

# Men About Town

## E. L. Nelson

As the entire area of Humboldt becomes more and more interested in the Centennial Celebration of First Baptist Church, about the middle of June, we thought it would be interesting this week to have a story on one of our senior citizens -- one who remembers much concerning this area dating back almost 84 years. There was a time when it was illegal to sell cigarettes -- even to give away cigarette papers -- and the only smoking done by women was the occasional old lady who smoked the pipe, usually a corn cob variety. There were two open saloons in Humboldt and young boys were known to have slipped up to the back door of the places and buy a 10 cent container of the forbidden fluid. The "Super Market" of the early days handled just about everything there was to handle in the food line -- just as they do today -- but in completely different forms and manners.

This man, with whom we are taking a sort of a "trip backward" today is: Mr. E. L. Nelson, soon to be 84 years of age. He was born within two and half miles of Humboldt and has lived within that

Humboldt has had telephones since 1896 but it was not until three years that long distance service was installed. The first "hard surfaced streets", a two-mile section covered with gravel, for the then growing municipality was in 1909. A year earlier the Tri-County Fair was organized and for several years presented a fall exposition of farm production, spiced with fast horse racing and exhibits of women's handiwork, and offering the young and the old the first carnival.

Mr. Nelson, now retired, has a lot of time to "remember when." He is still very active, walking sometimes several miles a day, and making his home with a daughter, Miss Sarah Nelson on 18th Avenue.

He has seen his town grow from the scattering few score to its present size.

To him the "good old days" were not especially "so good". He prefers the "good days of the present era." And he is still available for counsel and advice to the many who still depend on his good judgement.

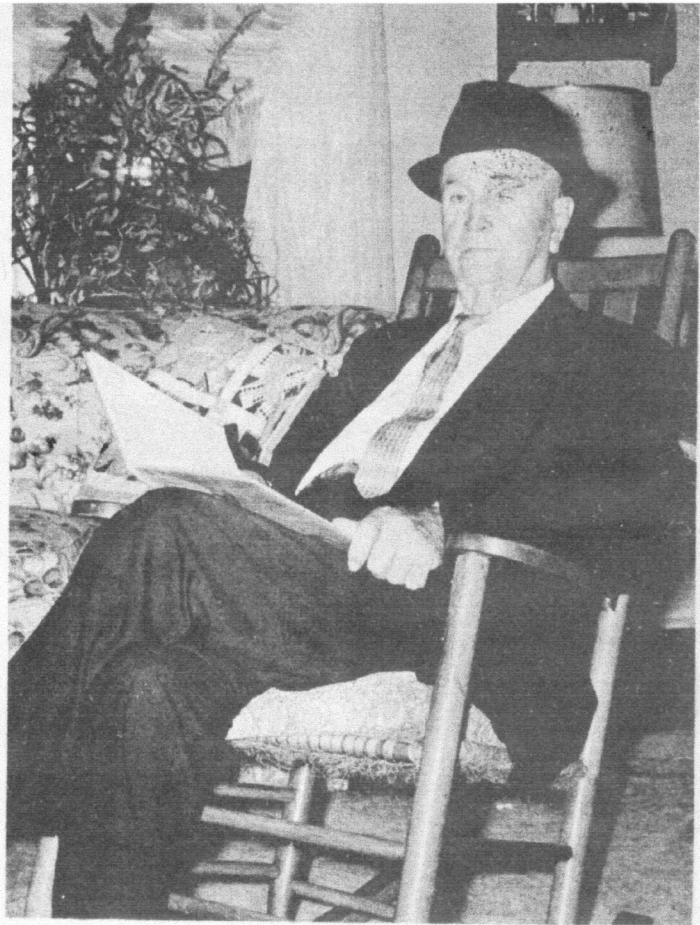
distance of the city or "in town" ever since.

Living conditions were not related in any manner to those of today according to "Uncle Dick", as many of his close friends have always known him.

Back to the grocery store. Most of them opened at 5 a.m. and remained open until 10 p. m. six days a week. For a while on Sunday morning they would open again for a few hours, mainly to permit the store's customers to pick up their fresh meats (very few homes had ice box facilities then).

Most items of merchandise came in bulk -- flour in barrels and large sacks. Also in barrel quantities came sugar, meal, salt, vinegar and sauer kraut. These products were dished out in paper bags, trays and empty whiskey bottles (furnished by the customer in the case of the vinegar bottles. No one ever heard of a "store bought chicken" except a live one. A clerk might handle a chicken from its coop, weigh up a pound of kraut, a sack of sugar, a pound of "soda crackers" from their large wooden or metal container, etc., "between hand-

Mr. Nelson says the first water and lighting system was established in Humboldt in 1895 - before he "moved to town" -- and that the first water mains were laid within the town 63 years ago. The sewerage system of the city was not started until 1920-21. The first fire department - a volunteer bucket brigade -- had its birth in 1901 and in the same year the city received a new general charter from the state legislature, changing the form of government to the present Mayor-Alderman system.



E. L. Nelson

washings."

When Mr. Nelson was born, Humboldt was a village -- hardly a struggling one -- 14 years of age. There was the "town well" on Main Street, in a mud-hole at the corner of Main and what is now 14th Avenue, and there were drinking troughs for the horses and mules which literally furnished the "horsepower" of the day.

"Uncle Dick" has been a busy man all his life, beginning in boyhood. He hauled fruit in his mule-drawn wagon from the farms "to town" for which he received 75 cents a day (and this was considered an unusually good wage in those days when a nickel, for instance, would buy a large sack of candy-dispensed of course from bulk containers.) He also clerked in a grocery store, measuring, among the many bulk varieties kerosene or "coal oil" which was the lighting vehicle of those early times. One of the most familiar sights near the front of the early grocery store was the large supply of buggy whips, hanging from the ceiling, these instruments being the "exclerator" of the latter part of the 19th century and the beginning of the next hundred years.

His activities in the business world covered many things. He had dealt in real estate and

acted as advisor to many persons not only who dealt with the land but who had other financial problems. He was a distributor in a big way for many years in fertilizers and farming equipment. He has been a fruit broker during the days when Humboldt really had a big output of edible products of the soil; for a long while he was a member of the Humboldt Finance Committee of the Peoples Bank. In all these enterprises he was a successful operator.

Also in the very early days Humboldt began to become "industrialized" with the establishment of a "cannery", financed by several citizens, which "put up" tomatoes, peas, corn and other local products. It was the beginning of the large canning establishment, which now are prevalent throughout West Tennessee and other areas of the South.

Those days in the latter '80's witnessed strong lodgemenberships when those belonging to such organizations were assigned the task of often "sitting up with the sick". His father was a member of the early Knights of Pythias which practiced this custom.

DECEASED  
AUG. 12, 1969