



Olmsted 200

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

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Some Troubles with Trains Were Tamed in the 21st Century

By the time the 20th century entered its final few years, Olmsted residents had endured almost 150 years of struggles with the railroads over issues of safety and quality of life. But to many people, the situation seemed only to be getting worse.

At the time, both sets of tracks that passed through Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township were operated by Conrail, the company set up by the federal government in the 1970s to take over several failing railroads and subsequently sold to private investors in 1987. A decade later in 1997, a deal was reached for CSX Transportation and Norfolk Southern Railway to acquire Conrail and split its assets between them. That was not viewed as a good development in Olmsted because it was expected to significantly increase the number of trains passing through. On the northern set of tracks that ran east-west through the city and the township, it was estimated 100 trains already passed through each day, and Norfolk Southern was considering adding another 28.



The number of trains passing through Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township increased greatly after Norfolk Southern Railway and CSX Transportation took over Conrail tracks in June 1999.

Having too many trains was not the only problem. In December 1997, Olmsted Falls City Council learned that in the four years since the beginning of 1994, the city had

cited the railroads for 151 cases of trains blocking crossings. Of those, 27 lasted an hour or more, and one lasted more than 18 hours.

“It seems that Conrail is trying to railroad us,” Joanne Berger DuMound wrote in the January 22, 1998, edition of the *News Sun*. She mentioned complaints about too many trains, stopped trains, slow-moving trains, faulty crossing gates, lack of gates and bumpy crossings.



Olmsted Falls tried to prevent CSX from acquiring these tracks in the southern end of town and Norfolk Southern from acquiring the tracks farther north in the middle of town.

million, the federal government would pay \$27 million, and the state would pay \$17 million. More than half of the money was designated for Berea, but Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township expected to get some of it.

Among the proposals discussed were overpasses or underpasses at certain crossings, so automobiles no longer would have to cross directly on train tracks. Other proposals were considered for safety measures that could be installed at other crossings to allow trains to pass through without having to blow their horns.

The federal government approved the takeover of Conrail by Norfolk Southern and CSX in August 1998, and the acquisitions became official on June 1, 1999.

Over months and years, negotiations went on over where to separate the roads from the tracks and on how to make crossings otherwise safer and quieter. On the issue of building overpasses or underpasses, a snag developed as early as December 1998, when city and township officials disagreed whether they wanted an overpass along Fitch Road or Stearns Road. Fitch Road was more centrally located for both the city and the township, but it was a shorter road that ran only about two miles between Bagley Road and Butternut Ridge Road. By contrast, Stearns Road already connected to Interstate 480 and eventually was to connect to Crocker Road in Westlake, Interstate 90 and Bassett Road in Bay Village.

In February 1998, Olmsted Falls filed a formal objection with the Federal Surface Transportation Board over the takeover of Conrail by Norfolk Southern and CSX. That was weeks after Norfolk Southern dropped plans to triple the number of trains running through such communities as Lakewood and Bay Village and instead send most of the trains farther south through Olmsted Falls, Olmsted Township and other neighboring communities. That led to negotiations with the railroads facilitated by then-Congressman Dennis Kucinich that reached an agreement by June 1998 that included an \$88 million improvement package to be spent in several local communities. The railroads would pay \$44

By July 1999, Cuyahoga County officials decided to proceed with an overpass on Fitch Road, but they did not rule out also having another one on Stearns Road. The county engineer's office conducted traffic studies of both crossings and found no significant difference in how much they were used.

In January 2000, two of the three township trustees passed a resolution favoring a Stearns Road overpass to one on Fitch Road, while Olmsted Falls officials opposed it. City Council President Beverly Smith argued Fitch would be better because it would provide easy access for safety vehicles from both communities. She told the *News Sun* one purpose of the overpass was to ease transportation for school buses, which crossed the tracks about 43,000 times a year.

In May 2006, Robert Blomquist, who then was mayor of Olmsted Falls, blamed that dispute for delaying the overpass project. "It's supposed to be centered in the two communities," he said in an interview. "The bottom line is we lost four years before we

finally got that re-established at Fitch Road under the authority of the county engineer because when the locals disagree, the county, the feds [and] the state are going to back off."



The underpass below CSX tracks moved Columbia Road west of its original route. This is how it looked on November 28, 2010, after several months of construction.

was chosen from 21 alternatives. It was expected to cost \$11.3 million. Mayor Blomquist said that option would be the least disruptive to nearby properties and most cost-effective. The project was to be funded with 85 percent federal and state money, 10 percent money from CSX and 5 percent city money.

