Olmsted 200

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

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Contents

Greenhouses Sprouted in 20th Century

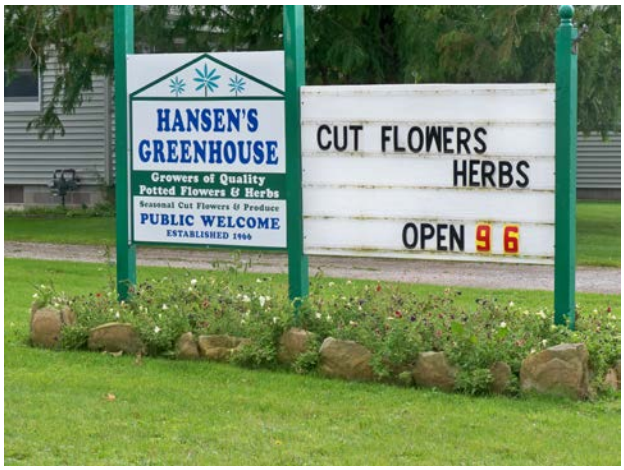
Although Olmsted had its first greenhouse operator, Theodore Schueren, as early as the 1880s, he moved away in the 1890s. (See last month's issue of *Olmsted 200* for more on that.) It took another few decades before the greenhouse industry planted permanent roots in Olmsted.

The reason so many greenhouses sprang up in Olmsted and other communities in the area goes back to another pioneer in the industry, Martin Ruetenik. About the time Scheurin was operating his greenhouse and nursery near Olmsted Falls, Ruetenik also operated an early greenhouse along Schaaf Road in what became Brooklyn Heights. But Ruetenik did more than that. He is credited with developing a standard design for greenhouses that inspired others in the Schaaf Road area, and eventually elsewhere in northeastern Ohio, to get into the business. His greenhouse was 30 feet wide, used pipes as supports and kept the plants warm with steam heat. According to the Ohio Agriculture Hall of Fame, Ruetenik, who was called the "Celery King," was the first to use steam sterilization of soil and mechanical refrigeration. He once served as president of the Vegetable Growers of America. So many of his neighbors built their own greenhouses that Brooklyn Heights eventually had more than 100 acres under glass.

Martin Ruetenik

Ruetenik also developed a special water supply system using a dam, a wind-powered pump and two storage tanks. But perhaps more important for the growth of the greenhouse industry in the Cleveland area, he was among the first growers to get into

truck farming. He used Ford Model T trucks to deliver fresh vegetables throughout the region, even as far as Pennsylvania and Indiana.



Hansen's Greenhouse is at 8781 Columbia Road.

Ruetenik was the son of a German immigrant, but Gayle Hansen, co-owner of Hansen's Greenhouse in Olmsted Falls, said in a 2009 speech that Dutch and Danish immigrants, including the Hansens, also were responsible for establishing many of the greenhouses in the area.

In the 1920s, greenhouse farming spread out to other communities in northeastern Ohio, such as Westlake, Sheffield and Olmsted Township. George Hall – who earned the nickname "Greenhouse George" – and his sons, Warren and Gordon, as well as his brother, Art, and George Dewey, a North Olmsted banker, are credited with starting Olmsted's first 20th century greenhouse along McKenzie Road in the township in 1923. Later, George Hall's other son, Harold, also joined the business.

Anna Hall, whose maiden name was Breisch, became part of the greenhouse industry when she married Bert, a grandson of George Hall, in 1949 and moved to McKenzie Road in 1950.

This undated photo, which hangs in Olmsted Township Hall, shows how big the Hall family's greenhouse operations were along McKenzie and Cook roads. In his 1966 history of Olmsted, Walter Holzworth said the Hall greenhouses covered nine-and-a-half acres.

"Their first greenhouse was only a quarter of an acre," she said in a 2012 interview when she was 91 years old. "They started out with that and then just kept adding to it as they went along. When they started, they were in vegetables, as were all the greenhouses in the area. They grew nothing but tomatoes at that time."

In 1924, Ernest Schuster built his first greenhouses along Columbia Road in what then was West View and now is part of Olmsted Falls. He grew vegetables, mostly tomatoes. By the 1940s, when his son, Harold, took over the business, it had 1.5 acres under glass out of a total of 15

acres of land, according to David Schuster, grandson of Harold and author of the history of the company, now known as Schuster's Westview Gardens, on the company's website. He wrote that the business also included "a coal boiler, a production 'head house,' or barn, and a truck or two for delivering the vegetables to 'market' in Cleveland. My father, Russell, also started with the business at that time, after finishing active duty at the end of the war and completing his Bachelor Degree from Ohio University."

