

# History of Old Grocery Store Building Remains a Mystery

*Alma's Grocery*

**Structure Located At Corner of West Main, Bassett Sts.**

BY ALEXIUS BAAS  
ON THE NORTHEAST corner of the intersection of W. Main and S. Bassett streets stands an old building known at present as Alma's Grocery. How many thousands of times I have passed this place I should hesitate to say. It has always intrigued me and I have repeatedly resolved to inquire into its history. A few days ago I made good that resolve. The building always had for me an air of mystery as if to say: "I could tell you much of the early times of this neighborhood, but I will not. Find out for yourself." I accepted the challenge. But so far as its exact age and origin are concerned I must admit defeat. Its present owners went to considerable trouble to hunt up the abstracts of title to the property but could find only those dating back to 1873. This structure was already old at that time.

MY SEARCH took me to various people who have lived in the neighborhood for many years but their recollections go back only as far as the date just given.

One ancient lady indeed was reputed to be in possession of its early history but she declared in no uncertain terms and in a voice that carried well down the street: "I won't tell ye nothin' about nothin'" and slammed the door for added emphasis.

This preponderance of negatives dampened my reportorial inquisitiveness and I retreated in bad order.

Others were eager but unable to be of much help. Mrs. Janette Foran who lives just around the corner on S. Bassett st. said that a family named Hill ran a grocery store in the building for many years. The Misses Rose and Julia McNamara, also long time residents of the neighborhood, had verified Mrs. Foran's statement and Miss Rose added the information that the Hills are all deceased—that there were two children, Ella and Rollin Hill, who inherited from the old folks and that Rollin disappeared about the time of the 1893 Chicago World's fair where he had gone and never was heard of again. Mystery seems to shroud the building's early years.

HERE, IT STANDS, mute testimony to the fact that some pioneer Madsonian built early and well. The abstracts referred to above contain a number of names familiar to old timers among which are C. J. Roe and wife, James Morgan, Hannah Hill, Blanche B. Harper, James McCue, J. H. James, James H. McCue, and his sister, Mildred; Anthony Dixon, Fredericka Krehl, August Krehl, and Pauline Conradi. I find also the Joseph Boyd company in later years and Lydia R. Bartlett.



Here is pictured the building at the northeast corner of the intersection of W. Main and S. Bassett sts., which is the subject of today's article on Madison's historic buildings, by Alexius Baas.—Capital Times staff photo.

About the year 1905 San Piazza left his native Sicily. In 1918 he established himself in the old Hill building as a shoemaker and continued his shop there until his death in 1935. At that time his daughter, Alma, and her husband, F. S. Stassis, took the place over and opened a grocery store. Thus the building reverted again to its old time use.

At present it is owned jointly by the Stassis and Sam Piazza. Alma's brother, The Stassis have three children, Colleen, employed as a typist by the Mautz Paint Co., and Anthony and Sam, both students at Central high school.

THE STASSIS have named their store Alma's Grocery after Mrs. Stassis whose first name is Alma. They are very proud of their establishment and well they may be. It has an atmosphere of friendly neighborhoodness and the owners make one feel at home and welcome whether one is a customer or merely a passerby who drops in for a chat.

The quarters are small but there is an amazing amount of merchandise on the shelves and every inch of floor space is utilized. There is a large room to the rear of the store formerly used by the Stassis as living quarters when the children were small. It is now used as a storeroom.

Alma feels quite strongly about the advantages of a small neighborhood store over the elaborate, modern, chain type of grocery and she can be quite eloquent about them. She is right. The cozy feeling that is so much a part of her place is entirely lacking in the larger establishments.

ALMA'S GROCERY is more than a place of barter and sale. It is a meeting place for the neighbors, a news exchange for the customers, a place where buyer

and seller are on intimate and friendly terms.

It is a "throw-back" if you like, to the corner grocery of older days. It has a unique charm all its own.

The exterior of the old building matches the "homey" simplicity of the store itself. It is built of brick, a simple rectangle with a wing to the rear. It rises to two stories and a small attic. The second story is painted in tan, much weathered by the years. The first story facing Main st. is white and brown. The store entrance is on the corner facing Main st. Entrance to the upper floor and to the remainder of the ground floor also face Main st. but at the western end of the building.

SEVEN LARGE double windows, twelve paned, light the upper story, five on Main st., two on S. Bassett st. These last are topped with two smaller windows half circular in shape. I doubt if Madison has their duplicates. From the arrangement of the five Main st. windows and from what Mrs. Stassis tells me of the floor plan of the second story, I would guess that the building originally functioned as a hotel or boarding house.

Among the older neighbors the old place still bears the name of Hill's corner. From time immemorial the corner has been the rendezvous of the neighborhood children. It still is and the Alma Grocery candy counter is heavily patronized by them. And, of course, there is the inevitable dog. In this case, a wise and friendly old Chow named "Skippy," who belongs in the next block but who is pet to all the kids and who makes the corner his headquarters.

Yes—Alma's Grocery is a colorful survival of the old days in-side and out and well worth a visit.