

Edward Armstrong

By J. A. Awadalla

Edward Armstrong, mayor of Daytona Beach from 1927 to 1937, was said to have corrupted mayoral elections by buying the votes of the black community. At the time, Volusia County as a whole was hardly considered angelic; it is said that it was once “considered second in corruption only to Cook County, Ill., where mobster Al Capone reigned,”¹ and Daytona Beach was largely considered one of the most corrupt cities in the county. The Ring and the racist Anti-Ring constantly fought for control of Daytona², and Edward Armstrong threw himself right in the middle of it. This essay will attempt to prove that under such conditions, racial equality was next to impossible unless the African-American community accepted Armstrong, and voted to keep him in power.

It is important to first note the election of 1927. Daytona Beach was not always as large as it is presently—it merged with two smaller cities, Seabreeze and Daytona, in 1926. Edward Armstrong was elected to office the same year, making him the first mayor of the newly-unified Daytona Beach. Simultaneously, according to Leonard Lempel, this also reduced the percentage of African-Americans living in Daytona Beach to about a third, particularly because Seabreeze was almost entirely white. This, Lempel concludes, made the idea of African-Americans voting more tolerable to white people because, “...when African Americans comprised over 40 percent of a region’s population, the number of whites tolerating black suffrage dropped rapidly. Had Daytona Beach remained half black, Armstrong may have had considerably more difficulty

¹ Pat Hatfield, “Volusia: Florida’s most corrupt county in 1920s and 1930s?” *West Volusia Beacon*, 26 May 2008

² Hatfield, *West Volusia Beacon*, 26 May 2008

forging a biracial coalition of voters.”³ This coalition was the catalyst for Armstrong’s political success. Lempel concludes that the relationship was symbiotic:

Black Daytonans derived many benefits from their alliance with Mayor Armstrong's machine, but in the long run, this alliance did little to further the cause of black civil rights. Daytona Beach's white-dominated political machine had no intention of altering the subordinate role assigned to African Americans.⁴

Robert Snyder calls Florida in the early 1930s, “. . .not simply for whites only but also home to a carefully controlled closed society.”⁵ This self-enclosure was reinforced in the form of what Snyder calls the “poverty quarantine.” Visitors who were unable to pay to be in Florida (room, food, etc.) were not allowed to even to cross into it from its borders, although chambers of commerce in Daytona welcomed the world. Police referred to the practice as “sociological, not mercenary.”⁶ With such an attitude toward the poor, being poor and black in Florida must have been excruciating. Additionally, Lempel writes that the Ku Klux Klan “burned down two black theaters and a Catholic church”⁷ in 1920, only adding to racial tensions following the massacre following the presidential election in 1920. Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of what is now Bethune-Cookman University, experienced this violence firsthand when the Klan learned of her efforts to get her students to vote. Maxine Jones writes of it:

³ Leonard R. Lempel, “The Mayor's ‘Henchmen and Henchwomen, Both White and Colored’: Edward H. Armstrong and the Politics of Race in Daytona Beach, 1900-1940,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 79, No. 3, (Winter, 2001), pp. 267-296

⁴ *Ibid.*, 269

⁵ Robert E. Snyder, “Daytona Beach: A Closed Society,” *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 81, No. 2 (Fall, 2002), pp. 155-185

⁶ *Ibid.*, 160

⁷ Lempel, “The Mayor’s Henchmen and Henchwomen,” 278



When the Klan made an uninvited visit to campus in 1920 she did not gather her students and hide. . . . "Mrs. Bethune made all the girls come out on the steps of Faith Hall and sing 'We are Climbing Jacob's ladder.'" (sic) The Klan threatened them, burned a cross, and departed.⁸

Edward Armstrong was a controversial figure, among white and black alike. According to Lempel, Armstrong ran for mayor in the first place because he "wanted to loosen the Ku Klux Klan's grip on the city."⁹ Armstrong announced his bid as a mayoral candidate by taking out a full page advertisement in Daytona's local paper, the News-Journal, saying, "I believe that we are now over managed (sic) I believe that money is being spent to maintain departments and offices that could be abolished, and I believe that money is being spent for salaries to people who have no interests in the city. . . ." ¹⁰ This is an important and telling statement.

