

# OUR CENTURY

## 1915

# Life becomes settled

### Clevelanders revel in 'good old days' before onset of war

By Fred McGunagle

It was an age of innocence — an innocence about to end. A generation or two later, Clevelanders would look back on the years just before the country entered World War I as “the good old days.” In 1915, it was just ordinary, everyday life. But it did seem to be changing faster than it used to.

Many homes had telephones and electric lights. There were bathrooms in houses, with clawfoot tubs; no longer was it a Saturday night family ritual to boil water and bathe in the wash tub on the kitchen floor. For poor people, though, especially immigrants crowded into cold-water tenements, life was as hard as ever.

The municipal bathhouses Mayor Tom L. Johnson had started were a godsend.

In the typical house, Pa was up before dawn to stoke the furnace and dress, while Ma cooked cereal or bacon and eggs. Then Pa picked up his lunch bucket to catch a streetcar or walk, sometimes two or three miles, to work. He walked on sandstone sidewalks along dirt streets often muddy and rutted. Main streets, at least in the city, were paved with brick, though unevenly because there was no subbase.

He saw more cars and trucks than horses and wagons. Police had patrol cars, although most of the fire engines still were pulled by horses, and the firehouse was an attraction for children.

The upper part of Pa's lunch bucket held a sandwich. The bottom held liquids, though it did not keep them hot or cold. At noon, a worker might fill it with beer from a nearby saloon. In city and suburbs alike, crews were busy turning farmland into subdivisions. They would give their buckets to one of their number who would hang them on a pole over his shoulder and hike to the closest saloon.

Ma, meanwhile, got the children off to school. In most of the city, that meant a multistory building. But in newly annexed areas and the suburbs, it still was a one-room school-



Icemen hoist blocks for delivery.

house with an outdoor bathroom and a pot-bellied stove fed from a coal bin or woodshed. The teacher was a single woman; women could marry or teach, but not both. Most of her pupils would not graduate from high school; quite a few wouldn't enter it.

Ma's morning included a trip to the grocery and then the butcher shop, because without refrigeration, food did not keep long. Some food was packaged, but much was scooped out of barrels. She had vegetables from the garden or, in the winter, from the Mason jars in the pantry.

She could buy bread and milk — and catch up on gossip with her neighbors — when the bakery and dairy wagons made their daily trip down the street. In the summer, farmers and hucksters sold fresh fruit and vegetables from wagons, and the fish peddler came by often. The iceman came every day or two and the coal wagon dumped its load down the coal cellar when ordered. Kids loved the waffle wagon, forerunner of the ice cream truck. The “peppa-rax” man came by weekly to buy old newspapers and rags.

Monday was wash day. Ma filled the wash boiler with water and put it on the stove to heat, then poured it into the washtub and scrubbed the clothes on the washboard. She boiled the whites, soaked the clothes in the rinse tub and hung them in the backyard. Tuesday, she ironed, alternately using two irons heated on the stove.

For Ma and the children home from school, lunch was leftovers or sand-



Cleveland in 1915 was a happy, growing city. In top photo is the Liederkrantz Hall saloon at E. 72nd St. and Kinsman Rd. Free soup was furnished from 9 a.m. to noon, a free lunch in the afternoon and free hasenpfeffer at night. Beer was a nickel a 16-ounce glass; whiskey, 5 cents a shot. The Omaha Club dance hall was upstairs. Above, a Cleveland Fire Department station, with horse-drawn engine.

wiches. Then Ma started dinner. It was easier since most families had cast-iron gas stoves rather than wood-burners, although there were no countertop appliances.

While dinner cooked, Ma cleaned house. Carpet sweepers made it eas-

ier and electric vacuum cleaners were starting to appear. Still, periodically, rugs had to be hung on the clothesline and beaten, a chore for the children.

Pa trudged home after 10 or more hours of work and sat down to a dinner of meat, potatoes and vegetables. Then Pa read his newspaper while Ma and the kids washed and dried the dishes. Or Pa would walk to the corner saloon for a nickel bucket of beer, which Ma might share out of sight of the neighbors.

The main home entertainment was the piano; at least one of the youngsters took lessons. Some families now had Victrolas; the kids would wind them tight and laugh as the records speeded up. Or the family might play cards or a board game.

A few beaux called on Lucilles in their merry Oldsmobiles, but most took the streetcar or walked to her house and courted in the parlor. Or the couple might take the streetcar to a movie house or to one of the municipal dance halls Mayor Newton D. Baker had opened.

The main evening amusement for Ma and Pa was visiting, especially in summer, when families swung on the front porch or strolled over to the neighbor's. The kids played hide-and-seek or baseball in the street until the street lights came on. They were electric now, though on a few streets the lamplighter still made his rounds to light the gas lamps.

