

RiverBender Blog: New Alton Meets Old Alton

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter
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My grandparents know a different Alton than I do.

Both of them are Riverbend natives, born and raised. In between the buildings and the cracked sidewalks, they can still see the Alton of their childhoods. I love going downtown with them and hearing stories about our shared hometown, 50 years removed from the city I know.

I never really noticed the years between us until the first time we went together to Germania. I had already spent hours at the downtown Alton location, hanging out with my friends and lounging on the rooftop benches overlooking the bridge. I thought my grandparents might enjoy something new, so we trekked downtown to check it out.

My grandpa, especially, had a blast. He remembers the building as it was before the coffee shop, when it was a bank and he could only go a few steps inside to the teller's counter. The rest of the bank was off-limits to the public, but now as he sipped at an iced chai and climbed the stairs to look out over the balcony, he was ecstatic.

Hearing his story, I noticed for the first time that the word "Germania" is stamped in stone over the building's door, a relic from Germania Bank all those decades ago. Somehow I had never noticed it before, or at least, I had never put it together that the name and building came years before the coffee shop. I had brought them to Germania to show them something new, but they already knew this place better than I ever could.

When we go downtown, I always insist on stopping by Mineral Springs to check out the shops. Before it was a mall, the building was a hotel with a beautiful ballroom. My grandparents and I stand with our faces pressed to the glass of a padlocked door, looking down into the ballroom where they went to prom.

The ballroom is now locked up and the building is supposedly haunted. But at that moment, I could almost picture them in high school, not yet aware of each other and twirling around with their friends in the basement of a mall where I now spend time with my friends, walking the same floors.

Sometimes we stop by Maeva's and the shops at the old Milton Schoolhouse. My grandmother used to work at the school as a secretary in the Alton school district. Even back then, the building was filled with ghost stories and Grandma refused to go into the basement, though she insists now that she doesn't believe in ghosts. We sit in an old classroom with the WiFi password written on the chalkboard, two worlds collided.

My grandparents overlapped during their time at Alton High School, which used to be housed in the middle school. They met officially at Southern Illinois University in Alton, before there was an Edwardsville campus and SIU Alton became the dental school.

A few weeks ago, I walked through the dental school campus and admired the changing fall leaves and old brick buildings. I wondered if I was passing important landmarks without realizing it, like a nook where they used to study together over watery coffees, or the administrative office where my grandmother worked as a student. These are places that still exist, where today's students still study and fall in love and drink bad coffee.

I'm reflective this week; can you tell? I spent Thanksgiving listening to these stories. We'll make another trip downtown soon enough, maybe to do some Christmas shopping or have a hot drink. All the versions of Alton will still be there, and the versions of my grandparents I never met but still know because these are versions of myself, too. We are walking the same hallways.

I hold my grandma's hand as we walk through the old buildings. These are my stories in 50 years.



