

# The 1990s

By Michael D. Roberts

The decade of the 1990s arrived like the sun bursting through a winter's gloom. Hope and optimism reigned over the region as Cleveland prepared to celebrate its two-hundredth birthday, in 1996, an event commemorating the triumph and travail of an American city in its maturity.

A sense of pride that had not been felt in years seemed to abound, and it was only right that the changes in the city should be lauded nationally with Cleveland being designated an All American City in 1993. It was the fifth time the city had won the award since 1949.

However, by 1990, the population in the city fell by 68,000 persons, or 11.9 percent in ten years to just slightly over a half- million people, dropping it to the 23<sup>rd</sup> largest city in American. Forty years earlier it had been the sixth largest city in the country.

Meanwhile, the decline brought with it a population sprawl across the region that left the original inner ring of suburbs in the early stages of decline. The sprawl in Northeast Ohio was caused by an excellent highway network, cheap gasoline, inexpensive land and a desire for suburban living. Later, a deteriorating school system in Cleveland and the movement of jobs away from the central city added to the exodus.

The sprawl now extended beyond the original ring of suburbs into a secondary grouping like Solon, Avon and Concord. It was pushing even further into an exurban grouping of scattered communities that reached beyond the bounds of Cuyahoga County.

And with the population shift went income. Between 1990 and 2000 per capita income rose from \$14,601 to \$22,321 in the region. In Cleveland it went from \$9,258 to

\$14, 291. But the disparity between income in the city and the suburbs had widened by \$2,687 over the last decade.

Civic and business leaders applied a new strategy to revitalizing the Cleveland. Millions had been spent on urban renewal with out appreciable success and now a different idea took shape. The idea of making Cleveland a destination city, a place that would attract visitors and in turn, stimulate downtown with some of those suburban dollars.

The set-piece of this strategy was the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, an idea that circulated in the early 1980s and gained such momentum that it ended up in a struggle with the New York recording interests over its location. Based on the legend that Cleveland was the cradle of rock and roll in the 1950s, the city won out in a vigorous national competition capped by a poll in *USA Today* that supported its selection in 1986.

Radio station WMMS---named for nine straight years by Rolling Stone as the best rock station in the nation---played a key role locally in the drive to bring the rock hall here where today it has drawn more than eight-million visitors since it opened in 1995 on the lakefront, just west of East 9<sup>th</sup> Street.

The Great Lakes Science Center was constructed next to the rock hall and other buildings like the Key Tower, the tallest building in the city, and a totally renovated Tower City, gave promise to a new downtown. No project appealed more to the future of the city than Gateway, the complex that housed a new baseball stadium and arena.

But amid the scent of progress, were whiffs of despair. After 90 years on Public Square, The May Company closed its downtown store in January of 1993.

The once proud banking house of Cleveland Trust---which was founded in 1894, weathered the Great Depression and went on to become the symbol of the city's financial establishment---found itself burdened by bad loans in the wake of a collapsing real estate

market. It was forced to merge with the venerable Society Corporation in 1991. Cleveland Trust had become Ameritrust in 1979 when it became a nationally chartered bank.

Also, there were those who warned that the financing of many projects was akin to mortgaging the city's future because millions in tax abatements were being issued as incentives toward another effort at saving and reviving downtown. Others argued that the neighborhoods and the poverty stricken were being overlooked in the rush to promote business.

Also, there remained the ever-increasing reality of Northeastern Ohio's place in the global community. The region was no longer an entity to itself, a citadel of manufacturing and commerce with a talented and well-paid work force. The world was shrinking as was Cleveland's place in it.

In 1980, manufacturing in Northeastern Ohio counted for 26.3 percent of the jobs. By the end of the decade, 18.4 percent of those jobs had been lost because of the global workplace. With the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994, even more manufacturing jobs bled off in the region as another 7.6 percent went by the wayside.

