Olmsted 200

Two Centuries and More History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township – First Farmed in 1814 and Settled in 1815

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## Old Photos of Big Red Mill Turn Up in California

If you could go back 105 years to the early days of 1920, you could still see the large structure of a sawmill that had stood for decades next to the waterfalls on Plum Creek in Olmsted Falls. But those would have been the final days of what was known as the Big Red Mill.

It was in 1920 that Grover Imhoff, who served as superintendent of the public school system, tore it down. Recently, Mike Gibson of Sonoma, California, found what might be a few of the last photos taken of the mill, and one has Imhoff's

This photo of the Big Red Mill was among the collection of photos from Olmsted history that Mike Gibson's father saved. Photo courtesy of Mike Gibson.

name on the back, so he might have taken the photos shortly before he dismantled the mill. The photos were among many historical photos Gibson's father had collected before the family left Olmsted Falls in the early 1960s to move to California.
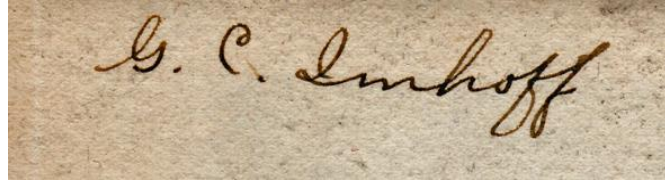
This is Grover Imhoff's name, possibly his signature, on the back of the previous photo. Photo courtesy of Mike Gibson.

The photo with Imhoff's name on the back was taken from the vantage point of the creek below the falls. It's likely that few current and former Olmsted residents have seen that photo in recent decades. However, two other photos Gibson shared with *Olmsted 200* are the same or very similar to those that have been part of the slide show (now PowerPoint presentation) that has been part of the historical lectures that Olmsted Township resident Bruce Banks has given on many occasions in recent decades. (See story on page 8 in this issue for more on that.) It's possible that Imhoff also took those photos.

It's not clear why it was the task of the school superintendent to tear down the old mill. Perhaps it was Imhoff's way of earning some extra money when school wasn't in session.

This 1916 LaFayette High School photo shows Grover Imhoff, principal, at the far left, and Cyrus McCleary, superintendent, next to him. In the row of girls seated in the front, McCleary's daughter, Fairy, is fifth from the right. Both Imhoff and Fairy McCleary moved a few years later to Olmsted Falls. Photo courtesy of Mike Gibson.

Imhoff's service as school superintendent was brief. Walter Holzworth, in his 1966 book on Olmsted history, did not say when Imhoff took over in Olmsted Falls, but it seems to have been sometime around 1920. That would have been not long after Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township merged their separate school districts and abandoned their small schools for one consolidated school, which opened in 1916 at the corner of what now are called Bagley Road and Mapleway Drive.

Holzworth wrote that Imhoff came from Shelby, Ohio, where he had been superintendent of Richland County's rural schools, on the recommendation of A.G. Yawberg, superintendent of the Cuyahoga County school system. (Back then, the Olmsted Falls district did not have full independence but was under the jurisdiction of the county school board.)

However, Gibson wrote that his father told him that Imhoff had been principal of LaFayette High School near Lima, and he has provided a photo to prove it. The photo identifies Imhoff as the principal and Cyrus McCleary as superintendent. Among the students in the photo is Fairy McCleary, daughter of the superintendent and the mother of Gibson's father.

"Dad told me that when Grover took the [superintendent] job in Olmsted Falls in about 1919 to 1920, he recruited my grandmother to come with him as a teacher," Gibson wrote. "She didn't teach for long because she was married by spring 1922 to William Gibson Sr. (my grandfather). Grover had a son named John Imhoff who became one of my father's lifelong friends."

Gibson said he can remember visiting Grover Imhoff at his home in Olmsted Falls along the east side of Columbia Road just north of the railroad tracks.

