

Russell Its Character Runs Deep

RUSSELL

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ger to comply. At one time or another, more than 20 honky-tonks, most along Highway 40, kept Russell hopping in the boom years. They included Jack's Shack, the Tokio Club, the Big Apple, the Red Owl and the Musical Pig. And they openly sold bootleg liquor until Kansas repealed Prohibition in 1948 — 15 years after the federal government gave up on it. The honky-tonks also offered gambling of all sorts, from slot machines to roulette, dice and craps. Russell was known to some as Little Reno, others as Little Chicago.

"You have a rough industry, people who lived rough lives, it brings sin," said Jill Holt, secretary-treasurer of the Russell County Historical Society. "It was just wide open, really. Everything was going on."

John Woelk remembers many a student buying a pint on a weekend night to share with high school buddies. And the sales weren't limited to the strip along the highway. You could buy a spiked drink at cafes throughout town.

"If you were old enough to see over the counter and had \$5... if you were 14 and big for your age, you'd get a pint of whiskey," Dean Banker said. "They had maybe 30 honky-tonks, but they had 22 churches. We grew up in this. It was truly a double-standard society. But that's all right."

The big oil companies and independent producers from out of state weren't the only ones to prosper from oil. Farmers who leased the mineral rights to their land got a percentage of the royalties, sometimes making more off oil than farming.

Others, like Anthony Henry Witt Sr., did it themselves and got rich. Witt drilled his own wells, pumping 3 million barrels out of 11 of them in the 1930s, up to 1,000 barrels of oil a day.

"As oil came in, some of the farmers became more prosperous, and some of the students had their own cars and drove to school," Woelk said. "I think at one time people said we had 10 to 15 millionaires. That was in a town of about 6,000."

In 1949, the town boasted 12 new car dealerships, seven farm implement dealers, several machine shops and the biggest oil field production company in the state, said Allen Evans, publisher of the Russell Daily News and Record.

Unlike the oilmen, though, the farmers who struck oil tended to buy more modest Buicks instead of flashy new Cadillacs, Banker said.

"By and large, they were pretty conservative with their money," he said. "They were surprised they had it. It was a true windfall."

Through it all, Russell never lost the spirit of community that got it through both the hard and the wild times.

"If you were really down and out, I think the people who know



Esther White and her husband, Dr. Fagan N. White.



Dean C. Banker, center, with customers Rich Reynolds and Norma Stangle in Banker's, the department store his grandfather opened in 1881.

you would really get behind you," Esther White said. "People were very accepting of each other. If you had a problem, it was their

problem." White, 69, grew up in a small frame house in a predominantly German neighborhood on Rus-

sell's east side. Her parents spoke only German when they arrived from Russia. White picked up English

from other children in the neighborhood and from her older sister, who learned it in school.

Everyone was poor, but they knew how to take care of themselves, White said. Most families had a cow, some chickens and a garden to help feed them through the winter. They put up potatoes, canned vegetables and baked.

Everywhere in those days children worked, doing chores at home or helping on the family farm. When they were old enough, they got jobs to help support their families.

And the community as a whole pulled together. Groups like the American Legion sponsored covered dish suppers and community projects. Businessmen were expected to be involved in community activities. The schools offered regular activities and entertainment for the whole family.

Family members took turns hosting barn dances on Friday nights. And Main Street was the place to be on Saturday — for shopping, movies, a stop at the soda shop or maybe a game or two at one of the town's several pool halls, which were largely family-oriented.

Two drawers in a gray metal file cabinet at Banker's Department Store are stuffed with aging paper charge slips from those years, bills that never were paid.

And years later, White's husband, Dr. Fagan N. White, remem-

bers the many house calls he made, often for no more than a mess of catfish to take home to supper. "We didn't even ask anybody to pay their bill," said White, 84, who delivered about 5,000 Russell babies. Instead, he told his patients, "After the harvest, you can pay it when you want to."

What oil couldn't do to banish the Depression, World War II did.

The war machine needed oil, and Russell County was happy to provide. Production peaked in 1944 at 23,145,000 barrels.

From 1942 to 1946, the government trained pilots at Walker Army Air Field, 15 miles west of town. About 6,000 military men and their dependents and 500 more civilians moved into the area.

A USO center opened in Russell. Benny Goodman's orchestra and other touring big bands regularly played town. Airmen and oilmen packed Main Street every weekend.

"Saturday nights you could hardly move in downtown Russell," said Anthony Witt's son, Cecil, 61, a former Russell City Council member and Russell County commissioner. "It was wild."

The end of the war and the state's repeal of Prohibition signaled the end of the wild ride. From the late 1940s into the '60s, basketball provided most of the excitement in Russell.

The Russell High School Broncos were state basketball champions in 1949, 1952, 1953, 1955 and 1963. And hometown players frequently made the statewide all-star teams.

The fortunes of the oil business ebbed and flowed and finally ebbed for good in 1986, when the bottom fell out of the market.

By 1992, there were more than 2,800 wells in the county. But production had dropped to about 3 million barrels a year.

"It was \$26 (a barrel), and all of a sudden it was \$9.80," Allen Evans said. "The thing about it was, oil and agriculture went down at the same time."

About 1,200 people left town in 1987 and 1988, leaving behind 200 vacant houses.

