

OUR CENTURY

1959

AT A GLANCE

Seaway celebration soggy and cold

“MONTREAL, April 25 — Gates of the St. Lawrence Seaway were open wide tonight to allow an armada of heavily loaded ships to make their way to Cleveland and other Great Lakes ports,” wrote Plain Dealer marine editor Homer Hendrickson.

“Ships flying the flags of many nations and loaded with thousands of tons of cargo poured through the new waterway that today created the fourth American seacoast.”

The first to stop in Cleveland — the self-proclaimed new “gangplank to the world” — was the Prins Willem II on April 28. A dozen small craft braved 5-foot waves to welcome it, and two fireboats shot streams of water into the rain that was falling.

The excursion boat “Good Time” choppily made its way to meet with Mayor Anthony Celebrezze and other dignitaries below, fighting seasickness.

A marching band and baton twirlers were waiting to escort the captain, but marchers assembled on the Mall in soaking wet costumes of Seaway nations had headed for the Arcade, where the parade was to end.

Cleveland’s enthusiasm also was dampened by the fact that the 258-foot Dutch freighter had made many previous visits to Cleveland. The city had tempered its original high hopes for the Seaway, which was hampered by its seven-month season, its inability to handle the largest ships and the political clout in Congress of East Coast ports.



PD FILE

Birns

A small-time racketeer named Clarence “Sonny” Coleman was shot three times early April 14 by a gunman leaning out the window of a car. The driver of the car, Coleman told police, was Shondor Birns. It made sense: Word on the street was that it was Coleman who had fired a bullet that narrowly missed Birns in the driveway of his home three weeks earlier.

Police went to Birns’ home on Judson Dr. and found the hood of his car still warm. He came to the door in pajamas and bathrobe and told them he had been asleep. They took him to Central Station. Reporters, tipped off, were waiting at the booking window. Birns, still in his bathrobe, saw them and grinned. “Hi, boys,” he said.

One witness against Birns disappeared before the trial. Coleman surprised prosecutors when he said on the witness stand that he must have been wrong — it couldn’t have been Shondor who shot him. He immediately was arrested as a material witness and brought back to testify that it was Shondor after all.

The jury, unsure it could believe anything Coleman said, acquitted Birns. It was his seventh victory in nine felony trials. Birns left the courtroom “jubilant and smiling,” according to The Plain Dealer.

General Manager Frank Lane started a ruckus in the off-season by indicating he might trade Rocky Colavito. A 14-year-old Hinckley girl wrote him that “You might as well go out and shoot yourself before the public does.” Lane didn’t trade the Rock, but he made 14 other transactions involving 33 players.

The Indians had their best team since the pennant year of 1954. Colavito tied for the league lead with 42 home runs, four of them in one game at Baltimore. A Lane pickup named Tito Francona batted .363. Minnie Minoso hit .302. The pitching staff included Cal McLish (19 wins), Gary Bell (16), Jim Perry (12) and Jim “Mudcat” Grant (10). Herb Score started well, but struggled to a 9-11 season.

In September, manager Joe Gordon announced he would quit after the season, whether or not the Indians won the pennant. Lane fired him on the spot and set out to sign Leo Durocher, but they couldn’t agree on terms. Lane called a press conference to introduce his new manager. It was Joe Gordon, who got a contract extension and a raise.

Meanwhile, back on the playing field, the Indians slumped at the close and finished five games behind the “go go” Chicago White Sox. Attendance rose to 1.5 million, meaning Lane collected a nickel apiece for the last 700,000.

That enraged the fans. Lane, who loved any kind of publicity, agreed to dedicate a new Lakewood metered municipal parking lot. With Mayor Frank Celeste beside him, he posed for photographers dropping in the first nickel.

It was a forgettable year for the Browns, though Jim Brown led the NFL in rushing for the third straight year and set a new season record with 290 carries. The team’s 7-5 record included a 48-7 humiliation by the New York Giants.

The Natural History Museum had a new star: “Hap” the dinosaur. The 70-foot skeleton was the largest haplocanthosaurus ever found.



