



Elyria: Making History, Then and Now!

The Founding of Elyria

In March of 1817, Heman Ely set foot upon a parcel of untamed countryside 12,500 acres in size but teeming with endless possibility. It was a land rich with potential, replete with fertile soil and churning with the opportunity for free power from the majestic Black River Waterfalls. He traveled with a small group of adventurers ferrying the same, simple goal of turning that land into something more. Traveling with Ely was Ebenezer Lane, who would later become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Ohio, Artemas Beebe, a joiner who would hold the first contract to deliver mail in the area, Luther Lane, a teamster, housekeeper Miss Anna Snow, and Ned, an African-American from Massachusetts who acted as Heman Ely's servant.

They started out small but smart, creating a joiners shop and a sawmill to prepare wood for other buildings. Within five years, the first bridge, first school – an old log cabin that was also used as a church on Sundays, and Beebe Tavern were built, and in 1822, when

Lorain County was officially formed at Ely's behest, the only reasonable choice for the County Seat was Elyria.

Early History

The Old Red Mill, an icon that to this day sits proudly on the patch worn by every Elyria Police Officer, was built in 1819. Industry came to the village in the form of soap manufacturing, an outgrowth of the tree removal necessary to accommodate the 23 new houses built along what is now known as Broad Street. Heman Ely expanded his industrial enterprise when he founded *Lorain Iron Company* along the West Falls to forge iron, on a road that today is aptly known as

Furnace Street. He recognized that as Elyria grew, so did the needs of the settlers, from law to commerce to education. He donated land to build the first courthouse on Ely Square, and in 1830, Elyria High School was incorporated as the first chartered high school west of the Allegheny Mountains under the guidance of Superintendent John Monteith.

Photos courtesy of the Lorain County Historical Society



Faith Finds a Place

The Faith Community has played a significant role in the history of Elyria since the beginning. The Presbyterian Church of Elyria, which is now known as The First Congregational United Church of Christ, was built in 1824. The congregation consisted of less than 20 members who met in a log cabin that also served as a schoolhouse. First United Methodist Church was created three years later, followed in 1836 by First Baptist Church of Elyria and St. Andrews Church the year after. In 1845, the first Catholic Church was built, St. Mary Parish – Our Lady of the Assumption. Some of these historic churches and many dozens more still stand today.

Downtown: The Early Years

One of Heman Ely's main visions for Elyria was that it would serve as a mercantile hub. Situated in the center of Lorain County, the City quickly became a mecca for anyone trading within Lorain County. An annual Wool-Buyer's Fair was organized on Broad Street, allowing settlers to bring their flocks of sheep downtown to sell their wool. One of the more industrious early merchants was Horace Kendall, who built a large brick building on Broad Street to be used as a center for commerce, upon which he engraved the name "The Fortress." Kendall opted to start a cash-only business, forgoing the risks and costs of credit and was therefore able to sell at a much lower cost. Customers from the entire county flocked to Elyria to take advantage, and the City flourished. Other stores and shops popped up and received similar success, from dry goods and cigars to photography and undertaking.

The Village of Elyria was

officially incorporated in 1833. The population had grown to 800 pioneering residents. A carding and fulling mill opened along the river to process fibers into thread that would be used to make clothing. Tailors, cabinet makers, blacksmiths, and shoemakers populated the downtown area. In 1835, John Monteith, who had become a staunch abolitionist, opened a boarding house and school for girls on East Avenue. Its proximity to the river made it an ideal stop for the Underground Railroad, and he would spend many of his nights helping escaped slaves make their way up river on their way to Canada.

Elyria elected its first mayor, Orrin Cowles, in 1842. Before his death in 1852, Heman Ely would watch Elyria transform into a bustling metropolis of more than 1,500 residents, with three grocery stores, five churches, and its own newspaper. In that same year the City would take a formal stand against slavery, adopting a resolution to oppose the Fugitive Slave Act and openly condemning the Whig and Democratic platforms for coddling slaveholders. Elyria was a rarity in the 1840, providing a sense of security to five African-American families, the Gunns, Phillips', Farrizes, Parkers, and Browns,

providing them the confidence to be counted as residents in the Census. While still far from perfect, as the number of minority residents grew, so did local support for them. Hundreds of Elyrians enlisted to fight in the civil war; an act that would be marked years later with the emplacement of a the Civil War Monument that stands in Ely Square to this day.

