

Automobiles

By 1916 autos were beginning to be a popular mode of travel. There were 125 automobiles in Almont at the town's 10th anniversary celebration on July 4, 1916.

As a young man, I never had the interest in automobiles that my friends had; they knew the various makes and models, and were anxious to own one of their own. Horses were of more importance to me.

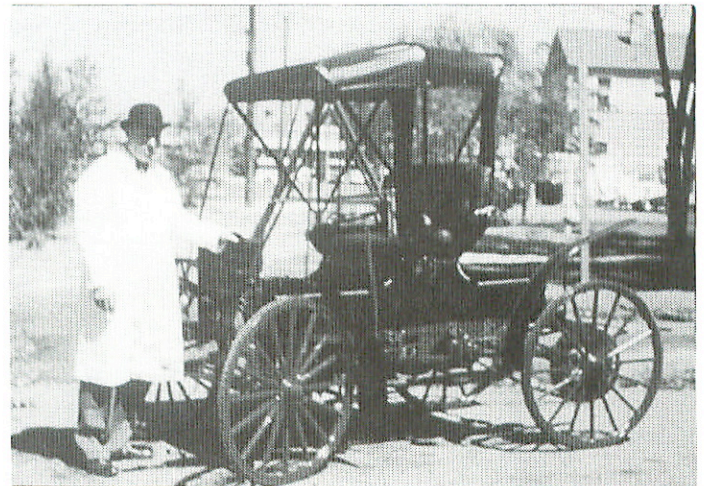
I believe the first "horseless carriage" that was seen in Sims was owned by Andrew Holritz, and ordered from Sears Roebuck and Co. That was before my time, but my older brothers told of Andrew driving his Auto Buggy down the street to our house (across the street from the church). He said to my brothers, "If you boys will help me push this thing up the hill, I'll give you a ride down." They took him up on the offer and were thrilled with their first ride.

Almont's attorney Hiram Goff bought an International Auto Buggy in Bismarck and had it shipped by freight to Sims. I'm sure it could not have made the trip by road as there probably wasn't any to speak of. Some years later the auto buggy was converted to a horse-drawn buggy by Joe Pederson and used for the family's transportation vehicle. The buggy has since been restored to its original auto buggy condition by Olaf Peterson of Richland, WA. Ole has used it in parades in the Richland area.

One of the first automobiles in Almont was a Brush make, owned by Jens Nelson. Pictures show the auto with no body; a chassis, engine and driver's seat was it. Nelson later had a Metz car. There were more early models used in the area, of which I have no information.

The Model T Ford seemed to be the most popular car. A 1924 price quotation shows a \$290 price tag. The Model T had to be cranked by hand, and if the spark was not retarded, it would kick, sending the crank in reverse; this was the cause of many broken arms. It was very frustrating when the autos refused to start; some of the guys seemed to have a "short fuse" and would take it out on the car. I witnessed one man so angry that he started pounding on the motor with a wrecking bar — even that didn't help! Some of the drivers never looked back when they put the car in reverse; we soon learned who they were, and gave them the right-of-way. We used defensive driving in those days, too. The Model T had no battery, so the lights were powered by the magneto. When the motor idled, the lights dimmed, but with a higher speed the lights improved. Thorleiv told about an evening Uncle Ted drove to town with him. The lights on the car must have been quite dim as Ted asked Thorleiv to stop the car — he went to the front of the car and lit a match to see if the lights were on!

There were always "know it all" drivers who were the butt of tricks. The tricksters would jack up a back wheel of the car while the driver was elsewhere. When he came back to



International Auto Buggy restored by Olaf Peterson. Buggy bought by Almont attorney Hiram Goff in 1910.

drive away, the car would not move, no matter how much he revved the motor.

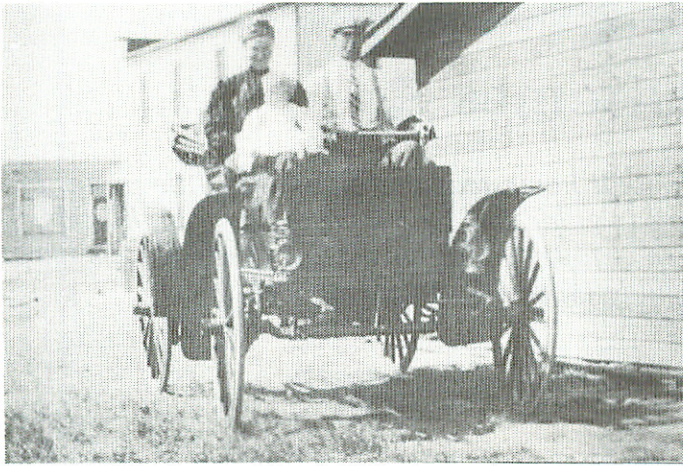
Many farmers would put their autors on blocks for the winter, and used horses for transportation instead. The roads were poor, there was no snow removal equipment, and cars were not reliable in cold weather. It was difficult starting cold motors, and also a problem to keep them from freezing. There were a lot of steaming cars to be seen in the winter. Filling the radiator with hot water helped to start the motor, and the temperatures would be controlled with blankets covering the hood. Later denatured alcohol, mixed with water, was used to prevent freezing.

