

# OUR CENTURY

## 1929

### AT A GLANCE

#### Most Americans shrug off market panic

The stock market had been rising throughout the 1920s, and in 1929 it took off like a rocket. Many of the shares were bought "on margin," or loans from brokers. On Sept. 2, the Dow Jones Industrial Average hit 381.2, for a rise of almost 100 percent since early 1928.

When the Dow declined sharply starting Oct. 23, brokers issued margin calls, meaning borrowers had to put up more money. If they didn't — or couldn't — the brokers sold out their positions for whatever they could get, forcing prices lower and causing more margin calls. On Oct. 29 — "Black Tuesday" — the slide turned to panic, and by Nov. 13, the market stood at barely half its September high.

Most Americans shrugged, since only 1.5 million of them had brokerage accounts. The Christmas season was a strong one for retailers. But automakers, realizing their boom was over, cut production and laid off workers, which led in turn to layoffs in steel.

Then, in December, stocks rallied again, regaining much of its losses. On Dec. 27, the Cleveland Stock Exchange had the busiest day in its 29-year history. Business leaders quoted in The Plain Dealer were upbeat. Harris Creech, president of Cleveland Trust Co., wrote, "Under the influence of President Hoover and the nation's leaders in industry, prosperity is due to continue."



Eaton

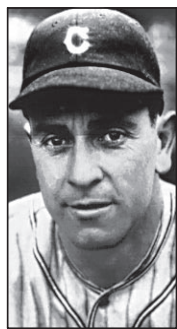
One Cleveland who wasn't intimidated by the downturn was Cyrus Eaton, who had come to Cleveland from Nova Scotia in 1905 to work for the East Ohio Gas Co. He soon went into partnership with John D. Rockefeller in securing gas franchises.

In December 1929, Eaton put together the

merger of five companies with assets of \$350 million to form the third-largest steelmaker in the country. He called it Republic Steel Corp.

If retail sales were strong, it was due in large part to a new phenomenon called chain stores. Independent stores were being forced out of business, but Woolworth's and J.C. Penney's were everywhere. On Aug. 1, Sears, Roebuck & Co. simultaneously opened two department stores — not downtown, but at 8501 Carnegie Ave. and Lorain Ave. at W. 110th St. The Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Co. had more than 500 food stores in its Cleveland district; there were 417 Kroger's and 317 Fisher's. There also were 16 Piggly-Wiggly stores, the grocery chain that pioneered a new approach called self-service. Instead of giving their orders to a clerk to fill, customers wandered around the store picking up what they needed and then took it to a cashier. Piggly-Wiggly prices were so low that its competitors quickly were forced to follow.

Stung by the Indians' poor showing in 1928, the new owners opened their checkbooks. They obtained outfielder Earl Averill from the minor-league San Francisco Seals for \$40,000 and two other players. For \$30,000 more, they added outfielder Richard Twilley Porter from the minor-league Baltimore Orioles. Porter's batting style won him the nickname "Twitchy Dick."



Averill

Averill opened the season with a home run in his first at bat and went on to bat .332 with 18 home runs. Porter hit .328. First baseman Lew Fonseca hit .369 to win the batting title and the league's Most Valuable Player award. Rookie pitcher Wesley Ferrell won 21 games. A skinny rookie named Mel Harder pitched in 11 games with a record of 1-0.

The Tribe won 81 games, 15 more than in 1928, but finished 24 games behind

Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics, who broke the Yankees' string of three straight pennants.

However, another Cleveland Indians team won a championship. Skating at the Elysium rink at University Circle, Harry "Happy" Holmes' Indians won the title in the new International Hockey League.

The original Celtics (from New York) had so dominated the American Basketball League in 1927 and 1928 that the league decided they had to be broken up. With three ex-Celtics in

#### Poison gas seeps into system; explosion rocks building

By Fred McGunagle

Silently, the yellow fog rose through the ventilating system and rolled along hallways into waiting rooms and examining rooms.

"Physicians, chemists and nurses fell with instruments, test tubes and charts in their hands," the next day's Plain Dealer said of the events of May 15, 1929 — events that forever would be known as "the Cleveland Clinic disaster."

Patients gasped for air and ran desperately for exits. Scores died trapped in stairways or pounding on elevator doors. Suddenly, an explosion ripped through the building, blowing out windows and the skylight. At once, fires broke out throughout its four stories.

By the time firefighters arrived, the Clinic was shrouded in brown smoke, but they could make out people screaming for help from the roof and the windows. As they donned gas masks and rushed in, nurses shouted, "Save the patients! Save the patients!" Another explosion shook the building.

Most of the Cleveland Fire Department rushed to the scene. So did engines from Cleveland Heights, East Cleveland and Shaker Heights and nearly all the Cleveland police on duty; one car was left to patrol the West Side. Taxis and passing motorists helped private ambulances get victims to hospitals.

The firefighters put up ladders to the roof and went down into the building. "Lord, help me," one said later, "as far down the stairway as you could see were bodies, bodies and bodies. Twisted arms and legs, screaming men and women. Bodies and screams."

