

# THE DOUBLE LIFE OF TOM L. JOHNSON

## Cleveland's Visionary Mayor Gave Up A Fortune To Dedicate Himself To The City. It Was His Undoing.

By Steve Luttner

The East Side hotel where Tom L. Johnson died was demolished years ago.

Gone, too, is Johnson's fancy Euclid Avenue mansion.

Too bad.

While the hulking Public Square statue of Johnson will probably sit there for eternity, the hotel and mansion better illustrate the dichotomy that was the life of Cleveland's most noteworthy mayor.

The mansion reflected the millions Johnson made as a 19th-century capitalist. The ivy-draped stone house came complete with servants, and Johnson's neighbors included some of the wealthiest families of Cleveland. While horse-drawn carriages were still the primary mode of transportation when Johnson took office in 1901, the cigar-chomping mayor was soon tooling about in a Winton motorcar he dubbed "The Red Devil."

Now shift to the old Whitehall Hotel on the corner of Chester Avenue and East 107th Street. This is where Johnson, 56, died two years after losing his bid for re-election to a fifth term in 1909. He had been forced to sell the mansion, his sizable personal fortune largely lost during those all-consuming days as mayor. There were few visitors to Johnson's bedside during those final days, although thousands of citizens lined Euclid Avenue as his modest funeral procession made its way to the downtown train station.

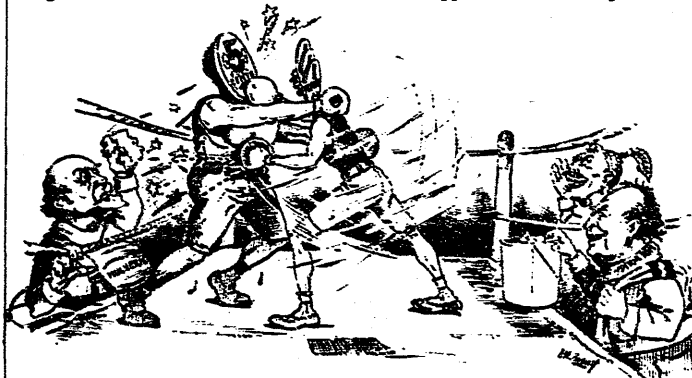
Johnson sacrificed a fine home, considerable wealth and probably his health as he engaged in the fervent, draining pursuit of making life better for the common man. A self-described "convert to social ideals," Johnson poured vast amounts of money into a loosely knit movement designed to champion the cause of the ordinary citizen. Near the turn of the century, for example, he spent \$100,000 to start a short-lived Cleveland newspaper designed to trumpet the movement's populist philosophies.

His deep commitment to the working man and woman — he was an early supporter of women's suffrage — resulted in

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Johnson's City Hall tilting hard at Cleveland's corporate elite. As mayor, Johnson battled for issues ranging from municipal ownership of utilities to lower streetcar fares. Although the hotel and the mansion are gone, the memories and accomplishments of Johnson are indelible. Champion of the ordinary citizen, Tom L. Johnson left Cleveland better than he found it.

Tom Loftin Johnson was born in Blue Spring, Ky. His father was a colonel in the Confederate Army. The civil war left the family broke and displaced. At war's end, they were in Virginia.



In 1902, the hot political issue was what to charge for public transportation: 3 cents, or 5.

When rail service was re-established in the Confederate state, young Tom cut a deal with the conductor who worked the local line. Johnson guaranteed that he would sell newspapers every day on the train if the conductor would bar competition from other vendors. Johnson had established his first money-making monopoly.

"As there was a great demand for them [newspapers], the boy had his own way in charging high prices, and he improved upon his opportunity," wrote Carl Lorenz in his book "Tom L. Johnson, Mayor of Cleveland."

He saved \$88, enough to buy train fare to get the family back to Kentucky.

As a 15-year-old in 1869, Johnson got a job with the streetcar company in

Louisville. By year's end, he was corporate secretary.

Johnson won steady promotions, but he established himself by inventing a streetcar fare box. It netted him \$30,000, a fortune in those days.

While in Louisville, Johnson lived with an uncle and his family. "Tom lived with the family of an uncle who had a large household of lively daughters," recalled one newspaper account. "Tom fell in love progressively with all of them. In this gracious, jolly household he got training in the joyous and hospitable living which marked his whole life."

His appreciation of family life man-

ifested itself at the altar, where he married his fourth cousin, Margaret.

With the money from his fare box, Johnson leveraged loans and acquired a broken-down streetcar company in Indianapolis. He made it profitable and installed his father as the boss.

"Tom made his father president of the road, which he improved and made profitable, and ran it until he came to Cleveland in 1880 — with half a million dollars in his pocket," wrote Lorenz.

Still in his 20s, Johnson was on a money-making roll. He quickly spread his industrialist wings, acquiring transit companies in Detroit and Brooklyn, N.Y. He started steel companies in Johnstown, Pa., and Lorain that made rails for his transit lines.

When Johnson moved to Cleveland, he locked horns with Marcus Alonzo Hanna, the most influential politician Cleveland has produced. Hanna would become a presidential adviser and a U.S. senator, but that didn't stop the feisty Johnson from sparring with him over control of the city's streetcar system.

Hanna controlled the West Side transit system, while Johnson gained control of the East Side lines by gobbling up a collection of trolley companies that served that part of the city. Johnson the monopolist was at it again.

"As he acquired new lines, Johnson's main goal was to give rides across town, from the West to the East Side, for one nickel fare or less," wrote The Plain Dealer in an earlier overview of Johnson's life. "Hanna bucked this heretical and dangerous notion. He and other rivals were milking 10 to 16 cents out of riders for such rides."

