



- BS in Psychology
- BS in Business
- MS in Counseling
- MPH in General Public Health
- PhD in Education
- PhD in Human Services

LEARN MORE

Sign in | Register for free

Site Search Search Local Business Listings

Sign in with Facebook

Search for keywords, people, locations, obituaries, Web ID and more

- Home
- News
- Business
- Sports
- Entertainment
- Interact
- Jobs
- Autos
- Real Estate
- Rentals
- Classified Ads
- Shopping

Top Stories



Enter The Plain Dealer's 2011 Travel Photo Contest



Denny Obermiller sentenced to death in grandparents'...



Indians reportedly sign Chad Durbin to a 1-year deal...

Home > Obituaries from The Plain Dealer > Life Stories Revisited

# Fred Kohler, controversial Cleveland mayor: Life Stories Revisited

Published: Sunday, January 30, 2011, 12:30 PM Updated: Sunday, January 30, 2011, 6:21 PM



By Plain Dealer staff Follow

Like Be the first of your friends to like this.

2

Share

Share 3

Email

5

Print

This article was originally published in the Plain Dealer on Jan. 31, 1934. Kohler died on Jan. 30, 1934 in Cleveland.

Kohler's tumultuous 35-year career in public life encapsulated many of the uproars that still make headlines now, 80 years later. Controversy. Gambling. A sex scandal. Expulsion from office in disgrace. Municipal budget problems. The Municipal Light Plant. Machine politics. The county jail. Kickbacks. His Plain Dealer obituary is reprinted here as it appeared at the time, with few misspellings but a style for commas and some abbreviations that looks peculiar to a modern eye.

EX-MAYOR AND CHIEF

WAS 69; JOINED FORCE

IN MARK HANNA DAYS

Directed Police for Tom Johnson and Newton D. Baker; Became Cleveland's Head in Famous Doorbell-Ringing Campaign; Had Been Ill 18 Months Since First Stroke In Europe; Funeral Services Will Probably Be Friday.

Fred Kohler died quietly at his home, 1894 E. 81st Street, shortly after 11 last night.

The paralytic stroke of nearly two years ago rounded off with a tranquil end the life of the man who rose from poverty to become Tom L. Johnson's police chief, and the most sensational chief of his day; who was dismissed from this post in a public humiliation rarely paralleled; and who then came back, licked two big political organizations single-handed and made himself, for



30-Minute ER Guarantee in Sagamore Hills

Sagamore Hills Medical Center  
Open 24 hours, 7 days a week

South Pointe Hospital  
a Cleveland Clinic hospital

Click here

## More Obituaries from The Plain Dealer

Most Comments Most Recent

Obituaries from The Plain Dealer stories with the most comments in the last 7 days.

- 9 Joanne Siegel dies, widow of Superman co-creator, model for Lois Lane
- 4 Mercedes Spotts was a court administrator and civic leader

## Most Active Users

What's this?

Users with the most cleveland.com comments in the last 7 days

282



Hegel

one term, the same sensational kind of mayor that he had been chief.

His early days on the police force were almost the early days of Mark Hanna politics--and his last days were spent in the politics of three generations later, in which, almost to the end, he remained as a potential threat to present political leadership,.

Death came after eighteen months of enforced confinement because of the only illness or invalidism he had ever known, and shortly before he would have reached 70 on May 2. Five months before he was felled by the stroke, he was on the verge of running once more for mayor and attempting to resume the office he had taken single-handed from Republicans and Democrats by his famous non-speech, doorbell-ringing campaign of 1921.



[View full size](#)

Cleveland Press collection at [www.clevelandmemory.org](http://www.clevelandmemory.org)

Frederick Kohler in 1930, several years after he had been voted out of his last office, as Cuyahoga County Sheriff. At 66 then, he was still a political force to be reckoned with for the rest of his life.

### Second Stroke Monday.

Death came in the midst of unconsciousness that began with a second stroke at 10:30 Monday morning. At the bedside were Mr. Kohler's wife, Mrs. Josephine Modroch Kohler; her brother-in-law and sister, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Mattmiller, and Miss Pauline Burda, a nurse, who had been in attendance since Mr. Kohler was first stricken in 1932. Until the second stroke, hopes for Mr. Kohler's recovery had been bright. Every day last week, when mild weather prevailed, he had been outdoors in his wheel chair or in his automobile. Stanley Carey, who became the Kohler chauffeur seven years ago, but who had since become more of an attendant and companion, took him to different parts of the city.