Embracing Diversity

African-American pioneers worked steadfastly along with their fellow Elyrians in the formation of the City. Brothers Aaron and Vinson Hardy, land owners who came to Elyria in the 1850s and found success as a farmer and a mason, respectively, raised families here who would help shape the area for years to come. Sarah Howard hosted many of the first meetings of the Lorain County Historical Society. Lewis Davis was a hardworking, intelligent man who owned a carriage shop on Broad Street and also found time to dabble in politics and harness his ingenuity to design a predecessor to the wheeled dolly. Judge John A. Howard was the first African-American judge in Lorain County. He was revered as a trailblazer whose family roots run deep into Elyria's history and was





repeatedly honored for his integrity and devotion to his fellow man. In addition to acting as President of the Ohio State Bar Association, he was appointed as Presiding Judge of the Elyria Municipal Court in 1984. In 2008 his legacy was honored when he became the namesake for the John A. Howard Municipal Courthouse located in Elyria.

The Creation of a Community of Culture and Civility

The City of Elyria, and especially Downtown, continued to mature to meet the demands of the cultured Elyrians around the turn of the century. Coal-oil streetlights were installed and lit by Watchmen each night, bringing downtown to life. Elyria City Hall was remodeled to include a 1,500 foot stage and seating for 350 people to view a variety of well-attended traveling theater shows and operas. Land was purchased on the shores of Lake Erie and by 1903 the City was pumping fresh water to the residents of Elyria. Land was donated for the creation of Ely Park and Cascade Park, now known as the *Jewel of the City*. An era of public services began with the creation of

the Elyria Telephone Company, and soon included home mail delivery and the Interurban trolley public transportation system. The first electric trolley rolled across the streets of Elyria in 1894 as a means to transport Elyria steelworkers to the Steel Mill in Lorain. More destinations were added by two competing companies, the Green Line and the Lorain Street Railway, until automobiles took over the roads a few years later.

Elyria was quickly becoming a nexus for culture and civility. National brands like Sears, Penney's, Woolworth's, and Rexall Pharmacy joined the growing district. Elyria Memorial Hospital was founded in 1908 in response to an horrific trolley accident the previous year. Eight people lost their lives and many more were left disabled, possibly due in part to inadequate local medical facilities. Seven years later, through the efforts of Edgar "Daddy" Allen, the Gates Hospital for Crippled Children opened its doors and became the first facility in the United States dedicated exclusively to the care of disabled children. In 1919, Allen founded the Ohio Society for Crippled Children, which would eventually become Easter Seals.

From the beginning, Heman Ely's goal was to create not just a City, but a close-knit, supportive community. Shortly after Elyria was founded, service organizations to support fellow Elyrians started to spring up, and many are still in operation today. The first and oldest of its kind was the *King Solomon's Lodge No. 46, Free and Accepted Masons*, founded in 1819 by Heman Ely, who served as Worshipful Master. The Elyria Rotary Club was chartered in 1918 and immediately joined forces

with Edgar Allen to help create the National and International Societies of Crippled Children. Today, two rotary clubs, including the Sunrise Rotary, continue to operate for the common good within the City.

The Elyria Women's Club was created in 1908 by Emma Olds to promote equality among genders and promote the Suffrage movement. The club has owned Monteith Hall since 1954 and continues to operate out of the building on East Avenue today. The Elyria YWCA dates back to 1913, eventually building Holly Hall, a center to house a variety of groups dedicated to the betterment of young women, named after revered director Miss Ona Holly. Many other groups followed to provide outlets for those with similar interests, backgrounds, or desires. The Elyria Kiwanis Club was chartered in 1919 and still exists today, supporting Safety Town, Junior Achievement, and other community initiatives. The Elyria Elks, the Elyria VFW Post 1079 and the American Legion Post 12, all embraced patriotic directives. The United Polish Club of Elyria was founded in 1941 with a total of thirty-eight proud Polish members. The history of Elyria has been preserved due in large part to the founding of the Lorain County

Historical Society in 1889, which houses its headquarters in Elyria and endeavors to preserve the local heritage of not only Elyria but all of Lorain County. Countless other groups that embraced the City and sought the betterment of its people were formed and are still active today, including Invest Elyria, Main Street Elyria, the Elyria Arts Council, and the Elyria Community Improvement Corporation.

