

Brian Roberts – Miami County Trolley

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

Let's hit the trail. It's not a biking trail or a hiking trail, this is a wine trail. Now it is possible to hit this wine trail by trolley. This is today's Kansas Profile.

During the past two weeks, we learned about the growing wine business in Miami County, Kansas. One element of that growth was the creation of the Somerset Wine Trail. A new trolley service is now available for wine trail travelers and others.

Brian and Michelle Roberts are owners of Miami County Trolley. Brian, a Kansas native, worked in sales and marketing in Iowa for 17 years before coming back to Kansas near where his wife's parents live in Miami County. "My wife and I were looking to start some business of our own," Brian said.

In 2010, he and Michelle visited the town of Hermann in the heart of Missouri wine country. They noticed a trolley service which provided transportation to the local wineries. It was an appealing idea, considering the growing winery industry developing back home in Miami County, but Brian wasn't sure there were enough wineries to support it.

"We had three wineries in the county," Brian said. "In 2012, a fourth winery opened, and we decided to go for it."

Brian and Michelle met with Janet McRae, the economic development director for Miami County. "Janet was huge for us," Brian said. She helped with business planning and more. They consulted with each of the wineries.

In order to fully learn the business, Brian and Michelle went back to Hermann, Missouri, to the guy who owned the trolley service there. "We spent six months with the guy in Hermann and learned the business inside and out," Brian said. "He sold us our first trolley."

Brian and Michelle established Miami County Trolley. One of the wineries, Somerset Ridge, had taken the lead in establishing a highway route called the Somerset Wine Trail which linked the wineries in the county.

Miami County Trolley is available for weddings, corporate events and parties, but the primary business is the wine trail. Every Saturday and Sunday, the trolley is available to transport people along the route of the wine trail.

"If they stay in Miami County, we can pick them up and return them right to their lodging," Brian said. Miami County has the Paola Inn and Suites plus several bed and breakfasts. The trolley can go to each place and shuttle people to the wineries. The business has grown to the point that Brian purchased a second trolley in September 2014. "It's become a full-time job for me," Brian said. He has even hired four other drivers.

The trolleys themselves are the classic vehicles, fully enclosed with heat and wood interior seats. There is even a bell for the driver to ring. One trolley is diesel powered and the other has a gas engine. One can hold twenty passengers and the other can hold thirty.

"We can shuttle up to a hundred people in a day," Brian said. It is such a convenient and worry-free way to travel, and especially to enjoy the wine trail. Seats on the trolley are booked by reservation. "We generally fill up," Brian said. He also has a fourteen passenger van which can pick up other passengers and bring them to the trolley.

During the holidays, the trolley offers Christmas lights tours. The trolley is available during the week for minimum groups of ten.

“I like meeting new people,” Brian said. “It’s a lot of work but it doesn’t feel like work. We’re continuing to grow the business.” Miami County Trolley is based in the rural community of Paola, population 5,033. Now, that’s rural.

Brian especially enjoys the camaraderie among the guests. “They will come in groups of four or five, but by the end of the trip everybody is hugging each other,” he said. For more information, go to www.miamicountytrolley.com.

Let’s hit the trail – not a bike trail or hiking trail, but the Somerset Wine Trail on the Miami County Trolley. We salute Brian and Michelle Roberts for making a difference by providing this ingenious transportation service. Now let’s roll.

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