The Civic Revival in Ohio

Humanizing Cleveland and Toledo

By Robert H. Bremner

In many respects Cleveland and Toledo fitted the picture Frederic C. Howe drew of the developing industrial city. They were two New England villages transplanted to Ohio and almost miraculously transformed into great industrial and distributing centers by the accident of their locations. Within a very few years their populations had changed drastically not only in size, but in habits and national origins. Only the political and social ideas of the old families who still ruled the towns remained the same. "The city is Puritan in its social and ethical consciousness and almost as foreign as Chicago in its ethnic make-up," Howe wrote of Cleveland.1 Toledo's fondest boast was that it contained more elms than Boston but when a visitor walked out such a street as Nebraska Avenue he might hear the babel of twenty different languages and see people living very much as they had in Poland or in Hungary.

I

The hordes of immigrants who poured into Cleveland and Toledo to work in the factories and mills disturbed the cherished Anglo-Saxon traditions of the two cities. The foreigners had their own notions of personal hygiene, their own ideas of how to spend the Sabbath, and most disturbing of all, their own attitude toward politics.

They might ordinarily vote en masse for the Republican candidates but if they did it was not because they believed in the ideas for which the party was supposed to stand. They voted that way because they liked the jobs and favors they got from the Republican machine. Howe said the immigrants had what the Anglo-Saxon so often lacked, a social feeling for politics. It was to this wanting, sharing attitude of the foreign-born voters that Johnson and Jones appealed with such success.

Both Cleveland and Toledo contained private settlement houses and charity organizations staffed by trained social workers. Their job was to instill in the cities' new residents the ideals of thrift, cleanliness, sobriety, and self-reliance. This was called Americanization. Perversely enough

1 "Cleveland—A City 'Finding Itself,'" World's Work, 6 (October, 1903), pp. 3988-99.
many of the immigrants seemed to prefer to acquire their Americanization in the saloons rather than in the settlement houses and from the ward boss and his lieutenants rather than from the social workers.

The Civic Revivalists did not blame this entirely on the depravity of the immigrant. A man like Howe whose experiences had made him familiar with both the saloon and the settlement knew that the first was often a cheerier, kindlier place than the second.

Howe knew, too, that Harry Bernstein, the corrupt boss of Cleveland's biggest and toughest immigrant ward was a friendlier and more human person than the young ladies of the Charity Organization Society. If you were in trouble and went to an agency similar to the latter for help, you would be asked all kinds of personal questions. Form after form would have to be filled out. Only after the young lady who interviewed you had convinced herself that you were "worthy" would you finally get some assistance.

Harry Bernstein asked no questions. Innumerable people in Cleveland could testify that he had lent them money, bought them coal, helped them to get jobs, aided them with the process of naturalization, and had gone their bail. All he expected in return (besides usurious interest) was that you vote for his friends.  

Furthermore Howe thought the ideals that the earnest social workers tried to inculcate in the slum dwellers had little validity in the immigrant's new environment. "Thrift has no appeal when your weekly pay check is scarcely sufficient to meet your expenditures," he said. "There is little inducement for cleanliness when you live in a tenement; sobriety is mighty hard to practice when the saloon is the best place you have to go for recreation; and self-reliance is meaningless when you don't have a job, or when the one you do have is insecure."

II

The Civic Revivalists believed it was the city's duty to perform the humanizing activities which it had previously left to private benevolent societies or to the machine politicians. They disapproved of both the corrupt motive of the boss and the philanthropic attitude of the private society. In addition they were convinced that municipally sponsored recreational facilities such as playgrounds, swimming pools, dance halls, and athletic fields were more effective ways of dealing with the problems of vice than regulation of saloons and recurrent raids on gambling places.

