

OUR CENTURY

1999

AT A GLANCE

Mayor is at the center of battle over Klan rally

It was a year of sensational charges leveled by and at Mayor Michael White. Most involved the police.

Their feud had been building since a March arbitrator's ruling denying police a \$500-a-year raise. In June, 300 off-duty police rallied outside the Justice Center to protest low pay and poorly maintained cars.

Police anger boiled over in July when White said Ku Klux Klan members planning an Aug. 21 rally could use the police garage to change into their robes and hoods.

George Forbes, the former City Council president who was now president of the Cleveland NAACP branch, was even more irate. He accused White of coddling the Klan.

Two weeks later, White called a press conference to charge that police had scrawled racist and Nazi graffiti on the walls of police stations and worn pins symbolizing white power. "The mayor's claims are outrageous and inciteful," declared an officer of the Cleveland Police Patrolman's Association.

White admitted he had no evidence of the charges, but said he had received a tip from a person he trusted. He asked the FBI and the Justice Department to look into his charges. At year's end, nothing had been heard of them.

Relations between White and Forbes deteriorated. Forbes wrote an obscene letter to White and invited him to release it to the media. At a private meeting, Forbes threw various objects at White, who — depending on who was telling the story — ran from the room or stood his ground calmly.

Their feud made a rally that might otherwise have drawn little attention a major story. On the day of the rally, police turned downtown into a virtual armed camp. Merchants worried about the safety of their customers. As it turned out, Klan leaders made their speeches to a small crowd, then left quietly. Police were still furious. They staged a traffic ticket slowdown in protest.

In October, White made the most sensational charge of all. He said his school officials had uncovered plans for a Columbine High-type massacre by 11 students at South High School.

The students and their parents said there had been nothing more than a prank. White won praise for his quick action, but as time went by critics charged the case had been botched. Police said White's airing of accusations before the students were questioned allowed them to get together on their stories. At yearend, five students awaited hearings in Juvenile Court.

Jay Westbrook had been Cleveland City Council president for more than nine years — longer than anybody but Forbes. He had survived repeated overthrow attempts by critics who called him a stooge for the mayor. In November, his critics came up with the 11 votes they needed. In his place they installed 22-year Councilman Michael Polensek, a frequent critic of White.

As the year started, winter grabbed Cleveland and wouldn't let go. A Jan. 2 storm stranded 300 passengers at the Greyhound bus station and canceled flights at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport. With more snow predicted, Clevelanders jammed grocery stores to stock up on food.

The snow let up briefly, then returned with a vengeance. Traffic crawled. Homeless shelters ran out of blankets. Schools closed; snow-bound kids overloaded phone lines. With temperatures below zero, White canceled refuse pickup, angering constituents.

Nicholas Schneider, 90, left his Parma home with his wife, Betty, 86, for a doctor's appointment. Lost and disoriented, they drove around for five hours. In Warrensville Heights, Mrs. Schneider went to ask directions. Her husband drove off without her. He was found in Painesville, his car stuck in a snowdrift and on fire. Bystanders were unable to save him.

Pope John Paul II was among those who asked Gov. Bob Taft to spare Wilford Berry's life. Wilford Berry was not; he refused to appeal his sentence.

On Feb. 19, at the Southern Ohio Correction Facility in Lucasville, Berry was given a lethal injection, becoming the first person executed in Ohio in 36 years. He had been convicted of the 1989 murder of Cleveland baker Charles Mitroff Jr.

The June robbery-murder of Susan Locke alarmed downtown workers. She had been beaten to death with a baseball bat at her desk in the Bond Court Office Building.

In October, Victor Washington was arrested on the basis of handwriting analysis of signatures in a lobby sign-in book. In December, before he could be tried, he was found dead of cardiac arrest in his County Jail cell.

A strike delayed the start of the 1998-99 National Basketball Association season. With veteran star Shawn Kemp and two promising second-year players, center Zydrunas Ilgauskas and point guard Brevin Knight, the Cavaliers were contenders. But the season had barely begun when Ilgauskas was lost with a broken foot.

The Cavs still appeared likely to make the playoffs until an injury ended Kemp's season. They finished 22-28. After six years as coach, Mike Fratello was fired — to his shock and that of many fans.