Making History, Then and Now

As the world moved on past World War II, Elyria experienced an educational and industrial renaissance. Elyria Catholic High School was built in 1949, and the Elyria School System successfully implemented a major expansion, adding buildings in the 1950's and 1960's, and undergoing a drastic redevelopment in the early 2000s. A new \$73 million high school campus that incorporated the historical Washington Building was completed in 2009, and the district is currently working on the consolidation and further improvement of the remaining school buildings. Secondary education grew as well, with the founding of Lorain County Community College in 1963, embracing innovative educational methods and technology and recently

becoming the first community college to house an onsite fabrication lab, *the Fablab*. In the mid-1990s, LCCC launched the University Partnership Program to provide undergraduate and graduate-level degrees from accredited Universities to Elyria residents without incurring the costs of traveling to a University. The program has been a tremendous success and inspiration to other colleges and universities throughout the country.

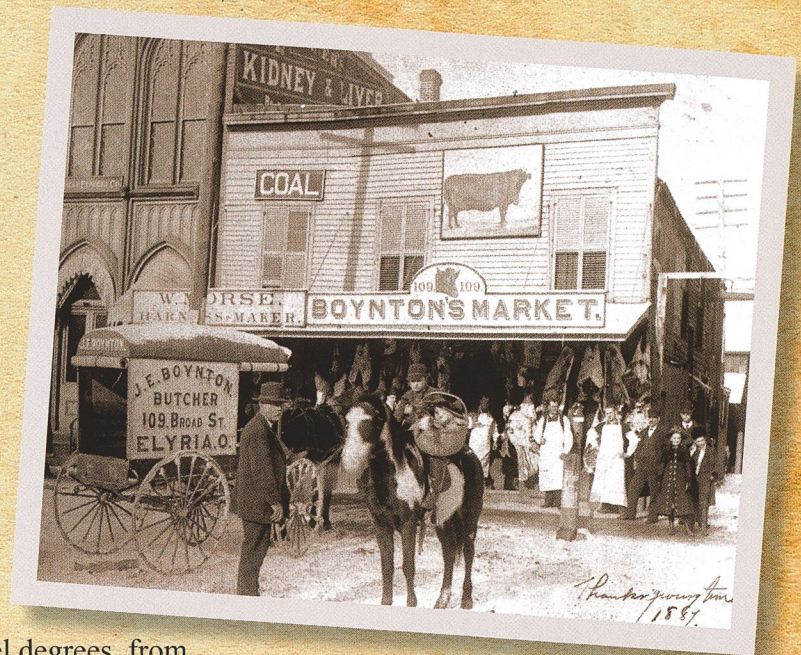
As the 1960's came to a close, Elyria continued to thrive. In the succeeding decades, the City would see ups and downs but continues to persevere, mirroring a history of success based in dogged determination. When an ice-storm froze the City solid in 1900, Elyrians hunkered down and helped each other until the thaw. When much of Broad Street burned down in 1909, they worked together to rebuild. When the Black River rose above its banks and washed out the Washington Avenue Bridge in 1913, they built another way

across. That same unyielding tenacity drives the City of Elyria today.