2 Howe describes the work done by Bernstein, *ibid.*, p. 3989.
The new spirit which Tom L. Johnson’s administration brought to the city government of Cleveland was very clearly expressed in the park popularization policy carried out by two of his appointees, Charles P. Salen and Daniel Leslie. When Johnson became mayor, Cleveland was the possessor of a beautiful group of parks which had been donated to the city by wealthy citizens like J. H. Wade, John D. Rockefeller, and W. J. Gordon. Salen and Leslie continued the work of beautifying the parks which had been begun by earlier park officials, but they also broadened the functions of the parks, changing them from sylvan rest spots to centers of active recreation. Baseball diamonds, football and soccer fields, skating rinks, and shelter and bath houses were constructed in them. Band concerts and athletic contests were inaugurated as means of attracting people to them.

The poor flocked to the parks but the policy introduced by Johnson’s appointees was not universally popular. An influential portion of the population still thought parks should consist of broad expanses of well-trimmed lawns broken here and there by carefully tended flower beds and clumps of ornamental shrubs. These were the people who liked to take Sunday afternoon carriage rides through winding park boulevards. In particular they were incensed by the removal of the “Keep Off The Grass” signs from public property.¹ So hot was their resentment at what they considered the desecration of the parks that in the session of the State Legislature which met in 1902 they obtained the passage of an act which removed control of the parks from the Cleveland officials and vested it in a board appointed by county officers.²

Jurisdiction over the parks was restored to the city by the municipal code which went into effect in 1903. Yet even if the parks had remained under the control of the county board it is very doubtful if the old conditions could have been revived. Once the people had learned the varied uses to which the parks could be put, it would have been difficult to have made them give up the practice of using them as playgrounds.

Johnson’s park policy was continued by Newton D. Baker. During Baker’s administrations new recreational devices were installed in the parks and the city itself began to take over the operation of the park concessions.³

Not only in regard to the parks but in a great many other respects the

³ For a good picture of the attitude of the more sedate citizens toward the park popularization policy see Charles E. Kennedy, Fifty Years of Cleveland (Cleveland, 1925), pp. 182–4.

⁴ This act is one of those discussed by Milo Roy Maltbie in “Home Rule in Ohio,” Municipal Affairs, 6 (June, 1902), pp. 234–5.

⁵ A news item in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, March 24, 1913, gives an illuminating picture of Baker’s park policy.
work of humanizing Cleveland which Johnson had begun reached its peak during Baker's four years as mayor of the city (1911–1915). A native of West Virginia, Baker had roomed with Frederic C. Howe at Johns Hopkins University. He came to Cleveland in 1899 and entered the law office of a prominent Democratic politician.

Almost immediately Baker overcame the handicap of a ridiculously youthful appearance (he was twenty-eight but looked about eighteen) to make a reputation for himself as an orator. It was not long before his legal talents had won him equal respect. As Johnson's law director he was recognized as the Mayor's most important assistant.

Certainly the tasks he had to perform were the most difficult of those assigned to any of Johnson's subordinates. Baker's job was to direct the city's legal battles against the streetcar and other utility companies who sought the courts for protection against Johnson's program. Day in and day out for almost ten years Baker matched his wits against the most experienced and brainy lawyers privilege could obtain.

The nature of the cases in which he was engaged was such that he had few opportunities to appeal to the sympathies of a jury, and the judges before whom he appeared were seldom in favor of the ideals for which he pleaded. When Baker won a law suit for Cleveland, it was because in handling the case he had proved himself the superior of his highly paid antagonists in industry, intellectuality, and legal craftsmanship. We can only surmise how disheartening to him must have been the innumerable technical delays which so often nullified the gains of the decisions he won for the city.

At any time during the period he served Cleveland as City Solicitor Baker might have withdrawn from his arduous, moderately paid public duties and devoted his remarkable talents to the establishment of a remunerative private practice. That this fundamentally conservative lawyer preferred remaining in the ranks of the Civic Revival to accepting opportunities to advance himself professionally and financially is one of the best illustrations we have of Tom Johnson's ability to inspire loyalty to the principles he represented as well as a strong personal devotion. All the while that he was City Solicitor Baker spoke frequently at the tent meetings in order to keep the people of Cleveland informed of the progress of the litigation in which the city was involved. Meanwhile he

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7 For Johnson's tribute to Baker see My Story, New York, 1913, p. 173.
somehow found time to superintend the introduction of reforms which made the procedure of the municipal courts less formal and more intelligible to the people haled into them.

