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Russell Townsley
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Bob's Homecoming

"If the President and Bob Dole stop in Russell tomorrow noon, can you take care of it?" Now that's an attention-compeller that grabs any newsroom anywhere. And the Russell Daily News, at Russell, Kan., home of Sen. Bob Dole, was no exception.

The Aug. 20 visit of President Gerald Ford and Sen. Bob Dole started almost casually about an hour or so after Ford announced the selection of Bob Dole as his running mate on the Republican ticket shortly before noon, Aug. 19. A chain reaction reached hurricane proportions in a matter of hours. Russell, Kan., 5,549 population in a county of 9,661, saw 10,000 people jammed on the courthouse square less than 24 hours later. By 1:30 p.m., Friday, Aug. 20, the town returned to normal--suffering only minor tremors and aftershocks which, as expected, continued past the Nov. 2 election.

Russell had last hosted a president, Theodore Roosevelt, May 5, 1903, when the Presidential train stopped on a whistle-stop tour. There were few left in the community in 1976 to warn of the impact.

The day, Friday, Aug. 20, was centered into the one hour at noon. People began gathering on the courthouse lawn at about 9 a.m. By 10:30 or so, there were more than 1,000--including the high school band. Don Arnold, Chamber of Commerce president, welcomed the crowd from the small speakers' stand. flags decorated Main St., political posters were appearing--nearly all of them homemade or left over from previous Dole campaigns. A bleacher was set up to the right of the stand, near the corner of the square, a half-dozen barbecue grills were being lit, some 1,500

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buns, and over 1,000 cans of soda pop were ready to be served from a half dozen table borrowed from the American Legion Hall across the street. The soda pop was already in a large horse watering tank south of the square being cooled in hundreds of pounds of ice.

A tree trunk served as a telephone line terminal for the press and a companion installation was set up across Main St., to the west where the motorcade was due to arrive. The microphone and public address system had been integrated with radio and TV mixing circuits to provide a feed for the press and sound for the crowd.

Downtown streets were barricaded. Large banners and signs were scotch-taped across store fronts. A thousand or more lined Main St. waiting to see the caravan before moving to the courthouse lawn.

The sun was bright, the square shaded with its tall trees, the skies clear, temperature hot but not oppressive, and the wind light and variable from the southwest. It was a typical, beautiful Kansas summer day. An ideal day for Bob Dole's homecoming.

Highways into Russell were filled with cars converging on the city bringing people to see the President. Local people left cars at home and walked downtown. Streets were lined with parked cars, bumper to bumper, for more than six blocks in all directions from the courthouse. And the people kept coming.

It was the most carefully staged informal, small town, spontaneous reception for a favorite son ever programmed in this part of the state. People were urged to meet at the courthouse. The airport, where the Presidential helicopters were to land, was closed to all but a handful of red and blue clad Chamber of Commerce

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Ambassadors, an official greeting party consisting of Nancy Lane, school teacher and city council president acting in the absence of Mayor Roger Williams, Mrs. Opal Ehrlich, Russell, and Elmer Svaty, Lucas, county Republican chairman and vice-chairman. The working press, about 50-strong, were kept some distance from the landing site, as were the Ambassadors.

The official caravan, including the Presidential limousine and its mate, an open car designed for the Secret Service, and a number of new sedans, among over 20 furnished by Bill Hopper Ford, Inc., for the day, were lined up.

There was no chance that a poor turnout at the airport could be misread by unthinking press corps people aboard one of the helicopters. Everyone was there for a reason and the crowd was waiting--patiently and pleased with the gala spirit of the day--downtown.

The two and one half miles from the airport was lined, at least by Russell, Kan., standards, by a couple hundred cars stopped on field entrances, township roads, shop and store driveways, and anywhere they could get off the right-of-way, to watch the caravan come by.

Late arrivals landed at the airport to join the official party including Gov. Robert Bennett and his wife, Sen. James Pearson, and a number of state officials. The airport had the appearance of an air show with over 20 planes parked on the grass aprons.

Even the barbecue grills downtown were placed so the wind carried the pleasant smell of roasting hot dogs across the crowd.

White House advance party staffer Andy Stern, who had been in Russell overnight, should have been proud. His attention to detail--even the smallest--was evident everywhere.

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The two large helicopters, tastefully painted and carrying the proud lable "United States of America" arrived from Salina on schedule. The Presidential jet had been left at the Salina airport, some 75 miles to the east.

After Bob Dole; his wife Elizabeth; his mother, Mrs. Bina Dole; daughter, Robin; and President Ford disembarked, greeted the hand-picked crowd, and entered the cars, the hour was underway.

Moving smartly at about 40 miles an hour, the motorcade approached Russell, turned north to go past the high school, police station and enter Main St. five blocks north of the courthouse, it slowed for a parade down Main St. As the caravan passed, over 3,000 people, by this time, left Main St. posts and walked to join the 6,000 or more already on the courthouse lawn.

The Presidential party was greeted by a Veterans of Foreign Wars color guard--which left some Legionnaires somewhat touchy about not being involved. Threading their way through the rope-lined aisles, staked the night before on the lawn, the party reached the speakers stand. Miss Lane introduced the governor who introduced the senator who introduced Bob Dole who introduced the President in approved protocol style.

Following the brief remarks, Dole and the President munched hot dogs, shook hundreds of hands, and, obviously enjoyed themselves.

The press, collectively by this time, numbered well over 300 and included, in addition to a hundred or so from Kansas, the press corps moving with the President from Kansas City to Vail, Colo., where President Ford arrived later that same afternoon. Two busloads of corps dependents arrived in Russell for the homecoming and moved on to Colorado as soon as it was over.