



# Olmsted 200

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

Issue 57

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## Fire Department Began with a Small “Empire” 140 Years Ago

One of the most important institutions in any community is the fire department. Fire can change the face of a community very quickly. That certainly was clear in Olmsted Falls 70 years ago, when within one week in January 1948, the Fenderbosch brothers’ grocery and then the original St. Mary of the Falls Catholic Church were destroyed by fire. (See Issue 56 from last month for more on those fires.)

Those fires occurred almost 70 years after the first fire department in Olmsted Falls was organized on August 28, 1878. It was called the Olmsted Falls Empire Hook and Ladder Company. Why the word “Empire” was in the title is not known. But from an account of the history of the department written



*This undated photo shows the rubble left by the fire that destroyed Moley’s store, which stood just south of the railroad tracks along Columbia Road. Later, Barnum’s Super Market stood on that spot until it burned down in 1967. Thanks to Mike Gibson for the photo.*

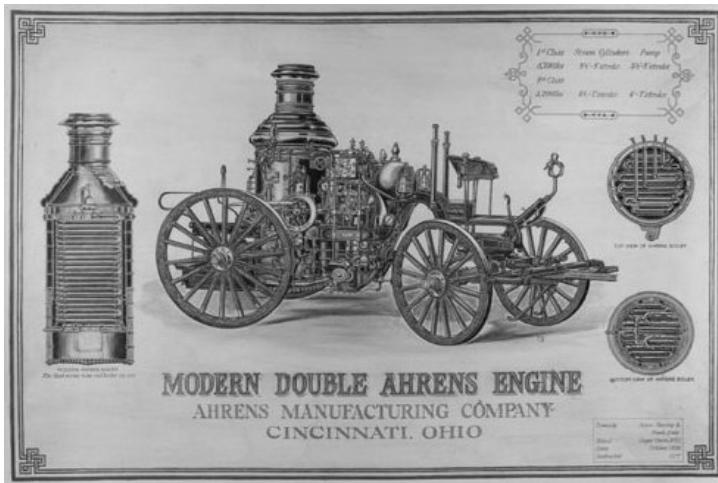
in 1927 by A.J. Pillars, editor of the *Berea Enterprise*, it is known that Dr. Frank A. Rose, the department's first foreman (or chief), made the motion at the organizational meeting for the name.

"It was carried without question, and the word 'Empire' was blazoned on everything thereafter – trucks, ladders, uniforms, belts, etc.," Pillars wrote.

Pillars, who was one of the 36 original members of the department, wrote that the "company during its four years of active existence did keep things going at the Falls at fever heat. And they did things with a bang."

When the company met on August 31, 1878, members decided they would have a uniform with a white cap, white stockings, red blouse, blue knee pants with a red stripe, and a black belt to be made by a local merchant. The cloth cost \$24.87, and each member of the company had to pay \$5.00 into the treasury.

Members of the department decided to spend \$65 to build a truck. Of course, a fire truck in 1878 was quite different from the fire trucks that became common in the 20<sup>th</sup>



*It is not known what the first homemade firetruck in Olmsted Falls looked like, but this is what one made about that time by Ahrens Manufacturing Company of Cincinnati looked like.*

The department used either Columbia Street (now Columbia Road) or River Street (River Road) to practice. Jim Burns, "a happy-go-lucky Irishman and quite a favorite among the boys," was honored by being chosen the official ladder-climber. "To hear the loud shouts of the multitude as he shinned up the ladder and placed his foot over the top rung – up there in the air where he must be seen, was an envied distinction," Pillars wrote. But when the company was at a tournament in Norwalk, Burns was replaced by Joseph Peltz, the local drugstore owner (who went on to join his brother-in-law Philip Simmerer in the hardware business as Peltz & Simmerer in the building now known as the Grand Pacific Hotel).

century and on into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It essentially was a wagon holding firefighting equipment that was moved forward by manpower. Thus, an ability to run with the wagon was important. A dispute broke out at that second meeting over whether three prospective members of the company could run well enough. Rose, the foreman, was quoted as saying, "Runners and wind are the two outstanding qualifications to become members of Ohio's prize fire fighters."

