



Olmsted 200

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

Issue 108

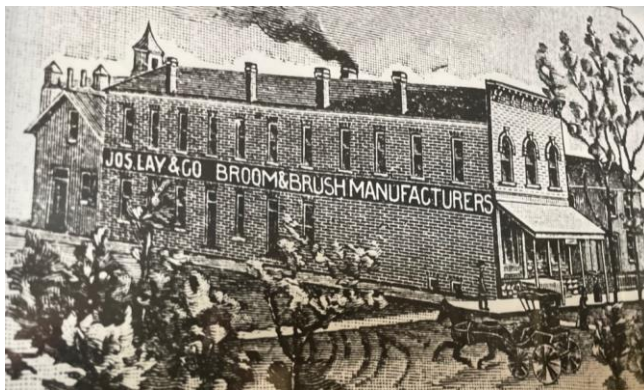
May 1, 2022

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After Leaving Olmsted, Lays Boomed with Brooms in Indiana

Imagine what Olmsted Falls would have been like if it had entered the 20th century as the home of one of the largest broom manufacturers in the United States. The community was well on its way in the late 19th century to seeing that happen, but it didn't because of an abrupt turn of events early in 1887.

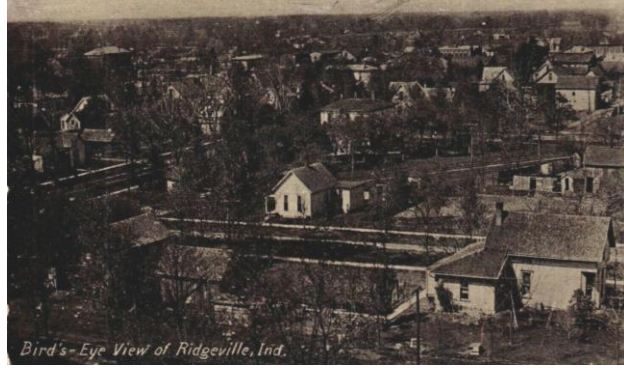


This drawing depicts the Lays' first broom plant after moving to Ridgeville, Indiana. Illustration courtesy of Cristi Bost and the Ridgeville Public Library.

By that time, Joseph Lay was a well-regarded citizen of Olmsted Falls and known as an inventor and entrepreneur who employed other Olmsted residents making brooms and other items in his factory along Rocky River. But 34 years after his 1853 arrival in Olmsted Falls from upstate New York, people in Ridgeville, Indiana, enticed him to move his factory there with the promise of having an ample supply of broom corn, as well as a suitable location to make his products. Lay family members maintained ties with

Olmsted Falls friends and relatives for many years, but Indiana became the home of their ventures – as well as some misadventures.

The Joseph Lay Company in 1887 left its facilities along the sometimes-flooded bank of Rocky River in Olmsted Falls for an abandoned brewery at the southeast corner of Portland and Fourth streets in Ridgeville, a small town on the northern end of Randolph County, Indiana. Randolph County is about midway along Indiana's border with Ohio.



This postcard photo from around 1910 shows what Ridgeville, Indiana, looked like about 23 years after Joseph Lay moved his company and family there.

“The business prospered, thanks both to a quality product and to an aggressive sales campaign, both by mail and through traveling salesmen,” a historical sketch from the Indiana Historical Society states. “The chief customers were manufacturers, street commissioners, hardware stores, and railroad purchasing agents.”

