

CLEVELAND
The Best Kept Secret

George E. Condon

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GEORGE E. CONDON

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The Battle of the Bridge

THE struggle for municipal supremacy in Cuyahoga County was short-lived, but nonetheless spirited. The addition of Brooklyn to the lists brought about a three-sided competition, but the major threat to Cleveland, man-eating wolves and all, continued to be Newburgh until 1826.

In that key year, the turning point in the Cleveland-Newburgh rivalry arrived when the issue of which town should be selected as the county seat came to a head.

Three county commissioners were to decide the issue, but one of the commissioners died and the two who remained were evenly divided. There was an election and the candidate who favored Cleveland, Dr. David Long, won the office. That resolved the issue in Cleveland's favor, and thereafter there was no question which community was dominant. Now Newburgh found itself slipping into the background, suffering even the final humiliation of being described to travelers as the town "six miles from Cleveland."

But pride does not die easily, and even in the Cleveland of today—in which the old rival is really nothing more than a very large neighborhood with indefinite boundaries—people still speak of "Old Newburgh" in tremulous voices that tell of their loyalty and the unspoken belief that Newburgh someday, somehow, will rise again.

Considering the extent of the rivalry that had obtained between Newburgh and Cleveland, it must be conceded that the losing village took its defeat in a sportsmanlike manner. Only seven years after the critical election that put Cleveland on top, a visitor from England who passed through Cleveland on his way to Newburgh said loudly that for the size of it, Cleveland was the "prettiest town" he had seen in America. The Englishman's name was John Stair, and even though he uttered those inflammatory words while enjoying Newburgh's hospitality, he was allowed to go his way unharmed or unmolested.

Cleveland's main concern at this point had become the town of Brooklyn. It was sprouting new shoots every day, growing at a prodigious rate in the salubrious climate of the times, and it quickly became ap-

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parent that Cuyahoga County had another competition on its hands. The immediate prize was incorporation as a city by the state legislature, with all the municipal powers thereto pertaining, and both towns fought hard for the distinction of being first.

This was a race that Cleveland lost, to the surprise of almost everybody involved and to the great chagrin of the older town. Brooklyn was incorporated under the grand new name of City of Ohio on May 3, 1836, and reigned, for five glorious days, as the only officially recognized city in Cuyahoga County. Finally, on May 8, 1836, Cleveland, too, became a city, but by that time some of the thrill was gone.

All this was to happen some ten years after Cleveland and Ohio City, and even Newburgh, had entered upon an era of great expansion and prosperity brought about by the construction of the Ohio Canal.

In addition to the economic effect of the great canal, it exerted a significant sociological influence on the young cities along its route. Cleveland, for instance, until the time of the canal had been populated almost entirely by New Englanders, and it was a city which was as much eastern in its character as any city could be. But the canal drew upon thousands of hard-nosed, hard-working immigrants for its laboring force, and when the job was done, most of these workers stayed on as permanent residents.

The assimilation of the "foreigners"—mainly Irish and German—was slow to come about, and often painful in the digestive process. They represented something strange and unknown in an area whose population had the comfortable homogeneity of a common New England background. The new people with their strange ways, their unknown tongues, their exotic dishes, and their inclination toward Catholicism were suspect in the Puritan-centered community that was a Yankee stronghold in the West.

A new flood of immigrants, mainly Irish, German, and Bohemian, poured into the young city in the middle of the century with the advent of the railroads. These twin developments, new people and magnificent new transportation facilities, gave Cleveland a forward impetus that would, in the following fifty years leading to 1900, establish it as one of the great cities of the nation.

The newcomers of common ethnic origin clustered together in the poorer neighborhoods which became nationality centers bearing colorful, suggestive names, such as "Irishtown," "The Angle," and, in time, "Little Italy." Some of those neighborhoods have retained their nationality character to this day.

With the completion of the canal, Cleveland changed from a sleepy, picturesque cluster of cabins and primitive frame buildings to a bustling, prosperous port. A picture of the city as it appeared to a stranger

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from the more sedate East is provided in a letter written by the famous educator, Harvey Rice, upon his arrival here in 1824, when the Ohio Canal was under construction.

Rice, a graduate of Williams College who had decided to seek his career in the wilderness country, sailed to Cleveland from Buffalo—a 120-mile trip that took three days—and arrived late at night on September 24, 1824.

"A sand-bar prevented the schooner from entering the river," he wrote. "The jolly boat was let down and two jolly fellows, myself and a young man from Baltimore, were transferred to the boat with our baggage, and rowed by a brawny sailor over the sand-bar into the placid waters of the river, and landed on the end of a row of planks that stood on stilts and bridged the marshy brink of the river, to the foot of Union Lane. Here we were left standing with our trunks on the wharf-end of a plank at midnight, strangers in a strange land.