The department used



*Another notable fire just north of the railroad tracks along Columbia Road destroyed the first Odd Fellows Hall. This photo from August 8, 1903, shows people who came by in an early automobile to see what was left.*

Although the company was formed to fight fires, it seems members were more interested in competing with other fire departments. Pillars wrote that the company made plans for tournaments at Amherst, Bellevue, Norwalk, Berea and other places. Nowhere in his account of the Empire Hook and Ladder Company did Pillars mention any fires that the company had put out.

#### **Few remained in the fire company after the early years.**

In his 1966 book on Olmsted history, Walter Holzworth wrote, “After the enthusiasm of the Hook and Ladder tournaments had subsided, Olmsted Falls fire department dwindled to a few on the spot business men.”

In her 1964 book, *Over the Years in Olmsted, Township 6, Range 15*, Bernice Offenberg wrote that the fire department from 1890 to 1900 consisted of gristmill operator Ed Damp, who had a bucket pump, and hardware store owner Philip Simmerer, who had a three-gallon chemical tank. Holzworth wrote that a hand pump on wheels was added to the hand-hauled hook and ladder truck.

From 1900 to 1910, barber J.M. Reedy, served as both town marshal and fire chief. Offenberg surmised that Reedy’s triple duties weighed heavily on him. She wrote: “The story is told that he, when informed of a fire and at the same time had a customer in the barber’s chair, would say, ‘Just as soon as I finish this haircut, I will be with you.’” Holzworth told a version of that same story in his book.

“During those early years the village fire alarm consisted of a bell located on top of the Methodist Church,” Offenberg wrote in her book. “The first station was a stable located behind the Village Hall. Following the untimely demise of the original pumper in 1910, the Village purchased a 35-gallon soda-acid extinguisher mounted on a two-wheel hand cart that served until 1920.”

Pillars wrote of Peltz, “Joe was quick and small of stature and could shin up the ladder like a monkey.”

Charles Harding, who was big and husky, was in charge of the ladder, along with some aides. “It was very necessary that this be done and done right, and it can be said of the stackers that there never was an accident, we can remember,” Pillars wrote.

In 1910, Bart Rydman became fire chief and served in that position until 1915. He had the misfortune of losing his own home to fire during his term as fire chief. The fire broke out about 10:45 p.m. on January 8, 1913, in a store owned by Walter G. Locke. The fire destroyed Locke's store as well as the adjoining store and tin shop of Joe Anton. It also destroyed a two-story residence owned by Andrew Locke, Walter's father, where Anton and Rydman lived.

Although the fire destroyed Rydman's home, he was credited with leading a bucket brigade that saved the home of Joseph Peltz. Peltz's home still stands at 8086 Columbia Road and now houses Mary's Hair Salon as part of Grand Pacific Junction.

The spot where Locke's store, Anton's shop and the residence of Anton and Rydman burned down remained vacant for about a decade until the Depositors Building was erected there in the early 1920s. It now also is part of Grand Pacific Junction and houses several shops and a restaurant.

Even though Rydman was fire chief in Olmsted Falls more than a century ago, he lives on in the memory of one *Olmsted 200* reader, Patty Lindamood. He was her father's grandfather's wife's brother. She knew him as Uncle Bart. He and his wife, Alice, lived above a feed store on the main street in Hudson when Lindamood was a child in the 1950s and her family lived in Cuyahoga Falls. She saw them about three times a year.

"He wrote poetry, and he was the kindest man in the world," she recalled. "When I was young, my parents told me that there was no Santa Claus, but Uncle Bart and Aunt Alice told me that there was a Santa Claus, and he used to stop at their house for me, and they would have things for us. He was just a very kind man."

She regrets that she never got him to talk about his work as fire chief.

After Rydman, Henry Fenderbosch became fire chief in 1915 and served until 1920, when Clarence Simmerer took over. He had long been a member of the department



*This former jailhouse served as a garage for the Ford firetruck in the 1920s.*

and served as chief for 28 years until 1948, according to Holzworth, although Offenberg wrote that Simmerer served as chief until 1945.

"Mechanization finally reached the department in 1920 at which time a Model [T] Ford Truck complete with two 35-gallon soda-acid tanks and ladders was purchased," Offenberg wrote. The truck was housed in the community's former jailhouse, which was moved to Mill Street. That small building was expanded by Clint Williams in the 1990s, when it became part of Grand Pacific Junction. It now houses Emerald

## Winds Honey Shoppe.

“With the addition of city water in 1926 the village augmented its fire fighting equipment with 400 feet of 2½ inch hose although the lack of a pumper resulted in the effectiveness of the hose being limited in direct proportion to the pressure in the city water mains,”

Offenberg wrote.