In the years after their move to Indiana, Joseph Lay's sons, Frank and Samuel, kept in touch with friends and family in Olmsted Falls through visits and letters. That's clear from occasional items included in the Olmsted Falls column of the *Berea Advertiser*:

- November 15, 1889: “Mr. F.R. Lay of Ridgeville, Ind., called on his friends at the Falls Friday.”
- March 14, 1890: “S.C. Lay of Ridgeville, Ind., writes they have the gas craze in that town with a pressure of 850 lbs. to the inch and things are booming.”
- March 21, 1890: “Mr. Samuel Lay is a trustee and also auditor of Ridgeville, Ind., Normal School.”
- April 4, 1890: “Mr. F.R. Lay of Ridgeville, Ind., called on frienes [*sic*] here Sunday.”
- May 9, 1890: “Mr. S.C. Lay of Ridgeville, Ind., spent Friday night at his uncle's, Mayor John Lay and family, and Saturday morning dropped off at Berea. He was going to Ashland, O., to join his wife who was visiting her parents there. Mr. Lay is looking well and is much pleased with his Indiana home. His many old friends hereabouts rejoice in his prosperity.”
- August 1, 1890: “At Ridgeville, Ind., Mr. S.C. Lay has erected a commodious dwelling house and will soon occupy it. Also Mrs. C.S. Whittern of Cleveland, O., has been spending a couple of weeks with her sister, Mrs. F.R. Lay, who has poor health.”

The May 1, 1891, issue of the *Advertiser* carried this news: “Mr. F.R. Lay and family of Ridgeville, Ind., have gone to Chattanooga, Tenn., to reside. Mr. Lay will go into the broom business.” The broom business Frank Lay established in Chattanooga in 1890 (according to records in a court case) was called the Crescent Manufacturing Company. It made and sold the same types of brooms the Joseph Lay Company produced in Indiana, but it’s not clear from records available online whether Crescent was a separate company or a subsidiary of the Joseph Lay Company.

In its June 19, 1891, issue, the *Advertiser* reprinted this item from the *Chattanooga Daily Times*:

Mr. Lay is a member of the firm of Lay & Sons of Ridgeville, Ind., one of the largest broom plants in the country, and whose goods have an excellent reputation. The Crescent Company are now employing ten hands, and turning out from thirty to forty dozen brooms a day. The output will be materially increased at an early day. The jobbers of the city, with the true Chattanooga spirit of patronizing a home institution, are taking the output of factory. The office of the Crescent Co. is 811 Broad St.”

According to the Indiana Historical Society (which has many boxes of materials about the company in its Indianapolis archives), the Joseph Lay Company established a branch factory in Columbus, Ohio, in 1896, then a branch in Mattoon, Illinois, in 1900 and another in Saratoga, Indiana, sometime later. The company also spun off a banking business in 1892-1893, when Joseph Lay’s daughter, Gertrude, married the new head of the bank. In addition, the company briefly operated an oil and gas business in 1898, and in the early 1900s, it ventured into automobile manufacturing (which is the topic of another story in this issue). But not all the broom company’s efforts to expand worked out well.



The stamp on this invoice shows it’s from the Lay branch in Columbus, Ohio, which was established in 1896.

“In 1900 the Joseph Lay Company was negotiating to purchase a factory in Indianapolis,” the historical sketch from the Indiana Historical Society says. “Instead, a former employee, M.R. Stratton, along with another Ridgeville native, George Lemaux, bought the factory. They established the Indianapolis Brush and Broom Manufacturing Company, and a suit between them and the Lays immediately ensued. One result of this suit was that the Lays made special efforts both to patent their Lay brooms and Victor brushes and to register trademarks for their distinctive labels.”

The Lays appealed that 1900 federal district court opinion. The January 23, 1903, ruling by the Seventh District U.S. Court of Appeals that upheld the lower court's ruling is available online and reveals details about the Lays' broom designs, their company's operations and problems with the original 1900 case.



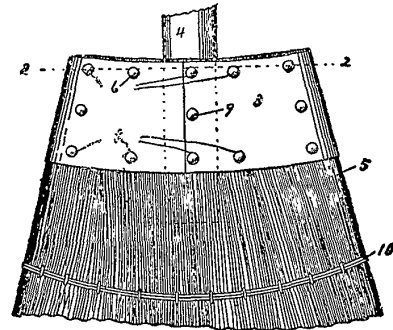
No photo of the Lays from their years in Olmsted Falls has turned up, but this part of a photo that hangs in the Ridgeville Public Library shows Joseph on the left and son Samuel on the right. Photo courtesy of assistant librarian Cristi Bost.

