

WELCOME BACK FROM THE ATTIC

YESTERYEAR AROUND CALEDONIA STATION

No. 5

1976



NORTH BROWNSVILLE ABOUT 1878

In 1835 William H. Brown purchased land along the Thornapple River where Alaska is now situated. Mr. Brown was living in Thornapple Township, Barry County. When he became dissatisfied with his land, he hired an Indian chief to take him down the Thornapple River on a prospecting tour, with the result that he selected the tract of land which is now Alaska. He could see the fine water-power afforded by the Thornapple River and was determined to monopolize that power. Where he saw power he purchased the land.

Mr. Brown in 1848 erected the first sawmill at Brownsville. Later in 1853 with Warren S. Hale, he built the first grist mill.

The photo on this page shows the village of Alaska about 1878. The photo view is from the east side of the Thornapple River looking west. The building left of the covered bridge on the east side of the river was a furniture factory. The first building south of the bridge on the west side was the flour mill. South of the flour mill was a sawmill. The long two story building above the flour mill was Kniffin & Proctor's hardware store. The long two story building with six end windows was the Alaska Hotel. Above the hardware store was the Baptist Church built in 1867.

The post office of Brownsville was opened on December 13, 1855, with Theodore Nelson as the first postmaster. Three days later it was changed to North Brownsville because of its location in the northern part of the township. Another name change was made December 4, 1868, when it was

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called Alaska. The 1867 purchase of the Territory of Alaska from Russia probably influenced its renaming. Alaska continued to have a postoffice until February 6, 1906, when it was closed.

Mr. Brown platted the area in 1866 as North Brownsville. In 1870, less than two dozen years after Brown built his sawmill, its population was 350 with more than 20 businesses.

One of the early residents of Alaska was Elijah D. Alden. He came in 1856 and constructed a furniture factory. He sold the building in 1868 and invented the Alaska turbine, a wind pump. He manufactured and sold the pumps for three years and then again went into the furniture business.

The village had hoped to be a station on the Grand Valley Railroad that was laid out in the late 1860's, but instead the railroad passed about six miles to the southwest with a station in Caledonia.

After 1880 it was all down hill for Alaska with several fires. The biggest and most destructive was in the early morning of September 18, 1895. It left the business portion of the village in ruins. Seven buildings were gone. Only one store was left in the whole block.

As the timber disappeared, the sawmills also vanished. The last grist mill was torn down about 1920 and the old covered bridge across the Thornapple River was replaced in the 1920's.



HAROLD KOSTER at the General Store
(in business about 1926-1940)

ALASKA BURNED

The Business Portion of the Village in Ruins.

S. T. COLSON LOSES HEAVILY

His Three Store Buildings, 1,500 Bedsteads and Stock of Goods Entirely Burned Without Insurance—Fire Supposed to Be Incendiary.

Alaska, six miles northeast of this village, was visited by a disastrous fire early Wednesday morning about 12:30, which wiped out the entire business part of the town. Seven buildings were laid in ruins, entailing a loss which is hard to estimate, but which is probably not far from \$10,000. The fire started in the rear part of the upper story of a two-story frame building occupied by J. W. Forbes as a general store, and the structure was in flames when the fire was first discovered. A strong wind was blowing from the southwest and soon the flames spread to a large double store building owned and occupied by County Treasurer Sherman T. Colson as a general store, adjoining on the east.

By this time the inhabitants of the village were astir and strenuous efforts were made to check the rapid progress of the flames. But in spite of all efforts the flames, fanned by the gale, leaped across the street and ignited two old frame buildings also owned by Mr. Colson. These buildings were soon in flames. In them Mr. Colson had stored about 1,500 spindle bedsteads which was some of the stock left over from the manufacturing business in which he was formerly engaged. Next the flames spread in both directions licking up a shoe shop on the west owned by John Koning, and a frame structure owned by William Glasgow and an unoccupied brick building owned by Joseph H. McKee of Grand Rapids, on, the east helped to check further spread of the fire, although the Douglass building across the street was somewhat damaged.

The Ruined Village

by Marie Marvin

Unlucky Alaska,
Its Quaint Beauty and Those Spindle Bedsteads.

A little town, discouraged and worn out with much battling against adverse circumstances, nestled down in a quiet valley, like an old man worn with the cares and sorrows of life settling down by his fireside, giving up the battle and quietly living out an uneventful existence.

