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Chapter 9

THE MOVEMENT UNRAVELS

When you think about the movements that were around then, civil rights, peace, and the beginnings of the women's movement, the farm workers' movement, there were so many kinds of causes... You could get yourself into something other than the movies. I noticed when I first got into this business, kids would walk in, would have a hope, and would want to go to work. They had a certain intensity about their lives. Today, a kid comes out of Wooster College and says, 'I did this paper on Alinsky, and I either want to go into retailing or organizing.' There's no passion. ¹

Harry Fagan, Commission on Catholic Community Action

The community organizing movement that swept Cleveland's neighborhoods benefited from a unique set of favorable conditions, including the movement legacies of the 1960s, an available labor pool of potential organizers, obtuse and blundering institutions that were dream targets, institutional cover from the Catholic church, and funding from the federal government, the Gund Foundation, and the Campaign for Human Development. There was the synergy of the right people being at the right place at the right time in key institutions.

Many of the changes that helped to bring down the movement began with the election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980. The 1980s were dominated politically, socially, economically and culturally by a grand campaign to roll back twenty years of social change. The goal was to restore order by restoring public passivity and the traditional hierarchies of power in the family, at work, in schools, and in the public life of the nation.

This campaign to restore order was expressed locally in the overthrow of the
Kucinich administration and the drive to exorcise from public life in Cleveland anything that even hinted of the populism and insurgency it symbolized. Although the community organizations didn’t like Kucinich either, their rabble-rousing tactics, irreverence towards authority, and grassroots values were not far enough removed from those of Kucinich to afford them safety. A top-down, consensus style of politics of ―go along to get along‖— carried the day. The decline and fall of community organizing in Cleveland fit neatly into the overall themes of the post-Kucinich era.

This transformation occurred on many fronts. Foundations turned away from organizing and toward development. With the decline of unrest in the African-American community and the incorporation of that community’s leadership into the establishment, the corporate elite did not feel a need to back organizing as riot insurance. With the restoration of political stability after the overthrow of the Kucinich administration, the corporations returned to their usual job of profit and gain.

On college campuses, idealism was out; business administration degrees were in. The steady supply of recruits for organizing positions dried up. The generation of organizers who had built the neighborhood groups left the profession driven by the pressures of marriage, family, and the need for a saner, more secure way of life. Many, if not most, migrated with the funding opportunities into the burgeoning world of the new development corporations. Others left organizing altogether. City hall learned how to deal with the neighborhoods. A new generation of city council members, many with neighborhood activist experience, found their footing and asserted their hold on their wards by turning development corporations into new and improved reincarnations of the old ward organizations.

Of the original staff of the Catholic Commission who had helped launch the movement, none were still around. Dan Reidy left the priesthood and moved to San Francisco to become an attorney. Harry Fagan left in 1983 to work for the Center for Pastoral Life in New York City, where he died of cancer in 1992. His mentor, William Cosgrove, took a new assignment in East St. Louis, Illinois, and retired in ill health. He died within a month of Fagan. Bishop James Hickey became James Cardinal Hickey in Washington D.C.

An autopsy of this era of activism in Cleveland, would find a multitude of wounds that, taken individually, would not have killed the movement, but, taken together, were fatal.

**The Commission Backs Away**

One of the most significant developments was the withdrawal of the Catholic Commission from active involvement in the movement. The start of this process dates from the spinoff of the Ohio Training Center (OTC) from the Catholic Commission in 1980.

In one respect, it was a natural separation. The community organizations were no longer projects of the commission, but were fully autonomous organizations with
their own administration, decision-making bodies, and fund-raising arms. They chafed under what they perceived to be the commission’s paternalism, particularly that of Fagan. Tom Gannon recalled an article in the Plain Dealer that gave Fagan a huge spread. While no one could doubt Fagan’s contributions, many in the neighborhoods were put off by the publicity, which Gannon felt Fagan reveled in. The article suggested Fagan had done it all by himself, when the movement was far broader and deeper than any one person. One of Gannon’s and Joe Mariano’s motivations for founding the training center was to enable the movement to leave home, the home of Harry Fagan.

According to Joe Garcia, who was a member of the commission’s board in the early 1980s, a marked change in the attitude of the diocese towards the groups and the commission occurred with the installation of Bishop Anthony Pilla in January 1981. Under Bishops Issenmann and Hickey, the commission had a lot of latitude. This relative autonomy ended under Pilla, who saw the commission as a part of the Diocese of Cleveland, and accountable to him.

Pilla was an unusual choice for bishop because Cleveland was his home. The general rule for appointing bishops was to bring in a bishop from out of town. James Hickey was not on a first-name basis with the movers and shakers of Cleveland who were regularly trashed by the groups. Pilla had had a long and distinguished career in Cleveland, and knew many of these people. It made him much less sympathetic to those who portrayed them as public enemies.