The last trip outdoors was Saturday, when Carey took Mr. Kohler to a barber shop in E. 105th Street to have his-hair cut. , Monday morning Mr.-Kohler awoke in a cheerful mood. He had breakfast at 8 a. m. At 10 Mrs. Ida May Miller came to massage his arms, a daily treatment. Miss Burda then administered a violet ray treatment. Then came the stroke with the unconsciousness that continued until death.

Before that Mr. Kohler had chatted with those about him, the principal topic being the weather. Monday morning was very cold. Mr. Kohler did not like cold weather. After the stroke he tried to say something, but the words were unintelligible.

### Admits Fight Is Lost.

Dr. A. E. Connell, who had been attending Mr. Kohler, was slightly indisposed when the second stroke came. Disregarding his own illness, Dr. Connell brought all his resources to an effort to keep his patient alive. Yesterday he visited Mr. Kohler three times. At 3 yesterday afternoon he said the fight was hopeless.

The first stroke left Mr. Kohler an almost helpless cripple. His left side was paralyzed. The muscles became useless. He could not control his tears because of that loss. The affliction somewhat softened the lines of his usually bellicose expression.

In recent days, however, Mr. Kohler had held high hopes, of recovery. Within the last few weeks he had been attempting to walk, but a few steps were all that he could take.

### Planned to Run in 1932.

In January, 1932, Mr. Kohler was regarded as a serious contender for the office of mayor in the

115  [mrclean](#)

114  [durhamlou](#)

98  [rpuck1](#)

95  [itsaconspiracy](#)

### Users We Love



**"Scott\_in\_SC" recognized as a featured cleveland.com user**

Learn more about "Scott\_in\_SC", cleveland.com's latest featured user.

[More Users We Love](#)

### Connect with cleveland.com

[What's this?](#)

[All Facebook & Twitter accounts >>](#)

### Recommendations



**'Pampered' unionists? Really? Connie Schultz**

2,092 people shared this.



**Does Ohio really hope to save itself by turning its public labor unions into the enemy? Phillip Morr**

1,091 people shared this.



**Reports say Cleveland Cavaliers to trade Mo Williams, Jamarion Moon to Los Angeles Clippers for Baron**

499 people shared this.



**Cavs acquire Semih Erden and Luke Harangody for 2nd round pick**

299 people shared this.

 Facebook social plugin

### From Our Advertisers

- **Employees of Case, Clinic & UH are buying new town homes at Circle 118**
- **I can show you the world**
- **Put the fun back into date night!**

[Advertise With Us >>](#)

### Popular Tags

[What's this?](#)

[baldwin-wallace college](#) [case western reserve university](#) [chardon cleveland clinic](#) [cleveland museum of art](#) [cleveland orchestra](#) [cleveland police department](#) [cleveland public schools](#) [cleveland state university](#) [cuyahoga community college](#) [death](#) [fbi](#) [general electric](#) [john carroll university](#) [metrohealth](#)

first election under the present city charter. Ray T. Miller and Daniel E. Morgan had been announced as candidates.

Mr. Kohler looked on conditions then from the same viewpoint as he had in 1921, when he slipped between the two major political organizations and won without making a public statement, holding a public meeting or using any of the usual campaign tactics in his famous doorbell-ringing canvass.

Then Peter Witt came into the field. Witt was the sort of campaigner who would appeal to those voters on whom Mr. Kohler had counted. He saw it would be hopeless for either Witt or himself to split that group. Kohler said life was too short for that sort of struggle and withdrew his candidacy.

Five months later he started for Europe. The vacation trip was cut short by his first stroke of paralysis at Plymouth, England, when Mr. Kohler was transferred from the French Line steamer Champlain, on which he had left New York, to the liner Paris, bound for New York.

Mr. and Mrs. Kohler first met 50 years ago. Mr. Kohler had first met his wife's sister. He met Josephine Modroch in her home, where he had gone to visit the sister. The marriage took place 48 years ago. It was performed by the late Rev. Paul Sutphen, then pastor of Woodland Avenue Presbyterian Church.

Besides his wife, Mr. Kohler leaves a nephew, Fred Kohler of Cleveland; a nephew, Edward White of Columbus, and a niece who lives in Columbus.