The little town of Alaska, lying midway between Caledonia and McCords, is a sort of a Michigan Sleepy Hollow with much of the picturesque in her early history and surrounded by some of the most beautiful scenery in this part of Michigan. And very beautiful must the country have looked to William H. Brown when he came down Thornapple River from his home in Middleville in the Autumn of 1838 in a canoe rowed by an Indian chief. About the present

town site the river scenery is especially charming in some places, shut in by high hills or bluffs that reach almost to the water's edge, then rolling tranquilly along again through a beautifully wooded country that is now all ablaze with gorgeous autumn colorings. Brown saw in the water power about Alaska a great future for a town site and he took up 1,300 acres of land in the vicinity, and in 1848 he returned with Benjamin Farnham from Middleville to make a sturdy pioneer fight for a new settlement.

It was a lovely autumn day when we walked slowly down the winding hill into the town, on the trip over from McCords pushing our bicycles, for if any one starts for the place with a mistaken idea that they are going to ride a wheel their disappointment will be great. We were told by a farmer near

Mr. Colson estimates his loss on his store building at \$1,500 and on his stock of goods at \$2,000. About \$500 worth of household goods in the upper story were consumed. His loss on the old buildings and bedsteads he places at \$1,000, making his total loss \$5,000. Mr. Colson carried no insurance, having allowed his policies to lapse some time ago on account of the high rate of premium asked, 6 per cent., making his loss complete. He was about to renew the insurance but delayed the matter one day too long.

Forbes' loss is estimated at about \$600 and he carried some insurance. The McKee building was valued at about \$2,000 and was insured. The other losses will aggregate from \$1,000 to \$3,000. Incendiarism is suspected and the origin of the fire will be investigated. Only one store is left in the whole block. It is a serious blow to the village. The reflection of the fire in the sky was plainly visible from this village.

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The Evening Press

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McCords station that we had better go by the way of the Grange Hall as it was "nigher than to go clean around", and with this definite information we started out. I will give this bit of private confidence to any future bicycle explorer that although the statement is made that the distance from McCords to Alaska is only five miles, we can give reliable testimony that it is really about a million on a warm day, with hills 20,000 feet high covered with sand twenty feet deep.

I will leave it to any fair minded person if the title Grange Hall hasn't an imposing sound. The Business Woman said that I was probably looking for a building modeled after the horticultural building at the World's fair. At any rate when we passed a small white building that looked like a respectable school house we rode past it and didn't turn to the left, which resulted in our traveling several extra miles. And any one knows, who has been there, the enviable position of having led a bicycle party on a wrong road. An exile to Siberia is to be envied and the position of grand vizier to the sultan of Turkey is a happy one when compared to it.

Just at the edge of the town we stopped and looked at the beautiful and picturesque scene before us. We could look across the Thornapple at our feet with its great dam 300 feet wide, over which the water came dashing to the ruins of the old mill on the other side of the river. Beyond stretched the main asset of the little village on either side of which are the ruins of a once prosperous town. For Alaska has suffered from four fires and her courage and energy is almost gone.

As we stood looking at the river an old man came out from a cottage near by and pleasantly wished us a good morning and we found that it was the same Benjamin Farnham who came with Mr. Brown to make his opening in the wilderness.

"Oh, yes," said Mr. Farnham, "I well remember the night that we first landed here. It was a warm spring night and we put up a rough shanty over there," pointing down the river, "and slept there. I can remember now how still it seemed, here in the midst of the forest, and how loud the sound of the river seemed to me, rushing along in the silence. That summer Brown and I built a saw mill and a log house and put a 300 foot dam across the river and the next winter we went to sawing and built the Brown homestead, which still stands on the other side of the hill.

"Mr. Brown was a fine, sturdy man with all the traits of character necessary to the successful pioneer--the town was first named for him and called North Brownsville--and under his wise and prudent guidance it grew and prospered. The saw mill was purchased afterward by E.D. Alden, who ran a big furniture factory here, and in 1853 Mr. Brown built a big flouring mill which was purchased by J.W. Boynton."

The furniture business evidently grew apace, for in 1860 Mr. Alden was employing fifty men, cabinet work was shipped in the white, besides finishing for the home market. When we stopped on the other side of the river in front of an old barn and saw some 800 spindle beds protruding from the open windows and doors, I was naturally interested in their history and asked an old man, who was standing near, about them.



SHERMAN T. COLSON.
County Treasurer.

