



Olmsted 200

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

Issue 55

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Contents

Rare Photo of District 8 School Illustrates a Pair of Stories	1
Elisha Fitch Portrait Stirs Interest in One Descendant	7
Holiday Laments Go Back Many Years	10
Still to Come	11

Rare Photo of District 8 School Illustrates a Pair of Stories

It's been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, a photo that recently turned up from Olmsted's past is worth at least a thousand words for the connections it represents to the history of Olmsted Township.

The photo shows the District 8 School that once stood on the east side of Sharp Road half a mile north of Sprague Road. The photo is undated, but it surely was taken either late in the 1800s or early in the 1900s.

One reason the photo is interesting is that it shows one of the small schoolhouses that were scattered around the township



District 8 School stood along Sharp Road near Sprague Road.

before 1916. After that, the township's school district (which by then had merged with the village school district in Olmsted Falls) opened a single school to serve all the students in the district from first grade through 12th grade. That 1916 school now serves as Olmsted Falls City Hall, but most of the little schoolhouses it replaced are long gone.

Another reason the photo is interesting is that it is a rare early photo from a section of Olmsted Township that received very little attention in many past decades, largely because it was very rural and quite swampy. However, a few occasions when that area did get attention in the local newspaper in the late 1800s were notable for what they said about that southwestern corner of the township.

First, let's consider the system of small schoolhouses. In the early days of the Olmsted Township Rural School District, the schools were built in eight locations around the township, so that every student would be within walking distance of one of them. They represented sub-districts within the overall school district, but they commonly were called district schools rather than sub-district schools.

The schools were built at different times and not in the order they were numbered. In other words, the District 8 School wasn't the last one to be built even though it had the highest number. In fact, an item in the December 19, 1884, edition of the *Berea Advertiser* reported that District 2 was the last to get a school:

Dec. 16th: -- The Board of Education of this township met at the new school house in Dist. No. 2 Tuesday, Dec. 9th, and accepted the building and ordered it paid for. It was built by Alfred Reublin and is the best school house in the township, also the last one to be built. There being now eight brick houses in the township and nine school rooms, as joint sub-district No. 1 is two stories high; it is well built, but it seems to us that the architect failed to combine the ornamental with the useful....

The District 2 School was in the northeastern part of the township along Kennedy Ridge about where the eastern end of Great Northern shopping center is now. Of course, that area is now in North Olmsted. When the northern portion of Olmsted Township broke away to form North Olmsted in 1909, three of the township's schools went with it. District 1 School was in the north-central part of the township just south of where Lorain Road meets Butternut Ridge Road. The other school in the section that became North Olmsted was the District 5 School, which was located on the south side of Lorain Road just east of Barton Road. That area also was called the Kelley District.

Other schools in Olmsted Township included:

- District 3 School on the south side of Cook Road about halfway between Stearns Road and McKenzie Road;
- District 4 School (also called the Gage District) on Barrett Road;
- District 6 School on the west side of Columbia Road just north of Sprague Road (later put into use as West View Village Hall); and

- District 7 School on the north side of Bagley Road (then called Dutch Road) about one third of the way from Stearns Road to Fitch Road.

Most of those were one-room schools. In a 1983 interview with Bruce Banks, co-author of the *The Olmsted Story: A Brief History of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township*, Lura (Hall) Weitzel, who was born October 21, 1891, and attended the District 3 School, recalled that it had just one room, as well as a girls' outhouse at one corner of the lot and a boys' outhouse at the opposite corner. She said the school was located about four lots east of Stearns Road on the south side of Cook Road. At the time of the interview in January 1983, a house had replaced the old school but the red brick boys' outhouse still stood on the lot.

An exception to the one-room schools was the District 6 School for West View. In 1889, the original one-room wooden school was replaced with a two-story brick building. As that project was being planned, the West View column in the *Berea Advertiser* on June 14,

1889, reported that people in the community were looking forward to having a bigger school. The columnist wrote that the bigger school would “add much to the beauty of our town and we hope by the earnest support of its patrons and teachers it may add much more to the morality, refinement and christianity [sic] of our youth.”

