

OUR CENTURY

1923

AT A GLANCE



PD FILE

Workers put finishing touches on the Federal Reserve Bank in 1923.

Tycoon Kirby in and out of prison

In an era of free-wheeling tycoons, nobody wheeled as freely as Josiah Kirby. He dropped out of school at the age of 14 in 1897, but seven years later was head of a large Cincinnati-area real estate concern and mayor of his hometown of Worthington.

At 24, Kirby was wiped out by the panic of 1907. At 28, he arrived in Cleveland with \$5.25 in his pocket and \$60,000 in debts. He set up an insurance agency in the Rockefeller Building but twice was forced out of business by his creditors.

He switched to securities brokerage and made \$1 million organizing three mortgage companies. In 1918, he bought the Rockefeller Building. He also took over the Cleveland Yacht Club from receivers, reorganized it and became commodore; 600 guests saw the launching of his yacht, the Suzanne.

In the same year, he started the Cleveland Discount Co., selling millions of dollars in stock. In 1921, he erected the 14-story Cleveland Discount Building at 815 Superior Ave.

In February 1923, the company collapsed. Receivers found it was \$33 million in debt and its stock was worthless. After a series of sensational trials and retrials, Kirby was sentenced to prison for mail fraud in the sale of the stock.

John D. Rockefeller bought the Kirby Building and changed its name back to the Rockefeller Building. The building at 815 Superior later became the NBC Building, and then the Superior Building.

Kirby died in 1964 at 80 in a threadbare downtown Cleveland apartment, a forgotten vestige of the Roaring '20s.

Sightseers gawked at one of the most ornate banking offices in the world when the Federal Reserve Bank, designed by Walker & Weeks, opened in August. The pink granite Italian Renaissance exterior was striking, but the interior was even more magnificent: high vaulted ceilings, coffered and gilded, with walls of veined Sienna marble and arched bays screened by wrought-iron gates. Entering the bank has been compared to walking into the interior of a bar of gold.

Tris Speaker hit a Speaker-like .380, four points behind Rogers Hornsby's league-leading average. Speaker also led the Indians with 130 runs batted in, 59 doubles and 17 home runs. George Uhle pitched 29 complete games while compiling a 26-16 record.

But this was the Yankees' era, and the Indians' 82-71 finish was good only for third place, 16½ games behind Babe Ruth & Co.

Western Reserve University and Case Institute of Technology had spurned the 1922 proposal of their alumni to combine as the University of Cleveland, but St. Ignatius College liked the name. In May 1923, it became Cleveland University.

That upset prominent Clevelanders, who still wanted their own Cleveland University. So in September, the Jesuit college changed its name again, to John Carroll University after the first Catholic bishop in America. The prominent Clevelanders in return promised to back a fund drive to move the college to a new campus in Idlewood — which then changed its name to University Heights.

The Depression delayed the move until 1935. St. Ignatius High School remained on W. 30th St., where it and the college had been since 1886. Cleveland University never materialized, but in 1925, Western Reserve opened Cleveland College on Public Square.



Prohibition helps gangsters rule city

Fred McGunagle

Cleveland had 1,200 legal bars, regulated by police, in 1919 when — a year ahead of the national Volstead Act — Ohio's Prohibition Amendment ended "the evil of the saloon."

By 1923, Cleveland had an estimated 3,000 illegal speakeasies, often protected by police, along with 10,000 stills. An estimated 30,000 Clevelanders sold liquor and another 100,000 made home brew or bathtub gin for themselves and their friends.

In 1920, Cleveland was seventh in the country in homicides. By the end of the decade, it had moved up to third. Although many were the result of gang wars, police said the majority occurred because of the general increase in drunkenness.

Prohibition was passed by rural and Southern voters, with little support in the big cities of the Northeast and Midwest. It became fashionable for women as well as men to flout the law. The costume of the emancipated "flapper," dancing the Charleston in short skirt and long beads, was incomplete without a hip flask. And that, according to Rick Porrello, created an opportunity "from a simple business concept called supply and demand."

Rick Porrello is a police officer. His 1995 book, "The Rise and Fall of the Cleveland Mafia," is a history of Prohibition in Cleveland, as well as the author's family history. His grandfather and three of his great uncles died in the gang wars.

Among the early entrepreneurs were Woodland Ave. barbers Louis and Abraham Auerbach. Their "Love Me Dearie" hair tonic was discovered to be pure grain alcohol. But the first major supplier of demand was "Big Joe" Lonardo — and he did it legally, selling bags of corn sugar to residents of the Woodland area. Each 100-pound bag produced eight gallons of whiskey in the stills, which soon were operating quietly — except for an occasional explosion — throughout the neighborhood.

Soon, Lonardo was raking in \$5,000 a week and was the *padrone*, or "godfather," of the neighborhood. "Lonardo's competition was dealt with by his henchmen in typical Mafia tradition," Porrello writes. "They died."

