

HISTORY OF THE 1960s

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The 1959 holiday season, the last of the decade, was full of good cheer and spirit, the downtown department stores merry with color, music and the smells of Christmas. Shoppers swarmed the streets, their heads bowed to the cold as they made their way up Euclid Avenue past the array of brightly lit stores.

Children wondered how Santa could be both at May Company and Higbee's. The giant Christmas tree at the Sterling-Linder-Davis department store was as traditional as the season itself. The restaurants and bars along the avenue were aglow with fellowship that only the holidays can bring.

It was the final hours of a peaceful and generally rewarding decade for Greater Cleveland. No one predicted that the upcoming decade, the 1960s, would be as tumultuous and trying as any the city, or the country, for that matter, would endure.

The decade was only weeks old when a harbinger of bad news appeared. On January 23, the *Cleveland News*, an institution that traced its heritage to post Civil War days, announced it would cease publication following years of competing for afternoon readers with the dominant Cleveland Press.

The Cleveland Press was no ordinary newspaper and because of the weakness in the two-party political system, Cleveland was no ordinary newspaper town. Under Louis B. Seltzer, the newspaper emerged as the most powerful institution in the region. Picked by *Time Magazine* as one of the most influential newspapers in America, *The Press* elected mayors, jailed corrupt public officials, hunted murderers, and drove the agenda of the city and its citizens.

Seltzer was as much a politician as a journalist. Diminutive in stature, blunt and street smart, he was self-made with minimal formal education. He reigned as the most powerful force in the city for a quarter of a century. He was a man whose vision did not eclipse the next election.

While no one realized it, the demise of the *News* marked the initial toll of the bell for *The Press* itself, as its death would take place 21 years later. By 1960, television news was coming of age, and a circuitous highway system was opening

a burgeoning suburban sprawl. Afternoon newspapers could no longer reach the spreading population before the six o'clock news.

By the fall of 1960, it seemed as if the whole of America was changing. The election of John F. Kennedy brought a vitality to politics that heralded a new era not only in Washington but across the nation. Cleveland was destined to be a major player in that change, even though it would be a painful change.

More than 25 years had passed without any major development or repair to Cleveland's infrastructure. The city suffered through the Great Depression; during World War II it focused its energy on the war effort. Its housing stock was decaying and many of its neighborhoods were overcrowded.

In a massive effort to rejuvenate Cleveland, the government embarked on six urban renewal projects. The city's business community hailed the effort and focused on the downtown piece of the project, Erieview.

In concert with urban renewal, a highway system planned as early as 1927 and spurred by the Eisenhower Administration's federal interstate program was progressing. Transportation was a constant theme in and around Cleveland, with a rapid transit system being the key to the development of Shaker Heights in the 1920s.

Together these two efforts—urban renewal and the transportation system—would be largely responsible for the consistent drain of population from the central city.

At the time, the urban renewal projects constituted the largest such effort in America. Critics accused Seltzer of promoting Erieview to benefit a new location for his newspaper. The scope and shape of urban renewal would severely affect the city's East Side and cause one official in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to later say Cleveland was the agency's Vietnam, because it was so deeply mired in a losing effort.

Meanwhile, on the city's West Side adjacent to Cleveland Hopkins International Airport, a group of scientists and engineers worked secretly and industriously to ensure that an American would be the first to set foot on the moon.

A federal aeronautical research laboratory was built in 1941 at the airport, to develop aircraft engines and test fuels during World War II. Later, it experimented with jet engines, rockets, and exotic fuels. In the 1950s, a handful of engineers quietly began to experiment with liquid hydrogen.

The laboratory, known as the Lewis Research Center, part of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, was an obscure facility, until October of 1957 when the Russians orbited Sputnik, the first man-made satellite. The launching of the satellite at the height of the Cold War shot panic throughout the U.S. government.

There was an obvious need for a new government organization to take on the challenge of the looming space race. Because of their work with fuels and rockets, a Lewis team headed by its director, Abe Silverstein, authored a memorandum used by the Eisenhower administration as the foundation for the creation of the new space agency.

