



TUMULTUOUS TIMES

1960 - 1969

This was a decade that should have come with a warning label like those found on aerosol cans: Caution, contents under pressure.

Nationally and internationally the decade was notorious as a period of tumultuous change and tragic events. It was no picnic locally either.

It started in 1960 with the horrific sight of a temporary scaffold collapsing at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway during the pace lap of the race, killing two people. It ended in 1969 with a large disturbance and mass arrests of blacks after the Fire Department was prevented from reaching a burning building on Indiana Avenue.

In between, came the city's worst disaster: A leaking propane tank exploded on Halloween night, 1963, at the Indiana State Fairgrounds Coliseum, killing 74 ice show spectators and injuring more than 400 others. And in 1965, 16-year-old Sylvia Likens was found tortured to death in one of the city's most remembered crimes.

But it was not all bleak news. It was during the 60s that the city took its first tentative steps toward revitalizing Downtown. A new City-County Building was completed in 1962 and, a few years later, the original city government building was converted for use as the Indiana State Museum.

The interstate highway system was largely completed during the 1960s, carving through established neighborhoods, but also making it possible to bring visitors Downtown more easily - which would be key to the development that followed.

Lockerbie Square became the city's first established historic district, and city and county governments approved plans to merge governments into what would be called Uni-gov.

The city also got its first zoo and Clowes Hall opened at Butler University. WTLC-FM, the first black-oriented radio station in Indianapolis, went on the air in 1968.

On the circle, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument was decorated with holiday lights and transformed into "the world's largest Christmas Tree" for the first time in 1962.

The Indiana Pacers played their first game in 1967 and the following year Indianapolis had its first enclosed shopping mall when Lafayette Square opened.

But despite these positive developments, the 1960s were overshadowed by frightening headlines of war, civil unrest and assassinations.

Opposite page: A young boy, battered by the force of the explosion, is lifted alive from the rubble of a Coliseum stand where he was trapped for nearly two hours, Oct. 31, 1963. More details on page 80.

In 1968, when word came that Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis, another national leader happened to be in Indianapolis. Senator Robert F. Kennedy was seeking the Democratic nomination for president and was on his way to a campaign stop in Indianapolis when he was told of King's death.

And so it was Kennedy who broke the news of King's death to a mostly black crowd of about 2,500 supporters who had gathered in the drizzling rain to hear him speak.

"I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world," Kennedy told the crowd, "and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight." A gasp was heard in the audience and cries of "No! No!" But not everyone heard the announcement. Eventually, Kennedy's subdued demeanor captured the crowd's attention.

"For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man."

Although there were riots in more than 100 cities across America that night, Indianapolis remained calm, and people who were there that night say Kennedy made the difference. Two months later, he was dead too.

Richard Lugar, who went on to be Indiana's longest-serving U.S. senator, was mayor of Indianapolis in the late 1960s, having served on the school board before that.

The last year of the decade provided a final flash point. One June night, a disturbance erupted on Indiana Avenue and Lugar was called back to city hall. When he learned firefighters were blockaded from a fire at a food market, he ordered police to start making arrests.

Several police officers were injured during disturbances, which spilled over into other areas. However, the city never experienced the turmoil that other cities, like Detroit and Washington, suffered.

As the decade wound down, city officials set about implementing a new government system called Uni-Gov, which merged most city and county government functions. On the west side of Downtown a new university campus was being formed from the merger of two branches, resulting in the cumbersome name, "Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis," or just "IUPUI."