ALISON CURTIS

Biography
Chris Plant
Western Wyoming College

Wyoming History Project

By
Lynell Elmlinger
May 8, 1989

ALISON CURTIS

Alison Curtis was born on June 14, 1907 in Diamondville, Wyoming, the first of six children born to Peter Gentleman Kirkwood and Francis Smith. The doctor in attendance was Dr. Brown. Mrs. Hunter was the midwife.

Peter Kirkwood was born in Scotland. He came to Diamondville from Idaho to work in the coal mines. Francis Smith was born in Almy, Wyoming. They were married in Diamondville in 1906 by Judge John Smith, Francis' grandfather.

When Alison was young they used a horse and wagon for transportation. Many of the town's people had horses which they kept at the stable. The ones who didn't have horses depended on someone else to help them if they needed it. They all worked together for survival. Some of them had buggies that were used for pleasure riding. In the winter they used bobsleds to get around.

Alison saw her first 'horseless carriage' when she was 7 years old. Her father's boss, Pat Sneddon, went to Salt Lake City by train to pick up his new Ford. One night shortly after this he offered to take Alison and her sister and two brothers for a ride. They thought it was wonderful to be the first kids in town to ride in a car. The car was black with isenglass windows.

Passenger train Number 6 was a daily occurance in Diamondville. It brought in the mail and fresh food, especially fruit. It brought passengers from SLC or any of the towns along the way to Diamondville. It was the town's connection to the outside world. The depot was on the other side of river just below the mine.

The name of the mine was The Diamond Coal and Coke Company. It was organized in Montana as Anaconda Copper. Diamondville was a little coal mining town with the mine right at the heart of the town so that miners

could walk to work. The houses were owned by the mine and rented to miners. They got a four roomed house with lights and water for $10 a month.

There was no indoor plumbing at that time. Everyone was careful about the way they used their Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Wards catalogs because they were recycled as toilet paper. (Nobody liked the 'slick' pages!)

The water was piped into the homes from storage tanks up on the hill above the mine. The tanks were filled by pumping water out of the Hamsfork River. The water pipes were all under ground but many times, in the winter, they froze when it was really cold.

They took their bathes in a the wash tub. Two people would use the same water. While they were taking a bath, more water was being heated on the stove in kettles for the next group.

Alison's father was the 'barn boss' so they lived across the river and the tracks near the mine and the big company barn. There were three other houses up there belonging to the boss, Mr. Sneddon, the assistant, Mr. Russell, and the clerk, Mr. Coffman.

Everyone in town got along and worked together. There were no ethinic divisions among the people although there were several different groups represented. The ones mentioned were Scots, English, Finns and Italians. The one distinction was Paper Collar Row where the store employees lived.

In Diamondville they had five stores, two bakeries and six saloons. The stores were supplied by the train. The company store was the Mountian Trading Company and was considered one of the best stores in southwestern

Wyoming at the time. They offered groceries, hardware, dry goods, furniture, a meat market and hay and grain under one roof.

Every two weeks when the miners got paid, they would go and put in an order. Later in the afternoon the order would be delivered to their door along with a treat from the store manager for the children. At Christmas time they would deliver orders on bobsleds. Just before Christmas Santa would ride along in the sleigh and visit every house and leave treats for the good boys and girls.

In the fall the train would bring in large loads of grapes for the Italians to make their wine. The kids would all gather around the wagons that were picking up the grapes and wait for the men to throw them bunches of grapes.

The Finn Hall was the center of social life in Diamondville. They had all their community dances and social gatherings there. It had a great dance floor! Anyone could rent it for their group. The Scotch people always had their Bobby Burns holiday there. (Bobby Burns was a Scotch poet and song writer whose birthday was celebrated with a dance and program on January 25 by all the Scotish born people and their friends.)

There were two saloons in town that had "girls". One was Borinio's and the other was Colletti's, both on main street. It was well known that this was their business. The girls kept to themselves and never became part of the town.

The most famous brothell in area was between Diamondville and Kemmerer. At first it was called the Green House. There was a fire in it and it had to be remodeled. When it reopened, they called it the Halfway House because it was halfway between Kemmerer and Diamondville. Later there was another fire. When they rebuild it, they made it a brick building and

called it the Southern Hotel which remained open until 1962. The building was run as a hotel for awhile and then used as a home until another fire destoryed it.

The only violence Alison remembers was a fight between two Finn men who owned a bar. One hit the other over the head with a baseball bat and cut his head open bad enough that he had to be rushed to the hospital in Kemmerer. They closed their place down after the incident.

Diamondville had two churches, the LDS Church and the Methodist Church. They met in different buildings but worked together and supported one another in their socials.

In 1918 a flu epidemic hit Diamondville killing five or six people. Every house that had flu was quarantined to prevent it from spreading. Among those who died were an aunt and uncle of Alison's. Her aunt was expecting her third child and couldn't get anyone to help because they were afraid of getting the flu. One lady, Emma Hunter, finally did come to see what she could do. The two children were sent to their grandparents house. She delivered her baby without assistance. The doctor came after the baby was born but she died anyway. Two hours later her husband died. The baby lived and was raised by the grandparents.

There was a hospital in Kemmerer started for the United Mine Workers by the state. It was called the Lincoln County Miners Hospital and served all the community's medical needs. They were equiped to handle most problems unless it was really serious then they were transported to SLC by train. There were several doctors in Kemmerer and two in Diamondville. They also had two dentists in Kemmerer.

There were several cases of men dying with consumption or black lung. When the men got the coal dust in their lungs, they didn't have much of a chance of recovery.

