

# OUR CENTURY

## 1975

### AT A GLANCE



PLAIN DEALER FILE PHOTO

Bewildered Browns Coach Forrest Gregg and owner Art Modell.

### Another year, another fiscal crisis

Thousands of Clevelanders jammed Public Square to welcome 1975. Emcee Doug Adair introduced Mayor Ralph Perk, who would sing "that great and beautiful song, 'I Believe.'"

It was a fitting choice. When "Auld Lang Syne" died away, Perk would face a financial crisis for the fourth time in his four New Year's Days as mayor. His plan to lay off 269 police and firefighters had been ruled illegal because it had not been approved by City Council. Perk was under court orders to get rid of 300 "temporary" employees — many of them patronage appointees — who had served beyond the 90-day limit set by civil service regulations.

Through horse-trading with Council President George Forbes, Perk won approval of the safety layoffs, and by appealing the civil service ruling he won enough time for a crash testing program to legalize the employees.

Cuyahoga County voters approved a 1 percent "piggyback" sales tax for the Regional Transit Authority, enabling RTA to pay Cleveland for the Cleveland Transit System.

Perk transferred the money-losing city zoo to the Metroparks. Federal funds from the new Community Development Block Grants and the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act allowed him to rehire laid-off employees or find other ways to do their jobs.

It would turn out later than Finance Director Warren Riebe was also "borrowing" bond funds for city operations. For now the banks, which had lent the city money routinely, "rolled over" the loans at the end of each year.

Perk finished 5,000 votes behind school board President Arnold Pinkney in the seven-man Sept. 30 mayoral primary. But there were two ways to look at the results.

One was that Democrats (four of them) had outpolled Republicans (Perk) 70,000 to 45,000. The other was that, counting three minor-party candidates, whites had outpolled blacks 67,000 to 50,000.

County Democratic Chairman Anthony Garofoli said his party, which had stayed neutral in the primary, would give "enthusiastic and unqualified" support to Pinkney. The third and fourth candidates, State Rep. Patrick Sweeney and former state lottery official James Dickerson, endorsed Pinkney. Pinkney, who is black, declared, "We've proved once for all that racism is dead, that polarization is dead."

In the campaign, however, white Democrats, especially council members, were notable by their absence. The Nov. 4 count was Perk, 98,000, Pinkney, 83,000.

The National Weather Service was predicting a 20 percent chance of rain on Sunday, Aug. 24. Suddenly, it was as though Lake Erie had been picked up and dropped on Cleveland. Up to 4 inches of rain fell between 2:30 and 8:30 p.m. Thirty families were evacuated from southeastern Cleveland and Warrensville Heights.

Two boys, 12 and 14, were killed by lightning as they ran under a tree at Kingsbury Park. A 10-year-old girl wading along W. 130th St. drowned when she plunged into a catch basin whose cover had washed away.

A 41-year-old man drowned swimming across University Circle in an attempt to find his daughter's car, one of a number under the water. Some East Side intersections were still under water Monday morning. Case Western Reserve University was flooded.

All four Cleveland sports franchises had losing seasons, though the Indians and the Cavaliers came close to .500. Nick Mileti's Crusaders slipped to 35-40-3, but his Cavaliers improved to 40-42. The addition of center Jim Chones and guard Dick Snyder gave the Cavs reason to look forward to the 1975-76 season.

Frank Robinson was baseball's first black manager and the Indians' first playing manager since Lou Boudreau. He got Mileti's Indians off to a memorable start before 56,000 on Opening Day when he hit a home run in his first at bat. Boog Powell, Robinson's old teammate with the Baltimore Orioles, hit 27 home runs for the Indians, but the team finished fourth, at 79-80.

The Browns opened with a 24-17 loss to Cincinnati, a 42-10 loss to Minnesota and a 42-6 loss to Pittsburgh. After the third loss, owner Art Modell held a closed-door meeting with rookie coach Forrest Gregg and hinted at drastic changes. The next week, the Browns lost to Houston 40-10. A bewildered Gregg hired and fired kick returners almost weekly. After losing its first nine games, the team won three of its last five; Gregg was retained.

By Fred McGunagle

It truly can be said of Shondor Birns that nothing in life so befitted him as the way he left it.

On Holy Saturday evening in 1975, he left Christy's Bar at W. 25th St. and Detroit Ave. and walked to his 1975 Lincoln Continental. He got in and turned the key. With a blast heard for blocks, Shondor was blown through the roof. Parts of him came down across the street at St. Malachi Church, where parishioners were gathering for the 8 p.m. Easter Vigil Mass.

Shondor Birns had died as he lived — violently, and with Page One headlines.

The papers called him Alex "Shondor" Birns, but that was backwards.

He was born Szandor (Hungarian for Alexander) Birnstein in either 1905 or 1907 in what is now the Slovak Republic town of Lemesany, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

He was only a month old when his family came to Cleveland and went into the bootlegging business. Author Rick Porrello records that in 1920 Birns' mother was killed when the still in their home exploded. The red-headed youth spent his teens in the Jewish Orphanage.

On graduation, he fell in with the Maxie Diamond gang. In the next 12 years, his "rap sheet" showed 18 arrests. In 1925, Birns was sent to the Mansfield Reformatory for two years for auto theft. In 1933, he served 30 days in the Workhouse for assault and 60 days for bribery.

In 1934, Birns was shot during a scuffle with a nightclub bouncer named Rudy Duncan. On the witness stand, Birns denied knowing who shot him. Duncan was acquitted. A few weeks later, Duncan was killed by gunfire from a car that pulled alongside his.

