

Woman recalls the good ol' days of forgotten town

RUSSELL — It doesn't look like much.

About eight miles northwest of Independence is the intersection of highways 121 and V. That's where Russell was born — and died.

Russell, named after a Scottish immigrant, once consisted of a post office, general store, cheese factory and school. Many farms dotted the valley's turbulent terrain.

Today, Russell is little more than a memory. The rundown converted store and school buildings serve as reminders of the past. Some farms remain while only remnants of others are visible.

"I don't think there are that many people in Trempealeau County who would even know where Russell is, or was," said Agnes (Roskos) Bautch, who has lived her entire life within walking distance of Russell. "I remember the good things, the family get-togethers, the events at the school. It doesn't seem that long ago. Things have changed so much."

It was 123 years ago that William S. Cramer journeyed from New England and settled with his family in this eight-mile long fertile valley.

Cramer didn't live to see future settlement of the valley by other pioneers with the names of Melsness, Russell, Sylla, Hustlegard, Borst and Warrings. Families named Roskos, Gunderson, Marsolek, Nelton and Hosegard followed.

Cramer enlisted in the Army for the Civil War shortly after settling in 1863 in the valley. He died the same year in a Nashville, Tenn., hospital.

The area continues today to be called Borst Valley, in honor of the Henry Borst, who at one point owned about 1,000 acres of area land.

A small community eventually developed along the dividing line of the towns of Chimney Rock and Burnside.

Mrs. Bautch continues to live on the Russell-area farm her ancestors started 93 years ago.

"It's changed so much," she said. "The store and the school were about all that kept people together. People used to do many, many things together as families, but now, you hardly know who your neighbor is. I miss the store."

The store today is a residence.

The settlement was named in recognition of William Russell, who came to the area in 1871. His son Henry and grandson Russie eventually took over the family farm. Henry Russell served 18 years as chairman of the town of Burnside, and also served as school board clerk.

The store was built and operated in the 1890s by Adolph Melsness. He also ran the post office from 1895 until rural mail delivery in the area ended shortly after the turn of the century.

Stagecoaches dropped mail pouches at the Russell store while making runs from Gilmanton to Independence.

A man named Jensen eventually took over the store. He sold it in 1925 to Mr. and Mrs. Peter J. Sylla. They operated it for more than 40 years.

"I still remember those people and the store," Mrs. Bautch said. "The shelves had about everything you could have wanted. Most things were sold in bulk."

Sylla purchased most of his groceries from a Winona, Minn., wholesale company. Those items were then taken by railroad twice a month to Independence, where Sylla loaded them into a truck or horse-drawn wagon.

The store stocked about everything area residents needed: clothes, farm machinery, food and hardware.

"I remember the penny candy," said Mrs. Bautch, who began attending the local school before age 5. "We weren't allowed to go over to the store during school, but when it got out, we headed over there for a 5-cent ice cream cone."

As transportation improved and the wiggly roads from Russell to either Independence, Lookout, Elk Creek or Gilmanton became conquerable, the Russell store became less popular.

"Places became closer, but it was still a lot easier to get things at the store than to drive into town," Mrs. Bautch said.

The store outlasted the school, which closed when consolidated into the Independence School District in 1962.

"There was a big picnic the last day, where we roasted hot dogs and marshmallows over a fire," Mrs. Bautch said. "At the time it was hard to imagine not ever going to that school again."

The brick school was built in the late 1880s, about the same time the Farmers Cheese Factory was built. The cheese factory was razed many years ago, but the one-room school building remains.

"There were times where there were about 30 students, through eighth grade, at the school, with only one teacher," Mrs. Bautch said.

The names of some of the teachers at the school included Lilac Kelevgard, Gertie Kowsek, Lilly Gunderson, Millie Boland, Elsie Berg, Mildred Stemberg and Loretta Merchant.

"We had outdoor toilets and a pump for water," Mrs. Bautch said. "They once had a raffle to get money to purchase an oil burner for the school. It was so cold in school sometimes that we wore our overcoats."

Mrs. Bautch recalls one neighbor lady during the last year of school who made hot lunch for the students and brought it to the school in a roaster. Most often though the children brought sack lunches.

The school was later used by the Russell Community Club, but that organization has since folded and the building has succumbed to time and weather.

