

OUR CENTURY

1908

AT A GLANCE

Strike mars joy of 3-cent fare agreement

April 27, 1908, was Mayor Tom L. Johnson's day of triumph. After a bitter seven-year battle, the city and the Cleveland Electric Railway Co. — the "Con-Con" — agreed to a compromise in which the private line was leased to the Municipal Traction Co. All the streetcars would have 3-cent fares — except that the first day was free.

"It was like a holiday," Johnson wrote in his autobiography. "Men and women and children rode, and in spite of the crowds not a single accident happened to mar the happiness of the day."

But the happiness was not to last. On May 16, employees of the private line went on strike, arguing that under their contract, they were entitled to a raise of 2 cents an hour. Violence broke out. Cars were stoned, wires cut and dynamite placed on the tracks.

Johnson's enemies harassed the conductors, offering \$5 bills to pay their 3-cent fare. They circulated petitions for a vote, and on Oct. 22, the lease was repealed by 605 votes out of 75,893 cast.

The Municipal Traction Co. was forced into receivership. Johnson's triumph had lasted less than six months.

If it hadn't been for Lakeview School, 1908 would be remembered as the year of the S.S. Kresge Co. fire on Public Square. On July 3, with the store full of pre-holiday shoppers, a child's sparkler ignited an American flag and \$30,000 worth of fireworks went off in seconds.

By the time firemen arrived, the entire store was an inferno. Seven charred bodies were found in the rubble.

Like the Collinwood fire, the Kresge disaster quickly brought new laws around the country. On July 13, City Council banned sale of fireworks in the city. Other cities picked up the cry for a "safe and sane" Fourth of July.



Flick

Rocky Colavito for Harvey Kuenn may not have been the worst trade ever by a Cleveland baseball executive. During spring training in 1908, the Detroit Tigers offered to trade Ty Cobb for Elmer Flick, even up.

Cobb had hit .350 in 1907 and stolen 49 bases to lead the Tigers to the pennant. Flick had hit .302 and stolen 41 bases. But Cleveland owner Charley Somers turned down the deal; he thought Cobb was too hard to handle.

In one of the most exciting races in pennant history, Cobb led the Tigers to the 1908 championship with a winning percentage of .588. Cleveland was second at .584, and Chicago third at .579.

The disappointing finish marred the thrill of Addie Joss' perfect game against the White Sox on Oct. 2. It was the second in Major League history and the Indians' last until Len Barker's in 1981.



Cobb

The Glenville Race Track had stood on St. Claire Ave. between E. 88th and E. 101st Sts. since 1870. But the new Glenville mayor, Fred H. Goff, declared betting illegal in the suburb. Owners and bettors packed up and headed for the newly organized village of North Randall.

At Hiram House on Orange Ave., the pioneering social settlement house he had founded with other Hiram College students in 1896, George Bellamy started a citizenship school for immigrants. It inspired Americanization programs around the country.

Cleveland invited the schools of the nation to send their 15 best spellers to a bee at the National Education Association convention in June. The home team came out on top, ahead of Pittsburgh, New Orleans and Erie.

New this year: The villages of North Olmsted and Idlewood (which became University Heights in 1925), the Cleveland Athletic Club, the Cleveland Engineering Society, the Chagrin Valley Hunt Club, the Linden Co. (a peculiar abbreviation, later part of Sterling-Lindner-Davis Co., which closed its downtown department store in 1968).

By Fred McGunagle

Fritz Hirter reached into "the burning hell where the children were."

"He caught his girl's hand while she kept her eyes on his face. Then the flames caught her. Her hair became a torch. She gave a last agonized shriek, then the father fell back blinded and beaten."

The Plain Dealer told many such stories.

Florence Sprung threw a ladder up to a window of the burning school. She saw Johnny, her 7-year-old, in the classroom. "Oh, mama," he cried out. "The next instant, Johnny was swept into the struggling mass and pushed out into the hall. It was the last Mrs. Sprung saw of him."

James Turner, 14, was out safely when he realized his younger brothers still were inside. "The boy dashed back into the building, despite the efforts of the rescuers to keep him back. All three children died."

William Schaeffer "caught a glimpse of his 7-year-old son Frank in the burning wedge of humanity. Reaching in, he managed to grasp one of the boy's arms. He pulled — and the arm came off at the shoulder. The child was sacrificed with the others."

The Collinwood school fire of March 4, 1908 — Ash Wednesday — was the worst disaster in Cleveland history. Its toll of 172 children and two teachers exceeds the 129 killed in the East Ohio Gas Co. explosion and fire of 1944, and the 124 in the Cleveland Clinic fire of 1929.

But numbers can't convey the horror of the parents who ran to the burning school, saw their children, heard their screams and only could watch.

Lakeview Elementary School, on Collamer St. in the village of Collinwood, had 396 pupils in 1908. Two years later, Collinwood would become part of Cleveland and the street would become E. 152nd St. The three-story building had a brick exterior, but the interior was all wood.

The fire apparently was caused by an overheated steam pipe that ignited joists under the front stairs. It was



PLAIN DEALER FILE

Investigators look over bodies from the Collinwood fire in a temporary morgue.

discovered when a child who had gone down to the girls' bathroom in the basement saw smoke and told Hirter, the janitor. He quickly sounded the alarm and ran to open the front and rear doors.

In previous fire drills, the school had been emptied in 90 seconds. But the classes marching toward the front doors found fire and smoke coming up the stairs. They panicked and ran to the back entrance, where others were trying to crowd through the narrow vestibule doors.