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He chuckled and evidently seemed to enjoy the excitement of telling the story to a stranger.

"Well," he said, reflectively, "them beds is a part of about 5,000 that was burned here a year ago and they stand an everlastin' monument to the fact that a cheap article ain't no good in the long run. Them beds was stored here for twenty-five years and they ain't worth twenty cents apiece. Why, they used to go out and cut down the timber in the morning, plane it in the afternoon, and make it up into beds before night. Yes sir, they had to cover them beds up from the sun gettin' them over to the station to keep them from crackin'. It was just after the war and they thought they could sell anything to a confidin' public, but they couldn't and them beds would have been standin' there until doomsday if that fire had not come along and burnt most of them up last year. Of course there was a terrible lack of management and spindle beds kinder went out of style, but spindle beds would have been good enough for most folks if they had only been made half decent.

"Mr. Alden had sold out the stock in 1877, to Levi Fisher and in two years he sold out to George VanEvery, who failed and then Sherman T. Colson of Grand Rapids, who is now county treasurer, took the stock on a mortgage. He owned the general store here then and did a big business. He stored the furniture in some stores he owned on the main street and when the fire came along a year ago it burned the whole thing up. About all them beds was good for was kindlin'," he added reflectively.

I saw a look of interest in the Dutchess' eye and I hurried the party along. She has an investigating and inventive turn of mind and I didn't know what designs she had on those old spindle beds. She once found a new joint of sewer pipe, painted it white and made it into an artistic tea table which was the wonder and delight of her friends--who never knew its plebian origin--and I feared that she was planning to have us take two or three of those beds home on our wheels to use for oriental couches or fret work, and I didn't propose to be a express wagon over that awful road.

I afterward met E.D. Alden and Warren Hale, who was Mr. Brown's partner in the early days, and they told me a great deal about the early history of the poor little town. In 1856 it was one of the most prosperous settlements anywhere about. Among the families then settled there were Mr. and Mrs. E.D. Alden, Mr. and Mrs. Warren Hale, Mr. and Mrs. Heman Blodgett, Mr. and Mrs. William Newson, Dr. George Fox, Mr. and Mrs. Theodore Nelson, Mr. and Mrs. John Watterson, Mr. and Mrs. Martin Blackford, Mr. Duncan and family and Gottlieb Martin.

The hotel was the headquarters for all the merrymakings in the county in those days. It was kept by William Locke for awhile and afterward by Heman Blodgett. At one county dance 300 couples danced in the dining room.

The first church services were held in the old saw mill. Elder Fairchild and his wife used to walk over from his home near McCords, four miles away, to conduct them. Afterward services were held in the schoolhouse and in 1867 the present Baptist church building was put up. Rev. Mr. Osborne used to hold Baptist service in the old school house in 1856.

In 1869 great excitement prevailed in Alaska, for the Michigan Central planned to run through the town. Railroad meetings were held and stock subscribed for by the town's people. Warren Hale and other merchants subscribed \$1,000 each, but for some unknown reason the plans of the road were changed and it went to Caledonia instead, and the little town settled back into its old rut of misfortune. It seems to be pursued by ill luck. The big flouring mill owned by J.W. Boynton burned twenty-five years ago. A few years later the town hall, generally known as the "yellow building," was consumed by fire. Nine years ago the hotel, barns and several dwellings near by were burned and in September 1895 a fire visited Alaska that carried away all the business part of the town. Four brick blocks, Mr. Colson's general store, and the shoe factory and several dwelling houses were swept away and Alaska seems crushed and broken by this last crowning piece of bad luck.

One of the early settlers of the place was Edward Campau, whose farm is near the town. He came from Detroit to Grand Rapids in 1838 to live with his Aunt Supernant and his Uncle Louis Moran. He

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was a member of the Campau family so closely connected with the early history of Michigan and his family trait of pioneering soon let him to start into the new country about Grand Rapids.

He soon secured a position as driver on the old stage line and many are the prominent Grand Rapids people whom he has spilled on the plank road, which was especially bad near Alaska. Away back in the forties he upset Mrs. T.B. Church and her baby, Fred, into a mud hole near the town. The baby was nearly suffocated in the water before he was found, and the future artist, whose pictures have been the delight and pride of the American art world, very nearly perished ignominiously in the mud hole of a plank road.

