

# The Village That Raised Bob Dole

Russell, Kansas, is crawling with Democrats, but there's not a Clinton-Gore sign in sight

BY JOHN YEWELL

The sun is teasing the horizon when I pull into Russell, Kansas. At the Amoco station just off the highway, I decide to do a little pulse-taking in the short time I have in the village that raised Bob Dole.

Russell, a town of barely 4,600 souls, is quiet in the cool Saturday-morning air. From where I stand, I can see gas stations, grain elevators, churches, drilling equipment, an A&W Root Beer franchise, a power plant and lots of Dole-Kemp signs. While paying for my gas, I ask the clerk if he knows Bob. "Oh, yeah, everybody does," he says. "He's made a point of that." He directs me to Bob's house a few blocks away at 1035 N. Maple. The well-maintained house is a modest affair with an American flag in front.

A few blocks further on is the grain elevator Dole's father used to own. Driving past, I find myself on Main Street, about four blocks long, and deserted at this hour. There's not a Clinton-Gore sign to be seen, but nearly every window has a Dole sign—even the local newspaper, *The Russell Daily News*. Neither are there any boarded-up storefronts. Dole has been good for the town, it would seem. One of

the few businesses without a Dole sign is the H&R Block franchise at 835 Main. Perhaps Dole's call to do away with the IRS as we know it is unpopular with that particular small-business owner.

I get out of my car and stroll a bit, and after a few minutes come across a woman with silver hair, walking a terrier named Max. I introduce myself and ask her about Dole. She won't give her name, but she is not afraid to talk. She says she's lived in Russell for 49 years and was a member of the same sorority in college as Dole's first wife, Phyllis Holden, who now lives in Topeka. Phyllis is an occupational therapist and was responsible for nursing Dole back to health after he was seriously wounded in World War II. Then he dumped her, she says. "It was Phyllis who got him back on his feet—not the nurses," she says. "It's a pity nobody talks about Phyllis anymore." To this day, Phyllis doesn't know why Bob just came in one night and asked for a divorce, the woman says. "I don't care for him," she scowls. "He's snide and hateful and thinks he's very clever." But it's a small town, so she's circumspect. "Lots of people are excited," she says. "So the

thing to do is just not talk about it and vote the way you want. Besides, I'm a lifelong Democrat." When we reach her house, I thank her, and she directs me to a farmers' market a block away where I might meet more of Bob's village people. Max, meanwhile, has wandered off into the neighbor's yard to do what dogs love most.

I introduce myself to a guy who looks to be about Dole's age, selling yams out of the back of a pickup truck. Ralph Denning, it turns out, was a year ahead of Dole in high school. He recalls Dole scoring the winning touchdown once in an important football game and says that Dole was a good basketball player, too. "Course in those days it was all set shots." No driving the lane? "No, sir. Coaches didn't tolerate hot-doggers in those days." Not in Bob Dole's village, anyway.

Russell used to be a den of illegal gambling. Ralph says, adding that Dole's father used to have slot machines in the basement of his creamery until the feds cracked down. (Perhaps this is where Dole gets his disdain for big government.) Ralph is a Democrat who spent 10 years on the city council, but he's voting for

Dole. Not everyone is, he says—not even some Republicans. "He usually pulls about 75 percent of the town in his Senate races," Ralph says. "You can't get that big without upsetting a few people."

Just as I'm about to mosey on (which is what one does in Russell), Ralph calls me back. "Norma Jean told me to save some yams for her. Why don't you stick around and talk to her."

Norma Jean?  
"Bob's sister."

A few minutes later a Frumpy Great Plains matron in a loud Dole-Kemp T-shirt approaches. Ralph introduces me, but Norma Jean Steele backs away. "It's Saturday," she says. "I get five calls a day from journalists. I'm taking the day off." I chat with a few other vegetable sellers, and it seems everybody's a Democrat, although most are voting for the hometown hero.

On my way back to the car, I pick up a copy of yesterday's *Russell Daily News*. On the front page is a United Press International story dated Springfield, Illinois. The headline reads: "Quayle: Clinton Has 'Good Chance' to Win."

