

Sara Dawson – Prairie Oaks Designs

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

Okeechobee, Florida. A package is arriving. Inside is a beautiful metal nativity set, designed and cut by a craftsman at a business halfway across the continent in rural Kansas. It's especially interesting to find that this craftsman is a woman. This is a special holiday edition of Kansas Profile.

Sara Dawson is the owner and founder of Prairie Oaks Designs in Florence, Kansas. Sara grew up near Florence and went to K-State. After working in the animal health business for a time, she came back and joined the family ranch. She married Troy Dawson who is farming and ranching and is trained as a master welder. Sara was thinking about how to add value to the family business.

One day in 2014, Sara was flipping through a catalog and spotted a picture of a rusty old metal item nailed to a piece of wood. It caught her eye and she wondered if she could produce similar products.

"How do those people cut that metal?" she asked her husband. "And what would it take to get that equipment?" When he told her the price of a plasma metal cutter, she thought, "Oh, there's no way we could get that." But her husband encouraged her to get it and try it out.

Sara decided to try designing and marketing these metal designs as home décor. They ordered the plasma cutter and signed up to exhibit products at an upcoming craft show.

Unfortunately, the plasma cutter was late in coming. When it finally arrived, a major component was missing. Sara's stress level went up as the date of the show got closer and closer. Once the plasma cutter was ready, she spent lots of late nights self-training on how to use it. She managed to make enough products to take to the show – and the response was excellent.

The demand for her products took off. Sara named her business Prairie Oaks Designs. She now creates her products using computer-aided design software and cuts them out of metal using a five foot by 10 foot CNC water table plasma cutter.

During the first few years, she did this work in an unheated and un-air conditioned metal shed on the farmstead. "It was either an icebox or a sauna in there," she said. As the business expanded, she opened a facility in her hometown of Florence. It has a climate-controlled shop in the back and a showroom and gift shop to display her products up front.

Prairie Oaks Designs produces attractive miniature metal designs as custom home décor, mounted on genuine antique barn wood. "I choose to cut those designs that are close to my heart and that I would want to have in my home," Sara said.

During the holidays, her nativity sets and other Christmas items are especially popular, but she offers a remarkable variety of products year-round. Many of these are focused on faith and family. There are scenes of cowboys, hunting, fishing, golfing, Kansas, inspirational thoughts, and many more.

Prairie Oaks Designs can custom-make virtually any design, such as names or letters for weddings or anniversaries. "When people come in to the showroom, they usually assume my husband is doing the work," Sara said. "They also ask, 'Where do you get your products?' I explain that everything we sell is designed and cut right there ourselves," Sara said.

The barn wood is reclaimed from old barns that are being torn down. "We're kinda picky and we go through the wood carefully to pick just the kind we want," Sara said.

The emphasis on quality has paid off. She is shipping products all over the country. Social media have been key to promoting these products quickly and efficiently. She now has nearly 12,000 followers on Facebook. It's an impressive business to find in a rural community like Florence, population 465 people. Now, that's rural.

For more information, see www.prairieoaksdesigns.com.

It's time to leave Okeechobee, where a nativity set arrived from Kansas. We salute Sara and Troy Dawson for making a difference with their creativity and entrepreneurship. Having such initiative and creativity is truly a gift.

Wishing you happy holidays, for the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.