Funeral arrangements are to be made by the J. & W. Koebler Co., 1966 E. 82d Street. It was announced last night that all that had been decided was that the services would be held at the Koebler Funeral Home Friday afternoon.

Fred Kohler was so stupendous an autocrat that, although his life was a series of bitter conflicts called forth by his despotism, it is not recorded once that he ever considered temporizing.

His celebrated slogan "Good or bad, right or wrong, I alone have been your mayor," might have been the slogan of his life. He was his own man and he walked upright and unyielding, contemptuous and hard-fisted through the most ferociously opposed career of any man of his day.

As police chief, county commissioner, mayor and sheriff he was forever plunged in clamor, but he went obstinately toward doing what he thought should be done regardless of what opposed him. He wasn't hypocritical enough to think or say that he was always right, but he believed that whatever he did was as right as he knew at the time of doing.

### "Roughneck" Always.

Since the turn of the century Kohler was a public figure. As a "blond giant" of a young policeman he was feared as much for his uncompromising candor as for his strength in a brawl. He was a "roughneck" and never pretended to be anything else.

As an aging man he was respected, feared, hated, reviled, attacked and ridiculed for his unwillingness to take anyone's counsel, but he went on being himself.

Kohler was born May 2, 1864, in a house near the corner of Academy Street, now W. 3d Street, and St. Clair Avenue N.W. When he was very small his parents moved to Prospect Avenue

[medical center](#) [nela park](#) [oberlin college](#)  
[obituaries](#) [obituary](#) [ohio state](#)  
[university](#) [playhouse square](#) [police](#) [the plain](#)  
[dealer](#) [university hospitals](#) [world war ii](#)

#### About this story

For almost 170 years, The Plain Dealer has chronicled the passing of Northeast Ohio's notables. We are now bringing those stories online to create an archive of the people who made history in Cleveland. If you have suggestions for obituaries we should post, please [e-mail us your ideas](#).

#### More sources

From Chapter 2 of "Cleveland, Confused City on a Seesaw" by Phillip W. Porter: ["The Blahs Turn to Euphoria"](#)

[Frederick Kohler](#), Encyclopedia of Cleveland History

["A Golden Rule Chief of Police"](#), Everybody's Magazine vol. 22, digitized in Google Books. "Indiscriminate arrests are a chief cause of crime," it says (about 1910).

[Colorful Kohler's checkered past doesn't stop oddball from getting elected](#), Plain Dealer, July 5, 1998

[Original Plain Dealer pages](#) (PDF)

[Fred Kohler](#) links compiled by [TeachingCleveland.org](#) a

in downtown Cleveland and a year or so later to a house near Woodland Avenue S.E. and E. 78th Street, opposite the old Woodland Cemetery.

Fred Kohler links compiled by TeachingCleveland.org, a project of the Teaching Cleveland Institute

### **Father Stonecutter.**

His father was a stonecutter of Bohemian ancestry. His shop was run in connection with the house, and Fred and his older brother were taught to assist their father almost from the time they began school. Fred went to Outhwaite and Willson grade schools but never got beyond the sixth grade, when he left to help his father and brother with the business. He was 14 then.

In later years he regretted that he had been unable to go farther in school, although he said frequently that most of what was taught in school was "nonsense."

For two years he worked in his father's yard. Friends then described him as big for his age and inclined toward arrogance. His face was large, his lips held tightly together, his eyes bored straight ahead.

When his father died he and his brother attempted to run the business, but failed. Fred got a job in the Woodland Cemetery tending graves but left it after a few months to try his hand at keeping a grocery store in the neighborhood. Houses were far apart then -- the corner of Woodland and 79th Street was virtually "in the country"-- and the business failed. Fred got a job in a factory and eventually became a coremaker.

### **Saw Poor Harried.**

It was while he was a factory worker that he absorbed the ideas that dominated all his actions, private and political, later. He saw that a great many people were poor, that crime grew in slums and fed off the poor, that the poor were harried by the police. Later his observations were broadened into his famous "Golden Rule" and its accompanying "Police Repression Policy," although he never was able adequately to explain what was in his mind.