Two years after Johnson's defeat for re-election in 1909, Baker was elected mayor of Cleveland by the largest plurality any candidate for that office had ever received. As mayor he carried on Johnson's fight against privilege by attacking the electric power interests. He also played a very important part in drafting the liberal municipal charter which Cleveland adopted after the passage of the home rule amendment.

The most characteristic feature of Baker's administrations, however, was the advance that Cleveland then made toward becoming a beautiful and human city in which to live. Baker coined a word, "civitism," which he said meant city patriotism. He defined this attitude in numerous public addresses and tried to foster the development of such a spirit in Cleveland by sponsoring many projects of a service nature.

During his two terms in office the building program at Cooley Farms and the Civic Center was accelerated. Municipal dance halls were installed in two city parks. A new market house, considered the most elaborate structure of its kind in the country and significantly located in the heart of a large foreign district, was opened in 1912. In 1913 Cleveland took a step toward the solution of the housing problem by purchasing a large parcel of land far out on the East Side. It was expected that the allotment the city planned to establish there would provide attractive, low-cost building sites for approximately five hundred families.

III

GOLDEN RULE JONES was no less desirous than Tom Johnson and Newton D. Baker of warming his city into a kindly, human institution. Toledo, however, has fewer memorials of his activity along this line than Cleveland has of Johnson's and Baker's work. In part this was because Jones was a little less eager for achievement than Johnson and Baker and a little more

8 See Cleveland Plain Dealer, Aug. 28, 1912 and "Cleveland's Municipal Dancing Pavillons," American City, 10 (January, 1914), pp. 34-5.
consciously interested in promoting a thoughtful, questioning attitude among the citizens of Toledo.

He wanted to improve the physical surrounding of Toledoans, but even more he was intrigued by the possibility of dispelling the prejudices and superstitions that he thought clouded their mental and spiritual outlook. "We are brothers, not competitors," he often repeated to his audiences at Golden Rule Park and he seemed to have a very pressing and sincere conviction that his mission was to free men (himself included) from bonds that kept the natural instinct of brotherhood from expressing itself.

Consequently Jones' vision of the ideal city differed somewhat from Johnson's. Johnson spoke of "The City on a Hill." The picture this phrase evokes is architectural. In our minds' eye we see a group of stately buildings. To Johnson's motto Jones added "where people sing in the street." Instantly the buildings in our mental picture fade into the background and the happy people who make up the city are highlighted.

Jones was much more than a dreamer. The reforms he instituted in the Toledo police force show how ready he was to carry his philosophical ideas into practical operation. But under the Toledo charter the police and fire departments were the only divisions of the city government over which the mayor exercised direct authority. The real reason why Jones' administrations left so little tangible impress upon Toledo was simply that he never had enough supporters in the Council to enable him to get the measures he suggested adopted.

In both Cleveland and Toledo the fact that the Civic Revivalists were avowedly fighting privilege caused their whole program to be opposed by people who might ordinarily have supported their humanitarian proposals. In Toledo the philosophical radicalism which Jones stirred up made the blind opposition to anything he suggested particularly intense. His most innocuous suggestion for the beautification of a piece of public property was looked upon by the conservative classes and their representatives in the council as either a wildly impractical dream or as an anarchistic attempt to undermine the foundations of society.

As a result of this hostility most of Jones' ideas for humanizing Toledo remain embedded in his annual messages to the Toledo Council. Nevertheless he constantly manifested his theories of government in humble ways.

