

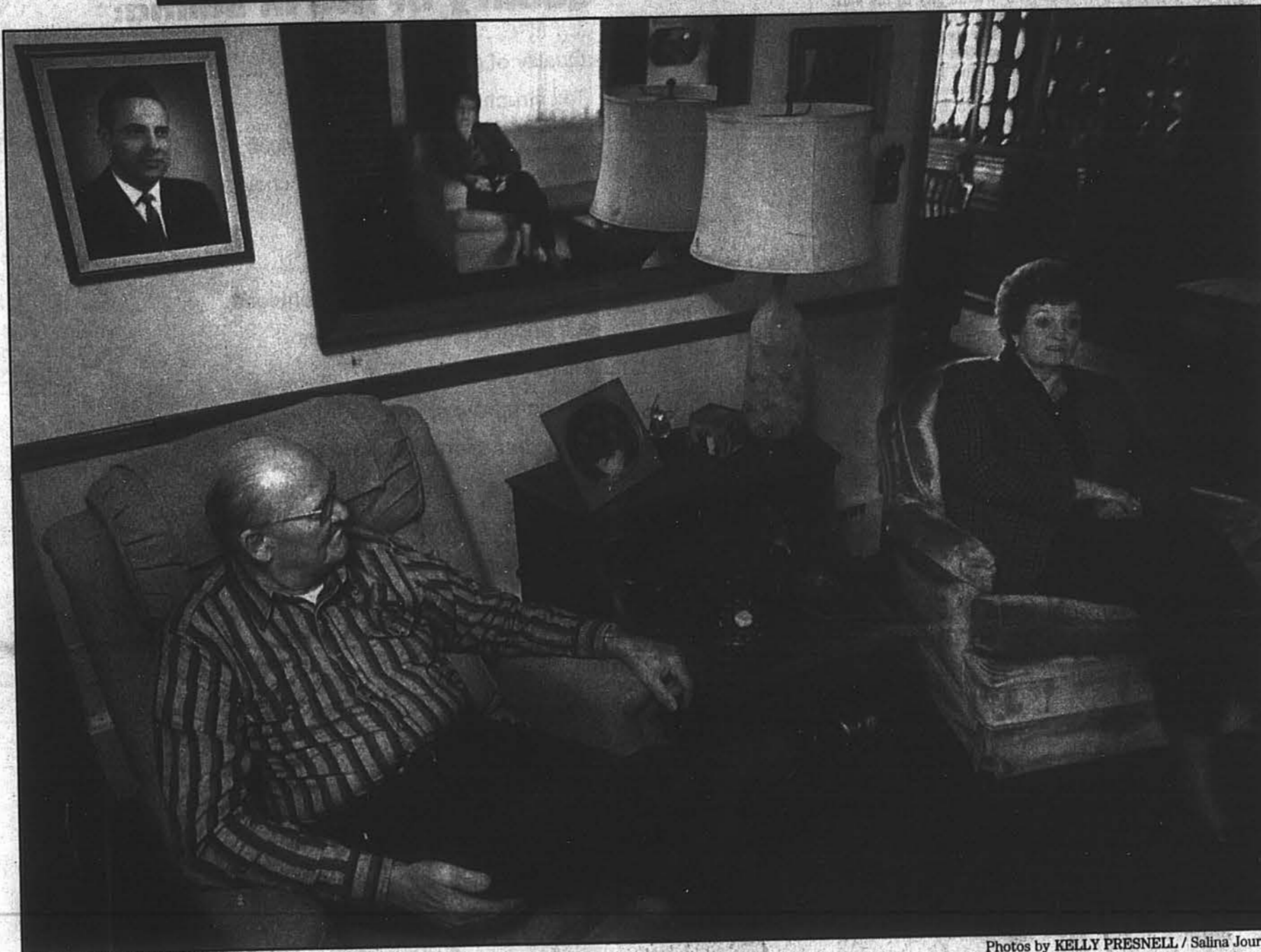
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"It's an oxymoron to talk about an honest politician, but that's what he is."