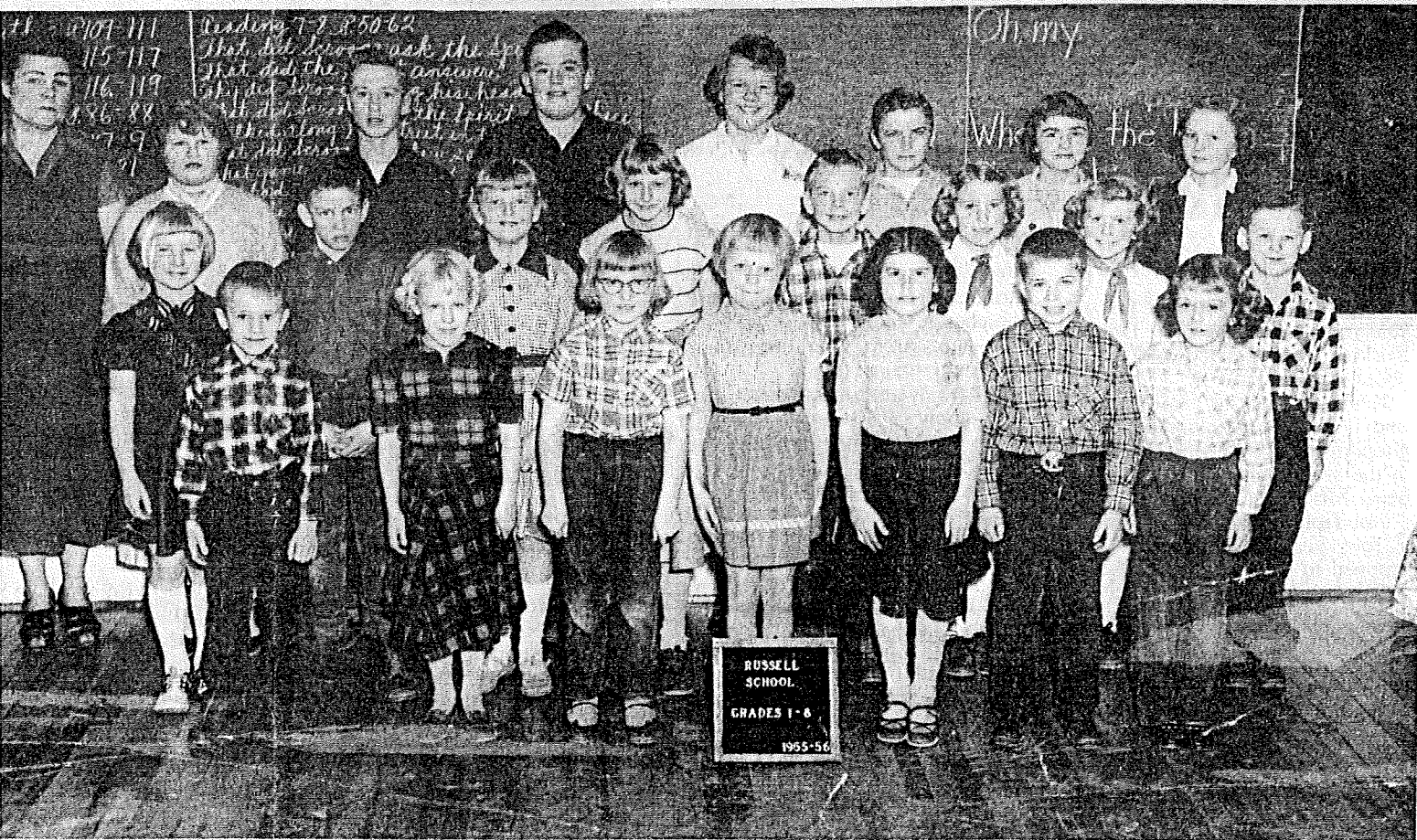
Memories of Russell, including threshing parties and Sunday afternoon picnics with neighbors, cause Mrs. Bautch to smile.

"It's not what's there now — it's what used to be there that makes this a special place for me," she said.

Sylla died in 1969 and his wife sold the business to Dominic Roskos, who operated the store for about seven years.

Roskos sold the store in the mid-1970s after it was robbed at gunpoint. Roskos' wife was alone in the store at the time of the robbery, Mrs. Bautch said.

Jim Tiplady bought the store, but a few years later business was dropped to the point where he sold the building and it became a residence. The old Cities Service gas pump still stands near the building.



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Photo contributed

...sell School closed almost 30 years ago, but memories of the building still exist. Included in this picture are: from left, first Kampa, David Waniorek, Judy Miland, Judy Whittman, Larry Miland, Cherrlyn Hestekin, Joanne Hestekin, Roger Boskos; third row, teacher



Staff photo by Chuck Rupnow

The former Russell Store was the hub of activity when this Trempealeau County community blossomed. The store, which became a residence

about a decade ago, and the Russell School, right, are all that remain as evidence of the community's existence.