A national foundation survey of American manufacturing cities noted that only in Cleveland did it find executives who were virtually unanimous in blaming the city's floundering economy on global competition.

As the 1980s began, the area hosted 12 Fortune 500 companies. In a little more than a decade, that number would dwindle to seven.

A Brookings Institute study found Cleveland lacking in entrepreneurial spirit, a condition that was first detected following the Depression when the large, surviving companies took on a conservative management style.

Another unseen dynamic that would play out later was the disappearance of the influence of the major law firms like Jones Day, Squire Sanders, and Baker Hostetler. From their inception early in the century, these firms had produced an intellectual reservoir that, in effect, could and occasionally did, act as a shadow government.

Often mayors would quietly draw upon the legal and corporate talent to assist with governmental problems. There were always special interests at stake and they often intermingled with the *pro bono* work of the law firm. While they continued to exist, the truth was there was less and less business here and the future lay in their offices elsewhere.

The media was in flux, too. By 1990, the area was served by only two major daily newspapers. *The Akron Beacon Journal* to the south of Cleveland, and *The Plain Dealer* in the city and the suburbs. Smaller, suburban dailies as well as a host of community weeklies existed to both the east and west.

Television had matured and found its place as a medium that could deal well with news that was easily captured visually, but it struggled with substantive issues. By now the print and electronic media had carved out their niches and attempted to service them to the reader or viewer satisfaction.

The internet had arrived, an oddity at first, but a technology so far reaching that it would not only alter global communications, but the way we lived. The traditional media---both broadcast and print---would enjoy its last decade of dominance before facing the challenge that the internet represented.

If the loss of the influence of the law firms on the city was noticeable, the loss of competition that the two newspapers generated had a palpable effect as well. *The Cleveland Press*, the most robust newspaper of its time, ceased publishing in 1982, leaving the market to the morning *Plain Dealer*.

The vacuum left by *The Press* generated the evolution of smaller publications that tried to fill the void. Cleveland had always been a secondary journalistic town, the two newspapers hostile to any attempt by any publication to enter the market. While other cities enjoyed an alternative press, Cleveland supported only the most sketchy efforts.

On the other hand, in the 1950s and 1960s, radio first, and then television enjoyed a national reputation from programming and providing talent that would find success in larger markets. Later the dwindling population and the impact of cable television would affect the market share that national advertisers sought, shifting their spending elsewhere.

Against this backdrop, a city struggling to reinvent itself, a victim of the global economy, with the loss of corporate and civic leadership, and a media in metamorphosis, emerged Michael Reed White, the 55<sup>th</sup> mayor of the City of Cleveland, a man destined to serve longer in that office than any predecessor and a man who, more than anything, challenged each obstacle, issue and personality he encountered.

He was clearly the dominant figure of the decade not only in the city, but the county as well. Traditionally, the mayor of Cleveland was recognized as the leading politician in Northeastern Ohio. A lot of this had to do with the city being the focal point of politics, economics and culture for the region.

While the suburban population was steadily increasing, its political clout was dispersed and unfocused as a crazy-quilt of 59 political entities existed in the county. For the past half century there had been efforts and movements to create a county or regional approach to governance. But the prevailing political forces ignored reform.

While cities, towns and villages had local governments, there existed a county government which was essentially an administrative body that collected taxes, and ran a variety of agencies and a criminal and civil court system. It was the job of three county commissioners to allocate monies to these agencies.

There were eight elected county officials who ran their offices as they saw fit. They reported to no other government official. Over time each office---the clerk of courts, the auditor, treasurer, recorder, engineer, sheriff, prosecutor, and coroner---built its own political apparatus.

This form of government was nearly 200 years--old and ill-suited for a county so complex in nature. It had no legislative capability and was prone to political manipulation with an impotent check and balance system.

Historically, the political power of city hall outmatched that of the county, and when Mike White came in office his presence was such that he was regarded as the mayor of the county.

