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Armstrong plaque reignites old-time politics

By Mark Lane

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Edward Armstrong, Daytona Beach's Depression Era political boss, died in 1938, but he can still stir a debate in City Hall.

It's not unreasonable to say that no mayor had more impact on Daytona Beach's development than Edward Armstrong.

He and the political machine he built and kept well-oiled pushed the city forward during the depths of the Great Depression. He ran the place at a time when it enjoyed international attention for the speed trials on the beach, and grew by about a third despite shocking unemployment and economic collapse. He worked to bring in federal Works Progress Administration money to build the Boardwalk, the Bandshell, a new waterworks and turn the municipal airfield into a real airport.

In a time of unrelenting state-enforced racial segregation and disenfranchisement of black people, Armstrong recognized that black votes could be helpful. His ward heelers encouraged black voter registration and sometimes paid the poll tax for poorer voters. There were city jobs open to black people. (Armstrong's chauffeur was the father of Yvonne Scarlett-Golden, Daytona Beach's first black mayor.) There were even black police officers in the 1930s, not something you saw in the South of that time.

He was a larger-than-life city political boss who got things done in hard times and died young at 57.

And he's still a controversial figure. So much so that 15 months after a proposal was made to put up a plaque honoring him in the Boardwalk he did so much to build, the Daytona Beach City Commission is debating whether to display it. At the Commission's meeting Wednesday, it finally agreed to take up the matter at its Dec. 4 meeting.

Just south of the Bandshell, there's an odd-looking monument, a coquina rock on a pedestal with a blank spot where a plaque would go. It looks like that because after Armstrong died in 1938, city commissioners, perhaps angry at him for not designating a successor or divvying up the

machine's slush fund that he kept closely guarded, voted 3-2 against a motion to put up a plaque and name the Bandshell after him. It's stood there ever since. A blank and puzzling sight.

But the Daytona Beach chapter of the National Association of Watch and Clock Collectors, a group that has done a lot toward restoring the Boardwalk clock tower to its former glory, has designed and raised more than \$3,200 for Armstrong's long-delayed plaque. All the city needs to do is approve it and put it in place.

Zone 1 City Commissioner Ruth Trager opposes the idea. "I do not think it is really good to honor somebody who was such a symbol of corruption," she said. She alluded to the time in 1937 when city police directed by Armstrong and National Guard troops directed by the governor had a standoff at gunpoint at city hall. Not a sterling moment in our civic history.

But Len Lempel, a historian who has researched and written about Armstrong, argued for a broader view. "I'm aware of Mr. Armstrong's faults, but I've come to the conclusion that his accomplishments and contributions to Daytona Beach far outweigh any problems he had with corruption," he told commissioners.

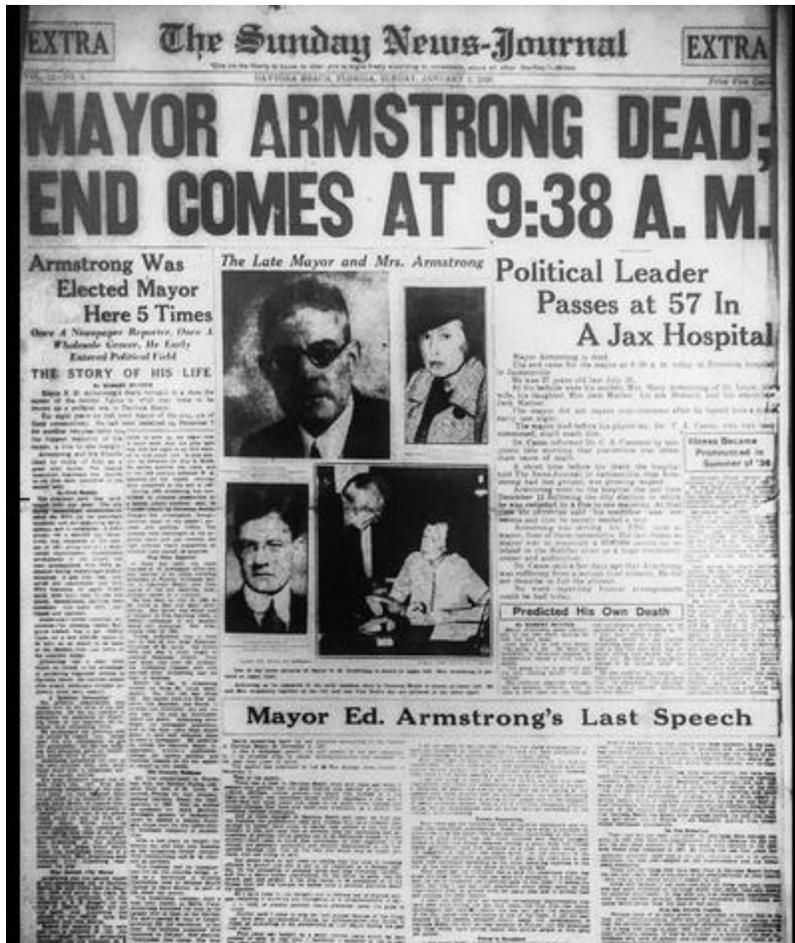
I'm with Lempel on that. Few people had a more significant impact on the city at this stage of its development than Armstrong. And I say that knowing my employer was at constant war with him. He even helped fund a short-lived competing newspaper with the hope of putting The News-Journal out of business. I've spoken to people who could still get angry talking about him more than a half-century after he died.

But after he died, His old enemy, The News-Journal's editorial page, ran a surprisingly even-handed piece. It said that yes, Armstrong was dictatorial and the city's finances were a mess that would take years to decipher and untangle, But: "The mayor was a man of many admirable qualities. He had tenacity, courage and a sense of justice. He played the game hard and wore himself out in the playing. He guided the destinies of this city through a trying adolescent period, and in some respects, he did a good job of it."

And he remains a big part of our past. A complicated past, an often embarrassing past, but one that bears remembering.



The blank monument where some want Armstrong's plaque to go. [News-Journal/Mark Lane]



An extra edition of The News-Journal announced Mayor Armstrong's death in 1938.



Daytona Beach Mayor Edward Armstrong, [News-Journal file photo]