Even as a young man Kohler had a habit of speaking out, a habit in which he did not spare himself. But although he admitted afterward that he might possibly have been mistaken in something he had done, he was unable to explain in other than roundabout terms what motivated his actions. It was charged by newspapers that addresses he gave explaining his "Golden Rule" were copied directly from a speech of an English criminal published in an American magazine. Kohler never answered the charge, but friends said that the underlying principle of the "Golden Rule"--the newspapers termed it that -- had been in his mind even before he became a policeman.

### **On Many Beats.**

At 25, in 1880 Kohler was made a policeman. At first his beat was in the old tenderloin district downtown, where he became very well known. Later at one time or another he was for short periods on almost every beat in the city.

In 1895 he was made a sergeant and already his raids in the tenderloin had made him a public character. From then on he was on every front page in the city frequently until he retired from the campaign for governor in 1927.

In 1896 he became a lieutenant and in 1900 a captain. Then began his growing reputation as a disciplinarian and a "man who couldn't be bought." His precinct -- still in the tenderloin -- was the most carefully operated one in the city, his men complained. Every night there were forays into the congested parts of the precinct, vice resorts that violated the rules of the old segregated district were closed, gambling rooms were vacated and the equipment smashed by an ax in the hands of Capt. Kohler himself.



[View full size](#)

CSU Library

Frederick Kohler in his characteristically spotless police uniform. He was appointed to the Cleveland force in 1880.

## **Banished by Johnson.**

Word came to Mayor Tom Johnson about that time that the Kohler raids were chiefly the attempt of a hard-boiled cop to embarrass the administration. Kohler wouldn't listen to any reason, friends told Johnson, and dealt as summarily with establishments in his districts as if he were a czar.

Johnson banished Kohler eventually to a precinct in an outlying part of the city.

Without a word of protest Kohler took over his new charge. From there word soon came downtown that "Kohler's men" were toeing the mark more carefully than in any other precinct. Residents of the precinct were complimenting the men on their fine appearance and on their work.

In 1903 Johnson sent for Kohler. According to his own story of the incident, he asked Kohler if he knew why he had been "sent to the woods." Kohler answered that he didn't care. He said he took what jobs were given him and did them without question.

## **Made Police Head.**

"I discover I was mistaken in my reasons for transferring you," Johnson said. "I want you to take charge of the police department."

Kohler was made chief of police as soon as Johnson could induce Chief George E. Corner to retire. In a year's time the Cleveland department was known throughout the country for its rigid discipline, its neat appearance and its crusading spirit. Kohler listened to no one but ran the department in the way he thought it should be run.

His raids on gambling houses and vice resorts continued in early days of his chiefship, then were abandoned for the more effective "police repression," a Johnson recipe. In a spotless uniform, a gleaming white vest, shoes highly polished. Kohler, brandishing his ax, went through resort after resort like an avenging spirit.

## **Checked on Visitors.**

Kohler's policy of "Police Repression" was simply the assignment of a patrolman to stand at the door of all disorderly establishments and take the names of visitors. A few days of this and trade fell off so badly that the establishments always closed.

The names of the visitors went into memorandum books and were given by the patrolmen to Kohler himself, who kept the "little black books" for many years, according to tradition.

In 1907 he laid down his "Golden Rule." Police were ordered to cease arresting first time offenders, juveniles especially. Intoxicated men were to be helped homeward if they could go. If they couldn't get home they were to be locked up without charge until sober, when they were to be taken before a police lieutenant, where they signed waivers and were released. Newton D. Baker, then Johnson's chief lieutenant and city solicitor, devised the system of waivers which the newspapers dubbed the "Sunrise Court."

The reputation of the police department and the "Golden Rule" made Kohler known throughout the world. He was at the top of his career and he rode like an autocrat.

Soon, however, reaction set in. Kohler was too severe, complaints said. It was a troublesome time, socially and politically. The temperance movement was coming to the top and its strength was being felt in City Hall. On the other side the liquor interests were combatants and they began to demand that something be done about Kohler.

## **Suspended In May, 1910.**

The chief was "acting like a king," they said. He was frequently drunk and boisterous in downtown resorts, it was also said, The complaints came to a crest in May, 1910, when Mayor Herman C. Baehr suspended Kohler and preferred 25 specific charges against him. Most of the charges were allegations of drunkenness and conduct unbecoming an officer. Behind it all was the hope of a Republican administration to remove an unfriendly if efficient chief.

After a hearing of nearly a month Baehr exonerated Kohler and reinstated him. One of the most important witnesses for Kohler was his friend Edwin D. Barry, then sheriff.