White was the first generation of minorities to reap the full benefits of the civil rights era. Born in 1951, he grew up in Glenville in the 1960s, and proclaimed as a youth that someday he would be mayor of Cleveland. He went on to Ohio State, became the first black Student Union President and returned home to work as an assistant to Cleveland City Council before becoming the councilman for Glenville from 1978 to 1984.

While in council he became a protégé of George Forbes, who reigned as council president, and was the most prominent black political figure in the city. White later served in the Ohio Senate.

In the beginning, following his overwhelming victory in the mayor's race over Forbes in 1989, any knowledgeable political observer, be they party member or political writer, gave White such high marks that he was thought to overshadow the legendary Carl B. Stokes, America's first black mayor.

It was White's turn, at 38, to consolidate those gains and further integrate black fortunes into the city while building the kind of government that would attract new businesses or at least retain jobs. The early days of his administration were marked by energy and enthusiasm. Arriving at work at 6 a.m., he impressed businessmen who saw him bounding up the city hall stairs at that early hour.

He exuded so much promise that he made the opening of his decade luminous along with the building and the visible progress that the city appeared undergoing. Articulate, passionate, intelligent, a black man representing a new generation, Mayor Mike White seemed to possess it all.

A poll taken in 1992 showed that 77 percent of whites interviewed believed that White had improved race relations in the city.

White came into office the recipient of much of the efforts that Mayor George Voinovich and Forbes had made in laying the ground work for Gateway and instilling confidence in developers like Richard Jacobs and Forest City, both of whom had made substantial investments in downtown.

White was a micromanager. And at first his efforts along these lines were both amusing and impressive. Driving to city hall he would see a pot hole and order it repaired by day's end. He directed the erasure of graffiti and would rile against lazy municipal workers or shoddy work. He seemed to dedicate his energies to single-handedly lifting the city from its lethargy to a higher station, one that not only would exalt him, but all those who shared life here.

As time passed, it appeared that for every strength White possessed, he was cursed with a fault. His anxious nature to achieve was blunted by suppressed anger that could erupt at a moment's notice. He would dismiss those who disagreed with him as if he were divine.

He created enemies over the merest issue, complained bitterly about the media and seemed constantly at war with the police department. Conversely, he was fiercely loyal to old friends, particularly Nate Gray, who was a life long companion and twice his best man.

The first major issue that White faced was the passage of a 15-year sin tax to underwrite the Gateway project that was to house both the professional basketball and baseball franchises. It was intended to develop the old Central Market area.

The tax was a county-wide issue. White worked hard for its passage which won by a scant 51 percent. City residents, opposing the use of public money for professional sports, voted it down. It was carried by suburban voters.

Also awaiting White was the paralyzing issue of the Cleveland school system, caught up in the throes of bussing for more than a decade. Its cost, the population drains from the city and the basic inability to educate was a burden of increasing magnitude.

By 1991, some black leaders were questioning the value of bussing. The activist Reverend Marvin McMickle asserted that white flight made bussing irrelevant, pointing out that transporting blacks cross town to sit in classrooms that were already 71 percent black made no sense. Other black leaders disagreed, but nearly everyone conceded that the schools were in disarray.

The Cleveland school board had become so politicized and contentious that its very existence was inhibiting progress. Over time, White used drastic measures on the school board, finally securing control over it by supporting a panel of candidates of his choice for office in 1993.

In his first term, the White administration had built more new houses in the city since the Korean War, talked the banks into investing \$600 million in the neighborhoods and boarded up 500 drug houses in the city.



White negotiated concessions from the labor unions serving the city, and balanced the budget without raising taxes.

His critics maintained that he had done nothing for mounting unemployment and that his strident manner had created unwarranted friction in reaching his solutions, unnecessarily alienating many in the community.