But Imhoff's service as superintendent was cut short when members of the local school board voted three to two against renewing his contract on May 1, 1924. George Hecker, George Hall and D.E. Boner voted against him, while Harry Barnum and Ernie Miller favored keeping him. The vote followed a period of discontent among some Olmsted residents who charged that the school system was spending too much money.
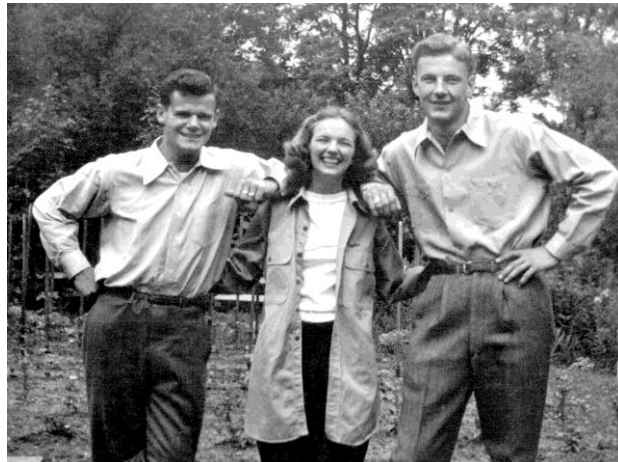
This photo from 1944 or 1945 shows William Gibson, Jr., and Jean Staten, who became Mike Gibson's parents, with John Imhoff, son of Grover Imhoff, on the right. Photo courtesy of Mike Gibson.

Yawberg, the county superintendent, and George Asling, the county auditor, argued in Imhoff's defense.

"Yawberg pointed out Imhoff's splendid record and Asling cited tax figures, cost and levies needed to meet the growing school systems and stated that Imhoff had no other choice in trying to meet rising costs," Holzworth wrote.

This is another of the photos of the Big Red Mill that might have been taken by Grover Imhoff before he tore the building down. Photo courtesy of Mike Gibson.

Barnum also argued in favor of Imhoff saying that 375 people – about 75 percent of the school district's voters – had signed a petition supporting his retention. But such arguments did not sway the board's majority.

However, as Holzworth wrote, the board voted on May 30, 1924, to hire Charles Ferguson, who was the superintendent of schools in Spencer, Ohio, to be Olmsted's superintendent at an annual salary of $2,700, which was $300 more than Imhoff had been paid.

Imhoff went to Vermillion to serve as the superintendent of schools there, but he later returned to live in Olmsted Falls.

The mill along Plum Creek that Imhoff dismantled had stood there for several decades. It dated back to the 1870s and perhaps earlier.

On the left, another photo, possibly taken by Grover Imhoff, shows the mill partially torn down, but its waterwheel was still intact. On the right, all that remains today of the Big Red Mill is part of the stone wall that had been in front of the wheel. Also, in the upper right of the left photo, the side and rear of the DeRooi/DeRoy store can be seen at what later became the front yard of the Harding family home at 7769 Columbia Road. A full story about the family and a photo of the front of the store can be found in Olmsted 200 *Issue 138 from November 2024. Left photo courtesy of Mike Gibson.*

According to Bernice Offenberg, in her 1964 book *Over the Years in Olmsted*, Joseph Olmsted Loomis, who arrived in 1832, and his son, Newton, who arrived in 1834, built the first mill on the site in 1844. She said brothers Levi and Sylvester Alcott later built a sawmill there in 1864. However, Walter Holzworth, in his 1966 history of

Olmsted, wrote that Thomas Lemmon, an immigrant from Scotland, built the mill that the Alcotts later acquired.