Mrs. Church laughed very heartily when telling about the incident a few days ago. "Yes," said she, "it was an exciting trip. We were coming from Yankee Springs. Mr. and Mrs. Coudon and Hon. John Ball were in the stage and Mr. Ball had just been holding little Fred for me as it was about 2 o'clock in the morning and I was very tired. It was very dark and suddenly over went the wagon into the water. Everyone, as soon as they scrambled up, asked about the baby, but he was found all safe and sound.

"We walked back in the darkness through the mud to Fiske's tavern and I lost my slipper in the road. They finally got our wagon out of the mud and we came on to Grand Rapids. We went to the old National hotel and all of us were simply soaked. We sat in front of the fireplace and the Coultons, who had one thousand dollars in paper money in belts about their waists, took it out and dried it in front of the fire. Edward Campau was a good driver in spite of tipping us over. I remember he married Yankee Lewis' daughter. This was my third trip over the old plank road."

Edward Campau's son Frank lives in Alaska now and keeps the general store there. He has married a daughter of William Brown and the grandson of these two sturdy pioneers, Edward Brown Campau, two and one-half years old shows already in his determined little face the traits of the famous Campau family which made them the most enterprising and successful pioneers of the West.

So all about Alaska we found interesting stories of the early days. We found Peter McNaughton's tavern and Edward Campau's farm with its remnants of a great beaver dam.

And in Alaska we found that spirit of affection which a deep, constant and common feeling of the world's hardships and the constant struggle for a livelihood sometimes arouses. The calm, noiseless hush of an unsuccessful place is over the town, an atmosphere of peaceful, resigned serenity, and there is a strange pastoral beauty all about. The sheep were browsing in their quiet fields, the sun shining on the fertile, quiet valley. One is haunted with the touching history of the little village. All the hopes and ambitions, passions and labor that had been expended there, seemed only to show the valuelessness of the energy and power of man in a fight against

HISTORY AND DIRECTORY OF KENT COUNTY, 1870.

ALASKA VILLAGE.

BLACKSMITH.

A. D. Hembling.

BOOTS AND SHOES.

Josiah Irons.

CARPENTERS AND JOINERS.

John L. Hopkins.

Cyrus Hull.

CARRIAGES AND WAGONS—(Manufacturer of.)

B. E. Richards.

DRY GOODS AND GROCERIES.

Beamer & Haviland.

FLOURING MILL.

J. W. Boynton.

FURNITURE MANUFACTURERS.

Van Every & Bellows.

FURNITURE—(Wholesale.)

L. W. Fisher.

GENERAL STORE.

S. T. Colson & Co.

HARDWARE AND TIN.

Kniffin & Proctor.

HOTEL.

William H. Lock.

JUSTICE OF THE PEACE.

Hugh B. McAlister.

MASON AND PLASTERER.

Sylvester K. Hickey.

MERCHANT TAILOR.

John Martin.

MEAT MARKET.

Horace S. Newson.

MILLINER AND DRESSMAKER.

Miss E. R. Newson.

MILLWRIGHT AND DEALER IN TURBINE WATER WHEELS.

E. D. Alden.

PAINTING—PLAIN AND ORNA- MENTAL.

Daniel R. Fox.

PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS.

George Fox.

Isaac B. Malcolm.

POSTMASTER.

Warren S. Hale.

PHOTOGRAPHER.

G. F. Hull.

SURVEYOR AND ENGINEER.

Robert S. Jackson.

SAW MILL.

L. W. Fisher, proprietor.

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destiny, against a spirit of relentless calamity which seems sometimes to hover about people and places and which no amount of effort can overcome.

Marie Marvin



Warren Hale.

WARREN S. HALE was born in Richmond, Ontario county, N.Y., April 3, 1826. His parents removed, when he was young, to Lima, Livingston county, N.Y., the seat of the Genesee college where he spent his early life and obtained his education. In 1844 he came to Michigan and for several years was engaged in teaching. In the year 1847 he was married to Mary A. Smith of Hartland, Livingston county, Mich., and settled on a farm in Bedford, Calhoun county. He was afterwards engaged for a time in merchandizing in Vermontville, Eaton county, and removed from there to Kent county in the year 1854 where he has since resided.

He was admitted as an attorney to practice law in the courts of this state in 1873 and in the later years of his life his time has been divided between the practice of law and other business. When he first came with his family and settled in the town of Caledonia, on the present site of the village of Alaska, there were only eighteen voters in the entire township and five or six farms opened up on the west side of Thornapple river.