The first director of NASA was T. Keith Glennan, the president of Case Institute of Technology in Cleveland. Silverstein was the architect of what would be the Mercury and the Apollo programs that resulted in the moon landing in July of 1969. Sadly, Washington politics involving NASA and its budget ultimately dealt Lewis a short hand and made Houston the center of the space program.

In Cleveland politics, a transition was taking place as President Kennedy selected Mayor Anthony J. Celebrezze to his cabinet, as head of the Department of Health, Welfare, and Education. Celebrezze served as mayor from 1953 to 1962, a generally prosperous and tranquil time for the city, highlighted by highway construction, all of which would lead away from the city.

Celebrezze was promoted and prodded by *The Press* and he did much of the newspaper's bidding, particularly when it came to the ambitious, but flawed downtown redevelopment plans. Celebrezze was a mayor in a tradition of ethnic politics that governed from City Hall since the early 1940s and answered to *The Cleveland Press*.

These politics represented a philosophy of indifference to which there was no statute of limitations. With its strong Middle European roots, the electorate was mistrust-ful of progressive government.

Appointed to replace Celebrezze was Ralph J. Locher, the city's law director, a taciturn man described by those who served with him as decent and pleasant, known for his integrity and honesty. He was no administrator, however, and no match for what would befall the city in his time. One councilman who served with him said Locher had the demeanor of a college president, rather than that of a big city mayor.

Locher's inadequate administrative skills and his links to a dying political past became obvious over time, compounding an already relentless series of issues that had been ignored for decades and was now playing out in a destructive confluence.

The mayor inherited a troubled city, the depths of which were evident to those who examined the realities confronting urban life. As the decade advanced, skepticism began to build around the massive renewal project that began with such grandeur and was slowly proving to be a profound gaffe.

An intrusive interlude to life in Greater Cleveland was a lengthy newspaper strike that began late in 1962 and ended the next spring and was costly to both newspapers. Art Modell, owner of the Cleveland Browns, timed the firing of the

team's legendary coach, Paul Brown, with the strike, hoping the news blackout would blunt one of the biggest sports stories here ever.

The Browns won the 1964 National Football League Championship, but Modell would never replicate Paul Brown's achievements.

While sports had its moments in the 1960s, urban renewal continued in the headlines. Erievue was an area bordered by East 6th Street and extended to East 17th Street and south to Chester Avenue and north to the lake. It was filled with small businesses and modest homes. These buildings were cleared, leaving vast stretches of acreage available for redevelopment.

The result was the displacement of people and businesses in such a fashion that it affected the commerce on Euclid Avenue, a stretch of upscale shops, stores, and restaurants that had been a traditional haunt of downtown shoppers. Over time, the combination of bad downtown planning and the creation of suburban malls aided by one of the best highway systems in the country, diminished downtown.

There were problems with other areas of the city designated for urban renewal. The process was driving residents, mostly black people, into neighborhoods that were overcrowded and filled with inadequate housing.

In the area around St. Vincent's Charity Hospital, some 1,200 families were uprooted and moved to the Hough area, itself designated for renewal. Hough was notable for its overcrowded conditions for black families.

In fact, the city did its best to ignore these conditions, almost from the very beginning of black migration during the Civil War era.

While historically Cleveland had a reputation of racial tolerance, its liberalism flagged as European immigrants arrived and settled, making the town a mosaic of ethnicity that became ingrained in its politics and culture.

Cleveland also attracted Southern blacks hoping for a better life. Two world wars within the span of two decades hastened that journey, as the industrial might of the city was geared to war production and needed as much manpower as it could absorb. The Korean War soon followed, maintaining the manufacturing need.

There were about 10,000 blacks living in Cleveland just before World War I. By the onset of the Great Depression in 1929, that figure had grown to 72,000, and by 1940 it had reached 85,000. By 1960, there were 250,000 blacks living mostly on the city's East Side.