The first truck I remember seeing was the dray and livery truck in Almont. It had solid rubber tires and exposed chain drive.

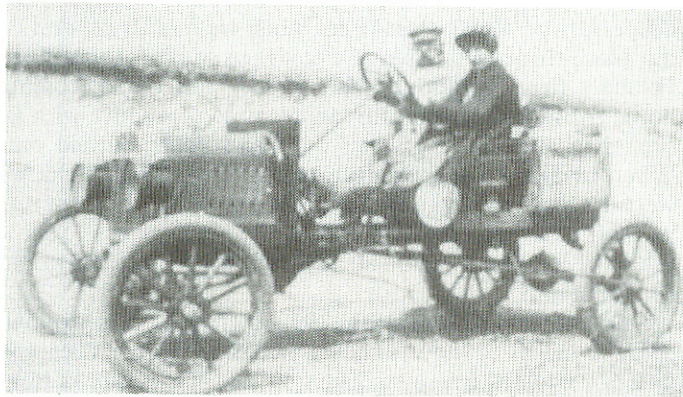
The Model T grain truck was a great improvement, compared to hauling wheat to town in a wagon pulled with a team of horses. The truck grain box held 65 bushels. It was a challenge driving those trucks — the rock-steel transmission was not to be trusted. When going down a long hill with a load, it was advisable to shift down to a low gear to save the brakes; the gears would not always mesh, which would put the truck in neutral with no brakes. Many a wild and harrowing ride resulted.

Trucks and roads gradually improved through the years. Stock racks were added to the grain trucks, making it possible to transport livestock, also.

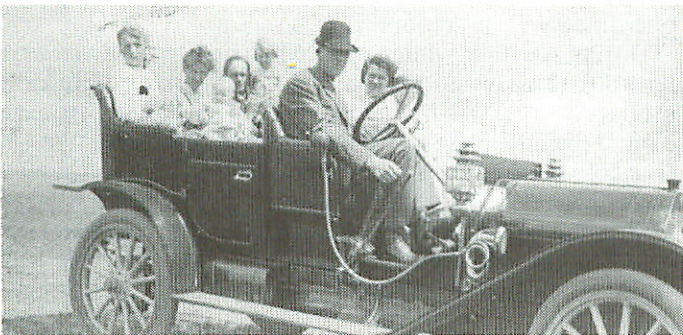
No driver's license was needed; we all started driving the



Andrew Holritz and family. Sears Roebuck Auto Buggy — 1911.



Early Brush car with J. Nelson and Amanda.



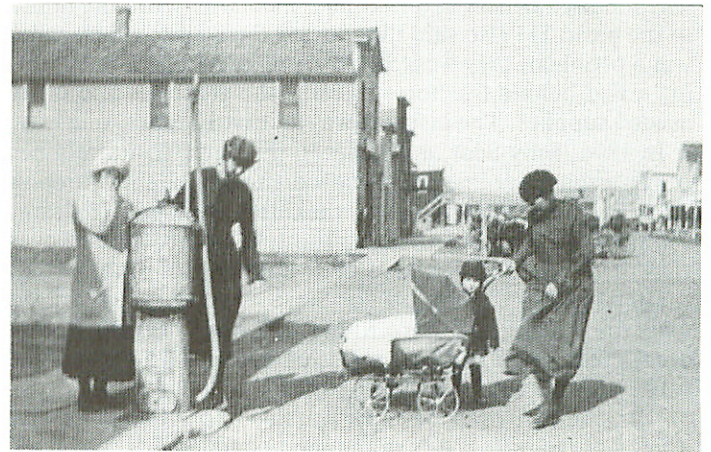
Nels Becklund's new auto.

family car at a very young age. Neither Marge nor I have ever taken a Driver's Test; when it became a law to have a drivers license, those who were already driving were issued a license without a test. Marge says the first car she drove was her grandfather's Maxwell, when she was about 10 (with her aunt sitting next to her). She started driving her dad's Model A Ford Coupe (alone) when she was 12, and has been "burning up the roads ever since!" The car had a rumble seat — a fun car for kids to "cruise" the streets of Almont.

