

Clare Moore – Henderson Inn

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

Guests are gathering for dinner at a vineyard in Napa Valley, California, when suddenly disaster strikes. The owner of the vineyard has been murdered! Is this a mystery novel? A new tv show? No, it's the scenario for a murder mystery dinner, hosted by an innovative, historic bed and breakfast and retreat center in the middle of Kansas. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Clare and Nancy Moore are owners of the Henderson Inn and Retreat Center in Stafford, Kansas. Clare grew up in a truly rural location, between Pratt and Stafford and northwest of the rural community of Preston, population 163 people. Now, that's rural.

As a kid, Clare and his family frequently visited his grandparents in Stafford. His great-grandmother, Sarah Henderson, had a beautiful older home. Another house, an abandoned building south of town, was sometimes called the haunted house or the Governor's mansion because it was partially modeled after the original Governor's mansion in Topeka. These houses caught Clare's attention.

Clare went on to Wichita State and began a career in real estate. In Wichita he became active in the Victorian Society and became deeply interested in historic preservation and restoration.

In 1978, after his great-aunt passed away, Clare had the opportunity to buy his great-grandmother's house in Stafford. This house had been built in 1905, and Clare's great-grandmother Sarah Henderson acquired it in 1906. Sarah's daughter Mary, Clare's grandmother, was married in the front parlor in 1912.

Clare painstakingly restored this gorgeous home and also purchased and restored a nearby home known as the Weide House. In 1990, he opened the Henderson House Bed and Breakfast. He subsequently bought and restored two other nearby homes, the Spickard House and the Littlefield House, with all of these serving as places for lodging.

In 2000, he bought a former church building in the same neighborhood. This structure provided a place for groups to have meetings, small conferences, or retreats. The name of his enterprise was changed to the Henderson Inn and Retreat Center. In 2005 he built another building called the Pavilion. Together, these houses offer 18 rooms with private baths, plus meeting space at Ye Olde Church.

As we have profiled previously, Stafford created a community-owned store in 2012. Clare played a major role in the design, development, and creation of the store. He added artifacts to the store which came from the old haunted house, the so-called Governor's mansion, which he had driven by as a kid. Those artifacts had been in storage since that building was torn down in the 1960s.

Meanwhile, Clare's collection of historic homes is what he refers to as a "neighborhood." All of these houses are on the same street, in close proximity to the retreat center. Through the years, Clare has had guests from coast to coast – literally from New York to California – and from as far away as Australia and South Africa. Wow.

Back in 2001, some friends in Clare and Nancy's Sunday School class had an idea for a fun evening. They had heard of murder mystery dinners, so they gave one a try at the Henderson House. It was a lot of fun, and when Clare was seeking to grow business in 2010, he started offering those for the public.

Now murder mystery dinners have become a signature for the Henderson Inn. Guests may come in costume and participate as a murder scenario plays out over dinner. Almost every guest is a suspect. They all have clues to reveal and alibis to proclaim. In the course of the evening, the mystery is solved.

These fun dinners have different themes, such as Hawaiian or Wild West. The Napa Valley scenario (called “A Taste of Wine and Murder”) has been an especially popular one.

For more information, go to www.hendersonbandb.com.

The mock dinner in Napa Valley is over and the mystery is solved. The guests go home well-fed and happy. We commend Clare and Nancy Moore of the Henderson Inn and Retreat Center for making a difference through historic preservation of these houses and then sharing these historic homes with others. Their positive results are no mystery.

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