

## **The crazy, true story of Alonzo R. Weed, a 4' tall hobo, was once elected Mayor of Amesville**

BY TYLER BUCHANAN MESSENGER STAFF JOURNALIST

*Editor's note: In order to give this story, the proper telling, we needed to break it up into two parts. The second will appear in Sunday's edition of The Messenger.*

AMESVILLE – Alonzo Weed was unfit for the job, village citizens complained. He drank too much and had no respect for the office. It was all meant to be a joke, but once the dust settled and votes were counted, few were laughing: Amesville had just elected a 4-foot-tall, wayward hobo as mayor.

The details of Weed's unexpected rise to power and subsequent descent into madness are rather muddled. Most "viral stories" from the early 1900s are this way, each tale borrowing and one-upping another to the point of confusion. From the best of this author's ability, it went something like this.

Alonzo Weed was likely born somewhere on the west coast around 1850. He was a classic "tramp" of the times.

We know for sure he first moved to Amesville in 1902. He perhaps did so to live there with his uncle, Daniel Fleming. Most sources claim Fleming had quite a bit of money. Weed was a strange, but friendly guy and made quick friends with many in town.

"Weed secured odd jobs about the place, earning enough money to keep well replenished his supply of intoxicating liquors," one Pennsylvania newspaper stated. "But he did not drink to excess, just imbibing enough to be entertaining."

Local residents were entertained, primarily, by the cut of Alonzo's jib. He was only 4 feet, 1 inch tall (other sources put him around 4 feet, 7 inches) and routinely dressed the part of a hobo. Townsfolk called him "Lon" or "Lonnie," short for Alonzo. He wore trousers and hats much too large for him, along with a gigantic coat that nearly swallowed him up.

It's hard to say for sure what first prompted his name to get placed on the ballot. In many versions, he was nominated by a few friends on Election Day as a joke.

Another story told in The Dighton Herald newspaper of Kansas is the preceding mayor of Amesville, Edward Clark, was very unpopular in town. Clark's supporters believed he had slim odds to be re-elected, so they conceived a plot to get crazy Alonzo Weed elected to replace him. That way, the town would immediately come to its senses and get Weed thrown out of office, putting Clark back in charge.

Yet another reason comes from The Daily Review of Decatur, Illinois. In this version, rich uncle Fleming was irritated by the "heavier taxes" collected in Amesville's municipal limits. Fleming wanted to dissolve the village of Amesville so that his land would be located in an unincorporated area, which meant paying less in taxes. The idea was to have Alonzo elected mayor, which would then cause the other village officials to resign in disgust. With no one to lead the village, voters would have no choice but to disband the town.

It's certainly possible there are elements of truth to this story (who doesn't want to pay fewer taxes?), but this scenario rings too much like the plot of a John Wayne western to be taken very seriously.

Incidentally, Daniel Fleming would later serve as an Ames Twp. trustee. Perhaps he felt a need to get more directly involved in order to carry out his miserly plot.

One way or another, Weed's name was indeed placed on the mayoral ballot of April 1903. The election the election ended in a tie. Weed and Gibson both received exactly 21 votes.

Both men gathered at village hall. They decided to settle the election with a deck of cards. Whoever drew the higher card would become mayor. Gibson went first and drew a nine of spades.

Had the three of clubs come next, we probably would have never heard about Alonzo Weed. But that's no fun. Weed pulled out the jack of diamonds and was sworn in as the new mayor of Amesville.

Almost immediately, local residents began to realize what they had just done. Weed, however amicable and funny as he might have been, was woefully unqualified for the job. He was an alcoholic in a dry town, a drifter with little appreciation or experience with municipal government.

Newspapers from all over the United States reported the absurd story. Writers affectionately referred to Weed as "the smallest mayor in America." The little town of Amesville and its "famous hobo midget mayor," as the Akron Beacon Journal called him, quickly became the talk of the nation. Residents became more and more embarrassed of their village's newfound fame.

Outside of Amesville, opinion was split. Some newspapers were outraged, like the Garrett Clipper in Indiana: "How could a town disgrace itself worse than to pick up a tramp and elect him mayor? Movements of this kind make politics a farce and should be a lesson to every small place that is governed by a mayor."

Other papers like The Salt Lake Herald in Utah came to Weed's defense.

"Suppose Weed does drink? Suppose he is immoral? Suppose he has a settled aversion for work of any kind?" the Herald asked. "If we are to make men who are immoral, who are drinkers, who are loafers, ineligible to political positions, we'll have to discharge a liberal proportion of the men now appointed to rule over us."

Amesville residents had one more hope. They pointed to a new state law which gave an Ohio governor the authority to unilaterally remove a mayor if circumstances required it. Many of Weed's detractors (mostly businessmen, politicians and lawyers) drafted a petition to Gov. George Nash and didn't hold back any punches. They argued Weed, an illiterate "drunkard," was mentally incapable of performing his duties as mayor. They noted he was once sentenced to the Cincinnati jail upon getting arrested for public drunkenness.