The city was not prepared to deal with this increasing influx of newcomers in terms of housing and schools. As time passed, both necessities degenerated further. By the early 1960s, the city was at a tipping point, but most were oblivious to the growing storm.

By 1960, jobs were still easily found for blacks, especially those in the steel mills where the money was good, but the work dirty, dangerous, and damnable. Federal government jobs as postal workers, clerks, and other official tasks were steady employment. There were positions available for teachers, social workers, and lawyers.

Blacks were increasingly part of the community's fabric. By 1963, ten of the 33 city council seats were held by blacks. However, beneath the surface existed an unspoken demarcation that separated the minorities from the rest of the community. As late as 1959, *The Cleveland Press* carried a page one story concerning downtown office space in which a respected realtor was quoted as saying he would not rent to Negroes because they were too messy.

There were few black newspaper reporters. Editors routinely asked whether an incident or event took place "at a good address." Black crime was often ignored as not being newsworthy. Reporters covering the police beat told editors of the conditions they witnessed in black neighborhoods, but could draw little interest in reporting on them.

Simply stated, the community had no sensitivity as to what was happening in the overcrowded slums and the inadequate and aging East Side schools. Even though these conditions festered for years, it seemed to the community at large that the ensuing discontent appeared overnight.

This was because of the nature of ethnic politics that drove City Hall for years, and the failure of the news media to play its role in communicating reality to the community. Politicians knew its ethnic constituency possessed a heritage distrustful of government and the best way to appeal to that instinct was to embrace the status quo.

The racial story broke in a series of confrontations between black students and their ethnic counterparts in those neighborhoods that abutted each other. Protests over the conditions in the schools became regular events. Some black students were going to school half days, in makeshift classrooms in the basement of churches.

Nationally, Martin Luther King, Jr., was beginning a cavalcade of civil rights protests that ignited the imagination of blacks across the nation. He was no stranger to Cleveland, visiting often with his message. Times were changing, and no place exhibited that dynamic greater than Cleveland.

This was the situation that Ralph S. Locher inherited as mayor. In a belated effort, the Cleveland City School District began a building program with an emphasis on East Side schools, which some civil rights activists saw as an effort to further segregate the city.

One of the dreadful moments of the decade took place on April 7, 1964. Involving the growing conflict over education, the ensuing tragedy rocked the community. Protesting the construction of an elementary school on Lakeview Road, Reverend Bruce Klunder lay in the path of a bulldozer and was accidentally crushed to death. The incident divided the community even further; photographs of the scene became a symbol of the agony of the times.

In the wake of this tragedy, the Interracial Business Men's Committee was formed, bringing together black and white business leaders with a stake in the community, in an effort to alleviate the growing conflict and solve the contributing irritants. The effort provided temporary relief, as more blacks were hired by business and a community relations department was established at City Hall.

As days passed, the news focused more and more on racial issues. The media showed a willingness, albeit naïvely, to explore the problem that had been evident for decades. One newspaper ran a series of articles on the life of a black family.

Newspaper readers in the summer of 1965 drew some respite from the city's woes when a *Plain Dealer* copy editor, Robert Manry, sailed the Atlantic Ocean alone in a 13-foot boat, the smallest vessel ever to cross the sea at the time. As he progressed, his 78-day adventure was played out daily, resulting in *The Press* scooping the morning paper on its own story by publishing a television interview of Manry in mid-ocean.

The man-against-the-odds story was in strange contrast to the odds-against-man story, which the city was struggling to confront, or at least to contain, in what was becoming an increasingly tension-ridden existence.

The mayoral election of 1965 was a contest of both black and white and the past and future, as Mayor Locher chose to run for his own two-year term, but this time his chief opponent would not come from the ranks of traditional ethnic politics. He would be a black man, Carl B. Stokes, who successfully ran as the first minority state legislator from Cuyahoga County.

In many ways, Stokes was the perfect candidate for the times. Handsome, articulate, a confident man, edgy in temperament, the representative of a cause whose time had come, he stepped into the campaign believing that he could make a difference both for his people and for Cleveland.