Industry Comes to Early Elyria

Industry began to blossom within the City by the mid-1850s. Mills were the first industry to take root in Elyria. As railroads became more prominent, it became easier to get products to settlers, and vice versa. Local industries immediately began to flourish. *Elyria Candy Company* was formed and quickly garnered such a following that its confections were sold 40 miles into the countryside surrounding Elyria; a tremendous logistical feat for the time. *West & Wilson* filed a patent for the first sewing machine in 1858, which was manufactured in the City of Elyria and is now housed in the Smithsonian Museum. *Elyria Tap and Screw Company* was founded in 1873 and marked the beginning of the industrialization of Elyria, staying in operation under one name or another for the next 118 years, eventually becoming *Moen, Inc.*

The Fay Manufacturing Co. was formed in 1885 and began producing a line of vehicles designed for the physically handicapped. After a merger and several name changes, first to *The Worthington Company* and eventually to *The Colson Company*,





production shifted mainly to bicycles. In 1953, when *The Colson Company* moved from Elyria, the largely-neglected wheelchair division was purchased by three employees and renamed *Mobilaid*. In 1971, after several successful mergers and acquisitions, the company became known as *Invacare Corporation* and still operates out of Elyria to this day.

Garford Manufacturing Company was founded in 1892 to produce the “Garford Bicycle Saddle,” an invention of company founder Arthur Garford. Soon thereafter, the company was selling more than a million spring-cushioned bicycle seats each year. By 1905, the bicycle industry was on the decline, and Garford shifted his attention towards the burgeoning automobile industry, building a significant production plant on Clark Street to produce automobiles, as well as parts to fulfill a partnership with Studebaker.

20th Century Industry

In 1914, the *I.T.S Rubber Company* (named for its founders, Carl Ingwer, John Tufford, and Art Smith) was

founded. Their new rubber heel sold more than forty-three million pairs in 1920 alone. In 1923, Ingwer partnered again with Art Smith and newcomer William Thewes to form the *Ridge Tool Company*. Initially, their product line consisted of one pipe wrench, but eventually expanded to include the gamut of home and industrial tools. After partnering with the Emerson Electric Company, they settled into the plant at 400 Clark Street where Ridge Tool still thrives today. That area of the City, known as the Taylor Street Corridor, has seen tremendous growth over the last century. The *Parker Hannifin*

Airborne Division moved into a former lace-manufacturing facility in 1965, and together with neighbor *Lear Romec/Crane Aerospace*, Elyria is home to two prominent leaders in the aerospace industry. The corridor, including other successful companies like *Elyria Plastics*, *Opta Minerals*, *Ohiomet* and others, is responsible for more than 1,400 manufacturing jobs and \$352 million in annual revenue. William F. Ohlemacher opened *Elyria Manufacturing Corporation* to produce screw machine products in 1925. Over the next few decades of exponential growth their product line adapted to include a varied catalogue of parts for everything from military tanks to voting machines, but it held true to the idea of a family-run business. Now literally ten times larger, the company is still owned and operated by the Ohlemacher family at the same location on Northrup Street.

In 1937, Reginald Beckett formed the *R.W. Beckett Corporation*. The company was born out of the basement of Beckett’s home at 312 Ohio Street, where he began the development of the “Model OB” oil burner. It was demonstrated to great fanfare at the Commodore Hotel in 1938, and subsequently earned the industry name of “The Beckett Commodore.” By 1955, a switch to natural gas burners was prudent and the “Model A” was developed