“Complete modern fire protection was introduced in the Village in 1928 with the addition of a new Whippet fire truck. Equipped with a 350-s.p.m. gear driven rotary pump, this truck also contained a 100 gallon booster tank with 200 feet of ¾ inch booster hose on two reels, 35-foot extension ladders and 400 feet of 2½ inch hose.”

The department used that six-cylinder Whippet for a couple of decades. Also in 1928, fire department members got rubber coats and hats, and they made badges to identify themselves as real firefighters. Although he was chief, Clarence Simmerer wore badge #3, rather than #1.



*This 1939 photo shows the firefighters with the 1928 Whippet firetruck that served the department for about two decades.*



*The 1940s Village Hall that included the fire department is now the Moosehead Restaurant, which displays old fire equipment to commemorate its fire station past.*

with a new building constructed with locally quarried sandstone blocks. That building had room not only for village offices but also the police department and the fire department. The building now houses the Moosehead Hoof and Ladder Restaurant at

The souvenir booklet for the 1939 Olmsted Falls Homecoming listed 25 members of the fire department. Along with Clarence Simmerer as chief, his brothers Russell and Oscar were listed as assistance chiefs.

In the early 1940s, Olmsted Falls replaced its old town hall, which was not in good shape even when it opened in 1883,

7987 Columbia Road. The restaurant salutes the building's firehouse past with décor that includes many pieces of old firefighting equipment.

During World War II, some of the men from the department went into military service, so eight young women volunteered to take their place. "Simmerer trained these girls to climb ladders, handle fire equipment and learn the techniques of fire fighting in weekly drills and was highly pleased with the results," Holzworth wrote in his book.

However, he wrote, Mayor Charles Bonsey worried about whether insurance company rules would accept a village fire department with so many women as members, even though village officials appreciated having their assistance. Apparently, the village leaders did not agree to pay the female firefighters, so Simmerer paid them out of his salary, which was only \$100 a year, Holzworth wrote.

One of the women, Hazel Muttersbaugh, achieved the rank of lieutenant. Holzworth wrote that she assisted in directing the aim of the nozzle tenders during a fire at the Olmsted Lumber Company in October 1944.



communities. But in 1946, village officials were at odds with township officials. The village cancelled fire protection for the township, and the township created its own fire department. *Olmsted 200* will have more on the Olmsted Township Fire Department next month.



*This manikin in the Moosehead shows what it might have looked like for a firefighter to come down the inside of the old Village Hall, although it is not clear firefighters actually did that. Below left is a photo of several women who served as firefighters during war years.*

"One incident they never forget was the time when three of them were in swimming when the fire siren sounded," he wrote. "They ran to the fire station in shorts and shirts and sped off to put out a grass fire in a field covered with brush and blackberry bushes and came back to the station badly scratched. Police Chief Donald Shirer applied lotion and bandages."

The Olmsted Falls Fire Department covered more than Olmsted Falls for many years. Through agreements with the Village of West View and Olmsted Township, the department served both of those

West View depended on protection from Olmsted Falls until 1965, when it formed its own fire department. But the two villages merged at the beginning of 1971, so the West View Fire Department lasted less than six years as a separate entity.

After Clarence Simmerer stepped down in the late 1940s, Robert Fenderbosch took over as fire chief of the Olmsted Falls Fire Department and served for many years. On January 19, 1948, Fenderbosch had the misfortune of seeing the grocery store he owned with his brother, Richard, ruined by fire (as covered in Issue 56 of *Olmsted 200*).

In the previous year, 1947, the department purchased a General fire engine. Fenderbosch later wrote that it had a capacity of 650 s.p.m., which apparently stood for strokes per minute.

“Its 200 gallon booster tank was ample for most area of the Village, but because of the lack of city water on Lewis, Usher and Cranage Roads, as well as in Westview, a used 1500 gallon tank truck was purchased in 1950,” Fenderbosch wrote in an essay in Offenberg’s book. “Unfortunately, this latter truck proved to be of questionable mechanical dependability, and in 1955 it was sold to make way to a new triple combination Howe-equipped International Harvester truck, complete with two-way radio, 800 gallon tank, hose, booster lines, extinguishers and ladders. Pumping capacity of the new truck was the same as that of the 1947 General, 650 s.p.m.”



