

Verne Claussen – Mill Creek Lodge

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

Go west of Alma a few miles and one will find a gem – not a literal jewel, but a beautiful place. It is a historic farmstead with fabulous buildings which have been painstakingly restored and repurposed, and now are open to the public for lodging and events. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Verne and Marilyn Claussen are owners of a newly opened facility called Mill Creek Lodge at Volland Point. This is on a ranch which belonged to his parents. Verne went to K-State and then Houston College of Optometry, becoming an eye doctor. After a fellowship at Yale, he came back to Kansas and bought another place near Alma. He served as an optometrist in the region for 43 years before retiring.

Meanwhile, he was puzzling over what to do with his parent's farm. This place has a rich history. J.R. Fix and his wife Rebecca homesteaded the place in 1865 after Fix had served in the Civil War. The couple had one son who died in infancy. Then they had a daughter – and then another daughter – and then another and another. All told, there were eight daughters born to the Fix family.

This meant they needed a spacious place to live. They also needed a large barn to house the workhorses needed for the farming, plus a place for the farmhands to live. The Fix family expanded the buildings through the years.

The place remains a working ranch, now known as the Claussen Ranch. But what about the buildings on the farmstead? By 2013, the barn was no longer suitable for everyday farm use, for example.

"I wanted to make it into something where people could come out and enjoy the rural lifestyle," Verne said. Verne took on a wonderful restoration of the house and buildings so as to create a place for lodging, meetings, and special events. That was the beginning of Mill Creek Lodge at Volland Point. The grouping of buildings has been designated a historic district by the National Register of Historic Places.

Since J.R. Fix and his wife had all those daughters, each daughter needed a bedroom so the Fix family built a majestic three-story Italianate home. "The house was in real good shape," Verne said.

In 2015, Verne restored the house with heating, air conditioning, and modern plumbing and electricity. He also brought in period chandeliers and antique furniture. Verne named each one of the guest rooms for the daughter who lived there. So, guests can stay in the Pearl bedroom or the Mabel bedroom, for example. There is no doubt about which room is which – those two daughters actually carved their names into the wood floor.

The nearby tenant house for the farmhands was restored and expanded also. Then came the barn, which received a total makeover. The exterior look was largely preserved, but windows, heat and air conditioning, water and bathrooms were installed.

"The barn had been built in two phases," Verne said. "The first part was to hold the horses, hay and wagons, and the second part was a corn crib to the west." Verne remembers putting hay in this barn as a kid. Now the barn has been converted into a thoroughly modern but rustic-looking meeting area with multiple restrooms. The hayloft area can hold up to 250 people and the horse stall area can hold another 100. The north

side of the old corn crib is now a receiving kitchen for caterers, and the south side is a bunkhouse. A springfed, hand-dug well is inside a cave nearby.

Mill Creek Lodge at Volland Point is now host to weddings, meetings, family reunions, and hunting in season. Up to 29 people can stay there overnight. The lodge is located 7 ½ miles west of the rural community of Alma, population 785 people. Now, that's rural. More information can be found at www.millcreeklodgevollandpoint.com.

Go west of Alma a few miles and one will find a gem – not a literal jewel, but a beautiful place. We salute Verne and Marilyn Claussen for making a difference by restoring and repurposing these historic buildings in rural Kansas. I think it is a treasure.

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