Like most of you, I am not a native Altoite or Altonian. My ancestors were from Bowne Center, and that being some three miles south of Alto still leaves me somewhat of an outsider even though I have lived here for some 63 years.
Three Candidates for Growth

• In 1861 there were three communities in the area that seemed likely to grow. They were Bowne Center, Merriman Corners, and Skidsville.

• The Grand Rapids, Lansing and Detroit railroad influenced the growth of the area.
Bowne Center

• In 1861 Bowne center was the place to go with two stores, a church, a school, an aid hall, a post office in my great-grandfather’s home, a couple of blacksmiths and even a doctor.

• It was the place to go if you wanted to enlist in the Union Army, which about 60 young men did, including David Skidmore.
David Skidmore, Founder

- David Skidmore’s parents, Sherman and Catherine, came from New York to Kent County in 1846 when he was 18 years old.

- He married Phidelia Stone in 1861, built a home for his new bride, and in 1863 enlisted as a Lieutenant in the Union Army. He was with Sherman in the March to the Sea.

- At the end of the war he returned home and started a family of four: Helen – 1866, Sherman – 1867, Levi – 1869, George – 1876
Merriman Corners

About four miles north of Bowne Center at the intersection of 52\textsuperscript{nd} street and Bancroft was Professor Merriman’s hamlet. It included his select school, German Methodist church, Grange hall, blacksmith shop, and postal service. It seemed a likely spot for expansion.
Skidsville

Skidsville consisted of a church, sawmill, a school, an apple dryer, and a couple of homes, one of which was the post office.
Which Way Would the Railroad Go?

Merriman Corners

Skidsville

Bowne Center
The Grand Rapids, Lansing and Detroit railroad in 1887 – 1888 laid track in Skidsville, leading to the platting of the village in section 4 of Bowne township.
Mr. Skidmore Plats a Village

- The Grand Rapids, Lansing and Detroit railroad laid track between 60th and 64th streets in the small settlement there.
- In 1887-1888 the railroad was completed.
- In 1890 Mr. Skidmore platted the village on his property in section 4 of Bowne township.
- His sister, Lucy McVean, suggested the name Alto because of its elevation on the rail line.
Alto a Hundred Years Ago

• The Alto that we are talking about tonight is from around 1890 to 1915 or so - about 100 years ago.

• In 1895 the population of Alto was 125 and in 1909 had boomed to about 425.

• Using your imagination, I would like to take a few minutes of your time and travel thru the streets of Alto as it might have been in around 1890-1915 or so.
Activity in Alto, 1900

2 General Stores
2 Grocery Stores
2 Hardware Stores
2 Liveries
2 Physicians
3 Blacksmiths
Apple Dryer
Baptist and Methodist churches
Barber
Cheese Factory
Cider Mill
Citizens Phone
Creamery under construction
Elevator/Feed mill
Farm Implement Store
Farmers State Bank

Grange Hall under construction
Hotel and Millinery Shop
Livestock Shipping Yard
Lumber Yard
Meat Market
Painter and Decorator
Post Office
Print Shop
Produce Shipping Facility
Real Estate Office
Restaurant and Pool Hall
Saloon
Stone Mason
Telegraph and Western Union
Weekly Newspaper—The Alto Solo
And Others
McVean School

- Built 1850 at 6735 Alden Nash Road.
- Moved to Bancroft in Alto 1912.

The site of this building is vacant.
The First Skidmore Home

The first Skidmore home was a wood frame house at the Northwest corner of 64th and Bancroft. It burned in 1863.
Apple Dryer

The apple dryer was constructed from the remnants of the Skidmore home.

The apple dryer burned in 1897 and again in 1903.

- 1889 W.S. Chapin
- 1895 Charles Bancroft

Today this site is vacant.
McVean School/Old School House

- 1912 the McVean school was moved to Bancroft Street in Alto.
- 1924 remodeled into 2 stories.
- 1926 burned.

This building burned in 1926.
New School

• Built in 1927 on the site of the previous school.
• Used as a school until 1964.

Today this is an apartment house.
Harris Lumber

No photo available. The site is currently the parking lot of the Fire Barn.

- In 1891 Harris had a lumberyard on the east side of Bancroft across from the old schoolhouse.
- Later it was moved to Alto to the intersection of Harrison and Linfield.
Skidmore Homes in Alto

The Skidmores’ second home was at 6133 Bancroft. It burned. The third home was a brick home. The brick for this home was hauled from Greenville. The brick home burned in 1891. Sadly, Mr. Skidmore died as a result of the fire. He went into the house to rescue his wife, who was not inside.

A fourth home, shown in the photograph, was built on the same foundation.

This home is still a residence today.
Homes on Bancroft

6074 Bancroft
Fred Pattison

6088 Bancroft
Cecile Bancroft Campau

6096 Bancroft
Charles Bancroft

Bancroft was also known at various times as West Street, Alto Elmdale Road, and Wall Street.