His first veto was issued against an ordinance which made the regulations against keeping geese in the city more stringent. In his veto Jones said this would work a hardship on the poor.11 Like Johnson he vetoed

11 Reported by the Toledo Blade, Nov. 9, 20, 1897.
all ordinances requiring peddlers, junk dealers, secondhand clothes merchants, and other people engaged in depression activities to purchase licenses for their businesses.

By acts such as these, and by the never failing sympathy he extended to the distressed who daily crowded his office Jones made his conception of the role of government plain to a great many of the voters of Toledo. He interpreted his repeated re-elections to mean that the common people of the city endorsed his theories.

Whitlock was as apt a pupil of Jones as Baker was of Johnson. "You are the father of all," the old foreign women said trustingingly as they laid their intricate domestic problems before him. Like Jones, Whitlock was always ready to listen to the unfortunates who came to him seeking jobs for themselves or paroles for their relatives.12

But he was very conscious of the work that Johnson and Baker were doing in Cleveland and he was impatient to undertake similar projects in Toledo. Consequently he was sometimes goaded almost beyond endurance by the cranks and reformers who also looked upon him as "the father of all." They demanded that the mayor use his paternal power to secure the enactment of a curfew ordinance, to censor the movies, and to stop the young people from making love in the parks.

Whitlock said that he could not remember that any of the people who plagued him with such demands, or smacked their lips and wrung their hands while they told him exaggerated stories about the prevalency of the white slave trade in Toledo, ever showed any interest in the constructive labor of building civic centers, bridges, boulevards, swimming pools, and similar improvements. They could not understand why the city was exercised over the matter of whether streetcar fares were set at three cents or five cents.

They were so much wrapped up in moral considerations, said Whitlock, so much under the influence of the evangelistic psychology, that they were disinclined to take part in any crusade except one against vice. "I think it is this spirit of Puritanism that has made the cities of America so ugly or permitted them to be ugly," he wrote after he left office.13

The same debate over the functions of government which had raged all during the seven years Jones was mayor of Toledo continued throughout Whitlock's four administrations. One measure backed by the latter carried the issue up to the Ohio Supreme Court. After the passage of the

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12 Elizabeth J. Hauser, "Toledo—A Coaling Station," Public, 10 (Sept. 7, 1907), pp. 536–8, has a good picture of this aspect of Whitlock's work.

constitutional amendment which supposedly extended the sphere of municipal ownership open to Ohio municipalities, the Toledo Council passed an ordinance appropriating funds for the establishment of a municipally owned motion picture theater. Previously there had been wide-spread criticism of the immoral and unsanitary conditions prevailing in many of the private movie theaters.

Whitlock realized that the movies were becoming one of the chief sources of popular entertainment. He might have tried to improve conditions in the private theaters by censoring the films and drawing up a schedule of rules to regulate the operation of the private houses. Roughly that is the "solution" which most cities and states have since adopted.

Whitlock, however, believed that municipal ownership of a movie theater would offer a more permanently effective way of dealing with the problem than either censorship or regulation. He thought that the municipal theater, besides providing entertainment at cost, could be operated in such a way that it would set a standard to which the private movie houses would have to adhere if they wished to attract any customers. It would bring about an automatic improvement in conditions.

The constitutionality of Toledo's attempt to establish a municipally-owned theater was challenged when the City Auditor refused to advance the money necessary to carry out the project. "The functions of the State are governmental only," said Chief Justice Schauck in reading the decision of the Ohio Supreme Court in the case which Toledo brought to force the Auditor to surrender the funds.

The Court refused to order the Auditor to turn the money over to the city because in its opinion Toledo was not justified in using money raised by taxation to operate such a non-governmental agency as a motion picture theater. One of the judges, disagreeing in theory with the very narrow interpretation of the function of government adopted by the majority of the court, was nevertheless unprepared to countenance the establishment of a municipal theater. He held this to be an invasion of "the sphere of purely private enterprise wholly disconnected and divorced from public needs or public purposes."