One issue in that legal case was whether the Lays' use of a tapered, or flared, shape for the metal case on a broom rather than a straight one was sufficiently inventive to be worthy of a patent. Using a flaring case for a flared-shaped broom seemed to be just common sense to the judges.

“What invention there would be in adopting such an obvious style of case, it is difficult to see,” the appellate judges wrote. “It would seem to be about as sensible to place a straight iron case on a flaring broom as to put a straight iron hoop on a flaring wooden barrel or pail.”

Another issue was that the U.S. Patent Office had rejected an application from the Lays repeatedly in 1897. “The claim presents nothing patentable over the references of record, and is rejected,” a June 26, 1897, order from the Patent Office stated.

In 1900, the Lays switched lawyers and tried again. After including a sworn oath by Samuel C. Lay (Joseph's son) and a few changes in their application, the Lays received their patent on June 26, 1900, exactly three years after the previous rejection. However, the patent could be issued only if the invented design had not been in public use or on sale more than two years before the patent was issued. The federal appellate court in 1903 found that that claim in the oath was false. The court cited testimony from several individuals – including Frank R. Lay (Joseph's other son) – that the company had sold brooms with the design in dispute as early as 1887, the year the Lays moved from Olmsted Falls to Indiana.



This illustration of the flaring metal case used on Lay brooms was included in the company's lawsuit against Indianapolis Brush and Broom.

The company got involved in another lawsuit in 1904. The Joseph Lay Company sued Paul Oscar Steidtmann of Hamburg, Germany. Steidtmann, who did business under the name Steidtmann and Nagel, exported broom corn. The dispute was over which company was responsible for paying \$455.64 in customs duty. A trial court in Illinois (because the shipment went through Chicago) found that the Lay Company was responsible for paying the duty, an appellate court reversed that finding, and then the

Illinois Supreme Court reversed the appellate court in 1908 and sent the case back to the



appellate court. It's not clear what the final resolution of the case was, but the case is another example of how much effort the company expended on legal issues.

Despite such legal problems, the Lay Company prospered. It reached sales of 326,000 units in 1909. The historical sketch from the Indiana Historical Society says the company in about 1910 seems to have led an effort to create a national association of broom manufacturers, partly to stabilize the price of broom corn.

After being thwarted in their effort to buy a factory in Indianapolis in 1900, the Joseph Lay Company moved in either 1901 or 1902 into what had been the main building of Ridgeville College, which began in 1867 and closed after its spring term in 1901. It was located between Second Street and Court Street in Ridgeville.

The Lay Company moved early in the 1900s into this building from the former Ridgeville College. Photo courtesy of Cristi Bost of the Ridgeville Public Library.

The enterprise went through another change in 1902, as noted by this item in the January 8 issue of the *Indianapolis Journal*: "RIDGEVILLE – The firm of Joseph Lay & Co., manufacturers of brooms and brushes, was dissolved on Monday and the plant in Ridgeville, including warehouses, four dwellings and a handle factory, was taken over by the new organization, to be known as 'The Joseph Lay Co.,' (Inc.). Capital, \$100,000 paid-up. Joseph Lay is president; Lester P. Simms, secretary; S.C. Lay, treasurer and general manager. The new concern will operate a branch at Portland."

Although that item focused on the realignment of the corporate structure of the company with a slight change in name, that last sentence about the branch in Portland, Indiana, is more significant than it appears because the company later moved its headquarters and main operations to Portland. Another notable aspect of that 1902 item is that Joseph's elder son, Samuel, was listed as the treasurer and general manager of the company, but younger son, Frank, was not mentioned. That omission seemed significant in hindsight a decade later when Frank Lay asserted himself.