Packing house worked with many growers.

A group of 19 greenhouse operators banded together in the 1920s to form a marketing organization, the Cleveland Hothouse Vegetable Growers' Association, which later changed its name to the Cleveland Greenhouse Vegetable Growers' Association. The organization set up a packing plant at the Cuyahoga County Fairgrounds in Berea to sort, grade and pack the vegetables for distribution. The biggest crop was tomatoes, but some growers also produced lettuce and cucumbers.

This photo from June 15, 1936, shows women grading and packing tomatoes inside the Cleveland Vegetable Packing Company at the fairgrounds in Berea. The photo is from the Cleveland Press Collection of the Michael Michael Schwartz Library at Cleveland State University.

"Originally, before the packing house, they would have to take them into Cleveland into Orange Avenue where the market is there," Anna Hall said about her husband's family. "By that time, they were doing it by truck."

A related organization, the Cleveland Growers Marketing Company, was based in downtown Cleveland. It handled sales and distribution of the greenhouse vegetable crops.

Having a packing plant in Berea and a marketing association in Cleveland made it easier for greenhouse operators in Olmsted, West View and neighboring communities to get their vegetables to market. An article in the May 28, 1933, issue of the *Plain Dealer* referred to "the selling of trainloads of tomatoes and cucumbers from Boston to Kansas City, from the gulf to the lakes." It said the Cleveland area then had a $6.6 million greenhouse industry and called it "the largest territory of glass in the country." According to the article, greenhouses required an investment of $25,000 per acre and the burning of about 500 tons of coal per acre for heating.

"Forty girls were packing tomatoes on the Berea fair grounds yesterday as fast as they could grade them," the article said. "Eight thousand baskets were started to eight markets several hundred miles away. As the trade piles up they pack up to 25,000 baskets a day, according to I.J. Kusse, in charge of operations."

The author of that article, John A. Crawford, wrote that on Saturday, the day before publication, he had toured a few greenhouses, including Heinrich's in West View, along the Lorain County line. He wrote that "the growers have the vines primed to maximum growth and fastest ripening. A scrawny cucumber four inches long will be eight or nine Monday and ready for market."

Crawford wrote that Chris Wind, president of the Cleveland Growers Marketing Company, told him that "if the little green balls on the seven to eight-foot tomato vines are not growing roundly, a bit of potash will make them spherical in a week." He added, "If they seem pale a bit of phosphorous is worked into the soil. If the plant doesn't seem to be thriving, some of the ammonium sulphate from the steel plants is sweated into the ground. And periodically men go through the ranges with foot lengths of rubber hose, tapping the vines to loosen the pollen in the yellow tomato blooms, so fruit will set. They pollinate only on hot dry days."

Wind also told him that the growers sold 75 percent of their crops outside of the Cleveland area.

In the 1930s, as the industry grew, the growers built a new packing plant at 430 West Bagley Road in Berea. In a May 28, 1933, article in the *Plain Dealer*, Harold Ward, who was Cuyahoga County's agricultural agent, said, "Since the greenhouse business in the Cleveland area comprises close to 300 acres, with a gross annual income of over $2,000,000, it is something about which much of interest can be told." At the time, he was getting ready for a discussion the next day on radio station WTAM titled "Growing Tons of Tomatoes from Ounces of Seed."

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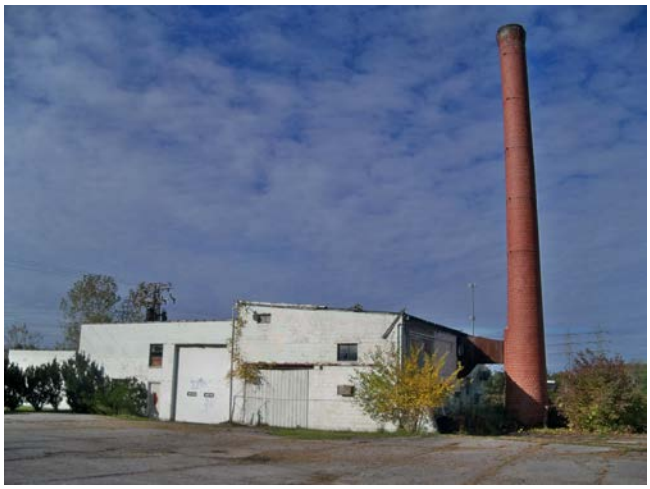
Anna Hall said the Olmsted growers heated their greenhouses with coal brought in

