

The Martin Blacksmith Shop

by Larry Martin © 2003, 2005

NOTE: Our family heritage is closely linked to the blacksmith shop of Herman Martin which he founded in the early years of Dalton, Nebraska and was operated by the family for thirty-seven years.

The Martin Blacksmith Shop was one of the oldest and longest operating businesses in Dalton. It was established in 1908 by Herman A. Martin and, upon his death, his son John Clifford “Cliff” Martin continued to operate the shop until late 1945, when he moved from Dalton.

The shop was originally located on the north side of Main Street near the site of the present post office. As the business grew, Herman Martin sold the property and moved his blacksmith business in February, 1920 to the northeast corner of US highway 385 and Park Street. That building was remodeled by Cliff in the early 1940s and remained there until 2004. After it had ceased to house the Martin Blacksmith Shop, it was used by various owners as a warehouse and storage facility until it was demolished in 2004.

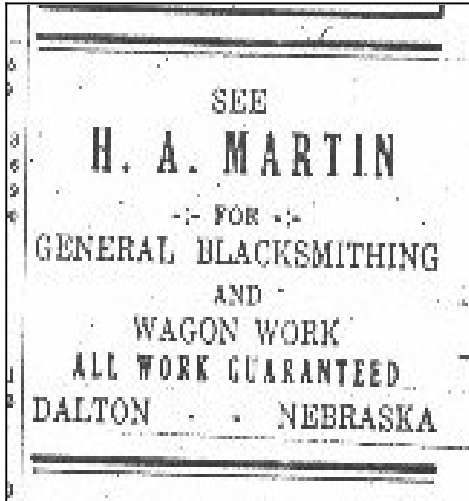
When Herman and Mary Martin moved from Bancroft, Nebraska to Dalton in 1908, they probably came by train, which enabled Herman to bring the heavy equipment necessary for establishing and running a blacksmith business. A blacksmith in the early town of Dalton was a welcome trade to support the increasing number of farmers and other business activities. The basic needs of the community included shoeing horses and repairing wagons and wagon wheels. Herman maintained a large and varied selection of horse shoes to meet every requirement and wagon repair was a specialty.



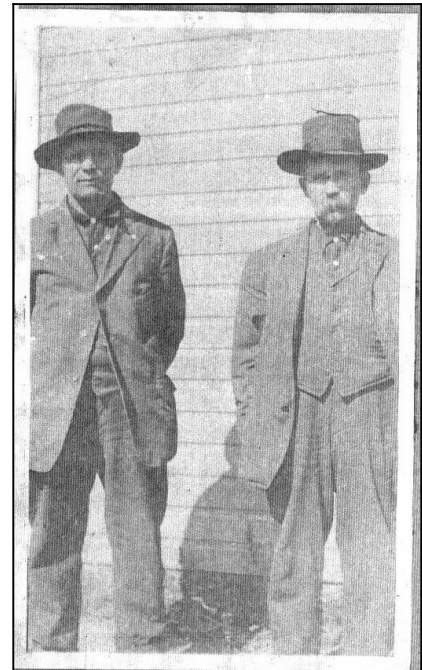
Front view of Martin Blacksmith Shop and Wagon Repair, 1908-1919. (L-R): possibly Kink, Herman, Albert Christensen.



Herman Martin's original Blacksmith Shop on Main Street in Dalton, Nebraska, 1908-1919. Herman stands with tools in hand near wagon wheel. Two small (Martin?) children are at far left.



Herman Martin's advertisement in the *Dalton Delegate* newspaper appeared regularly. This actual size ad from 1919.



Herman Martin and brother Ervin, circa 1918 in Dalton.

Mary Martin's father Hans Christensen had experience as a blacksmith, and his son Albert was a blacksmith. They moved to Dalton around 1910 and Albert worked for Herman before moving to nearby Gurley where he established his own shop. By 1918, Herman's younger brother Ervin and his family moved to Dalton, and Ervin worked in the Blacksmith Shop with Herman for a short time. Herman's oldest son, Jesse McKinley "Kink," helped his father in the shop while he was growing up in Dalton. Kink became an expert craftsman with wrought and ornamental iron design and fabrication, and that later became his life's work in California. Another of Herman's sons, Clifford, also worked with his father and learned the blacksmith trade.

