

Meanwhile, however, he had graduated from K-State in animal science and had the opportunity to go to Ohio to manage a cattle operation. While in Ohio, he became friends with the local airport operator who had a flight school. So Keith got his private pilots license. Somewhere along the way, the flying bug got into his blood.

He came back to Kansas where he managed a country grain elevator and bought a small Cessna. Keith says, "I would fly the plane to Kansas City for anyone who was willing to buy gas." He had completed all his advanced ratings in Ohio, so for the next two years, he worked at the farm and taught flying whenever he could.

And then he had another idea: What if he got a professional pilot's license? Keith happens to be colorblind, so he wondered if that would be an obstacle. He worked hard at it and successfully achieved his professional pilot's license. Keith worked at a large fixed base operation in Salina where he was chief pilot and chief flight instructor. He went on to work in Wichita flying Learjets.

Keith then took the step up to the major airlines. He became a professional pilot for Ozark Airlines, which eventually was purchased by TWA. Along the way, he met and married a flight attendant from Illinois named Debbie.

In the late 1980s, Keith's father passed away. Keith purchased the family ranch. He and Deb live there now, he was still flying for TWA, which has subsequently purchased and absorbed by American Airlines.

Now, I don't know how far you travel to work, but Keith commutes to St. Louis. Wow, that's a lot more than walking to the barn, isn't it? Whatever your commute is like, listen to Keith's: He hops in his small plane at the ranch, takes off on the grass strip there, flies to Wichita, and catches a plane to the hub in St. Louis. He can be there in 2 and a half-hours. And from there he begins 4 or 5 days of a series of flights across the North American continent.

Yet this transcontinental pilot continues to make his home on the ranch south of Tipton, Kansas, population 258 people. Now, that's rural.

At this point in our program, I can't resist the temptation to use that phrase from the old westerns: Meanwhile, back at the ranch...

Yes, Keith was thinking about the ranch as he flew for TWA. Even before his father's death, Keith had been thinking about diversifying the operation. But how?

For years, friends of Keith and his family had come to hunt on the Houghton ranch. Keith and Debbie had the idea to develop the ranch as a recreational hunting facility. Would this idea fly? Keith says, "This has gone far beyond what we expected."

Have you ever had an idea and wondered if it would fly? Today, we've met someone who has chosen to fly very literally for the airlines, and now he is making this new idea of recreational hunting fly in rural Kansas. We commend Keith and Deb Houghton for making a difference by using their skills and abilities on the airlines, while maintaining and enhancing the Houghton roots in rural Kansas. All this has led to something called the Ringneck Ranch, and we'll hear about that on our next program.

## Keith Houghton - Part 2-Ringneck Ranch

Some ranches raise cattle. Some ranches raise crops. Some ranches raise wildlife. Some ranches raise tourists. Put them together and you have a ranch that raises economic development.

Today, we'll meet a homegrown Kansas entrepreneur who has developed an outstanding recreational hunting experience on the family ranch in rural Kansas. Stay tuned for the conclusion in our series on the Houghton family, in a special hunting season edition of Kansas Profile.

On our last program, we met Keith and Deb Houghton. Keith is an airline pilot and Debbie a former flight attendant. They have taken the family ranch where Keith grew up in central

Kansas and developed it into an outstanding attraction for pheasant hunters.

For years, friends of Keith and family had come to the ranch to go pheasant hunting. In 1983, Keith and Debbie decided to concentrate on such hunting as a commercial enterprise. There on the family place, they established Ringneck Ranch.

Ringneck Ranch offers pheasant, quail, prairie chicken and dove hunting, but the specialty is ringneck pheasants. The business started in 1983 and listen to this: During the 2000 hunting season, from October through March, Ringneck Ranch is expected to have nearly 2,000 hunter days.

Ringneck Ranch offers more than 5,200 acres of native upland game bird habitat. The hunting ground consists of sorghum fields, CRP grass, abandoned railroad right-of-ways, creeks, weedy draws and tree breaks on the edge of native pasture country. The ranch also has access to another 10,000 plus acres. Twice a day, birds are liberated on the controlled shooting areas.

Hunters are put into groups of 4 to 6. Each group is accompanied by a handpicked local guide and dog handler who knows the territory and takes them on the hunt. At the end of the day, the ranch staff will clean, process, and freeze the birds for the guests.

Visitors stay right there at the ranch. They get three meals a day and lodging. And listen to these home cooked meals, prepared under the supervision of Deb Houghton: Start with hot-from-the-oven biscuits with gravy, sausage, eggs, and lots of hot coffee and juices. Lunches feature homemade soup of the day with homemade breads, relish trays and desserts. Supper's include grilled steaks, chops and beef roast with homemade rolls and fresh baked pies. No wonder that many guests consider the meals a highlight of their stay.

The facilities for Ringneck Ranch have expanded through the years. A new full basement was added in 1992, a multi-purpose hangar building for Keith's plane was built in 1996, a dog kennel in 1997, and what is now a beautiful lodge building was redone in 2000. It's a modern ranch house with several suites and five bathrooms, a wonderful place to stay.

Forty people can be accommodated at Ringneck Ranch, and another 12 at nearby Blue Hills Lodge. Blue Hills is operated by Lisa Hake, a local interior decorator, and her brother Mark. It is operated on the family homestead nearby the Houghtons. Guests bring their own guns and outdoor wear. Everything else can be provided by Ringneck Ranch.

And has the idea succeeded? Yes. Visitors have come from coast to coast and even internationally. The number of hunter days is up, and the future is bright.

And when the visitors come, they know they are in a rural setting. The ranch is situated between Tipton and Hunter in Mitchell County in north central Kansas. Tipton has a population of 258 and Hunter has a population of 114 people. Now, that's rural.

This rural setting is part of the attraction for hunters across the country. Keith and Deb do a wonderful job of accommodating corporate groups and celebrities as well as other hunters. Ringneck Ranch has been featured on television, on such shows as ESPN Great Outdoors, PBS Cabin Country, TNN Remington Country, and ESPN2 American Expedition. Wow. And now it is on the Internet at [www.ringneckranch.net](http://www.ringneckranch.net).

Some ranches raise cattle. Some ranches raise crops. Some ranches raise wildlife. Some ranches raise tourists. Put them together and you have a ranch that raises economic development. We commend Keith and Deb Houghton for making a difference with their entrepreneurship, vision, and hard work that have made Ringneck Ranch a reality. Altogether, this ranch is helping raise the quality of life in rural Kansas.