



Olmsted 200

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

Issue 121

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Lenau Park: Old Farm Becomes New Home for Germans

It is perhaps fitting that the Olmsted Township land that served as the 19th century home for a family who crossed international borders many times became the home in the late 20th century for an ethnic group that had fled several European countries for refuge in North America.

Issue 120 of *Olmsted 200* last month presented the story of how the family of Scottish natives Joseph and Margaret Gibson established a home and farm in the township just north of the border with Olmsted Falls, although they moved back and forth between the United States and Canada several times after buying the property. They bought the land in the 1870s, perhaps as early as 1872. Almost a century later, a German group known as the Donauschwaben – the Danube Swabians – bought the farm at 7370 Columbia Road from the Ritter family, which owned it during much of the 20th century.

This is a chapter of Olmsted history that requires a review of some European history.

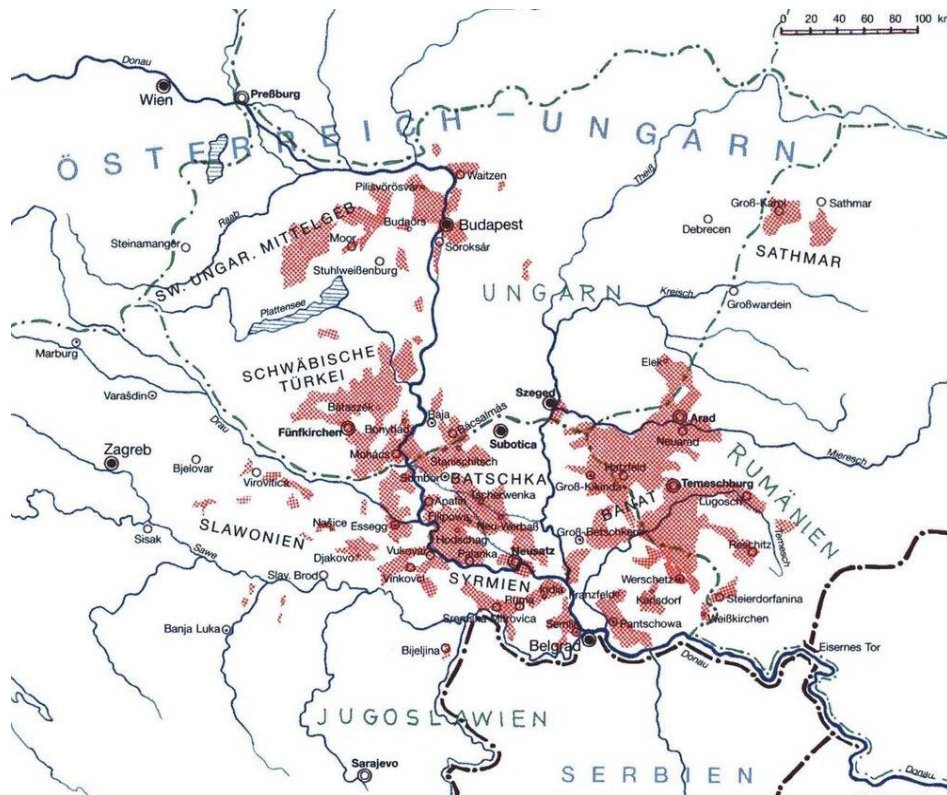
The Danube Swabians were



The Society of Danube Swabians – or Donauschwaben – built this Cultural Center and other facilities on Olmsted Township land previously owned by the Ritter and Gibson families.

Germans who were victims of World War II. Germany, under the Nazi regime, has been widely demonized as the evil force that caused much suffering and millions of deaths during the 1930s and 1940s, but after the Germans were driven out of the countries of southeastern Europe in World War II, the Danube Swabians became targets for retribution because of their German heritage.

The Danube Swabians settled in parts of southeastern Europe during three waves of immigration. The first began in 1722 at the invitation of Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI of Austria. He wanted ethnic Germans to settle in lands that had been under Turkish control for a century and a half until a German-Austrian army defeated the Turks. His goal was to make the region agriculturally productive. The region the immigrants settled in was bounded by the Danube, Tisza and Maros rivers and the Carpathian Mountains.