"We hardly knew what to do, but soon concluded that we must make our way in the world, however dark the prospect. There was no time to be lost, so we commenced our career in Ohio as porters, by shouldering our trunks and groping our way up Union to Superior street, where we espied a light at some distance up the street, to which we directed our footsteps."

The light was in a tavern kept by Michael Spangler and the travelers found lodging there.

"The town," Rice's account continued, "even at that time was proud of itself, and called itself 'the gem of the West.' In fact, the Public Square, so called, was begemmed with stumps, while near its center glowed its crowning jewel, a log court house. The eastern border of the Square was skirted by the native forest, which abounded in rabbits and squirrels and afforded the villagers a 'happy hunting ground.' The entire population did not at that time exceed four hundred souls . . ."

This was the town that was to disappear within a few years under the impact of its sudden development as a strategic center of shipping and commerce, but apparently the change would bring the town an attractive new look. We know that at least one newcomer to the city was impressed by the town. His name was Milo H. Hickox, and he wrote to a friend:

"Cleveland is about two-thirds as large as Rochester, east side of the river, and is the pleasantest sight that you ever saw. The streets are broad and cross each other at right angles. . . . There are between fifteen and twenty grogshops and they all live."

It is not too much to assume that among the very liveliest of all the grogshops was the Shakespeare Saloon, which advertised in the first city directory published in 1837, promising Falstaffian delights to

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its customers and "an agreeable retreat" in which "every attention" would be paid to their comfort and convenience.

That same city directory of 1837 devoted some of its precious space to a quaintly worded editorial pointing out the need for a city charter, saying:

"Sundry things were done; sundry hills and streets were graded, to the great satisfaction of some and dissatisfaction of others. Some six or eight thousand of inhabitants had come together from the four winds; some wished to do more things and some wished to do things better; and to effect all these objects, and a variety of others, no means seemed so proper as a city charter in due form and style."

That was a very exciting, historic year in Cleveland, that year of 1837. It was not, for that matter, a routine year anywhere, what with the great financial panic that it brought to the entire nation. Cleveland felt that panic in its economic life, but there were other distractions at hand, chief among these being the evidence of a continuing deterioration of relations with Ohio City. The rivalry between the two cities on the opposing banks of the Cuyahoga moved from the ideological and commercial area to the point of actual physical conflict in 1837. It is still remembered by both sides as The Battle of the Bridge.

Cleveland and Ohio City were connected at Detroit Street by a float bridge jointly owned by the two communities. It was a modest, low structure which, however crude and rustic in appearance, served its purpose admirably until the fateful year of 1837, when the City Council of Cleveland abruptly adopted a resolution directing removal of that half of the bridge extending from the east bank to the middle of the river.

This provocative action may be best understood in the light of some backstage finagling by a pair of real estate speculators named John W. Willey and James S. Clark. These two men in 1836 had purchased a large tract of land which clamped around Ohio City like a horseshoe, beginning in the river valley's flatland and swinging around to the south and to the west of Ohio City.

Willey and Clark had high hopes for this enormous tract of real estate which they had given the poetic name of Willeyville, seemingly intending to promote further municipal confusion along the banks of the Cuyahoga. They also had built another bridge over the Cuyahoga River where Columbus Street, far to the south of Detroit Street, came down into the valley. Columbus Street was an important highway linking Cleveland with the farmlands and towns to the south. Its traffic formerly had been accustomed to following Pearl Road to the Detroit Street Bridge, passing through the heart of Ohio City, before swinging over the river to Cleveland.

As the people of Ohio City saw the new Columbus Street Bridge,

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its sole purpose was to divert the main flow of traffic from southern Ohio away from its streets and into Cleveland. They boiled with indignation that the bridge-builder's art should be so evilly misused, but there wasn't anything they could do about the Columbus Street Bridge.

Cleveland's action in severing its half of the Detroit Street Bridge was something else again. It was a transparent effort by Cleveland to divert all the important through traffic to the bridge south of Ohio City, thereby bringing about a major bypass of the rival community to the west.

A fact which makes this tangled civic situation more understandable—at least, more interesting—is that John W. Willey, one of the two land speculators who brought about this unhappy state of affairs between Cleveland and Ohio City, also was the mayor of Cleveland. He was, in fact, Cleveland's very first mayor under the newly won city charter.

Some students of this situation have gone so far as to suggest, openly, that Mayor Willey was able to exert considerable influence on the Cleveland City Council in its enactment of the bridge legislation so directly calculated to boost the value of lands owned by Speculator Willey. But no matter how it happened, there was a civic crisis now at hand.