PLAIN DEALER FILE PHOTOS

Ice chunks from the flood, in Clifton Lagoon at the mouth of the Rocky River, Jan. 21, 1959.

Waterlogged in January

Warm weather spurs floods, killing 7 here, ravaging the state

By Fred McGunagle

The temperature was 60 degrees at 9 a.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 21. The snow on the ground was melting rapidly, but the frozen ground couldn’t hold it. Then the cold front hit and the thermometer plummeted in a driving rain with winds up to 80 mph. By midday, streets and basements were flooded.

Eastlake firemen in rowboats rescued scores of residents along the Chagrin River. A Coast Guard boat rescued a Willoughby Hills teacher, his wife and mother from a home on Milann Dr., but the surging current turned the boat over. The family and two of their rescuers grabbed onto tree branches but couldn’t hold on. “I can still hear them screaming for help,” said another would-be rescuer from the hospital where he was treated for exposure.

Seventy people in Valley View were rescued by boats, but two truck drivers — one a National Guardsman — drowned on flooded Canal Rd. when they inadvertently drove into the Ohio Canal. The Red Cross rushed in 100 beds to an emergency shelter at Cuyahoga Heights High School.

A group at the Cleveland Yachting Club had their lunch interrupted when the Rocky River came streaming under the clubhouse door. They ran out, but most were unable to start their cars. They waded to safety through waist-deep water, but 20 Yacht Club Island residents and another 20 from the Clifton Lagoons on the Lakewood side had to be rescued. Damage to boats was estimated at \$1 million. The flooding wasn’t limited to valleys. South Euclid firemen rowed to the rescue of four motorists trapped on Liberty Rd. Northfield Rd. in Warrensville Heights was under 3 feet of water.

In Brecksville, a mudslide derailed a three-locomotive train. Avon High School classes were canceled abruptly when water started coming in under the doors. At the zoo in Brookside Park, 165 of the 167 rep-



Snow and slush after the flood of 1959: at the corner of Euclid Ave. and E. 107th St.

tiles drowned, along with other rare animals. The monkeys escaped by climbing to the top of their winter quarters.

It was the wettest January day in Weather Bureau history, with 2.29 inches of rain, which would have been 20 inches of snow had the temperature been lower. It did turn into snow as the thermometer fell to near zero by early Thursday, but then it let up.

As families started to return to their mud-caked homes, another storm hit. The Coast Guard rescued four men from McGarvey’s Dockside Restaurant in Vermilion. The floods had struck all of Ohio, forcing 49,000 people from their homes and destroying 31 bridges. Gov. Michael DiSalle, touring flood-ravaged Mount Vernon, put damage at \$100 million. President Dwight Eisenhower declared the state a disaster area.



A floating car at North Park and Coventry after the flood.

It was the worst flood in Ohio since 1913, when 292 died, mostly in Dayton, Hamilton and other cities along the Scioto River. Cleveland got off relatively easy then.

This time, seven of the 16 statewide

deaths were in the Cleveland area and damage was spread across the metropolitan area.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.

LOOKING AT A YEAR



Holiday

Jan. 3: Alaska becomes the 49th and largest state.

Jan. 16: Revolutionary forces led by Fidel Castro overthrow the Cuban government.

Feb. 3: Rock ‘n’ roll singers Buddy Holly, the “Big Bopper” and Richie Valens die in a plane crash in Iowa.

May 28: Two monkeys survive a 1,700-mile trip in space aboard a U.S. satellite.

June 26: Sweden’s Ingemar Johansson knocks out Floyd Patterson to win the world heavyweight boxing championship.

July 25: Vice President Richard Nixon engages in an angry exchange with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev inside a kitchen.

Aug. 21: Hawaii becomes the 50th state.

Nov. 16: The musical “The Sound of Music” opens on Broadway.

Born: Emma Thompson, Randy Travis, Weird Al Yankovic, Hal Hartley.

Died: American lawyer and diplomat John Foster Dulles, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, jazz great Billie Holiday, actress Ethel Barrymore,



Yankovic

American Gen. George Marshall.