

Hometown

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Woman recollects on 88

Nellie Jewel (Owens) Ruge has seen city, county grow



Kathleen Purcell photo

Nellie Ruge has lived in Wright City for 88 years and still puts in a day's work at Farmers & Merchants Bank. She has watched the city grow with the times, and she sees a bright future for Wright City.

**By Kathleen Purcell
Correspondent**

When Nellie Jewel Owens was born in 1913, there were less than 400 people living in Wright City, there was no

Wright City High School and a trip to St. Louis required a train ticket.

This January, Nellie Jewel (Owens) Ruge will celebrate her 88th birthday. A lifelong resident of Wright City, Ruge has seen her hometown

blossom from an isolated, rural stop along the railroad between St. Louis and Kansas City, to one of the western-most suburbs of the St. Louis area.

"My first memory of Wright City is the railroad," Ruge said. "My father was the section foreman here, so we always had a pass and we would visit our relatives in Pendelton and St. Louis."

During her life, Ruge has seen transportation revolutionize life in Wright City.

"I can remember when there were very few cars in town, and only the wealthy people had them," she said. "The first car I remember was owned by August Blattner. I think it was called a 'Moon.' One time Mr. Blattner let me drive it through town three blocks or so. I was probably 13, and I thought I was in hog heaven."

Most Wright City residents at that time traveled by horse and buggy, Ruge said.

"I can remember going up and down Elm Street, and it would just be lined up horses and buggies," she said. "The farmers would come in, and they'd bring eggs and trade those for groceries."

The Owens family lived on Highway F, on the site where the Honey Hole store is today. That house burned to the ground when Ruge was 12, and the family moved into town.

Before the fire, Ruge walked to school every day, she said.

"We walked all that way from up there to where the middle school is now," she said. "It was a two-room school then. They had first through

Living

years of memories

fourth grade, then fifth through eighth grade. Before I got out of eighth grade they established a two-year high school. People who wanted to go longer than that went to Warrenton. The year I was in 10th grade they went to a four-year high school, so I was able to graduate from Wright City High School in 1931."

Ruge saw the birth of Interstate 70 in Warren County.

"There was one place where they needed to scoop out some dirt," she said. "I can remember they had a horse pulling a scoop, and they would scoop out as much as that horse could pull. Before they opened it up to traffic, we kids would get on our roller skates and bicycles and ride up and down the highway.

"The year they closed off the highway to put in the Wright City overpass, we had a bridge celebration because we could go back and forth easily. That was how the Strassenbash started."

In 1931, after graduating from high school, Ruge went to work at Farmers & Merchants Bank.

"I made \$30 a month, and Mr. George Blattner, who was the cashier and my boss, said, 'You're doing such a good job I'm going to give you a raise.' So he gave me \$32.50. That was when Pepsi Cola was a nickel, and gasoline was 'fill 'em up' for a dollar."

Ruge still goes to work every day at Farmers & Merchants Bank, but her job has changed over the years.

"Back then we had maybe 300 accounts," she said. "Now we have thousands of accounts, and everything is computerized and different. The work was more manual then. We have our original old safe that held all the money we needed then. Now it would-

n't even hold our \$1 bills."

While working at the bank, Nellie Owens met her future husband, Corwin Ruge, whose family had a part interest in the bank.

"On the first date I had with him he said, 'I'm going to marry you.' And I said, 'Oh yes?' Shows what I knew. We got married in '34," she said.

The depression brought a change to banking in Warren County, Ruge said.

"There were two banks in Wright City then," she said. "Wright City Bank and Farmer's & Merchant's Bank. Then in 1930, the Wright City bank did not qualify for FDIC insurance and we did, and so we bought their good loans and their good deposits, and we took them over. We are the only bank in Warren County that came through the depression without having to reorganize, rename or sell out. This year is our 90th anniversary."

After 88 years in Wright City, Ruge has developed a feel for where her hometown is going, and she foresees a period of dramatic growth coming.

"It's going to bloom," she predicted. "There are new businesses coming, and we'll need people to work in them. My one wish for Wright City is that we extend our boundaries and take in the surrounding area so we're not hemmed in."

Ruge said things already have grown drastically in the area since her upbringing.

"I wish I could tell you how much I've seen things change," she said. "There was a time when you could have bought all of Wright City for a meager amount of money. Today, one acre sells for thousands of dollars. I'd sure like to see what the next 20 years will bring to Wright City and Warren County."