

## *'Twas the Night Before & After Christmas at Wildwood: A Peek into Mentor's Past*

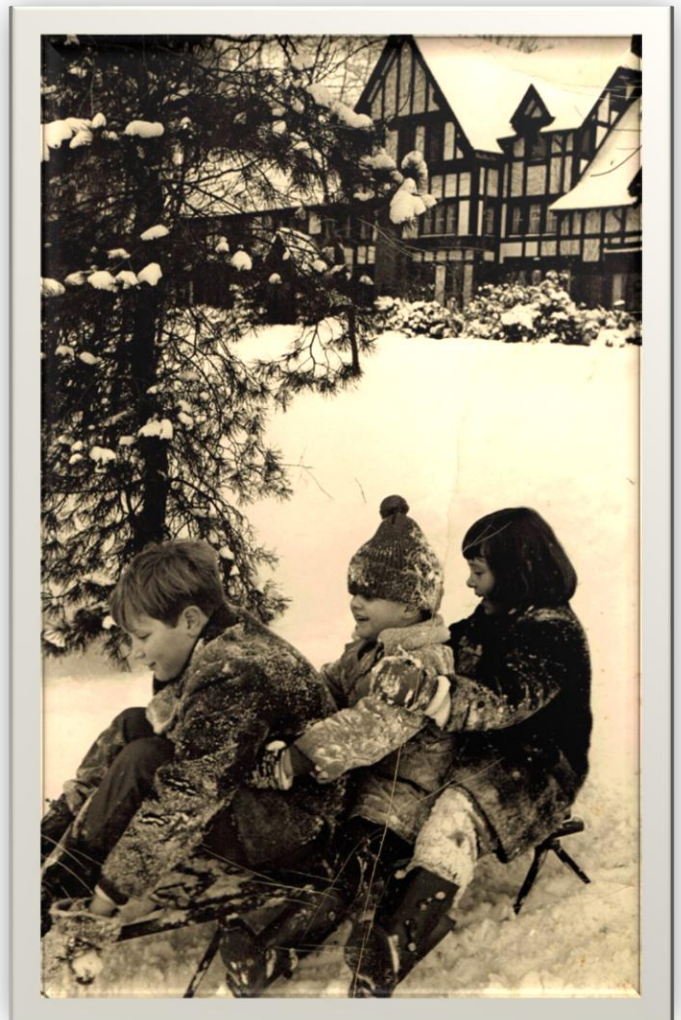
Despite the hustle and bustle of daily life, Lake County at Christmas is filled with holiday fun. From tree lighting ceremonies, downtown holiday strolls, Kirtland Nativity displays, and the Farmpark Country Lights to local concerts and "Harbor Holidays" with a Grinch visit, family fun can be enjoyed across the region. This month, a special estate from our past offers a period glimpse into the season and our architectural heritage. We visit **Wildwood**, the 25-room manor house



situated on 34 wooded acres that was the country home of the **John Green Oliver** family.

Now a popular Mentor locale open to the public, one cannot enjoy the special history of this vintage Tudor manor house without knowing a bit of the backstory of the historic estates of Lake County. From 1895-1930, Cleveland, Ohio, was home to an estimated 70 millionaires. The advent of electrified streetcars, circa 1900, allowed families of means to escape crowded urban streets for rural (suburban) fresh-air havens.

By 1903, land in Mentor was being sold at \$1000 acre, due in part to the **C.P.&E. Railway** lines. The year 1918 found thirty





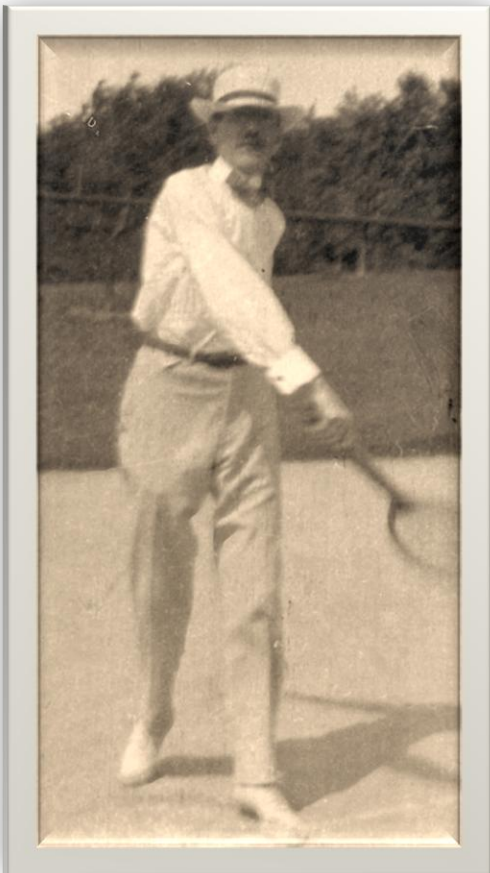
Cleveland millionaires with established residences in Lake County. Among them was noted Cleveland industrialist

**John G. Oliver**  
(1861-1939),

This **Golden Age of Lake County** included names like

**Coulby, Casement, Halle, Hanna, Mooreland, Chandler, and Corning**, which still resonate





today. The era came to an end in 1959, when the construction of I-90 sliced through the pastoral properties.