Today these are family homes.
Rural Free Delivery

Rural free delivery mail service began in 1903.

Abe Cudney and his team were still delivering mail in 1920.
Alto Garage

11591 Depot Street.
- 1888 James Dennis had a blacksmith shop here.
- 1907 Jesse Boulard built an auto repair garage on this location.
- 1920 Albert Duell had his business here. Building was torn down in 1945.
- 1946 New building constructed for Lawrence Richardson and Richard Fairchild.

Today this building is still in use.
James Dennis Home

• 1173 Depot St.
• Built in 1888 by James Dennis.
• First wood frame home in Alto.

Today this building is a family home.
Elevator

- Built 1887 by Benjamin Palmer.
- 1893 destroyed by fire.
- 1895 rebuilt by John Layer.
- 1919 Henry Slater.
- 1931 Bergy Brothers.
- 2003 Abandoned and burned.
- 2017 Silos removed.

The site of this building is vacant.
Creamery

- Built in 1901 as a cheese factory.
- 1905 Became a co-op.
- 1911 New building.
- 1927 Dale Curtiss, Lawrence Headworth.
- 1997 Torn down.

Today this site is occupied by an industrial building.

- In 1911 their butter came in first out of 100 at the State Fair.
- In the 1920’s and 30’s it was not unusual to feed 500 – 600 people at the annual Creamery Dinner held at the Grange Hall.
- One year they made 746 thousand pounds of butter.
Hunt Produce

- Built in 1900 by Loveland and Hinyon.
- 1905 Bush & O’Harrow shipping potatoes.

The building was destroyed by fire in 1935. Today the site is vacant.

The Hunt Produce building is visible behind the depot in this photo.
The first depot was constructed in 1888-89. The first building, above, burned in 1916.

The second depot was reconstructed in 1917.

Today the site of the depot is vacant.
Alto Baseball

The field was at the intersection of Railroad Street and Linfield. Over the years they have played ball games in this general location. Today an industrial facility occupies this site.
Pickle Factory

• 1920’s Sterling Moore.
• Hirsh Brothers.
• Lawrence Gephart.

Today the site is vacant.
Slater Stock Yard

This was next to R. J. Linton Lumber. Today the site is vacant.

- 1908 Henry Slater and S. Noble.
- Live stock shipping.
R. J. Linton Lumber Yard

6071 Depot St.
- 1903 Harris Brothers.
- 1905 C. Kelley.
- 1908 Ernest Rosenberg.
- 1927 Roland Colby.
- 1934 R. J. Linton.
- 1976 Durkee.

This building remained a lumber yard until it closed in December 2017.
Standard Oil Storage

Today the site is vacant.

- Built in the 1920’s.
- 1920 Leon Rogers
- 1921 Houghton Brothers.
- 1926 Basil Hayward.
The Alto Methodist Church

Originally built at Merriman Corners. In May of 1906 or 1907 the church was placed on rollers and moved by horsepower to Alto. The trip took two days, and was slowed while taking the building through the fields on the west side of Bancroft Avenue.

Upon reaching the property across from what is now the DeVoe property in 1907, the property owners refused to let a Methodist Church cross their field. The movers had to cross to the East side to complete the move to 11431 Kirby.

Today this is still a church.
Ellis Barber Shop

• There were several small businesses in this small building on Kirby Street.
• Owen Ellis had the barber shop.
• This is a typical barber shop for the era.

Today the site is part of Veterans Park.
The Grocery Store

Built in 1893 by John Scott on the corner of Linfield and Kirby.

- 1901 - Bancroft and Denise and later Bancroft and Proctor.
- 1905 - W. H. Watts.
- 1921 – Rosenbergs.
- 1941 - Ken Lyons.

Today the site is part of Veterans Park.
Beauty Shop and Other Uses

6037 Linfield
Built as part of building by John Scott which included other stores.
The beauty shop entrance, indicated by the arrow, is between the grocery store and the bay window.

Today the site is part of Veterans Park.

- 1905- Mrs. Williams dress maker.
- Sadie Wilson clothing repair.
- Ruby and Alice Broadbent dressmakers.
- Belva Bryant seamstress.
Harness Shop and Shoe Repair

6045 Linfield
- 1908- Hood and Son harness repair
- 1930- “Daddy” Geyer watch repair.
- The Library used this site at one time.

Today the site is part of Veterans Park.

Note that the Jerrils home at the right of the picture is still standing.
Citizens Phone

• Located in home of Charles Peet just north of Dintaman’s hardware on Linfield.
• There were 44 customers----sometimes customers had two different services, and therefore two different phone numbers, at the same time.
• 1913 Mr. B. S. Shaw had a funeral home and furniture store in this building.
• Today this location is vacant.
Dintaman Hardware Store

- 1909- Elmer and Irwin Dintaman founders.
- Later on Elmer’s son Paul joined his dad in the business.
- Closed in 1960.