By the September 27, 1889, edition of the paper, the West View columnist reported: “Our school house is completed all but finishing.” But that pronouncement seemed to be premature, because the columnist wrote in the December 13, 1889, edition: “Our two story school is nearly completed and school is expected to commence next Tuesday. The corps of teachers will be Miss Edith A Basker in the grammar room and Miss Helen Blodgett in the primary department. Success to the school.” The newspaper did not indicate whether West View students met elsewhere while the new school was being built that fall or had an extra-long vacation from school that year.



The former District 6 School had two stories. It later served as West View Village Hall after West View was incorporated. After West View and Olmsted Falls merged in 1971, it served as one of two city halls until the late 1990s. This photo is from 2010.

Even though that information about the District 6 School was sketchy, it at least received some attention because the *Advertiser* had a columnist who reported regularly on news from West View. Schools in other parts of the township, such as the District 8 School, rarely received any attention because they were too far away from newspaper columnists. They quietly went about their business.

However, Walter Holzworth, in his 1966 book about Olmsted history, included excerpts from minutes of public meetings in 1880 for the District 3 School on Cook Road. They indicate that decisions for the school, such as the hiring of teachers, selection of a director for the sub-district and payment of bills for the school, were made by all the qualified voters of the sub-district who showed up for the meetings. Thus, each sub-district school operated with much autonomy, although under an 1853 state law, the township school district had an elected, three-member board of education with authority to hire teachers and maintain school properties.

The system changed in 1904, when a five-member township board of education was established. The new board had authority to hire a superintendent to oversee all the schools around the township. The board also appointed directors to handle maintenance for each school.

The whole system changed again in 1915, when the Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township school districts merged and then, as noted earlier, built one big school in 1916 to serve all students of the village and township and replace the small one-room and two-room school buildings.

Wetland Issues Drained Township Officials' Attention

In rural areas of the township, such as District 8, the old schools were likely local residents' only public buildings. But they were not those residents' only dealings with local government. In District 8, a big issue was the wetness of the land. In the 21st century, the ecological value of wetlands is recognized and often protected by law. But for many 19th century farmers, wetness was a curse, a detriment to their livelihood. So there was a great effort in places like southwestern Olmsted Township to drain the land.

Farmers' desire to drain their land is one reason why Ephraim Biglow, Jr., was successful in the 1880s, when he switched from running a general store in West View to operating a firm that made drainage tiles. That story was featured last month in Issue 54 of *Olmsted 200*. As noted in that story, Holzworth wrote of Biglow: "His kiln was the main source of supplies for several progressive land owners and farmers who realized the benefit of tile drained areas."

In his book, Holzworth used the term "muck land" to refer to the section of southern Olmsted Township west of Sharp Road. Further, he wrote:

Old township records contain pages of trustees discussion and decisions regarding natural drainage. Most of their meetings concerned ditches [sic] and roads. The Ditch Supervisor or Overseer was a busy and important person. Many an argument waxed hot about the Good Lords arrangement that causes water to run down grade. In the northern part of the township, the Olmsted-Dover ditch caused inter-township squabbles that required decisions of the County Commissioners to settle.

The several ditches that drain all the southwest section of the township flow northeast to eventually drain into the west branch of Rocky River. Most of them were dug by hand in 1880 at the staggering wages of a \$1.50 a day. The exact location caused many a squabble that had to be settled by Township or County authorities. In some cases shot guns were in evidence to convince a neighbor that water naturally flows down hill.

One such squabble was apparently the reason District 8 made a few rare appearances in the *Advertiser* in 1880. In the January 8, 1880, edition, someone identified only as “NIMROD” had a letter dated December 31, 1879, printed. Using exaggerated rhetoric, the writer referred to people and incidents that only insiders of the time would fully understand, but it clearly was criticism of the digging of drainage ditches:

We, of this “land of promise,” or, as is better known the “lost nation,” which is not only over run with “golden rod and rag weed,” but with major and minor ditches, were greatly startled the other day at seeing several men, (I suppose they call themselves) with shovels and spades ready for their satanic work, in front of one T. Andrews house....