The decision in this case, Toledo v. Lynch, was a great blow to the Civic Revival. It was the first case in which the court was called upon to interpret the home rule amendment of 1912. By asserting its right to decide whether or not a given project was an appropriate subject for municipal

14 *The State ex rel City of Toledo v. Lynch, Auditor*, 88 Ohio State 71. Judge Wannamaker dissented from the opinion of the Court.
ownership and by making it clear that in deciding this question it would continue to be guided by a conservative theory of politics the court greatly limited the fields open to municipal activity. In practice it meant that no matter what the amendment said, the judges of the Supreme Court and not the people of the cities would decide what services would be municipalized. In effect the Supreme Court substituted itself for the State Legislature as the supervisor of city affairs.

IV

The grouping of the city, county, and federal buildings into a "Civic Center" was the most ambitious scheme of civic beautifications undertaken in either Cleveland or Toledo during the period of the Civic Revival. The Cleveland group plan was by no means the exclusive creation of the Civic Revivalists but it was built during the administrations of Johnson and Baker and one of the originators of the plan was Frederic C. Howe.

In the mid-nineties when Howe was a young and not too busy attorney in Cleveland, his best friend was Morris Black, also a lawyer. They formed an eating and drinking club which met at Wohl’s, a small but soon to be famous Hungarian restaurant. Both young men had toured Europe and they liked to talk about the beautiful cities they had seen there.

About this time plans were under way for the construction of a new federal building in Cleveland. There was also talk of building a new city hall because the rented quarters which then housed the municipal offices were day by day becoming more inadequate. It was expected that the rapid growth of the city would also require the erection of a new union depot, a new public library building, and a new county court house.

Under ordinary circumstances these structures would have been put up here and there all over the downtown section, built of various types of materials, and done in different styles of architecture. Howe and Black, remembering the European cities they had admired, became enthusiastic about the possibility of grouping all of these public and semi-public buildings together and building them in a harmonious style. Henceforth their weekly dinners at Wohl’s Restaurant became the center of agitation for what was later known as the group plan.

If they had had some real estate or building materials to sell the city, it is difficult to see how Howe and Black could have done a better job of lobbying than they did for the adoption of the group plan idea. Newspapermen were invited to dinners at Wohl’s and while their resistance was broken down by rich food and generous drafts of a potent drink called
Slivowitc; Punch they were indoctrinated with the plan. The feature sections of the Sunday papers carried illustrated articles, prepared anonymously by the two men, which showed how public buildings were grouped in Vienna, Paris, Budapest, Dresden, and Munich.

Howe and Black induced the local branch of the Institute of Architects to hold a contest to find the best design for a Civic Center. Finally, to cap their work of promotion, they succeeded in interesting the Chamber of Commerce in the plan. About seven years after the idea had first come to him Howe had the satisfaction of introducing into council the legislation which definitely committed the city to the project.  

Work on the group plan began in 1902 when a supervising committee of architects was named by the city and given full authority to settle all problems relating to the layout, design, and construction of the buildings of the Civic Center. The men placed in charge of this undertaking were Daniel Burnham, John M. Carrere and Arnold Brunner. They were among the most dignified and expensive, if not the most original, members of the American architectural profession. By 1904 they had devised the plan which with one major change was later carried out.

To symbolize the wealth and commercial importance of Cleveland they chose a heavy Roman Classic style of architecture. The site they selected for the Civic Center was a piece of land stretching between Lake Erie and Superior Avenue and located just north of the Public Square. They proposed to place the Union Station on the lakefront. Fronting on Superior Avenue were to be the Federal building and the Public Library. According to their plan a mall or parkway which would form an imposing entrance to the city was to extend from the railway station to the Federal building and the Library. Situated on the mall were the City Hall and the county Court House.