This display of Lay brooms and machines used to make them can be found at the Jay County Historical Society in Portland, Indiana. Photo courtesy of Kay Locker.

The affairs of the company, as well those of the family, got messy toward the end of Joseph Lay's life. In 1913, *Brooms, Brushes, & Handles*, a trade magazine, reported: "Joseph Lay, former president of the Joseph Lay Co., is in no way connected with that firm now. He is 84 years of age, and still active and interested in broom progress." That item only hinted at what went on then.

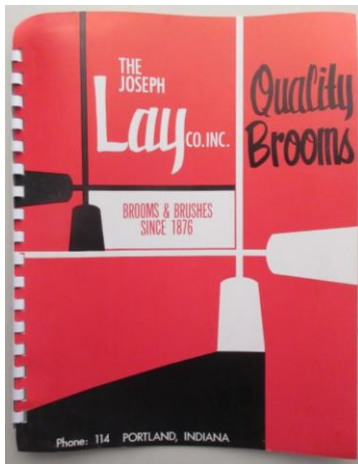
Samuel and Frank Lay had not gotten along for many years. Perhaps that's why Frank had gone off to run his own broom factory in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in the early 1890s. However, by 1912, he was back in Indiana, and he persuaded his father to leave the Joseph Lay Company, which Samuel was then running, to join Frank in founding the Joseph Lay Broom and Brush Company.



The Bostich staple machine (left) used to put metal cases on brooms and to staple wires on brooms and the broom repair bench (right) are part of the Lay Company display at the Jay County Historical Society. Photos courtesy of Kay Locker of the society.

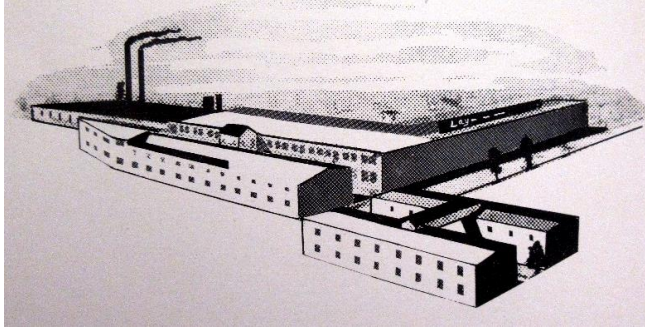
"The result was a memorable tangle, with one company receiving and filling the orders intended for the other," the Indiana Historical Society's historical sketch says. "Of course there was another suit. In 1914, probably because of Joseph Lay's death, the rival company was dissolved."

In fact, Joseph Lay lasted a bit longer than that. He died on March 4, 1915, in Ridgeville, at age 84. That was 62 years after he and two of his brothers moved from upstate New York to Olmsted Falls and 28 years after he moved his company and family to Indiana.



On the left is a Lay broom catalog from the company's Portland years. In the center is an illustration of the advantages of Lay brooms. On the right is a broom label. The first two are courtesy of Kay Locker and the Jay County Historical Society.

Samuel Lay remained with the company until his death at age 65 on January 25, 1921, but he had turned over the operations of the firm by then to his son, Arthur. That allowed Samuel to spend his summers in Michigan.



On the left is the first Lay Company location in Portland, Indiana. On the right is an illustration of the facilities the company occupied after moving its main operations to Portland. Both are courtesy of Kay Locker of the Jay County Historical Society.

Under Arthur Lay's guidance, the company moved its headquarters and main operations from Ridgeville to Portland, which is about 14 miles away. Portland is the seat of Jay County, the next county north from Randolph County, where Ridgeville is located. According to information provided by Christi Bost, assistant librarian at the Ridgeville Public Library, that move occurred in 1932.



These photos show the former Lay broom factory after it became Portland Body Works. Both are courtesy of Kay Locker and the Jay County Historical Society.

