

*“The Times-Commoner Reporter Visits Alma” – May 1967*

*“Earl Allmon - Old-Timer Recalls Alma Highlights”*

*By Diana Smith*

In 76 years, a fellow sees a lot of things happen, but certain ones stand out more than others in his mind.

That’s been the experience of Earl ALLMON, Alma’s busy barber, who has lived in and around Alma for more than three quarters of a century.

One vivid picture that has stayed with Allmon all these years was in 1898, when he was a boy, during the Spanish-American War. About 15 or 20 volunteers from Alma were standing on the railroad platform, waiting to leave, and the Alma band played a stirring farewell tune which was apparently very moving to all. He still remembers the tears in the eyes of those boys as they listened to the band play, right before they left.

His happy school days at Happy Hollow School over on the Brubaker Road, when they moved outside of town, also left an impression on Allmon. His teacher was Harry Rainey, now a farmer in the Brubaker community. There were about 60 students enrolled in the eight grades at that time, the biggest enrollment the school ever had, he believes.

There was no trouble at school, he says, no fighting among the children, and it was a very pleasant school. (We wonder if it was the beautiful surroundings or home-taught good manners that produced the peaceful atmosphere enjoyed by the youngsters.)

The big fire in 1908 which destroyed Alma’s business district is another sight he hasn’t forgotten. He can still recall the piles of merchandise and canned goods in the streets where they had been moved hurriedly out of the stores. As all business buildings on both sides of the street were wooden structures, they all went up in flames and every business was burned out. It was never rebuilt quite the same.

Earl Allmon has been barbering for 53 years now and even has customers coming up to him from Salem. He learned his trade at the St. Louis Barber College, which he entered in 1914, and has been working at it ever since. For a while, he tried farming, but was not satisfied with it. He likes barbering and enjoys people.

A change has occurred in the barber business since World War I, says Allmon. Before the war, most men used to be shaved at the barber shop. But during the war, the Army issued razors to all men in service, and they had to learn to shave themselves. Afterwards, the returning veterans simply continued shaving themselves and this custom prevailed. Barbers were not sorry, observes Allmon. Shaving was always a nuisance to them.

If the first war had lasted a little longer, Allmon would have been in, he recalls because his name was next on the list to go. Although he was married, they had no children, so his number was coming up. He had considered several times enlisting anyway, and at one time was deferred because of farming, but he and the Army had never quite gotten together. Then the war ended abruptly, just when his name was in sight.

Acres and acres of pears, mushmelons, peaches, apples, tomatoes, and flowers are a sight still fresh in Allmon’s memory, when Alma was a fruit and flower center. Long lines of wagons winding down the street and around the corner, waiting to get to the depot, are something he well remembers.

“Our mushmelons were sweet and nice, with a small center,” he reminisces. “I’d like to have one now. They were called ‘Alma Gems.’ ”

There was even a canning factory in Alma then, but it burnt one fourth of July when some fireworks set it off. There was also a basket factory and a pickle factory.

Allmon and his friend, Barney Craig, whom he calls his “twin” because their birthdays are 12 days apart, know quite a bit about Alma history, and what one may forget momentarily, the other remembers.

Alma had three different names, they say – Mound City, Rantoul, and then Alma. It was finally named “Alma” because of the Crimean War, says Barney Craig.

We couldn’t figure how the Crimean War got over here, but Craig believes the name was bestowed by one of the early settlers, Uncle Billy Ross, a preacher in the Christian Church. Uncle Billy was of British background, probably Scotch, judging by the name. He also helped establish the fruit and flower industry here because he brought the original seeds and bulbs for the pears and Easter flowers.

Uncle Billy brought the Christian Church here too, and no doubt was influential in establishing the Christian Church College in 1896 for training preachers. Part of the old college building is still in use where Alma Grade School is now. *(DFM note: The Alma Industrial College wasn’t a college for training preachers, although it was started by the Alma Christian Church and supporters such as Billy Ross. Also, the old college building burned down in the spring of 1912. It was used for about 11 years as the Alma Public School, but a new building was built after the fire on the Alma property.)*

Allmon has been active in town affairs over the years in various ways, and was town clerk for 12 years. He is now a member of the Senior Citizens, one of the most energetic groups in town, and has missed only five Sundays from church in the past 15 years. He has been a devoted gardener, but is giving up gardening now. He still has beautiful flowers in his barber shop from his garden, however.

Although Allmon and his wife had no children of their own, they adopted a little girl. Later, after she grew up and married, they adopted her son and raised him. The son died just a few years ago. Allmon is now a widower and lives alone.

“I don’t get mad at anybody,” is Allmon’s philosophy, and he must have a lot of friends as a result. He can’t see why people should fight and argue. They can discuss and even disagree, in a friendly way, but there’s no need to get mad, he says.

Allmon is a great town booster.

“We’re proud of our streets here,” he points out. “All hard surface.” And he quickly enumerates many of the other advantages Alma has, the stores, the restaurant, the new post office.

Probably Alma’s greatest asset, though, is its good people.”

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