

Teresa Arnold – Biggest Barn Quilt

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

Think big! That can be a challenge, but today we'll meet a woman whose thoughts turned into a big community project which is encouraging tourism in southwest Kansas. Thanks to Connie Larson of Manhattan for this story idea. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Teresa Arnold is the person who helped inspire this project. She grew up on a farm, married and settled in Ashland, the county seat of Clark County.

A few years ago, Teresa took an interest in barn quilts. Barn quilts are those colored designs of quilt squares, painted on panels that are attached to barns or sheds. These colorful works of art have become quite popular. There is a barn quilt trail one can follow in the Flint Hills, for example.

After attending a barn quilt class, Teresa called her sister-in-law Beth DeMont who had retired as an art teacher at Herington. "You ought to give painting these barn quilts a try, it's fun," Teresa told Beth. Her sister-in-law did try it and found she enjoyed it. She painted several of them, as did Teresa and her other friends.

"The local PRIDE committee put barn quilts on the lampposts in Ashland," Teresa said. As the barn quilts multiplied, Teresa and her friends needed more places to display them.

"I was driving with a friend and we were brainstorming about barn quilts," Teresa said. "We knew we wanted to promote Ashland. I finally said, 'If Cawker City can have the largest ball of twine, why can't we have the largest barn quilt?'" Teresa said. The idea took hold.

Teresa and her friends got together and worked on plans for the project. They knew the city budget didn't allow for non-essential expenditures. "We wanted to promote the town but we wanted to do something that wouldn't cost the chamber or the city," she said.

With donated labor and supplies, Teresa and her friends Mary Kaltenbach, Rhonda Swonger and others put together the plans. They decided to put together multiple 2 x 2 and 4 x 4 size quilt squares into one giant barn quilt.

"We had 'paint and donate' events, where people paid the class fee, painted a barn quilt, and then donated it for the display," Teresa said. Some people painted several quilts. Some used existing designs. Some made original creations. There were 50 total participants across Kansas and beyond.

Brad and Heather McCann, owners of the local Venture Foods grocery store, agreed to let them use the north side of their building to show the barn quilts. Two by fours were bolted to the wall so that the barn quilts could be attached to them. The display is next to a small park on the street corner. A crew from the city and a couple of contractors donated their time to install the barn quilts.

Today, Kansas' largest barn quilt is a 30 x 16 foot display of gorgeous homemade art in downtown Ashland. The words Ashland Kansas are spelled out in big letters. The panels include patriotic and sunflower designs, plus

individual quilt blocks with designs that are meaningful for families and community organizations. For example, there is a 4-H block, a Girl Scout block, etc.

“We tried to pick designs that are pertinent to this area,” Teresa said. These include blocks showing deer and fishing and wheat.

The women are working on installing a station next to the barn quilt which would have a legend describing all the quilt blocks plus a guestbook for visitors to sign. “We’ve had more than a thousand likes on our Facebook page,” Teresa said.

“It was a labor of love,” she said. “We wanted it to be a community project, and we achieved that,” Teresa said. “We hope people will come visit our rural community,” she said. Ashland is a community of 867 people. Now, that’s rural.

Think big! In doing so, Teresa and her friends helped create the biggest barn quilt in the state of Kansas. We salute Teresa Arnold, Beth DeMont, Mary Kaltenbach, Rhonda Swonger, and all those involved for making a difference with their creativity and ingenuity. It demonstrates the power of a big idea.

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