The Joseph Lay Company lasted at least through World War II. A letterhead from the company used in 1945 includes a logo at the bottom that says: "War is Hell! But Defeat is Worse – Buy Bonds and make a quick Victory a certainty."

In 1936, the company began making the popular Kitchenette broom and registered the trademark, but the company sold the rights to the Kitchenette in 1948 to Quinn Broom Works of Illinois. (Newton Broom and Brush Company of Illinois later acquired the rights to the Kitchenette and still makes it today.)

Perhaps the Joseph Lay Company lasted only until 1948. According to Kay Locker at the Jay County Historical Society, the former Lay broom factory had been

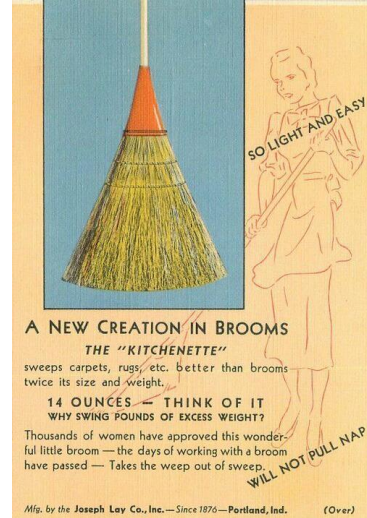
converted to be a book bindery by 1960. She also provided undated photos of the former Lay factory labeled as the Portland Body Works.

No matter when the Joseph Lay Company came to an end, it had a long run in Indiana after achieving early success in Olmsted Falls. Items from the company remain treasured possessions at both the Ridgeville-Kitselman Museum at the Ridgeville Public Library and the Jay County Historical Society in Portland. By contrast, it would be difficult to find any items from the Lays' broom-making operations left in Olmsted Falls, where they got their start.



Arthur Lay (above) led the company after his grandfather and father. Photo

courtesy of Cristi Bost at the Ridgeville Public Library. To the right is a promotional piece for the Kitchenette, introduced by the company in 1936 before it went into long production by other firms. That item is courtesy of Kay Locker of the Jay County Historical Society.



Many thanks go to David Kennedy of Olmsted Falls for extensive research into records about the Lay family and their company. Special thanks also go to Cristi Bost, assistant librarian at the Ridgeville Public Library and its Ridgeville-Kitselman Museum, and to Kay Locker of the Jay County Historical Society for their help in providing photos and other items about the Lays' operations in Indiana.

Victor Autos Took the Lays on a Rough Road



In this 1902 photo, Joseph Lay is at the wheel of a Ford. Photo courtesy of Cristi Bostic of the Ridgeville Public Library.

Brooms and brushes were the main products of the Joseph Lay Company, but Lay family members dabbled in other types of businesses, including banking and drilling for oil and gas. In the early 1900s, Joseph Lay and son Samuel joined many industrialists of the time in entering the automobile manufacturing business. They founded the Victor Automobile Company in November 1906, a few years after Joseph Lay acquired a Ford, the first auto in Ridgeville, Indiana. Their new venture did not go well.

The company's autos were sold under the name the Senator, or the Ridgeville Senator. The Lays devoted an outlying building at their broom factory to assembling the auto. It was more an assembly process than the complete manufacture of a new automobile.

“The Lays manufactured much of the exterior, but they purchased the mechanical parts elsewhere,” Robert M. Taylor, Jr., wrote in a 1994 magazine article about the Lays’ auto manufacturing venture. “The four-cylinder air-cooled Carrico gas motors and the Universal carburetor came from the Speed Changing Pulley Company of Indianapolis. That city’s Marion Motor Car Company supplied the Hester transmission, all axles, and the wheels made with white hickory spokes. The Fiske Rubber Company produced the tires. Other firms produced everything from the iron bolts and nuts for the chassis to the curled hair and machine-tufted leather used in the upholstery to the baked enamel pressed steel fenders and the Fairfield duck top.”