At some time, apparently in the 1870s, Civil War veteran Tom Stokes joined the Alcotts as a business partner. Together, they built a larger waterwheel that allowed them to provide finished lumber and trim. In 1873, they added a planing mill and a matching mill. That apparently completed the Big Red Mill, which lasted almost another half-century. Sylvester Alcott died on August 31, 1882, and by the following January, Levi Sylvester sold his interest in the mill to Stokes. Stokes then expanded the business by building a warehouse and allowed its upper floor to be used as a meeting hall for the Grand Army of the Republic Post 634, a Civil War veterans' group. That building now serves as a home at 7835 Columbia Road.

This June 2017 photo shows the residence at 7835 Columbia Road that was built by Tom Stokes in 1887 to serve as a warehouse and meeting hall for Civil War veterans.

All that remains of the Big Red Mill is part of the stone wall that stood by the waterwheel along Plum Creek. For more information about the Big Red Mill, see Issue 51 of *Olmsted 200* from August 2017. For more information about the warehouse and meeting hall Stokes built, see Issue 50 from July 2017.

Community Church's Creation Began 110 Years Ago

This photo shows the former Congregational Church in 1920, just a few years after it merged with the Methodist Episcopal Church to form the Olmsted Community Church. Photo courtesy of Mike Gibson.

Change was in the air in Olmsted Falls 110 years ago this month. At least that's when a very small item appeared in the Olmsted Falls column of the *Berea Enterprise* that foreshadowed a big development that was to come to the community within a couple of years. The column in the newspaper's February 5, 1915, edition included 16 items. This was the ninth one down: "A great deal of thought and hard work is being put on the Community Church proposition. It is a good thing. Help it along."

Someone who was not directly involved in the village's two Protestant churches might not have understood what that was about, but it was the first indication in print that

the congregations of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Congregational Church were seriously considering uniting into one congregation. The two churches were located directly across Columbia Street (now Columbia Road) from each other. For many years, they had conducted joint activities, such as Sunday school classes, at times.

By early 1915, they started considering making one church out of two. By late 1916, each church formed a committee to figure out how to make that work. That led to their adoption of articles of

This undated photo shows the building of the former Methodist Episcopal Church, which merged with the Congregational Church to create the Olmsted Community Church. It now is the Grand Pacific Wedding Chapel.

federation in January 1917 to create the Olmsted Community Church. The former Methodist Episcopal Church, which now is home to the Grand Pacific Wedding Chapel, was bigger, so it was used for the Sunday morning services, while the former Congregational Church was used for Sunday school classes and other meetings. It came to be known as the Community House until it was torn down in the 1950s to make way for construction of the current Olmsted Community Church building. Its site became part of the parking lot between the church and the former Village Hall that now houses the Moosehead restaurant.

Phone Service Changed 70 Years Ago

It's hard to imagine now in the 21st century, when making a phone call anywhere in the country and beyond is as easy as punching 10 or more numbers into a cell phone, but making phone calls outside of a small local area was much more cumbersome as recently as seven decades ago. In 1955, a big change in the process occurred that affected many people in northeastern Ohio, including Olmsted Falls, Olmsted Township and West View.

The change was explained in a story in the February 25, 1955, edition of the *Berea Enterprise.* It said that, beginning March 20, Ohio Bell customers in most Greater Cleveland communities would be able to dial their calls directly, not only in the local area, as they had been doing, but also to about 60 other communities in the northeastern quadrant of the state as far away as Youngstown and East Liverpool. Person-to-person,

collect, or pay station long-distance calls would still have to be placed through an operator. That's also when dialing "0" became the way to reach an operator, replacing the previous method of dialing "211."

It was such a significant change that Ohio Bell sent 55 specially trained representatives to visit the homes and offices of more than 12,000 Greater Cleveland customers who were "known to make frequent calls between widely separated suburbs."

Northeastern Ohio was playing its role in a continent-wide movement toward increased automation in telephone service. In 1947, the system of three-digit area codes was established. At that time, there were 86 area codes. By 1967, the number had increased to 129. By 2023, the United States had 335 area codes.