One characteristic of his confidence was a sense of arrogance that could be repelling. In 1965 Stokes failed to ask the ten black city council members for support of his mayoralty bid. It was not that they opposed him, it was a matter of protocol. Stokes, for his part, thought he could win without asking for help.

He did not win. The newspapers backed the old politics and won the day as Locher triumphed by 2,143 votes, the slimmest victory in the city's history. *The Press* predicted a 20,000 win for Locher. Stokes impressed the reporters covering the race; he later would say that this campaign was the highlight of his political life.

The victory was Pyrrhic for Locher, as events in the city continued to spiral out of control. After years of neglect, the city and its services deteriorated, despite the late efforts to fix a failing school system. Education remained a primary issue, and the now apparent folly of urban renewal had come together like a Greek tragedy to generate a violent encore.

Meanwhile, another important story broke in 1966, when the U.S. Supreme Court held that Dr. Sam Sheppard, who had been convicted of the murder of his wife in a famous case in 1954, was subjected to unfair pretrial publicity by *The Press*. Sheppard was ordered released from prison and given a new trial. He was later acquitted.

The news damaged the reputation of *The Press* at a time when *The Plain Dealer* was attempting to surpass it in both circulation and civic leadership. The court decision cast a shadow on *The Press* and gave the morning newspaper the appearance of greater credibility. In an odd way, this would come to bear on the campaign.

It was an oppressively hot July 18 that summer of 1966. At 5 p.m., outside of the Seventy-Niner's Café on the corner of East 79th Street and Hough Avenue, a crowd gathered. The heat made it a bad time to drink. The bar, owned by two white brothers, had problems with its clientele. Someone had tried to burn their car a few days before and a cherry bomb was exploded in the men's room.

Tensions were high.

A young woman, identified by some as a prostitute, was in the crowded bar, soliciting money for flowers for the funeral of another streetwalker. One of the owners ordered her out of the bar and she joined the crowd outside, angry at her dismissal.

A man who purchased a bottle of wine was refused a glass of water by one of the brothers. His anger provoked, he joined the crowd, claiming he had been called a "nigger." The crowd began to swell in size and emotion.

Police were summoned, but it was too late. All the frustration and conflict of the past welled up in one wild rampage that swept through the Hough area in a violent torrent. Shops were looted, fires set, the sound of gunfire resounded through the neighborhood. The scene resembled street fighting on the television news in some far-off land.

Looters roamed the streets with a strange sense of glee, pushing racks of stolen clothes and carrying bundles of goods. The best the police could do was to take photographs of the looters and hope to identify them later.

Locher waited and finally, reluctantly, asked the Ohio National Guard to intercede in what became a six-day siege of the Hough neighborhood. Four residents were killed and some 240 fires were set. Blame for the violence rested on

overcrowding and the failure of the urban renewal program to provide relief from conditions in Hough.

The sight of military vehicles mounting heavy weapons moving through the city streets was eerie and disturbing. Guardsmen were crouched in doorways, their rifles at the ready, scanning rooftops for snipers in the night.

Despite its obvious cause, a county grand jury comprised of some of the town's most respected citizens, and led by Seltzer, found that the riot was instigated by a conspiracy organized by outsiders, maybe even Communists. There still existed a sense of denial among the city's leadership as to the true conditions of the city.

Tragic as it was, Hough was the event that would propel Carl B. Stokes into City Hall and the annals of history.

The Hough riot shook the city's business leaders, cast a cloak of fear over the town, and brought more negative national media to a city already suffering from cynical reviews. White people feared driving through the East Side and blacks dared not venture near the Murray Hill area. There were random shootings and some killings, including the ambush of a policeman on the East Side.

The mood at City Hall was sullen. Community leaders lost faith in the ability of Ralph Locher to run the city and to deal with the overwhelming problems that were mounting daily. But it was not just Cleveland. The nation's major cities were facing racial unrest, with rioters taking to the streets elsewhere.