Today the building is unused.
Hardware Storage Building

The hardware storage building is in the foreground. The back corner of the Dintaman Hardware store is just visible at the left.

Today this building is unused.
Blacksmith Shop

Today this building has been replaced by the Post Office.

• 1921 John Watcher and Earl Vanderlip.
• 1922 Harve Omstead.
• 1926 Ed Clark.
This Grange hall was built in 1909. This is Alto’s second Grange Hall.

The building is still in use.
The Grangers in Alto

• In 1873 the Grangers met at the home of David Skidmore – this was their first informal meeting.
• In 1874 they rented a room at the William Stewart home. This home was on the land belonging to Stewart and Pat Thomet on Timpson Ave.
• The first Grange Hall was moved from Merriman Corners to the spot where the Library is now. It became a general store.
• Then the building was moved again to a lot where the grain elevator later stood.
• The current Grange Hall was built in 1909 on Kirby.

One interesting thing they did at Grange meetings was the “general Interest” question. For example, if the New Woman married a farmer what will be her position on the farm? Answer: The boss!

Why are our children of the present day so discourteous and impolite? No answer.
The church was organized in 1854 at the Jerod Miller home (later Wingeier/Kinsey) on Timpson. Services were held in a log schoolhouse on Morse Lake road, south of 60th across the road from where Fred Moss has his home today. Then they held services for five years at Merriman School. They built their own church in Alto in 1878.
Blacksmith Shop

- 1921 William Precious.
- 1923 Charles Lehman.

This is a typical blacksmith shop of the era. The site is now vacant.
Bank/I.O.O.F. Hall

I.O.O.F. Hall was on this lot until 1912.

- Bank organized by Francis Campau in 1904.
- Building constructed in 1906.

Today the site is occupied by a private business.
Saloon

Today this building is the Alto Bar.

• 1905 George Perkins.
• 1920 Julius Wester.

Used as a pool hall/ice cream shop/lunchroom during Prohibition.
General Store

- 1914 A.O. Bickford.
- 1916 Harry Daily.

Today this site is vacant.
Lunch Room/Other

- 1924 Linton Lunch Room
- 1930’s and 1940’s, Owen Ellis Barber Shop
- Was used as the library at one time.

Today this site is vacant.
Thorne Building

- Constructed by James Henry in 1892-93.
- 1893 George McKee, grocer.
- Jacob Konkle, grocer.
- Charles Foote Hardware (also State Representative 1913-1918).
- Building was also Post Office.

Today this building is the American Legion.
The Drug Store

Today the site is occupied by a garage business.

- 1895 – C.S. Williams.
- 1909 – Charles Brown.
- 1936 – Eric Hahne.
The Story of Eric Hahne

There was a rumor that he left town because he was a German spy. It was later revealed that he had joined the U. S. Armed Forces and served as an interpreter all the way through World War II.

In 1936 he sold the store, supposedly because he felt there was a prejudice against him because he was a German. Hahne left for New York and sailed for Germany to visit his parents and other relatives.

There was a rumor that he left town because he was a German spy. It was later revealed that he had joined the U. S. Armed Forces and served as an interpreter all the way through World War II.
Meat Market

- 1889 A. C. Blakeslee.
- 1899 S. E. Stauffer.
- 1901 Henry Slater.

Today this site is occupied by a garage business.
Barber Shop

- Constructed approximately 1913.
- Jean Bryant (from Kansas City).
- 1923 Skip Yeiter.
- Many barbers were in this building over the years.

Today this building, next to the Library, is vacant.
Implement Store

- 1895 A. Bergy.
- 1900 Jack Whitey.

Today the site of this building is occupied by the Library.
This is the Grange Hall building that was moved from Merriman Corners in 1887. The store was on the first floor and the Grangers met on the second floor. The building was moved to Depot Street across from the elevator when the new store was built, and later dismantled.

- This building was built in 1916 as the Watts store.
- Rosenbergs moved into this store in 1940.

Today it is the Library.
Hotel and Livery

- Built in the 1890s by John or Oscar Scott.
- 1901 Clifford and Greta Proctor, famous for their chicken dinners. They drew large crowds.
- 1915 Charles and Leona Williams.

Today this building is gone.
Alto’s First Fire Truck

The fire station was behind the stores on Linfield.

The gentleman in the picture is possibly Basil Hayward.
Acknowledgements

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Bowne Township Historical Commission Information and Photos.
Chapman 1881 History of Kent County.
Charles Johnson (no relation), History of Alto.
Edee Hoag Kornoelje for photos.
Henry A. Johnson (related), Mission of a People Within the Valley of the Little Thornapple.
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With so many references, many conflicting dates appeared. When I could I used the dates from Linda’s book as they came mostly from newspaper clippings and tended to be more accurate than people’s memories (mine excluded).