

109.1976

5

Ron Nessen, White House press chief, was much in evidence as were many leading network news personalities. We met and talked with many, like Ray Morgan, Kansas City Star, who we've known and respected for years. We've been to state press meetings attended by fewer well-known members of the great Kansas working press.

The brief stop had toppers even for the impressive impact of the occasion itself. Mayor Roger Williams, long-time friend of Bob Dole, was in Washington, D.C. when the convention in Kansas City neared an end. With motor trouble in Maryland, he was delayed coming to Russell. Finishing the trip by chartered plane, the Mayor arrived while the speaking was under way. His last-minute arrival and hearty welcome by Dole and others who knew of his problems reaching Russell brought cheers.

Speaking at home, a few feet from his former county attorney office, among friends and without his father who died suddenly last December, Dole's voice broke and a tear came to his eye when he referred to the friends who helped him when he needed help. He was surrounded by hundreds who gave money to provide medical care and treatment for his seemingly hopeless war injuries nearly 30 years ago.

President Ford, seated behind Dole, caught the sudden silence, rose to his feet leading in applause for Sen. Dole. His quick move, turned an awkward situation into a solid victory.

I've heard that "silence" only a few times. It is awesome and brings terror to me because I've only known it in connection with sudden tragedy and shock happening in plain view of hundreds of spectators. Looking away at that second, I turned quickly to see what had happened. Believe me, I was relieved to see it was Bob Dole, being as human as I've ever seen him in some 30 years. That sudden silence is frightening--even for a reporter.

7

Calls from news rooms and wire services blanketed the town. We fielded only a few of them at The News. Some of Bob's friends, knowing the urgency of the moment, arranged for relatives, friends, classmates, teachers, and others who had worked with and known Bob Dole to meet in the Community Room of the Russell State Bank. Press, radio, and television crews were turned loose on the assemblage.

It was like turning martyrs out to the lions, but, in the long run, the move proved to be a Godsend. Time was saved, people and stories were put together and visiting news crews had their feet inside the doors of Russell without losing a half day or longer making contacts.

Crews were already ranging through town shooting pictures of everything, Dole's home and home town--and anything else, whether it moved or not.

At The News, everyone was turning out something on Dole for the Thursday paper, already past deadline. Somehow, they converged, fit, and we made the streets with the edition.

In the midst of the confusion, there was a call from Frank ^{Uresonars} ~~Imar~~ ^{Escu}, White House advance party. It was his question about Dole and President Ford coming to Russell which triggered the community-wide effort.

"Bob Dole suggested that I call you, Everett Dumler or Mayor Roger Williams," the staffer said. "Can you handle it in Russell?"

Ground rules were simple. No formal dinner, so sit-down situation, an informal gathering, picnic-like, with lots of people. A quick check with local sources for places available, motel rooms, facilities for the press and a big welcome were duly reported in my return call a few minutes later.

6

Leaving the courthouse, an abbreviated caravan, the Presidential party, Secret Service and a press corps cadre, made an unannounced turn to take them past Bob Dole's home where the party was kept waiting for about 10 minutes while Bob's mother, Bina, somewhat more nervous than usual, tried to find the house key which had slipped from its usual hiding place.

The return to the airport and return flight to Salina went as scheduled, from a guarded airport with major roads blocked until the Skiorsky's were on their airborne way.

There's no way to measure the total, frantic 24 hour effort which went into that hour's visit.

The first indication was a call Thursday about mid-morning from Norma Jean Steele, Derby, Kan., Bob's sister. "Bob wanted me to call you to tell you he's been asked to be the vice-presidential candidate and he can't get to a phone right now. He wants you to know."

At about the same time rumors of the impending appointment were carried on the wire services.

At The News, we began diggin through the "Dole" file, which had been sadly neglected for a couple of years.

At about 11:30 a.m., NBC radio called from New York City and asked us to tell her about Bob Dole while we both waited for the formal announcement to move on the UPI wire. That interview went out on NBC radio at noon.

Meanwhile, editor Prince Elmquist began a remake of the front page. The five phone lines into the office were jammed.

Within the hour, planes began arriving with news crews. Among them were two private jets, one carrying a crew which had been waiting in Tennessee at the home of a man who didn't make it.

8

The advance party was set to arrive in Russell at 6 p.m. by helicopter and "could we arrange to meet them at the airport?"

We could and did.

By this time, all was still tentative. City Manager Jim Boyd, Everett Dumler, Police Chief Bob Tyler, Chamber president Don Arnold, Don Woelk of the radio station, and a few others were on hand when the helicopter landed.

A quick check of ~~several~~ ^{seven} sites which had been offered was made as the party, about White House staff members and about the same number of Secret Service agents, toured Russell heading for a meeting with local representatives of service, civic, veterans, and other organizations in Russell.

The courthouse lawn caught the eye of the advance party. It had the informality that the football stadium lacked, had the room which the Elks Lodge and VFW Hall lacked, and offered the homecoming touch they wanted.

Within an hour or so, the Secret Service had met with law enforcement officials while the advance party had worked out basic arrangements for the following noon. There wasn't time to cook anything, except hot dogs, in the number needed, but there ought to be food to give the picnic atmosphere. Weather looked good for clear Kansas skies. The check list went on and on.

It wasn't until about 8 p.m. that official clearance was given. In total, some 15 to 20 organizations in Russell started then making arrangements.

While part of the advance party and Secret Service returned to Kansas City, others stayed to coordinate activities.

Security was the most intricate. A command post was set up in the police station with a sub station set up at the