The Berea Enterprise *story about change in telephone dialing was accompanied by this map. Cuyahoga County is in the black area.*

On November 10, 1951, the first direct-dialed call by a customer using an area code was placed from Englewood, New Jersey, to Alameda, California. It took a little more than three years after that for direct dialing to reach northeastern Ohio. That was still ahead of many areas because it took until the early 1960s for direct dialing to be adopted in most communities across the United States and Canada.

During Ohio Bell's information campaign in 1955, the company also distributed a color movie to explain the change, as well as the new electronic equipment that made it possible. The story said:

> *These special machines record automatically on a tape all details of long distance calls, such as the distant city dialed, the telephone number, the time of day or night and the length of the conversation. The telephone number of the calling party is secured by the Cleveland operator and also recorded on this tape. These tapes are then run through decoding machines which make a printed record of each call.*

The story said organizations that wanted to show the film could call the telephone company film library to arrange to borrow a copy and even to get the projection equipment to show it. The number of the film library was given as MA 2-9900, which is another indication of how much has changed in the past 70 years.

Olmsted Falls, Olmsted Township and West View were just a small part of this coast-to-coast evolution in telephone service, but it made a significant difference in the lives of the communities' residents.

Harding Was One of Correspondent's Brave Men

Recent issues of *Olmsted 200* (Issue 138 from November and Issue 139 from December) included stories about the history of the Harding family of Olmsted Falls. Since then, a few readers pointed out that Charles Harding was interviewed about two weeks before his death by Ernie Pyle, one of the best-known World War II reporters.
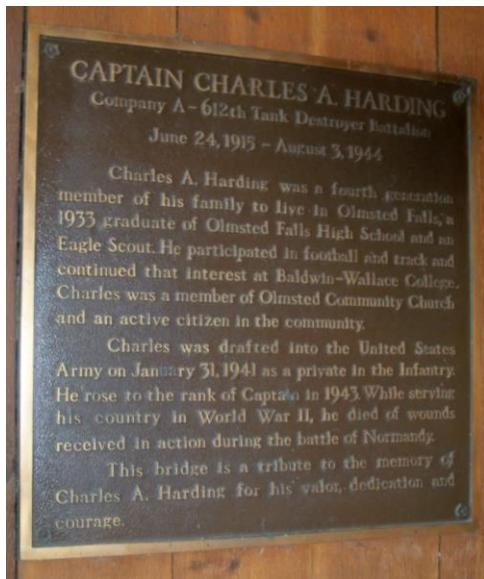
This plaque with a short biography of Charles Harding is inside the covered wooden bridge over Plum Creek that is named for him.

Here is what Pyle wrote about Harding on page 363 of his 492-page 1944 book, *Brave Men*: "One company commander, Captain Charles Harding, of Olmsted Falls, near Cleveland, had just had a letter from home telling him to keep an eye out for me. He figured that in a war this big our paths would never cross, but they did."

That was it. Their encounter occurred while Harding, who led Company A of the 612th Tank Destroyer Battalion, was stationed in Britain waiting to go to France. His unit was transported to France on June 14, 1944, just eight days after the Allies launched the Battle of Normandy on June 6. He lost his life a bit more than six weeks later after coming under enemy fire. He is believed to have died on August 3, 1944.

After covering the war in North Africa and Europe from 1942 through 1944, Pyle went to the Pacific in 1945. He was killed while covering the invasion of Okinawa in April 1945.

Olmsted Historian Got Noticed 40 Years Ago

A man who has contributed much to what now is understood about Olmsted history received his first published attention for that work 40 years ago this month. The story written by Helen Rathburn in the February 7, 1985, edition of the *News Sun* was about Olmsted Township resident Bruce Banks.

The story – titled "Falls Detective?" – suggests that Banks had much in common with two television detectives of that time – Columbo and Remington Steele – except that, instead of searching for criminals, Banks searched for "clues to complete the history of our area."

These are some of the items Bruce Banks and his son dug up at the site of a former mill in Olmsted Falls. Photo courtesy of Bruce Banks.

