THE DAYTONA BEACH
NJ NEWS-JOURNAL
NEWS-JOURNALONLINE.COM
HOME OF THE WORLD'S MOST FAMOUS BEACH

After 80 years, city may finish Boardwalk's mystery monument

By Mark Lane

Posted Jun 16, 2018 at 11:31 AM Updated Jun 17, 2018 at 9:04 PM

A tribute to long-ago political boss Ed Armstrong

There's a coquina stone on the Boardwalk near the Bandshell that's atop a coquina pedestal. It has a rectangular indentation where a plaque would go, but there's no plaque there. This puzzles people. It's been that way since 1938.

Randy Jaye would like to put a plaque on the mystery monument. Something similar to the original plan for the rock.

But here, we should back up and explain why there's no plaque.

The builders envisioned a plaque honoring the mayor of that time, Ed Armstrong. Armstrong was mayor in the 1920s and 1930s, reelected five times. He was a true, old-fashioned political boss sometimes called "10-cent Ed" because city employees were expected to kick back 10 percent of their salaries to his political slush fund.

Armstrong was indisputably a guy who got things done. He was instrumental in getting the city big, federally funded Works Progress Administration projects. Notably the Bandshell, the Boardwalk expansion and the Boardwalk clocktower now in front of the Hilton Daytona Beach Oceanfront Resort. So as work on the Bandshell and ocean park project wound down, the coquina monument awaited a suitable bronze marker to honor Armstrong as the man who made it all happen.

But as workmen put the finishing touches on the project, Armstrong, long in ill health and directing the city for months from his home and hospital bed, died Jan. 2, 1938, in Riverside Hospital, Jacksonville.

The problem with one-man rule, whether in a city or an empire, is always succession. And Armstrong did not leave a designated successor.

His trusted business manager, Frank Crouch, would eventually be appointed mayor by the city commission. But only after a lot of back-and-forth among Armstrong's lieutenants. Only after Armstrong's wife, Irene, said wasn't interested in the post. And only after City Commissioner Ralph Richards was paid $10,000 out of the mayor's campaign fund.

Richards was convicted of receiving a bribe in 1939, but was pardoned by the governor. Crouch dissolved the campaign fund and ended the kickback requirement shortly after taking office.

There were lingering hard feelings toward the newly dead mayor both by his opponents and his former supporters. When a motion to commission a plaque and name the Bandshell after Armstrong was made in 1938, it died in a 3-2 Daytona Beach City Commission vote.

Which is why the blank mystery monument has looked like that ever since.

But for all Armstrong's faults – and this newspaper historically was vocal about them – he was a leader with an eye on the city's future. He got the Bandshell, boardwalk, downtown post office, city water works and airport built.

And because he depended on the votes of the black people, Daytona Beach had an unusually empowered black community for its time. Segregation was still the law, but black people had city jobs and were more politically organized than usual in the South of the 1930s. The mayor actively fought the Ku Klux Klan when it was at the height of its political power in Volusia County in the 1920s.

Which is why Jaye feels Armstrong's place in the local history needs to be remembered. "It's 80 years overdue," he said.

Jaye has been president of the local chapter of the National Association of Watch and Clock collectors for 13 years. The group has been active in the recent restoration of the Boardwalk's clocktower. And that work and research got him interested in the long-ago mayor.

The group has come up with a proposed plaque design and will donate money toward its $3,300 cost should the city approve it and install it on the stone by the Bandshell.

Mayor Derek Henry seemed supportive at the last City Commission meeting. Armstrong "did a lot of extraordinary things for the city," Henry said. "I don't think we should wipe him away from our history."

The plaque will come up before the commission sometime soon.

True, Armstrong was hardly a profile in good government. And yes, he did try to put my beloved newspaper out of business by subsidizing a competitor. But he is a big part of local history, especially the Boardwalk area, so you have to give the man his due.

Plus the mystery monument just looks funny without one.

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

After 80 years, city may finish Boardwalk's mystery monument

The Boardwalks mystery monument with its spot for a plaque. [NEWS-JOURNAL/MARK LANE]

After 80 years, city may finish Boardwalk's mystery monument