



P.O. Box 245,
RUSSELL, KS 67665
785-483-6640
rchs@russellks.net
russellkshistory.com

AGRICULTURE, ACADEMICS & AUTOS MUSEUM

825 N. Kansas Street
(RCHS office)

FOSSIL STATION MUSEUM

331 N. Kansas
(Historic Ave.)

OIL PATCH MUSEUM

North West Side of
I-70 & 281 Exit

GERNON HOUSE

808 N. Kansas Street

HEYM - OLIVER HOUSE

503 N. Kansas Street

**All entities available by
appointment year around
call 785-483-6640 and leave
a message, or email
rchs@russellks.net
to set a date.**

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Tim Boxberger, President
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Board Member:
Marsha Radke Brown

FALL 2026



The 2026 summer season came to a close with over 200 visitors to the museums. Travelers and tour groups enjoyed learning about and seeing Russell County History. The museums hosted an RV group visiting the area and the AAA Museum hosted the Russell County Leadership group meeting in September.

AMOS MORRIS MEMORABILIA DONATED

The Amos Morris family recently donated memorabilia to be displayed in the AAA Museum's sports room. Items donated include photographs, game stats, recordings of games, letters and other memorabilia representing the legacy of Amos Morris with Russell High School.



HOLLANDS DONATE CECIL BRICKER PARK

The Cecil Bricker Park previously owned and created by Nancy G. Holland in memory of past community member Cecil Bricker was recently donated to the Historical Society (RCHS) by Nadia and Michael S. Holland II.

Continued on next page...



CECIL BRICKER PARK...

The park located on the corner of Main at 8th Street has been available for use by the community for downtown events since the late 1990's. This location has a lengthy history starting back to 1869, see story below. Two buildings were erected on this location, one in 1878 and the other in 1900. For many years the buildings were known as the J.H. Hill Hardware & Implement store. In 1932 the buildings were remodeled by E.M. Wentworth. Through the years the buildings served many purposes including a restaurant, barbershop, jewelry and hardware stores. The upstairs contained doctor's and dentist offices, serving as a hospital with operating rooms and laboratory. Both buildings burned down in November of 1950 and the area remained a vacant lot until Cecil Bricker Park was created. The mural overlooking the park was created by Victoria artist Rick Rupp in 2011 commissioned by the Russell's Original Art Review organization. Our wonderful volunteers immediately got busy when RCHS took possession this September to clean up the park along with installing a ramp on the east side. The pavilion also needed a new roof and will eventually have new lights installed.



THE KIT'S FORK ATTACK — BEFORE THERE WAS A RUSSELL

Two years before the Northwestern Colony arrived and established the community that became Russell, Fossil Creek Station was a lonely railroad outpost on the Kansas plains.

On the morning of May 28, 1869, seven railroad workers left Fossil Creek Station aboard a handcar to perform their day's work along the Kansas Pacific Railroad west of the station.

Among them was Adolph Roenigk, who later recorded a detailed account of what happened.

The men had recently been warned that Native American parties might be moving north, but as they worked along the railroad that morning, they were suddenly surprised by mounted Cheyenne emerging from a nearby ravine.

That ravine would become known as **Kit's Fork**.

The railroad men attempted to escape, and a running fight developed as they tried to make their way back toward Fossil Creek Station.

By the time it was over, **two railroad workers were dead and four others wounded**.

The two men killed were **Alexander McKeever, of Canada, and John Lynch, of New York**.

The surviving men reached Fossil Creek Station, where the wounded took shelter. The attackers later damaged the railroad track, causing a train to derail.

The following morning, the bodies of McKeever

and Lynch were brought back to Fossil Creek Station. According to Roenigk, they were wrapped in blankets and buried about 300 yards south of the railroad tracks and a little east of the water tank, near what later became **Main Street in Russell**.

Their graves became one of the earliest landmarks of the settlement. A railroad guide published in 1872—only three years after the attack—reported that the graves could still be seen on Main Street and that a small stone identified:

**John Lynch of New York
and Alexander McKeever of Canada
Killed May 28, 1869.**

The wounded railroad men were taken to the government hospital at Fort Harker. Station keeper John Cook and his family left for Salina, and Fossil Creek Station was temporarily abandoned.

Less than two years later, on April 19, 1871, the Northwestern Colony arrived from Wisconsin.

Fossil Station would become Russell.

