

In Tom's Shadow: Cleveland's Forgotten Progressives

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Tom Johnson's reputation as a businessman who "got religion" from Henry George, came to Cleveland, successfully ran for mayor, and used the business acumen from his former "sinful" life to thwart the streetcar and natural gas interests in the name of the public good, is an important, nationally celebrated chapter in Cleveland's past. However, owing to Johnson's gigantic reputation, much of Cleveland's rich and diverse progressive past has been obscured by his shadow. This presentation focuses on a few of the many important figures who contributed to Cleveland's reputation at the turn of the century as one of America's finest and most progressive cities. Individuals discussed include Newton Baker, Frederic Howe, Glen Shurtleff, Starr Cadwallader, William Greenlund, Charles W. Chesnutt, and William Stinchcomb.

By 1900 Cleveland was suffering from the same problems experienced by many growing urban centers of the day. These difficulties were discussed in a number of circles, including the Chamber of Commerce, the City Council, social settlements, women's reform associations, immigrant self-help societies, various charity organizations, the Municipal Association, and a collection of clubs dedicated to the discussion of local problems. Many individuals belonged to two or more of these groups. Some belonged to most or even ALL of them.

Progressive activity in Cleveland was so powerful and, one would assume, so exciting, because of the sheer number of people involved. Engaging themselves in a process of personal and professional "cross-fertilization," participants educated and encouraged one another through their mutual and multifarious involvement, the addresses they presented to or heard from their peers, and the investigation in which they often engaged to more fully understand their areas of study. This progressive activity led to the establishment of public bath and laundry facilities, public playgrounds, a loan company to fight rampant usury, and a number of influential institutions, including the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Court, Citizen's League, Legal Aid Society, and City Club.