By late 1919 or early 1920, Herman began advertising his Blacksmith Shop property on Main Street for sale in the *Dalton Delegate* newspaper. He was in the process of re-locating his business a little south to a building near the northeast corner of U.S. Highway 385 and Park Street. We don't know the details of the sale of the old building and the occupancy of the new one, but in the March 19, 1920 issue of the *Dalton Delegate*, Herman advertised:

"NOTICE TO FARMERS!"

"We now have our blacksmith shop in running order and wish to urge upon our farmer friends that they bring their discs, plows and other implements NOW and have them sharpened and put in running order before the rush of spring work begins. Bring them in TODAY." H. A. Martin

The Martin Blacksmith Shop did a good business, keeping two men busy and three could work steady during peak times. An article by Dick Toof, a member of the Platte County Historical Society, recalls his childhood during the early 1930s Depression years, when he lived on a farm just outside of Dalton and made occasional visits to Dalton with his parents. He said the most exciting visits to town were when he would come with his father during plowing season. They would often bring in dull plow shares to be sharpened at the Blacksmith Shop. He recalls his childhood fascination: “The blacksmith shop itself was a ramshackle shed that somehow seemed to suggest a mysterious cave when I stepped into its darkened interior. The blacksmith was a large and muscular man whose clothing, hands and face were darkened by smoke and soot from the glowing crackling fire in the center. And from that fire, red hot plow shares were lifted away by the blacksmith’s giant tongs, placed against the anvil, pounded with a heavy sledgehammer that made a ringing metallic clangor, and then the plow shares were lifted into the water tank, where the tortured iron hissed and sizzled into silence. I watched, wide-eyed with wonder.”



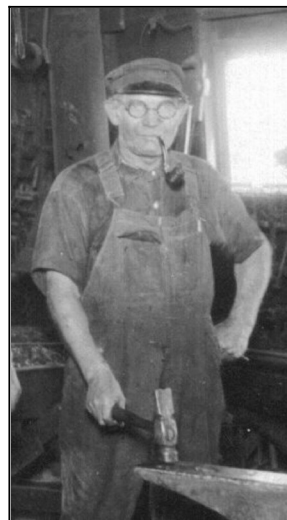
Interior of Herman Martin’s new Blacksmith shop circa 1920s, generally as it appeared when Cliff took over in November 1934 upon the death of his father. In the center is the trip hammer, the anvil, and the old forge with chimney. Note to the right on the wall is a selection of horseshoes. Grandpa Martin shod horses, but Cliff never did. The two men in the picture might be Kink near the forge and Herman left near grinder.



Herman Martin was an active supporter of community affairs and participated in the annual Dalton Fall Festival with floats such as this one, circa 1920. Note the humor, "Bring your checks, we forge anything."

Herman, a respected tradesman and Dalton community leader, died suddenly of a heart attack in October 1934. He had served as the village blacksmith for 26 years. His son Cliff had graduated from Dalton high school three years prior to his father's death and had learned the blacksmith trade from his father. Cliff had also become expert with the relatively new skills of both acetylene and electric arc welding. With the death of his father, Cliff, at age 21, assumed the responsibility for operating the Martin Blacksmith Shop in the fall of 1934.

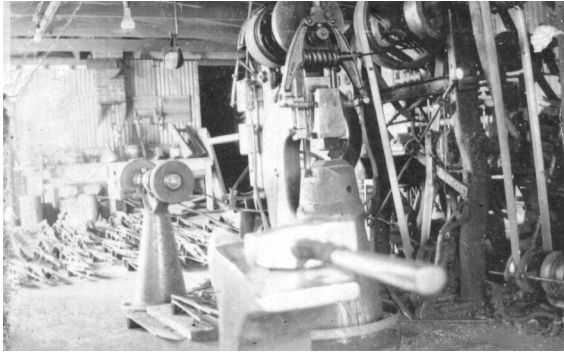
About 1940, Cliff decided to expand and upgrade the building which housed the shop. A portion of the old shop was torn down, and a new structure was built which adjoined the remainder of the old building. Unlike his father, Cliff never shod a horse. The primary focus of the blacksmith shop now was sharpening the farmers' plow shares (or plow lays as they were commonly called), and their disc implements, as well as all manner of repair and fabrication. During the plowing season, the floor of the blacksmith shop would be covered with hundreds of newly sharpened plow lays or those waiting to be sharpened.