Wayne Embry, soon to be inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame, announced that he would step down after 13 years as general manager in favor of his assistant, Jim Paxson. The coach for 1999-2000 was Randy Wittman, who had been an assistant with the Minnesota Timberwolves.



GUS CHAN / PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPHER

Opening kickoff for the new Browns, Sept. 12, 1999.

Seeking an identity for the next century

Drew Carey says it's time to 'shut up' about the Cleveland jokes, but doubt still struggles with pride in the city's psyche

By Fred McGunagle

The Marine Drum and Bugle Corps marched on the bright green grass. Air Force jets roared across the black sky. Fireworks thundered on all sides of the new Browns Stadium.

Down on the field, the smoke drifted away. Drew Carey couldn't contain himself. "Everyone who ever told a Cleveland joke or laughed at a Cleveland joke," he shouted, "YOU CAN NOW SHUT UP!"

A roar came from 72,000 throats as a team emerged through an inflatable tunnel shaped like a football helmet. It continued as the players lined up for the kickoff. It crescendoed as Phil Dawson sent the ball floating toward the Pittsburgh Steelers.

The Browns were back!

The fans were ready. They had been starved for football since Art Modell shocked the country by moving the 50-year-old franchise to Baltimore three years earlier.

They had mobbed the Pro Football Hall of Fame for the expansion draft. Guard Jim Pyne, the first player taken, got the biggest ovation an offensive lineman ever received. When the Browns' first choice in the regular draft was University of Kentucky quarterback Tim Couch — who, like Bernie Kosar, wanted to play for the Browns — he became an instant hero.

The opening exhibition was the Hall of Fame Game in Canton. When the Browns beat the storied Dallas Cowboys, 20-17, in overtime, exuberant fans thought they saw the first first-year team that would reach the Super Bowl.

Unfortunately for the Browns, the ball that Dawson kicked on Sept. 12 came down. So did the fans' hopes. The Browns managed only two first downs in a 43-0 shellacking at the hands of the Steelers.

The losses continued for seven weeks, including a humiliating defeat by Modell's team, now called the Ravens, and a last-minute loss to Cincinnati.

Then in New Orleans, with time expiring, Couch threw a pass from his own 44. As players from both teams

fought for it, it bounced into the hands of Cleveland's Kevin Johnson in the end zone.

The Browns had a 21-16 win. As the players jumped up and down in celebration, fans in living rooms across Northeast Ohio jumped up and down with them. *We won!*

There was another joyous celebration when — again with time expiring — Dawson's field goal sailed through the uprights in Three Rivers Stadium. The Browns had beaten their old rival, the Steelers — the team that ruined their opening night — by a score of 16-15.

But the losses resumed. Gloomy fans faced the fact: Clevelanders would have to wait to exclaim, "We're No. 1!"

Indians fans would have to wait, too, though the team came oh-so-close. For the fifth straight year, they won the American League Central Division. They had the Boston Red Sox down 0-2 in a best-of-five series with Dave Burba holding a 1-0 led in the fourth inning. Then Burba hurt his arm and had to leave. Boston won, 9-3. The next night the Red Sox pounded Indians pitchers in a 23-7 rout.

The deciding game was in Jacobs Field. The Indians took a 5-2 lead on a homer by Jim Thome, his fourth of the series. But Boston's Troy O'Leary hit a grand slam in the third and a three-run homer in the seventh. The Red Sox won, 12-8. The Tribe had collapsed. Clevelanders were humiliated. *We had lost.*

When did sports teams become "us"? And why were Clevelanders so self-conscious?

Clevelanders at the beginning of Our Century weren't self-conscious. Cleveland was the boomtown of America, but they gave that little thought. They were too busy building. When the Indians won the 1920 World Series, they celebrated, but it wasn't surprising for America's fifth-largest city.

It was in 1927 when the flag was raised above the Terminal Tower, 708 feet above Public Square and visible from much of Cuyahoga County, that Clevelanders began to notice. The

Tower was the tip of the Van Sweringens' \$179 million project of seven major buildings. Its only rival was Rockefeller Center in New York.