Barry later became one of Kohler's bitterest enemies. He was one of the first of a long list of Kohler friends who became alienated by Kohler's arbitrariness and who remained throughout the rest of his career to attack and oppose him.

After his exoneration Kohler went to Europe and moved like a reigning monarch from city to city, where he was received with respect, sought for advice. In Germany he met Emperor Wilhelm, whom he admired intensely and who had heard of him. In Scotland he sat on a bench with a judge who wanted to know the workings of the "Golden Rule."

### **Back in Swiss Hat.**

Kohler came back to the city "in a reddish-brown suit and a Swiss Alpine hat," the newspapers said, and resumed his old position as uncompromisingly as he had held it before.

In 1913, under Mayor Newton D. Baker, the full force of the protest which had been growing against Kohler broke when Baker suspended him on charges of "gross immorality."

The scandal which resulted in throwing Kohler from his chiefship was born in a divorce suit late in 1912 brought by a traveling salesman living on Daisy Avenue. The case aroused no attention at its trial because Kohler's part was shrouded and protected. But two months later, in February, 1913, while Kohler was on a trip to Central and South America, the news leaked out that the Baker administration was ready to prefer charges of immorality and misbehavior as a police officer.

Kohler stepped off the boat with his lips tightly closed and went through a gruelling sensation of a civil service trial in almost the same mood, although, on the witness stand, he denied so many of the circumstances brought against him as to create the impression that he had decided to protect the "woman in the case," come what may.

On the night of Feb. 13, 1913, the Civil Service Commission found him guilty of all charges, ordered his removal from the police force, and permitted his retirement on half pension only. Thousands flocked that night to the lobby of Hotel Hollenden to see whether Kohler would dare appear in his favorite haunt on schedule time. He was there, glaring back at the hundreds of curious and hostile eyes, his chin as high in the air as ever; and he chatted casually with his friends as if nothing had happened. This demonstration of self-control was really the signal that the fallen hero, once called "America's best police chief" by Theodore Roosevelt, was ready to attempt his comeback.

### **Series of Defeats.**

That fall he ran for Council and was defeated. In 1914 he was a candidate for the Republican nomination for sheriff and was defeated by the organization, which considered him a liability. In 1915 he was a candidate for clerk of Municipal Court and was defeated. In 1910 he won the Republican nomination for county commissioner against the wishes of the organization but was defeated in the Wilson "landslide."

Throughout all his attempts to "win vindication," Kohler conducted himself as he had when chief. If he disliked someone he said so. If he was bored in conversation he abruptly left a room. If he disliked an expressed opinion he gave his own assertively and walked away.

In 1918 he was elected county commissioner, as the first Republican in eight years to break into a solid Democratic court house, and once more against the wishes of the organization, which had a horror of him. He began his term by quarreling with his colleagues and announcing he was going to clean up the court house.

Commissioners' meetings during his terms were almost public spectacles that people came from great distances to see.

"He thinks he's the only man in this court house who's doing right," one of his colleagues said at a meeting one day.

"Well, I am," said Kohler.

### **Went House to House.**

In 1920, Kohler was re-elected. In 1921 he announced himself a candidate for mayor. While the two party machines laughed at him he held no meetings, gave out no statements, did nothing that candidates ordinarily do. He went from house to house in all heavily populated districts asking people to "Vote for Fred Kohler."

He won in a badly split-up field and came to City Hall announcing that he alone would run the city. He began by selecting a cabinet regarded by the public as composed of the best men ever to be in City Hall. He announced a policy of "economy," always one of the major tenets of the Kohler doctrine. In his first month he fired nearly 1,000 employees, all job holdovers by favor of one or another of the political parties. He denounced "frrippery" in municipal government and cut down the work of many departments. He attempted to abolish the smoke inspection department until protests from women's clubs prevented it. He cut down the budget of the parks department, abolished the park engineering department, cut down the budget of the service department.

### **Slashes Salaries.**

In February he cut the salary of all employees, except those under classified civil service", 10 per cent. He got into a quarrel with civic associations by refusing to open the new Public Hall until he was sure it would support itself. He laid down a dictum for all employees that anyone not working eight hours a day would be fired.

By summer time he had quarreled with almost all of the occupants of the City Hall. City Council, especially the Maschke Republican element led by Herman Finkle, Fred W. Thomas, William E. Potter and others, started a policy of hampering him whenever possible.