Some people found their way to exits, but a strange thing happened. A Green Cab Co. driver reported: "Believe it or not, as soon as they hit the air they turned green. I turned around to look at them in the taxicab and they were as green as this cab, so help me God!"



PLAIN DEALER FILE

May 15, 1929, always will be known in the annals of Cleveland history for the Cleveland Clinic disaster. More than 100 people died, but the tragedy helped spur development and enforcement of safety regulations in U.S. hospitals. Here, firefighters rescue people trapped inside the clinic.

Others who got out seemed unaffected; some even joined the rescuers. Hours later, they keeled over. One, sent to Mt. Sinai Hospital, joked with attendants there. Ten minutes later, he was dead. Dr. John Phillips, one of the founders of the Clinic, became ill after returning home. By evening he was dead, despite the desperate efforts of his colleagues. One man drove home 150 miles to Grove City, Pa., apparently unharmed. The next day, he got sick and died.

All told, 123 people died, about half the number who had been in the Clinic that morning. It's a toll exceeded locally only by the 174 deaths

in the 1908 Lakeview School fire in Collinwood, and 130 in the 1944 East Ohio Gas Co. explosion and fire. Although the Clinic also had an explosion and fire, the event is known as the "disaster" because nearly all of the victims died of poison gas.

The symptoms of poison gas were eerily familiar to Dr. George Crile, the famous surgeon, as he paced in front of the building barking orders like a military commander. The idea of the Clinic had been born on the battlefields of France from the experience of the "Lakeside unit," the Lakeside Hospital doctors and nurses who volunteered together and reached France a month after America entered World War I.

Drs. Crile, Phillips, Frank Bunts and William Lower dreamed of forming a similar medical group on their return home, and only eight years after its opening, it was nationally recognized. Now, Crile watched his dream burning before him.

Forty-three doctors, nurses and other Clinic employees died, many heroically trying to save patients. There were other heroes as well. Sign painters working nearby heard the explosion and rushed to the Clinic with their ladders. Workers from the nearby Hupmobile agency brought out at least 25 people. Doctors and nurses quickly arrived from nearby hospitals.

The fires were out and the victims removed within two hours. Inside the building, reporter Roelif Loveland noticed a sweetish, nauseating odor. "But more terrifying than this was the yellow smudge," he wrote. "It was everywhere. Figuratively a hand of death, it had found every nook and cranny." The charred walls were yellow. Papers left on desks were yellow. So were the sheets on beds. The floor was a dirty yellow.

The source of the yellow smudge quickly was evident. The fire had started in a basement room where 70,000 X-rays were stored. Something started them burning — spontaneous combustion or maybe a cigarette or contact with a dangling light bulb — and the nitrocellulose film released toxic hydrocyanic and bromine gases. It was a danger that should have been foreseen: Only three months earlier, a similar fire had killed eight in an Albany, N.Y., hospital and manufacturers had switched to using acetate film instead.

Contrary to American Hospital Association guidelines, the X-rays were in paper folders. Some had been left outside of the steel cabinets where they were supposed to be kept. Worse, the building's ventilation system was located in the same room, which had no sprinkler system. A fire door was open, allowing the gas to spread. Fortunately, the door to the adjacent Cleveland Clinic Hospital was closed.

The building was severely damaged and the Clinic had only \$30,000 in liability insurance to cover claims of victims. Eventually, the lawsuits were settled for a total of \$167,000, a Cuyahoga County record at the time: Relatives were awarded \$5,000 for the loss of a husband or father, \$2,500 for a wife or mother.

All in all, the fire cost the Clinic \$840,000 after insurance, including \$440,000 for a new building. Cleveland rallied to its support: The fires were barely out when 36 wealthy Clevelanders, headed by Samuel Mather, pledged to raise \$500,000. Within five days, the Clinic reopened in a converted dormitory across the street and set out to rise from the ashes.

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.



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The clinic's temporary offices across the street from where the fire began.

### LOOKING AT A YEAR

**Feb. 14:** Seven gangsters are slain in Chicago in what becomes known as the "Valentine's Day massacre."

**Feb. 27:** Charles Lindbergh and his fiancée narrowly escape injury when a plane he is piloting crash-lands in Texas.

**May 16:** The first Academy Awards ceremony is held in Hollywood. "Wings" is voted best picture.

**June 27:** Bell Laboratories in New York demonstrates the first color television set.

**Aug. 29:** The dirigible Graf Zepp-

lin completes a historic 21-day journey around the world, landing in Lakehurst, N.J.

**Nov. 5:** Tammany Hall wins a huge victory as Jimmy Walker is re-elected mayor of New York, defeating Fiorello LaGuardia by nearly a half-million votes.

**Born:** Martin Luther King Jr., Jacqueline (Kennedy) Bouvier, Yasser Arafat, Audrey Hepburn, Beverly Sills.

**Died:** Wyatt Earp, Coca-Cola founder Asa Candler, actress Lily Langtry, German auto pioneer Friedrich Benz.

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