

George R. Russell, PE/LS 696, retired
University of Idaho, Associate Dean Emeritus

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Many of us know George Russell as our former professor or Associate Dean at the University of Idaho's College of Engineering. He worked there for nearly 40 years. I know him as a father figure, a friend, a neighbor, but most of all as my mentor. George has guided me through much of my 35 yr career, giving advice and answering my questions not only about engineering and surveying but about life. I followed him in service on the Idaho Professional Engineering Board and also on the Moscow City Council. Often I would go to him seeking help with a particular issue. Many times it concerned clients or constituents who might want special treatment. He would always say "Oh, Larry, you know what to do. Don't worry about what others think. They will get over it." He was almost always right.

Last year George's wife, Lois, passed away. They were married 55 years. George continues to live by himself in their same house in Moscow. So when I received an invitation in October from the Engineering/Surveying board to a dinner honoring past board members I immediately thought of George. I called him and arranged for us to drive to Boise together to attend.

Over the past 40 years George has shared many stories about his family and himself. But I realized a two day trip in the car together would be a treat I could not pass up. I knew Lois and George had five children. I knew Robie was his oldest son and the apple of his eye. I always thought Robie was short for Robert. I didn't understand it was an old family name. After Robie came Julie, educated as a civil engineer and also married to a chemical engineer. George is so proud of her that when people inquire he hands out her business card. Ralph was born next, named after his grandfather. Ralph manages the family ranch at White Bird, Idaho. Ralph was also a surveyor for a time. Connie is a nurse from Billings, MT. She calls her dad every day and comes over to see him once a month. A nine hour drive each way. And last is Sarah who is also married to an engineer who works for Boeing. George loves his kids and also loves engineering and surveying.

We agreed to meet at George's house in Moscow at 9:00am to begin our trip. The mode of travel would be his 1997 Mercury Grand Marquee with me as the driver. It now has 65,000 original miles on it. It's huge. I called it the SS Exxon. The trunk looks like a mini storage unit. As I pulled up to his door I noticed several boxes out in the driveway waiting to be loaded into the trunk. He told me they were peaches to be delivered to the ranch on our way down to Boise. He also had a bundle of special towels he had received from Connie to be delivered to his friend, Cheryl an EMT, that still operates the local café in White Bird.

As we traveled along US 95 I was astounded at the times he would casually say “There’s a section corner on top of that hill” or “there’s a quarter-corner across the river.” He gave me a running account of the entire route and its history. He talked about all of the people he knew in the Transportation Department and how they contributed to improving the highway throughout the years. This in itself would have been worth the trip but I wanted to know more about his family history. So I asked.

George’s grandmother, Isabella Kelly, moved from Staten Island, NY to North-Central Idaho with her father in the mid 1850’s. John Kelly was a miner in search of the new found gold in that area. In 1863, at age 15 yr, little redheaded Isabella married another minor named Sam Hutchinson in Florence, Idaho. They later settled in the White Bird area.

The Battle of White Bird took place in 1877. The Nez Perce Indians had been at odds with the settlers in the area for some time and the Government had sent out the Cavalry to quell any insurrections. Sam was worried about his wife and decided to send her and three other women into Lewiston until things quieted down. She had a horse and some belongings and with her friends they traveled at night and hid during the day. A couple of days into her flight she was captured by a band of Nez Perce. She was eventually let go when the women of the tribe convinced the men that she was a good person and had taught them many valuable traits about sewing and cooking. The day before the battle Sam was killed by the Indians.

The Cavalry engaged the Indians and eventually chased them all the way into Montana. A few days after the battle another miner named Edward Robie came across Isabella and her friends and took them back to Fort Idaho which was located northeast of Grangeville. Not long after that Isabella became Mrs. Edward Robie.

I said to George, “So that’s where Robie’s name came from? That’s an odd name; I’ve never heard it before.” He just looked up a little and said the Robies came to Massachusetts in 1639.

George says he doesn’t know when the ranch house was built but that his mother was born in the house in 1888. The house is located on a sand bar about 6 miles up stream from the town of White Bird. You can see it from US Highway 95 a few miles south of the base of White Bird Hill. Not far from White Bird the Salmon River flows into the Snake River and up stream on the Snake is a place called Pittsburg Landing. Many of today’s river rafters put in here to float the Snake.

