

OUR CENTURY

1934

AT A GLANCE



PD FILE

A shantytown at Whiskey Island, east of E. 9th St.

Politics mirror bad U.S. economy

Never had there been so much political agitation. Louisiana Gov. Huey Long, who gloried in the nickname “the Kingfish,” proclaimed “Every man a king!” until he was assassinated. Gerald L.K. Smith led the isolationist America First Party.

The elderly rallied behind Dr. Francis Townsend’s Townsend Plan to pay them \$200 a month so they could spend the nation into prosperity. From Detroit, Father Charles Coughlin, “the radio priest,” assailed bankers and Jews until his bishop silenced him.

The school superintendent of Gary, Ind., declared that he had been offered \$1 million to lead a Communist plot to seize the government. In San Diego, a fascist group calling itself the Silver Shirts planned to attack the Communist May Day Parade, then seize City Hall and “liquidate” a Jewish deputy sheriff.

On Oct. 28, about 150 Communists stormed the doors of Cleveland City Hall during a City Council meeting in an effort to present demands for greater relief for the poor. Police blocked their entrance, but arranged for their leaders to meet with Mayor Harry L. Davis. Party members vowed to demonstrate at the homes of council members.

Still, a Chamber of Commerce survey showed manufacturing employment up 5.5 percent over 1933. And at the shantytown at the city dump on the lakefront, residents told reporter Roeliff Loveland they believed 1935 would be better.

Manager Walter Johnson didn’t get along with sportswriters or his own players, but the Indians rallied in September for a third-place finish and he was rehired. Mel Harder won 20 games, in addition to the All-Star game in New York’s Polo Grounds.

Monte Pearson won 18 games, while first baseman Hal Trosky batted .330 with 35 home runs, an Indians record. Earl Averill batted .313, and reached base nine straight times in a doubleheader. The keystone combination of shortstop Bill Knickerbocker and second baseman Odell Hale hit .317 and .302 respectively.

But the League Park stands looked nearly as empty as those in the Stadium had looked the previous year.

The Work Projects Administration provided the country with plenty of jokes about WPA workers leaning on shovels or being mistaken for statues. But it also provided more than 40,000 unemployed Cuyahoga County residents with jobs paying \$60 a month.

And it expanded the airport, renovated Public Hall, built roads and bridges, laid sewers, guarded school crossings, built three public housing projects, the City Greenhouse, the Donald Gray Gardens by the Stadium and Monkey Island at the zoo. It conducted public health surveys, planted trees, painted murals and even wrote and put on plays — all projects beyond the means of strapped local governments.

Radio was the cheapest entertainment — at least for those who could afford to buy one. WTAM, WGAR, WHK and WJAY each were on the air from 12 to 18 hours a day. All of the shows were live and most were local. Performers like the Singing Stranger, the Barnbusters, Gumming’s Band and Clara, Lu and Em had their regular 15 minutes a day.

Housewives could catch “Ma Perkins” in the afternoon. Youngsters home from school could listen to “Freckles” and “Jack Armstrong (the All-American Boy).” Jack Benny and Kate Smith were among the stars in the evening.

A survey by the Real Property Inventory found that 9 percent of Cuyahoga County homes still lacked bathtubs or showers and 25 percent lacked central heating. Although 56 percent of households owned automobiles, only 38 percent had telephones.

The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals estimated there were 35,000 starlings in the area of Public Square. A proposal to get rid of them with poison gas was pigeon-holed.

Risking life and limb for a thrill



WESTERN RESERVE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Barnstorming pilot Roscoe Turner, right, mugs for the camera with Frederick Crawford, left, after winning a Thompson Trophy race. Crawford was president of Thompson Products, which made auto and aircraft engine parts.

Barnstorming aviators help relieve drudgery of Depression

By Fred McGunagle

They lived in fame or died in flame. On Labor Day weekend in 1934, Doug Davis did both.

At 3:46 p.m. on Friday, Aug. 31, stunt pilots and parachutists were interrupted as Davis landed in front of 38,000 spectators at Cleveland Municipal Airport. He had made the trip from Burbank, Calif., in nine hours, 26 minutes to win the Bendix Trophy.

He had flown through storms that

under 1,000 cubic centimeters. His speed of 306 mph was a record.

On Labor Day, two days later, Davis was the favorite in the 100-mile, 10-lap, \$10,000 Thompson Trophy race, sponsored by Cleveland’s Thompson Products Corp. Extra grandstands and chairs had been rushed to the airport to bring seating to 100,000, at \$1 for adults and 50 cents for children. Along the course, an estimated 150,000 more watched. Farmers in North Olmsted and Middleburg Heights charged a dime to park in their fields.

