



# Olmsted 200

Bicentennial Notes about Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township –  
First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

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## Keep Observing Olmsted’s Bicentennial

Welcome to 2015, the bicentennial of Olmsted’s settlement. Yes, Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township celebrated their bicentennial last year, but it marked only the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first farming in the township that later was named Olmsted.

A careful reading of the best records from the 1800s reveals that no one lived in the township in 1814. But James Geer, who still lived across the border in Columbia Township, planted a meager crop of corn on land on the Olmsted side of the border that spring. It was the following year, 1815, when he built a cabin on that land and moved his family in to become Olmsted’s first settlers since Native Americans had left the area.

Later in 1815, Elijah Stearns and his sons began moving into the northern part of the township around Butternut Ridge. (North Olmsted, which broke away from Olmsted Township in 1908-1909 – and joined with a small part of the former Dover Township – considers 1815 as its founding date.)



*These were two of the publications that marked the early bicentennial observance in 2014.*



So if you enjoyed celebrating Olmsted's bicentennial in 2014, there is no reason to stop now. And if you missed it, you still have a chance. In fact, the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of settlement is an even better reason for celebration than the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a small crop of corn. Cheers to 200 years of the people of Olmsted!

## **Greenhouses Required Hard Work but Still Evoke Warm Memories**

Several greenhouses still operate in Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township, as well as in neighboring communities, but some that operated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are long gone. Those that still exist mostly grow flowers and other decorative plants rather than the tomatoes and such vegetables as cucumbers and lettuce, which once were the primary products of northeastern Ohio's greenhouses. Another big difference is that, because of environmental regulations, today's greenhouses can't burn coal for heat as many of them did in past decades. In fact, tougher environmental regulations that helped clean up the air also contributed to the demise of some greenhouses. (For more on why Olmsted was part of what once was considered to be the country's biggest concentration of greenhouses, see Issues 18 and 19 of *Olmsted 200*.)

Memories of hard work at the greenhouses of the past are still strong for some people in the area. Ted Baehr of Olmsted Falls remembers two of them: the Westview Greenhouse along Columbia Road in what now is Olmsted Falls but then was West View, and the C.E. Neubert Greenhouse on Station Road in the section of Columbia Station that is part of the Olmsted Falls school district.

The Westview Greenhouse, which became part of the adjacent Schuster's Westview Gardens in the 1970s, employed Baehr's father as a grower for many years in the 1930s and 1940s. He said I.J. Kusse, who served for two decades as president of the Cleveland Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association, as well as on West View Village Council, was one of the owners of Westview Greenhouse, which had six acres under glass. Later, Ted Baehr also worked part-time at the greenhouse firing the boilers for a couple of years under Russ Schuster's ownership. The boiler room that once burned coal to heat the greenhouse burned down a few years ago, he said.



*Although it is not evident in this view, the former Westview Greenhouse became part of Schuster's Westview Gardens.*

“When I was a kid, we used to run around in the greenhouse there at Westview, and I always enjoyed the greenhouse,” Baehr said.

Working at the greenhouse cost Baehr’s father his life in 1943, when Ted was 10 and his father was 37. “They used to have a pump back by the river that pumped water from the river to the greenhouse pond,” Baehr said. “He went back there one morning to fill it up with gas, spilled some gas over the hot engine, and it blew up on him.”

Despite that unfortunate event, Ted Baehr did not hesitate to go into greenhouse work when he had the chance. In 1958, he was just out of the army and considering going to college when his uncle, Fred Baehr, offered him a job at the C.E. Neubert Greenhouse, which had three acres under glass. Fred Baehr had acquired the greenhouse from Neubert, its original owner. Ted Baehr worked there for about 20 years.

“It was like a jack-of-all-trades,” he said. “I did a lot of overtime on different things. When we had to have insecticides spread out, I’d have to do that after everybody went home. And then, when we were picking, I was usually the last one to go because I had to take the tomatoes over to the packing house and just keep it under control really. We always had good help. I had good fellas that worked seven days a week. We had two of them that did seven days a week, except for maybe Fourth of July to Labor Day.”