There is, unfortunately, no record that tells what happened in the early hours of the morning following the unannounced nocturnal removal of the Cleveland half of the bridge. All we can do is try to piece together the most likely sequence of events based on the laws of probability and fit them in with the unverified legends that live on in neighborhoods on both sides of the river.

It is an unconfirmed legend, but likely enough to believe, that a horse-drawn fish wagon, running late toward the market place in Cleveland, went careening onto the bridge in the predawn darkness through a heavy mist and rumbled noisily toward its watery surprise. The clatter of the hoofs on the loose-fitting boards and the sound of the iron-rimmed wheels could be heard far out into the river, as could the drayman's occasional shouts of encouragement to his high-trotting horses.

Suddenly, earwitnesses testified later, there was a shriek, which they thought came from the throat of the driver, although the fish and the horses weren't entirely ruled out. It was followed by the sound of a large splash, and minutes later moderately big waves were noted splashing in toward shore. The fish wagon had run out of bridge in the middle of the stream.

The driver and the horses swam back to the Ohio City side of the river minutes later, but no part of the fish cargo ever was recovered. They had been freshly caught, and it was the general opinion of the

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time that most of the fish had seized this golden opportunity to take it on the lam for the lake and liberty.

By dawn's early light, the shore on the west bank was lined with Ohio City residents who had heard the alarming report that the bridge had been tampered with, and it was in this first gray light of the day, through the mists that still lay heavy on the river, that they saw there was only half a bridge left. And, as the drayman had learned, half a bridge was no better than no bridge at all.

A Cleveland journalist, James Harrison Kennedy, relating how the dastardly deed was done at night "while the Ohio citizens lay dreaming of future municipal greatness," went on to describe how "when the morning mists arose from over the valley of the Cuyahoga, they saw their direct communication gone, and realized that to reach the court house and other points of interest in Cleveland, they would be compelled to travel southward and make use of the hated Columbus Street bridge."

Now it was just like the old days when the Indians occupied the west side of the river and the colonists in Cleveland lived tensely, never knowing when the redskins would get out of hand and go on the warpath. Bonfires burned brightly along the west bank of the river, and the people of Ohio City hopped from one foot to the other in their indignation, crying out for aggressive action.

Retaliation was quick. The council of Ohio City declared the hated Columbus Street Bridge a nuisance and ordered the city marshal to "abate" the nuisance "without delay."

The rallying cry of the West Siders summed up their demands: "Two bridges or none!" Streets leading southward to the Columbus Street Bridge were crowded with traffic on both sides of the river as business and normal living came to a halt while everybody in both towns hustled to the river crossing to see what excitement was next in store.

It was Ohio City's move, and the city marshal, flanked by deputies, strode purposefully onto the bridge and planted some heavy charges of powder. He and his men ran back to shore, put their fingers in their ears, and cringed in expectation of the explosion—as did everybody in the crowd. But the worst that happened was several sharp popping noises and several large bursts of smoke. The damage to the bridge was entirely negligible, if not laughable.

Nobody took the risk of joshing the red-faced city marshal, who determinedly called his deputies to his side, conferred with them, and then led them to the Cleveland side of the bridge, where they dug a deep ditch immediately in front of the bridge entrance. Then they returned to the Ohio City side and dug another ditch, equally wide and deep. It was a temporary measure, but the bridge was effectively

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closed off to those who would use it until more conclusive means could be found to destroy the structure.

A council of war was held in Ohio City and a date was set for an all-out attack on the bridge. In all the excitement, the historians of the time forgot to jot down the chronology of occurrences, but it is widely assumed and generally accepted that D-Day was the day following the failure of the explosives. Word traveled fast and early on the fateful day. It is estimated that nearly a thousand men from Ohio City and other communities of the county—volunteers, so to speak—gathered for the attack. Many of them were armed with clubs, rocks, and rifles, and they even had their own chaplain. Dr. Pickands, pastor of the Presbyterian Church, invoked divine aid in behalf of the stalwart force before it began the march to the bridge site with a lawyer, C. L. Russell, in the lead.

Cleveland was not about to be taken by surprise. Some of its scouts had infiltrated the Ohio City camp and learned of the serious plans for reprisal. When the Ohio City army reached the Columbus Street Bridge, they saw that Cleveland had marshaled a formidable defense. There, across the river, stood a company of militia with muskets in readiness to rake the bridge area. And if this were not enough to quell the Ohio City offensive, Cleveland also had rolled down to the river's edge an ancient cannon which usually was fired as the highlight of the Independence Day celebrations—continuing the tradition of Uncle Abram Hickox.