But before the streets were laid out, before the courthouse, homes and businesses, and before there was a town called Russell, two railroad workers already rested beneath the prairie soil near what would become its Main Street.

Their deaths on May 28, 1869 became remembered in Russell County history as the **Kit's Fork attack**.

RECENT DONATIONS:



Ardean Boxberger and family donated a horse hair full length coat and gloves worn by GJ Boxberger in the late 1890's.



Juanita Flegler shown with RCHS board member Karla Berry donated a Centennial Trinity Lutheran Church commemorative plate.



A saddle used by Nancy Aspegren was donated by the Aspegren family. Nancy was a member of the Russell Saddle Club and used the saddle in many Russell parades.

'HISTORICAL INTERACTION'



RCHS Board Members Karla Berry and Laura Thomas are preparing a presentation entitled "Historical Interaction", for Russell's two Elementary Schools After School Programs. Students in Grades K-6 will be encouraged to interact with, and ask questions about various items that represented daily life both at home and at school, in past years.

School items may include a lunch pail, chalkboards, and a wooden paddle. Household items such as a rug beater, rotary telephone, manual typewriter, toys, etc. will be available as well.

The presentation is tentatively scheduled for Spring, 2027. We are looking forward to sharing a piece of History with our young people.

**PLEASE JOIN US ON
THURSDAY,
NOVEMBER 12TH
AT 5:30 P.M.
FOR OUR
ANNUAL MEETING
AAA MUSEUM, 825 N. KANSAS**



**COME LEARN ABOUT
OUR 2027 PROJECTS**



Russell in 1873 looked much the same as any pioneering town on the Kansas prairie. Lumber was shipped in on the train to build stores and business like these. Wooden structures, combined with a lack of water, set the stage for the many devastating fires towns in Russell County would experience.

The Cooper ranch is shown with the new limestone farmhouse under construction in 1909. Leslie Winfield "L.W." Halbe found an inexpensive box camera and began snapping pictures when he was 15, creating a record of rural life in central Kansas at the turn of the 20th century. Below, the Cooper family assembled on the porch to celebrate the completion of construction several years later. This ranch was one of many built near the Saline river, taking advantage of excellent grazing and proximity to that rarest commodity-water-through by the river's name, it was not suitable for irrigation.



The new county courthouse opened in 1903, with a soaring clock tower added in 1908. Built of native limestone, it was surrounded by landscaped grounds and was a true showcase. When birds discovered the tower they began nesting in such great numbers that when the building was expanded in 1949, the tower was dismantled.



In prehistoric times, Kansas was covered by the great inland sea. Vast deposits of limestone were formed, and early residents began to quarry this resource. Soft and easily worked when freshly quarried, limestone hardens when exposed to air, forming the exceptional building blocks and "post rock" fence posts for which the area is known. These men are quarrying stones that will be used to build the new courthouse.



This is the Milberger Days Festival in the early 1910s. It is an annual event, featuring a parade and community picnic and celebrating the founding of the town. Community days like this helped lessen the sense of isolation many settlers felt from building a life on the prairie. The C. Milberger General Merchandise Store and post office is visible on the right.

Russell, Kansas: From Fossil Station to a Prairie City

The story of Russell, Kansas, is the story of people who looked across an almost treeless prairie and imagined a community where none yet existed. It is a history shaped by the railroad, agriculture, immigration, county-seat rivalry, limestone buildings, oil wells, highways, local businesses, churches and schools—and by generations of ordinary people whose lives became part of Russell's identity.

Long before Russell was a town, the region was part of the vast central Kansas plains. The coming of transportation routes began changing that landscape. The Butterfield Overland Dispatch established Fossil Creek Station in the area in 1865, and the Kansas Pacific Railway reached the vicinity in 1867. That same year, the Kansas Legislature established Russell County, named in memory of **Captain Avra P. Russell**, a Kansas cavalry officer who died from wounds received at the Battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas, during the Civil War.

But the permanent community of Russell really began in the spring of **1871**.

A Colony Arrives on the Prairie

The founders were members of the **Northwestern Colony Association of Ripon, Wisconsin**, led by Benjamin Pratt. Rather than arriving in covered wagons, the colonists came west aboard the railroad. They left Wisconsin on April 17 and arrived at Fossil Station on **April 19, 1871**. Contemporary accounts put the group at about seventy people, including five families.

What greeted them was hardly a town.

