



The Great City Hall Standoff was 80 years ago

By Mark Lane

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Eighty years ago a mayor was removed and Daytona Beach City Hall was the scene of an armed standoff between police and National Guard.

This month and next marks an important but seldom acknowledged civic milestone.

One that lets us know that whatever low opinion people have of local government, things were worse in the past. Way worse.

And that's the Great Daytona Beach City Hall Standoff of 1936-1937, 80 years ago this month. A series of events worthy of commemoration.

The short version is this:

After the governor tried to remove the mayor for fiscal mismanagement, the mayor's supporters barricaded themselves in city hall. The governor called up the National Guard, which surrounded city hall. Armed police held them off while the city officials filed legal challenges and destroyed documents.

The governor was David Sholtz, the only Florida governor from Daytona Beach. Sholtz, a New Deal Democrat, was a political foe of Edward Armstrong, Daytona Beach mayor and undisputed boss of the city political machine in the 1930s.

This paper opposed Armstrong vigorously. One story referred to him in print as "10-cent Ed" because he required city employees to kick back 10 percent of their salaries to a slush fund he controlled.

In his last month as governor, Sholtz prepared to remove Armstrong from office. Armstrong was aware of this and resigned Dec. 10, 1936. He had his wife, Irene Armstrong, named mayor by a compliant City Commission. Smooth move.

The governor “laughed robustly” when informed of the move by a reporter, the Daytona Beach Morning Journal reported. “Oh ho, that’s fine, that tickles me,” Sholtz said.

On Dec. 30, Sholtz removed Mrs. Armstrong from office for misfeasance and incompetence and appointed Harry Wilcox, a former city commissioner, as mayor. But when Wilcox tried to assume office, he found City Hall locked and his way barred.

“I want you to go your way and be peaceable,” Mrs. Armstrong shouted to him from a window.

The governor responded by calling out 200 National Guard troops. The Armstrongs responded by calling in police with riot guns as well as armed supporters, about 100 people in all. Garbage trucks were summoned and left filled with city documents.

Here are the Daytona Beach Evening News headlines:

“CITY HALL AN ARMED FORTRESS ... COPPERS HOLD RIOT GUNS AT WINDOWS ... Mayor Irene Commands Police to Occupy City Hall ... Resists Expulsion Edict Charging Incompetency.”

The confrontation made headlines nationally. It was a great story: A “lady mayor.” Armed standoff under the palms. Even then, national audiences found Sunshine State government colorful reading.

“It will soon blow over,” was the calming headline of Daytona Beach Evening News’ editorial a few days into the crisis. Which didn’t sound convincing, but it is what happened.

The Armstrongs lawyered up, fought the expulsion and won in court and won politically.

The new governor, Fred Cone, rescinded the order on Jan. 6, 1937.

“I put them back because they were elected by the people and I don’t believe in this Mussolini stuff of taking troopers and putting municipal officers out,” he told the Associated Press.

In February, the Florida Supreme Court said the law Sholtz evoked was invalid.

Mrs. Armstrong stepped down. Her husband resumed as mayor and was re-elected in 1937 by an astounding 5-1 margin. He died before he could be sworn into a new term.

Armstrong may have been corrupt, cynical and heavy-handed, but the courts and public opinion were firm that barring criminal indictment, election results have to be respected.

None of this Mussolini stuff.

"None But Friends Shall Enter"



Photo. By LoSquire

BEHIND these and scores of other guns ousted city officials took refuge yesterday in the city hall. Not a shot was fired. "I told our policemen not to do anything illegal," Mrs. Armstrong, three weeks mayor of Daytona Beach, said. From left to right the officers are Paul Doles, Ben F. Clifton, Jr., and Robert Richens.

Jan. 2, 1937 Morning Journal showed armed police at city hall.



Edward Armstong, Depression Era mayor of Daytona Beach. Photo courtesy Leonard Lempel