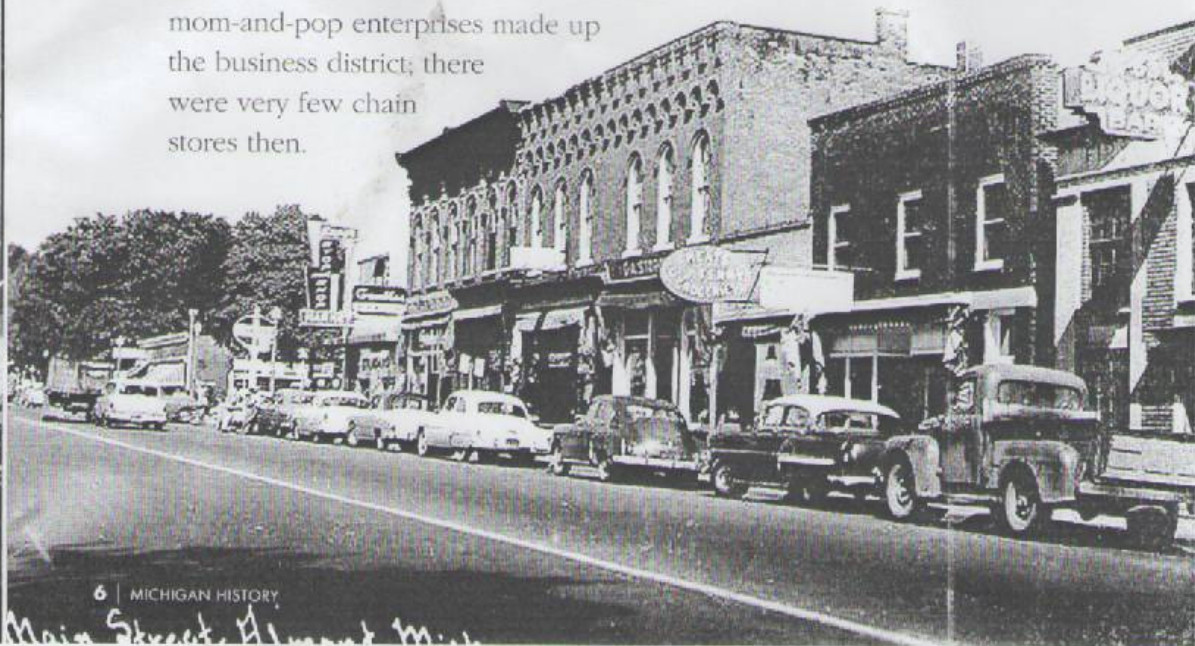


A Hidden Gem *in the Thumb*

By Richard Liblong

Michigan is made up of dozens of small towns and villages, all with their own stories. My hometown of Almont—population 1,000 back then—wasn't Lake Wobegon. But it was a pretty good place to grow up in the Eisenhower calm of the 1950s. In fact, I don't think it's a very big stretch to imagine that Norman Rockwell could have moved his easel there and not missed a brushstroke.

Almont is located 45 miles north of Detroit, east of Flint, and west of Port Huron. It was organized in 1834, before Michigan was admitted to the union, and named in 1846. I don't remember how big it was in area, but if you went one mile in any direction from the village center, you were in the country. The village itself was about six or seven blocks long and wide, with one traffic light at the intersection of Main and St. Clair Streets. Real mom-and-pop enterprises made up the business district; there were very few chain stores then.





Images courtesy of Richard Liblong

Left: Rick Liblong and his grandfather pose in front of the elder Liblong's beloved 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air. Right: Liblong's grandmother admires the family's pet pheasant Billy.

The surrounding area was farm country, with gently rolling hills, rivers, and creeks (pronounced 'cricks' by us). When I was young, the farms grew acres of corn, beans, wheat, lettuce, and cabbage as well as peaches, apples, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, and cherries. Most of Almont's mothers and grandmothers canned these Michigan delights, and baked pies and made jam for us to enjoy the rest of the year.

The Hurd Lock Company, which moved to Almont in 1931, was the largest employer of Almonters, including my uncle and grandfather. It was one of the state's many small manufacturing plants that helped supply the auto industry and the war effort. A sign at the edge of town read "Almont, Home of Hurd Lock." When the company moved to Greeneville, Tennessee in 1962, someone changed the sign to "Home of Hard Luck." Several Hurd employees then founded Almont Lock Company—still a going concern today.

I lived on Teeds Street, the last street in the village as you drove south. In 1946, my dad, his brother, and my grandfather built our house in eight weeks without any plans. When they got up to where the windows would be, my mother told them where she'd like those located. There was no basement and it was all on one level with one small bathroom, but there was enough room for my dad, my mother, my sister, and me.

Two blocks east of our place was my grandparents' house where my dad grew up. The garage next to it was built by my grandfather with wood from a torn-down railroad station. He kept his two-tone '57 Chevy Bel Air in there. I still think it was the coolest car ever. Grandpa

also had a nice big garden and raspberry patch in the back as well as an empty chicken coop where we kept our pet pheasant Billy. Billy thought he might be a dog and ran around the yard with us.

Almont School was only seven blocks from our house, so I walked or rode my bike there every day. The 45 kids in my class, as well as the other students, were blessed with great teachers who taught us values and social graces in addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Sports-wise, our gym was the smallest in the league and the circles on the basketball court intersected. Needless to say, we had a big advantage in home games and a big disadvantage on the road.

I could name every kid in school within three grades of me. And, it was true that if you did something wrong your parents would find out—often before you got home from school. But most of us got along.

I am very grateful for the things I learned and experienced in Almont. When we traveled to surrounding towns to battle their sport teams, we would open the windows of the school bus and yell as loud as we could, "We're from Almont and couldn't be prouder. If you can't hear us, we'll yell a little louder!"

I'm not yelling it anymore, but I'm just as proud of Almont—one of Michigan's hidden gems—more than a half century later. **m**

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