The announced schedule was for the design to be completed by February 2005, construction to start in April 2006 and construction to be completed by December 2007. That proved to be too optimistic. The project went out for bids in mid-2009 after

While the location of an overpass in Olmsted Township was debated, plans moved forward for an underpass on Columbia Road to go below the CSX tracks in the southern section of the city that formerly was West View. The number of daily trains on the tracks increased from 15 previously to 54 in 1999. In April 2004, it was announced that a proposal for an underpass to move the road west at that spot



The underpass caused Columbia Road to bypass this section of the old West View business district dating back to the 1800s.



Today, the railroad bridge makes it clear it is in the City of Olmsted Falls. This photo was taken on August 4, 2018.

new 105-foot right-of-way for Columbia Road that allowed motorists to pass under the train tracks instead of using the old grade-level crossing.

Soon after the opening of the Columbia Road underpass, the Cuyahoga County



By the time the left photo was taken on August 20, 2011, the bridge supports that would carry Fitch Road over the Norfolk Southern Railway tracks were erected. By December 24, 2011, when the right photo was taken, the bridge had a deck and trains were passing below it.

Engineer's Office announced in January 2011 plans for the Fitch Road Grade Separation project. It was to begin by mid-2011 and take about two years to reroute Fitch Road on an overpass to the east of the existing road. That was to be followed by another overpass project on Stearns Road scheduled for 2014. In the spring of 2011, Great Lakes Construction Company won a \$4.95 million contract to relocate Fitch Road 400 feet to the east. Completion was scheduled for June 2013. Money from the Federal Highway Administration and Cuyahoga County helped fund the project.

In May 2011, construction workers began demolishing a Bagley Road house to make way for the Fitch Road overpass. By September 2011, workers were ready to place

being selected for \$5 million in federal stimulus money under the American Recovery Act, the legislation designed to help pull the country out of the big recession that hit in 2008. That's because it was considered to be "shovel-ready." By mid-2009, the CSX tracks were carrying 70 to 80 trains per day, so the need for the underpass was greater than ever.

Work began in March 2010 with the relocation of tracks. By the end of 2010, Olmsted Falls had a



On August 17, 2012, Olmsted Township and Olmsted Falls officials gathered to celebrate the completion of the Fitch Road overpass. In the left photo, Olmsted Township Trustee Jeanene Kress gets ready to cut the ceremonial green ribbon. Among those looking on are Olmsted Falls Mayor Robert Blomquist on the left and Trustee Sherri Lippus in the center. In the right photo, a Norfolk Southern train passes underneath as officials prepare for the ceremony.

136-foot beams across the overpass supports. By October, bridge deck construction began after about 90 percent of the embankment had been completed and all the precast concrete I-beams had been placed on piers and abutments. After a winter shutdown, work resumed in April 2012. By August, work on the overpass was completed almost a year ahead of schedule with help from a dry summer. Olmsted Township trustees, Olmsted



The rerouting of Fitch Road on the new overpass turned a portion of the existing road north of Bagley Road into a cul-de-sac. On the same day the overpass was opened, workers erected a "No Outlet" sign and that portion of the roadway became known as Old Fitch Road.

Falls city officials and others assembled on the bridge on the afternoon of August 17, 2012, for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to dedicate the overpass. It opened in time for the beginning of the school year on August 22.

Two-and-a-half years later, in the spring of 2015, several houses on both sides of Stearns Road north of Bagley Road were vacated and boarded up, signaling the beginning of the township's second overpass project. Construction began a few months later. The



The Stearns Road overpass is seen here in photos taken September 6, 2020.

overpass was projected to cost \$11 million. By mid-summer 2016, it was opened for southbound traffic while work continued several weeks longer on the northbound side. In October 2016, the overpass was ready for its own ceremony. Officials from Cuyahoga County, Olmsted Township and the school district gathered on a rainy day under umbrellas with oversized scissors to cut the ribbon.

Thus, more than 160 years after the two railroads were built through Olmsted – 16 decades during which travelers had to wait every time a train passed through or stopped on the tracks – within a span of six years, residents received one underpass and two overpasses that allowed them to avoid completely three of the 10 crossings in Olmsted Township and Olmsted Falls. That not only saved time but also improved safety by reducing the possibilities of automobile-train collisions and giving emergency vehicles options to get to fires, accidents and crime scenes much more quickly.