A Page One cartoon in the Plain Dealer showed the tower breaking through the clouds with banners marked "Happiness," "Wealth," "Growth" and "1,000,000 Population" — a target sure to be reached by 1930.

When the Union Terminal opened in 1930, 150 trains a day arrived and departed. Travelers from across the country marveled at the mammoth marble-and-oak "city within a city." And then they walked out on to Public Square, where Clevelanders asked if they could spare a dime.

The Depression was even more devastating in that hopes had been so high. When the Allies won World War II and the predicted postwar depression didn't occur, Clevelanders still doubted themselves, even as migrants from the South flocked to work in the new suburban auto plants.

That seemed to change in 1948, when the Indians won the pennant in a playoff and went on to win the World Series. Hundreds of thousands poured into the street for the triumphant parade down Euclid Ave.

The Plain Dealer's Alvin Silverman caught their attitude. "This was not a crowd which had come merely to honor a group of athletes," he wrote. "This was a crowd which was, in a sense, cheering itself."

By now, sportswriters nationally were hailing the 3-year-old Browns as the best team in either pro football league. When, at the packed Stadium, Lou Groza kicked another "automatic" extra point, fans rose and sang, "We're all-American people in an all-American town."

By the 1960s, race riots, urban renewal failures and downtown deterioration had shaken Clevelanders' faith. And when the stimulus of the Vietnam War ended, the old factories that had built Cleveland closed or moved away, one by one. Cleveland was losing jobs.

Cleveland's teams — the ones that had us cheering ourselves — were losing games. The area was losing people — the second most in the nation in the 1970s. In 1978, Cleveland lost face when, with the nation watching, it went into default. Clevelanders

began to think of themselves as losers.

In the 1980s, the New Cleveland Campaign tried to change that image. To show how much better the "new" Cleveland was, it stressed how bad the old Cleveland was. When Americans thought of Cleveland, as Randy Newman sang, the Cuyahoga River went smoking through their dreams.

The revival of the Flats and Playhouse Square and opening of North Coast Harbor gave downtown a boost. So, especially, did Gateway; the sight of the three skyscrapers rising behind the "porch" at Jacobs Field was beamed across America. But the city's inferiority complex lingered, as Carey's defiant shout would make clear.

Then, in 1995, the Indians went to the World Series for the first time in 41 years. Again the city cheered the team and itself — until, days later, the unthinkable occurred. The Browns were leaving. We had been abandoned.

The Indians fired manager Mike Hargrove and promoted hitting coach Charlie Manuel. Dick Jacobs announced he was selling the team to Chardon lawyer-developer Larry Dolan. The frustrating losses continued for the new Browns.

And so Our Century ended, with Clevelanders not quite sure how to think of themselves. They longed again to be all-American people in an all-American town.

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Plain Dealer Library

A book of 'Our Century'

Today marks the last week of the Our Century feature. Early next year we will offer readers the opportunity to obtain a compendium of these pages. Look for more information in The Plain Dealer in mid-January.

LOOKING AT A YEAR

Feb. 12: By a vote of 55-45, the Senate acquits President Bill Clinton of impeachment charges stemming from the Monica Lewinsky affair.

March 13: NATO announces a major escalation of air strikes against Serbia.

July 16: A small plane piloted by John F. Kennedy Jr. crashes into the

Atlantic Ocean, killing Kennedy, his wife, Carolyn, and her sister, Lauren Bessette.

Sept. 10: A special counsel is appointed to investigate the FBI's handling of the 1993 FBI assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas, that killed cult leader David Koresh and 80 others.

Oct. 31: An EgyptAir jetliner

crashes into the Atlantic Ocean, killing all 215 people aboard.

Nov. 23: First Lady Hillary Clinton tells supporters in New York she intends to run for the U.S. Senate. Her likely opponent will be New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

Dec. 14: Former President Jimmy Carter hands over control of the Panama Canal to Panama.

Deaths: Retired Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, Watergate figure John Erlichman, baseball legend Joe Dimaggio, football legend Walter Payton, basketball great Wilt Chamberlin, golfers Payne Stewart and Gene Sarazan, singer Mel Torme, authors Mario Puzo and Joseph Heller, movie director Stanley Kubrick, actor George C. Scott.