As the story notes, Banks was head of the electro-physics section of the nearby National Aeronautics and Space Administration facility at that time, and he employed some of his scientific research methods to dig up information about Olmsted history. Some of that work included literally digging in the ground, such as when he and his son found bottles, bullets and other artifacts at the site of a long-gone mill.

Banks organized some of his findings into a presentation with photos that he initially presented to the Kiwanis Club. He went on to make that presentation, called "Olmsted Then and Now," many times over the last four decades, such as during Olmsted Heritage Days. After projecting his photos on slides for many years, he later put them into a PowerPoint presentation. He also was co-author of the 2010 book, *The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township*, which includes many of the historical photos he collected.

The left photo from 2009 shows Bruce Banks at work at NASA. The right photo from August 2, 2019, shows him making one of his history presentations at the Grand Pacific Hotel during Olmsted Heritage Days.

His professional work led Banks to earn at least 40 patents. His role as an inventor was featured in Issue 112 of *Olmsted 200* from September 2022 as part of a

series of stories about the history of Olmsted's inventors. His many professional honors include being inducted in 2021 into the Hall of Fame at NASA's John H. Glenn Research Center at Lewis Field.

Longtime Local Resident Remembers a Big Pond in Olmsted

This is Joyce Geiger, on the left, with her sister, Joan Ditmire Chapman. "We were the Ditmire twins," Joyce said.

Many current and former Olmsted residents are familiar with the pond that is one of the attractions in David Fortier River Park, but several decades ago, Olmsted Falls had a bigger pond a bit farther west that was also quite an attraction.

"There was a pond that was there in the spring," Joyce Geiger told *Olmsted 200*. "Every spring, we used to catch tadpoles and frogs there, and then every winter, the village would flood it for ice skating. And it ran from Cranage Road on Mapleway – or at that time, it was Division Street. It ran from Cranage to Cook before there were any houses there. And it was that whole big block – it was an ice-skating rink."

On the west side of the pond was Clark Street, she said.

"Everybody from the whole town – all the kids – went skating there," she said.

Geiger, who now lives in North Ridgeville, said the pond was there when her family moved into Olmsted Falls in 1946, and it seemed then to have been there for a long time.

"It was huge, except the hockey players always took it over," she said. "I was a figure skater."

