansas. Wayne went to watchmaking school at Bradley University and came back into the family jewelry business in Colby. In 1965 he assumed ownership of Horlacher Jewelers when his father retired.

Wayne and Millie had four children, all of whom pursued higher education: Jeff, who graduated from Kansas Wesleyan in psychology and went on for a master's degree at Fort Hays State; Jan, who went to Baker University in Baldwin and then to Purdue for her master's degree in mechanical engineering; Joan, who had a great love of animals and graduated from the veterinary assistant program at Colby Community College; and Jim, who also went to Baker University and got an MBA at Scotland's University of Edinburgh on a Rotary scholarship.

Jeff, the oldest son, practiced counseling in Great Bend and Hays for several years before coming back into the family business to help his father. In 2000, Wayne retired and Jeff assumed ownership, although Wayne still helps out. Jan now lives at Manhattan where her husband, Kevin Carnes, is a research physicist at K-State. Jim is a financial advisor in Lenexa where he is a financial advisor in socially responsible investing.

Wayne and Millie share an interest in socially responsible living. In 1980, they purchased a twenty-six acre tract of land in Colby which they named "Eco Acres." It is governed by covenants requiring energy efficient, environmentally friendly homes. These lots have proven popular recently. As of 2015, there were 21 lots left for sale in the development. By May 2017, only six lots remained unsold.

Horlacher Jewelers is located in downtown Colby which has a population of 5,639 people. Now, that's rural. The store offers diamond rings and colored gems for weddings, engagements, and gifts, plus wearable jewelry such as bracelets and necklaces.

Wayne still does watch repairs. Many watches now have battery-powered quartz movements which the shop can repair or replace.

In 2017, Horlacher Jewelers will mark 90 years of ownership within the same family. Wow. How does a store survive for 90 years? “Hard work, dedication, and good business practices,” Wayne said. “You have to be willing to put in extra time and continue to develop expertise and customer relations.” For more information, see www.horlacherjewelers.com.

It’s time to leave Alaska where we find a beautiful ring sold by Horlacher Jewelers of Colby, Kansas. We commend Wayne, Millie and Jeff Horlacher for making a difference by serving this community for generations. For Colby, this local, family-owned business is a real gem.

And there’s more. Remember that Millie Horlacher is an author? She writes inspirational work – which would prove vital when her family was hit with tragedy. We’ll learn about that next week.

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