Young "dudes" my age, who got the use of their dad's car, were very popular with the girls — in fact, he might wind up with a harem. They would drive until the gas tank neared the empty mark before the passengers would be asked to unload — with a promise that they may be asked again, soon.

Car tires were not very durable and were the high pressure type with inner tubes. There were many punctures and blowouts. I've almost forgotten the sound of a blowout — it was loud, and would almost pull the car off the road. A person always allowed extra time for car trouble when going someplace, and a tire patching kit in the trunk of the car was a necessity. Some of the more mechanically minded men also had wrenches along to make other repairs. It didn't take long to snug up the connecting rods on a Model T when they started knocking.

There were fewer auto accidents in those days, even though the cars were poor, and the roads poorer. I think we know the reason — top speed was about 25 miles an hour!



Almont's first gas pump - 1917.



July 4, 1916, Almont, ND.

Weather Extremes

Winter blizzards were always a threat to the pioneers and homesteaders. There was little protection from the ravages of a snow storm, and no roads or fences to guide someone traveling by foot, horseback or wagon. There was always a chance of getting lost, even in foggy conditions. Most of the pioneers kept a kerosene lamp on a table in front of a window, to guide those who might be lost.

On May 27, 1886, Alexander McDonald and his two sons, were on their way home from a day of work at Sims. A raging snow storm came up and they lost their directions. Mrs. McDonald had run out of kerosene, so there was no light in the window to guide them. They were found frozen to death the following day close to their farmstead. Their place was about a half mile northeast of our present ranch. That same storm must have been quite severe in other parts of the state as well; a news article relates that on that same date several hundred buffalo drifted into the Painted Woods area, north of Bismarck. Buffalo had not been seen in that area for several years.

George Ormiston, Sr. remembered the winter of 1887, when many farmers had to tunnel their way from the house to the barn. He also said that during the winter, when snow was a problem, they would go to Sims by saddle horse, pulling a sled behind the horse to carry the groceries and other needed supplies. The distance was at least 12 miles, one way.

In 1896, Billy Scot, a rancher in this area, lost a number of cattle that were in a shed. Snow drifted in the shed through a few holes and it was reported the cattle smothered to death. I have seen cases when the cows' nostrils were so frosted over that there could easily have been a danger of smothering.

On May 1903, cattle on the Steve Weekes ranch drifted with the storm, and were found at Louse Creek (Flasher area). The ranch suffered a loss of between 75-80 head of cattle and a number of young colts.

I remember my grandmother walking to our place to spend a few hours visiting. My grandparents and Uncle Ted lived a mile northeast of our farm. On this particular visit, she stayed until evening and then started home in the fog. In about an hour she was back again at our door. There were no fences at that time and evidently she had walked in a circle. Dad said that people usually step further with one foot than the other without realizing it, causing them to walk in a circle. Luckily Grandma had no ill effects.

When we drove to school in Almont with horse and cart, I would let the horse take us home, if visibility was nil. We have heard of several occasions when the horses have saved lives. Margie's uncle Harry Jacobson was blind, and his only way of transportation was by his trusted horse, Net, who always brought him safely home, no matter what the weather. (Harry lived eight miles south of Almont.)

After a three-day blizzard in the early 20's, our range horses were lost. Barney went on foot to look for them; after hours of walking he heard the whinny of a horse as he rounded a bend in the creek and found them snowed in. He was able to rescue them by tramping a trail for them to follow.

Roads snowed in very easily as they were not graded. Deep snow made it impossible at times to drive on the road; we had to make a trail through pastures and field to miss the deeper drifts. There were times when we had to go west of our place through our pasture and then south through Otto Feland's field. In about 1925, Barney and I were coming home from New Salem after an evening of practice with an orchestra and chorus, when our head lights burned out. When we arrived at the detoured trail through the field, we were in trouble! We knew if our car got out of the deep ruts we would be stuck, so Barney ran ahead of the car to show the way. He had to run a steady pace for fear that I would run over him.

On October 18th and 19th, 1932, a freezing rain, followed by 12 inches of snow, knocked out all telephone, telegraph and power lines between Bismarck and Dickinson. Trains were dispatched by KFYR Radio; the idea for this service was proposed by Stanley Lucas, a KFYR engineer, who at one time lived in Almont.

