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DAYTONA BEACH'S CITY COMMISSION: THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS

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Modern-day Daytona Beach was established on Jan. 1, 1926, when the city of Daytona officially joined with the towns of Seabreeze and Daytona Beach to form the city of Daytona Beach.¹ The new Daytona Beach was divided into four zones. Zones one and two, located on the peninsula, were composed of the old towns of Daytona Beach and Seabreeze respectively. On the mainland, old Daytona was divided into two zones, with the northern half (north of what is now International Speedway Boulevard) constituting zone three and the southern half (south of ISB) encompassing zone four. Under the new charter, municipal elections were held every two years to elect one commissioner from each zone by the qualified voters of that zone (single member districts). A fifth commissioner, the commissioner-at-large, was elected by all the qualified voters of the city, served as mayor of Daytona Beach, and presided as chairman of the city commission. On October 6, 1925, 1,549 citizens voted to select Daytona Beach's first mayor and commissioners. Attorney H. F. Brass was elected mayor, and A. J. Parkhurst (zone 1), Dr. F. B. Groesbeck (zone 2), R. Dennis Craig (zone 3), and A. E. Donnelly (zone 4) were elected commissioners.²

The original city charter specified that the mayor had to receive a majority of the vote to be elected. The charter also stated that a qualified elector residing on the east side of the Halifax river would alternate being mayor with one living on the west side of the Halifax -- undoubtedly reflecting the concern among early residents that beachside and mainland residents receive equal attention.³ However, both of these provisions were quickly discarded. In the election of 1927 Edward H. Armstrong was declared mayor even though he fell 283 votes short of receiving a majority -- he was the clear choice of the city's electorate in a four man race where 3,819 votes were cast. Similarly, the provision that mayors would alternate between beachside and mainland zones was never enforced.⁴

The merger of the "triple cities" came at the height of the Great Florida Land Boom. Though south Florida cities have been most closely associated with the boom,⁵ Daytona also realized skyrocketing real estate values in 1925. These heady times generated a spirit of unabashed optimism about the continued growth and prosperity of the Daytona area, and consolidation of the triple cities seemed both a harbinger and reaffirmation of the new metropolis's bright future. With the *Daytona Beach Journal* carrying a front page banner promising "100,000 Population for Daytona by 1930," few could have imagined in 1925 that the land boom would turn to bust the following year, and that even more tumultuous economic times lay ahead. Daytona Beach's political climate was just as turbulent during its first two decades as political factions fought for control and scandal tainted city officials. In the years before World War II, twice the governor intervened and appointed a mayor and city commissioners to replace the elected ones. These were wild times in Daytona Beach. LeRoy Harlow, who served as city manager during the early 1950s, summed up the city's early history as "one long story of wide-open gambling, strong-arm government, fraudulent elections, vice-connected killings, intimidated citizens, and governmental waste."⁶



Mayor Edward H. Armstrong, circa 1930's.
Courtesy of Marion Irene Armstrong
Trezeciak, Huntsville, Ala.

Old Daytona had adopted a commission-manager form of government in 1922, and the new Daytona Beach retained this format. Although intended to bring professional governance to the city and to mitigate political corruption and "bossism" by limiting the power of the mayor, Daytona Beach's commission-manager system of government did not accomplish those lofty goals prior to World War II. During the late 1920s and through much of the Depression decade of



A pro "ring" political cartoon published in the *Daytona Beach Observer*, August 31, 1940. The caption refers to the 1940 municipal election where the city's two major political factions squared off against each other. Franklin E. Fitzgerald's newspaper, the *Daytona Beach Observer*, supported the "ring" candidates, while Julius Davidson's *News-Journal* supported the Daytona Beach Committee candidates.

the 1930s, Mayor Edward H. Armstrong and his supporters on the city commission functioned as a powerful political machine (commonly referred to as the "ring") that dominated city government. Armstrong's accomplishments were many -- he secured federal monies to build, among other things, the boardwalk and bandshell, airport, and city water works, and gave the city's large and long-suffering African American community unprecedented economic opportunity and political influence. However, his iron rule and alleged corruption created great controversy and occasional embarrassment for the city. It was common knowledge that Armstrong required city employees to "donate" ten percent of their wages to his personal slush fund, and Armstrong was notorious for using aggressive means to ensure that his supporters arrived at the polls on election day. After losing his re-election bid in 1929, Armstrong regained the mayor's office in 1931 but not without help from illegal ballots -- the number of registered voters exceeded the adult population in three city precincts!