This photo shows John Oliver Carpenter at the wheel, mounted on the right side, of a Senator. Carpenter was a machinist who supervised auto production for the Lays.

Taylor’s article, “As Good as a Buick,” is a fascinating tale of the Lays’ misadventure. It was included in the Spring 1994 issue of *Traces of Indiana and Midwestern History*, a quarterly publication of the Indiana Historical Society. The article is worth the time of anyone who wants to learn more about the company and is available online (<https://images.indianahistory.org/digital/collection/p16797coll39/id/7424/rec/33>).

The short version of the story is that the Senator, which cost as much as \$2,000, was a bad car. Its top speed seemed to be 20 miles an hour, it had trouble climbing hills, and it was prone to overheating.

One dissatisfied purchaser from Mattoon, Illinois, sued the Lays after they refused to take his car back and refund his money. One key point in the case was whether Samuel Lay had pledged the Senator was “as good as the Buick or better.” It took a jury only about 90 minutes to issue a verdict against the Lays. An appellate court overturned the verdict and sent the case back to the city court in Mattoon, but Samuel Lay settled that case and one from another disgruntled purchaser by paying partial refunds and taking the cars back.

The Victor Automobile Company produced a total of seven Senator cars by the time the Lays closed the firm in 1912. They realized they were much better at making brooms and brushes than automobiles.

Joseph Lay Had a Complicated Family Life

As noted in the story about Joseph Lay’s years in Indiana, relationships in his family sometimes were troubled. One example of that was when his younger son, Frank, persuaded his father, who then was in his 80s, to leave the firm he had founded and named for himself to join Frank in a similarly named broom-manufacturing company. That followed years in which Frank and Joseph’s older son, Samuel, did not get along.

But those troubles were mild compared to what Joseph Lay went through several decades earlier when he still lived in Olmsted Falls.

On April 2, 1856, just three years after he moved from Seneca County, New York, to Olmsted Falls, Lay married Lucinda Witham, who then was age 17. She was born in Maine on October 3, 1838, but she moved with her family to Ohio at least by 1840.

A little more than nine months after getting married, Lucinda gave birth to a son, Samuel C. Lay, on January 16, 1857. Almost four years later, on September 12, 1861, she gave birth to a second son, Frank R. Lay.

The Lays had the makings of a happy little family, but they weren't. While the Civil War raged elsewhere in the country, the Lays had their own conflict at home. In 1864, Joseph Lay filed for divorce. As the November 28, 1864, edition of the *Cleveland Leader* reported, he had filed his petition "on the ground of adultery" with the Cuyahoga County Court of Common Pleas.



This was Henry Lewis Wicks, who was born in 1865 and died at age 85 in 1950.

"The decree of divorce was granted, with alimony for the defendant," the newspaper reported.

A little more than two months after the divorce decree, Lucinda gave birth to a son, Henry Lewis Wicks, on February 2, 1865, in Dover Township, which was the township immediately to the north of Olmsted Township. Several months later, she married Alexander Wicks, whose second wife had died in 1862. He was a Union soldier who was discharged from the service on June 17, 1865. He and Lucinda married on August 8, 1865. They had another son, Ernest Albert Wicks, in 1867.

By the time of the 1870 Census, the Wicks family was living in Deepwater, Missouri, but they returned to northeastern Ohio within a few years. On the night of September 28, 1874, Alexander Wicks was walking along the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern railroad tracks near Olmsted Falls when a train hit him and killed him. He was buried in Painesville, where the family might have been living at the time.

Several years later, on July 3, 1881, Lucinda married again when she was 41 years old. This time, it was to Alfred Thompson in Hopkins, Michigan. That marriage apparently did not last because online records show he married again in December 1888, although those records don't include any mention of a divorce from Lucinda.