Nash suspended Mayor Weed while his office considered the allegations. Everyone involved expected the suspension would remain permanent.

Instead came another twist. Nash completely reversed course and issued a stunning announcement that Weed would be reinstated as mayor.

The townsfolk back in Amesville were understandably outraged. What on earth made Nash change his mind?

For Nash, the decision was simple. The law was designed to allow him to remove a mayor for any misconduct committed as mayor. The laundry list of issues – Weed's criminal background, questionable backstory and having "drifted into town as a tramp". this all occurred prior to his candidacy.

Nash's official response, printed in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, laid it all out: "The statute giving me power to remove mayors does not contemplate that I shall inquire into their conduct prior to their election, but during their term of office ... As nearly as I can learn, the electors knew as much about him when they voted for him as they do now. They have made their own bed and they shall now lie in it. In the meantime, they can learn also that the election of a mayor is not a joke, but a very serious matter."

In other words: if you had problems with Weed's background, you should've thought of that before electing him as mayor. Doing the job was not really Alonzo Weed's gig. Becoming mayor is a lot more fun than actually being mayor.

It was only a matter of time before Weed hit the road again. Shortly after Gov. Nash's decision, the Coshocton Tribune reported Weed had "quit the town" and stated he was "hoofing it toward Parkersburg, West Virginia."

The townsfolk were overcome with joy thanks to Weed's self-imposed absence. In response they celebrated a Fourth of July that had not yet come.

"The rest of the population want to hang out the flags and shoot firecrackers," The Tribune reported. "They say they feel free for the first time since the joke was perpetrated and their only fear now is that 'Lonny' may lose his way and return by accident."

In sum, Weed's life consisted of traveling and drinking. The latter was somewhat of a criminal offense back then, and he was soon caught by Columbus policemen carrying out one of his public, drunken stupors. Judge Roy Wildermuth ordered Weed pay a \$5 fine and sentenced him 10 days in the Columbus "workhouse". One newspaper was especially harsh with its news headline: "Amesville Freak Gets Ten Days to Ruminare."

Weed did his time and got released. A reporter met him at the workhouse gate to see what the famous mayor would do next. By the tone of his answer, it seems he was sick of getting tied down to one place and was prepared to travel again.

"Back to the road," Weed replied. "No more Amesville for me. I have enjoyed my stay in prison more than my administration as mayor. Tell my friends I am out of jail, out of politics, and out for the coin. Politics is rotten."

Weed stayed out of trouble for about two months. Then came another catastrophe, as reported in November 1903 by the Akron Beacon Journal. After being stranded in Canton, Alonzo walked the 25 miles to Akron with just \$8.15 in his pocket. That was enough money to "fill his tank," so to speak, and he planned to spend his remaining cash on a train ride further north to Cleveland.

Weed would later tell police he was walking around town when a couple of ruffians" stole his money and threw him into a nearby river.

Drunk, soaked and penniless, he wandered back into town. A cop found him shivering on a street corner.

The Beacon Journal tells of a fun exchange during his subsequent court appearance. Weed told Akron Mayor Charles Kemple, who presided over police court, that he could not possibly have been drunk because he "only" visited two saloons the whole night.

Weed sensed the clock was ticking, so he turned to his trademark charm. The newspaper reported "his amusing swagger, combined with his diminutive size, made him a picture that brought roars of laughter from the court."

Weed told Kemple of his own brief experience handling police court back in Amesville.

"I always let 'em off easy, as I didn't know when my turn would come," he said. "I believe in the golden rule."

"A mayor would have to have a stout heart to resist a plea like that," Kemple replied.

Kemple decided to release his mayoral counterpart without further penalty. Weed told reporters he would again try to head north toward Cleveland.

Now, take a guess. How long do you think it took for Weed to get in trouble again? Six months, maybe three?

Answer: one or two days. He made it to Cleveland, alright, and got arrested again for drinking too much. Weed got sentenced to 10 days work in the Cleveland House of Correction, where he earned 50 cents a day tying rice roots together to make scrub brushes.

Another arrest meant another chance to tell his story to the local newspapers. These articles were routinely picked up by the various wire services, which explains why papers many states away kept up-to-date with the latest foibles of Alonzo Weed,

### **The amazing story of Alonzo Weed will continue in Sunday's edition of The Messenger.**

MAYOR Continued from page A1 questionable mental state and memory, given his reported alcoholism; Alonzo altering the story on purpose for his own amusement; or perhaps even the embellishment from reporters themselves. During this time period of yellow journalism, such editorial choices would not have been out of the ordinary.