Life was good for the paunchy Johnson. He traveled throughout the East and Midwest, visiting his factories and trolley companies. In his autobiography, "My Story," Johnson told of a conversation he had with a train attendant. Johnson wasn't much of a reader, but the "train boy" told him of a book entitled "Social Problems," by Henry George. The book railed against the inordinate power of the wealthy, a theme that George boiled into one, scorn-filled word — privilege. Johnson read another George book, "Progress and Poverty," and soon became infatuated with his philosophy.

In "My Story," which Johnson finished on his deathbed in the Whitehall Hotel, it's clear that George's influence was with him to the end. Throughout the book, whenever the word "privilege" is mentioned, it is done so with a capital P, so as to set it off as something particularly offensive or nasty.

"When I read Henry George I came to a realizing sense of the menace of Privilege," wrote Johnson.

Johnson appears to have been irretrievably converted to George's philosophy during an 1885 business trip to New York, where he visited his hero. Immediately impressed by the "greatness of the man," Johnson told George that he (Johnson) was not a good public speaker or a writer. The only thing he did well, Johnson wrote, was make money.

"He [George] assured me that money



Voting on  
November 7, 1906.

Poster from Johnson's  
unsuccessful 1903 gubernatorial campaign.

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could be used in many helpful ways to promote the cause, but said that I couldn't tell whether I could speak or write until I had tried; that it was quite probable that the same qualities which had made me successful in business would make me successful in a broader field. He suggested that I go into politics. This seemed quite without the range of the possible to me, and I put it aside, but said that I would go ahead and make money and devote the profits largely to helping spread his doctrines if he would let me."

Johnson worked on George's unsuccessful run for mayor of New York, where Johnson made his first public speech. In 1888, Johnson ran and lost a race for Congress from Ohio's 21st District. In 1890, he ran again and was elected.

"I had become fully convinced that the most practical way to serve the cause to which I had committed myself was to bring the question into politics," Johnson said. "I am a monopolist and so long as I continue in business I shall take advantage of all the class legislation enacted by Congress, but as a member of Congress I shall work, speak and vote against such class legislation."

He was defeated for re-election in 1896. At the end of the 19th century, Johnson began to sell his businesses, including holdings in the Cleveland transit system. But his streetcar war in Cleveland would be waged for decades.

His standard campaign slogan was "3-cent fares," a phrase that for years drew the attention and the votes of many Clevelanders.

At least one of Johnson's other mayoral accomplishments would eventually outshine his protracted battle over public transportation. By pushing to annex what is now known as Old Brooklyn, Johnson acquired for Cleveland a power plant that got the city involved in the municipal sale of electricity. The legacy of that move is known today as Cleveland Public Power, the city-owned electric utility that sells power to city residents for less than its private competitor, the Cleveland Electric Illuminating Co. Some find it interesting, if not appropriate, that Johnson's statue on Public Square has its back to CEI headquarters.

Cleveland's business leaders were sometimes aghast at Johnson's demeanor toward them. It made news when one of Johnson's top aides was quoted as referring to the well-to-do Union Club as the "Onion Club."

But insignificant as it may sound now, it was in the extended trolley wars that Johnson invested most of his populist fervor. His dedication toward 3-cent fares surely captured the attention of Cleveland's masses at the turn of the century, when the city was swollen with poor immigrants whose only method of transportation was public transit. Paying 3 cents instead of 5 cents for a trolley ride was a big deal in 1905.

Johnson's preoccupation with delivering upon his promise of a 3-cent fare peaked and crashed within a few years.

Despite mild objections, Johnson personally helped form companies that promised 3-cent fares while he was mayor. He posted a bond for one company, and he started a bank to help finance another.

By 1906, Johnson had helped form the Municipal Traction Co., which offered Clevelanders the much-touted 3-cent fare. Johnson had delivered on his biggest campaign pledge.

But attempts to merge that company with its largest competitor resulted in labor problems, brought on by longtime workers at the competing firm. Labor strife ranging from a strike to other, more devious ploys — riders presenting trolley motormen with \$5 bills and demanding change for the 3-cent fare — rendered Johnson's system undependable. In 1909, based largely on the problem-plagued transit system, Tom L. Johnson was voted out of office.

There were other accomplishments during Johnson's eight years as mayor: a graft-free administration, well-lighted streets, new bridges, better conditions for prisoners, removal of "Keep Off The Grass" signs from public parks, municipal ownership of utilities. But the trolley struggle surely took a substantial toll on Johnson. He traveled to Europe after his defeat, a guest of a group in Britain that wanted to pay homage to him.

Johnson's exploits and his dedication to helping the ordinary citizen had made him famous. Muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens called him the "best mayor of the best-governed city in America." But his conversion from capitalist to public servant had cost Johnson dearly. There were signs that it had strained his marriage, as reflected in his wife's 1934 obituary.

"Born of the Southern aristocracy, she married Johnson before the teachings of Henry George, his friend, had caused him to take such wholesale interest in the common man and the plight of the common man. It is related that she was bewildered when Johnson began lashing out at the aristocrats and, as a result of this, she suffered at the hands of her former friends."

Defeated and sick, the friend of the ordinary man passed away quietly at the Whitehall Hotel on April 10, 1911. He was buried in New York, near his friend and mentor Henry George.

In his book, Lorenz said of Johnson, "Cleveland became in the course of time the battlefield of his life and finally his Waterloo. From the very beginning of his career in Cleveland, he encountered endless strife."

Cleveland was where Johnson lost his fortune. It was where he lost his health, then his life.

In the end, Tom L. Johnson was better to Cleveland than Cleveland was to him.