The quest for quiet went on.

Meanwhile, as work progressed on those projects, another effort to make the communities safer and quieter also went forward. By March 1999, Berea and Olmsted Falls had entered negotiations with the two railroads on safety measures that could be installed at crossings to allow trains to avoid blowing their horns while passing through. But they had to reach out to higher authorities for help because they needed to change federal regulations and a 1953 Ohio law that required trains to blow their horns as they approached crossings. By the turn of the 21st century, after CSX and Norfolk Southern took over the Conrail tracks,



From the overpass on Stearns Road, the overpass on Fitch Road to the east can be seen.

it was estimated that Olmsted residents suffered from more than 1,600 blasts each day as about 110 trains passed through at all hours of the day and night. Other communities joined Berea and Olmsted in their quest for quiet.



Olmsted residents long had wanted relief from the noise of trains passing through, but their desire for relief went up after the number of trains passing through each day increased immensely in 1999.

In September 1999, Congressman Kucinich reported that the Federal Railroad Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation had reacted favorably to a “quiet zone” proposal for placing safety features at crossings that would eliminate the need for trains to sound their horns. The cost was estimated to be about \$100,000 per crossing.

In 2004, state legislators in Ohio passed House Bill 247 to establish conditions for creating quiet zones. On August 18, 2004, Governor Bob Taft signed the bill into law in a ceremony at Grand Pacific Junction in Olmsted Falls. Ten months later, the federal piece of the puzzle fell into place when the Federal Railroad Administration’s Train Horn Rule became effective on June 24, 2005. It established criteria for establishing quiet zones and a process for communities to pursue them. Safety measures that could be used included four-quadrant gate systems that close all lanes of a roadway in both directions and gates with channelization devices or raised medians that prevent vehicles from driving around lowered gates.

Olmsted Falls wasted little time in pursuing quiet zones. That fall, the city sought construction bids, but the lowest bid received by November 14, 2005, was \$128,000, well above the \$101,442 cost estimated by an engineer. The increased cost of asphalt was blamed for the problem. After that, the quiet zone effort bogged down. By mid-2007, the city was still waiting for the railroads to respond to its declaration of intent to set up quiet zones. A few more years passed without any action.

Meanwhile, in July 2010, the Federal Railroad Administration placed Ohio seventh on a list of the top 10 states with the most highway rail-grade collisions from 2006 through 2008. Ohio had 344 accidents, including 37 fatalities, in that period. It could have been worse because Ohio ranked fourth in the nation for total rail miles. Other states in the top 10 for the number of collisions were: Alabama, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana and Texas. They accounted for 51 percent of such accidents nationwide. The Rail Safety Improvement Act of 2008 required the

Federal Railroad Administration to identify the top 10 states. Those states then had until August 27, 2011, to submit plans for solving safety problems at crossings.



This raised median on Brookside Drive is among the safety features installed at the crossings around Olmsted Falls that led to the establishment of quiet zones, so that trains don't have to blow their horns as they approach the crossings.

It's not clear whether that action had any effect on Olmsted's quiet zones project, but early in 2011, Norfolk Southern Railway announced it was about ready to upgrade flashing lights and gates at crossings at Lewis Road and Columbia Road using federal funding. Meanwhile, the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio said it would help Olmsted Falls with the cost of rumble strips, illumination, improved signage and other safety improvements for up to \$5,000 with money coming from the State Grade Crossing Safety Fund. The Ohio Rail Development Commission had already installed a device called the Safetran 4000 to improve the response of gates to the approach of trains at the Columbia Road crossing.

By December 2011, raised concrete medians had been installed in Olmsted Falls at several railroad crossings, including those at Brookside Drive, Lewis Road and Sprague Road. They were painted yellow and were half a foot high, enough to prevent cars from going around lowered railroad gates.

It was 2012 – seven years after the federal Train Horn Rule took effect, eight years after Ohio House Bill 247 became law and 14 years after local communities began seeking relief – when quiet zones came into existence in Olmsted Falls. The final day for train horns to blow routinely along Norfolk Southern tracks in the city was reported to have been April 17, 2012. Seven months later, on November 21, 2012, the CSX crossings on Sprague Road and West Road became quiet zones.

That was progress, but it didn't solve all of Olmsted's trouble with trains. Train operators didn't always follow the quiet zone rules and sometimes still blew their horns while passing through. The trains also still occasionally blocked crossings by stopping or traveling very slowly through the community. In 2015, the city reportedly issued 187 citations at \$105 each to the two railroads.

Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township might never eliminate all their problems with trains, but the improvements of the early 21st century have made life with the railroads safer and quieter than in past centuries.

It Was a Matter of Seconds

By Ross Bassett

Editor's Note: Recent issues of Olmsted 200 have recounted how dangerous Olmsted's railroad crossings were from the time they were created in the mid-19th century through much of the 20th century. Here, reader Ross Bassett presents the story of a fatal event for his family at one of those crossings.



Johnny Cusato and Nancy Clague fell in love in the West Park neighborhood of Cleveland. All photos here are courtesy of Ross Bassett.

On January 11, 1948, a young couple was killed at the Sprague Road railroad crossing at what then was the border between West View and Columbia Township. This was just one of many sad stories that happen the world over daily, but the girl in this story was my aunt, Nancy Ann Clague. All my life I have been told the details. Now some 70 years later, I find myself sharing this story with my young grandson.

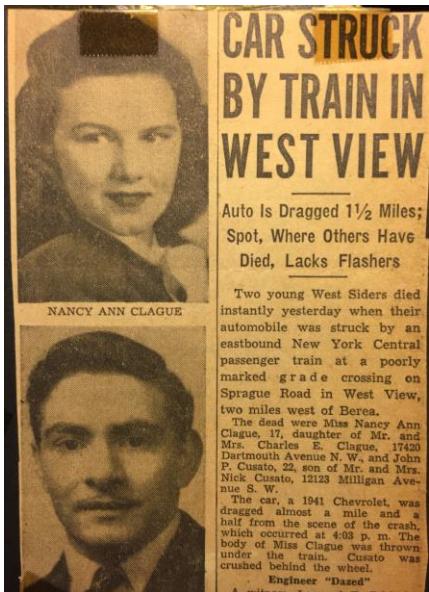
Johnny Cusato and Nancy Clague both lived in the West Park area of Cleveland. Sixteen-year-old Nancy, who attended John Marshall High, also worked at the soda fountain at Standard Drugs, 17004 Lorain Road near Kamms. Johnny Cusato had been in the Army and had been wounded in Europe. When he returned home, he spent a lot of time in his dad's shoe repair shop just a couple of doors down. At mealtime, he would get a sandwich from the soda fountain where Nancy worked. They met, started dating and fell in love.

On January 11, 1948, Johnny, who was 22 years old, picked up Nancy, who was then 17, at her home on Dartmouth Avenue. They told her parents that they were going for a ride in the country to take some pictures. They headed out to the West View area. Johnny knew this area because, just a few years earlier, he had been in a fight with Alvin Zapior at Zapior's Tavern.

Just after 4:00 p.m., they were heading east on Sprague Road when they slowly approached the railroad crossing. Back then there were no crossing gates. A witness stated that the two of them were on opposite sides of the front seat of the 1941 Chevy. Two witnesses also reported that they heard no train whistle. Just as Johnny and Nancy were crossing the tracks, the Cleveland-bound New York Central passenger train smashed into the passenger side of their car. The train



A New York Central train destroyed Cusato's car and killed him and Clague on January 11, 1948.



This newspaper story told of the deaths of Clague and Cusato.

ahead of them. A person's life can change in just a matter of seconds. As I share this story with my soon-to-be-driving grandson, I tell him if only they had arrived at the crossing a few seconds earlier or later they might have married and lived happily ever after, But that was not to be.

Ross Bassett, who is president of the West Park Historical Society, has made previous contributions to Olmsted 200, but this is the first story he has authored.

Readers Share Olmsted Railroad Recollections

Several readers reacted to recent *Olmsted 200* stories about the railroads. One of them was Nancy Nickels, who wrote to say she enjoyed seeing the 1931 photograph of two people at the watchman's shanty at the Columbia Road railroad crossing in downtown Olmsted Falls in last month's issue. But she offered a correction: "The boy is Bill NICKELS and his uncle, Frank Nickels, who was gate keeper for many years."

Using information provided in 2012 by then 91-year-old Anna Hall, the people in the photo were misidentified as Bill Nichols and his grandfather. That spelling relied on information from Walter Holzworth's 1966 book on Olmsted history. Holzworth did an amazing job of compiling a vast amount of information about the people who lived in the community over many decades but spelling unfortunately was not one of his strengths.

