Growth & Tragedy

1910 - 1919

In the "Teens" Indianapolis continued to experience rapid population growth, from 233,000 in 1910 to 314,000 by the end of the decade, and although business leaders were buoyed by the city's new stature, calling it the "Queen of the Central Western States," an expanding city added new stresses to ordinary life.

As natural gas fields north of Marion County ran dry, people switched to coal. Suddenly there was a lot more coal smoke pouring from chimneys, and the new Soldiers and Sailors Monument began to look old with its patina of soot.

The city also needed sanitary sewers, and better control over the dumping of refuse. And then there was automobile exhaust. Who could blame Indianapolis author Booth Tarkington when he described urban life as a place where "the streets were thunderous; a vast energy heaved under the universal coating of dinginess?"

In his 1919 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Magnificent Ambersons,* Tarkington commented on the change brought by automobiles. "With all their speed forward they may be a step backward in civilization," he wrote. "They are here, and almost all outward things are going to be different because of what they bring."

Cars, like railroads a generation earlier, were having a major effect on the city. Indianapolis was home to the Stutz Motor Car Co., whose factory was at 10th Street and Capitol Avenue. Another sprawling plant was the home of the Cole Motor Car Co. at 730 E. Washington Street The first running of the Indianapolis 500 was in 1911 and was raced each year afterwards except for the war years of 1917-18.

Despite the coal dust and exhaust fumes, the decade was also a time when beautification efforts in Indianapolis started to take root. Architects at the time were studying the buildings of imperial Rome, and so it was not by chance that two landmarks of this period are neo-classical in design: the Central Library (1916), 40 E. St. Clair Street, and the old City Hall (1910), later the Indiana State Museum, at 202 N. Alabama Street.

Urban planning spilled over into the parks, too. Where others saw streams such as Fall Creek as obstacles, George Kessler saw a way to create parks linked by sweeping boulevards.

The second decade of the 20th Century also brought tragedies of nature. In the spring of 1913, the city found itself waist-deep in water after 11 inches of rain fell in four days. Floodwaters broke through earthen levees along the White River, and water 4 to 10 feet deep swept over four square miles on the Westside, home to about 4,000 families. Statewide, the death toll was reported at 200. In Indianapolis, three people died and 200,000 were left homeless.

After the Great War began in Europe, German-Americans in Indianapolis found themselves under suspicion. Germans started changing their names and avoided speaking the language in public. Das Deutsche Haus at the intersection of East Michigan and New Jersey streets was re-named the Athenaeum, and the Indianapolis Public Schools board voted to end German-language teaching in all of the district's elementary schools.

In the autumn of 1918 another disaster came in the form of a global epidemic of influenza that would kill 969 city residents within a 15-week period. More than 600,000 people died nationwide and 21 million around the world.

In Indianapolis, Mayor Charles Jewett directed the police chief to begin vigorous enforcement of an anti-spitting ordinance and called for the daily fumigation and cleaning of streetcars. As local deaths and new flu cases mounted, orders prohibiting public gatherings went out to schools and movie theaters As the death toll rose, the city Fire Department was asked to flush Downtown streets and sidewalks. Volunteers were sought to staff three Richmond casket plants that were trying to keep up with orders.

Armistice Day on Nov. 11 brought an end to the war, but added a strange twist to the epidemic. Five days later, city health officials reported a rash of new flu cases, apparently from people kissing in celebration of Germany's surrender.

Opposite page: Charles Basle, driver of car No. 17, heads for the pits with a broken crankshaft after the 46th lap of the first Indianapolis 500 in 1911.