Late in the year Charles H. (Time Clock) Hubbell got out recall petitions against Kohler. Fifteen hundred signatures were secured and the petitions were given to the city clerk, who charged many of them were forgeries. County Prosecutor Edward C. Stanton started an investigation of the petitions which was later dropped, although it was admitted some of the signatures were spurious.

### **Kohler Christmas Card.**

In December Kohler issued the first municipal report the city had ever had, in which he proudly declared that the "city has lived within its income." When the municipal Christmas tree was erected on the Public Square, under it was found the first of the celebrated Kohler signs. The sign said: "The city has lived within its income for 1922 -- Fred Kohler, mayor."

In January, 1923, dissension broke out in his cabinet. There were many resignations. The Plain Dealer denounced Kohler's "stockyard tactics" in reprimanding A.B. Roberts, his director of city utilities. Roberts resigned when Kohler refused to apologize.



[View full size](#)

Cleveland Public Library at  
[www.clevelandmemory.org](http://www.clevelandmemory.org)

Mayor Fred Kohler and England's David Lloyd George in 1923, on their way to lay the cornerstone of the Cleveland Public Library building downtown. Lloyd George was British prime minister until 1922.

Kohler announced that his departments would have to cut their budgets by \$300,000 to make up for revenue lost to the city by shrinkage of land values. Public groups protested that economy was well enough but that his cuts had already abolished necessary service. Streets were being neglected, they said, park property was deteriorating, the municipal light plant was a "disgrace."

### **"Moths" Plague Him.**

Kohler brusquely went ahead with his activities, friends fell away from him. Council continued to snipe at him, the newspapers continued to upbraid. In the spring the great "tussock moth controversy" was started. Tree men said tussock moths infested the city's world celebrated trees because of neglect. Kohler intimated that the tussock moths were something the newspaper men invented to plague him.

Again he continued as usual, and one day the city awoke to find all city property had been painted orange and black, which Kohler said were "right pretty" colors. Public protest and ridicule as usual had no effect.

At about that time, too, the Harry H. Packer Sign Co. donated eight large signs to Kohler because, officials said, of what he had done to improve traffic conditions. Kohler got into a feud with Clayton C. Townes, president of Council, over refreshment stand concessions in the parks. Kohler wanted to give all concessions to one man, but Townes blocked the project. The newspapers continued all summer to make fun of Kohler, to point out the dilapidated condition of the parks.

### **Sign Feud Breaks.**

On Oct. 19, 1923, the great "signboard quarrel" between Kohler, and Capt. Andrew J. Hagan and Capt. Emmett J. Potts, both of whom were then lieutenants who had just graduated from night law school. Hagan and Potts had irritated Kohler by opposing him on the police pension board, of which they were both members.

Four workmen for the Packer Co. were putting up a sign on city park property at St. Clair Avenue N.E. and E. 88th Street when Potts and Hagan appeared. They were both off duty and "happened to be driving by," they explained later.

To the workmen they said it was not permitted to put up signs on city property. The workmen explained that a mounted patrolman had previously stopped them but that they had called City Hall and been told by Kohler's office that it was "all right." The signs were for Kohler, they explained.

Hagan and Potts politely apologized but said they would have to put the men under arrest. They took them to the Thirteenth Precinct, where Hagan was detailed, and then to Central Police Station, where Police Prosecutor Frank Jilek refused to give them warrants for the men. Capt. Lyman Van Orman, in charge of the Thirteenth, said it was all right for the men to proceed with the signs but Hagan demurred that the signs were plainly against the law and that it was his duty to arrest the men.

### **Veils "Brainless Wonders."**

Kohler raved, called Hagan and Potts "brainless wonders" and said they had been "bucking their superiors" for two years. He intimated he would have them sent to "the woods."

The next day Hagan rearrested the men, who were fined in Police Court and later ordered released by the Court of Appeals. Hagan, who lived at 2031 W. 43th Street, was ordered transferred to night duty at the Fifteenth Precinct at Nottingham Road N.E. and E. 185th Street, a car ride of an hour and half from his home. Potts, who lived at 4249 E. 126th Street, was ordered to the Seventeenth in West Park, a car ride for him of equal distance.

Hagan and Potts got injunctions against the transfer, Attorney Hagan appearing for Lieut. Potts and Attorney Potts appearing for Lieut. Hagan. Eventually the matter was dropped after a long wrangle in the courts.