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The old Baptist church

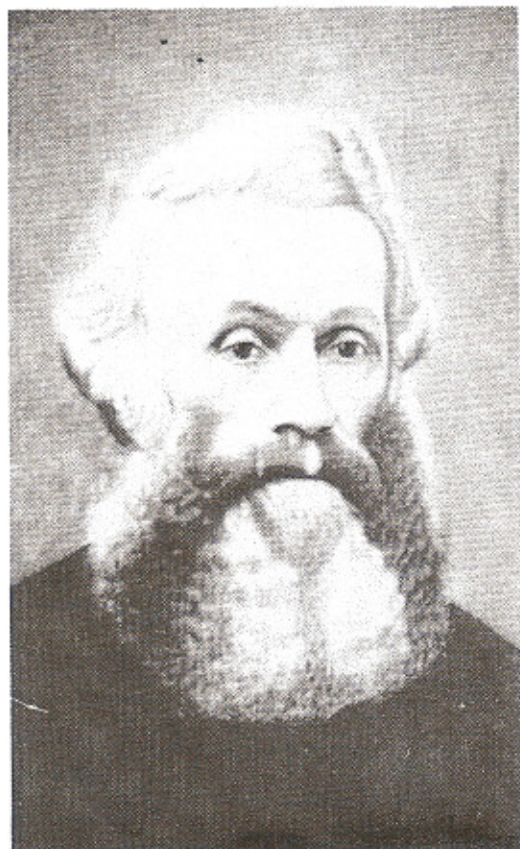
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WILLIAM H. BROWN was an honored pioneer of Caledonia. He was born in Warwick, Kent Co., R.I., in the year 1810. His parents, Othaniel and Martha (Whitehorn) Brown, were natives of the same state. In early manhood Mr. Brown went with his parents to Genesee Co., N.Y., and at a very early day in the history of Western Michigan, he came to Thornapple, Barry Co., and entered 100 acres of land. Becoming dissatisfied, he hired an Indian chief to take him down Thornapple river on a prospecting tour. He selected a farm and entered a large tract of land in Caledonia, of which the homestead includes a portion. In 1853 he built a grist mill at Alaska, and operated it for a number of years. In 1868 he erected a flouring mill at Caledonia Center (Labarge), at a cost of \$14,000, also building a saw-mill at that place. He built two saw-mills at Alaska soon after his settlement. The original name of Alaska was Brownsville, founded and platted by Mr. Brown. He was married in 1845 to Clarissa Paul. Of their four children two are living--George E. and Hattie N., born Nov. 18, 1848 (Mrs. Joel Jackson, of Minneapolis, Minn.). Another son, Charles H., was a member of Co. E, 21st Reg. Mich. Inf., and died April 14, 1863, in his country's defense. Another daughter, Caroline A., is deceased. Mrs. Brown died Aug. 3, 1858, and Mr. Brown was again married, March 25, 1860, to Lufanna, widow of Francis Donaldson, and daughter of John S. and Elizabeth Leek. She was born in Ulysses, Tompkins Co., N.Y., July 18, 1828, and by this marriage had four children. The following named are living--Carrie M., born March 14, 1863; Alva W., Nov. 14, 1865, and Freddie O.C., born Sept. 30, 1868. She has two children by her former marriage--Frank S., born Sept. 6, 1849, and Libbie, July 2, 1855, wife of Aaron Fisher. Mr. Brown was popular in public life; he was an ardent believer in and advocate of the principles of the Republican party; was many consecutive years the incumbent of town offices, whose duties he discharged to his own credit and the entire satisfaction of his constituents. He was one of the organizers of the Baptist Church of Alaska, and was Deacon at the time of his death, which occurred Oct. 14, 1877, after a period of protracted illness. Few men excell Mr. Brown in the spotless record he left as a precious memory to his family and friends. His life was one of usefulness and liberality, and in dying he gave evidence of the sincerity of his belief in the Master's precepts, by bequeathing \$5,000 to the Foreign Missionary Society.



A Grand Dramatic Entertainment will
be given by the

**ALASKA DRAMATIC
SOCIETY,**

For the benefit of the

ALASKA SILVER CORNET BAND,
At Alaska Hotel Hall, On
FRIDAY EVE. MARCH 4th.
THE FORTY-NINERS
Or the
PIONEER'S DAUGHTER.