The unemployment situation was at 7.5 percent in Northeastern Ohio between June of 1990 and June of 1993. Cuyahoga County lost 35,000 jobs in that period. The majority of these jobs were in the city. Later White would assert that his administration had created 10,333 jobs in the first five years of his office.

As the mayor concluded his first term, there were no serious challengers seeking to unseat him. The race in November of 1993 was one of the most inconspicuous campaigns in city history as David Lee Rock, a political unknown, told voters that he would arm the police department with submachine guns if elected. White won going away.

In December of 1993, amidst the anticipation of the opening of Gateway in the spring, Mike White made ominous mention of an unmentionable thought. There appeared to be other cities attempting to lure the Cleveland Browns from their birthplace.

There was reason to believe White's observation. Attempts to build a new domed stadium in the 1980s had failed. Discussions dealing with the renovation of Municipal Stadium had been inconclusive, and Art Modell had shown no interest in being part of Gateway.

Modell had been one of the city's great champions and benefactors since he bought the Browns in 1961. There was something strange afoot, but most fans could not believe that their beloved Cleveland Browns would leave town.

In the past, genuine alarm had been raised when rumors of the Cleveland Indians circulated and, on at least one occasion in the 1960s, a move to New Orleans had been cut off at the last minute. Part of the impetus for Gateway was a warning by Major League Baseball that the Indians needed a new stadium if it was to remain in Cleveland.

The National Football League had become dominated by men of means, millionaires who bought into the game as a pastime or hobby. The truth was time had by passed Art Modell. Once one of the league's great innovators, Modell was no longer in a position to compete with these new elite owners for whom money was no object.

The pettiness of Cleveland politics had derailed efforts to build a domed stadium while other cities were erecting facilities of such magnitude that, in comparison, Municipal Stadium appeared worn and tired, a relic from the Iron Age.

Modell was aided in his deliberations by his friend, Al Lerner, who had made millions in the credit card business and came to Art's aid by becoming an investor in his troubled holdings.

Lerner made his money in Baltimore and was now living in Cleveland. It was his desire to own a team in the NFL and he had done spade work to that end in Baltimore which had lost its team to Indianapolis in 1984.

For Cleveland's suffering sports fans, 1995 would prove to be the best of times and the worst of times. The year started out with the task force assigned to study the Browns situation recommending that Municipal Stadium be refurbished.

On June 1, White announced that he supported a 10- percent parking tax. Five days later the Browns broke off contact with the city, Modell citing a need to give the community time to collect its thoughts and study its resources.

Sports fans continued to follow the story unaware of the impending doom. They were distracted by the fact that the Cleveland Indians for the first time since 1954 played in the World Series, though they would lose in six games to the Atlanta Braves.

Finally, in order to head off the possibility of a news leak, Modell announced on November 6 that the Browns were moving to Baltimore. The news came on election eve with the sin-tax extension on the ballot. It passed the next day by 72 percent. It was too late.

In the aftermath of the announcement, there was an outcry of anger and chagrin unlike heard here before. And no one was angrier than the angry man himself, Mike White.

White's resulting denouncement of Modell and the NFL shook the football world and almost immediately guaranteed the city a replacement team, although the mayor fought to keep the Browns with threats and lawsuits and every form of intimidation that he could muster.

But White's ceaseless attacks put the league in a position that it had to move quickly and decisively in placating the Cleveland fans with the offer of an expansion team in 1999, after a new stadium was built.

There will always be the lingering question as to why the stadium was built on the site of Municipal Stadium which occupied prime lakefront land. Many ask whether the city had once more missed an opportunity to develop its waterfront into vibrant and attractive location.

There had been six sites proposed and a commission selected by Mayor White chose the existing stadium location because the city already owned the land and construction could be completed in time for the 1999 football season. It would also be assured to be built while White was in office.

From the beginning, the construction of the stadium was a continuous controversy as overruns drove the cost of the facility over \$300 million. At least that is what White reported to a skeptical city council two years after the stadium opened. As one reporter who tried to pin down the overruns, which were greater than Gateway, claimed it maybe that the true cost of the building might never be known.