Ralph Russell was born and raised in the Wallowa Valley of Oregon. As a teenager he migrated down to Pittsburg Landing to find work. In the early 1900’s, on a trip to White Bird, he met Sarah Alice Robie and in 1914 they were married. Ralph and Alice, as she liked to be called, moved to White Bird to live in the Robie house and George was born there in 1921. George had a younger brother also named Ralph.

When George finished eighth grade he told his father that he was going to quit school and work on the ranch. Well, his father told his mother and she put a stop to that right away. He not only finished high school but went on to the University of Idaho where he received his Engineering degree in 1943. His brother, Ralph, worked as a teacher of agriculture in White Bird for a time but died at the age of 32 yr from an inoperable brain tumor.

The Russell family owns 1.5 miles of property on the Salmon River along with another 900 plus acres in the surrounding area. The old maps call the area Russell Bar. As we stood in the back yard of the ranch house, talking with his son Ralph, George looked up at the hills across the river and said "There's a section corner up in that saddle and a quarter-corner down by the river. Of course the meander corner has been gone for years." George and Ralph were discussing their continued attempt to preserve their property lines. They have recently hired Pete Ketchum, PLS to assist them in this endeavor.

While George was in the house I asked Ralph where all of the canned peaches came from. He told me that his dad and Robie go to Hood River, Oregon every year in the fall and buy them. It's a ritual. Before we left Ralph's partner, Cindy, gave us a large bag of cookies which she had just finished baking. She had them all divided into groups labeled chocolate chip, butterscotch chip, peanut butter, etc. Just perfect for two old engines. As we left the ranch I ask George about the little air strip located along the highway right by the entrance to the house. He said it belongs to the State. He sold them the land many years ago so they could build this emergency landing strip. It shows on all of the newer maps of the area.

As we continued on to Boise I asked George what he did after he graduated from college. He told me he originally went to Alaska to work for the Alaska Road Commission. Not long after he arrived WWII was in full swing so he applied for a commission in the Navy Civil Engineering Corps. He was accepted and sent out to the Aleutian Islands to build air strips. He said the wind blew up to 130 knots. It was a difficult time but good experience. The best part was it didn't last long. In 1944 he returned to Idaho and began doing some work at the UI. In 1947 he married his first wife and in 1948 Robie was born. The marriage only lasted a couple of years and she took Robie to California. In 1949 George had moved back to Alaska to work for the Department of Roads again, this time in Juneau where he met Lois. She was the secretary to the Director and he was a young engineer. At first she wouldn't have anything to do with him because he was still married to his first wife, though in the process of getting a divorce. She did invite him over to play bridge once with some other people but that was it. He eventually got divorced and began to court Lois. They married in 1952 and Julie was born in Juneau in 1953 .

In 1953 the Russell family moved back to Moscow and the University of Idaho. Ralph and Connie were born in Grangeville and Sarah was born in Moscow. Robie came to visit during the summers and enjoyed it so much he eventually came to school at the UI. As I said before, George loves his children and now especially his grandchildren. He

proudly told me that James, Ralph's son, just graduated from the UI in Chemical Engineering and has moved to Alaska to work on the North Slope, following in his grandfather's footsteps.

We arrived at the dinner in Boise a little late but that's OK. George, 88 yr, takes a little longer to get ready now. He and his good friend Sam Barton, 95 yr, are the senior members of the Board. Respected and loved by all, they both got a chance to reminisce about their time on the Board.

The next morning we met George Eidam and Don McCarter for breakfast. What a treat it was to just sit and listen to these three. All of them, along with Sumner Johnson and Archie Biladeau, signed my engineering license 30 years ago. I just sat back and thought to myself how fortunate I was to have this opportunity.

The drive home was less eventful. We stopped at the ranch again and this time spent some time inside the house visiting. The walls are filled with history. An old oil cloth covers the kitchen table. It looked like one George's mother might have used. We visited some more about surveying and the way the river was changing. George told me there was a time that it measured 130,000 CFS. Now it might get to 90,000. As we drove along the highway I saw the White Bird Cemetery. He told me his grandmother has the biggest tomb stone in White Bird. I asked if his grandfather was buried there. He said no, he was buried at the ranch, but both his parents and Lois were buried there. I said I bet you have a space reserved, don't you? He just smiled and said yes.

As we left for home George seemed very comfortable with himself. He should be. What a legacy he has given to so many of us. He dropped off to sleep only to wake up long enough to say "There's a section corner up that draw."