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1995

RUSSELL

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after draining the heat from the pump engines. Perfect for a swim.
"Walked everywhere," said Banker, now 69. "Or rode a bike, if you were lucky enough to own one."

The roster of local folks who have made good doesn't begin with Dole, who grew up in Russell, and end with Specter, who lived there from age 12 to 17. Add to the list an actor, author, oilman, television producer, railroad tycoon.

"We export an awful lot of real good talent," said Russ Townsley, 75, publisher of the Russell Daily News and Record from 1947 to 1989.

"Having to get along on potentially nothing and having to live without for a number of years has a lot to do with that."

"People don't ask what they can do" for each other and the community, he said. "They do what they have to do."

A lot of people around town attribute the success of Russell natives to an excellent educational system supported by oil money through the hard times.

Others credit the determination of itinerant European immigrants to give their children the education they never had.

"They were so eager for their children to achieve, and most of all be good citizens," said retired teacher Alice Mills, 94.

Some say it was the gumption of their pioneer ancestors.

"You had people with a lot of get-up-and-go," said Jill Holt, town historian. "They just really had a can-do spirit."

Or the grit of survivors.

"Anybody that grew up in this era, during the dust storms, during the Depression, during World War II, they were forged in a pretty good crucible, you know it?" said retired drug store owner G.B. "Bub" Dawson, 78.

"I think the togetherness of a small town, the helpfulness... I think it was the small-town influence that attributed to the success of so many of these kids."

The pioneers who settled

Russell were lured to the Kansas Territory by the promise of a new start and cheap land along the westward route of the Union Pacific Railroad. They hoped to establish a stable farming community free from the curses of whiskey and gambling.

About 70 settlers made that first trip by train in 1871 from Ripon, Wis. — the birthplace, Russellites like to point out, of the modern Republican Party.

When they got off the train at Fossil Station, as the railroad stop was then known, the settlers found themselves on a vast, treeless plain.

Since they had no timber, they quarried native limestone, or "post rock," and split or sawed the soft rock into fence posts and blocks to build churches and schools.

Instead of Fossil, the new city, like the county before it, took the name of fallen Civil War hero Avra P. Russell. After a brief political struggle with nearby Bunker Hill, Russell permanently secured its place as the county seat. Other settlers followed, many of them Civil War veterans hoping to claim 160 acres courtesy of the federal homestead and timber culture acts.

A second major wave of pioneers followed in 1876, this time German craftsmen and wheat farmers fleeing political persecution in their temporary homeland of Russia.

Many of the early settlers raised sheep, later switching to cattle. Wheat became the dominant crop not long after Mennonite immigrants from Russia introduced the hardy Turkey Red variety to the county in 1880.

John C. Woelk was in grade school when the Great Depression settled on the country, and drought descended on the prairie.

For four years, beginning in 1933, Kansas was part of the Dust Bowl.



Craig Hacker/Correspondent

PROMINENT PEOPLE WHO GOT THEIR START IN RUSSELL

The late Fred B. Anschutz, billionaire oilman and rancher

Philip F. Anschutz, billionaire oilman, rancher and railroad tycoon

Robert Billings, real estate developer

Don Colhour, former television executive, now a seminary student

The late E. Hubert Deines, wood engraver

Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., Senate majority leader and candidate for president

Marj Dusay, actress who portrays Alexandra Spaulding on "The Guiding Light" soap opera

Blaine Hollinger, physician and medical researcher

W.A. Michaelis Jr., oilman and banker

Steve Mills, television producer

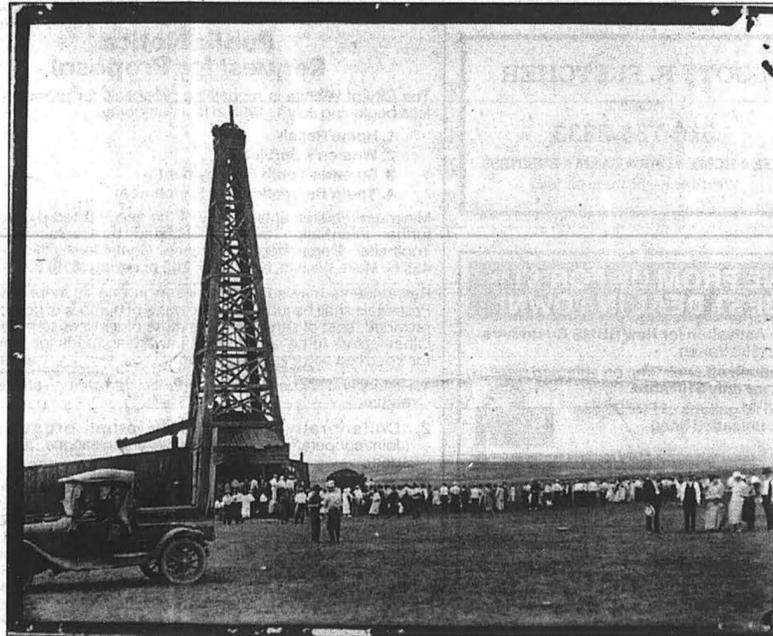
Dean Ostrum, retired lawyer and telephone company executive

