

OUR CENTURY

1931

AT A GLANCE

Celebrating the local while jobs are scarce

The Depression was growing worse. An estimated 100,000 Clevelanders were out of work, and those still working had their pay cut and cut again.

Still, Clevelanders found ways to take their minds off their troubles. They celebrated the city's 135th birthday by coming downtown for "Made in Cleveland Week"; stores, banks, hotels and theaters displayed locally made products.

On July 2, the city celebrated the completion of Cleveland Municipal Stadium on time and on budget. At the last minute, city officials had decided to add \$40,000 for field lighting for night events. Bands played and a 2,500-voice chorus sang at the opening ceremonies. "The ancient world never saw a structure like this," said City Manager Daniel Morgan.

The first event was the following night, when 36,936 saw Max Schmeling knock out Young Stribling in the 15th round to retain his world heavyweight boxing championship. Opera Week later that month featured stars from the Metropolitan and Chicago Opera companies performing on a 300-by-125-foot stage across the infield.

The biggest crowd was 70,000 for a Holy Name Society service. In football, the Stadium was the home field of the John Carroll Blue Streaks, and in November, Cathedral Latin won the city high school championship with an 18-0 victory over Central before 19,304 spectators in the first Plain Dealer Charity Game.

The Indians still were playing at League Park, and hopes were high. A local boy, Joe Vosmik, joined Earl Averill and Twitchy Dick Porter to give Cleveland the best outfield in the league. All batted over .300, and Averill hit 32 home runs, a team record. First baseman Ed Morgan batted .351, third-best in the league.

Wes Ferrell won 22 games, including a no-hitter, and also had nine homers and 30 runs batted in, both records for pitchers. But after their usual fast start, the Indians went into their usual fade and finished fourth, 30 games behind Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics.

The hockey Indians had a mediocre season, but now there was a Cleveland Indians team in a third sport. In the first football game in the Stadium, an exhibition, the Indians won, 10-0, over the semi-pro Pennzoil team from Pennsylvania.

The American Basketball League folded after the 1930-31 season, but the Rosenblums continued to play touring teams. One was the New York Renaissance, an all-black team considered the best in the country. All seven of its members, including Cleveland-born Wee Willie Smith, were voted into the National Basketball Hall of Fame in 1963.

Like so many of Cleveland's landmark buildings, Severance Hall was designed by the firm of Walker & Weeks. It cost \$2.5 million, the same amount as the Stadium. On Feb. 5, Nikolai Sokoloff led the Cleveland Orchestra in an opening concert that featured Charles Martin Loeffler's "Evocation," composed for the occasion.

The Georgian "temple of music" had an exterior of Indiana limestone and Ohio sandstone and an interior of bronze and aluminum in blue and white. It held an 1,840-seat auditorium, a 400-seat chamber music hall and a radio broadcasting studio.

The Terminal Group came closer to completion when the Higbee Co. moved back to Public Square in September. Its new building was described as one of the finest department stores in the country, from its unbroken line of 65 street-level display windows to its 10th-floor auditorium.

The National Air Races had first been held at Cleveland Municipal Airport in 1929. Now they returned with the first Bendix Trophy Race, from Los Angeles to Cleveland, as the opening event. Jimmy Doolittle won in a Laird biplane at an average speed of 223.06 mph.

Lowell Bayless maneuvered his GeeBee around the pylons 10 times at an average speed of 236.24 mph to win the Thompson Trophy Race, sponsored by Cleveland's Thompson Products Co.

'Rarin' Bill' silenced

Colorful courtroom scenes follow councilman's death

By Fred McGunagle

Unlike a couple of his City Council colleagues, "Rarin' Bill" Potter had beaten the rap. But now, as 1931 began, minor figures in the city's land scandals had begun to "sing." Word was that William E. Potter, turned out by his constituents and facing a new trial for perjury, would join the chorus.

He never got the chance. On Feb. 8 — the day before his trial was to start — Potter was found dead in a Parkwood Dr. apartment, a bullet through his head. His wife revealed he had been missing since five days earlier, when he called to say he had an appointment and wouldn't be home for dinner.

County Prosecutor Ray T. Miller was sure of the reason: "To my mind," he declared, "the motive for this murder will be found in one of the many ramifications of the Coit-St. Clair land scandal." He speculated Potter had been "put on the spot" by someone who feared what he would reveal secrets.

It was an era of unprecedented scandals around the country. On a visit to Cleveland, old-time muckraker Lincoln Steffens suggested a reason: Prohibition and the gang war-



Above left, Mary Outland Woodfield is sworn in in court. At right, William Potter and his wife in 1931.



CLEVELAND PRESS COLLECTION

fare it brought. "We enact unenforceable laws which have to be broken," he said. "They go out with their guns — they can't be suppressed — and graft gets more firmly entrenched."

In Cleveland, Thomas Fleming, the city's first black city councilman and a key lieutenant of Republican Boss Maurice Maschke, had gone to prison for bribery. Another powerful Republican, Liston G. Schooley, chairman of council's Finance Committee, had been sent up along with his son, Liston Jr., for defrauding the city on a playground purchase. Council Clerk Fred Thomas had been tried, but like Potter escaped conviction.

