THE ALMOND HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Almond was settled in 1796 by families from Luzerne County, Pennsylvania. The Almond Historical Society was formed in 1963 under the leadership of John Reynolds, who was its president until 1971. An absolute charter was granted to it in 1971 by the University of the State of New York.

The home of the Society is at 11 Main Street. The house was built about 1830 and was willed to the Society by former member Kenneth Hagadorn.

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MY FATHER'S OLD-FASHIONED DRUG STORE

(The manuscript for this article was presented to the Almond Historical Society in February 1972 by one of its members, John Burling Dixson of Arlington, Va. It was written by his father, John B. Dixson, Sr., in July 1945. The times he was writing about were in the early 1870's. It is a clear and detailed description of the village drug store of that period and a document of great historical value.)

In a pleasant, peaceful valley amid the rolling hills of the Allegheny range in Western New York lies the little country village of Almond. There my father kept for many years what would now be called an old-fashioned drug store. There I was born and there I lived the first 28 years of my long life. It is with feelings of deep affection and reverence that I now turn about to look back across a span of three quarters of a century to see again with the eyes of memory that little village and my father's old store. I see the one-storied building with its white painted front, the window sash set with numerous small panes of glass, the door even with the windows, and the whole front flush with the sidewalk. It was on the main street and directly across the road from the Village Square. Above the windows on a plain boarded space was painted in letters of blue, this sign:

IRA W. DIXSON
DEALER IN
DRUGS & MEDICINES
PAINTS - OILS - DYE-STUFFS
The front windows were fitted with heavy wooden shutters, fastened from the inside by bolt and lever. They were put up each night and taken down and carried in each morning. The lock on the front door was a massive one of iron and bolted to the inside. The key was of brass and so large that Father carried it in his hand when he went home at night. Upon arriving at the house, he would go directly to the living room and put the key in a drawer in a bureau overnight. Then he would settle down in his easy chair to read and partake of his evening snack of doughnuts and cider that Mother would bring to him. I have witnessed that little domestic scene many times.

Inside the store were plain wooden counters along both sides of the room. On two or three of the counters there were old-style, flat-topped showcases in which were displayed toilet soaps, face powders, hair brushes and combs, sponges, chamois skins, etc. On one of the counters was the regulation drug scale, in vogue at the time, with its tall central standard, heavy brass cross beam, and its round brass pans suspended by long chains from the cross beam. With these scales was a so-called nest of brass weights, ranging from $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce to 2 pounds. This style of scale is now obsolete, superseded by the more modern box scale, but may still be seen set aside in some old drug store or in antique shops.

There was also on the counter the Wedgewood mortar and, also, the iron mortars and pestles and an iron cork compressor—an alligator-shaped utensil used to pinch corks to a smaller size.

On the other side of the room at the end of the last counter stood the tall-legged, hinge-lidded desk at which Father stood when doing work or writing.
I do not recall his having a high stool but remember him as always standing when working at the desk. On the desk was a dish of fine shot in which he stuck the pens when not in use. This kept the pens clean and thus retarded corrosion. Also, on the desk was an ivory-handled seal or stamper used to impress the melted wax on letters and packages, as was the custom in those days. I still have that seal among my possessions.

In the rear of the store was a large, round, cast-iron coal stove, and on the flat top of it was an iron kettle, always kept filled with water. The show windows had their colored show globes, lighted at night by kerosene oil lamps. Also, in the windows were pyramid-shaped wooden racks or steps for the display of merchandise. On the shelves along the left side of the store were the nicely labeled bottles of uniform shape and size, containing the various liquid and dry drugs. The many herbs, roots, barks, leaves, and seeds in stock were in packages and in drawers below the shelving. On the top shelf of the section was a row of white porcelain jars containing solid extracts of various vegetable drugs. These extracts were of putty-like consistency and pills were made from them by hand. These solid extracts were much used before fluid extracts were known. Along about this time, however, fluid extracts were born. The Tilden Company of New Lebanon, New York, was the first firm, I believe, not only in the United States but in the world, to manufacture and market a line of fluid extracts. This is an honorable distinction, for the advent of these hydro-alcoholic extracts marked a great advance in the use and administration of vegetable drugs.

Proprietary or so-called patent medicines were much used in those days by country people and considerable shelf room was allotted to this class of merchandise.
merchandise. I remember seeing Hostetter's bitters, Ayer's sarsaparilla, Ayer's Hair Vigor, Jayn's Expectorant, Jayne's Tonic Vermifuge, Vinegar bitters, Chamberlain Pain Balm, King of the Blood, Merchant's Gargling Oil, Ransom's Hive Syrup, Hamlin's Wizard Oil, and many others. Another feature of stock that I especially remember was dye-stuffs. This was before the days of package dyes and housewives usually had their own recipes for the home coloring of cloth, yarn, and carpet rags. These recipes they would bring to the store to be made up, so Father kept a good supply of the natural dye woods and chemicals used in dyeing. These were kept in the back room in barrels, a whole rown of them--these were Logwood chips, Logwood Extract, Nickwood, Camwood, Fustic and Madder.

Some farmers likewise brought in their own formulas for horse and cattle condition powders for Father to prepare.

