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DIETRICH

Pictures bring grandpa back to life

SORTING through a box containing pictures of family members brought a smile to Raymond Coleman's face. A gentle rain was easing up and a ray of sun fell on a picture he held in his hand. "That's my grandfather, Asa Coleman," he said.

The picture showed a man with wavy hair, parted in the center. His keen facial features were enhanced by a modified handlebar moustache.

A look of pride flashed across Coleman's face as he spoke of his grandfather being one of the early black settlers in Lorain. "He came here from Pennsylvania, but he was born in Tennessee," Coleman said as he fished through more pictures.

Coleman pulled out a tin-type photo of the old Reid House, which had served as a hotel in Lorain in the late 1800's. "This is where Grandpa lived when he came," said Coleman, as he thumped the tin. "He lived there until he built his home on Elm Street, now called Ninth Street, near Brownell Avenue."

When the Reid House was built in 1830 by Conrad Reid on the site where the Renaissance Inn now



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stands, the town was called Charleston Village. The Black River, which ran behind Reid House, was dredged by a team of oxen, and a ferry was used to transport people and animals to the east side of town.

According to an account given by the late Rusha Reid Fauver, Reid's granddaughter, she lived in the house from 1873 until her grandfather sold it in 1879. Reid then moved his family to a newly constructed home on Fourth Street. A fire burned the hotel to the ground that same year, and it never was rebuilt.

Coleman continued sorting through the box of photos and pulled out a picture of his grandfather Asa's home at 1309 Ninth St. A shingle with the words "Plaster Contractor" painted on it hung above the address. In the background, standing tall above a few other houses, was the old Brownell School, which was razed in 1984.

"I don't know what year this picture was taken, but there weren't many houses in the area," said the 70-year-old Coleman. When Grandpa built his home, there was nothing but farmland out there. It was really the end of the line for housing.

"Grandpa's house was considered as being in the country. He never bought a Christmas tree. He just went out his back door to the wooded area, found a pine tree and cut it down."

Grandfather Coleman and his wife, Fannie, had five sons — William, Joseph, John, Albert and Raymond Sr. There were four daughters — Lottie, Naomi, Retta and Dela. All are now dead. The sons worked with their father in the plastering

business.

"My grandfather and his sons plastered the homes on Ninth Street, going west from Oberlin Avenue," said Coleman. "Uncle John and my grandfather were good at creating roses and rose petals from the plaster. People often requested them because of this special talent.

"When they began building houses on Oberlin Avenue, my father plastered every house going up between 13th and 14th streets. I would be on my way home from high school and I'd stop and talk with him."

Coleman said he remembers when his grandfather was digging a basement for the Seventh Street CME Church, now known as Wesley United Methodist Church.

"I spent most of my time at my grandparents' home, and I remember the time my grandfather was digging the church basement at Seventh Street Church," explained Coleman. "He had a big Belgium horse which he used for pulling out the scoops filled with dirt. Grandpa would let me sit on the horse while he worked. I was so small, my feet stuck straight out by the horse's side."

Coleman said his grandfather and sons were hired to plaster the newly-built Palace Theater in 1928, which was built by the Cleveland Amusement Company for Warner Brothers.

When the Mills Brothers began their singing career, so did four of the Coleman Brothers — Joe, Albert, John and Raymond.

"My father and his brothers were good," said

Coleman. "I'm not bragging, but they could sing. They had engagements at Euclid Beach, Ruggles Beach, on WTAM radio in Cleveland, and at Lorain's Palace Theater. They dressed in dark jackets, bow ties and white pants." Another look in the box produced a picture of the singers.

Coleman said most of his family is gone now, and he just has memories which are aided by the pictures. His first wife, Theresa, died in 1987. He is now married to Lillie Mae. He has two daughters living in Lorain — Sherry Shine and Janice Chapman — and grandchildren, great grandchildren and several cousins.

"I graduated from Lorain High School in 1941 and worked for a while at the steel mill. I retired after 30 years as superintendent of the street department for the city of Avon Lake," said Coleman.

"Times change and people change. I can remember the days when Grandpa used to say there would never be toilets in houses, because there were no sewers. He ended up putting one in his house long before he died.

"When I couldn't tolerate cow milk as a child, my grandfather bought me a goat. We kept it in the barn with the other animals. That was on Ninth Street. Look at that street today. It's far from what we remembered as being the country."

Coleman said he also remembers listening to old-timers telling the kids about the deer and antelope coming from Canada across Lake Erie on the frozen ice.

Times certainly have changed.