John G. Oliver was an early Cleveland industrialist and a co-founder of **Pardons & Oliver**. Along with **George Bardons**, they founded their machine tool firm in 1891 and operated it in various downtown Cleveland sites through 1988.

In 1908, the Olivers' Mentor

home was built at **7645 Little Mountain Road** as a summer residence. The family included wife (**Frances**) **May Lockwood Oliver** (1869-1941), daughters **Hortense** (1894-1983) and **Margaret** (1905-1973), and son **Lockwood** (1896-1994). Formerly known as the **Wildwood Estate**, the stately house and park grounds have a prosperous history. As an employee of **Warner & Swazey Inc.**, John Oliver drafted plans for the largest telescope of its time. After leaving their employ to establish his own firm, Oliver's visits to England sparked a fondness for English manor houses of late Medieval-early Renaissance style and their companion gardens.

Following in the footsteps of other notable Cleveland businessmen, **Abram Garfield**, son of the late **President James Garfield**, was commissioned to design and build Wildwood. Construction lasted three calendar years. At completion, the stately house contained nine bedrooms, eight fireplaces, a full basement and third floor ballroom.

Oliver would journey from his University Circle home in Cleveland to Mentor often. Wildwood was one of the earliest examples of this English Tudor Revival style in Northeast Ohio. A staff of six managed the estate. In time, he



added a barn, gardens, apple orchards and a children's playhouse to this forested beauty. The small brick play structure in the back had running water, electricity and a working mini-kitchen. Livestock, vegetable gardens and even a freezer for storing food were soon in place.

In its heyday through early 1924, the Olivers hosted small parties on the top floor where oak floorboards made their dance floor the envy of others.



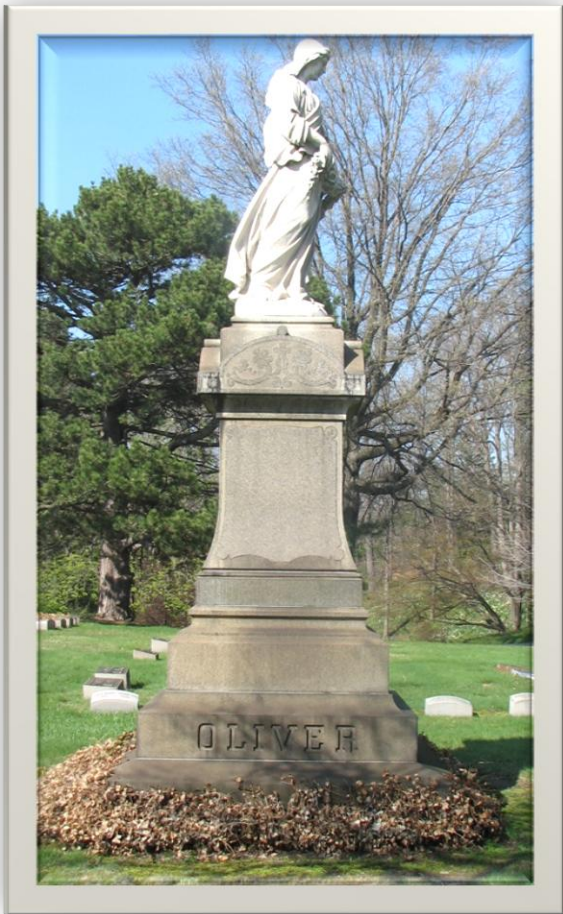
At John Oliver's death in 1939, the estate was willed to his daughter **Margaret Oliver Collacott (1905-1973)** as a living trust for her daughters. During the decade after receiving the inheritance, Margaret and her husband Robert winterized the home for year-round use. With Margaret's

passing in 1973, the estate was inherited by her daughters **May Targett** and **Catherine DeWitt**.

Both women continued to visit and maintain the family home until early 1980. That year both were approached by the **City of Mentor** to discuss the possible sale of the property for preservation as a park for Mentor citizens. A negotiated purchase price of \$300,000 was reached and \$172,000 of additional funding became available when the estate was placed on the **National Register of Historic Places** by the United States Department of the Interior.

Updates to electric wiring, plumbing, woodwork, wallpaper, carpeting and interior furnishings have elevated the Oliver Manor House into one of Mentor's finest gems, a place enjoyed by the public for programming, various classes, community rentals, major cultural events and daily public visits.





This sprawling home, where once it was possible to move from room-to-room without stepping into the hall, allows visitors to travel back in time and experience a lifestyle known only to the wealthy of Cleveland's Gilded Age. While **Guided Showcase** and **Music in the Manor** are seasonal favorites, it is the month of December that offers a festive decor and comfortable holiday setting not to be missed.

The Oliver family is buried at **Lake View Cemetery** in Cleveland.

**Submitted by. Dan Maxson**

Local Lore by Max, 2010-2016 - The News-Herald, Community Media Lab - Volunteer Docent , Curator - FHHS / Fairport Harbor Lighthouse & Marine Museum - Volunteer Curator / Docent - Old Stone School, Concord Township

Vintage photos from the **Wildwood Cultural Center**, City of Mentor, Ohio.