The right to play in that stadium was won by Al Lerner who spent \$530 million for an NFL expansion team, outbidding a half-dozen groups who vied for the franchise. White had endorsed Lerner. The Browns were back, but it would never be the same.

In July of 1996, the city paused to celebrate its 200<sup>th</sup> birthday, the exact day being July 22. A committee that had formed in 1992 managed to raise \$80-million to spend on events and projects. The city was alive with concerts and festive gatherings. A lakefront trolley connecting Gateway with the North Coast Harbor was opened and the city's bridges were festooned with lights giving a spectacular glow to the night. A plan was unveiled to plant 10,000 trees in the city over the next year.

White had promised Clevelanders that he would create a police department of some 2,000 officers, an increase of 500 officers. Crime was a problem in Cleveland, as it was in many urban areas, and as with other challenging issues he faced, White attempted to deal with it forcefully.

The Cleveland Police Department is virtually a culture to itself. It is also at the edge of the city, the sharp edge where the streets get mean, the duty dangerous and the hair-trigger nature of race is a trip wire.

When White took office, the city's crime rate was beginning to climb after dropping in the 1980s. In 1990, there were 4,917 robberies, 3,259 assaults, 171 murders, a total of more than 9,000 violent crimes. During his years in office, crime steadily dropped despite a continuous change of police chiefs, eight in all.

A central concern of the business community was the access to Cleveland by air. It was thought that some of the companies that moved to other cities had done so because flights out of Cleveland Hopkins International Airport were limited. The global economy was again pressing the region to react to its requirements. The airport facilities needed expansion and new runways.

Hopkins had been the first city-owned airport when it was built in 1925. Over the years, the airport's development languished, and the city was threatened with the loss of a major airline hub unless it improved. The problem was that Hopkins was land-locked and any expansion would require negotiations with suburbs.

White began a series of talks with Brook Park Mayor Thomas Coyne, who would lose neighborhoods in any expansion. The negotiations between the two mayors over the \$528-million project ran an emotionally charged gamut beginning in 1992, both men belligerent in support of their positions.

In executing White's airport expansion plan, the city became locked in a lawsuit with the City of Brook Park over the IX Center, which was located in that city and provided tax revenue to the municipality. Cleveland lost the legal battle to acquire the center, which sat in the way of runway expansion.

It took four years of litigation and failed negotiations before an agreement was reached in August of 1996 that enabled the airport to build a new runway, expand an existing one and create a taxiway out of yet another. The agreement preserved the IX Center for the time being.

In 2001, after reopening negotiations with Brook Park, Cleveland bought the IX Center for \$66.5 million, twice what the next bidder offered, the deal included a land swap with Brook Park. The purchase of the exhibition hall would result in the 2005 conviction of Ricardo Teamor, one of the mayor's confidants. Teamor later was

sentenced to prison for bribing city councilman Joe Jones and confessed to paying kickbacks for city contracts.

When the administration's attention shifted back to the airport, so did the omnipresent shadow of Nate Gray who became involved with airport parking. Several things enabled him to weave his special interest into the fabric of major projects in which the city engaged.

While it reported the news from city hall, *The Plain Dealer* failed to investigate the emerging suspicions over the conduct of city affairs. There was an internal conflict in the way *The Plain Dealer* went about its business. On the one hand, the publisher, Alex Machaskee, liked to court power, particularly city hall, and that very implication sent a message to the reporting staff to tread lightly.

Mike White used this situation to drive a wedge between the publisher and the editor. In doing so, he changed the culture of the newspaper in 1999 when a new editor, Doug Clifton from Knight-Ridder, began to bring outsiders to staff the newspaper.

The coverage of city hall intensified and the tension between the newspaper and city hall magnified.