It did not help when the Cleveland officer, testifying before a state legislative committee, urged that the death penalty be applied to rioting black nationals. The tension between the city's police force and the black community lingered for years.

All the sins committed by City Hall over the past decades suddenly came to rest on Locher. *The Plain Dealer*, that stood so gray and idle while *The Press* dictated to City Hall for years, lashed out critically and rendered frustration and wrath on its competitor through the Locher administration.

To make matters worse, the federal government cut \$10 million of the city's urban renewal funds, leaving the already embattled program adrift. It was evident to everyone that Locher's term as mayor was fading into failure.

The national media's portrayal of Cleveland became so negative that Locher refused to meet with another out of town reporter.

It was also evident that the performance Carl Stokes made in the 1965 campaign elevated him to a level where victory, while not probable, was certainly more than possible. This time Stokes actively sought support, not only from the black councilmen, but from the business community, as well.

The 1967 mayoral race was perhaps the most memorable and remarkable in the city's history. Not only was the first black mayor of a major American city

elected, but the drama and excitement of that campaign generated world-wide attention. Reporters from every major news outlet in the world descended on Cleveland, creating a genuine global event.

A signal and surprising moment in the campaign came with the endorsement of Stokes by *The Plain Dealer*, an act he considered legitimized him among the white establishment. It was an important moment for the newspaper as well, for it symbolized its ascension over the rival *Press*.

The business community, stung by the ineptness of the Locher administration and fearful of more racial unrest, pumped money and influence into the Stokes campaign. Some observers feared that business leaders were so anxious to rid the city of Locher, that they would support Stokes in the primary and then back a white candidate in the general election.

Reporters followed Stokes in his forays into the white West Side, where he met in small gatherings over coffee, asking for support, urging that the issue of race be cast aside in favor of enlightened leadership in City Hall. He handily defeated a subdued Locher in the Democratic primary.

Poised to oppose Stokes was Seth Taft, a Republican with one of the most prominent political names in Ohio history, and a descendent of a U.S. president. Seth Taft was regarded in the community as honest, dedicated, and active, but most importantly, he was white.

While both candidates tried to remain above the race issue, it smoldered in the background, threatening to burst into full flame at any moment. Race would be the deciding factor, but it did not mar the campaign.

The campaign itself was exciting and interesting, unlike any since. Both camps exhibited well-run political organizations. A series of debates between the candidates held in various parts of the city were set-piece battles, while reporters pontificated on the victor.

Stokes was the superior orator, but Taft improved as the campaign progressed and showed surprising and increasing aggressiveness. As Election Day approached, polls showed the two candidates neck-and-neck. The town was alive with speculation and anticipation.

Election Day was cold, with flecks of wet snow. A huge voter registration drive, largely funded by a \$175,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, worked the neighborhoods in the months preceding the election. The question was whether the voters would respond.

Representatives of the global media roamed the city that day, studying the turnout, which was not only large, but electric in mood. Despite the issue of race, there was a wholesome quality to the campaign, two excellent candidates locked

in a struggle that personified democracy. People sensed history in the making and wanted to be part of it.

Early returns that night had Taft ahead, but by 9 p.m. the race was neck-and-neck. And then at midnight, Taft began to pull away. At 2:15 a.m., Stokes took his first lead and held on to win by some 2,000 votes in the closest race in city history.

The succeeding weeks and months were filled with an optimism that Cleveland had not experienced in years. A feeling of achievement abounded, and while only 15% of white voters had supported Stokes, there existed an atmosphere of elation, a sense of genuine community.

Stokes had little time to celebrate. The conditions that contributed to his election were now his problems to solve. The first issue was the quality of personnel serving the city. After so many years of patronage, the various departments were larded with political hacks who contributed to City Hall's ineptitude. The new mayor attacked the problem with vigor.

Despite its aimlessness, the urban renewal program had to be regenerated and Stokes persuaded Washington to restore Cleveland's funding. He then hired a director with national experience, as part of an energetic and capable cabinet. Urban experts from other cities were eager to come to Cleveland and participate in the city's rebirth.

