

The Rise and Fall and Rise of Cleveland

Thaddeus S. Jaroszewicz

January 29, 2018

Somewhere between 1950 and 1980, Cleveland, Ohio, once called the “Best Location in the Nation” became the “Mistake on the Lake” Racial and ethnic issues, political incompetence, and irresponsible corporate behavior led to a series of unfortunate events that made Cleveland the laughingstock of the nation, the butt of late night comedians’ jokes. Almost 40 years later, the city is still recovering, but is clearly on its way back to greatness.

The Cleveland of my boyhood was a patchwork of neighborhoods representing the outcasts and refugees from Europe; black migrants from the south; and Appalachians from Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Kentucky. They had ALL moved to Cleveland looking to escape oppression, the ravages of war and abject poverty. There were jobs in Cleveland – well-paying union jobs in steel, autos, specialty chemicals and many other businesses.

The immigrants who moved to Cleveland were not European noblemen. Our Europeans were farmers and peasants. Their families had lived through misery for generations. They began to come to Cleveland in the mid 19th century, and continued to come throughout the 20th century, when Europe was blowing itself up.

The black migration to the North began after the Civil War. The blacks of the South, from families that had been held in bondage for generations, came looking for jobs, opportunities for educational advancement, and to get free of the intense racial hatred of the South. There were plenty of jobs for blacks in Cleveland, but there was no escaping segregation or racial issues. Blacks, like Poles, Italians, and Germans, lived in their own distinct neighborhoods. As in most places in America, blacks rode the back of the bus, drank from separate water fountains, and were not welcome at the counters of Woolworths in downtown Cleveland.

A critical problem for black families was their inability to get a mortgage loan. Realtors could legally keep black families out of white neighborhoods. And banks would not typically lend money to black families for home purchases in black neighborhoods. Redlining policies developed in the mid 1930's by the Federal Housing Administration and the Federal Home Loan Bank Board discouraged banks from making mortgage loans in black neighborhoods. The Poles had Ben Stefanski and The Third Federal Savings Bank to provide mortgage loans. Black families had no such options. The discriminatory practices were outlawed only in 1968, by the Fair Housing Act. As a result, black families usually lived in inadequate rental housing owned by white landlords, in densely populated neighborhoods with poor schools and limited recreational facilities.

The Appalachians also came for the jobs and to escape the poverty of their hard scrabble mountain environments. They hated the immigrants and the blacks. They seemed to be the biggest rabble rousers – screaming, yelling, gun-toting hillbillies

who had huge chips on their shoulders and had no problem letting the world know about the injustices they faced.

The neighborhood we lived in was nicknamed Poznan, after a city in Western Poland, where the original settlers of this neighborhood came from in the 1880's. It was bordered on the north by St. Clair Avenue, and on the south by Superior Avenue. It ran from East 72nd street to East 87th. Many of the streets were named after Polish heroes like Kosciuszko, Pulaski and Sowinski. There were seven distinct Polish neighborhoods like ours in Cleveland. They were nicknamed after Polish cities, like Warsaw and Krakow, or after their respective parish church. The parish church, school and hall formed the center of religious, educational and social life in each neighborhood. There were similar Slovenian, Serbian, Bohemian, German and Italian neighborhoods.

Cleveland had prospered on and off from the middle of the 19th century. John D. Rockefeller started Standard Oil in Cleveland. Republic and Bethlehem Steel had enormous facilities there. General Motors and Ford had plants that made car bodies and engines. By the 1950's, Cleveland had more Fortune 500 headquarters than any other US city except for New York and Chicago.

Cleveland's wealthy citizens helped build and endow the Cleveland Orchestra, Severance Hall and the Cleveland Art Museum. Downtown Cleveland was the hub of the city, anchored by the retailers Higbees, the May Company and Halle's.

Cleveland's sporting teams had their glory years in the 20 years after WW II. The Indians won the World Series in 1948. In 1954, the Tribe won 111 games only to go on to lose the World Series in four straight to Willie Mays and the New York Giants.

The Browns, started by Paul Brown, were perennial contenders for NFL championships in the 1950's and 60's, led by greats like Otto Graham, Marian Motley, Frank Ryan, Lou Groza and Jim Brown. The Browns won their last NFL Championship in 1964.

In the 1950's and early 1960s, Cleveland was a city that seemed to be on a long, upward economic and cultural trajectory. But bad things were brewing in the streets.

It turned out that Cleveland, like so many other northern cities was not a melting pot. It was a place of segregated social groups who didn't understand or like each other. Immigrants from Europe had no concept of the civil rights struggles of the black community. The black community did not appreciate the journey the Europeans had endured, the wars they had lived through, or the labor and concentration camps they had survived. And the Appalachians – they were angry with everyone. Everyone had suffered, but no one understood the suffering of groups other than their own. This was not a formula for everlasting peace and prosperity in an urban setting. It was a powder keg looking to explode.

As a young boy, I started to gain a small appreciation for this when I noticed that one block south of our house was a store front with the name “The Afro Set” printed on the window. To a 9-year-old white boy, it looked like a place to avoid. The Afro Set was the home of a Black Nationalist group dedicated to seeking justice and equality for blacks. Its leader was Fred Ahmed Evans. Unlike Martin Luther King, the Black Nationalists had no qualms about seeking justice with violence if necessary. Peaceful protests had not helped black families in Cleveland’s inner city to get better housing, better education or safe neighborhoods.