Most of the land on which the Civic Center now stands was acquired by the city during Johnson's administrations. The first unit to be completed was the Federal building. The City Hall, begun in 1910, was completed in 1916. The most important respect in which the plan worked out by the supervising commission was disregarded was in the location of the railway station. After the World War a group of men

15 For Howe's account of the promotion of the Group Plan see Confessions of a Reformer (New York, 1925), pp. 80–2. A more detailed account of the building of the Civic Center and the steps leading up to it is to be found in Inventory of the Municipal Records of Ohio, Vol. 5, No. 18, pp. xx–xxv.

using methods similar to those earlier employed by Black and Howe, but with less disinterested motives, succeeded in having the station lifted out of the Group Plan and located on the Public Square where it became the key unit in a private real estate development.

V

Many cities have since followed Cleveland's lead by grouping their public buildings into Civic Centers. One of the first to do so was Toledo. The group plan seems to have influenced industrial as well as civic architecture. While the Civic Center was being developed in Cleveland, Nela Park, the home of the Mazda Lamp Division of the General Electric Company and the first important American example of industrial grouping, was built in the same city.

The Civic Revivalists believed that the concern for the beautification of cities thus evinced was an indication of an awakening civic consciousness. They were not content to have "civic consciousness" stop with the mere adornment of cities, however. They believed that the kind and extent of the public services the people of a city required their government to perform was a better index of civic spirit than the size and location of that city's public buildings.

A city whose people and officials complacently allowed it to be ruled by privilege was barren of civic spirit, in their opinion, even if it had strewn massive piles of granite over a spacious, tree-studded mall. The guide books might tell the tourist this was a civic center and describe it as "a monument to civic consciousness." If that is all it is, said the Civic Revivalists, the taxpayers could have saved themselves a lot of money by simply buying a marble shaft and carving an appropriate motto on it.

Men like Jones and Johnson, and Whitlock and Howe had no interest in building monuments to ideas. They were very interested, however, in finding ways to give living expression to their principles of government. In this paper we have emphasized their desire to make Cleveland and Toledo human—to find ways to make life in the two cities more enjoyable and more worthwhile to the people gathered there.

Civic Centers appealed to them not for aesthetic reasons alone. Primarily the Civic Centers attracted them as suitable headquarters from which all the new service enterprises in which they expected their cities to engage could be directed. The buildings of the Civic Centers would be beautiful not just because of architecture and landscaping, but because the work done in them was dedicated to a wholesome end. The buildings would be impressive, too, instead of merely pretentious, because the business transacted in them was of a significant nature.

They believed that when a city's positive activities in behalf of its citizens had been increased by the extension of municipal ownership into new fields and when the people had rid themselves of the domination of privilege, the Civic Centers would really become the heart and center of community life.

Ohio State University

In Memoriam: Eugene O'Neill, 1888-1953

The foremost dramatist produced by the American theatre in the past generation, winner of both the Nobel and the Pulitzer Prizes, Eugene Gladstone O'Neill had been more widely produced than any other playwright except George Bernard Shaw. As Brooks Atkinson noted, he broke up a number of old molds, shook up the drama as well as audiences and helped to transform the theatre into an art seriously related to life. His genius lay in raw boldness, in the elemental strength of his attack upon outworn concepts of destiny.

As sheer literature, Mourning Becomes Electra reached, if it did not surpass, the heights of Greek tragedy. But it had another significance. In it O'Neill sought to employ the newer psychological insights of his age. Has anyone caught the conflict between the individual and the collectivity better than he did in The Hairy Ape? Or caught the essence of inter-group conflict as he did in The Emperor Jones? Or penetrated into the psyche of the maladjusted as he did in Anna Christie? He groped, more earnestly than most, for reality. So it was that, through the late Harry Weinberger, our colleague, he became acquainted with the work of this Journal from the start in 1941 and followed its efforts to the end of his lifetime. He worked in another medium. But he could write for us and did: on several occasions he sent little notes of encouragement, valued by us as much as the most rigorous piece of research we received. His passing leaves us with a deep sense of loss not merely for his genius but for his unique human virtues.

W.L.