Our truths, therefore, must come from the most common repetitions. Weed had tied with Frank Gibson on Election Day, though occasionally the name given was Thomas Gibson. The deck of cards appears in most stories, while a few had them drawing straws or "lots" to see who won. Of the stories with cards, Gibson most often drew a nine of spades and in a few others grabbed an unspecified four (granted, he lost either way to Alonzo's jack).

So once more, this time inside the Cleveland workhouse in early December 1903, Alonzo spun his tale. All the major details were there. Weed also noted Amesville Council President George Clark was serving as acting mayor while he traversed the many fine jails of Ohio.

This particular article, appearing in the Akron Beacon Journal offers some interesting (though questionable) biographical details. It states Weed was born in New York City in 1851. The date feels about right, but nowhere else in any article about Weed's life is the Big Apple ever mentioned. In fact, many of them make specific note of his origins from out west. A website purporting to include the Fleming family tree (file this with the "for-what-it's worth" department) lists Alonzo R. Reed and two siblings as having been born in the Seattle, Washington area.

Few articles described Weed's love life (as a vagabond, he perhaps did not have one). This Beacon Journal story, however, is the only one to report he once lived a married life in Stamford, Connecticut "for some years." The couple

supposedly had a son together, who Weed said was 24 years old and living in Sherman, Texas. When his wife passed away, Weed returned to a life on the road.

Admittedly, it is difficult to track down the exact life story of Alonzo Weed. If 50 articles say one general thing, though, and the 51st unearths a host of exclusive details (all of which come straight from the tongue-in-cheek source himself), the outcast should be taken with an appropriate grain of salt.

Weed served out his time and was trundled into Cleveland's "pardon board" to determine if he should be freed. The director asked Weed what brought him there, which of course set the whole story in motion for the millionth time. This telling was the same as usual, except for the addition of an anecdote the defendant told of the police court in Amesville.

Earlier that year, two men were arrested in the village on intoxication charges. We'll let Weed tell the rest, courtesy the Cleveland Leader newspaper:

"They had a keg of beer, and when they came before me for trial, I sentenced them to turn the beer over to me. I told them they were discharged providing they delivered the keg of beer at my house. Well, they didn't do it, and I have never had the nerve to have them arrested for contempt of court."

Apparently, the notion of an alcoholic mayor attempting to self-serve himself beer through the judicial system failed to raise any eyebrows in Cleveland. The members of the pardon board enjoyed the story and voted to let Weed go.

He celebrated the decision by leaving the county jail, getting drunk and immediately getting arrested. Thing was, authorities in northeast Ohio were just like Amesville residents in that all they wanted was to get Weed out of there.

Not that Weed minded. Whatever works, right? He convinced the jail superintendent to let him free. The city even paid for a train ticket to send him away to Pennsylvania.

Thus, closed out an eventful 1903. Weed was elected, suspended and reinstated as mayor of Amesville. He oversaw all of two criminal cases in mayor's court, then left to get arrested for public intoxication in Columbus, Akron, Cleveland and Cleveland again.

By all indications, Alonzo Weed never fully returned to his mayoral duties in 1904. In fact, there is little evidence that he ever returned. The next we hear of him is six months later in June 1904. He was once again arrested, this time in Youngstown.

The Akron Beacon Journal, who had been delighted to print ceaseless details on Weed just a year before, only gave him one paragraph of attention this time. The interest in him had nearly vanished, as natural curiosity - "how did a midget tramp become mayor?!" - was reduced to a sad, revealing tale of alcoholism and criminal mischief.

"Weed is the same old character," the Beacon Journal's tiny news item concluded, "and tells police officials the same old story of his desire to lead a better life."

It's unclear just at what point he stopped "being" mayor. The newspapers couldn't get it straight. At various points in 1904, Weed was referred to as either the sitting mayor or "former" mayor of Amesville. (Some of the more rural newspapers were still getting around to reporting the initial details of his election for the first time, which had happened almost 12 months prior.)

In October 1904, Weed's name popped up in The Evening Review newspaper in East Liverpool, near Steubenville. He had been arrested up there for drinking.

Police in Georgetown, Ohio found him two months later "reeling along the streets." He was so drunk, one story noted, Weed kept asking jail guards if he was in a restaurant. Asked what his destination was, Weed replied: "Straight ahead."

Weed went straight ahead toward Cincinnati and promptly got arrested on Christmas Day 1904. At first, he gave police an assumed name, "Charles Johnson," but the city prosecutor recognized him from all his previous encounters with local law enforcement.

The article detailing this arrest states he had been working in a glass factory in Butler, Pennsylvania, but recently quit in order to travel back to Amesville. He overshot Athens County by 150 miles, likely on purpose, and wound up in Cincinnati.

The judge there offered to dismiss the charges if Weed would simply leave town.

And so, it goes. The Fort Wayne Journal Gazette reported in February 1905 about the arrest of a drunken vagabond "who gave the name of Alonzo Weed."