Now, with the press and public in full cry, police set out to find the mysterious "M.J. Markus" who had rented the Parkwood apartment a week earlier and had not been seen since the murder. Within a week, they had arrested Hymen "Pittsburgh Hymie" Martin, a bootlegger and gambler who, when in Cleveland, hung out with a group police called the E. 105th St. mob.

When brought back from Pittsburgh, The Plain Dealer reported, Martin "was dressed in the approved racketeer style. He has a light gray hat with turn-down brim, a brown

suit, a long blue chinchilla overcoat, a white scarf and highly polished pointed shoes."

Police soon also found Martin's "paramour" — Mary Outland Woodfield, whom the papers dubbed "Akron Mary." (Betty Gray, who gave police a tip about Martin's whereabouts, didn't want to talk to reporters and so became "Bashful Betty.")



Martin

Martin denied renting the apartment or ever meeting Potter. He said he had come to Cleveland with a load of whiskey and registered under an assumed name at the Auditorium Hotel. The day of Potter's disappearance, Martin checked out and drove with Mary to Akron, where they registered under his real name and went out with a number of people who could testify to their presence there.

At Martin's trial in April, the super-

intendent of the apartment building identified Martin as the man who had rented the apartment. Several witnesses said they had seen a man who looked like Martin with Potter. Prosecutor Miller scoffed at Martin's alibi witnesses, but couldn't shake Martin on cross-examination.

In his summation, assistant prosecutor P.L.A. Lieghley ridiculed Martin and his attorney, Samuel Rosenberg, repeatedly referring to them as "Rosey Rosenberg from Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh Hymie."

Defense lawyer William Minshall (later a congressman) pointed out that 10 witnesses backed Martin's Akron alibi and added that the prosecution hadn't shown "a scintilla of evidence" that the murder was connected with the land scandals.

Miller's summation was dramatic. Donning Potter's hat and overcoat, he re-enacted Potter's frantic attempt to ward off the bullet, then put his finger through the bullet hole in the sleeve. Then, The Plain Dealer reported, he picked up the murder weapon.

"He pointed the weapon toward his own head and clicked the trigger. With that the prosecutor sprawled over the davenport that had been in the living room in Suite 4 at 880 Parkwood Dr. . . . The cushions below the prosecutor's head were stained deeply with the blood of the former councilman. . . . "I wouldn't ask anyone to send a man to the electric chair," the prosecutor said to the jurors, "unless he was as low as a rat — as low as a louse." Turning about, Miller pointed directly at Hymie and looking the accused square in the eye, said "And this man is that low!"

The jury took 11 ballots to find Martin guilty, but with a recommendation for mercy. He was sentenced to life. The Court of Appeals, however, overturned the verdict on the grounds the judge should not have allowed Miller to bring in evidence of the land scandals and because of "abusive, unjust and inflammatory personal vituperations" by the prosecution.

By the time of the retrial in June 1932, several prosecution witnesses had disappeared or changed their story. The defense brought out that several prosecution witnesses who remained had been put on salary by the prosecution. The jury deliberated for barely an hour before finding Martin not guilty.

Meanwhile, another jury had spoken. In November 1931, disgusted voters threw out the city manager form of government by a vote of 61,267 to 51,970. They called for an election early in 1932 to choose a mayor and 33 ward councilmen under the old system.

By the second trial, there was a new prosecutor, Frank Cullitan. The former prosecutor had a new title — Mayor Ray T. Miller.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.



PLAIN DEALER FILE

The new Cleveland Stadium in 1931.



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Prosecutor Ray T. Miller demonstrates in court how Potter was found lying on a sofa. The sofa and gun in his hand were found at the scene of Potter's death.

LOOKING AT A YEAR

Jan. 1: Unemployment in the United States surpasses the 4 million mark, prompting President Herbert Hoover to urge Congress to provide \$150 million for public works jobs.

March 18: The City Affairs Committee charges New York Mayor Jimmy Walker with inefficiency and incompetence.

May 1: The Empire State Building, the world's tallest structure, opens in New York.

May 31: The split between the Vatican and Italy's government widens as Pope Pius XI denounces Mussolini's Fascist Party as one "given to hate, to irreverence and to violence."

Aug. 8: A crowd of 150,000 in Akron

gather for the christening of the U.S.S. Akron, the Goodyear Corp.'s first dirigible.

Sept. 4: Maj. Jimmy Doolittle sets a cross-country flying record, traveling from California to Newark, N.J., in 11 hours, 16 minutes.

Oct. 24: Al Capone is sentenced to

11 years in prison for income tax evasion.

Born: Mikhail Gorbachev, Boris Yeltsin, Rupert Murdoch, Dan Rather, Toni Morrison, James Earl Jones, James Dean, Desmond Tutu.

Died: Thomas Edison, Knute Rockne, French war hero Marshal Joffre.

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