This German map (with Vienna – or Wien – at the upper left, Budapest at upper center, Zagreb at center left, and Belgrade – or Belgrad – at the lower right) shows the areas where the Danube Swabians settled in southeastern Europe in the 18th century. The map is from the Society of Danube Swabians.

Another wave of immigration occurred between 1763 and 1770 under Empress Maria Theresa. Her son, Emperor Joseph II, prompted the third wave of immigration beginning in 1782. Many of the settlers travelled east on the Danube River, and most of them settled near the Danube, so they became known as Danube Swabians. An account of this history can be found in *Fünfzigtes Jubiläum – Celebrating 50 Years*, which is a 2008

book about the group's history on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Society of Danube Swabians in the Cleveland area.

According to the book, even though the settlers suffered from famine and plague at times, they were able over two centuries to make the region the "Breadbasket of Europe." By the end of the 19th century, "the Danube Swabians numbered over one million and had achieved a relatively high economic and cultural status," Anton Kremling (as translated from German by Dr. Helmuth Kremling) wrote in one of the book's essays, "Who Are the Danube Swabians?"

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was dissolved after World War I, so the Danube Swabians found themselves residents of Hungary, Romania and Yugoslavia. That made their lives more difficult, but they went on until, as Kremling put it, "the suicidal policies of Germany...eventually sealed the fate of the Danube Swabians." That's a reference to World War II. Further, he wrote, that, as communist regimes took over in those countries after World War II, "the mostly innocent and defenseless German ethnic groups" in those countries faced intolerance and cruelty:

The unsuspecting Danube Swabians who could not flee in time or who did not give up their homes so readily often became victims of the boundless hate for everything German at that time. [Yugoslav President Josip Broz] Tito's reign of terror demanded tribute in the form of human life and 250,000 succumbed in his concentration camps. Many of the remaining Danube Swabians in Romania were deported to Russian workcamps or to the Baragan Steppes of Romania where tens of thousands also perished. German settlers were forced to leave Hungary for Germany or Austria as a result of the Potsdam agreement.



Beginning in 1925, the Banater Club at 11934-11938 Lorain Avenue served some ethnic Germans who came from Banat province in what now is Romania. It was replaced by a second Banater Club on West 140th Street in 1951. Photo courtesy of Cleveland Public Library.

(The Potsdam Agreement among leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union in August 1945 determined much of the post-war fate of many European nations.)

About half a million Danube Swabians were among about 12 million refugees who went to Germany or Austria after the war. Several hundred thousand eventually moved to the United States and Canada, while others went to several other countries, although many remained in Germany and Austria. Kremling wrote that Danube Swabians settled in almost all the urban centers in the United States, but the greatest concentrations were in New York, Rochester, Trenton, Chicago, Cleveland,

Cincinnati, Akron, Mansfield, Philadelphia, Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Louis and Los Angeles. After working for a couple of centuries to maintain their German language and heritage in eastern Europe, many of the Danube Swabians did the same in America, he wrote.

Although many Danube Swabians came to the Cleveland area in the 1950s, some had come earlier. In 1925, they built the Banater Club along Lorain Avenue near West 120th Street in Cleveland. The club didn't survive the hard times of the Great Depression, but in 1951, the group built a new Banater Club at 3580 West 140th Street near Lorain Avenue. However, as the number of Danube Swabians expanded in the area, they outgrew the Banater Club. They wanted someplace new that could accommodate youth sports contests and large festivals.

As Karoline Lindenmaier (translated by Hilde Hornung) wrote in an essay, "Historical Review" in *Fünzigstes Jubiläum*:

After an extensive search for properties in the suburbs of Greater Cleveland, Jacob Geyer found a parcel of land in 1970, with approximately 17 acres, on Columbia Road in Olmsted Township. After walking the property with the Board of Directors, it was decided that the location was ideal and the purchase process was begun. When the purchase was finalized, many members volunteered to spruce it up and make the area usable. Soon thereafter soccer fields and tennis courts were constructed and a lake was excavated. With the many summer activities being scheduled at the new property, it was necessary to build a bar and sanitary facilities. Flowers, bushes, trees and grass were planted. Much of this work was done by our senior members who wanted to contribute in some way.