During the first winter of our married lives, there were several bad snow storms that blocked the roads. Our only means of travel was by saddle horse; we pulled a toboggan behind the one horse to transport our groceries from town. One cold evening the sound of horses' hooves and people's voices broke the stillness of the night. We looked out to see a horse-drawn sleigh, filled with young people from Almont, who had come to spend an evening of fun and music with us. A wind came up during the night and they were forced to stay until daybreak. Many of the group were teachers and were counted tardy that day.

I believe it was the winter of 1939-40 that this area had a record snowfall. We were at that time ranching south of Almont in Grant County. The roads were blocked and we had not been off the place for three weeks; everyone in our area was getting low on groceries and other supplies. Our newly built country telephone line proved to be very useful at that time; we put in a general ring to announce a snow shoveling day to Almont. Everyone responded, including Ragna Barstad and Marge, and by late afternoon, we had shoveled our way to the top of the hill south of Lovers Cliff. There we were met by Fred Reetz (school janitor) and a group of high school boys who had opened the road from Almont and had come to meet us. The stores did a brisk business that evening and some got in a little visiting, too. (Marge was anxious to see her mother and two sisters.) That night, after everyone was safely home, the wind came up and roads drifted in deeper than they were before — and another snow shoveling bee was in the planning stage.

Other weather extremes that have plagued this area have included the extreme drouth of the 30's, and heavy rains and rapid snow thaws that have caused flooding.

The terrible drought of the 30's, brought hardship to the entire country, and this area was no exception. A popular song at that time was entitled "*It Ain't A'Gonna Rain No More, No More.*" Without rain, there were no crops harvested, jobs were scarce and as a result, people started moving out of the area to 'greener pastures', which was west. Those states were not affected by the drought as was the Plains. More about the "Dirty Thirties" can be found in other chapters of this book.

After years of dryness, the rains finally came during the first part of June 1937 — it rained and it rained — the drought seemed to be broken. Our wedding rehearsal was Saturday evening, June 12 and we'd had an abundance of rain that week — roads were almost impossible, especially on the unsurfaced gumbo road south of Almont, where Marge lived. If you've never driven on a gumbo road, you can't imagine it. During rehearsal there was a cloudburst, making travel even more impossible than it had been. When Barney and I drove home, the little bridge south of our farm was not to be seen — not even the bridge railings. I walked ahead to see whether or not the bridge had washed out — it was still there so Barney followed. I'm not a good swimmer, so what would have happened had the bridge been out? (Probably no wedding!)

A fast thaw in March 1943 caused one of the worst floods in North Dakota history. Three bridges on the Heart River south of Almont were washed out, and all outbuildings on the Clara Mortenson farm were washed away, besides 17 head of cattle, a team of horses and chickens. The Otto Feland

bridge was also swept away.

1950 was a year of records — the greatest snowfall, the lowest temperatures on record — and a flood. Blizzards in March caused power failure for several days, and a 3-day blizzard in April blocked all roads and stranded 11 people at the Walt Bakken farm for two days. The snow melted fast and on April 17, flooding started. Ice jams destroyed bridges, including Art Feland's, Charlie Hoger's and the steel bridge south of town. Water on main street measured 34 inches.

In 1966, a three-day snow storm March 2-4, hit parts of the state. It was called "The Storm of the Century;" 20 inches of snow, with a 70-mile wind caused many hardships and inconveniences. Almont and the rural areas were out of electric power for 14 hours; a cattle shed on the Edd Bachler farm caved in and killed 92 head of cattle. there were also other cattle losses. On June 15th of the same year, Almont had its largest flood — the result of a 9.3 inch rainfall in Glen Ullin. All streets were flooded and all business places and homes were damaged. The mess that was left took years to clean up.

On April 1967, a snow storm, which included lightning, thunder, rain, hail, sleet and snow — and a 70-mile wind, caused quite a bit of damage in the area. Enoch Willman lost 29 head of cattle when they drifted into a flooded creek and were drowned.

In 1969 an estimated 50 inches of snow fell, blocking all roads. The Almont school was closed for one week in March. After school resumed, some students were brought to school by snowmobile to stay in town until buses could run again.

We're glad we were able to "stick it out" through all the many hardships nature has dealt us — we're a tough breed of people — us North Dakotans.



Main Street in Almont. Flood, April 1950.

❧ Fires ❧

Prairie fires were a constant worry and hazard to the early pioneers. In some cases, there was loss of lives and homes, as well as valuable prairie grass and animals. Settlers and ranchers were always on the look out for smoke; most of them had a plowed fire guard around the farmstead.