The mayor's difficulties came to a head in 1936 when he came under investigation by the state's attorney's office for exceeding the city's budget by \$200,000 the previous year. Fearing that Governor Dave Sholtz, a Daytona Beach native, would remove them from office, Armstrong along with commissioner allies R. W. Carswell and George T. Robinson resigned on December 10, 1936. Armstrong and Robinson named their wives to succeed them, while Carswell chose the city finance department's bookkeeper as his successor. The Governor responded by replacing the new mayor, three city commissioners, the city clerk, and the city manager. When Irene Armstrong, Edward Armstrong's wife, refused to yield to the governor-appointed mayor, Sholtz ordered her into the national guard. For a time an armed struggle seemed likely after Mrs. Armstrong, protected by armed policemen, barricaded herself in City Hall while national guardsmen advanced on the building. But fortunately the "Battle of Daytona" ended peacefully thanks to a court injunction, and by early March of 1937 Edward Armstrong was reinstated as mayor. In December of that year Armstrong was re-elected by a landslide, but he died shortly before beginning his fifth term.⁸

Armstrong's death, however, did not end political turmoil in Daytona Beach. A struggle ensued between the remnants of Armstrong's political machine and those advocating reform. In early 1939 a new city charter was proposed by the reform-oriented City Charter Advisory Board (later succeeded by the Daytona Beach Committee, or DBC). This revised charter reinstated the primary (which had been removed by Armstrong in 1937), included civil service reform, and called for the creation of a fifth zone with one commissioner elected from each. In response, the ring proposed its own charter that omitted city primaries and civil service reform, and most significantly, called for the governor to appoint seven commissioners to replace the current ones. This appointed commission was to serve until October, 1940. City elections were to be held the first Tuesday in September of 1940 and every two years after that, to elect one commissioner from each of the five zones. At the first meeting after the election, the five newly elected commissioners would select a mayor-commissioner from among their ranks. The ring justified its drastic proposal by claiming that "the city has been torn for years by political discord and has had many changes of personnel in the city government."⁹

Outraged at the ring's charter "with its obnoxious provision for appointment of officials," reformers mounted a furious campaign to defeat it. A newly formed "home rule committee" garnered 6,000 signatures on a petition urging passage of the reform charter. Thirty members of the committee trudged to Tallahassee and lobbied legislators to preserve home rule in Daytona Beach, but they failed to influence the lawmakers. Daytona Beach's political machine, allied with the county ring led by the notorious Francis P. Whitehair of DeLand, steered the ring charter bill through the state legislature. Even after the hated charter was passed on May 31, 1939, the determined home rule committee members refused to accept defeat and began pestering Governor Fred Cone to veto the bill. At a meeting in Cone's office "15 women beset Governor Cone with a storm of protests against being robbed of their right to vote.... There was little semblance of order in

the brief session between the vehement women and the chief executive.” Finally, several female committee members “trailed him down the hall until he came to the door of the washroom. There Governor Cone admonished them to wait outside.” However, their pleas to the governor were to no avail, as Cone defended his inaction by claiming that “I can’t veto these local bills.”¹⁰