Franz Anwender (translated by Marie Spaan and Hilde Hornung) wrote in his essay, "The German-American Cultural Center of the Danube Swabians," in *Fünzigstes Jubiläum* that the group paid \$97,000 for the Olmsted Township land. He wrote that, soon after the purchase, the Danube Swabians, who renamed the land Lenau Park, drew up plans to build a clubhouse. It took until 1980 for them to raise the money they needed to begin its construction and then several more years to complete their new Cultural Center, or Kulturzentrum. Until it was built, they either held events outside or in the old farm buildings, including the house built by Joseph Gibson in 1883. After the center was built, the group razed the old farm buildings and then built a pavilion, a gazebo and a service building, as well as a brick wall with two entrances along Columbia Road, according to Lindenmaier.



This photo from Fünzigstes Jubiläum shows Mrs. Ritter receiving the check purchasing her family farm in 1970.



This was the program for the Cultural Center's dedication May 17-18, 1986.

Among the German cultural celebrations that the Danube Swabians brought to Olmsted Township is the Oktoberfest. However, instead of waiting until early fall to hold it, as the original Oktoberfest in Munich does, the Danube Swabians hold theirs in mid-August. Thus, they call it the Sommer Oktoberfest. In *Fünzigstes Jubiläum*, Lindenmaier wrote that they held their first Oktoberfest under a big tent in August 1980. However, a story in the August 27, 1981, edition of the *News Sun* about that year's Oktoberfest said it was the fifth year for the festival. That indicates that 1977 was its first year. No matter when it began, the Sommer Oktoberfest has become an annual three-day celebration of German food, beer, music and dancing that attracts thousands of visitors. This year, it will be held August 18, 19 and 20.

Although the Cultural Center wasn't quite finished in 1985, enough was ready by then for Lenau Park to host an international meeting of Danube Swabians with representatives from Europe, Canada, South America and the United States. The Cultural Center was dedicated May 17 and 18, 1986. The lobby was added in 1996.

In 1988, two years after the completion of the Cultural Center, the Danube Swabians welcomed Vice President George H.W. Bush, who was then running for president. He brought with him his wife, Barbara, as well as his running mate, Indiana Senator Dan Quayle, and his wife, Marilyn.

Six years later, in 1994, Lenau Park hosted a big festival over Labor Day weekend to mark 50 years since the Danube Swabians were expelled from southeastern Europe in 1944. Among the dignitaries who addressed the gathering was Ohio Governor George Voinovich.

The Danube Swabians chose the name Lenau Park for what had been the Ritter Farm (after it was the Gibson family's farm) because "Lenau" was a pseudonym for a German poet who was born on August 13, 1802, in land that now is part of Romania. His real name was Nikolaus Franz Niemsch.



While campaigning for president, George H.W. Bush greeted Josef Holzer, president of the Society of Danube Swabians, at Lenau Park in 1988.

Although he spent most of his life in Europe, Lenau was fascinated with America. He came to the United States in 1832 and even tried running a farm in Crawford County near Bucyrus, Ohio, for seven months. But that didn't work out well, so he returned to



Lenau Park is named for the poet whose real name was Nikolaus Franz Niemsch.

Germany to find out that *Gedichte*, his first published book of poetry, was faring well with both critics and sales. Unfortunately, the rest of his life was not so happy. He died at age 48 in Vienna on August 22, 1850.

The Danube Swabians' relations with their Olmsted neighbors generally have been good. In a story about Lenau Park, in the October 11, 1984, edition of the *News Sun*, reporter Helen Rathburn noted that the Danube Swabians had to overcome a bit of skepticism when they sought to buy the land from the Ritter family in 1970.

“Swabian President Joe Holzer says the group had to convince the city and Mrs. Ritter they weren’t buying the property to resell it for a housing development,” Rathburn wrote. “True to their word, they have built a haven for their people to relax with open spaces and greenery prevalent. And they have invited the community to enjoy the space as well.”

Holzer told her that many of the society’s members did not have German heritage but were instead local residents who wanted to use Lenau Park’s athletic facilities or participate in its social activities.

However, relations between the organization and the Olmsted community hit a rough spot three decades ago. Late in 1992, the Ohio Board of Tax Appeals ruled in favor of the Danube Swabians in a case in which they sought tax-exempt status for Lenau Park. Because the board made the decision retroactive to 1987, officials of the Olmsted Falls City School District despaired over the loss of about \$318,000 in tax revenues already due plus the ongoing loss of about \$40,000 in property tax revenue each year. Lenau Park was reported to be the district’s fifth largest taxpayer at the time.