The piece is somewhat hard to read because of the writer’s style, but it indicates that “those inhuman ditchers, and more than inhuman [township] Trustees” refused to delay the ditch-digging while Mr. Andrews was ill, only a few weeks after a member of his family was laid to rest. The writer said the ditch-diggers and trustees “turned a deaf ear, and said by their actions, the ditch is of far more consequence than the life of the promising little girl of ten years, and thus sent those ditchers back the second time that day. Was it surprising that the mother of the dead and dying child should run frantically to the spot and pull their stakes from the ground? Me thinks not. What mother does not fight for her child to the last?”

The piece said that the child’s attending physician, three of Elyria’s best doctors and a prominent Berea doctor had signed a document presented to the trustees to urge that the ditch should not be dug until the late child had recovered. The writer also indicated that the trustees were paying twice as much as necessary to have the ditch dug.

“We feel that such outrageous actions on the part of town officers should be exposed to the public and more careful attention paid to the assigning the right men in the right place,” Nimrod wrote. “Let a word to the wise be sufficient.”

Below the piece, the editor of the *Advertiser* wrote: "If the statements set forth in the above communication are facts, the people of that neighborhood have reason to feel indignant. But it is quite probable that the township officers may wish to explain their action in the matter; we therefore place our columns at their disposal to do so."

One week later, in the January 15 edition, the paper carried a letter dated January 12, 1880, in which someone apparently associated with the township disputed Nimrod's statements. In doing so, the writer provided some background into the township's drainage efforts. Here is a portion of that response:

He speaks of the ditches overrunning that part of the township. They have no more than they need for the health of the residents and of the people in that region (especially Nimrod) had kept their portion of the ditches clean that was assigned them, T. Andrews would very likely have been able to attend to his crops and saved them instead of losing them by reason of the water.

In November, 1878, a Petition and Bond was filed with the township Clerks of Olmsted and Ridgeville asking that the trustees of such township should take such legal action as might be necessary to order the cleaning out and repairing of certain ditches on what is known as the Big Marsh, including what is known as Lateral, No. 6, said Lateral being the one which T. Andrews has raised the muss about and which has caused such a flow of eloquence from 'Nimrod'. There was a meeting of the trustees to consider the matter. There being only two of the trustees of Ridgeville present and one of those being a man who argued that water would run faster on a level surface than it would down hill, no conclusion was reached. The matter was adjourned from time to time, until after the April election, when the matter was decided in favor of the petitioners. From that time to the present, Geo. VanDorn has opposed the cleaning of the ditch. He has threatened law and all kinds of bluff but the trustees having acted in accordance with the law, were not to be scared and proceeded to advertise and sell the work, Mr. Andrews portion with the rest....

Again, it would require someone with inside knowledge from that time to fully understand all the details of that dispute. But those letters to the newspaper provide a brief glimpse of what life was like in southwestern Olmsted Township, Nimrod's "lost nation," which rarely received much public attention back in the days of the District 8 School.

One other glimpse into District 8 life also appeared in the January 8, 1880, edition of the *Advertiser*. In this case, it came from a writer identified only as "NOMAD":

Not much excitement has been exhibited in our society for the past week. On the night of the 22d, Mr. H.P. Richards addressed our people on

the subject: "The United States." It is understood that he intends shortly, to, give us a lecture on religion and its expressions.

We understand that our teacher is spending his vacation at the home of his parents, in West Salem, Wayne Co., O.

Although Nomad did not say where H.P. Richards gave his lecture, chances are good it was in the District 8 School.

Thanks go to Mike Gibson for providing the photo of the District 8 School.