During those late summer days, Baehr said, the weather was warm enough that no one had to be there at night to fire the boilers. “I guess there were about 10 days in there when a night fireman had to come in because we were sterilizing the soil, cooking the soil,” he said. “You always cooked the soil for 24 hours. It took about 10 days to do the thing.”

Baehr said the greenhouse had to close in the late 1970s, when its coal-burning boilers could no longer meet environmental regulations. “We did tomatoes until those last couple of years we went into cucumbers, a few,” he said, but the greenhouse never switched over to flowers. Growing cucumbers was an experiment that did not last long, he said.

“There wasn’t much difference,” Baehr said. “The only thing is you had different things to do with the cucumbers. At that time, you had to wrap them all in cellophane. Actually growing them, you didn’t have to keep the heat on as much as you did tomatoes. That’s about the biggest difference.”

After the Neubert greenhouse closed, the man who bought the property tore down the facilities except for the service room and the boiler room, which Baehr believes are still standing.

Except for part-time work at the Schuster greenhouses, Baehr left the greenhouse industry and got work with Westview Concrete. But he missed his former work as a grower.

“It’s a job you have to like, and I did like it,” Baehr said. “I loved the work despite a lot of hours.”

*“It’s a job you have to like, and I did like it. I loved the work despite a lot of hours.” – Ted Baehr*

People who have never worked in a greenhouse don’t realize how many long hours go into operating one, he said. “That was a big thing,” Baehr said. “I don’t know if we could have done any better or not. I

keep thinking we could have done something better about that, but at the time, the greenhouse business was going downhill. You couldn’t really invest a lot of money into it. During World War II is when they made all their money. Tomatoes were a good price then.”

Prices were frozen during the war, he said, so they stayed higher than they might have otherwise for tomato growers. But conditions for the greenhouse industry became tougher in later years.

“You had to like it to work there,” Baehr said. “That’s about the size of it, because it’s an awful lot of long hours, especially when you’re a grower or something like that. My dad worked an awful lot. They used to rototill with a hand tiller back then, and he had six acres, and he did most of the rototilling. It’s just a lot of hard work and a lot of sweat.”

### **Son had hand in operations of West River Greenhouse.**

Roger Barnes, who now lives in Brook Park, also remembers hard work in a greenhouse but it is from the perspective of the son of the man who was the foreman at the West River Greenhouse, which was located along Columbia Road about halfway between where Uncle John’s Plant Farm and Schuster’s Westview Gardens are now. He grew up in a house at 8893 Columbia Road, which was at the front of the greenhouse property that was owned by Tom Judy of Rocky River from the early 1960s until the early 1970s. Barnes’s father, Clayton worked there the entire time that Judy owned it

“He worked in planting the tomato plants, harvesting them and tending them,” Barnes said. “Just about anything and everything that had to be done at the greenhouse.”

At times, his father called him in to help. “Come harvest time, I went down and helped pick the ripe tomatoes and pack them into boxes,” he said. “We’d haul them down to the main packing part of the greenhouse, weigh them up, box them, load them on the truck.” They then took the tomatoes over to the packing house on Bagley Road in Berea that was owned by the Cleveland Greenhouse Vegetable Growers Association.



*This is one of the baskets that once held tomatoes grown in greenhouses in Olmsted and neighboring communities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Carolyn Petlowany, who took this photo, now uses the basket to hold clothes pins.*

“We took them over to the packing house and offloaded them, and then I came back with my father and we did it all over again,” Barnes said. “It was all under the table because I was like 13, 14 years old, 15 years old. I wasn’t allowed to work by law.”

Unlike Baehr, Barnes was a reluctant greenhouse worker. “It was extremely hard work,” he said. “Honestly, I was like any other kid back then, and I really didn’t want to work. They gave me a few bucks to put in my pocket to go up to the Falls Kreme Shop and get some ice cream or whatever and hang around with my buddies when I wasn’t working. I

didn’t do too much during the school year, Monday through Friday, but on the few Saturdays that we were down there, I would go in and pick tomatoes till sometime in the afternoon, then go clean up and then go do whatever I had to do.”

On summer days, greenhouses didn’t need to be heated the way they were during cooler parts of the year, Barnes said, but other tasks had to be done. “On hot days, when you’d get the sun beating down, we had to make sure the place was ventilated,” he said. “There were glass vents at the end of each row of tomato plants. There were vents that we had to crank up and lower down at nighttime. In the daytime, we’d let the hot air out and keep the warm air in at night. Fertilizing the ground – we had some compost piles we had to spread around inside the greenhouse.”