- Russ Townsley, newspaper editor and Dole friend

FAVORITE SON



Photos by KELLY PRESNELL / Salina Journal

Bob Dole's brother-in-law Larry Nelson (left), sister Gloria Nelson (reflected in mirror) and sister Norma Jean Steele discuss Dole's life in his Russell home.

Dole has special relationship with Russell

By LINDA MOWERY-DENNING

RUSSELL — Dean Banker hears the question more and more. "Will he run?" ask the sales representatives and others who stop by Banker's decades-old department store on Russell's main street.

Banker doesn't have an answer. Neither do Bob Dole's other friends in Russell. Nor his family. "We're just like everybody else. We're waiting to get the word," said his sister, Gloria Nelson.

This month, the 71-year-old Dole announced the formation of a cam-



campaign committee to determine whether he should seek the presidency in 1996. The Senate majority leader described it as an exploratory committee and added, "I haven't yet

officially thrown my hat in the ring." He has promised a decision by late March or early April. However, the committee allows Dole to start the enormous task of

raising the millions of dollars he will need for a campaign.

For citizens in Russell, the town that has supported its favorite son through his successes and disappointments, the push toward a formal announcement has already begun.

Nelson and Dole's other sister, Norma Jean Steele, have given several interviews, including one over the telephone with a reporter from Canada. And down the street from Banker's Department Store, Susan NeuPoeth Cadoret, executive director

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of the local chamber of commerce, keeps a list of Dole acquaintances handy as sources for reporters and others who call. She has been on the job six months.

"I'm just too inept," Cadoret said of her lack of experience with Dole happenings. "I do the background."

Sweet dreams

Even the chamber director can't help dreaming, though.

Abilene, about 100 miles to the east on Interstate 70, has the Eisenhower Library.

If Dole decides to run ...

If he wins ...

If a library is built in Russell ...

"If we had two presidential libraries in Kansas, that would mean a lot to the state. I'm kind of looking forward to it if he does run," Cadoret said.

For others, a presidential campaign would be nothing new.

This would be Dole's third try for the White House. He ran an underdog campaign in 1980. Eight years later, the man from Russell was a serious contender for the prize, but fell to then-Vice President George Bush in the snows and bitter cold of the New Hampshire primary.

Both efforts started in Russell near the drug store where Dole worked as a teen-ager. The business has since closed.

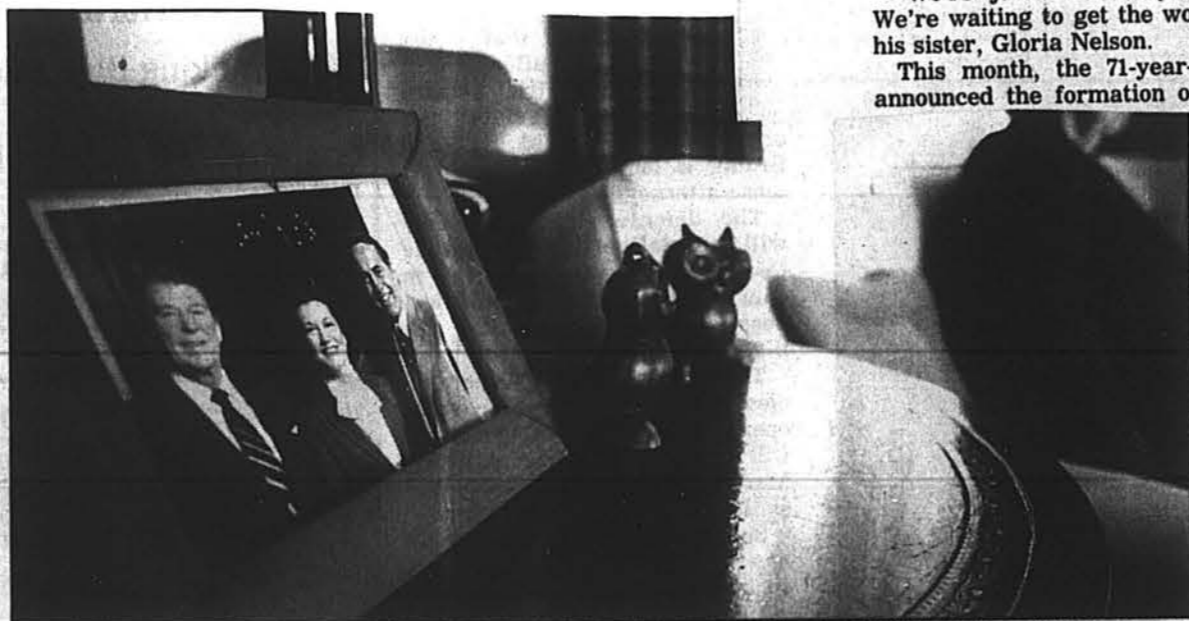
Banker and Russ Townsley, a retired newspaper publisher who has known Dole since 1947, say they often hear the same comment at the coffee shop and at other places in this town of about 5,000: "Why the hell would anybody want to be president?"