The other failure was that of the county prosecutor's office by now thoroughly politicized and blind to public corruption. More than one prosecutor would argue that the office did not possess the resources to combat white collar crime. Yet, it never made an effort to gain those resources.

Six years into his tenure, White drew increased attention from the media. *The Plain Dealer* reported that the turnover at city hall under White was running twice that of the Voinovich administration. Some 45 persons had departed the administration. By this time, he had gone through four police chiefs and four fire chiefs.

Shrugging off increasing criticism from the city council and the media, White sought a third term in office. Despite his drop in popularity, there was no political figure that was a serious threat to White. Councilwoman Helen Smith stepped forward to offer some opposition, but lost by some 25,000 votes.

In the always problematic school system, the mayor had not only positioned his candidates on the school board to gain control of a situation replete with problems, but sought to have the state legislature grant him the power to have city hall take over the operation of the entire school system.

In July of 1998, White took over responsibility of the troubled school system with its \$600-million budget and implemented new leadership and reforms. It was a burden so immense that even the toughest task master found the path toward achievement littered with obstacles.

From 1990 until White left office in 2001, the Cleveland schools had seven changes in its top leadership which illustrated the chaos in which the system was operating. His selection of Barbara Byrd-Bennett in 1998 temporarily halted the turnover as she lasted as the system's chief operating officer until February 2006.

Instability became the hallmark of a school system in dire need of help. The instability, in fact, seemed at times to be contagious in the city.

It struck the Flats in 2000. The Flats had gained a regional reputation as an entertainment spot that drew visitors from adjacent states. To sit in one of the waterside bars during a summer evening and watch the boats dock, four and five deep, alongside the restaurants was one of the city's joys.

One public official described the Flats as "Cleveland's front door." The problem was that the throngs of thousands of visitors were not accompanied by needed security.

The alcohol and proximity of the river resulted in several drownings each summer and assaults became synonymous with the revelry.

White ordered the police department to crack down on the clubs in the Flats. Fire and health code violations began to close clubs. Some bar owners saw racial overtones in the police enforcement as city hall complained that minorities were not being treated equally in the operations in the Flats.

Slowly, what had been a showcase for the region went dark.

And then in a surprising move, on April 23, 2001, Mike White announced at Miles Standish School---where he was once a student---that he would not seek a fourth term. He said he had done what he had come to do and would never again run for public office.

Even his most severe critics acknowledged that White's achievements were impressive. He built stadiums, expanded the airport, set an ailing school system on a new path, built housing and brought jobs to the city. It was not perfect. City Hall finances were a mess and under a state audit.

But history would not offer a satisfying conclusion for the man who was mayor longer than anyone else, and clearly one of the best.

Four years after White left office, a shadow descended over the record of his administration. In a packed courtroom in the Carl B. Stokes Federal Courthouse overlooking the Flats, Nate Gray, White's best man, friend and confidant was sentenced to 15 years in prison and ordered to pay \$1.5-million in taxes for his role in public corruption.

White was adamant in telling reporters that the case was about Nate Gray and not Mike White.



The media would find this not to be true.

It was White who was the target of the investigation. The affidavit that the FBI submitted for the federal court's permission to wire tap suspects was a sealed document, meaning it was illegal for the media to possess, let alone publish it which happened.

The FBI affidavit asked for the wire taps in order to investigate former Mayor Michael White. He was never indicted. Nate Gray refused to cooperate with federal lawyers and served more time in jail where he remains (as of 2012).

Authorities found that Gray had deposited \$13.4 million in his bank account during the 12 years of the White administration.

It was a dark ending to a decade that had begun with such promise and held so much achievement. Mike White retired to raise alpacas on a farm in Newcomerstown, Ohio, in Tuscarawas County. He rarely makes public appearances and almost never deals with the media.

Undeterred, the city moved into another century with many old problems still lingering and even more beginning to fester. It was time for new leadership and new challenges. And in time there would be more corruption in public office which would lead to startling developments.

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