Elisha Fitch Portrait Stirs Interest in One Descendant

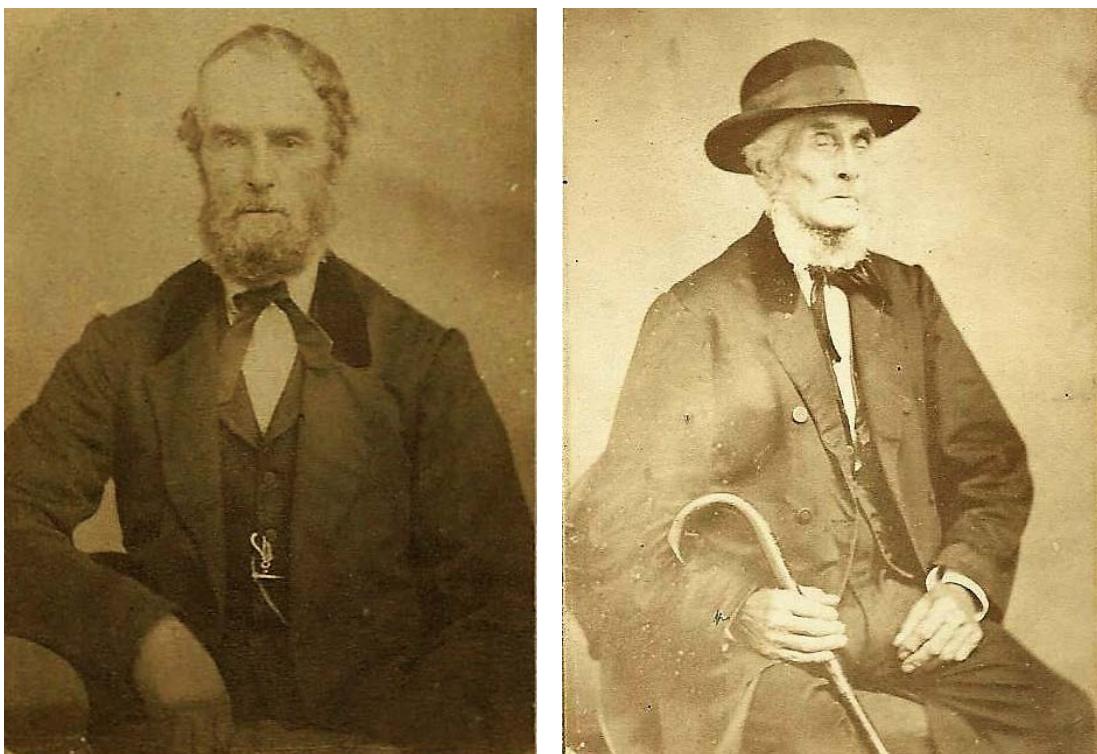
The story in Issue 53 of *Olmsted 200* from October about the house built by Eli and Sabra Fitch in the 1830s was of particular interest to one reader because it showed a portrait of Eli's brother, Elisha, which hangs in the house. It was the first time Tom Atkinson, a descendant of Elisha Fitch, had ever seen that portrait, even though he has done much research into the family's history.

“This portrait is a younger Elisha than any pictures I have of him so I can't definitely identify it as Elisha or Eli,” Atkinson wrote, adding that he doesn't have any pictures of Eli Fitch for comparison. “The beard under the chin along the neck line in the portrait is definitely the same style as the two pictures I have of Elisha but the face is definitely younger.”



This portrait of Elisha Fitch hangs in the house at 8566 Lewis Road that was built by his brother, Eli.

Rich and Carol Roberts, who have owned the house at 8566 Lewis Road for 47 years, believe the portrait depicts Elisha Fitch because the frame once had a small metal plate that identified the subject as him. Atkinson was hoping the portrait would have Elisha's signature, so he could compare it to copies of the signature in his possession, but it came with only the metal plate, not a signature. The Robertses heard that the portrait was painted by another of the Fitch brothers, but they didn't know which one and that story is unconfirmed. A total of seven Fitch brothers settled in Olmsted Township in the 1830s.