Lenau Park, with its Cultural Center and other facilities, was the subject of a decade-long dispute over property taxes.

The Board of Tax Appeals initially rejected the Society of Danube Swabians’ application for tax-exempt status because it seemed to be more a fraternal and social organization than a charitable organization. But after an appeal that included endorsement letters from Congresswoman Mary Rose Oakar, Cleveland Mayor (later Governor) George Voinovich, other dignitaries, Olmsted Falls American Legion Post 403 and the Olmsted Falls Kiwanis Club, the tax board decided that the society really was a charitable



This lower-level meeting room with its murals of pastoral life in Europe is among those Lenau Park rents out to community groups. This photo is from 2012.

organization because of its athletic programs, services for senior citizens, cultural and educational programs, and its “ongoing sponsorship of traditional American family values.”

As a *News Sun* story on November 26, 1992, noted, Lenau Park rented out its 300-plus capacity hall, ran an indoor soccer facility, and hosted fish fries and other events open to the public. One week later in the *News Sun*, Holzer talked about seeking some accommodation with the school district.

“We want to work peacefully and cooperate with the community, like we have always done,” reporter Joanne Berger DuMound quoted him as saying. Holzer said membership in the society was open to everyone, not just those with German heritage, and membership cost only \$15.00 a year.

“If we were a private group, we would charge \$2,000 for membership,” he said. “We want more people to enjoy us, so we charge less.”

However, the tax board’s decision wasn’t the end of the story. The school district appealed the case up to the Ohio Supreme Court. In 1997, the justices ruled in a four-to-three decision that, despite the society’s many charitable services, it was primarily a social and fraternal organization. At the time, the school district said it was looking for payment of about \$236,000 in back taxes. The Danube Swabians took their loss in stride.

“We thought we did enough in the community, but if we have to pay taxes, we’ll pay,” Holzer told reporter Tom Vanek in the March 6, 1997, edition of the *News Sun*. “We won’t fight it.”

Lenau Park has gone on to host many community activities, as well as the Danube Swabians’ own activities. The society’s website says it offers “a 46,000 plus sq. ft. multi-level building that is today replete with sundry class, meeting, and dance rooms, a two-lane bowling alley, an indoor soccer field with locker and shower facilities, as well as a central ballroom. Named in honor of Josef Holzer (Holzer Halle), the ballroom has kitchen, bar, and restroom facilities to accommodate nearly 600 people.” More information on Lenau Park is available at:

<https://www.donauschwabencleveland.com/>.



The society’s coat of arms includes the German eagle, a wavy blue line for the Danube River and six towers representing Danube Swabians’ primary settlements.



Former Olmsted Falls resident Mike Gibson took these photos at Lenau Park during a celebration of the bicentennial of the United States on July 4, 1976. That was six years after the Society of Danube Swabians bought the land from the Ritter family but a decade before they removed the house built by Gibson's great-great-grandfather, Joseph Gibson, in 1883.

Olmsted Falls Had Holy Rollers 150 Years Ago

If it's true that a picture is worth a thousand words, according to one adage, it's too bad local newspapers didn't publish photos 150 years ago. One photo could have said so much about an important development in Olmsted Falls history. Instead, we have just these 18 words in the Olmsted column of the *Grindstone City Advertiser* issue for June 27, 1873: "THE Catholic Church has been on rollers the last week, and has nearly or quite reached its destination."

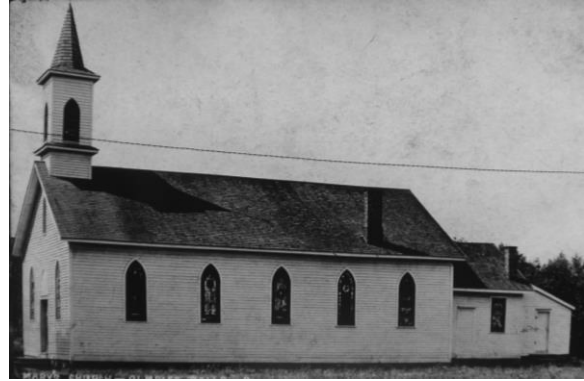
The Catholic Church was Saint Mary of the Falls. What a sight it would have been as it rolled on logs down Columbia Street (now Columbia Road) from the northern end of downtown Olmsted Falls to the southern end. It was a small, wooden church that the local pastor, Father Louis J. Filiere, built in 1858 at about the site where the Olmsted

Community Church now stands. Fifteen years later, his successor, Father E.J. Murphy, was ready to abandon that location, perhaps because the startup of sandstone quarries nearby a few years earlier made it noisy and dusty rather than the peaceful spot Filiere had chosen.