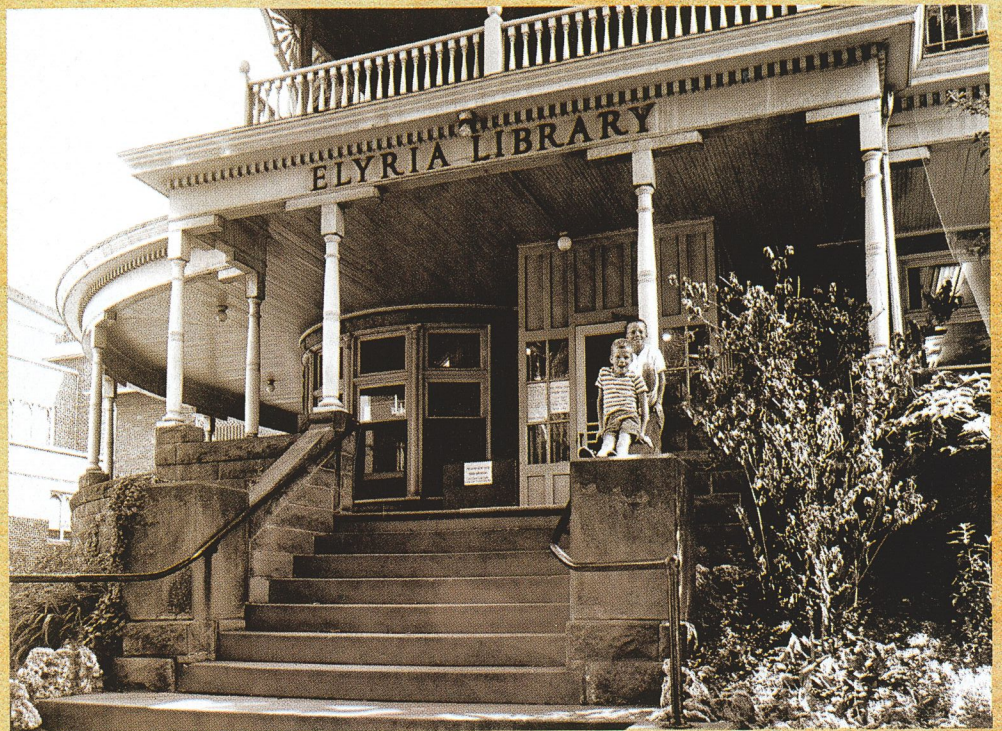


under the leadership of John Beckett, Reginald's son, who led the company to continued success over the following decades.

The Bendix Westinghouse Automotive Air Brake Company was created in 1941, and saw a tremendous boom after a disastrous automotive accident in 1955 which led to legislation ostensibly mandating the widespread installation of particular brake parts manufactured by Bendix. The plant tripled in size and after Bendix was commissioned to design brakes for the Ford "L" series of trucks, Bendix became a worldwide leader. By 1975 the Bendix dual air brake system had become the industry standard. In 1983, the company had moved the majority of its manufacturing out of state but the Engineering Department remained at the original plant. Bendix is expected to move its Lorain County location to Avon in the near future.

By 1927, Elyria had earned the reputation of a progressive manufacturing center, housing forty major industries producing a highly diversified line of products. Elyria was located near raw materials and markets, adequate water and power supplies, and a wealth of reliable labor and ingenuity. During World War II, many businesses took the initiative to aid in the war efforts, such as *Riddell*, who developed a web-sling suspension system for helmets that the military used for quite some time.

By 1945, the *Brown-Lipe-Chapin Division of General Motors* had become the largest industry in Elyria. *The Ternstedt Manufacturing Company*, which had been founded in 1917 to make a window crank



assembly for automobiles, would merge with *Brown-Lipe-Chapin* in 1962 under the purview of GM, producing more than 85,000 pieces of automotive hardware every day. By 1971, the company had become the *Fisher Body Division of General Motors* and had expanded to cover



225 acres and produced enough automobile parts to fill 250 rail cars each month. The Fisher Guide Plant continued to employ more than 2,000 workers until July of 1988 when it closed.

As Elyria moves through the 21st Century, industry continues to grow and evolve. *BASF*, which had

acquired a century-old, stalwart Elyrian company called *Hershaw Chemical Company* twenty five years prior, opened a state-of-the-art cathode materials production facility in Elyria to produce the lithium-ion batteries that power electric vehicles in 2012.

Lorain County Community College continues to entice companies on the cutting-edge of technology into the City. In addition to future-proofing our workforce through educational programs specializing in alternative energy and advanced manufacturing, the college continues to embrace and support the technology industry by creating more advanced facilities on campus. In 2001, a collaboration between local government and education created the Great Lakes Innovation and Development Enterprise (GLIDE)

program designed to empower local entrepreneurs to bring their ideas to reality, and in 2013, *SMART Microsystems* created a facility in the Desich Smart Center specializing in microelectronic package assembly.

As industry evolves, the City of Elyria evolves with it and continues to reinvent itself.