Birns soon became a power in what was variously called the "numbers" or "policy" or "clearinghouse" racket, in which operators enforced their territory by bomb and gun. In effect, it was an illegal lottery; newspapers regularly denounced it until the state went into the business. Soon the papers were labeling Birns Public Enemy No. 1. He loved the publicity; it was good for business.

On the legit side, he operated nightclubs — the 1011 Club on Chester Ave. and then the Alhambra at E. 105th St. and Euclid Ave. The latter became the place to be seen. A genial host, Birns especially enjoyed entertaining news people and police.

During World War II, Birns tried to enlist. His draft board, figuring that better he should be shooting Germans, went to bat for him, but the armed forces refused him. Instead, since was still a Hungarian citizen, he was interned as an enemy alien. After the war, the United States tried to deport him to what had become Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia wouldn't take him.

In 1949, Birns beat up a policeman and served nine months in the Workhouse. The Workhouse superintendent was later fired for allowing Birns to take virtual control of the place. While he was there, the home of policy operator Henry "Buster" Mathews was bombed. Mathews blamed Birns, and a Workhouse guard said he helped Birns plan the bombing.

The newspapers had a field day with the two-month trial of Birns and four other hoods. Witnesses told of mob operations and payoffs to police. Defense attorney William Corrigan demanded: "Why is Buster Mathews allowed to conduct the biggest policy racket in the city unmolested?" The jury deadlocked; Safety Director Al Sutton later charged that Birns had tried to bribe and scare off witnesses.

Birns served three years in federal prison for income tax evasion in the 1950s, but repeatedly beat local charges. In 1957, a numbers operator named Donald "the Kid" King — later a nationally known boxing promoter — stopped paying protection money. When King's house was bombed, he told police he would tes-

McGunagle is a Cleveland freelance writer.

# Car bomb kills Shondor Birns



PLAIN DEALER FILE PHOTOS

When Shondor Birns' Lincoln Continental exploded, the blast was heard for blocks.



Birns appears in court in 1937 on charges of carrying concealed weapons.

tify that Birns was responsible, and he did — even after he suffered head wounds from shotgun pellets. However, King's testimony failed to convince the jury.

In 1959, somebody shot at Birns. Word on the street was it was Clarence "Sonny" Coleman, a numbers operator. Soon afterward Coleman was shot from a passing car; he said Birns was the driver. In court, Coleman suddenly said he had been wrong: it wasn't Birns. He was arrested as a material witness and the next day testified it had been Birns after all. The jury didn't know which version to believe. Once more, Birns walked.

The most sensational case involving Birns was the murder of financier Mervin Gold. In 1961, Gold was accused of defrauding banks and the Small Business Administration by using stolen Canadian bonds as collateral for loans. He fled to Israel, but returned in 1962 to face trial and indicated he would cooperate.

In July 1963, Gold's wife reported him missing. On July 5, his car was found in the woods of Solon with his body in the trunk. He had been strangled and shot. His wife gave police an envelope he had left in case he ever disappeared. It contained an affidavit that he had gotten the stolen bonds from Birns. His wife said he had planned to meet Birns on the night he disappeared.

Birns was nowhere to be found, though his leased auto was spotted near a motel in Toledo. Five days later, he showed up in Cleveland and told police he had heard he was wanted. He insisted that on the night Gold was killed he had been at home — and could produce a woman "of fine character" who would swear she



Birns puts up bond at the Central Police Station in 1950, a familiar procedure by then.

had been with him all night.

Her identity was a shock. She was a 24-year-old Garfield Heights schoolteacher named Allene Leonard. Frustrated police could not bring charges. Shortly afterward, Birns married Leonard, having recently divorced his first wife.

His cronies at the Theatrical Restaurant on Short Vincent Ave. remembered "Shon" as a nice guy, generous to those in need. Reporters mourned him because, as the Press put it, "he was good copy and ever ready to stand them a drink." Even the police who knew him as a cold-blooded killer found him hard to dislike.

His murder went down as unsolved, like so many of which he himself was suspected. In "To Kill the Irishman: The War that Crippled the Mafia," Rick Porrello fingers Danny Greene, a young hood who had once worked for Shondor as an enforcer and had ambitions of taking over the rackets.

Barely two years later, Greene met



Birns in 1950, after a "not guilty" verdict.

a similar fate as he left his dentist's office. Nobody could match the half-century survival record of Shondor Birns, the charming killer.

### LOOKING AT A YEAR

**Feb. 11:** Britain's Conservative Party elects its first female leader. She is Margaret Thatcher, former minister of education.

**Feb. 21:** John Mitchell, John Ehrlichman and H.R. Haldeman are sentenced to prison for their roles in the Watergate cover-up.

**April 30:** Saigon surrenders to Viet-

namese Communists. A few days later, it is renamed Ho Chi Minh City.

**April 13:** Jack Nicklaus wins a record-setting fifth Masters golf tournament.

**Sept. 18:** Hostage-turned-fugitive Patty Hearst is arrested in San Francisco.

**Oct. 1:** Muhammad Ali defeats Joe Frazier in a Philippines boxing match that becomes known as the Thrilla in Manila.

**Nov. 12:** In failing health, William O. Douglas retires from the U.S. Supreme Court.

**Dec. 17:** Lynette "Squeaky"

Fromme and Sara Jane Moore are sentenced to life in prison for trying to assassinate President Gerald Ford.

**Born:** Tiger Woods, Drew Barrymore.

**Died:** Chiang Kai-shek, Francisco Franco, Susan Hayward, Fredric March, Aristotle Onassis, Casey Stengel.