Somebody fell and others tried to force their way through. One of the exterior doors had blown shut and the children became wedged in the narrow space. Teacher Grace Fiske and her second-graders were trapped between them and the panicky students who continued to spill down the stairs. Soon, the floor gave way and they all plunged into the burning basement.

Classes on upper floors fled using the fire escapes. Others jumped out of windows into the arms of neighbors who had run to the scene.

Katherine Weller got most of her third-grade class out safely, then turned back to try to save other children. Her body was found with theirs.

The bodies were taken to a makeshift morgue at the Collinwood Yards of the New York Central Railroad.

"The ambulances galloped back and forth until their horses were white with lather," The Plain Dealer reported. "The bodies were laid in rows on the ground floor, between the shelves and heaps of castings, and covered with blankets."

Parents were admitted in groups of 10 to identify them. Many were Slovenian immigrants, speaking little or no



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Onlookers, neighbors and grieving families watch the building smolder.

English. "Some screamed, some fainted; others, too deep in sorrow for tears or words, mutely nodded their heads, and the white sheet that marked the identified dead was placed over the corpse."

It turned out that the team of village horses that normally pulled the fire engine was busy dragging a road scraper a mile away. When the volunteer firemen finally arrived with borrowed horses, they could do little. Because the village was debating annexation to Cleveland, it had cut back spending for equipment. Mayor P.S. Westropp said the village did not have a steam engine, and if it had "it would be practically useless. There is but one paved street in the village."

Many blamed janitor Hirter, who lost three of his own children, but an investigation later cleared him. A state fire marshal told reporters the doors of the school opened inward. It wasn't true, as others quickly pointed out, but the false report seared its way indelibly into people's minds.

However, the disaster did bring about laws requiring fire-resistant materials, enclosed stairwells and "panic bars" that trigger door latches when pushed from inside.

Children everywhere were safer because of the terrible fire that happened in Cleveland 90 years ago.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.

MEMBERS AND PUPILS WHO LOST THEIR LIVES IN THE COLLINWOOD SCHOOL FIRE MARCH 4, 1908

NAME	AGE	RESIDENCE
ALICE BROWN	10	152nd St.
ANN BROWN	8	152nd St.
BEATRICE BROWN	6	152nd St.
BESSIE BROWN	4	152nd St.
BETTY BROWN	2	152nd St.
CHARLES BROWN	10	152nd St.
CLARA BROWN	8	152nd St.
EDNA BROWN	6	152nd St.
ETHEL BROWN	4	152nd St.
FLORENCE BROWN	2	152nd St.
FRANK BROWN	10	152nd St.
GEORGE BROWN	8	152nd St.
HENRY BROWN	6	152nd St.
JANE BROWN	4	152nd St.
JAMES BROWN	2	152nd St.
JOHN BROWN	10	152nd St.
MARY BROWN	8	152nd St.
WILLIAM BROWN	6	152nd St.
ALICE SMITH	10	152nd St.
ANN SMITH	8	152nd St.
BEATRICE SMITH	6	152nd St.
BESSIE SMITH	4	152nd St.
BETTY SMITH	2	152nd St.
CHARLES SMITH	10	152nd St.
CLARA SMITH	8	152nd St.
EDNA SMITH	6	152nd St.
ETHEL SMITH	4	152nd St.
FLORENCE SMITH	2	152nd St.
FRANK SMITH	10	152nd St.
GEORGE SMITH	8	152nd St.
HENRY SMITH	6	152nd St.
JANE SMITH	4	152nd St.
JAMES SMITH	2	152nd St.
JOHN SMITH	10	152nd St.
MARY SMITH	8	152nd St.
WILLIAM SMITH	6	152nd St.
ALICE WILSON	10	152nd St.
ANN WILSON	8	152nd St.
BEATRICE WILSON	6	152nd St.
BESSIE WILSON	4	152nd St.
BETTY WILSON	2	152nd St.
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JAMES YOUNG	2	152nd St.
JOHN YOUNG	10	152nd St.
MARY YOUNG	8	152nd St.
WILLIAM YOUNG	6	152nd St.

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The names of the 172 children and two teachers are displayed on a memorial at Lake View Cemetery for those who died March 4, 1908.

LOOKING AT A YEAR

Jan. 1: Georgia's prohibition law takes effect.

Feb. 1: King Carlos of Portugal and his son, the crown prince, are assassinated while riding in their carriage. The ringleader of the assassins is killed.

June 18: Meeting in Chicago, Republicans nominate William Howard Taft, the hand-picked choice of outgoing President Theodore Roosevelt, as the GOP standard-bearer.

Aug. 12: The first Model T rolls off the assembly line in Detroit. The two-seater costs \$850.

Aug. 21: The U.S. War Department pays Wilbur and Orville Wright \$25,000 to build a plane for the Army. The Army requires that the plane stay aloft for an hour at a speed of 40 mph.

Sept. 12: Winston Churchill marries Clementine Hozier in a London church.

Oct. 31: In an interview with the

London Daily Telegraph, Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm makes a series of anti-British statements that send shockwaves through Europe.

Nov. 3: Taft crushes Democrat William Jennings Bryan and is elected the 27th U.S. president.

Dec. 26: Jack Johnson becomes the first black to win the heavyweight boxing championship, with a technical knockout of Tommy Burns in Sydney, Australia.

Born: Lyndon Baines Johnson,

Adam Clayton Powell, Joseph McCarthy, Nelson Rockefeller, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, James Stewart, Rex Harrison, William Saroyan, Thurgood Marshall, Harry Blackmun, Simon Wiesenthal, Edward R. Murrow.

Died: Former President Grover Cleveland; playwright John Synge, author of "Playboy of the Western World"; Russian composer Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov; Tz'u Hsi, empress of China.



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