Prior to the election in 1935, Armstrong received funding for three projects with New Deal money: \$252,000 for Daytona Beach's now-famous boardwalk, \$42,000 for what is now Daytona International Airport, and \$10,000 for a nursery. Armstrong applied for an \$8,785 open-ditch drainage project for an African American district, but it was rejected. ¹¹ Because of all of these grants in what it felt were in all the wrong places, the News-Journal published an editorial blasting Armstrong and accusing him of corruption by asserting that his African American constituents had been essentially been betrayed:

Again and again [African Americans] have been promised a recreation park, a swimming pool—a play place. Again and again they have bowed their heads when the promise was broken

⁸ Maxine D. Jones, "'Without Compromise or Fear': Florida's African American Female Activists," *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 4, (Spring, 1999), pp. 475-502

⁹ Lempel, "The Mayor's Henchmen and Henchwomen," 267

¹⁰ *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, 23 November 1927.

¹¹ Snyder, "Daytona Beach: A Closed Society," 167



Does Mayor Armstrong think that because he has tricked the negroes (sic) in the past with broken promises he can get away with it again? In the past he could tell them the city had no money with which to build the things he had promised them. He can't make them believe that this time.¹²

For the News-Journal to call Armstrong corrupt because he received grants for tourism projects on account of the black communities' need is inaccurate and unfair. The sole project to improve an African American neighborhood Armstrong submitted was rejected; the primary reason Armstrong focused so much on tourism was because it was, and still is, the city's economic lifeblood. Snyder states in several pages how far the state of Florida would go to bring visitors; Florida was compared to the French Riviera,¹³ they catered to every interest possible,¹⁴ and even turned the local black population into an attraction, "The Negro population is especially amiable and picturesque, black as coals from Newcastle, and fond of winter visitors. The natives indulge in old-fashioned southern hospitality."¹⁵ Snyder also says that "For the tourist season ending March 1934, visitors spent an estimated \$500,000,000 in Florida,"¹⁶ more than justifying Armstrong's investment in the boardwalk the following year.

Yvonne Scarlett-Golden, former mayor of Daytona Beach herself, shows that Armstrong eventually built the park he promised; Lempel interviewed Scarlett-Golden, who "credits Armstrong with building the playground and swimming pool that she fondly recalls enjoying as a child during the 1930s, and she attributes his popularity among blacks to his sincere personal

¹² Ibid., 30 October 1935

¹³ Snyder, "Daytona Beach: A Closed Society," 157

¹⁴ Ibid., 159

¹⁵ Ibid., 159

¹⁶ Ibid., 156

concern, such as paying funeral expenses for indigents.”¹⁷ Because of this unusual sensitivity towards them, African Americans were more than willing to be patient with Armstrong; in the election in 1935, Armstrong won by over 1,100 votes; his two competitors combined received 2,893 votes.¹⁸ Assuming that all of the African Americans in Daytona voted for Armstrong, that makes 2,267 votes from the African American community alone, out of Armstrong’s total 3,961 votes. The victory certainly wasn’t without reason. Armstrong was at his most active in Daytona’s African American community. According to Lempel, Armstrong’s biggest contributions were made during this time, most notably employment in New Deal projects from the PWA and WPA projects Armstrong won. Bethune-Cookman college benefitted greatly from this as well; Mary McLeod Bethune headed the Negro Affairs division of an organization called the NYA, and lent her college to the NYA for training and funds.¹⁹

Although former judge Titus had ‘campaigned’ to the black constituency in the past,²⁰ no candidate had done it as much as Armstrong had—Armstrong went out of his way to put African Americans to work to ensure their votes. This may have something to do with the fact Armstrong began his business in the black community,²¹ but he campaigned to them to the point he was called out in a political advertisement as discriminatory by the Home Rule League. In the advertisement directed at Armstrong personally, the league alleges that:

At the colored school auditorium on Second Street on Friday evening you participated in a colored political meeting On October 15 [1929], last, you made a campaign ‘speech’ at a

¹⁷ Lempel, “The Mayor’s Henchmen and Henchwomen,” 287

¹⁸ *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, 23 November 1935.