Two weeks later a home rule delegation was back in Tallahassee trying to convince the governor to allow a city primary election. Once again, Governor Cone rebuffed their appeals by declaring that “I ain’t going to call any primary down there with negroes and republicans involved.”¹¹ Instead, on June 15 he named seven men to the Daytona Beach commission, including Ernest H. Padgett (mayor and commissioner-at-large), George D. Kellerman (commissioner-at-large), J. Harry Haigh (zone 1, South Peninsula), George P. Young (zone 2, Seabreeze), Clive Hansard (zone 3, North mainland), J. G. Smith (zone 4, South mainland), and George H. Upchurch (zone 5, middle mainland and peninsula). The appointment of a new commission did not end the controversy, however. Three members of the elected five-man commission refused to vacate their seats to the Cone-appointed commissioners. This “anti-ring majority,” with “armed policemen on guard,” maintained control of all city property, forcing the appointed commission to hold its initial meeting at the private home of the new commissioner-mayor, Ernest Padgett. For more than a month two city governments existed while the courts determined which one was legal. Finally, on July 19, 1939, the Florida Supreme Court ruled in favor of the new charter and Cone’s appointed commissioners, thus ending Daytona Beach’s twin city commissions.¹²

Despite their defeat, the reformers maintained their Daytona Beach Committee and rallied public support in favor of “home rule” over the next thirteen months. Their efforts bore fruit. In the 1940 election held on September 3, three of the five commissioners elected were DBC candidates. Wilson Summerlin, Ucal W. Cunningham, and Jarvis W. McFarland were the DBC commissioners elected, while Chester W. Danner and Ernest L. Padgett were identified by the *News-Journal* as the “ring” commissioners elected. Over the next two elections the “anti-ring reformers” consolidated their control over city hall, electing four commissioners in 1942 and all five in 1944. A key goal of the Daytona Beach Commission was to promote more honest, efficient, business-like management of the city by hiring a professional city manager. In contrast to the machine politicians’ preference for a powerful mayor running the city, the DBC believed that “the city should be run...by a capable city manager, with the commission functioning as a board of directors.” In addition to securing a professional city manager, the DBC-controlled commission successfully appealed to the state legislature in 1943 to restore city primary elections, thus reducing the potency of machine-generated bloc voting.¹³

But alas, Daytona Beach’s political machine was not dead. The opponents of the DBC would win all five commission seats in 1946, and the tumultuous political struggle that enveloped Daytona Beach during its first two decades would plague the city in the post war era as well. That story will be featured in the next issue of the *Halifax Herald*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a brief history of old Daytona’s city commission see Leonard Lempel, “The Evolution of Old Daytona’s Town Council,” *Halifax Herald* 19 (June 2001), 15-20.
- ² *Daytona Beach Journal*, October 7, 1925.
- ³ *City Charter of Consolidated Daytona Beach, 1926*, in City Records and Archives, Daytona Beach.
- ⁴ *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, December 7, 1927.
- ⁵ Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920’s* (New York, 1964), 227.
- ⁶ LeRoy F. Harlow, *Without Fear or Favor: Odyssey of a City Manager* (Provo, Utah, 1977), 226.
- ⁷ Leonard Lempel, “Mayors Edward and Irene Armstrong and the Battle of Daytona Beach,” *Halifax Herald* 18 (June 2000), 7; *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, November 12, 1931.
- ⁸ Leonard Lempel, “Mayors Edward and Irene Armstrong and the Battle of Daytona Beach,” *Halifax Herald* 18 (June 2000), 6-9.
- ⁹ *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, May 31, 1939; September 4, 1940.
- ¹⁰ *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, May 31, 1939.

- ¹¹ *Daytonu Beach Morning Journal*, June 14, 1939. Besides revealing his opposition to blacks and Republicans participating in elections, the governor's comment was ironic, since it **was** the city's political machine -- opponents of the Home Rule Committee -- that received overwhelming support in Daytona's black precincts, while the reform minded Home Rule Committee had denounced the bloc voting of African Americans in municipal elections.
- ¹² *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, June 16, 1939; June 17, 1939; July 20, 1939.
- ¹³ *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, September 4, 1940; September 2, 1942; *Daytona Beach Evening News*, December 6, 1944; November 10, 1946.