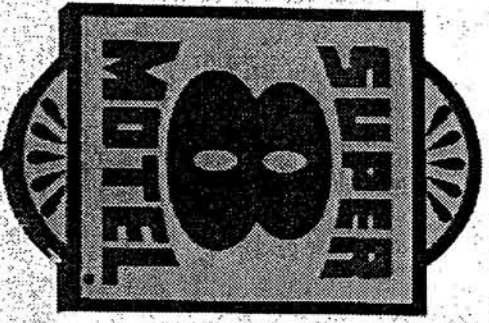


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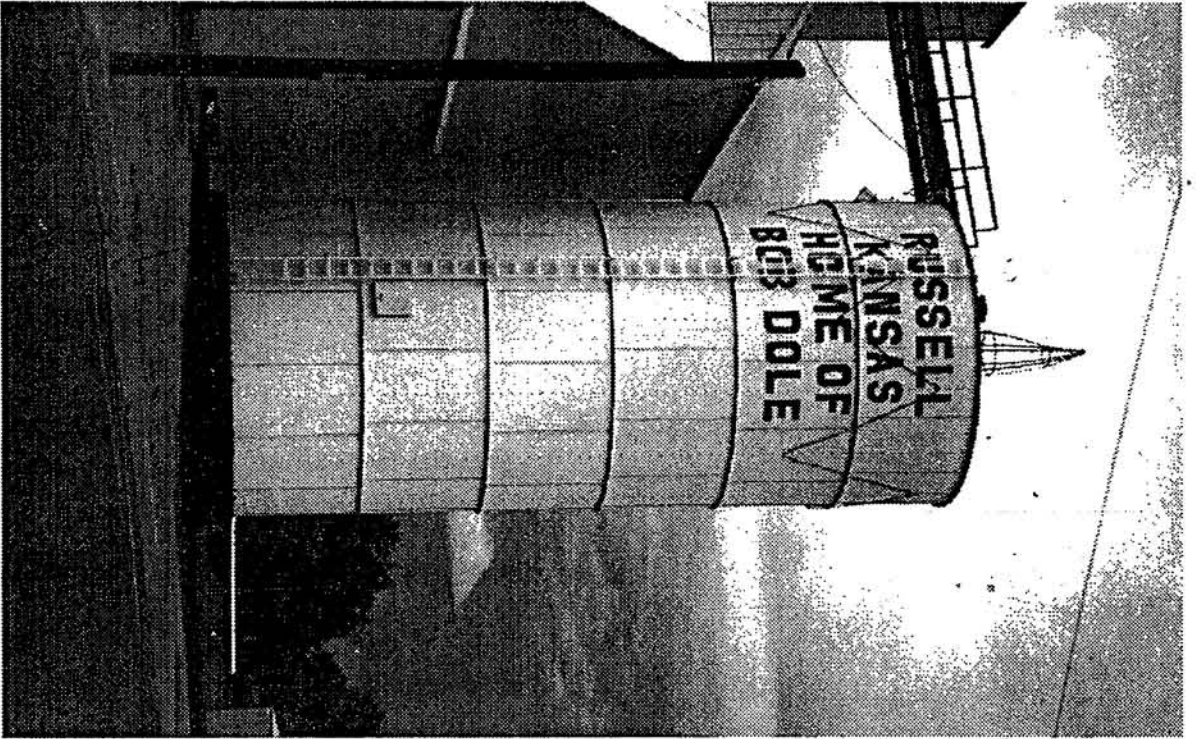
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PHOTOS: JOHN YEWELL

and quotes former Vice President Dan Quayle saying that he thinks Clinton has a good chance to get re-elected. Quayle says he is encouraging people to vote for a GOP Congress even if they don't vote for Dole. Despite the obvious boosterism in the newspaper offices, it seems that the *Russell Daily News* is not afraid to diss the town's favorite son.

Many people who grew up with Bob and formed him still live in his village, and for the most part they support him. If it does take only a family to raise a child, then Bob might just as easily have ended up dealing cards in Vegas. But it does not, and he's not. And Russell — Democrats and all — is prospering. ♦

of their politics, most Russellites stand behind the hometown boy and hope he'll go to Washington.