The 1883 *History of the State of Kansas*—the same A. T. Andreas volume preserved in our Russell County materials—described an immense prairie with little development around Fossil Station. The railroad supplied three boxcars, and those cars, along with the colonists' passenger coach, became temporary homes while buildings could be erected.

The settlers surveyed streets, blocks and lots during April and May and renamed the settlement **Russell**. The Kansas Pacific contributed land to the colony, while the settlers acquired additional land immediately south of it.

Construction began almost immediately.

H. W. Tustin and Stillman Mann erected a little 16-by-16-foot shanty that housed both families and also served as a boarding house. L. Bicknell erected the first frame building during the summer of 1871 at Ninth Street and Kansas Avenue. Tustin established what the early his-

tory identifies as Russell's first store. A frame school-house went up in July, and by December Stillman Mann had opened an early hotel at Main and Ninth streets.

The transformation was remarkably fast.

By the end of 1871—only about eight months after the town was laid out—**Russell had approximately 200 residents.**

The Battle for the County Seat

The settlers understood that becoming the seat of Russell County government could determine the town's future. But Russell had a formidable competitor: **Bunker Hill**.

When county government was organized in 1872, the rivalry became intense. Bunker Hill initially emerged as county seat after more votes were cast there during the county's organizational election. The disagreement grew into a prolonged political and legal struggle between the communities.

Finally, an election was ordered for **April 23, 1874**. Russell won.

From that point forward, Russell remained the county seat. The victory stimulated construction and commerce and helped establish the community as the governmental and business center of the county.

The prairie town was becoming permanent.

Residents increasingly turned to **native limestone and brick** for construction. One particularly important survivor is the limestone house built in 1872 by blacksmith **Nicholas Gernon**, today preserved as part of Russell County's historical heritage.

Schools, stores, churches, hotels and meeting halls followed. Newspapers chronicled virtually every part of community life. The *Western Kansas Plainsman* began publication in Russell in 1872, followed by the *Russell County Record* in 1874.

Building a Community

Russell's story cannot be separated from the farms and smaller communities surrounding it.

Immigration brought an especially important new population to the county beginning in the 1870s: **Volga Germans**, whose descendants profoundly influenced the religious, agricultural, culinary and cultural character of Russell County.

Agriculture became the economic foundation of the region. Wheat fields, cattle, grain elevators and farm businesses connected Russell with the surrounding countryside. The introduction of **Turkey Red wheat** helped transform agriculture in the county.

By 1910, Russell had grown to **1,692 people**. Contemporary descriptions listed two banks, three weekly newspapers, an opera house, public library, grain elevators, hotels, telegraph and express offices and other businesses.

Russell had become something its founders could only have imagined when they slept in railroad cars in 1871: a substantial western Kansas town.

Then came the event that would transform Russell County again.

Oil Changes Everything

In 1923, oil was discovered west of Russell.

The discovery ushered in a new economic era. Russell County developed into an important Kansas petroleum-producing region, and the boom brought new workers, businesses, investors and money into the community.

Oil became intertwined with Russell's identity.

Service stations, drilling companies, lease operators, equipment suppliers and restaurants serving oil-field workers became part of everyday life. The history wasn't made exclusively by men, either. Among the remarkable stories preserved in our material is **Margaretta Billings**, remembered as the "Oil Operator Queen." After the death of her husband, Alva, she assumed responsibility for oil production and supervised producing wells while raising her family.

Russell's location also mattered. The old railroad town became a highway town. U.S. 40 carried generations of travelers through Russell, while U.S. 281 provided the important north-south route. Later, Interstate 70 would change travel patterns again.

Hotels, cafés, filling stations, theaters and Main Street businesses served both local residents and travelers. The grand **Hotel Holland**, local restaurants, neighborhood stores, the Isis Theatre, service stations and countless other businesses weren't merely commercial establishments. They were places where Russell residents met, celebrated, worked, ate, argued, courted, heard the news and watched their children grow up.

That everyday history matters just as much as the major events.

The People Are the History

Russell's history is filled with celebrations, school activities, fishing derbies, lodge picnics, church suppers, county fairs, dances, businesses opening and closing, wartime departures and joyful homecomings.

It includes tragedy as well.

