

OUR CENTURY

1953

AT A GLANCE

‘Forgotten war’ delays city’s industrial decline

The negotiators at Panmunjom finally reached agreement, leaving the border between North and South Korea just about where it had been three years earlier when the Korean War started. Two Clevelanders were among the first American prisoners released.

All told, 33,629 Americans were killed in the war and 103,284 wounded. Cuyahoga County sent 44,000 of its sons and daughters to war; 1,161 did not return.

In “The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History,” David Van Tassel writes, “There was no public rejoicing when the final cease-fire was signed at Panmunjom July 27, 1953, just a general sigh of relief and an easing of tension.

“For Cleveland, the period marked the high tide of its industrial growth, with steel production records set in 1952 and 1953. Steel prices had doubled after a long strike in the spring of 1953, and all apparent signs presaged a bright future for the seventh-largest city in the nation.

“The impetus of the ‘forgotten war,’ by thrusting it to new levels of prosperity, had delayed the city’s decline as an industrial and population center by a few years.”



PLAIN DEALER FILE

Anthony Celebrezze and his wife, Anne.

Mayor Thomas Burke’s announcement in May that he would not seek a fifth term meant there would be a wide-open election. Democratic Chairman Ray T. Miller put up County Engineer Albert S. Porter, who was endorsed by The Plain Dealer. Judge William McDermott, who had come within 22,000 votes of beating Burke in 1951, was backed by the Republicans and the Cleveland News.

The Press, in front-page editorials denouncing the “party machines,” called for the election of diminutive state Sen. Anthony Celebrezze, an independent Democrat who had been born in Italy. In the primary, Celebrezze and Porter were expected to battle for the spot behind McDermott. Instead, Celebrezze ran first, sweeping ethnic neighborhoods and winning 21 of the city’s 33 wards.

In the general election, McDermott focused his attack on Ward 16 Councilman Jack P. Russell, who had been found in a Parma bar with notorious racketeer Alex “Shondor” Birns. As a Ray T. Martin lieutenant, Russell had loyally backed Porter in the primary, but he endorsed Celebrezze in the general election.

McDermott called on Celebrezze to repudiate Russell’s support. “I say there is no place in Cleveland public life for a man who consorts with Shondor Birns,” he thundered.

Though the Democratic Party refused to contribute to Celebrezze’s campaign, he won in November by 56,000 votes to become Cleveland’s first foreign-born mayor. Press Editor Louis B. Seltzer emerged as the city’s king-maker.

It was Al Rosen’s year. The Indians’ third baseman hit a league-leading 43 home runs, breaking Hal Trosky’s record of 42, and drove in a league-leading 145 runs. He missed the triple crown by one point, batting .336 to Mickey Vernon’s .337, and became the first player since Ty Cobb to be named the American League’s Most Valuable Player by unanimous vote.

The “Big Three” had another good year — 21 wins for Bob Lemon, 18 for Mike Garcia and 17 for Early Wynn, and Bob Feller rebounded from his first losing season to win 10. But Casey Stengel’s New York Yankees won their fifth straight pennant. For the third straight year, Al Lopez’s Indians finished second. Despite tension between Lopez and Vice President Hank Greenberg, Lopez was given a new two-year contract.

Before the season, Mickey McBride sold the Browns to a group headed by David Jones for \$600,000, the most ever paid for a professional sports franchise. Coach Paul Brown traded a defensive back named Don Shula, but he drafted a linebacker named Chuck Noll. Both later would be listed among the game’s great coaches.

The team won its first 10 games en route to its eighth straight division championship. Against San Francisco, Otto Graham was knocked out of the game by an elbow from the 49ers’ Art Michalik. It took 15 stitches to sew up the cut, but Brown told trainer Morrie Kono to make a shield that would allow Graham to continue. Graham came back in the second half to complete nine of 10 passes, engineering a Browns’ victory.

But for the third straight year, the Browns lost the NFL title game — the second in a row to the Detroit Lions. This one was a heart-breaker, with Bobby Layne throwing a touch-down pass to Jim Doran with two minutes left for a 17-16 Lions win.

Tornado, blasts rock West Side

Death and destruction come from above and below

By Fred McGunagle

Louis Balint was watching “I Love Lucy” when he heard the terrible shrieking noise getting closer and closer. He yelled to his wife to pull down the blinds so the glass wouldn’t fly around.

“I rushed to Danny’s crib — I had my hands on it and was touching it,” he said. “Then it hit. The wind tore the baby right out of my hands. Next thing I knew I was under timbers in the back yard.”

It was hours later — early on the morning of June 9 — that his W. 117th St. neighbors found 3-month-old Danny Balint crushed against the wall of a garage five houses away, where the tornado had hurled him. By then, eight other West Siders were dead.

Five, including a 13-month-old baby, were found in the debris of a house on W. 28th St. An Elton Ave. woman died when her back porch fell on her. A Clinton Ave. man was electrocuted by a downed power line. A W. 59th St. man died of a heart attack after his chimney was blown off.

Three hundred people were injured. More than 200 were homeless. Hundreds of cars were damaged by falling trees and poles. But the human toll could have been much worse. The Weather Bureau’s new tornado watch system had alerted radio and television stations, which put out the word at 8:55 p.m., 50 minutes before the tornado was spotted crossing the northwest corner of Cleveland Hopkins Airport.