Gloria Nelson's husband, Larry, has similar thoughts.

But, he said, "That's up to him. If he wants to run, we'll back him; and if he doesn't want to run, we'll still back him."

Such is the relationship between Bob Dole and his hometown.

Last week, his sisters and Larry Nelson visited the two-bedroom brick home on Maple Street that was purchased by their late parents, Doran and Bina Dole.



Kelly Presnell/Salina Journal

A photograph of Dole, his wife, Elizabeth, and former President Ronald Reagan decorates an end table in the Dole home in Russell.

The home, which now belongs to Bob Dole, is filled with family photographs, including a picture of Dole's grandfather at an old-time rabbit hunt. Others show Dole with Nixon, Reagan and other political friends.

Fun times at home

More than a year ago, about the time his only brother, Kenneth, died, Bob Dole was home often, his sisters said.

"I think Bob can come here and get tranquility and strength," Gloria Nelson said.

The family goes all out during those times. There is usually a dinner with his favorite dishes: fried chicken, homemade ice cream, brownies and potato salad without onions.

In recent months, as Dole prepared for his leadership role in the Senate, trips to Russell have been infrequent. The family mostly keeps in touch by telephone.

Or relatives and friends go to Dole. Gloria Nelson took oatmeal cookies to her brother during a stop at Hays.

"If Bob doesn't come to Russell, Russell will usually find him," Townsley said. "He's always going to be a part of the town."

Friends and family, many of whom have campaigned for Dole in the past, worry about the demands of a presidential race. And, for some, age is a factor, although Norma Jean Steele said she never thinks of age when she looks at her brother.

"He'll keep going until the job gets done," Nelson said. "That comes from our mother and father. They could accomplish so much."

Reputation disputed

Banker said the coffee crowd talks about Dole's qualities when the conversation turns to a possible presidential run.

"His capabilities, his intelligence, his energy are not questioned," he said.

Neither is Dole's compassion for the less fortunate, despite his national reputation over the years as being fiercely partisan. Part of that image dates back to 1976, when Dole was chosen as Gerald Ford's running mate.

Ford, the candidate for president, took the high road, while Dole was put in charge of the front-line attack on their Democratic challengers.

"It was overstated to begin with," Townsley said. "You have to remember that Bob Dole is an

attorney and a very good one. In this case, his client was the president and the Republican party and he was doing what any good attorney would do for his client."

An honest man

Townsley describes Dole as an honest man who has set tremendous goals for himself. The former newspaperman has covered the senator since Dole was Russell County attorney and "I have yet to find any sign of corruption or favoritism."

"It's an oxymoron to talk about an honest politician, but that's what he is."

These are the things Dole's family and neighbors have said for years. Now, people outside Russell have started to listen.

Several days ago, Banker said, a couple from Illinois stopped at his store. Instead of going through Ellsworth on their way to visit her mother in Great Bend, they kept driving and stopped in Russell because they wanted to see Bob Dole's hometown.

"There's a name recognition and visibility he may not have had before and I think it's more positive," Banker said.

"People here are ready. They're ready to go with him one more time."