

## Zenda – part 2

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 the lumber yard.” At our house, that usually means we need supplies for carpentry repairs or a do-it-yourself project. Today we’ll learn about a lumber yard where one can find a whole different set of supplies. Instead of wood, we find wine. Instead of hardware, we find hamburgers. Instead of stacks of lumber, we find steak dinners. This business is owned by a pioneering cattleman from rural Kansas. It’s today’s Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about the community of Zenda. One of the prominent businesses in Zenda is the Lumber Yard Steakhouse, now owned by local rancher Mike Molitor. Special thanks to Kansas writer Steve Suther and the Angus Journal whose 2014 article provides background about the Molitors.

In 1902, the Ultch Lumber Company built a lumber yard in Zenda, providing the community with the typical wood and building supplies that one would expect. The lumber yard operated on that spot for 73 years.

In 1991, a local family named the Grabers bought the property. When Zenda’s supper club closed in 1993, the Grabers decided to put a restaurant on that location. In order to be consistent with its history, the restaurant was named the Lumber Yard Steakhouse.

In 2010, the restaurant was bought by Mike Molitor. Mike wasn’t an expert in restaurants, but he did know about one key component: Beef.

The Molitor family came to south central Kansas around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Molitors were looking for a German Catholic community, and they found one in Willowdale, north of Zenda. Today, the beautiful St. Peters Church still stands at Willowdale.

The Molitor family farmed and raised cattle near the Willowdale community. Mike Molitor’s parents, Richard and Angela, started their Angus herd in 1952. Mike and his sisters showed cattle and sheep in 4-H. The family won lots of cattle shows and improved their genetic seedstock over time.

Mike earned college degrees in mathematics and business management and worked for Farm Credit Services before coming back to the farm and growing the Angus operation. Molitor Angus became a pioneering business in the use of embryo transfer, ultrasound technology, and effective marketing tools. Mike got involved with the Certified Angus Beef program. Mike was a founding member of U.S. Premium Beef and served as President of the Kansas Angus Association.

Continuous improvement has been a theme of the Molitor Angus operation. The Molitors have developed a 300-cow herd on 4,000 acres. New bloodlines have been introduced through strategic mating of individual females to proven sires. In 2014, the operation was honored as the national winner of the Certified Angus Beef Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

That’s quite an honor for a rancher who comes from Willowdale, an unincorporated rural community with an estimated population of “30-some” people. Now, that’s rural.

When the Lumber Yard Steakhouse in nearby Zenda was at risk of closing, Mike bought it and has upgraded it. This fits with his lifelong goal of producing high quality cattle and high quality beef.

“I see the full circle from conception on, but it’s not only about the big picture,” Mike said on the Lumber Yard website. “Whether we're talking about diners at the steakhouse, bull buyers or cattle, the individuals are the most important consideration.”

Mike also sees the importance of such services for rural communities. “Small towns will die if they don’t have places like this,” Mike said. “It’s church, it’s community, it’s the whole works.”

Today, the Lumber Yard Steakhouse serves what the Molitors proclaim are the “best Angus steaks in Kansas.” The extensive menu also features salads, seafood, sandwiches, and full dinners. Travelers come from long distances to enjoy high quality food and friendly small town service.

For more information, go to [www.lumberyardsteakhouse.com](http://www.lumberyardsteakhouse.com).

“Let’s go to the Lumber Yard.” No, not for a two-by-four, but for a terrific steak. We commend Mike Molitor and Richard and Angela Molitor for making a difference with leadership in the beef industry, all the way from the pasture to the plate.

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