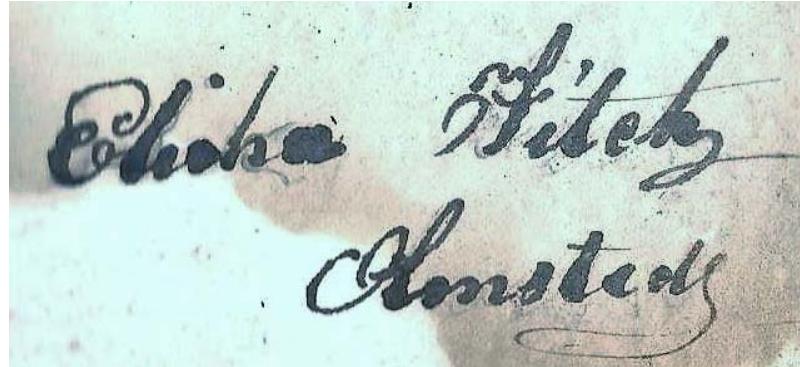


These are the two photos of Elisha Fitch that Tom Atkinson already had in his possession. Is it the same man depicted in the painting? He is not sure.



The painting shown on page 7 once had this metal plate attached that identified the subject as Elisha Fitch, although Fitch lived a year longer than it indicates. Photo courtesy of Rich and Carol Roberts.

To the right is one of the signatures of Elisha Fitch on documents in Tom Atkinson's possession. Unfortunately, the portrait that purportedly depicts Fitch does not have a signature for comparison.



This photo shows the Atkinson house (originally Elisha Fitch's house) in 1967. This is the way Tom Atkinson remembers his childhood home at 7555 Columbia Road. Later in the 20th century, different owners rebuilt the house and saved only parts of the original.

in 1831 with the Land Deed of Elisha Fitch buying 160 acres from Charles H. Olmsted,” Atkinson wrote. Elisha was one of four Fitch brothers who bought land in 1831 from Charles Hyde Olmsted, son of Aaron Olmsted, the Connecticut sea captain who participated in an auction by the Connecticut Land Company in 1795 to get the right to buy almost half of what later was named Olmsted Township.

Among the other items in Atkinson’s collection are several original deeds with the signatures of other prominent 19th century Olmsted residents – Peter Kidney and his wife, Asenath, and Luther Barnum and his wife, Mary – as well as Elisha Fitch from the mid-1800s, when Fitch bought more than 15 acres along what now is called Columbia Road. He and his family moved there from the 160 acres farther north that he had previously bought from Charles Olmsted.

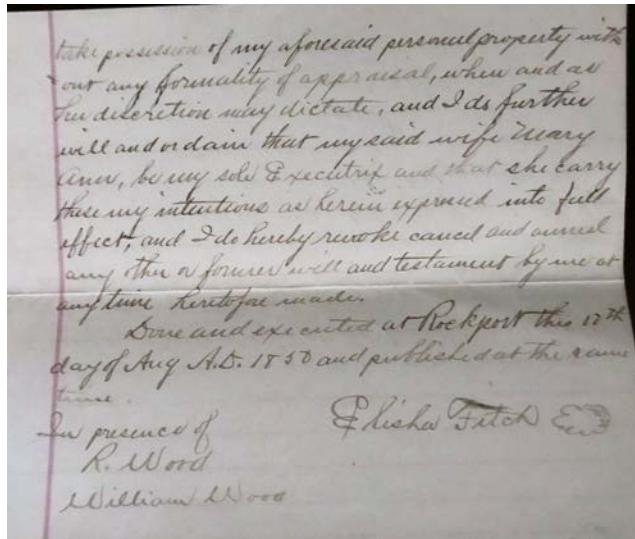
Atkinson has collected many items representing the history of the Fitch and Atkinson families. Some of those items were shown in a story about the history of the Fitches and Atkinsons in Issue 15 of *Olmsted 200* from August 2014. The Atkinsons also were involved for many years in operating the Olmsted district’s school buses, and that story was told in Issue 5 of *Olmsted 200* from October 2013.

