

A Picnic for a President—in 24 Hours or Less

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One August night in 1976, the Russell High School band rehearsed Hail to the Chief, United Telephone Company laid miles of press phone lines, Community members wrangled up all area chips, hot dogs, BBQ grills, grillmeisters and 40 cases of pop in a water tank on ice. Highway patrolmen from all over northcentral Kansas were temporarily reassigned to Russell. At the eleventh hour, it was decided what the set-up really needed was bleachers.

Kansas City's Kemper Arena had just played host to what would become the last contested convention of a major political party. In the wee hours of August 19, 1976 Gerald Ford, the newly selected Republican nominee for President who had just narrowly defeated challenger Ronald Reagan, gathered his people to select his #2 man, the Vice Presidential nominee.

Surprising most pundits – and the nominee himself – Ford selected US Senator from Kansas Bob Dole, who accepted the President's invitation on one condition – that they kick off their campaign in Dole's hometown of Russell. "We don't want anything formal," Ford staffers told Russell officials over the phone later that day, "a 'homecoming' for Bob Dole, with everyone welcome." The President's men descended on Russell with secret service at 3:00 that afternoon.

Less than 24 hours later, the President and his Vice Presidential candidate arrived in town. It was noon on a sunny Friday, August 20, and they were greeted by a crowd of 1,000s – or, as one newspaper account put it, half the total population of the county.

Speaking from the front lawn of the yellow limestone Russell County Courthouse, an emotional Bob Dole acknowledged the crowd: "If I have had success it was because of the people here...the times I have needed help, the people of Russell helped me."

Dole's friend, local clothier Dean Banker reflected, "We remember when he caught the winning touchdown in the mud against archrival Hays high school."

President Ford, a former speaker of the US House, who in previous years had visited Great Bend and Dodge City to campaign on behalf of his colleague, then-Congressman Dole, echoed these sentiments – of Russellites and their fellow Kansans: "You not only produce grain, cattle, and energy, doggone it, you produce great people."

The visit's single snafu, well-documented by the New York Times, occurred at the Dole family home: the President waiting on the front stoop, Dole's mother Bina discovered they were locked out – and the hidden key was missing. Fortunately, his wife Elizabeth Dole located the key behind a drainpipe. "I never believed I would be in this position when I was county attorney." Dole said in his remarks from the courthouse lawn, "It shows you can come from a small town in America. You don't need all the material things in the world, to succeed, if, indeed, I have succeeded."

That day, named “Bob Dole Day” by Nancy Lane the acting mayor – a Democrat, who as such took gentle ribbing that day by Senator Dole, reminds us that we all start somewhere – and that, when we work together, we can achieve the unexpected against all odds. Or, as Andy Stein, a member of the Ford advance team, put it, expressing awe at the Russell community’s effort: “Usually we have 4-6 days to pull off what they did in 12 hours.”

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