By 1888, Lucinda was living in Cleveland. She lived with her son, Ernest, for some time in Cleveland, but by the time she was 72, the 1910 Census listed her as a resident of Chester in Geauga County, Ohio. She lasted another decade there until she

died on November 15, 1920, at age 82. She was buried at Coe Ridge Cemetery in North Olmsted under the name Lucinda Witham Wicks.



This photo was taken of Lucinda Witham Wicks late in her life.

Meanwhile, Joseph Lay did not remain unmarried long after his divorce from Lucinda. In April 1865, he married Lemira Adams, who went by Myra. He was 34 at the time. She was three years younger. She was born in Olmsted Falls on July 13, 1833, to John and Maria (Hoadley) Adams. Her father served as a major in the War of 1812. Her mother was a member of the Hoadley family responsible for building several water-powered mills in northeastern Ohio, including the one along Rocky River just south of Olmsted Falls (where Gibbs Butcher Block now is located) and others farther north along Rocky River and Plum Creek in what now are Olmsted Falls and North Olmsted.

Joseph died in 1915, and Myra died in 1920, both in Ridgeville, Indiana.

Joseph wasn't the only Lay who had a complicated family life. His father's affairs got interesting late in his life and even more difficult after his death in Olmsted Falls in 1883. *Olmsted 200* will have more on him in the next issue.

Thanks go to David Kennedy for help with the research for this story.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will have stories about other inventors from Olmsted and the interesting late life and death of Samuel Lay, father of Joseph.

If you know of other people who would like to receive *Olmsted 200* by email, please feel free to forward it to them. They can get on the distribution list by sending a request to: wallacestar@hotmail.com. *Olmsted 200* has readers in several states beyond Ohio, including Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Washington, West Virginia and Wisconsin, and as well as overseas in the Netherlands, Germany and Japan.

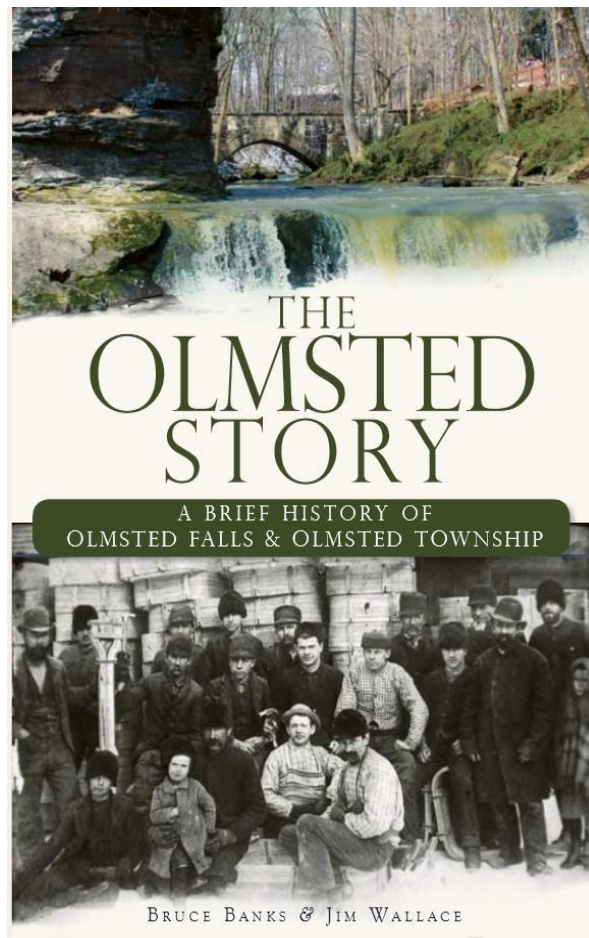
Your questions and comments about *Olmsted 200* are welcome. Perhaps there is something about Olmsted's history that you would like to have pulled out of *Olmsted 200*'s extensive archives. Or perhaps you have information or photos about the community's history that you would like to share.

If you have missed any of the past issues of *Olmsted 200* or want to share them with someone else, all of them can be found on Olmsted Township's website. Go to <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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