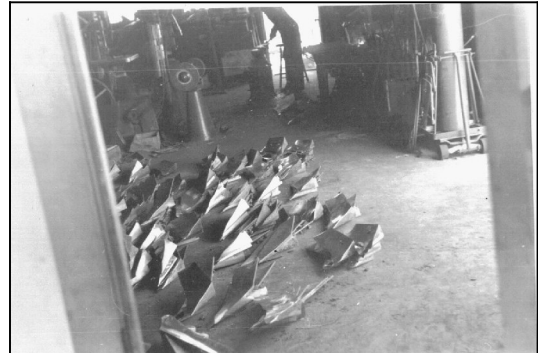
Herman A. Martin, Dalton blacksmith and civic leader 1908-1934. Picture circa 1920.



John Clifford "Cliff" Martin operated the blacksmith Shop from 1934-1945. Picture 1945.



Interior view of Cliff's newly-remodeled Blacksmith Shop, 1944. Anvil with hammer in foreground, trip hammer in center, and plow lays on floor to the rear.



Sharpened plow lays were stacked on the open floor while Cliff to the rear working at the anvil, 1944.



Shows location of remodeled Martin Blacksmith Shop on NE corner of US Highway 385 and Park St. In Dalton, Nebraska as it appeared fifty years later in 1993.



The Martin Blacksmith Shop after remodeling by Cliff Martin during early 1940s. Large doors on side of building were the main work entry doors. This picture taken 1993, fifty years after this new structure built.

Cliff's widely recognized welding skills were always in demand. Many times he would drive to a farm with his welding outfit to repair an implement which would be difficult for the farmer to bring to the shop. Cliff designed and fabricated cabs for tractors at less cost than those which were commercially available. Sometimes welding supplies, steel and iron and other materials were in short supply because of World War II. Many times Cliff would find ways to adapt an old item to make it work, or fabricate an improvised replacement piece to repair the farmers' implements.

Cliff loved welding and the blacksmith trade. When I was about seven or eight years old, dad began teaching some of those skills to me. Dad even made a forge, anvil and other tools in a size appropriate for my age, and purchased a welding outfit for me. But as World War II was drawing to a close, dad recognized that new technologies, developed during the war, would have an

impact upon farming and the blacksmith business. New, hard and longer wearing metal was being used for the sharp blade portion of the plow lay, and farmers could just replace them rather than have them sharpened at the shop. More and more farmers were learning the basics of welding and acquiring their own welding outfits. The future of the small town blacksmith did not look promising.

Reluctantly, in the summer of 1945, Cliff sold the equipment from the shop to nearby blacksmiths and local farmers, and sold the shop building itself. Cliff had been Dalton's blacksmith for eleven years. The Martin Blacksmith Shop had been a mainstay business activity in Dalton, serving the nearby farmers and residents of Dalton for 37 years. The *Sidney Telegraph* newspaper of August 23, 1945 reported that Cliff had sold his blacksmith tools and closed the shop and lamented that with his departure from Dalton, he "will surely be missed and the blacksmith shop, which has been run by the Martin family for so many years, will be empty."

About a year after Cliff closed the Martin Blacksmith Shop, Ira White, a blacksmith in nearby Chapell, began a blacksmith business in Dalton in 1946. Because of the changing times and needs of the farmers, the business did not flourish, and black smithing in Dalton soon came to an end. However, the blacksmith shop building, as remodeled by Cliff, still stood at US 385 and Park Street, used primarily for storage, until September of 2004.

In September 2004, we were holding a reunion of the Herman and Mary Martin grandchildren and great grandchildren in Sidney, Nebraska. We spent a day in Dalton to participate in the Fall Festival activities. Each time I had visited Dalton over the years, I had noted that the old blacksmith shop building had fallen into serious disrepair. While my wife and I were in line for the festival's chicken noodle noon meal at the Presbyterian church, we were lamenting the sad state of the building, which I, as a child, had thought so big, modern, and wonderful. In an ironic twist, the woman in front of us heard me and said that she had just purchased the building so that it could be torn down and the land used as a parking lot for her son's semi trucks as part of his trucking business. Out of curiosity, I asked her how much she paid, and she allowed that for the building and the large lot, she paid \$5,000, which was probably too much. All of this left me with mixed feelings. I hated to learn that the old building, which held so many memories for me, was to be demolished the very next day. But at the same time, because of its deterioration, it was no longer the shop and building in which dad and I had taken such pride.