Ben Phlegar, retired editor, U.S. News and World Report

Gary Sick, professor, author, former National Security Council staffer

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., candidate for president

Norman Staab, former national commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars



File photo

Above, Russell farmer Cecil Witt, son of farmer and oilman Anthony Henry Witt Sr., stands by the Carrie Oswald No. 1, the well that started the northwest Kansas oil boom when it came in on Thanksgiving Day 1923. Left, the Carrie Oswald No. 1 on the day the well came in, Thanksgiving Day 1923.

"Many farmers lost five or six straight wheat crops during the drought," said Woelk, 74, a Russell lawyer and former state senator who grew up on a farm outside town.

The federal Work Project Administration eventually stepped in, putting some unemployed locals to work building a school and planting shelter belts of trees in an effort to save the soil.

"During the drought, a lot of people around here lived on WPA money," Woelk said. "It was real rough here in those days."

Alice Mills considers herself one of the fortunate few. She spent the Depression and Dust Bowl years in a Russell hotel. A room and three meals a day cost \$15 of her \$100 monthly salary.

"During the Depression, teachers were the only ones who had any money," said Mills, who counts Dole and Specter among her 5,000 or so students.

"School would be closed for days at a time," she said. "You couldn't see the clock on the other

side of the room. The dust would be just like a snowdrift. You'd get up in the morning, on the bedsheets there'd be a place where your head had been. All around it was dust."

Bub Dawson remembers a Russell High School basketball game in Hays where play stopped every few minutes so someone could sweep the dirt off the floor.

The players couldn't see the goal at the opposite end of the court, he said, and the crowd had to stay overnight in the gym because the dust was too thick for them to drive.

From the window of his father's drug store, the young Dawson could just barely make out the pink glow of the sign at the Mecca Theater across the street.

"If it was red dirt, it came from Oklahoma," he said. "If it was black, it came from western Kansas."

"... Nobody had any money," Dawson said. "We went through some of the hardest times there ever was."

The hard times of the '30s were a little easier in Russell thanks to a discovery on Thanksgiving Day 1923.

Old-timers would remember that a German geologist had passed through Russell County 43 years earlier, predicting that oil derricks would rise there someday.

On a ridge about 16 miles west and north of town, the Carrie Oswald No. 1 was proving him right.

The closest producing well at the time was about 140 miles to Russell's southeast. But the surface geology — the fossils and limestone — was promising, and the coyote that ran in front of G.A. Stearns' car was an omen.

That's where Stearns and the rest of the Lucky Seven Syndicate decided to drill, and that's where the group of local wildcatters struck oil.

Other oilmen followed. The next year, Russell County wells pumped 233,000 barrels of crude. The year after that, more than a million.

The boom was on. "They came by the hundreds, literally, from Texas, Oklahoma, and also eastern Kansas and Arkansas," said Dean Banker, who's still selling suits at the department store founded by his grandfather in 1881.

The store soon found its chamber shirts and bib overalls wouldn't do. Oilmen wanted "suntans," cotton khaki pants and jackets.

And they wanted trucks, not sedans. So they made their own "pumper cars" by replacing the rumble seats on their Model A coupes with wooden truck beds.

Between 1930 and 1940, Russell's population more than doubled to about 5,000 people. And those people needed places to stay.

The opera house was converted into rooms for boarders. And many a town resident rented space to oilmen, using the rent money to pay their mortgages.

The pumpers and roustabouts who couldn't find space in Russell stayed on farms or in camps set

up by large producers outside town. Their children, meanwhile, enrolled in Russell schools, creating something of a culture shock.

"We couldn't understand them to start with," Dean Banker said. "And some of them were a little tougher than we were. We grew up a little faster because of this influence... a little more worldly."

In 1936, a second major oil pool was discovered in the southern part of the county. In the next year alone, 419 wells were completed.

In all, 536 active wells in the county produced 11,379,000 barrels of oil in 1937. In 1940, Russell County wells pumped more oil than any other in the state.

The oilmen brought something to town that folks in Russell hadn't seen much of for awhile — cash. They worked hard for their money, and they wanted to spend it.

There were entrepreneurs ea-

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Street, Russell, 1940.

File photo



Main Street, Russell, today.

Craig Hacker/Correspondent