

HISTORY OF ALMA, ARKANSAS

CITY OF ALMA, ARKANSAS

Much of the early history of the **City of Alma** is but a compilation of many different bits of legend, folk tale, family “handed-downs” plus a volume of factual evidence gleaned from early periodicals, historical collections, old letters, business records relating to the area.

Published History, now accepted as factual, was the result of information secured from the above named sources, some of it challenged by those living at the time first published, but now regarded as “Historical”. This conclusion applies to any current research into other community that has progressed to become recognized today for its leadership in economic and cultural development.

The community of **Alma** first resulted from westward immigration principally as families moved from lands east of the Mississippi River into the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase to find new homes and “tame the wilderness”. These were joined by others who arrived by wagon-train, by overland trek, stagecoach, and later by railroad.

The region was heavily covered by forest, principally Gum, Oak, Cottonwood, Willow, Walnut, Hickory, and pine. With increased population came the demand for lumber to supplement the early day log-pen homes which represented the first structures to be erected. The sawmill in its several phases of development, served as an important adjunct in the modernizing of the communities. Hand-saws, cross-cut saws, saws powered by mules, replaced soon by steam powered mills, and the water-wheel.

Because of the prevalence of Gum trees, and the out-put of Gum lumber which was used extensively in home building, the community became known as **Gum Town** until the early 1870's. About 1871 a group of local business men decided to incorporate the town, and secure a postoffice.

The land on which **Alma** now stands was bought from the government by Armistead Smoot sometime between 1835-1840. In July 1840, he sold to Joshua Fisher who lived near Mulberry Creek. Mr. Fisher later deeded the land to his sons, Thomas and King Fisher. During the war between the states they sold the land to Andrew Austin of Van Buren, receiving payment in Confederate money, which after the close of the war was worthless. The Messrs Fisher showed their honesty by not trying to reclaim the land, saying the deal was made in good faith by Mr. Austin, and that he was not accountable for the depreciation of the money. Later Mr. Austin sold to Col. Mathis F. Locke.

The land on which the town was located was owned principally by Mr. Locke. The first postmaster was Alex. W. (A. G.) Griffin in whose store the postoffice was located. A new name, “**Alma**” was authorized for the newly established postoffice, which was located about the southwest corner of the present Cazort lot, at the intersection of Fayetteville Avenue and Main Street, thought to be on the East side of Fayetteville Avenue, North side of Main Street. This junction of the road leading Northward made its way into the Boston Mountains and on to

Fayetteville in Northwest Arkansas.

Other stores were opened in the course of time in the vicinity of this intersection. Names of early day business and community leaders are many. Some of these citizens arrived in the area with favorable reputations for business acumen, and civic leadership, whose various promotions left their imprint on the future welfare and the development of the town. Such names as M. F. Locke, W. P. Brown, J. D. James, Col. James A. Mc Neely, D. B., Locke, John S. Renfroe, B. Caraway, W. H. Byars, W. R. Bolling appear as contributors to the improvement of the community.

Little Rock and the Fort Smith Railroad:

The construction of a railroad along the north banks of the Arkansas River was pushed westward from Little Rock, but progress was slow because of economic condition in the area prior to the civil war. In the latter part of the 1860's progress on the road had reached Crawford County. Quoting from portions of a letter written by Col. Locke:

“ The Fort Smith and Little Rock railroad was surveyed and cut out before the was between the states to run one-half mile south of **Alma** and the writer was much concerned to have another line that would come to us and give us a depot, and after many efforts and offers, and after furnishing us the necessary assurances that we would secure them the right-of-way and deeding them the sum of a tract and 50 feet on either side of the road, they consented to change the route and give a depot, but Uncle Peter Kuykendall owned a 40 acre tract east of Alma and the company were anxious for me to give the 8 acres for depot purposes, and I was unwilling to do more than I had promised. They offered to Uncle Peter Kuykendall a depot and a town if he would give them every alternate lot, and when I found Uncle Peter willing to take their offer, being anxious to have the depot, I consented and gave the 8 acres with the depot in the center, with no other condition than that they should fence a fourth of the same and keep it fenced, provided the town would sow down and keep up a plot of the different grasses grown in Arkansas.”

Naming the New Postoffice:

There are two principal stories extant as to the selection of a new name for the town. These explanations are matters of historical record, to which references is made. One explanation may be found in a portion of Col. Locke's memoirs which accompany the store of **Alma** revealed in this issue of the heritage.

Quoting Col. Locke's version: “Mr. Griffin and the writer were very much bothered about the name for the town, and the name **Alma** was almost forced upon us in order to secure a certificate from the Postmaster at Van Buren, Mr. Samuel W. Daugherty, who claimed the right to name the town, if he gave us the certificated of recommendation for which he wanted the town named for his daughter. Afterwards, we were well pleased with the name.”

Another version of how **Alma** became so named, was given by Mr. Tobe Steward, a Confederate veteran, who said he was present when the town was named. A meeting was called for the

purpose of selecting a name for the Postoffice. The meeting was called to order, and the presiding officer asked each one present to write the name he wanted on a slip of paper and put it in a hat. Two names tied, and as a result three persons were asked to leave the room and select the name from the two suggested. **Alma** received two votes. The town took the name of the Postoffice later. The Postoffice was established in 1871 and the town was incorporated in 1873.

Alma Is Incorporated:

The first known house in the area of the town site was an old log house along Fayetteville Road in the vicinity of the present location of the Presbyterian Manse on Locke street. This structure was there long before a town site was laid out. The first residence was built for Col. Locke in 1868-69 by Mr. W. H. Northcut. The lumber was hauled from the Rudy Mill on Big Mulberry by Mr. E. D. Steward. It took ten days to haul it with ox teams. The next house was one built for J. D. James. The Locke home was located at Fayetteville and Walnut Street. The James home was on the south side of Main Street. The first residence on Fayetteville Avenue was Dr. Black's home, built about 1874. The first business houses on this street were J. T. Hollowell, B. P. Renfroe, J. D. James, and T. L. Smith, all general merchandise. Previous to 1876 the business of **Alma** was all done on what is now Main Street. Those in business at the time were Renfroe & James, Dry goods; Brodie & Locke, Dry goods and groceries; Ed Steward & S. A. Wright, saloon; Dr. G. W. Smith, drugs; George Bolling, drugs; Lett Bros, restaurant; George Hurst, butcher shop; Ed Steward, livery stable; and Dick Douglas, colored blacksmith.

The physicians were Drs. Black, Hughes, Wynne, and Cathey; The Hotels were kept by King, and William Bostick.

In 1872 a public hall was erected and was used for school purposes, church meetings, and other public purposes, the site being near where Hall and Mulberry streets intersect, originally on the south side of Mulberry Street, but later moved to North of Mulberry and West of Hall Col. Locke donated a square acres of ground and gave three hundred (some say five hundred) dollars. The upper part of this hall was not completed for several years, then it was used by the Masons for a lodge room. The first teacher was a Mr. Brown, who was also the first mayor. Among the early settlers in the vicinity of Alma were messrs. J. D. James, Amasa Howell, Renfroe, Byars, and Ed Steward. The first white child born at Alma was Agnes James, daughter of J. D. & Mollie Steward James.

Note, The Alma Area Chamber of Commerce takes no responsibility in verifying the above writings as being factual, merely hand me down compilations.