by rail to the depot in Olmsted Falls. The growers would pick up the coal from cars parked along railroad sidings and truck it back to their greenhouses. She said the greenhouse her husband, Bert, ran on McKenzie Road originally had a steel smokestack, but as the operation grew, the brick smokestack that still stands was built in the 1950s.



This building along McKenzie Road with a brick smokestack for its coal-fired furnace was an integral part of the Hall family's greenhouse business for several decades.

"Originally, the boilers were hand-fired," Hall said. "Then they got to the point of having hoppers where the boilers were fed, but they still had to shovel the coal by hand into the big hopper before the worms would carry them into the boilers." [The worms she mentioned apparently were worm drives that conveyed coal to the boilers.]

In the 1960s, greenhouse-grown tomatoes were still a big crop in the Olmsted area. In April 1966, when Ohio Governor James Rhodes visited the Greenhouse Vegetable Packing Company in Berea, a *Berea News* article referred to the plant as "the world's largest packer of greenhouse tomatoes." It noted that the governor "fondled, tasted, juggled, and petted choice tomatoes coming off conveyors" at the plant.

"This is a $25-million business in Ohio," Rhodes said. "When we eat tomatoes, we boost our state economy."

According to the article, about 5,000 people in the Cleveland area were employed in growing tomatoes on about 600 acres of greenhouses in 1966. However, a *Plain Dealer* article in April 1972 said the 80 members of the Greenhouse Vegetables Packing Company had only 175 acres under glass. It said the cooperative was handling about 3 million eight-pound baskets of tomatoes a year. One greenhouse operator, Frank Root of Avon, complained that "previously people wanted a quality product, [but] now they seem to buy for price."

Competition from warmer areas increased.

Several months later, on September 24, 1972, the *Plain Dealer* ran an article with the headline: "Area's 'Farms Under Glass' Struggling to Survive." It said Greater Cleveland's more than 400 acres under glass made it the largest greenhouse area in the country. "But the cost of labor, an uncertain market and imported produce make it a risky business which few people enter," reporter Thomas H. Gaumer wrote. He noted that Martin Ruetenik's grandson, Richard Pretzer, did not want his children to get into

greenhouse agriculture unless the business would get better. To reduce the biggest cost, labor, Pretzer was experimenting with having soil-filled boxes run on conveyors through a sterilization unit, a seeding unit and then a growth chamber with artificial lighting and automatic watering and fertilizing. As he put it, he was "bringing the soil to the machines rather than machines to the soil."

The article said northeastern Ohio's greenhouse industry was being hurt by tomatoes imported from Mexico and California, where growers had cheaper labor costs and lacked the high heating costs of Ohio. It said maintenance on greenhouses also was expensive. Florida was not mentioned in the article, but growers there also had become tough competitors in the tomato business.

Gaumer wrote that Elmo Caruthers, manager of Westview Greenhouse Company at 9191 Columbia Road in Olmsted Falls, put the cost of heating each acre of a greenhouse at $10,000 a year. With 5.6 acres under glass, Westview produced 121,000 baskets of tomatoes in 1971, according to the article. It said Caruthers estimated that a greenhouse needed a yield of 22,000 baskets an acre to turn a profit.

"Fifteen years ago, it was easier to make a profit from a yield of 15,000 baskets per acre," Caruthers said.

Some greenhouse owners faced the challenges by switching from vegetables to flowers and tropical plants. That is what Russell Schuster did in the 1970s after taking over the Schuster family's greenhouse business from his father, Harold. He also purchased the adjacent Westview Greenhouse, which more than doubled the size of the Schuster operations.

Anna Hall said her family began experimenting with growing mums while still in the tomato-growing business, although she couldn't remember when that occurred. "Partly, it was because of the way the seasons would overlap," she said. "They could grow one and take up a slack period with the flowers when the tomatoes weren't producing at that time. It got to the point where the flowers were more profitable, because as I say, as transportation became more economic, the tomato business was going downhill, so they got to the point where they quit growing tomatoes and went totally into flowers. But they gradually got into a lot of potted things: lilies for Easter, geraniums for spring and that sort of thing in addition to the mums. Eventually, the potted things became number one."