Unlike a traditional farm, which would have one planting season, one growing season and one harvest season for a crop, Barnes said, greenhouses growing tomatoes would have different seasons going on simultaneously.

“The plants tended to grow pretty fast,” he said. “As the plants were growing, we would have to go through and do what was called stringing them up. Over each row of

*“The plants tended to grow pretty fast. As the plants were growing, we would have to go through and do what was called stringing them up.” – Roger Barnes*

plants, we had a wire cable running the length of the greenhouse, and we had twine coming down. We had to go around and twist the tomato vines on the twine to get it to grow up. They were usually about six to eight feet tall. They were never in the same stages of growth. As one house would be depleted, we’d put new ones in. Then we’d start at the opposite end and pick those. It was a continuous rotation of plants. That’s the way Mr. Judy worked it.... It seemed like we always either were twisting the plants up or

planting new plants or picking the ripe tomatoes. So it all depends on where it was in the season.”

For a few years in the late 1960s, Barnes recalled, West River and other greenhouses employed migrant, Mexican workers. “A whole slew of them came into town, and they went down to the greenhouses,” he said. “My dad started working around 7:30-8:00. Like I said, we lived on the property. He had a pickup truck that he would drive down to the greenhouse every morning. It was a quarter-mile to a half-mile back by the river. He would drive that to the greenhouse. As he was driving to the greenhouse, they would be walking down the drive to get to the greenhouse. He’d stop and they’d all pile into the back of the pickup truck, and he’d drive them on down there.”

Sometime in the early 1970s, when Barnes was away serving in the army, a big storm damaged the greenhouse facilities and led to the closing of the operation. “It went from like a 10-house greenhouse to a five-house greenhouse,” he said. “I guess Mr. Judy couldn’t make ends meet anymore.”

Shortly after the storm hit, West River tried to improve production by rotating the tomato crops with lettuce. “I guess it was, from a farming point of view, the tomato plants were constantly using the same nutrients,” Barnes said. “You were rotating the crops in the field, such as a farmer would do on his farm. You don’t want to put the same crops in the same field year after year. You rotate them around.”

Anyone looking today for something left on the site from the West River Greenhouse would be disappointed, he said. “Actually, there’s nothing there now,” Barnes said. “It’s long since been torn down, basically abandoned.”

Even when West River was in business, passersby on Columbia Road would not have noticed much because of the way the greenhouse operation was situated, he said.

“Originally, when Tom Judy owned it, there were 30 acres there,” Barnes said. “There were two houses on the property. My family lived in one, and another worker and his family lived in the other. The greenhouse was all the way back by the river, probably a quarter-mile to a half-mile back. At that time, if you were driving down, you could see the smokestack and the boiler room. You could see that. That’s about it.”

### **Woman retains mixed memories of Lewis Road greenhouse.**

*Olmsted 200* reader Lisa Eary-McCarty has memories of another greenhouse that grew tomatoes along Lewis Road where the New Chestnut Grove Cemetery is located now. Her father worked there seven days a week from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. as a boiler operator, she said.

“As children, (there were 6 of us) we all had to help him making baskets, and other small jobs around the greenhouse,” Eary-McCarty wrote in an email. “We would





*The New Chestnut Grove Cemetery was previously the site of a greenhouse along Lewis Road. This photo is from a Memorial Day 2006 ceremony.*

restaurants. And finally, (but the most fun of all) was the ‘BIG POND.’ It sits [way] up on a ridge behind what is now the cemetery... We swam there and often times had ‘parties’ there. Most of my friends can still recall my Dad chasing them off the property with a gun when they were caught there drinking and smoking pot, (and skinny dipping).”

Two small houses were on the property, she wrote. One was her family’s home. She recalled that the other one housed a series of Puerto Rican families of greenhouse workers.

Not all of Eary-McCarty’s memories of those days are fond. Her parents split up, the house burned down, and she believes the greenhouse closed shortly after that. Despite that, she said, “I still cling to the ‘good times’ we had.” She has no photos of the property would be interested seeing some. (Anyone with photos to share can send them to *Olmsted 200* at: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com).)