On **October 24, 1944**, a military bomber from Walker Army Air Field crashed near Russell, killing all twelve airmen aboard. Decades later, Russell resident Karl Newacheck remembered hearing the terrible sound of the crash while he was an eighth-grade student. Stories such as his remind us that national events like World War II were also intensely local experiences.

Russell also produced people whose influence extended far beyond the county line. Most famously, **Bob Dole**, born and raised in Russell, carried the values and experiences of his hometown through a remarkable career in Congress, the United States Senate and national politics.

But Russell's history isn't only the history of famous people. We have so many success stories from our town. To many to name here, but it also belongs equally to the shopkeeper who swept the sidewalk before opening in the morning; the farmer watching the sky for rain; the child walking into a one-room school; the waitress pouring coffee before daylight; the oil worker coming home covered in dust and grease; the volunteer firefighter answering a nighttime alarm; the church organist; the newspaper editor; the teacher; the railroad worker; and the families who buried their loved ones in Russell County soil.

That is Russell's real story.

From approximately seventy colonists stepping off a Kansas Pacific train in April 1871, Russell became a community built and rebuilt by successive generations. Railroad town, county seat, agricultural center, oil town and highway community—each era left another layer.

Today, when we preserve an old photograph, newspaper clipping, business ledger, letter, map, school record or family story, we preserve another piece of that larger history.

And that is why Russell's history can never be reduced simply to dates and buildings.

Russell is the accumulated story of the people who called this place home—and preserving their stories ensures that the community they built will not be forgotten.

Dear Friends of Russell County History,

The Russell County Historical Society is at an important point in its history. As Russell County scales back the core funding that has helped sustain our organization for decades, we must build a stronger, more permanent financial foundation for the future.

We are asking you to consider a meaningful gift to the **RGHS Legacy Fund**, our endowment held through the Russell County Area Community Foundation.

Our goal is to build this endowment to provide dependable annual support for our museums, historic buildings, collections, archives, educational programs, and preservation work—regardless of what future county budgets may bring.

Please consider a gift of \$500, \$1,000, \$5,000, \$10,000 or more. Memorial gifts, estate gifts, appreciated assets, and other planned gifts can also create a lasting legacy.

We understand that some donors may prefer to have their gift available for the Society's **current and immediate needs rather than placed in the restricted Legacy Fund**. Unrestricted gifts to the **RGHS General Fund** are equally appreciated and allow us to use your support where it is needed most for operations, programs, collections, buildings, and preservation.

This is about more than meeting today's expenses. **It is about making sure the history entrusted to us will still be protected 25, 50, and 100 years from now.**



To support the RGHS Legacy Fund:

Make checks payable to
RCACF – RGHS Legacy Fund -

To support the RGHS General Fund:

Make checks payable to
Russell County Historical Society.

Mail either gift to: Russell County Historical Society, P.O. Box 245, Russell, KS 67665

The Russell County Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, and contributions may be tax-deductible as allowed by law.

Whether you choose to support our permanent Legacy Fund or our immediate needs through the General Fund, your gift helps preserve Russell County history for generations to come.

Thank you for your consideration and support.

Sincerely,

Board of Directors, Russell County Historical Society

Funds that Make a Difference
To Grow an Even Better Russell County Area

LIVE A LEGACY LEAVE A LEGACY



An affiliate of Greater Northwest Kansas Community Foundation



RUSSELL COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Membership & Donation Form

Name(s): _____

Business/Organization: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ ZIP: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Please select your membership or gift:

☐ Annual Membership — \$50

☐ Lifetime Membership — \$500

Membership includes our newsletter, events, and annual meetings.

☐ **General Fund Donation:** \$ _____

Supports current museum, operating, and preservation needs.

Make check payable to: Russell County Historical Society

☐ **RCHS Legacy Fund Donation:** \$ _____

A permanent endowment held through the Russell County Area Community Foundation to support historical preservation.

Make check payable to: RCACF – RCHS Legacy Fund

Gift Details (optional)

☐ In honor of ☐ In memory of

Person, family, or business: _____

Project you would like to support: _____

☐ Please keep my gift anonymous.

☐ Please mail me a donation receipt.

Legacy Fund receipts are provided by the Russell County Area Community Foundation.

Payment or Pledge

Mail this form and your contribution to:

Russell County Historical Society • P.O. Box 245 • Russell, KS 67665

785-483-6640 • rchs@russellks.net

Main Office: 825 N. Kansas St., Russell, KS 67665

Thank you for helping preserve Russell County history!