"It got to the point where the flowers were more profitable, because... the tomato business was going downhill, so they...quit growing tomatoes and went totally into flowers." – Anna Hall

The 1970s were tough for Ohio greenhouses growing tomatoes, but a series of events that began at the end of the 1980s made times tougher for them. On December 19,

1989, freezing temperatures destroyed Florida's tomato crop. That could have been good for Ohio's greenhouse operators if only their tomatoes were ripe, but they weren't, and some of them struggled to pay high heating bills. Many grocery stores, including those in the Cleveland area, began importing Mexican tomatoes, but the prices were high and sales were low.

In Florida, farmers replanted tomatoes quickly at a time they did not normally plant. The result was that the Florida tomatoes hit the market in early March about the same time as the greenhouse-grown tomatoes from Ohio. According to the Cuyahoga Valley Greenhouse Growers Association website, the Florida farmers got just 25 cents per pound for their tomatoes, while the Ohio greenhouse operators spent 75 cents per pound growing their tomatoes.

"The fate of local greenhouse farming lay in the hands of the grocers," the association says. "If the grocers had sold the Florida tomatoes under $1.00 per pound, the excess supply would have been used up, and the price of Florida tomatoes would have risen. The grocers made a fateful decision. In order to make up for the low profits from tomato sales during the first quarter of 1990, they kept the price at $1.99 per pound, while buying the Florida tomatoes at $.25 per pound. Sales were not high enough to relieve the price pressure of the tomato glut, and the price obtained by the farmers stayed at $.25 per pound."

Consequently, the northeastern Ohio farmers lost money on the tomatoes they sold. Many of them went into debt and then out of business.

Another factor that hindered many of the greenhouses was environmental regulations on their coal-burning furnaces. Obviously, some greenhouses found ways to overcome such difficulties and survive, but not all of them. The end for the Halls' greenhouses came right after the turn of the 21st century.

"Basically, they just had to let the property go," Anna Hall said. Her grandson, Gerard Krug, said, "The economics had changed. There was a lot of changes in the regulations as to how we could heat it. Once coal was no longer available, natural gas just got to be a little too expensive. Now, it's getting real cheap again. Again, economics had changed – a lot more competition. Hall Gardens was mainly wholesale. The cut flower department wasn't really open to the public."

"The cut flower part of it was gone by then," Anna Hall said. "The only retail part they did out of there was when they would do whole truckloads of geraniums and that sort of thing, but mostly it went through the wholesale house, which was the building

"The economics had changed…. Once coal was no longer available, natural gas just got to be a little too expensive." – Gerard Krug

on Cook [Road]. They were two separate companies with the same ownership. This [the greenhouse on McKenzie Road] was Hall Gardens, and the other was Hall Gardens Wholesale."

Krug added, "Hall Gardens Wholesale was such a large supplier to all the little greenhouses around and flower shops." He said, "They not only sold their own product, but they brought in from all over the world. They had things shipping in from Australia and Hawaii, and that sort of thing, and Holland that would come in."

Greenhouses still operating in Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township include: Uncle John's Plant Farm at 8579 Columbia Road, Schuster's Westview Gardens at 9165 Columbia Road, Hansen's Greenhouse at 8781 Columbia Road, Schulz's Greenhouse at 26965 Cook Road, and Rottel's Greenhouse at 27085 Bagley Road.

Barn Site Heads into First Winter without a Barn

John Hall's barn still stood and wore a wreath a few years ago.

For many years, one of the traditional holiday sights in Olmsted Township was a green wreath on the red barn that stood near the entrance to The Renaissance along John Road. Little did viewers realize one year ago they were getting their last opportunity to see that display.

Because of the deterioration of the barn, which John Hall built in 1880, The Renaissance entered into a contract with Razing Cleveland to dismantle the barn and sell off the materials for re-use. That work began last spring and was mostly completed by this fall.

"The area has been cleared of debris and will remain as is over the winter," Sandy Skerda, executive director at The Renaissance, said by email late in November. "We will move forward in the spring with a landscaping project. The details of the project are yet to be determined. We'll let you know when a decision is made."