"Bill died in May of last year," Nancy Nickels wrote. "[He was] born above the dry cleaners and lived here all his life. He was 3 days shy of 93, We were married 3 months shy of 70 years."

dragged the car more than a mile past the Columbia Road crossing where the train finally was able to stop.

Johnny had to be cut out of the car, and Nancy was found under the train. Both had been killed instantly. It is believed that Nancy was also decapitated. Police reports indicated that Nancy was driving. A nearby neighbor reported that there were six accidents at this crossing just in the past year, 1947, and also that 10 people had died there in the prior 12 years.

Just a short time later, a report came on the radio that a young couple had been killed. Even though they were not overdue, somehow her father just knew that it was Nancy and Johnny. He rushed to the morgue where his suspicions were confirmed.

Both Nancy and Johnny had their whole lives

ahead of them. A person's life can change in just a matter of seconds. As I share this story with my soon-to-be-driving grandson, I tell him if only they had arrived at the crossing a few seconds earlier or later they might have married and lived happily ever after, But that was not to be.

Another reader, Dave Shirer, wrote that the same story reminded him that he, his mother and older brother sometimes would sit with Frank Nickels during the summers of 1941 through 1943 to watch the New York Central train called the Mercury pass through about eight o'clock in the evening. They also watched another passenger train, perhaps the Pathfinder, go through about nine o'clock and the 20th Century Limited about 10 o'clock.

"They had different color lights on the rear of the last passenger car (as I recall they were white, red and blue)," Shirer wrote. "I was only 7 to 9 at the time so my recollections may not be exactly correct."

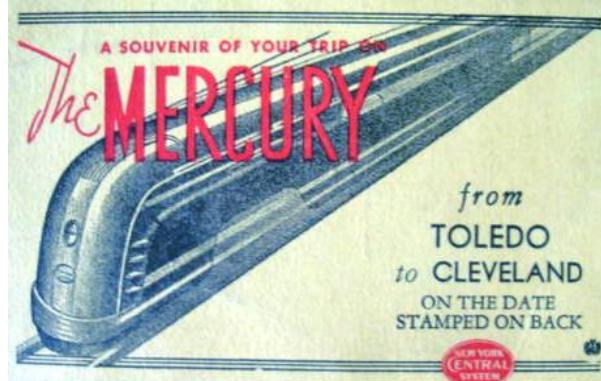
They watched Nickels work the crossing gates and put red lanterns on them, he said.

"We also watched many of the military trains during WW2 in hopes of seeing tanks and other equipment," Shirer wrote. "Later, after the electric gates were installed, Frank was retired and was allowed by the town to live in a basement room at city hall. Since my dad [the police chief] had an office upstairs I often had an opportunity to visit with Frank and talk about the railroad."

One of his bad railroad memories was seeing the mother of a girl he knew killed at the Lewis Road crossing on Christmas Eve 1948 or 1949. He said his father, Donald Shirer, was police chief at that time and was "quite affected" by that accident.

"Later when we lived across from the Village Green I would pass by the station [Olmsted Falls Depot] every day on my way to school," Shirer wrote. "My friend Bill Stanton and I would go inside to buy Dentine gum from a machine for 1 cent a stick. Later in high school Bill and I got friendly with a local train crew delivering supplies to the Farmers Exchange. They let us into the cab of the switch engine and watch them while they were taking cars from the train and shuttling them into the siding for the Exchange. A real thrill for a couple of teen aged boys. Of course it was against RR rules but who was going to find out and I think the crew liked to show off."

Yet another reader, Sue Simmerer, wrote, "So interesting reading how railroads evolved in the Olmsted area, etc. Interesting that we still have accidents with people trying to 'beat' the train as they drive through the lowered gates! Some things never change!"



The Mercury was a passenger train the New York Central introduced in 1936 on a route between Cleveland and Chicago. It was distinguished by its Streamline Modern design, as seen on this ticket.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include a story about a big change in the map of the Olmsted area that occurred 50 years ago, as well as other stories about the history of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township.

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 California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, Louisiana, Florida, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Maine, 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 <http://olmstedtownship.org/newsletters/>. A list of *Olmsted 200* issues is on the right side. Click on the number of the issue you want to read. All of 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/index.php. A link to *Olmsted 200* can be found on the left side of the page.

Except where otherwise noted, all articles in *Olmsted 200* are written by Jim Wallace. Thanks go to Mary Louise King for help 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 Angelina's Pizza in Olmsted Falls and the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.

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