¹⁹ Lempel, “The Mayor’s Henchmen and Henchwomen,” 293

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 277

²¹ *Ibid.*, 267

meeting of colored people held a Shiloh Baptist Church It is right that colored voters should hear the candidates discuss the issues of the campaign, but your discrimination against the League of Women Voters is an insult to every citizen of Daytona Beach²²

One candidate, W. Maxwell Hankins, was infuriated by Armstrong's tactic of soliciting black voters and vowed "to use every effort and solicit all possible support in securing legislation to redistrict this city in such a manner as to obviate for all time any possibility of using the negro (sic) for dominating city elections." Hankins went on, "The white people of Daytona Beach must be awakened and must believe the truth about the dangers facing this city if Armstrong is continued in office[.]"²³ On top of simply being black, African Americans were also largely laborers; Snyder reports:

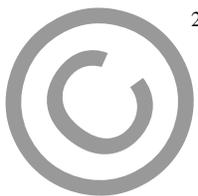
Agriculture was the largest employer of men: 746 males worked as farm laborers. The largest number of black women (2,118) labored in domestic and personal services About an equal number of men (234) and women (249) were engaged in hotels, restaurants, and boarding houses A final telling statistic on the status of Volusia County's African Americans was that only 246 were employed in professional and semi-professional occupations.²⁴

From a social perspective, as far as Florida was concerned, leaving out poor and uneducated voters, especially African Americans, wasn't seen as anything scandalous. In fact, disenfranchisement of African American voters had already been attempted before in the 1933 election for mayor:

²² *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, 1 December 1929

²³ *Ibid.*, 24 November 1935.

²⁴ Snyder, "Daytona Beach: A Closed Society," 161



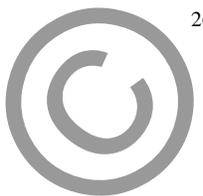
At some black polling stations as many as four hundred stood in line waiting to cast ballots, and "some negroes who were at the end of the line at 9 a.m. finally got in to vote at 6 o'clock at night. Many went away without voting." Election boards, ". . . . conceived of a list of 26 questions to ask each negro who appeared as a voter." A black meat inspector for the city later recalled how "the official killed time for us by asking a lot of nonsensical questions, so much so that the polls were closed before even half of us had voted."²⁵

Mayor Armstrong was alarmed by this, and was afraid he was going to lose the election. The Sheriff of Daytona arrested three election officials, and Armstrong called Governor Sholtz, asking him to send the National Guard to protect the African American voters, and to keep the polls open past the 6:00 p.m. closing time. At first the governor refused, but after the combined persuasion of Armstrong and the Sheriff, "Under the gaze of National Guard troops with fixed bayonets, the polls remained open until 9:30 p.m. Armstrong won commanding victories, bringing to an end Daytona Beach's 'military election' of 1933."²⁶

Just two years later, redistricting was the next stunt to kick Armstrong out of power, but it would not be what got him out of power. His policy of eliciting votes from African Americans specifically was the cause of much protest in the political arena. Governor Sholtz, a native of Daytona Beach himself, became involved in the hotly contested mayoral seat; Daytona's budget was \$200,000 in deficit for the year, and Armstrong was blamed. This prompted an investigation by Governor Sholtz, who sent a special state's attorney to do so. Armstrong was found in violation of a 1933 city charter amendment, and as consequence, the governor could remove

²⁵ Ibid., 286

²⁶ Ibid.