Does anyone else remember that pond? If so, *Olmsted 200* would be interested in sharing your memories. Any photos of the pond would especially be welcome.
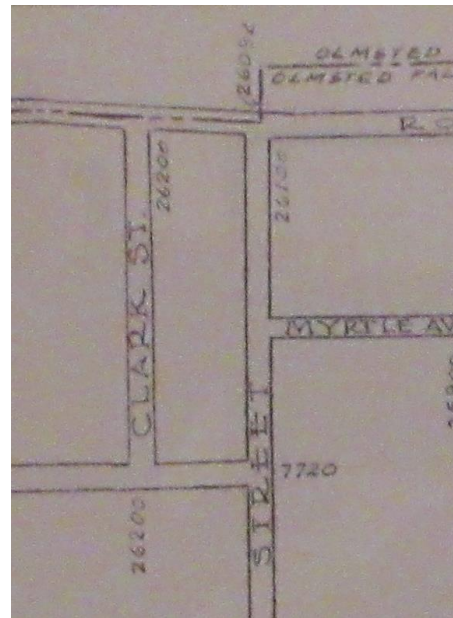
This portion of a 1954 map shows the block south of Cook Road, north of Cranage Road and west Division Street. That is where a pond was located decades ago.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include stories about Olmsted's fight against Dutch elm disease, the construction of the Olmsted Falls depot, the electric railroad that helped pull North Olmsted away from Olmsted Township, and the opening of a safe that revealed some early Olmsted Township records.
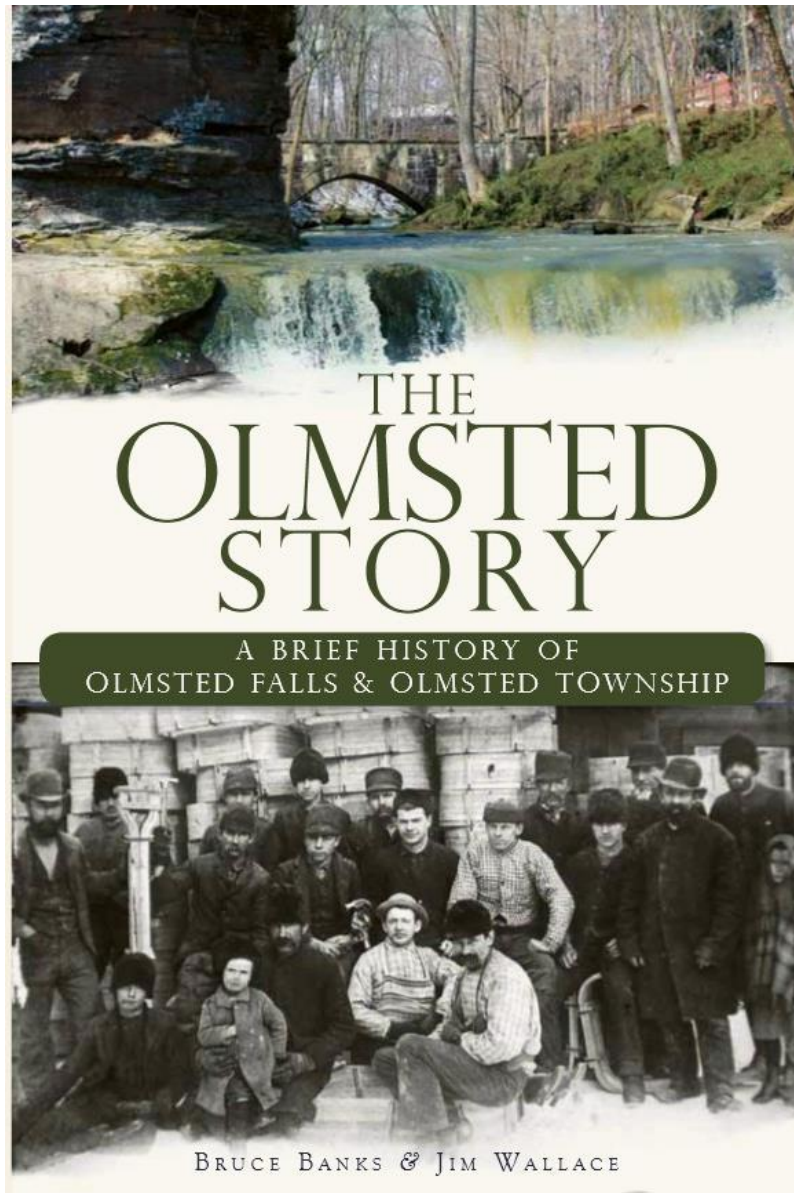
If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin, and as well as overseas in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like to have pulled out of *Olmsted 200*'s 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 https://www.olmstedtownshipohio.gov/290/Past-Newsletters-Olmsted-200. All the issues of *Olmsted 200* also are available on the website of the City of Olmsted Falls. Find them at: http://www.olmstedfalls.org/olmsted_falls_history/olmsted_200_issues.php. A link to *Olmsted 200* can be found on the left side of the page. On each site, click on the number of the issue you want to read.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Thanks go to Mary Louise King for helping in proofreading and editing many issues. Thanks also go to David Kennedy for frequently contributing research and insight for some stories. 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.

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 the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.*

THE
OLMSTED
STORY

A BRIEF HISTORY OF
OLMSTED FALLS & OLMSTED TOWNSHIP

BRUCE BANKS & JIM WALLACE