



Alma (Images of America)

David McMacken

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Ralph Ely, founder of Alma, selected 10 acres of old forest on the bank of the Pine River in 1853. In this central-Michigan wilderness, he built a log cabin, a log store, and two steam-powered mills--a sawmill and a gristmill. At first, his growing settlement was called Elyton, but within a few years, it was renamed Alma, memorializing a battle in the Crimean War. Alma was energized by the acquisition of millionaire lumberman and entrepreneur Ammi W. Wright, who poured his resources into the town. Wright encouraged the establishment of Alma College in 1886 and the state Masonic home for the elderly in 1911. Wright laid the foundations for Alma's great Republic Truck Company, the largest exclusive maker of trucks in the world by 1920. The discovery of several oil fields prompted the establishment of two oil refineries in Alma in the 1930s and saved the town from the doldrums of the Great Depression. By the 1950s, Alma was a key national manufacturer of house trailers and mobile homes. This photographic panorama reflects the city's economic cycles and its institutions that have given Alma an enviable stability through the years.

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