Meanwhile the sign on St. Clair disappeared mysteriously. Others appeared at Bulkley Boulevard N.W. and W. 44th Street and at Carnegie Avenue S.E. and E. 105th Street. One said, "Good or bad. right or wrong, I alone have been your mayor -- Fred Kohler, mayor." The other said. "City of Paved Streets -- Fred Kohler, mayor." The signs were painted in orange and black.

### **Denounced by Finkle.**

The Maschke Republicans were stirred to great activity by the public protest. Herman Finkle, Republican floor leader in Council, denounced the signs and Kohler. The Council created an administrative code commission, designed to transact most of the city's business to replace the board of control which Kohler had furiously admitted was controlled by "one man -- Fred Kohler."

Kohler refused to recognize the new commission, as he had refused to recognize Council's previously created "board of municipal research." Paul Lamb, his director of law, resigned after a quarrel with Kohler when Lamb protested that city ordinances made him as much of an adviser to Council as to the mayor.

For the rest of the year Kohler fought with the Council majority, the newspapers and organized groups. He became more reticent, refused to see newspaper men, quarreled with more of his friends.

### **Sign Is Blaze of Glory.**

At the end of the year he went out of office in a burst of glory by introducing a revolving sign under the municipal Christmas tree on the Square which said to the citizenry over his name: "I have been loyal to you." "I have worked and saved money for you." "Watch for my 1923 report." "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

In his report he told the public he had saved \$1,800,000 for the city and went again into private life to the open declaration of politicians that he was "through again." William R. Hopkins as city manager took over the reins of the city under the form which had been voted in 1922 when Kohler was elected.

To a reporter who caught him in a reminiscent mood Kohler said:

"Yes, sir. I wouldn't mind going all over it again, because I know I was right, and if I did, I'd tell all the old crowd to go to hell -- newspapers, Council, uplifters, tipoff guys, political hangers-on, bookbugs, ingrates, the whole crowd. I'd paint everything orange again.

"I Take My Medicine.

"But there's one thing about me. I take my medicine. You never heard me squeal. I've never peeped, and I never will. I know how to take it.

"I've learned human nature from hard experience, having been dragged up, so to speak, on the streets. I've learned about it from being a policeman. But I've learned and kept learning about it all my life.

"I know one thing -- a lot of those birds who tried to knock me never have grown as big as I am -- not in height or weight, but in thought. They haven't been thinking up where I have. And I haven't paid any attention to any of them.

"I know I've been accused of being high-handed, but I was elected mayor, not anybody else. It was my picnic or my funeral."

Immediately afterwards Kohler went to South America for 73 days. All his life it was his habit to go traveling, alone, whenever he ran into unusual stress.

### **Back in Politics.**

When he came back he went to Florida. Returning, he said he might run for governor. In the spring he announced he was going to run as a delegate-at-large to the Republican national convention in Cleveland. He got into a typical Kohler argument with party leaders when he was told he'd have to declare whose candidate he was. He threatened to name himself as a candidate for president and his wife as vice president. Finally he declared that he was a Coolidge delegate but the Supreme Court ruled that as Coolidge had not yet made a formal declaration of candidacy, the candidacy was illegal. Kohler withdrew.

In August he surprised and pained party leaders by running for sheriff. He was nominated and

later elected, although political writers noted he seemed to be losing strength.

### **Hires and Fires at Old Rate.**

His term as sheriff was a repetition of all his political squabbles and brawls and battles in his previous career. He began by quarreling with county commissioners over budget requirements. He cut pay of deputies and hired and fired new ones in the Kohler manner. In a year he had hired and fired 53 deputies.

"It's going to be a real jail," Kohler announced on taking office. "There's not going to be any more of this summer camp atmosphere around here."

He abolished "speeders" row" where speeders had had special privileges, and made the space over into a private office for himself.

Late in the fall after a series of personal quarrels, Harry H. Hershey, a bank clerk of Lancaster, O., who confessed to having embezzled \$60,000, told police who arrested him that he had lost the major part of the money at a gambling house operated by George Himmelstein in Garfield Heights.

Reports that at least six other gambling houses were operated in the southern and southeastern suburbs left Kohler unmoved. He said it was a matter for local officials to solve.

