



The Boss of Daytona died 80 years ago

By Mark Lane

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Edward Armstrong, the city's legendary political boss, got the Boardwalk and Bandshell built.

This week marks the 80th anniversary of the death of Edward Armstrong, Daytona Beach's legendary political boss. His eight-year tenure was the most turbulent of any mayor here.

He died Jan. 2, 1938, in Riverside Hospital in Jacksonville. A Sunday, but in those pre-TV, pre-Internet days, this was an important enough event that News-Journal editor Herbert Davidson called in staff to put out an extra edition of the Sunday newspaper that afternoon. On the front page, there were variations on only one story: "Mayor Armstrong dead; end comes at 9:38 a.m."

"He repulsed attack after attack, seemingly stronger after each assault," noted the obituary by the City Hall reporter, Robert Hunter.

A true assessment. All the more remarkable for appearing in a newspaper whose editors considered Armstrong as the embodiment of crooked local politics.

But unlike his associates, cronies and imitators who came later, Armstrong worked crooked local politics masterfully and with some vision for the future. He worked to build the Boardwalk, the Bandshell, and a new waterworks. He pushed to upgrade the municipal airport and build a bus system.

And in an era of vicious racism and legally enforced racial segregation, Armstrong recognized that black votes were useful, too. His ward heelers encouraged black registration and city jobs were open to black people. (Armstrong's chauffeur was the father of Yvonne Scarlett-Golden, Daytona Beach's first black mayor.) There were even black police officers in Daytona Beach in the 1930s, something unknown in most Southern towns the size of Daytona Beach.

"The guy is a character," said Leonard Lempel, a retired Daytona State College history professor who has written scholarly articles on Armstrong. "He comes across as a typical Northern big city boss only transplanted into Daytona, into the South."

Armstrong was sometimes referred to as “10-cent Ed” because city employees were required to kick back 10 percent of their pay to the Armstrong machine.

When his longtime local political enemy David Sholtz became governor, Armstrong knew there would be a reckoning. In December 1937, on finding out the governor was about to remove him from office, Armstrong appointed his wife, Irene, as mayor.

Smooth move, but the governor removed Mrs. Armstrong from office along with the three other commissioners and the city manager.

Still, the Armstrongs would not be removed that easily. They barricaded themselves in City Hall along with supporters and police armed with riot guns. The governor responded by calling out 200 National Guard troops who surrounded City Hall. Garbage trucks were summoned and left filled with city files, a tribute to an era when public records laws were a lot looser. The standoff made national news.

Gov. Sholtz was at the end of his term, however, and the new governor, Fred Cone, had no intention of spending a lot of time on Daytona Beach’s local politics. He rescinded Armstrong’s removal saying, “I don’t believe in this Mussolini stuff of taking troopers and putting municipal officers out.” The courts, too, backed Armstrong.

So Armstrong was fully back as mayor by March 1937 and that December enjoyed re-election to a fifth term by a stunning five-to-one landslide.

A dramatic public reaffirmation but Armstrong wasn’t able to enjoy it. He had suffered heart and liver ailments and since the summer had been absent from his duties for months at a time. He was hospitalized again in December.

The News-Journal reported that 7,000 people attended his memorial, almost a third of city’s population. He left no clear successor, which meant his death created a political scramble. The vote to succeed him was marred by a bribery scandal with Commissioner Ralph Richards convicted of taking a \$10,000 bribe for casting the deciding vote to make Frank Couch mayor.

Local politics did not get cleaner with the boss’ passing, just less organized. Armstrong may have been corrupt, but he had ambitions for the place and the clout to set them in motion. It’s easy to wonder what things would have looked like if he hadn’t died relatively young at 57.

EXTRA

The Sunday News-Journal

EXTRA

MAYOR ARMSTRONG DEAD; END COMES AT 9:38 A. M.

Armstrong Was Elected Mayor Here 5 Times

Once a Newspaper Reporter, Once a Wholesale Grocer, He Early Entered Political Field

THE STORY OF HIS LIFE

Mayor E. D. Armstrong died tonight in a room at the Jax hospital at 9:38 a. m. after a long illness. He was 57 years old. He was elected mayor of Dayton five times. He was a newspaper reporter, a wholesale grocer, and an early entrant into the political field.

The Late Mayor and Mrs. Armstrong



Political Leader Passes at 57 In A Jax Hospital

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Mayor Ed. Armstrong's Last Speech

Mayor Ed. Armstrong's last speech was delivered at the Jax hospital tonight. He spoke of his long career in public life and his love for the city of Dayton. He said he was proud to have served the people of Dayton for so many years.

This front page is from the extra edition of the Sunday News-Journal on Jan. 2, 1938. [NEWS JOURNAL LIBRARY]