Window glass, putty, and varnishes were a part of the store's stock. These were in the back room. Small window panes were the style and 7 x 9, 8 x 10, and 10 x 12 were the sizes most in demand. Putty came in tubs and was sold by weight in any quantity the customer wanted. Varnish was bought in 5 gallon cans and sold in any quantity, the customer usually bringing his own container. There were three kinds of varnish--White Damar, Copal, and so-called furniture varnish. There also were the long bars of white and mottled Castile soap that Father would cut up for sale into small cakes, by taking a strong string and with a rapid up and down see-saw motion cut through the soap. To operate this primitive process, however, required someone to hold the bar of soap. The soap shavings were collected and used in making soap liniment. Very little of anything was allowed to go unused.
On the ledge in the rear of the room was a large earthen bowl of strained or clarified honey. The bowl was covered by cloth or parchment tied around the rim with a string and in the bowl was a wooden ladle. A boy's natural fondness for sweets made of that old honey bowl a sure port-of-call for me when I went to the store.

Up front was a wall case in which were some perfumes and flavoring extracts. I don't think there were many different odors of perfume, but I remember Jockey Club, New Mown Hay, and Lubin's French perfumes of Patchoule and Frangipani and there was also Eau-de-cologne. Country drug stores at that time did not carry many different items of a class, especially in toilet articles, for example, I recall only two makes of face powders in Father's show case, namely Saunder's and Swan's Down--both came in white and pink (or flesh) only. It was that or nothing for the ladies then. The same with toilet soaps. There were a few kinds only and mostly of Basin and Sargent's make and some medicinal soaps. What a contrast to the drugstores of today with their multiplicity of cosmetic items.

About the first of the year, there was always a pile of new almanacs on the counter published by medicine manufacturers as an advertising medium and sent to the drug stores for free distribution. They contained, in addition to the advertising, considerable interesting and useful information, and everybody wanted an almanac, especially the farmers. On Father's counter were usually four kinds, Ayer's, Jayne's, Hostetter's, and Herrick's. In speaking of these Almanacs, I remember once looking at an Ayer's Almanac and noticing the date printed on the
cover, it was 1872. I can still see that date as clearly as if I now held the book in my hand. It seems strange that so trivial and unimportant a thing as that date should leave an impression on my mind. That has endured through all the years since then, but such is the fact. There was also another entirely different class of Almanac known as Josh Billings Almanac, a humorous publication that sold, I think, for 25 cents.

There was an academy in the village, so Father had for sale the textbooks used in the school; and the Spencerian writing books and the old-time slates and slate pencils, both now obsolete. Another item of stock well remembered was valentines, of which in their season Father kept a good assortment, fancy ones of various designs and prices all breathing a message of love which the boys found pleasure in giving and the girls were delighted to receive. There was another kind the so-called comic valentines, plain sheets of cheap paper with pictures in caricature and verses in burlesque. These sold for one or two cents each. Though these comics often made an amusingly accurate shot at a person's habits and personality, they were circulated more in a spirit of fun than otherwise.

Once, at Christmas time, Father went over the fence into a new field of merchandise by buying for the Christmas trade a supply of wall brackets, racks, etc. They were of various designs and prices but all made of walnut wood. These things at this time were the fashion and popular. Father must have disposed of his entire stock for I never saw any of the articles in the store after Christmas was over. I have mentioned the fact that Father's store was sit-
uated directly across the road from the Village Square. That square was where the baseball games were played between the Village team and players from some neighboring towns, usually once a week during the summer. There was only the width of the road between the home plate and the store front, so on the afternoon when a game was scheduled, Father would have to put up the wooden shutters to protect the windows from the uncanny attraction they seemed to have for every foul ball that was batted.

There were no traveling salesmen calling on country drug stores in those days, and I think Father bought most of his drug supplies direct of Schiefflin Company, New York, and of Gerrity Brothers, Elmira, New York. It was, however, the custom for some wholesalers to send wagons through the country at regular intervals to supply merchandise direct to the dealer. Some goods were sold outright and some were left on consignment. Once a year or so, Father would make a buying trip to the city and sometimes take Mother with him to make of it for both of them a pleasure trip as well as one for business.

There is associated in my recollections of the old store a most unique character whose business and methods were also unique. I think his name was Mason. He was an itinerant peddler. His business establishment was a four-wheeled cart pushed by hand up hill and down through the countryside, selling his wares to the farmer's wives along his route and stopping for hotel accommodations at whatever farm house he chanced to be near when night over took him. My recollection of him lives mainly in his
visits to Father's drug store. On his visits to Almond, he would come to the store to replenish his stock of Essence of Peppermint, Wintergreen, Anise, and the flavoring extracts of lemon and vanilla. I can see him now standing at the counter bargaining with Father for his supplies and tasting the products to see if they met his approval as to quality. His was an interesting type of business in his day, but now as obsolete as the Pilgrim's ducking stool.

The old drug store has long since ceased to be. Fifty years have come and gone since the old building was torn down and a new building erected on the site. The memory of it, though, still abides with and will till life is done. Other interesting Village Enterprises, such as the Blacksmith shop, the Waggon shop*, the tin shop, the harness shop, the cheese factory, and the grist mill have all gone with the wind; victims of the inevitable trend of change and evolution consequent on our Country's growth and expansion. They were in their day necessary and useful components of the American way of life. They are gone but not forgotten.

* Waggon--This is not a misspelling but an old English spelling common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The door of the old Waggon Shop in Almond hangs on the garage of James Woughter on Park Street (1972). The name appears faintly in raised letters on the weathered wood as though they might have once been covered by metal or wooden letters.
There is a circumstance in connection with this narrative that I think is especially worthy to be told. It is this, that there is still living today (and at last reports in good health) in this same little Village of Almond a gentleman with whom I have had the privilege of a life long acquaintance and friendship. A certain Horace Stillman who, as a lad, at one time clerked for my Father in this very same OLD-FASHIONED DRUG STORE.

THE END

John B. Dixon Sr.
July, 1945
Stockbridge, Mass.