### **Barricades Self In Jail.**

The newspapers and public agencies protested so strongly that Kohler barricaded himself in his jail and refused to see reporters. A committee of citizens headed by Clarence N. Greene, former mayor of Garfield Heights, started to circulate recall petitions against Kohler.

Eventually the public outcry closed the gambling houses and Kohler promised, grudgingly, that he would "investigate."

Kohler and Barry, safety director, indulged in a series of acrimonious remarks against each other through the newspapers. Kohler hinted that he and his men would raid in "Barry's wide open territory."

Earlier in the same year Kohler had fought the Animal Protective League by announcing he wouldn't appoint its director as dog warden, as had been customary. During the ensuing quarrel Kohler threatened to build a dog pound, operate it himself and have his deputies act as dog catchers. After a public and acrimonious meeting Kohler appointed a warden.

In April and May, 1926, prisoners in County Jail went on a "hunger strike" and barricaded themselves in the bull pen, charging that Kohler was underfeeding them. After three days the prisoners were subdued when Common Pleas Judge Frank C. Phillips promised them there would be no reprisals. Kohler had kept all news of the rebellion from the public, until reporters found out about it when Kohler was unable to deliver prisoners to court.

### **Pie Concession Probed.**

A grand jury investigation followed. It was charged Kohler had given the "jail concession" on pie, ice cream and cigarets to "Louie the Pieman," a trusty, who turned over all profits to Kohler. Because food was bad in the jail, it was charged, prisoners had to buy ice cream or pie at high prices to keep alive.

After the investigation the common pleas judges decreed that Kohler must feed prisoners a specified menu, which they considered nutritious, and return the unused money to the county. Previously sheriffs had kept the money left over from the 45 cents a day allowed to feed each prisoner.

Kohler carried the case to the Supreme Court but lost.

When the investigation of under-feeding men was at its height it was noted that Kohler was unpopular with great bodies of people who had formerly supported him. In the primary in August,

1926, party leaders considered asking him to withdraw from the race for the sake of the party because his showing was so poor.

### **Tours With Fleming.**

By that time he had become reconciled to the organization. On primary night he even toured the Eleventh Ward with Thomas W. Fleming, then a Maschke lieutenant in Council and later sent to the penitentiary for bribery.

Old supporters of Kohler shook their heads, saying he had lost his independence.

But even though he had made party alliances, Kohler continued to act as autocratically as he had before. He still was his own man as far as his demeanor went. He had become older-looking, grimmer, more bitter. He talked then hardly at all.

He was defeated in November by E.J. Hanratty, who ran on an anti-gambling platform, and he went out of office quarreling with commissioners. His deputies complained that he made them work as hard on the last day as on the first. To prevent their "laying down" he had their salaries delayed until the last day.

When he left office he went at once to Europe, alone as usual. When he returned he announced he was going to run for governor. In 1928 he filed his candidacy for governor and sailed for Europe.

He got but a handful of votes.

After that he made no more attempts to run for office. He was seen daily around Hotel Hollenden lobby as stern and uncompromising as ever.

In all the attempts to abolish the city manager form of government in Cleveland, Kohler figured prominently in speculation as a possible candidate for mayor. When the manager plan finally was voted out in November, 1931, he announced that he was thinking about running and would have a statement to make later.

But before Kohler got around to making his statement several groups of his friends and admirers put his petitions in circulation. He then decided, characteristically, to make no statement at all and let the politicians sweat. One of the admirers who circulated his petitions was Charles H. Hubbell, a candidate for mayor in 1921, who attacked Kohler bitterly at that time and later tried to remove him as mayor.

Finally the time came when Kohler's petitions were filed with the Board of Elections and he had to notify the board whether he would accept the nomination. He waited until the last moment, then wrote a letter to the board in which he pointed out proudly that he had had nothing to do with the circulation of the petitions and that he did not know they were filed until he read it in the newspapers. He told the board he would not be a candidate and concluded his letter with the statement:

"After all, life is too short."

**Related topics:** [fred kohler](#), [frederick kohler](#), [life stories revisited](#)

---

#### **Sponsored Links**

---

Share this story

Story tools

[Email](#)

[Print](#)

---

#### **More stories in Obituaries from The Plain Dealer**

**Previous story**

[George A. Coulman was Cleveland State dean of engineering](#)

**Next story**

[Jeremy Malafa was a leading skateboarder](#)