

ALMA, 19TH CENTURY RIVER TOWN

Fourth In A Series Of Articles On The 19th Century Photography Of Gerhard Gesell

From 1876 through 1906 Gerhard Gesell documented everyday life on the Mississippi River in Alma, Wisconsin and throughout Buffalo County. Coming from Reads Landing, Minnesota, Gesell knew Alma as the “town across the river”.

The site of Alma was known as Twelve Mile Bluff long before the first two settlers, Victor Probst and John Waecker, arrived on August 20, 1848. The place had been named by riverboat pilots for a prominent rock formation located on the bluff directly above the present Alma Cemetery, which was visible from the mouth of the Chippewa River twelve miles to the north. Pilots used it for a landmark to guide their boats and log rafts on the Mississippi.

Probst and Waecker were both Swiss immigrants who had traveled upriver by steamboat from Galena, Illinois. And steamboats provided them their first means of livelihood—cutting firewood for sale as fuel. From that humble beginning Alma, Wisconsin carved out a presence on the western shore of Wisconsin between the Mississippi River and 500-foot river bluffs. Immigrants continued to arrive with contingencies from Germany (Prussia), Bavaria, Switzerland and Norway.



In 1860 Alma became the county seat for Buffalo County. A courthouse was built, the newspaper was established, stores were opening to serve the needs of the 150 residents and Buffalo County sent its first company of soldiers (6th Regiment of Wisconsin Infantry, Rifle Company H) in response to President Lincoln’s initial call for 75,000 volunteers.

Bluffs above the Mississippi River forced the containment of Alma to two blocks wide and seven miles long. From an Indian trail along the river, the settlers built two streets at the base of the bluffs. They were and still are called Main Street and Second Street. A number of short streets connect them but beware, 12 of these “streets” are stairstep streets and only accessible by foot, a unique feature of the city. Main Street is also Wisconsin State Highway 35, a part of the Great River Road and Wisconsin’s first Scenic Biway.

Today the 19th century charm of an historic river town can still be seen in Alma, Wisconsin and the photography of Gerhard Gesell serves as a reference point of a building from then to now. In 1982, 346 acres and over 200 buildings were included in the designation of the City of Alma as a National Historic District when it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

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Photo: Swing Boom, Beef Slough (WHS Image PH 6131)