Things came to a boil in Cleveland on July 18, 1966, when the Hough Riots erupted about 1 mile south of where we lived. Several accounts attribute the outbreak of violence to the refusal by an Eastern European restaurant owner to serve a black man a glass of ice water. Whatever the spark that set it off, the powder keg exploded. For five nights, the Hough neighborhood burned. Four people were killed, 50 were injured and 275 were arrested. The National Guard was called in. Soldiers in Jeeps patrolled the streets day and night. The mayor at the time, Ralph Locher, seemed powerless to do anything effective to stop the violence.

A Grand Jury blamed the riots on communists and Black Nationalist organizers. More probably, the rioting was sparked by racism, lousy housing conditions for black families in the Hough area, and policing that was less than exemplary. In hindsight, the predominantly white leadership of Cleveland, political and

business, was clueless as to what was really happening in the city's predominantly black neighborhoods.

In November 1967, Carl B. Stokes was elected mayor of Cleveland, the first black man to be elected Mayor of a major city in America. The summer of 1968 proved to be no easier than 1966. Martin Luther King had been assassinated that spring. Then Bobby Kennedy. The city exploded again, this time in the Glenville neighborhood. The Glenville Shootout took place on the night of July 23rd, 1968. Seven people were killed and another 15 wounded. Four nights of rioting followed. The Ohio National Guard had to be called in again. One more time, death and property destruction became Cleveland's story. Cleveland, the city that had welcomed immigrants from Europe, the Deep South and Appalachia, had become an unmanageable nightmare. Stokes later wrote in his autobiography, Promises of Power, "The aftermath of that night was to haunt and color every aspect of my administration for the next three years." Fred Ahmed Evans of the Afro Set was held responsible for the Glenville Shootout, and was convicted of seven counts of first degree murder. He was sentenced to the electric chair. His sentence was eventually changed to life in prison, where he died in 1978.

Mayor Stokes succeeded in getting federal funding to attempt to rebuild the inner-city neighborhoods. But the federal investments were ineffective. They neither rebuilt the neighborhoods that were destroyed by the riots nor did they stem the white flight out of the city.

Our family of seven loved our little neighborhood. It was our village. But our village, located just a few minutes' drive from both the Hough and Glenville neighborhoods, had become a battle zone in a war that my parents did not understand. Bricks were thrown through our front windows. Shots rang out during the day and the night. By 1969, it was clear that we had to get out, if only to preserve our lives. We moved to the suburbs in 1971.

Cleveland gained further national notoriety when Time Magazine wrote a story about the Cuyahoga River, which caught fire on June 22, 1969. The Cuyahoga had caught fire 13 times since 1852, a result of the massive amount of flammable effluents being spewed into the river by Cleveland's great manufacturers. But the 1969 fire seemed to highlight the plight of Cleveland in the late 1960's – a city burning down. Even water was burning, and the air was unbreathable. Lake Erie was not swimmable. The beaches were covered with hundreds of thousands of dead fish. Lake Erie itself was pronounced DEAD in the 1970's, the place where, according to the New Yorker Magazine, "the Rust Belt meets the water."

And just when we thought things couldn't get worse, Dennis Kucinich was elected Mayor. In 1977, Kucinich was a 31-year-old member of city council who ran as a populist who was going to clean up the city. Kucinich and his henchmen, Bob Weissman proceeded to lead Cleveland straight into default on its debts.

Weissman famously went to a luncheon of business leaders and proclaimed, "we don't like you, we don't want you, and we don't need you!" Less than two years after his election, Kucinich faced a voter recall, which he won by only 236 votes.

For me, Dennis the Menace represents the nadir of the last 100 years of Cleveland's history.

In 1980, Kucinich ran for Mayor against Lieutenant Governor George Voinovich. Thankfully, Voinovich defeated Kucinich. Voinovich had an effective 8 year run as mayor that began the process of rebuilding Cleveland. The Flats along the Cuyahoga River were redeveloped. Voinovich led the effort to locate the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland. Standard Oil of Ohio, renamed BP, built a new headquarters building, as did Society Bank (now Key Bank).

The Cleveland Indians occupied the basement of the American league until the Jacobs Brothers of Forest City Enterprises made them a competitive team again in the 90's. The Browns had a few chances in the 80's to win an AFC Championship, but their hopes were dashed three times by John Elway and his Denver Broncos. Art Modell then decided to move the Browns to Baltimore in 1996, where they became the Ravens. A new franchise was formed in 1999, but the new Browns reside in the cellar of the NFL, having employed more than 25 quarterbacks during the same period that Tom Brady has won five Super Bowl Championships in New England.

Thirty seven years have passed since George Voinovich became Mayor of Cleveland. Cleveland has had major ups and downs, and starts and stops since then. Like our own city of Cincinnati, broad groups of citizens have worked tirelessly to make Cleveland a better place to live. LeBron James returned to Cleveland to help the Cavaliers win an NBA championship. A World Series win has

been elusive. The arts survived, the core wealth survived, and a surprising amount of the inner city real estate survived.

My oldest son rents a house today on Cleveland's near West Side, in Ohio City. When I sit on his front stoop, I marvel when I see young 20 somethings like him driving by in Volkswagen Jetta's and BMW's.

It took a long, long time for Cleveland to deal with its problems. The city of my childhood is not out of the woods, but it's on its way back. Fish have even repopulated the Cuyahoga River. Cleveland has maintained its "never say die" attitude. I don't want to go back, but I'm happy it's once again become one of the best locations in the nation.