Meanwhile, the business community, swept by euphoria, raised \$5.5 million and created an organization to support many of the Stokes initiatives called Cleveland: NOW. The idea, born out of a swelling sense of community pride and necessity, ironically would become fickle and turn on Stokes in the meanest way.

Cleveland: NOW! was created by several white businessmen, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in April of 1968. The nation was in turmoil over King's death and that of Robert F. Kennedy in June. Adding to the domestic anxiety was the stalemate in Vietnam and the increasing protest over that war.

These angry forces were mounting across the nation, as demonstrators and militants exercised their wrath in the streets. In Cleveland, civic leaders hoped that a black mayor possessed the ability to calm their community. Stokes maintained that a black mayor was no insurance against racial violence.

Fred Ahmed Evans, a Korean War veteran, became an astrologer of sorts, after claiming to witness a UFO over Glenville one day. While known in the neighborhood as somewhat of a militant, he was an obscure figure until catapulted to notoriety by *The Wall Street Journal*, which wrote that Evans had predicted the outbreak of a race riot in Cleveland.

Evans portrayed himself as a black revolutionary, a man who called for a national black revolt, and used his incendiary rhetoric to inflame ghetto youth. Cleveland: NOW! gave Evans \$6,000 to fund a youth group. Stokes later

characterized Evans as a street hustler who used the idea of revolution to extort money.

In the aftermath of King's assassination, Evans, among other black militants, walked Cleveland's streets with Stokes to calm the anguish which was spreading across the nation and creating violence in other cities.

On July 23, 1968, Evans and some of his self-proclaimed revolutionaries engaged in a gun battle with Cleveland police that left seven dead, including three police officers, three suspected militants, and a citizen. Fifteen more were wounded, and the Glenville community suffered more than \$2.5 million in damage.

It was never clear what triggered the shooting. Evans was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life in prison, where he later died.

The shoot-out made headlines even in war-torn Vietnam. It destroyed the myth that a black mayor could prevent racial violence. It also effectively damaged the mayoralty of Stokes, when it was learned that Evans used Cleveland: NOW! money to buy guns.

The irony was that one calamitous event aided Stokes's political rise and yet another would accompany his decline. He was proof that there were no easy answers to the city's racial problems.

In 1969, Stokes was elected to a second two-year term as mayor, but the heady days, bright with promise and alive with community spirit, were gone. He struggled with reform of the police department, a culture of its own, only to have his efforts and innovations go awry or fail.

That summer, men landed on the moon and the triumphant national celebration that followed underplayed the achievements of a handful of space pioneers at the Lewis Research Laboratory that came at a time when it appeared America had lost its technological edge. It was no small thing that these men on the West Side of Cleveland had achieved.

Back at City Hall, the newspapers became increasingly critical of Stokes, who bridled at the criticism, making the tenor of his final term one of rancor and bitterness over failed expectations. He left City Hall in 1971 to become a television anchorman in New York City.

Among Stokes's lasting achievements as mayor was passage of an equal opportunity law that assured minority companies of participation in city business. While there had been no public housing units built in the five years before he became mayor, he could point to nearly 5,500 built during his term in office.

The Stokes years were significant in the city's history, in that they opened the way for the black community to participate in the mainstream of business and political life. The decade brought change in how a city worked and what roles black citizens played. In retrospect, it is clear that the community and Stokes

himself set expectations that were far from achievable, given the times and the state of the city.

It was an exhausting decade for Cleveland and its citizens, but when it was over, there were triumphs among the travail. Life went on, but it was changed forever.

The holiday season of 1969, the last of the decade, was not as festive as that of ten years before. The city had endured pain brought on by decades of neglect, wrought by a political culture that worshipped the status quo. The next decade would bring more change and a different dynamic, but this would involve the appearance of the city, and the dimming of downtown lights. The altering of its soul had already taken place.

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