And so another ordinary day ended. They were living in the good old days, but the Clevelanders of 1915 didn't realize it yet.

Just like the Clevelanders of 1998.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer. Contributing to this article was his uncle, William McGunagle, who was 18 years old in 1915.

### AT A GLANCE



PD FILE

The Lusitania leaves New York City.

## U-boat sinks liner; Clevelanders mourned

The horror stories were chillingly similar to those of the Titanic three years earlier. But this time it wasn't an iceberg that sank a British liner with prominent Americans aboard: It was a U-boat.

On May 7, a German submarine torpedoed the Lusitania within sight of the Irish coast, killing 1,256 people, including seven Clevelanders. The incident brought the war close to America and America close to war. Col. Roosevelt, as the former president Theodore preferred to be known, called it “a vaster scale of murder than any old-time pirate ever practiced.”

The German government maintained that the liner was armed, although the British and U.S. governments insisted that it was not, and the Germans blamed the Americans for ignoring their warning to avoid British ships. Americans already had been incensed by the German invasion of neutral Belgium and by reports of German atrocities, spread by British propagandists. Cleveland's large German community began to find itself an unpopular minority.

The buzzword became “preparedness.” More than 700 Clevelanders enrolled in the Ohio National Guard Training School for Civilians, and a Women's Auxiliary soon was formed to train women for home-front responsibilities.

The 1913 City Charter called for preferential balloting, intended to give voters a say after their favorite candidate was eliminated. In November, it cost Peter Witt the mayoralty.

Witt, the firebrand who had been city clerk under Tom L. Johnson and traction commissioner under Newton D. Baker, led in first-choice votes, but was defeated by Republican Harry L. Davis when second- and third-choice votes were counted.

The handsome Davis was re-elected in 1917 and in the middle of his second term was elected governor. In the early 1930s, he served another term as mayor.

The release of Napoleon Lajoie at the end of 1914 forced a change in the name of the Naps. Louis “Chief” Sockalexis, a Penobscot Indian, had had a mercurial career with the team, then called the Spiders, in 1897-99. He hit home runs in his first two at-bats and batted .338 in his first season, but alcohol was his downfall and he died a drifter in 1913.

Some sports writers had taken to calling the team the Indians when Sockalexis played, and on that slim connection the team got a new name that would spark protests eight decades later.

First baseman Joe Birmingham became player-manager. Whatever the name, the team was almost as woeful in 1915 as in 1914, finishing 44½ games out of first place. Fans turned to amateur baseball in droves; in October, the White Autos of Cleveland defeated an Omaha team in Brookside Park for the national amateur title before a crowd that was to live in legend as 100,000. (There was no admission fee.) Studies later indicated the hillside could not hold that many.

Twenty-nine makes of cars were on display at the annual Cleveland Automobile Show. Ford offered a new option: an electric self-starter for \$75. A crank remained standard equipment. Twenty-five years later, 26 of the 29 makes had ceased to exist, including all with headquarters in Cleveland.

The North Randall Track introduced auto racing under the lights on Aug. 27. A young daredevil named Eddie Rickenbacker made his debut in a Maxwell Special. Two years later, he became America's most decorated air ace of World War I, and later he was president of Eastern Airlines.

**New this year:** Junior high schools in Cleveland, the Cleveland Planning Commission, the village of Maple Heights, Karamu House, the Musical Arts Association, Hawken School, the Cleveland Motor Plow Co. (now Cletrac Inc.), the Telling-Belle Vernon Co. (now part of the Sealtest Division of Kraftco Corp.).



PLAIN DEALER FILE

Some stores shared a common entrance and formed a natural side-by-side combination for more convenient shopping. Lamden and Fromson's delicatessen and Fine's grocery were close neighbors on Woodland Ave.

### LOOKING AT A YEAR

**Feb. 12:** A massive French offensive in Champagne takes 20,000 German prisoners on its first day.

**March 3:** The film “Birth of a Nation” opens in New York.

**April 5:** The reign of the first black heavyweight boxing champion ends in a Havana, Cuba, ring as Jess Will-

ard knocks out Jack Johnson in the 26th round.

**April 24:** Germany admits using poison gas against French troops.

**Aug. 6:** German troops smash through Russian defense lines around Warsaw, taking control of the Polish city.

**Sept. 26:** An Allied attack in France sends the German army into retreat.

**Nov. 12:** Winston Churchill resigns from the British Cabinet to join Allied troops on the battle line.

**Born:** Frank Sinatra, Moshe Dayan, Orson Welles, Arthur Miller, Ingrid Bergman, Saul Bellow, Billie Holi-

day, Yul Brynner.

**Died:** educator and civil rights leader Booker T. Washington; Paul Ehrlich, the German chemist who developed a cure for syphilis; J.A.H. Murray, creator of the Oxford English Dictionary.



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