Being so close to the tomato-growing industry might have left a bad taste in some people’s mouths, but Lisa Eary-McCarty and Roger Barnes have this in common: They still love to eat tomatoes.

*Thanks to Ted Baehr, Roger Barnes and Lisa Eary-McCarty for sharing their memories of Olmsted’s 20<sup>th</sup> century greenhouses. Also, thanks to Lisa Baehr-Zychowski for arranging for the interview with her father.*

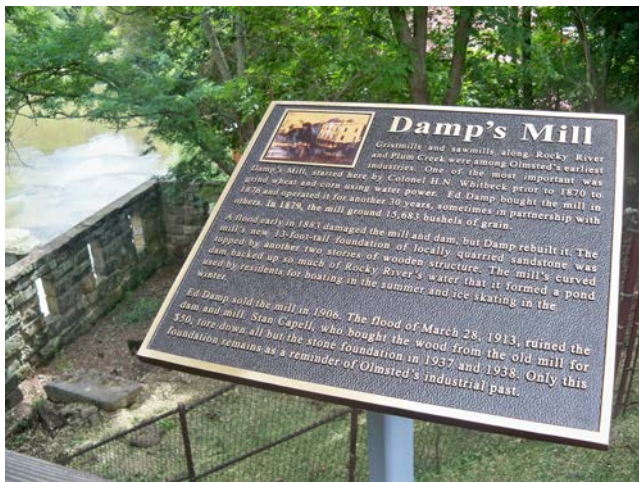
## **Olmsted Had Historical Gain and Loss in 2014**

For everyone interested in preserving the history of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township, 2014 was the year one longtime landmark was lost and another received welcome attention.

When the year began, a barn that John Hall had built in 1880 along John Road, which was named for him, still was a prominent sight in the northern part of Olmsted Township. But it did not last another half-year. The Eliza Jennings organization, which owns The Renaissance retirement community built on land that once was Hall's farm, decided the cost of repairing and preserving the barn – in the range of \$300,000 – was more than the organization could afford. So Eliza Jennings contracted with Razing Cleveland to disassemble the barn and find new uses for its wooden and stone parts. As 2015 begins, plans for a green space that would incorporate pieces from the barn, including the “J.H. 1880” date stone, are yet to be determined.



*John Hall's barn stood for 134 years until it came down in the spring and summer of 2014.*



*No longer obscured by thick growth of trees, bushes and other plants, the foundation of Damp's Mill received a plaque telling its history.*

Just as the old barn in the township was disappearing, the view of another landmark in Olmsted Falls was improving. As a result of the efforts of Mayor Ann Marie Donegan and other city workers, the vegetation that had obscured the view of the foundation of Damp's Mill during warm-weather months was cut away. And a new plaque telling the history of the mill, which was a prominent business in town in the late 1800s and early 1900s, went up by the observation deck behind Falls Family Restaurant and next to the shops of Mill River Plaza. Olmsted has many historical structures that could be

considered for similar treatment to ensure that they and their stories are not lost. Perhaps one or more could get their own plaques in this year, the bicentennial of Olmsted's settlement.

## **Hecker Plate Photo Got Lost in Editing Process**

Some readers of an early version of Issue 18 of *Olmsted 200*, which came out November 1, might have been confused by the identification of one photo in the story about Shirley Hecker (“Artist Is Honored for Work Showing Olmsted Scenes”). The story was meant to include three photos of pewter plates based on Hecker's depictions of



scenes around Olmsted Falls. Unfortunately, in the final editing process, one photo erroneously was dropped from the publication and the cutline identifying what was in that photo was inserted under a different photo of another pewter plate. The electronic version of Issue 18 was corrected and is available from Olmsted Township's website at: <http://www.egovlink.com/olmsted/docs/menu/home.asp>. Click on "Olmsted 200" and then "Issue 18."



Here is the photo that inadvertently was dropped from that issue. It shows the Union Schoolhouse that stood on the Village Green from 1873 until 1960.