Russell's population, which peaked at 6,857 in 1954, is 4,783 today.

The passenger train doesn't stop here anymore, and most of the kids who grow up here leave after high school.

But it wouldn't be smart to count Russell out.

A wheat gluten processing plant is going up on the edge of town. The vacant storefronts on Main Street are far outnumbered by the retail shops and offices.

And town leaders are planning a bright future, which might include a presidential library someday.

"It's a good place to raise a family," said Esther White, who has traveled the world but goes to sleep every night in a bedroom just blocks from the one she slept in as a child.

"I can't think of a place I'd rather live," she said.

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Everyone is moving right; the question is, how far?

Thoughts on returning from the Senate majority leader's formal announcement as a candidate for president:

Bob Dole now says he wants to be our Tenth Amendment president.

Some of us have known Bob Dole 30 years and longer, and can't remember his ever mentioning states' rights before. At least not very loud. And even more remarkably, on the very same day Bill Clinton was defending the attitudes of the "angry white male" to a California crowd of discomfited Democrats, a high percentage of them black.

Amazing. And if the truth were known, probably Dole and Clinton were equally surprised to find themselves suddenly that close to the tiny Libertarian Party, which has always held that that government is best that governs least.

After all, Dole is the man who gave us food stamps, wheelchair access to public buildings, championed affirmative action. Clinton is the



Gene Smith

man who almost gave us history's biggest new bureaucracy last year before his health-care train derailed, championed gays in the military and introduced the quota system to the presidential cabinet.

Yet, more recently, Clinton has come within an ace of supporting prayer in public schools and Dole has decided Dan Quayle was right all along on family values. Nor are they alone. Indeed, the whole U.S. Senate now treats the tenets of the House "Contract With America" as a de facto standard, even though they never endorsed it. Just yesterday they were curling their collective lip at the same document.

It just goes to show how far and how fast the whole herd of American politicians has sidled to the right in the past eight months.

Some citizens have questioned whether it's wise for Senator Dole to dance publicly with the National Rifle Association, pledging to try to lift the ban on assault-rifle look-alikes — barely demonized by a Democrat Congress last fall after tremendous pressure from the Clinton White House and some well-financed anti-gun pressure groups.

Who knows? But if you check with a couple of recently defeated Democratic congressmen from Kansas, they'll tell you their exit polling showed their support for the gun ban cost them

20 percent of the vote last Nov. 8.

Some citizens have questioned whether William Jefferson Clinton can now persuade American voters he's been the champion of "the middle class" all along, when he didn't even discover it existed until after last fall's GOP landslide. To do so, they point out, is to imperil the traditional Democratic power base: the urban poor and minorities.

Again, who knows? Dole, Clinton, et al are political catfish who spend their working lives with barbels quivering, sensing changes in the shifting currents of public opinion. They know America has been drifting to the right for 20 years now. Witness the predilection for Republican presidents despite continued Democrat Congresses — the reason Clinton cleverly campaigned as the "candidate of change." When President Clinton instead offered even more intrusive government, a further lurch to the right was certain.

Still, we've had landslide elections in the past without seeing the kind of movement and distance now evident. Why?

The catalyst has been a man who's not even running for president: Newt Gingrich, the new House speaker, whom no one took seriously for years.

"The truly amazing event of the last eight

months is the way Newt Gingrich used the 'Contract With America' to shift the national agenda," said Marlin Fitzwater, press spokesman for both Presidents Reagan and Bush.

"The contract has been a lot more important after the election than it was before. Most importantly, Newt through his flamboyance and his willingness to jump into the media fray, has managed not only to keep the debate in front of the country but to institutionalize it. Now any candidate has to deal with the perception that America is far more conservative than it has been in the last 20 or 30 years."

Gingrich brought "two elements of genius to this that have never been applied before," said Fitzwater, now a semi-retired Washington consultant. "First, the personal drive that bonded the conservative Republicans together and got them to vote as a block. Second, his willingness to throw his body in front of the train" repeatedly "and force his philosophy onto the public; get them to become part of his political thinking."

Fitzwater noted the latest opinion polls show "an amazingly high level of (public) support for the points in the contract" and a much lower level of approval for Gingrich himself — "which says to me he's paid a personal price for keeping the agenda out front."

Without Gingrich "we might've had the elec-

tion, but we never would've had the aftermath," Fitzwater said. "It's moved every politician to the right, no matter where they are in the spectrum. President Clinton is almost an afterthought. (Gingrich has) not only assumed the trappings of presidential leadership, but the real power as well."

Despite current Democratic efforts to paint the 1996 election in class-warfare terms, Fitzwater expects ultimately to see Clinton run as a near-Republican. "The tip-off was the state of the Union message, when he sounded like Ronald Reagan. I think he'll sign most of these bills he's been getting, too."

With the welfare state discredited and disgraced, the Democrats are a party in search of an idea. Attempts to label the Republican Congress as "extremist" and the parties as a matter of "us against them" are straws, unlikely to work. They haven't, since Reagan won California. In '92, Clinton was elected by preempting Republican planks — and then only with the help of a weak GOP incumbent and a charismatic right-wing spoiler candidate.

It's very early yet. But if the terms of the debate are now agreed, the campaign of 1996 will produce a new slogan:

Ask not what your government can do for you, but what you can do for yourself.