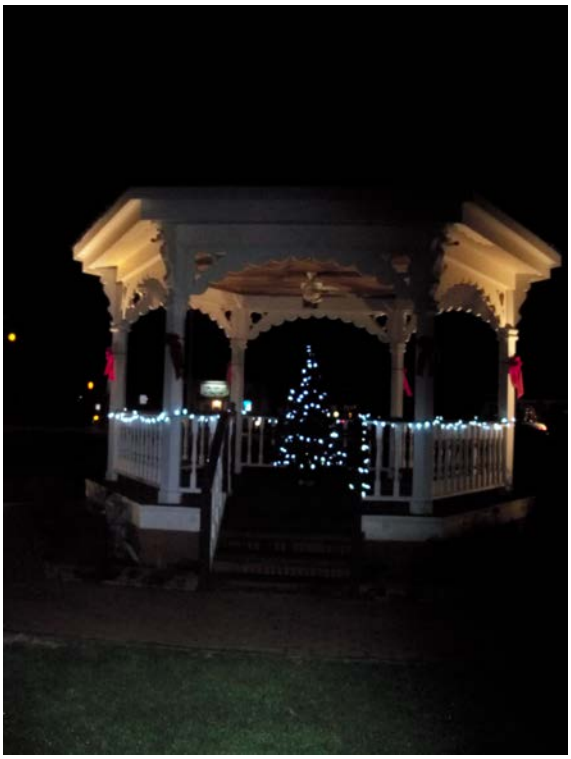
This was all that was left at the site on November 29. Photo by Bob Buzzard.

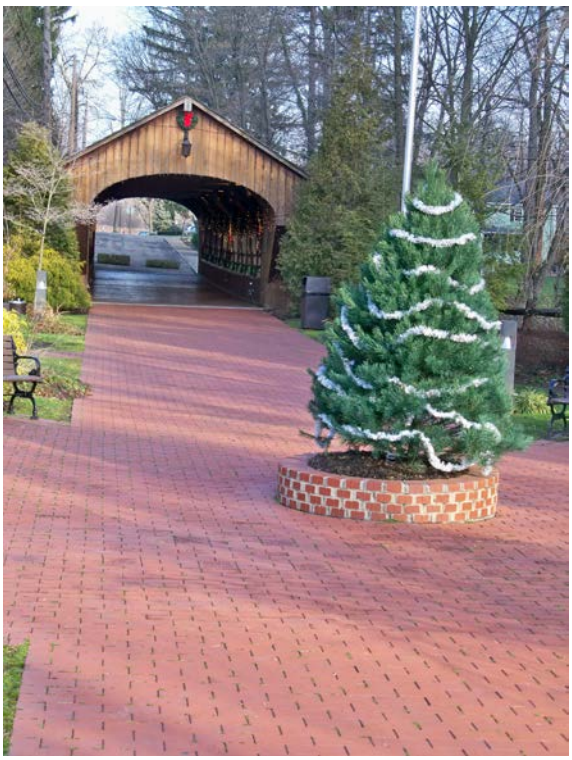
All along, Renaissance officials

have said they want to have a green space at the site that at least incorporates the stone that says, "J.H. 1880," John Hall's initials and the year of the barn's construction. Skerda has welcomed suggestions from *Olmsted 200* readers on what the site should look like. The winter would be a good time to give thought to that. Any suggestions sent to wallacestar@hotmail.com will be forwarded to The Renaissance.

Olmsted Dresses Up for Holidays

The scenic spaces in Olmsted Falls get lighted up and spruced up for the holiday season. Here are views of the gazebo at the Village Green and the Charles A. Harding Memorial Bridge from past Christmases.





Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will have personal memories about the greenhouse industry in Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township from those who worked in the greenhouses. A few people already have volunteered such stories, but anyone else with stories to share should contact *Olmsted 200* at wallacestar@hotmail.com. Also still in the works is an article about what Olmsted Falls looked like 60 years ago, based on a map that was a souvenir of the 1954 Homecoming. Anyone with information about Olmsted six decades ago is invited to share that information with *Olmsted 200* and its readers. In addition, early in 2015, *Olmsted 200* will have stories about Grand Pacific Junction, including how it was preserved and the histories of some of its buildings.

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, Colorado, Texas, Louisiana, North Carolina, West Virginia, Florida, Massachusetts and Maine, as well as overseas in Mongolia and Japan.

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

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

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

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