Murphy bought several lots at the corner of Columbia Street and Hamlin Street (now Bagley Road). He repaired a stone house on the site to serve as his parsonage and had the church moved next to it.

Although no photo is known to exist of the church on rollers, the building lasted until the 1940s, so photos of it in its later years exist. A little imagination could place it on rollers, at least in the mind, for a glimpse of a move that affected the development of Olmsted Falls for many decades to come.

Fire destroyed the old, wooden church on January 24, 1948. It was replaced two years later by the current brick church. The story of Saint Mary of the Falls can be found in Issue 56 of *Olmsted 200* from January 2018.



Except for the addition in the rear, this was the original wooden-frame version of Saint Mary of the Falls that was rolled down the street in June 1873.



At the upper left is the stone house already on the site that Father E.J. Murphy made his parsonage. At the upper right is an aerial photo from the early 1900s

showing the stone house on the corner of Bagley Road and Columbia Road and the old church farther south on Columbia. At the bottom are post-fire photos of the church.

New Technology Reveals Old Schoolhouse Photos

Olmsted 200 reader Mike Gibson again has come up with old photos that show an important piece of Olmsted history. In this case, the cause of historical preservation has benefited from modern technology.

The latest two photos he is sharing show the Union Schoolhouse in the 1880s. One photo is from 1880, seven years after the school was built on the Village Green. The other is from 1886.

The 1880 photo shows 11 men and women standing in the doorway and two more peering out of upstairs windows. Perhaps they were the school's teachers. Maybe some were school board members. It's notable that no trees stood in front of the school in that photo.



This 1880 photo shows the Union Schoolhouse at the Village Green just seven years after it was built with 11 men and women at the front door and two more in second-story windows. Notice the lack of trees in front of the building and the house on the right. That house is likely the one built half a century earlier by John and Eunice Barnum. It still stands.

The right side of the photo also shows a house. It might be the house built in the early 1800s by John and Eunice Barnum, who donated to the community the land that became the Village Green where the school was built. In recent years, that house at 25334 Water Street has been owned by Wendell and Sandra Brooker. (For a story about the Brookers and their house, see Issue 113 of *Olmsted 200* from October 2022.)

The second photo from 1886 shows the school after trees had been planted in front of it. It also shows a few dozen adults and children standing or sitting in front of the school.

Gibson said he found both photos among a set of 35 millimeter negatives from photos his father took around Olmsted Falls in about 1963.

“He copied many photos in people's albums,” Gibson wrote about his father. “From other photos published in Olmsted Falls books, I'd say that the photos are from the Bislich and Nickels families. I have a new slide scanner that works wonders with old film.”

About the 1886 photo, Gibson wrote that the quality of the negative was too poor to restore until he used his new scanner. He said the result was: “Brand new landscaping!!! There are lots of kids in the background. Josephine Gibson Atkinson would have been 14 and Alexander Gibson would have been 11. I wonder if they are in that old photo. I have never seen the 1886 photo published anywhere.”



As the writing at the bottom indicates, this photo of the school was taken in 1886. Mike Gibson used modern technology to restore it.

Well, now it has been published. The ancestors he mentioned were included in the story about the Gibson farm last month in Issue 120 of *Olmsted 200*. Gibson said his new scanner with help from Adobe Photoshop Elements also restored the 1880 photo of the school.

That school lasted until 1960, when village leaders decided that the building had deteriorated too much to preserve, so they had it torn down. Some people who lived in Olmsted back then remember seeing it go. One woman educated at the school wrote her memories of the school as it was being demolished in 1960. Next month, Issue 122 of *Olmsted 200* will share what she wrote.

Still to Come

The next issue of *Olmsted 200* will include more stories about the history of Olmsted Falls and Olmsted Township, including one woman's memories of the Union Schoolhouse.

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, Georgia, 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 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 Township and the Berea Historical Society's Mahler Museum & History Center and through online booksellers.

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