A year passed, then he was arrested again in Burlington, Vermont for, you guessed it, drinking. Weed appeared in court wearing four shirts and two pairs of pants. He told the judge he'd been working in Brockville, Canada but got sick and came back to America.

"Just why he wore so many shirts and trousers, he did not explain," a local newspaper wondered.

Around this time, a man also with the name Alonzo R. Weed was elected mayor of Newton, Massachusetts. A cursory glance into the mayor's biography makes it clear this is not our Weed, but an additional fact serves as a helpful clue: The Newton Weed made it his first priority as mayor to crack down on illegal liquor sales in town.

It's probably good our Weed no longer had to preside over Amesville police court, as things wound up getting pretty heated in town. James Rodgers and Edward Porter got in a pretty nasty fight, leading Rodgers to pull out a gun and shoot Porter dead. Then there was the time Dr. E. E. Gilliland, a local physician, was charged in 1907 with throwing acid on a horse. ran a feature story later on about George. H. L. Beeman, a new pastor up there in Summit County. As it turned out, Beeman was a former village councilman who had served under Weed's brief administration. The Beacon Journal reminisced how "the midget mayor created such a furor over the state."

Ten years passed and his story more or less vanished from the newspapers. Had we heard the last of Alonzo Reed?

Out of nowhere, the Los Angeles Times published a very small news brief on the bottom corner of page six, dated June 10, 1915. The report came from the Times' bureau in Chicago. It described a man named Alonzo Weed, said to be 83 years old, who was arrested in Chicago on a charge of disorderly conduct. If Weed was indeed born around 1850, he would've been only 65 years old in 1915, not 83. How do we know it's the same guy?

Weed told the judge he was mid-way through a cross country walk from Los Angeles to Stamford, Connecticut. Weed said he had made some type of bet with a friend, worth \$5,000, that he could make it to "his former home in Connecticut" by the Fourth of July. He couldn't afford to serve out a jail term in Chicago or else he would lose the bet.

Yeah, that all sounds like Alonzo R. Weed. The judge let him go.

If you recall, Stamford, Connecticut is the same city. where Weed claimed to have lived with his wife and kid much earlier in his life. At the time, those details seemed like an aberration compared to the dozens of other articles printed about him. Maybe his story was true after all,

Except, a check of other newspapers around the Stamford area for mentions of his name comes up dry. So too does an exhaustive search on FindAGrave.com (usually the most helpful source in historical treasure hunts like these). The most tantalizing part is there are actually multiple places called "Weed Cemetery" in Fairfield County, Connecticut, where Stamford is located. These interment lists show there were many residents from that area with the surname Weed.

In none of these cemeteries is an Alonzo R. Weed buried, nor do any of the females buried there appear to be connected to him. As for the son, there are no Weeds buried in Grayson County, Texas, where Sherman is located

The sad truth is sometimes these stories hits a wall.

For now.

You won't find many official documents listing the name Alonzo Weed. There are no parks in Amesville named after him, no schools or even a measly alley.

Outside of the human-interest columns of newspapers, his name is tough to find.

This author found one official mention, inside the Ohio Secretary of State's roster of city and village officials, dated 1903.

The Athens County page from that year is somewhat of a who's who. Serving in Athens (population 3,066) was longtime Marshal Peter Finsterwald and Board of Public Affairs Trustee Henry O'Bleness, whose banker son Charles would years later donate money to help create O'Bleness Memorial Hospital.

Amesville's listing featured the usual suspects. There was Clerk McCune and Treasurer Clark, two names often mentioned as part of the group who petitioned to the governor for Weed's removal.

Above them is the man elected mayor of Amesville, the character who drew a jack of diamonds to take office, the tramp who was nominated as a joke, a plot, a ruse or an act of desperation depending on who you asked: "Alonzo Weed, N P" (no political party).

But of course, there was no party. No matter where he went, Weed was always a man on his own two feet.  
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**Alonzo R. Weed**

# Hobo Mayor Deposed From Office.

Extraordinary Story of a  
Tramp who Blew into  
Amesville, O., and became its  
Executive.

The Mayor of Amesville, Ohio, who was elected to office last year, was a tramp who had been in the city for some time. He was a well-known character in the town and had a large following. He was elected to office and became the executive of the town. He was a very popular man and was loved by the people. He was a very good man and was a very good mayor. He was a very good man and was a very good mayor. He was a very good man and was a very good mayor.



A photograph of the town of Amesville, Ohio, showing the town and the surrounding area.



A photograph of the town of Amesville, Ohio, showing the town and the surrounding area.



An illustration of two men sitting at a table, possibly representing the Mayor and a visitor.



A photograph of a man in a suit and top hat, possibly the Mayor, standing in a doorway.



A photograph of a man in a suit and top hat, possibly the Mayor.

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