*This photo of the fire department members with their equipment is reportedly from 1942, but it seems instead to be from the early 1950s because it includes the General fire engine purchased in 1947 and the 1,500-gallon tank truck purchased in 1950 and sold in 1955.*

In addition to getting the new truck, the department added a two-way radio to the General fire engine. Fenderbosch wrote that those improvements led to fire insurance rates in Olmsted Falls being reduced from 75 cents per \$100 valuation to 35 cents per \$100 valuation. He called that a “tribute not only to the men responsible for procuring of modern up-to-date equipment but also to the training and efficiency of each of the volunteer members of the department.”

By the mid-1960s, the department added an International truck with a pumper and other equipment. The department has gone through many vehicles and other equipment since then.



*This rare color photo from more than six decades ago shows the water fight between two teams of firefighters during Olmsted's 1956 Homecoming celebration. Thanks go to Mike Gibson for the photo, which his father saved.*

In many years, one of the popular events at Olmsted Homecoming celebrations was a competition among firefighters. It was equivalent of a tug-of-war contest fought with firehoses. A barrel would be positioned in the middle of a wire stretched between two poles. Two teams of firefighters would station themselves on opposite sides. Each team would try to drive the barrel over to the other end using the water from their hoses. That tradition was revived briefly in 2014, when Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township celebrated the bicentennial of when the first corn crop was planted in the township by James Geer (which was one year before he and his family became the township's first settlers). Firefighters from several communities in addition to Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township competed on the grounds of Olmsted Falls Intermediate School along Bagley Road on July 4, 2014.



*These firefighters were among those who competed in water battles during Olmsted's bicentennial celebration in 2014. The team on the right represented Olmsted Township.*

In 1972, Olmsted Falls built a new fire station on Brookside Drive. It remained in use for the next three decades. But by the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it was considered too small for the department's needs.



In 2001, city voters approved a 1.1-mill bond issue to build a new fire station at 9274 Columbia Road. With about 10,000 square feet, it was four times the size of the former station on Brookside Drive. The new station cost \$2.25 million and was dedicated on September 11, 2004, the third anniversary of a series of terrorist attacks on the United States. It was described as a state-of-the-art facility with three double bedrooms for firefighters, a dining area, a kitchen, a dayroom, showers, lockers and physical fitness workout space.



Since 2004, the Olmsted Falls Fire Department has called this building along Columbia Road home. Its design was based on a yearlong needs assessment the department conducted among its firefighters.

The station also has safe room vestibules. People who believe they are threatened by someone can go into a vestibule and have it locked until police arrive. Other features of the fire station include an emergency medical services clinic and a community room that can hold up to 30 people for meetings as well as become an emergency operations center in case of a disaster.

These days, the Olmsted Falls Fire Department is operating fire engines that cost more than \$300,000, as well as much other equipment, such as breathing apparatus, gas detectors, a thermal-imaging camera and specialized saws. It has come a long way since the Empire Hook and Ladder Company's \$65 homemade, manually powered wagon.



*An Olmsted Falls fire engine crosses the railroad tracks on Brookside Drive during the Olmsted Heritage Days parade in 2014.*

## **Stories Fired Up Readers' Memories**

The stories in Issue 56 of *Olmsted 200* about the January 1948 fires that ruined the original St. Mary of the Falls Catholic Church and the grocery store run by Richard and Robert Fenderbosch evoked some memories in several readers.

“When my family moved to Olmsted falls in 1960, they were putting the final touches of the newest part of the building, the sanctuary, in 1959,” Patrick Carroll wrote about the current St. Mary’s building, which replaced the one that burned. “It wasn’t quite ready yet in the winter of '59-60, but my Mother took me up to register for school and register the family as parishioners. Up until that point, the Mass was held in the old basement of the school portion of the building, to which the sanctuary was subsequently attached. My Father’s employer, Weimels plumbing of Cleveland, Ohio, (a little West of Lorain Blvd. and Rocky River drive) had him and a crew do the plumbing for the new Church; They had previously done the work for the school. I remember him quipping that, ‘Whenever you go to the bathroom, think of me!’”