The stations — all but WSRS in Cleveland Heights — were knocked off the air when the storm hit. Callers jammed the phone lines to police, newspapers and the Illuminating Co.

The twister had touched down along a route from the airport to the lake at E. 40th St., but the worst-hit areas were between W. 117th and W. 130th Sts. south of Lorain Ave., and around Franklin Circle. Downed trees made streets impassable to fire engines and ambulances.

Emergency rooms were jammed at Lutheran, St. John’s and Fairview Park hospitals (the last still on Franklin Blvd.). With no power, doctors and nurses worked by flashlight and candlelight.

Mayor Thomas Burke called for the National Guard and summoned his Cabinet to an emergency session. Cleveland Police Chief Frank Story called out extra patrolmen and toured the West Side, directing operations. Firefighters searched the rubble for more victims.

Streetcars and buses were trapped by fallen trees and utility poles. Other streetcars were stranded on the lower level of the Detroit-Superior High Level Bridge when power went off. On Vincent Ave. downtown, thou-



PLAIN DEALER FILE PHOTOS

The aftermath of an underground explosion, looking north on W. 117th St. from Berea Rd. The blast lifted the street and tossed cars like toys.

sands scattered when the Fun for Funds Fair was caught in a torrent of water from the skies and from backed-up sewers; some fair-goers had to be rescued from collapsed tents.

The Red Cross set up an emergency shelter at Sts. Philip and James Catholic Church on Bosworth Rd. and sent mobile canteens through the area with food for rescue workers and the homeless. Its resources were strained; in one of the worst tornado periods in history, 115 had been killed in Flint, Mich., the same day and 90 died in Worcester, Mass., the next day.

In the morning, traffic in the area was hopelessly snarled. Buses were detoured on the Cleveland Transit System and Lakewood Rapid Transit lines. Thirteen schools had to close because of damage. Church steeples were toppled and stained-glass windows shattered. St. Stephen Catholic Church sustained an estimated \$200,000 to \$500,000 damage. Services were moved to the school.

It took a week to clear all of the streets and months to repair structural damage, estimated at \$50 million. Louis Balint mourned that he didn’t even have pictures of his son. “They were in the dresser in our bed-



Railroad tracks and streets caved in after the mysterious explosion along W. 117th St.



AL SCHAEFER/ NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

The roof and portions of the second story of this house on Cleveland’s West Side were removed by the 1953 tornado. This photo appeared in the book “Thunder in the Heartland.”

room,” he said. “There isn’t any dresser or bedroom anymore.”

Three months after death and destruction from above, the West Side was struck from below. On Sept. 10, at the peak of the evening rush hour, an underground explosion hurled pavement and cars into the air along W. 117th St. from Lake Ave. to Berea Rd. on the Lakewood-Cleveland border.

“Autos were crushed under chunks of concrete and manhole covers. Sidewalks disappeared. Water from broken mains flooded the area,” The Plain Dealer reported.

A Parma woman was killed when her car was crushed by falling debris. Fifty-eight others were admitted to St. John’s, Lakewood, Lutheran, Fairview Park, City and Berea Community hospitals. A woman was trapped in her car when another car landed on it; a priest gave her last rites while firefighters worked to free her.

“W. 117th looked like the aftermath of a bombing,” The Plain Dealer said. “The pavement was alternately lifted and sunken 5 or 6 feet. A deep trench was blasted out from a point 100 yards south of Berea Rd. to Madison

Ave. Here, concrete chunks 20 feet long and 10 feet wide were tossed about like jackstraws.”

A resident of an apartment building at W. 117th and Detroit Ave. narrowly escaped injury when a manhole cover came crashing through his fourth-floor flat. Another cover sailed through the roof of a two-story house and landed in the kitchen, just missing a woman who was preparing dinner.

A second explosion an hour later sent manhole covers flying at W. 104th St. and Clifton Rd., but no one was injured. Once more, the West Side was caught in a gigantic snarl as homebound motorists were stopped dead. So did trains on the Nickel Plate Railroad.

The Red Cross came to the aid of West Siders again, sending a tank truck to a gas station at W. 117th and Franklin. Neighbors came with pails, kettles and cooking pots to carry water home.

Investigators ruled out sewer gas as a cause of the explosion. Suspicions centered on industries that could have dumped chemicals into the sewer system.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.

LOOKING AT A YEAR

March 5: Russian dictator Josef Stalin, 73, dies of a massive brain hemorrhage suffered four days earlier.

March 26: Dr. Jonas Salk’s vaccine against polio tests successfully in both adults and children.

May 4: Ernest Hemingway wins the Pulitzer Prize for his novel “The Old Man and the Sea.”

June 2: New Zealand mountaineer Edmund Hillary and his guide become the first people to scale Mount Everest.

June 18: Spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are executed for revealing America’s atomic bomb secrets to the Soviet Union.

July 28: A cease-fire in Korea

brings an end to that nation’s 3-year-old war.

Sept. 12: Sen. John F. Kennedy marries Jacqueline Lee Bouvier.

Sept. 30: California Gov. Earl Warren is chosen chief justice of the United States.

Dec. 10: Winston Churchill wins the Nobel Prize for literature.

Born: Tim Allen, Michael Bolton, Marcia Clark, Mary Matalin.

Died: Ohio Sen. Robert A. Taft, American playwright Eugene O’Neill, Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, American astronomer Edwin Hubble, American athlete Jim Thorpe, U.S. Chief Justice Frederick Vinson, country music star Hank Williams.