Louis Rosen hijacked a carload of alcohol belonging to Lonardo associ-



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Police raid a home on West Ave. Lt. Charles Snyder, with the cigar, looks over a still.

ates. He was cut down by four men with sawed-off shotguns and handguns as he returned home one night. August Rini was importing alcohol from Buffalo, N.Y. Early one morning, he got an urgent telephone call and drove to E. 25th St. and Woodland Ave., near the Lonardo store. Three men stepped from a doorway and pumped seven bullets into his body.

Salvatore Pella was believed to be supplying police with information about Lonardo's business. He was sitting in his car in front of the Piuono Funeral Home when a passer-by fired three shots through the open window. Two days later, he was laid out inside the funeral home.

In 1926, Big Joe Lonardo and his brother John were playing cards in the back room of the Porrello family's barber shop in Little Italy. The seven Porrello brothers also were in the corn sugar business. Two gunmen stepped through the back door and opened fire. Joe fell mortally

wounded. John managed to stagger out, but died on the steps of the Caruso Meat Market.

Police rounded up known gangsters and searched their houses. A few days later, a still exploded in John Porrello's home. Police who had searched the house had not reported it.

The Lonardo brothers' funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Cleveland. Fifteen motorcycle policemen led two bands and 500 cars of mourners. Hundreds more filled the church and the streets outside. There were more flowers, newspapers reported with civic pride, than for the funeral of gangster Dion O'Banion in Chicago.

It was rumored that Anthony Caruso was working late at his meat market when John Lonardo staggered to his doorstep, and Caruso saw the gunmen running away. A few nights later, he was shot and killed. Joe Porrello appointed himself Mafia boss of Cleveland, though he and his six brothers had rivals — the Mayfield Rd. gang of Frank Milano and "Big Al" Polizzi, which soon included Angelo Lonardo, Joe's son.

In December 1928, a policeman noticed a group of flashily dressed men entering the Statler Hotel. Suspicious, he copied down their names from the hotel register. They were top criminals from around the country. The next morning, 65 police surrounded the hotel and arrested them, charging them as "suspicious persons." Porrello rounded up 28 citizens to pledge their homes as bail for the hoods, who were given suspended sentences and told to get out of Cleveland.

They had gathered to divide up territories in Cleveland and around the country. It was later learned that Al Capone was a late arrival and, tipped off to the trouble, hurried back to Chicago.

Porrello relates gang murder after gang murder, including those of Big Joe Porrello and brothers Raymond — his grandfather — Rosario and Vincenzo. Big Joe's funeral was even bigger than Joe Lonardo's. However, Milano's Mayfield Rd. gang emerged



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A Cleveland officer smashes some homemade beer at a "joint at 82nd and St. Clair" during Prohibition.

in charge of the underworld, though in alliance with the Cleveland Syndicate, headed by Moe Dalitz.

Dalitz's group, an offshoot of Detroit's "Purple Gang," operated the "The Big Jewish Navy," running liquor across Lake Erie past the out-manned Coast Guard. The Coast Guard captured the pride of the fleet, the 300-horsepower, armor-plated "Sambo-G," with 1,500 cases of booze aboard. The following day, it was discovered that the liquor was missing.

By now, public support for Prohibition was fading, and the new leaders could read the handwriting on the wall. They branched out into gambling, both illegal and legal. When Dalitz died in 1989 at the age of 89, he was mourned as "Mr. Las Vegas."

They left a legacy of police and political corruption that continued until the administration of Mayor Harold Burton and his safety director, Eliot Ness, in the late 1930s. The disrespect for the law engendered by Prohibition never completely died out.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.



CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

The funeral of John and Big Joe Lonardo.

LOOKING AT A YEAR

March 9: Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin retires from office after a severe stroke. A "troika" is chosen to replace him.

June 22: With its war-ravaged economy a shambles, Germany's mark drops to a 20th-century low, prompting bankers to declare a national emergency.

Aug. 2: President Warren G. Harding dies unexpectedly in San Francisco, having taken ill the week before during an exhausting tour of Alaska.

Sept. 1: The worst earthquake in Japan's history levels Tokyo and Yokohama, killing 300,000 and injuring 500,000.

Oct. 12: A pattern of possible wrongdoing emerges as a U.S. Senate panel begins exploring the leasing of the government's rich oil reserves at the Teapot Dome fields in Wyoming.

Nov. 12: German nationalist and emerging political leader Adolf Hitler is arrested for plotting a coup against the German government.

Born: Henry Kissinger, Robert Dole, Alan Shepard Jr., Marcello Mastroianni, Joseph Heller, Norman Mailer.

Died: Mexican general and war hero Francisco "Pancho" Villa, French actress Sarah Bernhardt; Gustave Eiffel, builder of the tower in Paris that bears his name.

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