Further, Carroll recalled, “When Father [Joseph] Walsh took my mother and I that day inside the unfinished sanctuary, I noticed a recess every so often in the walls of each side, about 6' x 10'; I asked, as a curious little boy, ‘What's this room for?’ With a wink at my mother, he directly gazed at me and said, ‘This is where you go to tell your sins, when you have been bad, to the priest...’ Now, the ‘unfinished room’ was *quite scary and daunting* being only concrete block, dust, trash, coffee cups etc. As I gaped into it with wide eyes, I swore to Father Walsh, ‘Wow! I am *NEVER* going to be bad!’ Such was my first encounter with the Catholic Church! I went to St. Mary's from 1st to 4th grade, then transferred to Olmsted Falls Elementary in 1963, and the rest, as they say, is history!”

Another reader, Maureen Diver, wrote that she recalled being six years old as Father Walsh conducted catechism before the church fire. “It was so cold in there we had to wear our coats,” she wrote. “When he walked by the breeze coming thru the wall was so strong it flapped his vestment.”

Diver also wrote, “I thought I remembered a dark almost black stone building on the outside, but I was only 6 years old.” When it was suggested that she might be remembering the parsonage, which was a building made of black stone blocks, she replied, “Ok. Maybe they just moved us there for some reason. It sure wasn’t the warmth.” Her memory could corroborate a long-told story that the night when the church

burned was so cold that the furnace, which was blamed for the fire, might have been cranked up to the maximum, perhaps causing it to overheat.

In a Facebook post, Jenni Carothers Fenderbosch said she appreciated the story about the Fenderbosch grocery. “I’ve always heard bits and pieces of what happened but it was interesting reading the entire account,” she wrote.

## Feathers Flew in Fowl February Fight

For the last several decades, Olmsted Falls sports have generally been associated with Bulldogs. But 125 years ago this month, poultry was the focus of a sporting event held in Olmsted that attracted interstate competition. It was a cockfight.

The February 10, 1893, edition of the *Berea Advertiser* included this item under Olmsted Falls news:

*One of the most important cocking mains of the season was fought last night at Olmsted Falls, or rather near that town. The fight was held in a large hall; about 100 sports, mostly from this city, crowded about the pit. The arrangements for main had been in preparation for some time and everything was about perfect. The fight was between Cleveland birds on one side, and cocks from Buffalo and Rochester on the other. According to the terms of the match, twenty-one birds were to be shown on a side and all those that fell in weight were to be pitted. Fifty dollars a side on each battle and \$500 on the main was the money staked. The local birds were handled in the pit by a well known Cleveland fancier, while the chickens from New York state were handled by a Rochester man. Quite a delegation of sports from Buffalo and Rochester came down to see the sport, and as they were well supplied with money, it was expected that betting would be brisk.*

That was not the only cockfight in Olmsted Falls to be reported in the local newspaper. Almost one year earlier, the *Advertiser* reported in its April 15, 1892, issue that a cockfight had occurred the previous Wednesday in the village.

“There were about 250 sporting characters present from Detroit, Pittsburgh and Cleveland,” the newspaper reported. “It lasted all night and much money changed hands. This time the crowd outwitted the sheriff and they were unmolested.”

It’s not clear how much cockfighting occurred in Olmsted Falls, but the fact that two such events were reported in the newspaper just 10 months apart indicated that cockfighting was not unusual in the community, or at least in the area. In his 1966 book on Olmsted history, Walter Holzworth suggested that the village marshal and township constable must have been unwilling to crack down on cockfighting. Otherwise, he wrote, the scores of fans who got off the train at the Olmsted Falls depot “must have tiptoed into town.”

Although cockfighting was outlawed in many states in the 1800s, it remained legal in a few through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Oklahoma was the last state to ban cockfighting in 2002.

## Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include a story about the history of the Olmsted Township Fire Department.

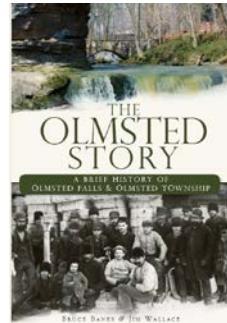
If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: [wallacestar@hotmail.com](mailto:wallacestar@hotmail.com). *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina, Kentucky, West Virginia, Florida, 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](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. 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 the Village Bean in Olmsted Falls and the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.



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