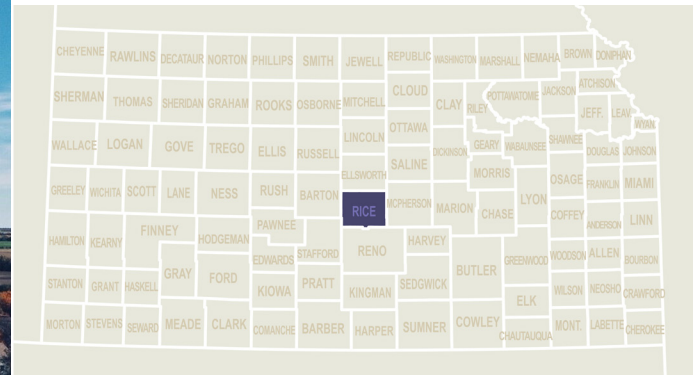




Downtown Little River, Kansas from above.



About the Community

POPULATION*	563
COUNTY POPULATION*	9,868
MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME*	\$43,929
MEDIAN AGE*	36 years
CHILDREN LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL** †	19.3%
FAMILIES LIVING BELOW POVERTY LEVEL** †	11.0%
LOW INCOME & LOW ACCESS TO GROCERY STORE** †	6.6%
PEOPLE WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE** †	18.7%
CHILDREN WITH LOW ACCESS TO A GROCERY STORE** †	4.7%

Background

Located along the banks of the Little Arkansas River, the city of Little River is nestled among rolling Kansas hills and pastures. Families choose to live in Little River because of the City's access to jobs in nearby cities like McPherson and Hutchinson, relative affordability, and its small-town feel with big-city amenities. Mutual Telephone Company has been operating in Little River, a designated "Smart Rural Community," for over 100 years and offers high speed fiber to every home and business in town.

"How many rural small communities have high speed fiber connected to every home and business? Not many."

-David Nelson, Little River resident



Garden of Eden on Main Street in Little River, Kansas.

*ACS 2013-2017, **Kansas Health Matters, †County Level Data

The Issue

A point of pride for the city of Little River is that they have never been without a grocery store. The Garden of Eden sits in a more than one-hundred year-old building on Main Street. In 2005, when the previous grocery store owners announced their retirement after almost 40 years, Little River native, David Nelson and his wife Debra, decided to purchase the store. The Nelsons received a 30-day training from the retiring owners. During that month, David received a crash-course in running a meat counter where he learned the “language” of meat cutting. After a few years, David and Debra began to realize the challenges of operating a business out of a 100+ year-old building.

“Our coolers and freezers were 40 – 50 years old. Besides not being efficient, they were constantly breaking down and we were having a hard time finding parts for them...” -David Nelson

After learning of the Nelson’s challenges, a local banker attended the National Rural Grocery Summit and came back with an idea: sell the grocery store building and its fixtures to the City of Little River and in turn, the Nelsons could lease the building from the City. Improvements to the building and its fixtures would then become the responsibility of the City, which would release the Nelsons from the financial burden of maintaining the building.

Little River History & Groceries

The history of the Garden of Eden building is showcased throughout the store; from the original wooden floors and the display of meat lockers (bottom right), to the keys for the rented meat lockers (bottom left). The Nelsons have collected photos of the grocery store from as far back as the 1920s (right). Debra plans to create a wall that showcases the store’s history.



The Process

TIMELINE

1920s

Moll's Market existed in the building that is today's Garden of Eden.

1961-1968

Diamond's Grocery operated in Little River for seven years.

1968 - 2005

Fullers Market provided groceries to Little River for almost 40 years.

October 2005

David and Debra Nelson opened Garden of Eden in Little River.

June 2010

Debra Nelson spoke at the National Rural Grocery Summit in Manhattan, Kansas about ideas for increasing sales in rural grocery stores.

2010

Debra Nelson spoke at the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development in Manhattan, Kansas.

2011

Debra Nelson received the "We Kan Award - Progressive Difference Maker" from the Kansas Sampler Foundation.

2012

David and Debra Nelson received the "Citizen of the Year" award from the Lions Club of Little River.

2012

Debra Nelson served on the Rural Grocery Initiative Advisory Board.

2017

Garden of Eden was highlighted in Marci Penner and WenDee Rowe's *Kansas Guidebook 2: For Explorers*.

2017

The City of Little River purchased the grocery store building and Garden of Eden received major upgrades to its coolers, freezers, air conditioning and heating, without once closing its doors.

In 2017, the City of Little River purchased the grocery store building from the Nelsons and applied for a grant through the Little River Community Foundation. The transfer of ownership was critical to the success of this proposal. As a for-profit entity, the grocery store was ineligible for a grant from the Little River Community Foundation. The grant was received and included funding for new coolers, freezers, HVAC upgrades, ceiling and facade improvements. The ceiling improvements included new insulation, ceiling tiles, and lighting. The front of the building was repainted and a new awning installed.

During the renovation, the Garden of Eden continued its daily operation. David recalls that, "The community really stepped in. People just came in and asked, 'What can we do to help?'" Now, the Nelsons lease the building from the City. "Since the new improvements, our utility costs have been cut in half and sales have increased 33%," the Nelsons say. Transferring ownership of the building to the City was a positive investment in having a grocery store in Little River for the foreseeable future.

"We are ensuring that when David and I retire, a younger person will be able to afford to own a grocery store without the financial burden of buying the building and repair costs of equipment." -Debra Nelson



The Nelsons operate a full-service meat counter in their store. Photo credit: Garden of Eden

Lessons Learned

✓ Go Beyond Groceries

The Garden of Eden contributes to its community in more ways than providing groceries. The Nelsons and their employees enjoy working with students from the Rice County P.R.I.D.E. Special Needs program. The Garden of Eden teaches on-site life skills that will aid in the future employment of these students in their own communities. Garden of Eden also sells handmade organic dog biscuits made by the P.R.I.D.E. classroom.

Embrace Your Community ✓

The Garden of Eden works with everyone in town. They sell items regularly to the local restaurant, nursing home and daycare. They work with businesses, churches, social clubs, school fund-raisers, charities and the Chamber of Commerce to supply needed items. The Garden of Eden sells pizza to a local church program that provides a safe place for high schoolers to socialize after home ball games. They provide a sitting area both inside and outside of the store for customers. They also source local products to sell at the store - from a local cookie dough company to locally grown popcorn, alpaca products, raw honey, local vegetables, and more... They do this because they feel strongly that supporting one's community and state supports the store.

✓ Focus on Customer Service

Creating a stress-free environment is important to the Nelsons. They take pride in knowing everyone who walks through the door of their store. When they see someone new, the Nelsons are sure to greet them. Customer service is huge at the Garden of Eden. Employees carry items out to cars and make deliveries. At the meat counter, customers can order their fresh cheese or meats and watch it being cut, sliced or ground right in front of them!

Project Successes

David and Debra strive to go beyond groceries, embrace their community, and focus on customer service. They have made their unique grocery store a destination place where people want to go.

“Through God All Things are possible. Our story is so much greater than I could have ever dreamed.”

-Debra Nelson



Debra and David Nelson in their store, Garden of Eden in Little River, Kansas. Photo Credit: Garden of Eden

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"Garden of Eden Little River"