“I was fortunate to have grown up in the Elisha Fitch Homestead built in 1856 and able to learn about the family history starting

Atkinson also has Fitch's pocket watch from 1868, a copy of his will from 1884, and a copy of the will of Elisha's widow, Mary Ann, who died in 1902. That latter will left the property to Arthur Elisha Atkinson, Tom Atkinson's grandfather. Tom Atkinson even has a Hitchcock hand-gilded, wicker-seat chair from the Fitch-Atkinson homestead.



This is what the Atkinson house looked like in 1925.



On the left, this will for Elisha Fitch, written in 1850, provides another example of his signature. Fitch lived another 34 years after he made out this will. His wife, Mary Ann, lived another 52 years after this will was drawn up. On the right is the Hitchcock hand-gilded, wicker-seat chair from the Fitch-Atkinson homestead. Except where otherwise noted, all the photos on this and the previous two pages are courtesy of Tom Atkinson.



Holiday Laments Go Back Many Years

Some things change little as the years pass. A newspaper item from 125 years ago this month is a reminder of that.

Each year, as holidays go by, someone complains that Americans have failed to observe the true meaning of a holiday – whether it's Christmas, Memorial Day, Flag Day,

Independence Day, Veterans Day or Thanksgiving Day. That was the case in the Olmsted Falls column in the *Berea Advertiser* for December 2, 1892, which included this complaint from a reader:

“Better late than never.”

Another Thanksgiving has come and gone and our day of thanks for 1892 is not already forgotten by many; but a word in regard to that day will be read with interest. The system of Thanksgiving, as observed in America today is nothing more nor less than a day of guzzling and gluttony. Is it a day of thanks? Is it a day when we can all turn to an unseen something, and say, “I thank thee?” No!

If a man has seen a dear beloved one die, and pass out into nothingness and night forever, if he has been crippled for life; or dethroned in the respect of his fellow men; or if he sees his family in rags and wretchedness, denied all the pleasures that gold can give, it is not likely he will be in a mood for thanksgiving – hardly. It isn’t likely that he will regard the calamities in question as blessings in disguise – hardly. Thanksgiving day does very well for the men and women who are healthy, wealthy and progressive; who have no black and brutal memories to tear their hearts – no green graves over which to make the unavailing moan; but for the man or woman who is thus unblessed, our Thanksgiving day is a cruel mockery.

Subscriber.

[We believe every one has something to be thankful for. –
EDITOR.

The language and punctuation, which are reproduced here just as they appeared in the paper, are different from those that typically would be used in the 21st Century, but complaints of that sort get published in newspapers (and now in other media) year after year.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will look back 70 years to a month when fire caused big changes in the downtown district of Olmsted Falls.

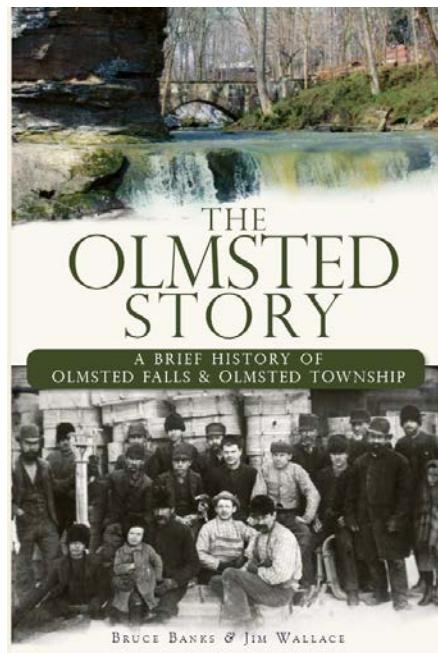
If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including California, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, 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. 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.

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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