Before the opposing forces could enter into any hostilities, a peace-maker suddenly appeared on the bridge. He was none other than John W. Willey, mayor of Cleveland and real estate moonlighter, the villain of the piece. A mighty roar shook the Ohio City side of the bridge when Willey stepped forward and held up his hands for attention. Before he could utter more than a few words, a volley of stones drove him to cover, and the fight, you might say, was on.

At either end of the bridge was an apron that could be raised or lowered, and the one at the Ohio City side was let down to provide a shelter for the anti-bridge forces. The men went at their job of destruction with crowbars and axes, ripping up the planks and throwing them into the river with cries of exultation even as the Cleveland militia thundered across the bridge in a charge that would have brought a sparkle to the eyes of Rudyard Kipling. They were greeted with rocks, clubs, and occasional rifle fire.

In all the swirling melee, an Ohio City man named Deacon House carefully picked his way through the Cleveland lines and spiked the old cannon before it had been fired the first time. It is generally acknowledged that his deed was the military highlight of the day and perhaps the very act that saved the entire affair from becoming

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a very real tragedy. Had the fieldpiece been fired into the crowd of Ohio City men, many would have died and the chances for any future union of the opposing cities would have vanished.

Some men were injured, even as the fight progressed, but nobody was killed. The battle was brought to a halt by the Cleveland marshal, who also was sheriff of the county. He stepped between the opposing armies and demanded a cessation of hostilities. Having achieved as much, he took possession of the bridge and shortly obtained a court decree against further interference. Guards were posted at either end of the bridge to enforce the free movement of traffic.

Eventually the dispute was carried into the civil courts and a peaceable solution was found—one which provided a multiple choice in bridge crossings, as the Ohio City people earlier had demanded.

Out of every such dramatic moment in history should issue some great literature to memorialize the heroism and high deeds that were achieved. The Battle of the Bridge, it is gratifying to report, found at least one poet inspired by what had happened. His name was D. W. Cross, and he wrote an epic poem called "The Battle of the Bridge," which was published by *Magazine of Western History*.

The poem, in part, sang out as follows:

On hills, like Rome, two cities might be seen,
(Meand'ring Cuyahoga flowed between);
Whose rival spires in rivalry arose,
The pride of friends, the envy of their foes.
Each rival ruler of each rival town
On his would smile, but on the other frown.
Each sought for greatness, in his rival's fall,
Regardless that the world was made for all.
Envy and hatred waxed to frenzied height!
Naught could appease but fierce and bloody fight.

The culmination came! A peanut stand
Erected by a "combination" band
Of desperate men of capital, who swore
No trade should be diverted from their shore.
They claimed that Clark and Willey, reckless, sought
To build a bridge. The right of way was bought
Already! And they then designed to build
Columbus street and bridge! This rumor filled
Their souls with madness, and their eyes with tears!
To think that peanut stand, the toil of years
Should for the want of patronage decay
And trade and barter turn some other way.
They all agreed this could not be allowed,
And boisterous bellowing agitate the crowd!

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The epic poem goes on in that vein to recite the valorous deeds of that historic event, and upon publication it became the favorite piece of literature in the libraries of Ohio City. It should go without saying that it was especially popular among elocutionists of the area because it offered a wide range to a really talented public speaker adept in the throwing about of arms, kneeling to simulate the firing of muskets, clapping the hand to the head, reeling about, and all the other dramatic gestures that raised oratory to its highest point of development in the nineteenth century.

The memory of the Battle of the Bridge now has faded from memory and literature, and there is hardly a Clevelander on either side of the river who has anything but a vague idea of what happened. Now the Cuyahoga River is alive with bridges of all types and the people cross back and forth, merry as they please, little aware that once it was a real trick to cross the old river.

Seventeen years after the Battle of the Bridge, the existence of Ohio City as a separate municipal entity was ended by annexation. An election to decide the issue was held in both cities on April 3, 1854. Clevelanders voted in favor of annexation by a count of 1892 for, 400 against. The Ohio City vote count was 618 for annexation, 258 against.

Cleveland, by that time, had far outstripped Ohio City in population. The 1850 census gave Cleveland a population of 17,034, while Ohio City had but 3950.

It is plain that there had been a lot of behind-the-scenes dickering between the Clevelanders and the Ohio City people on the actual terms of surrender, and much of this talk must have centered on the old issue of bridge facilities across the Cuyahoga. Immediately after annexation had been approved, Cleveland built the Main Street Bridge, rebuilt the controversial Center Street Bridge, and constructed still another new bridge at the foot of Seneca Street.

The new spans probably were meant to be symbolic of the new union; of the twain becoming one. But the merger didn't work out quite that simply. Ohio City disappeared as a corporate entity, it is true, but in its place appeared the West Side, and the rivalry between the people on the opposing banks of the river has continued to this day.