Davis jumped off to a quick lead and after seven laps appeared to have the race won. But in a moment of confusion, he missed No. 2 pylon northwest of the airport. He threw his plane into a tight upward right turn to circle back around it.

He was out of sight from the airport grandstand, which faced east. Suddenly, the announcer in the airport tower shouted: “Davis is out of the race! He is going to crash!”

Two minutes later, he told the crowd Davis had parachuted safely to the ground. Minutes later, he had to announce that the first report had been false: Davis was dead. “With a spontaneous movement,” The Plain Dealer reported, “the spectators bared their heads and stood in silent tribute to the daring Southern boy who had flown his last race.”

Witnesses near the pylon described what had happened: Davis was at 800 feet when something fell from the plane. He went into a tailspin, pulled out momentarily, then suddenly dived straight toward the ground. He crashed into a field near Lorain and Gessner roads in North Olmsted and was killed instantly.

It was determined later that a section of wing had come loose from the plane during the tight turn. Crowds rushed to the scene and fought to

grab parts from the wreck as souvenirs. A small boy tried to pull the aviator’s cap from Davis’ head. As the National Guard tried to load wreckage on a truck, the mob broke through the lines and took all but the engine. “The crowd seemed to be mad with excitement,” a police lieutenant said.

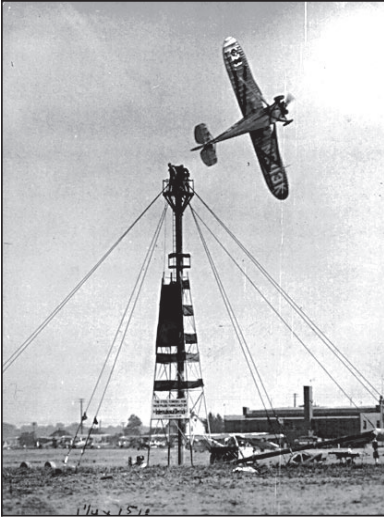
Davis was 33, and had been the youngest Army Air Corps pilot in World War I when he was commissioned at 17. He had joined the barnstorming circuit when the war ended. He had won the first Thompson Trophy in 1929, which created a grim statistic: Of the winners of the first five races, only Jimmie Doolittle survived. Four others had died in crashes.

The aviators were a colorful group, and none more than Roscoe Turner, who went on to win the race after Davis’ crash. Turner had a flare for self-promotion; he wore uniforms of his own design and often flew with his pet lion cub, though not in races.

Turner had been a contestant in Friday’s Bendix race, but an oil leak prevented him from taking off. He and two other contestants who failed to take off got a second chance when backers put up \$3,500 for a race the next day to New York via Cleveland.

He won it, landing at Municipal Airport for six minutes en route to refuel. He reached New York in a record cross-country time of 10 hours, 2 minutes, 51 seconds, covering the 2,475 miles at an average speed of 246 mph. Turner later won the 1938 and 1939 Thompson races, retiring the trophy, and then retired himself.

The National Air Races began in Los Angeles in 1920. They were held in Cleveland in 1929, 1931-32, 1934-35 and 1937-39. After World War II, they returned from 1946-49. In the 1949 Thompson race, Bill Odom crashed into a house in Berea,



PLAIN DEALER FILE

A plane banks sharply around the home pylon during the National Air Races in 1929.

killing himself and a couple and their 13-month-old son. That was the end of air races in Cleveland, though since 1964, the National Air Show has been held on Labor Day weekend.

The races of the 1930s did more than provide entertainment for a Depression-weary city. At a time when the military had little money for research, they led to advances that proved vital during World War II.

A shaken Roscoe Turner had put it this way minutes after Davis’ death. Accepting the Thompson Trophy, he said: “People go through sacrifice to advance aviation — sacrifice of time and money and labor — and life.”

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.

LOOKING AT A YEAR

April 8: Rioting breaks out during a New York rally that attracts more than 9,000 supporters of Adolf Hitler.

May 23: Bank robbers Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow are killed during a bloody shootout with the Texas Rangers in Louisiana.

June 30: In what becomes known as

the “night of the long knives,” German troops loyal to Hitler brutally snuff out a brewing revolt among German storm troopers.

July 13: Heinrich Himmler is given command of Germany’s concentration camps.

July 22: Notorious bank robber and

killer John Dillinger is gunned down in front of a Chicago movie theater.

Nov. 6: A new rival emerges to challenge the government of Chinese General Chiang Kai-shek. He is Mao Tse-tung, the Communist Party leader who recently had spent years in hiding.

Born: Carl Sagan, Hank Aaron, Yuri Gagarin, Sophia Loren, Shirley McLaine, Winnie Mandela, Gloria Steinem, Ralph Nader.

Died: German war commander Paul von Hindenburg, Japanese admiral Heihachiro Togo, American beer baron August Busch, baseball manager John McGraw.

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