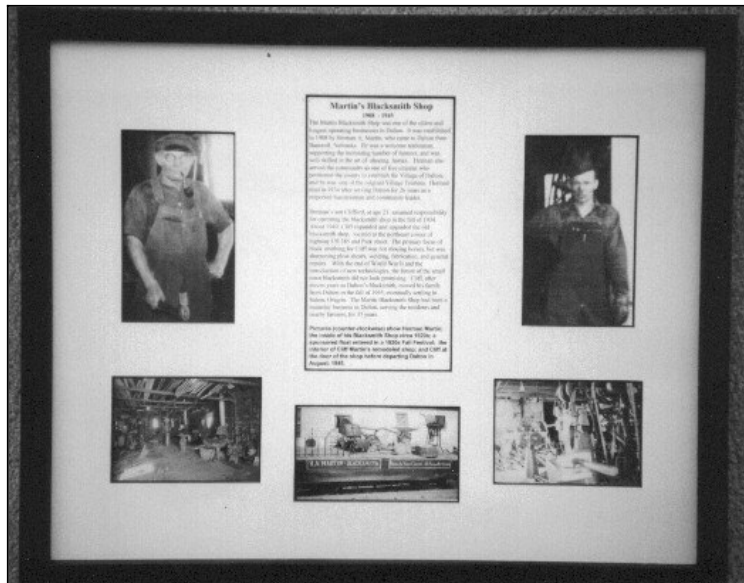


The former Martin Blacksmith Shop building which had been enlarged and remodeled by Cliff Martin in 1940, as it appeared in September 2004 one day before it was demolished to clear the land for a truck parking lot.

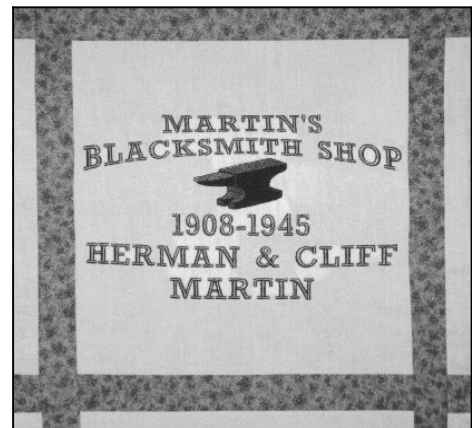
As a child in Dalton and having had the opportunity to work with my dad in the Blacksmith Shop, to learn some of the blacksmith and welding skills, I was pleased to be a part of Herman Martin's blacksmith heritage. Then, I felt that someday I would be a partner with my dad in the Blacksmith Shop, following in his footsteps just as he had done with his father. I am thankful for my direct relationship and involvement with the Blacksmith Shop, but technology and other events did not allow those boyhood dreams to materialize.

The Martin Blacksmith Shop is for all of us an important part of our heritage. It represents the skills and trade of our grandfather Herman Martin. When he brought his skills, experience and equipment to Dalton in 1908 to establish the first blacksmith business in the community, he was welcomed. Over the years he earned the respect of Dalton's other businessmen, the farmers and townspeople. His blacksmith business helped his own brother and brother-in-law become established. His sons, Kink and Cliff, and perhaps others, learned the blacksmith skills and business which had a positive influence on their lives and work. Herman was able to earn a comfortable living for his family and this helped make for the wholesome upbringing for his children by he and Mary. Following Herman's death, his son Cliff was able to assume the role of Dalton's village smithy, and the earnings of the Martin Blacksmith Shop continued to help support Mary Martin until the end of her life.

To recognize the contributions of the Martin Blacksmith Shop to the community of Dalton, we cousins presented a framed picture story board to the Dalton Prairie Schooner Museum in 2002. Also, in 2002, as part of the 75th Dalton Fall Festival, a square was placed on the large community quilt, and an article similar to this one was published in the commemorative *Dalton's Heritage* history book.



A 14x12 inch picture story board recognizing the Martin Blacksmith Shop, presented to the Dalton museum, 2002.



Martin Blacksmith Shop 12x12 inch square included on the community quilt celebrating the 75th Fall Festival, 2002.