Many of the holiday celebrations became community celebrations. They celebrated Easter, Christmas and the 4th of July but the biggest celebration was on Labor Day. This was a celebration of the eight hour day.

They had a committee who planned and prepared a lunch for everyone. They would have games and races for the adults and children. The girls would all have new white dresses. It was always a contest to see who had the prettiest dress. Their dresses were made so that the petticoats could show because that was where the lace was.

Easter was celebrated by going to church. The community sponsered an Easter Egg hunt for the children. The children were treated to an ice cream cone or a soda pop. The girls wore their nice dresses for the occasion.

Christmas was memorable. Everyone had to be good or Santa wouldn't come to them. They were always surprised on Christmas morning. One Christmas Alison's family had company. All the kids were sent to bed so that Santa could come (but they didn't sleep). Pretty soon they heard Santa come in and jingle his bells. They were allowed to get up and see Santa but had to go back to bed so he could leave their presents. They were up a 5:00 the next morning to see what he left for them.

Someone would go up to the hills and bring back a wagon load of Christmas trees and sell them for 25 cents a piece. They were decorated with candles and homemade ornaments and lots of tinsel. The candles had to be watched closely because they caused a lot of fires. The Mountain Trading Company would always put a big tree up outside the store.

When someone died, they would be taken to the funeral home and prepared for burial. Then they would take the body back to the family home until the funeral. Someone would stay with the family and the body until it was buried (three or four days unless it was a contagious disease). Friends, wanting to pay respect, would call at the home usually bringing food for the family. The hearse was a glass enclosed case drawn by a horse.

There were some Indians that passed through Diamondville every fall. They never caused any trouble but they were watched closely because they tended to pick up everything they saw. They generally had a wagon but most followed the wagon walking.

The Diamondville kids had a playground behind the Finn Hall where they gathered to play games. Some of the favorites were Kick the Can and Run Sheepie Run. They played Hide and Go Seek behind the church and the houses. Most of the kids in town were a part of this group. Some kids lived up on the hill and only came down once in a while.

They had an elementary school in Diamondville with two rooms. There were three grades in each room. When children needed to be punished, they were put in the book room and given some extra job to do. If they did it well, they were given two peanuts by Mr. Burgoon. The only activity offered was baseball. When they were ready for high school, they went to Kemmerer.

The children were expected to help around the home. The boys had to get the coal and wood in which was used for heating the home and cooking. The girls had the clean the toilets out each week and empty the chamber pots or"slob jars" daily. The toilets were scrubbed with lysol.

Alison baked her first batch of bread when she was eight years old because her mother was sick in bed. She had her bring the pan into the

bedroom on a chair and told her what to put in and how to mix it. Everyone told her is was good and she's been doing it ever since.

Their houses weren't fancy but they kept them clean by scrubbing the wood floors every week. They made rugs to cover them out of old scraps of cloth. On the outside they were expected by the town to keep their places clean. Some had grass but most just had vegatable and flower gardens. These were watered with "boxed faucets" until they had water in the house then they watered with hoses attached to the sink and drawn out the window.

As a child Alison was healthy. She had what was considered the childhood diseases, chicken pox, measles and sore throat but nothing serious.

Once when she was about eleven she fell through the window at the post office while playing with some girls. The doctor wasn't in town at the time and her wrist was bleeding badly. A friend of hers, a boy scout, put a tourniqet on her arm. Later they said if he hadn't have done that she would have bled to death. The doctor arrived about two hours later and put fourteen stitches in her arm as her dad held her, with nothing to deaden the pain. It had cut through an artery.

On her eighth birthday her mother gave her a surprise party. She was told to go over to her grandmother's for something and while she was gone her friends came. When she came back, her mother told her to go get something from the bedroom. And surprise! There were all her friends. Her mother had made a big birthday cake. She had whipped up mounds of potatoes and put clean dimes in them. When the kids ate the potatoes, they got to keep the dimes the found. For presents she got ribbons, rings, braclets, handkerchiefs, socks and money.

When children were disciplined, they were spanked or sent to their rooms for several hours. If they planned to do something, they were stopped. The parents always stuck to their word and would not give in.

For dates they would go to the show. There was a theater in Diamondville. The movies were the silent ones so there was a piano player for the theater. The little kids would go to the matinee and older kids and adults went at night. The cost was 10 cents for children and 25 cents for adults.

For vacations the mothers would take the their families to Lava Hot Springs by train for ten days or two weeks. This was done in groups with four or five families going together. Sometimes they went to Bear Lake and stayed in the cabins. They would go to Paris, Idaho by train and have someone meet them at the depot.

There were dances every Saturday night and on holidays. Dancing was great entertainment. They were always good, clean fun. No drinking or smoking was allowed. These dances were for everybody, old and young. They did many kinds of dances but mostly the waltz.

Alison met her spouse, Blaine Gamble, at a carnival. He and a friend asked her and her sister to ride the ferris wheel. Then he started pampering her! He would always pick her up after work so she wouldn't have to walk home. After about a year of this, they decided to get married.

Blaine worked in the mines, too. He was born in Almy, Wyoming and was 14 years older than Alison. His father was one of the doctors in Diamondville.

When they got married, the guys Blaine chummed around with planned to put him jail over night. So they decided not to tell anyone and get married a little sooner with just the family and the ones that stood up for

them. They were married by the Methodist minister at Alison's family's home at midnight and had a wedding supper right after the ceremony. They left for SLC on the 2:00 train for their honeymoon. They stayed for five days in the New House Hotel.

When they come back, they moved into a little house they had fixed up. They lived in Diamondville or close around there all their married life. They had three children, two boys and a girl.