Armstrong from power.²⁷ In an attempt to thwart the governor, Armstrong resigned, but put his wife Irene in power in his place. The Daytona Beach Morning Journal criticized Armstrong for this move, claiming that he was still in control of Daytona because his wife would “read from prepared manuscript,” but also reported that Armstrong was suspicious that the governor would replace him with W. Maxwell Hankins, whose racist mayoral campaign had failed miserably.²⁸

Armstrong’s plan was to wait out the rest of Governor Sholtz’s term; Fred Cone had already been elected to take Sholtz’s place when Armstrong resigned. In an interview with both Edward and Irene Armstrong, Edward Armstrong explained, “We had word direct that Governor Sholtz had told one of his friends here that He was going to remove us from office. . . . We were prepared to go to the supreme court (sic). . . . then we decided in favor of resignation.”²⁹ Not everything went as Armstrong thought it would, however; on December 30th the governor made his move. Governor Sholtz ordered several city officials, including Irene Armstrong, to leave city hall, citing, “poor judgment and administering in city affairs.”³⁰ Two hundred National Guardsmen were deployed to Daytona Beach City Hall, where Irene Armstrong had locked herself inside City Hall. Edward Armstrong ordered around one hundred policemen to go to City Hall and defend his wife.³¹ The Florida Supreme Court eventually deemed Sholtz’s actions unlawful, and Edward Armstrong won his fifth term on December 7th. Armstrong’s victory was the most resounding he had ever had—he won the election against his opponent five to one.³² Assuming once more that one third of the vote was African American,

²⁷ Ibid., 290.

²⁸ *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, 10 December 1936

²⁹ Ibid., 11 December 1936

³⁰ Lempel, “The Mayor’s Henchmen and Henchwomen,” 291

³¹ Ibid.

³² *Daytona Beach Evening News*, 7 December 1937.

out of the total 7,395 votes cast for mayor, 2,465 of the votes would be African American, and whites would outnumber them for the first time at 3,720 votes. Armstrong's opponent only received 1,210 votes.

Armstrong did not live to enjoy his fifth term, however; he died the day before of his inauguration for the term.³³ There were so many mourners anticipated that the public was asked by Mrs. Armstrong not to follow the funeral procession to the cemetery, and instead Armstrong's body would lie in state.³⁴ Despite the allegations of corruption Armstrong faced, Lempel concludes:

As a consequence of their involvement, Daytona Beach's blacks acquired a degree of empowerment and self respect (sic) rarely experienced by African American communities in the South before World War II. Black Daytonans believed that their voices counted, their interests were protected, and their concerns mattered. As one black resident stated, "When Mayor Armstrong was coming up, he asked what we wanted ... and was told: policemen, freedom on the beach to a reasonable extent, and so on. We got them."³⁵

Armstrong did not insulate the African-American community from discrimination completely, that much is true, but his career served as an inadvertent a stepping stone for African Americans in Daytona Beach to better themselves. Mary McLeod Bethune wrote to Edward Armstrong, lauding his outreach and contributions to the African American community,³⁶ and

³³ Lempel, "The Mayor's Henchmen and Henchwomen," 292

³⁴ *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, 4 January 1938

³⁵ Lempel, "The Mayor's Henchmen and Henchwomen," 293

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 293

personally contacted Armstrong aide Joe Harris when her son Albert was thrown in jail. Harris secured Albert Bethune's release.³⁷ In such a climate where African Americans were disenfranchised and discriminated against in the political system, Armstrong fought for equality; even if it was for his own personal gain in the end, he still contributed to African American empowerment in his own—if selfish—way.

Racial tensions undoubtedly still existed in Daytona and the rest of the South, and it is sad that it would not be for twenty more years when African Americans would finally see equality in all aspects. Present-day Daytona Beach is far better than it was in the 1930s, but it still has much work ahead of it. It would be fantastic to see black and white come together in Daytona; although segregation's curtain has been lifted, social division still exists—but there is plenty of coexistence in Daytona as well. It is as Yvonne Scarlett-Golden recounted, "There used to be a saying among people: 'We don't want to deal with those blacks in Daytona. They have too much power.'"³⁸

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

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