

Lois Keller – Kansas Play Klay

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 a school in California. The second graders are having a great time, playing and squeezing and shaping a new product: A brightly colored dough. But this is not your grandfather's play-dough – it's a new, biodegradable product made from wheat, and it comes from rural Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Lois Keller is the co-founder of a new business called Kansas Play Klay which produces this innovative wheat product. Lois lives on a farm near Ellis in northwest Kansas.

Lois studied psychology at Fort Hays State University, met and married Jerry Keller, and chose to work on the farm and be home with her children. She and Jerry had five children, and now they have 11 grandchildren.

When their youngest son was two years old, he was diagnosed with celiac disease, which meant that his digestive system could not digest wheat gluten. "At that time, there were no gluten-free recipes around," Lois said. "I searched all over trying to find something that this child could eat." She tried rice bread and other possibilities without much success.

Then a pediatrician suggested that Lois use whole wheat flour that she ground herself – not the blend which is available in the stores. When Lois ground her own wheat, she found that her son's system could tolerate it. She did more experimenting and developed recipes of her own which were really liked by her friends and family.

As an active wheat producer herself, she was proud to find these recipes and to celebrate the healthy, nutritious value of wheat. At one point, the Kansas Wheat Commission asked her to share her recipes, which Lois did gladly.

Lois has been identified by Kansas Wheat as part of its Speak For Wheat program, which includes spokespersons from across the state. For some 20 years, she has spoken to countless ag days and school events about whole wheat baking and the nutritional value of wheat.

When grandchildren came along, she thought about another creative way to use this grain. "As a conservative farm wife, I wanted to see if I could make something which the grandkids could play with while they're here," Lois said.

She experimented with gluten and food coloring and ended up with a colorful, doughy product which could be squeezed and shaped in zillions of creative ways. She tried lots and lots of improvements in her formula. "When I made it the 201st time, that was the one I liked," Lois said. More importantly, it passed the grandkid test.

"The kids liked it, and when I added a scent, they loved it," Lois said. Then their friends came over. The friends loved it too, and they wanted to take some home.

Lois' long time friend named Lilly Kingsley saw how popular this material was and said, "Maybe we could sell this stuff." Lilly is a graphic artist with grandkids of her own. She designed a sunflower logo, and Kansas Play Klay was born.

Kansas Play Klay comes in several colors and scents, the most popular being grape, lime, and strawberry. Available by special order are cherry, peach, mango, watermelon, root beer, orange, lemon, cotton candy, bubble gum, and more. Seasonal

products include wintergreen and berry at Christmas, pastel colors at Easter, and orange and black at Halloween.

Kansas Play Klay is not intended to be eaten, but it is safe because it is made from wheat. Lois and Lilly insist on producing it with food grade components and equipment so that the product is high quality and fully safe. It is biodegradable and non-toxic. For more information, go to www.startreeproducts.com.

How exciting to find wheat entrepreneurs from rural Kansas. Lois and Jerry live near Ellis, population 1,852, but Lois grew up further west near the town of Marienthal, which now has a population of maybe 75 people. Now, that's rural.

It's time to leave California, where kids are squeezing Play Klay and enjoying this product which was made from wheat out in Kansas. We commend Lois Keller and Lilly Kingsley for making a difference with their creativity and entrepreneurship. Such entrepreneurship can help counter the squeeze on rural Kansas.

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