*Photo by Darci Spilman, daughter of Shirley Hecker.*

## Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will begin a series of stories about Grand Pacific Junction, including the histories of its buildings and how they came to be preserved. Also still in the works is an article about what Olmsted Falls looked like 60 years ago, based on a map that was a souvenir of the 1954 Homecoming, and a story about a one-armed photographer who worked in Olmsted Falls in the 1870s and 1880s.

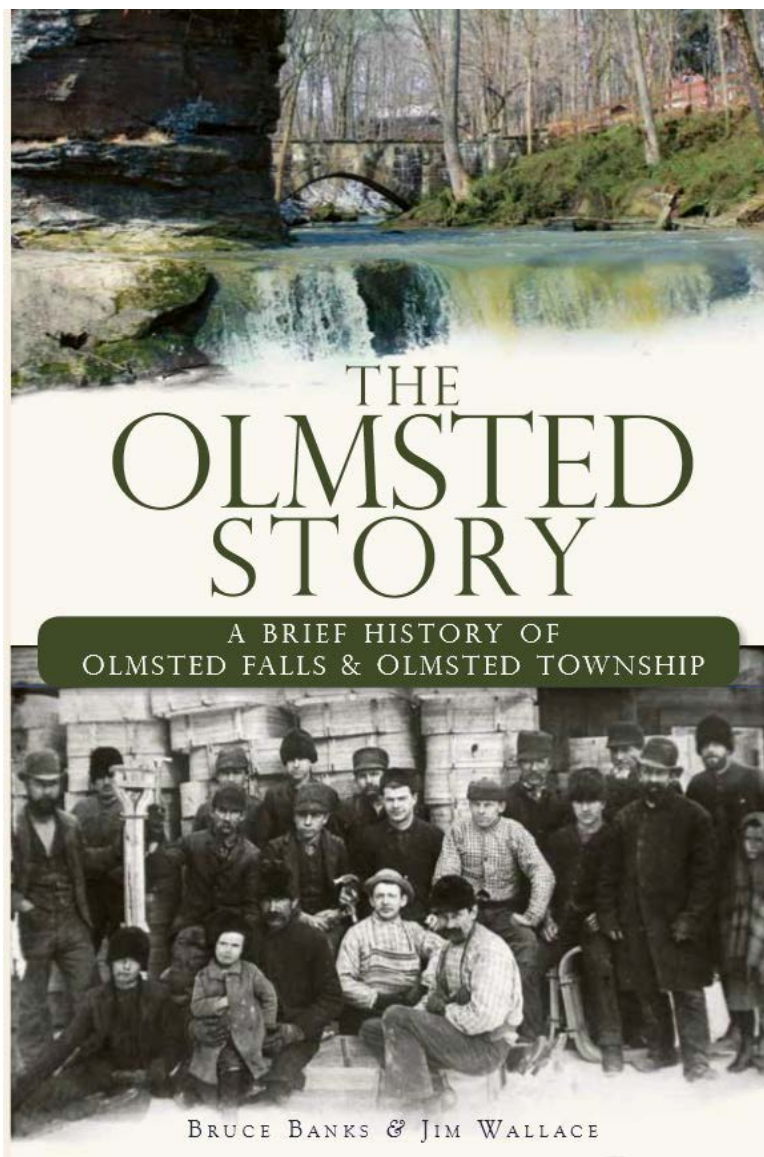
If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com). *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including California, Colorado, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, West Virginia, Florida, Kentucky, Massachusetts and Maine, as well as overseas in Mongolia and Japan.

Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like me to pull out of my extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information or photos about the community's history that you would like to share.

If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to <http://www.egovlink.com/olmsted/docs/menu/home.asp> and click on "Olmsted 200." Also, beginning with the June 1, 2014, issue, Olmsted Falls made room on the city's website for the latest issue of *Olmsted 200*. Look for it at: <http://www.olmstedfalls.org/2008/fullnews.php?n=174>,

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Written contributions and photos, as well as comments and questions about items in this newsletter, will be considered for publication. Send any correspondence by email to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com).

*Olmsted 200* is written, researched and edited by Jim Wallace, who is solely responsible for its content. He is co-author (with Bruce Banks) of ***The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township***, published in 2010 by The History Press of Charleston, S.C. ***The Olmsted Story*** is available at Clementine's Victorian Restaurant at Grand Pacific Junction, the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.



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