There was little cultivated land in those days, and no highways, making it next to impossible to stop the head fire. Side fires could be controlled by neighbors who came with wet gunny sacks, shovels, etc. to fight the fire. In some instances, we have been told, a beef animal would be killed, the hide pulled off and dragged along the side fires by two saddle horses. I saw a conglomeration of chains in the Medora Museum that had been used for that purpose.

It is hard to image the size of some of those fires of long ago, when the grass was high and plentiful. In the fall of 1890, a fire started in the Dickinson area, reportedly caused by sparks from a railroad locomotive. The wind was estimated at 80-miles an hour — a prairie fire always seems to create a strong wind. This fire, we are told, jumped the Heart River and burned as far as the Cannonball River — a distance of about 60 miles. The Steve Weekes Riverside Ranch, on the Heart River south of Almont, lost 500 head of cattle in the fire.

A prairie fire in 1885, which started a few miles northwest of the William Bethke farm (located south of New Salem), swept through the Bethke farm yard and burned down the house. Mrs. Bethke and one child were unable to escape and

were victims of the fire.

My dad and Dave Pederson, as young men, were on their way to the Morton County Fair in Mandan, driving a snappy team on a buggy. After traveling quite a distance, they looked back and noticed smoke to the south. They turned around and raced back to the Peterson farm and found that the old dog "Heck," sensing the danger, had gathered the cattle together. Dad and Dave corralled the cattle and were able to "back fire" enough to save the buildings, stock and hay.

Many fires in the area were caused by the trains; farmers and ranchers were alerted by the smoke and were quick to go and help. Women were also involved in the prairie fires; they brought water, food and coffee for the fighters, and gave them a little moral support, too.

The last fire of any size that I witnessed or was involved in, was in Grant County, two miles south of where Marge and I lived the first years we were married. It was in the spring of 1943. A strong wind whipped up a fire in an apparently burned-out straw pile, south of the John Bahm farm. The fire traveled very fast in that high wind, and could not be stopped until it reached the banks of the Heart River, a



All buildings shown in this picture, plus the Adams Barn, were destroyed by fire on August 16, 1910.

distance of about 3½ miles. Folks came from Almont, Carson and other directions, but there was not much that could be done, except control the side fires. A calf had been planted by its mother on the east side of a hill and the fire went over the calf so fast it was not even singed.

There were also business and home fires in early years. I do not remember any major fires in Sims, and that is surprising because homes and businesses were all heated with pot-bellied stoves that were very poor. I remember the sheet metal stove jackets getting red hot — and the stove pipes leading to the chimney being red hot, too. Live ashes were carried outside — and some were dropped on the way, hot clinkers were dug out of the stove and also carried outside. (Every home or business had an ash pile.) Why more homes or buildings didn't burn, is a mystery to me now.

Almont had several big and destructive fires. The first one was in 1910 and was started from live coals emptied out of a locomotive fire box. That fire destroyed both grain elevators, the Chase Lumber Co., and Adams barn. On August 2, 1913, the barn behind the Tischler Hotel (Tavis Cafe) burned. Almont citizens organized a "bucket brigade" from the creek to the burning building, which saved the hotel and Holritz Store from burning, too. There was no fire fighting equipment at that time.

The largest fire in Almont was on February 25, 1915; it consumed the Timmerman Store, Davenport Drug Store, F.X. Todt Barber Shop, and Casserly Hardware. Firemen from New Salem came by train to help fight, but nothing could be saved. A monkey, which was an attraction at Timmerman's Store, also burned.

In 1923, Mitzmen's Store burned to the ground. It was a large general store located on the corner where the Legion Hall now stands. The only fire fighting equipment at that time was



Almont's Main Street the day after the fire of 1915.

a two-wheel chemical cart, pulled by hand; it was not very effective in fighting a big fire.

In 1931 the Northern Pacific depot burned; it was a two-story building with living quarters on the second floor. Walt Bakken was the agent at that time, and he and his wife, Anna, lived on the second floor and lost all their belongings.

In the 50's two more buildings went up in flames. In 1950, the Naucke Feed Store, located on the corner across the street from Tavis Cafe, burned to the ground. The building had originally been the First State Bank. In 1953, a garage constructed by Glen and Clyde Hoovestol burned. It was located on the site of the old Livery Barn.

With all these buildings gone, it is not surprising that Almont's business district suffered much loss, and gradually began to decline. Some businesses were re-established, but other merchants gave up and moved on, in hopes of better luck at a different location.

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