While Gannon felt that Pilla’s familiarity with the elite chilled the atmosphere for confrontational organizing, Len Calabrese, present-day director of the Catholic Commission, saw Pilla’s hometown heritage as an asset. It made him more knowledgeable and sensitive to the concerns of the parish grassroots.

Many who were close to the Catholic Commission such as Garcia, felt that the change in attitude by the diocese was rationalized by a study the Gund Foundation commissioned of the community organizations, begun by Art Bloom of the Case Western University’s School of Applied Social Science (SASS) and finished by Michael Murphy, also of SASS. Garcia, who was on the commission board, felt the study was taken at the initiative of the diocese, but Gannon remembered it originating earlier at the suggestion of the Gund Foundation. Garcia considered the study to be a test that the community groups were destined to fail, giving the diocese an excuse to withdraw from community organizing. According to Garcia, the community organizations came out of the Murphy report looking like a mess, although Gannon remembered the report being not all that bad. Garcia thought the study used absurd criteria to judge community organizing:

When you do organizing, this is a creative event. These are artists who work on intuition, response, timing, and getting ideas at 2:30 in the morning. They don’t act in the confines of a bureaucracy or an organization. Forget about it! It’s like taking a duck out of
water. Murphy says, 'Eh, this organization is not efficient.' All this management garbage. You can't organize, you can't tell Picasso to come in at 8, go home at 4. You know and get what Picasso creates for the world.  

It is interesting that Murphy was chosen for the task. His wife had been hit by Citizens to Bring Broadway Back at a meeting when she represented her employer, Forest City Enterprises, before the group. Murphy did not like community organizing, and he was furious over the hit. It is hard to see how any study he led could have been objective, yet the report was a success because it justified a major shift in the commission's attitude toward the groups. From the time of the study onward the impetus for organizing shifted to the parishes. Garcia was livid, and confronted Fagan at a commission event:

So I ripped. Harry, in his mightier-than-thou rhetoric said 'Joe, it's a strategic decision that we will now get organizing out of the parish council.' I said to him, 'You gotta be kidding me!' He said, 'Joe, we'll be able to spread organizing wider throughout the diocese by turning over this portfolio of organizing to the parish council.' He said it with a straight face! I looked at him and said, 'You gotta be kidding me,' I mean, I was laughing and angry, and he was so good at what he did. He didn't blush.... It was a great performance. I said, 'Harry you're in the wrong business. Go to Hollywood, Harry. Go to Broadway, Harry.' The relationship was not the same after that between him and me.  

Len Calabrese of the commission looked upon the diocese's disengagement with community organizing as a reflection of changing times and a response to outside pressures on the diocese, not as a repudiation of organizing, activism, or advocacy. The incentive to change came in the advent of the Reagan administration. Its bellicose foreign policy and hostility toward the American welfare state shifted the focus of all Catholic activists to issues of peace and poverty. By 1983, the National Council of Catholic Bishops was issuing major statements on the economy and peace.  

The challenge for the American church was how to mobilize around these issues, and the solution was to turn back to the parishes to mobilize the Catholic constituency. In addition unease was stirring in some parishes about the activities of the groups and the loss of some of their best people to the groups. Withdrawal of the commission removed much of the political cover that the groups had enjoyed since the mid-1970s at a time when the national political and social climates were shifting dramatically to the right.
Funding

Where are you going to get money for organizing? As I said, you can get a list of volunteers to activate the program. The people who were the staffs of these organizations worked for pennies. With the exception of a few enlightened neighborhood businesses, where are you going to get the money? You just aren’t.  

Hank Doll, George Gund Foundation

Funding helped to create the environment in which organizing flourished, and its withdrawal dramatically altered that environment. The Catholic Commission under Fagan helped open sources of funding through the Campaign for Human Development and the Gund Foundation. The groups were also funded by grants from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and they were staffed by subsidized volunteers from the VISTA program.

Community organizations in Cleveland started experiencing financial decline in the early 1980s. With or without foundation reaction to the SOHIO campaign, funding would have run out sooner, rather than later. First, the funding from the foundations was limited to three-year funding cycles. By the early 1980s, the funding cycles and extensions of those cycles began to run out. Second, the organizations were badly hit by the arrival of the Reagan administration. Ken Esposito of the Ohio Training Center was called on inauguration day 1981 by the new head of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) and was told to stop operations immediately on the program he was running. When asked why, the official was blunt: “Because we are in power now, and you are out.”

One of the worst blows came with the curbing of the VISTA program, which provided vital organizing staff. The involvement of VISTA volunteers in advocacy organizing had enraged conservatives for years. They made gutting the program part of their “de-fund the left” campaign. This can be seen in the letter Sandra Kluk of Buckeye Woodland Community Congress (BWCC) received from Ted Wysocki of the National Training and Information Center (NTIC), their technical assistance agency for VISTA, on April 21, 1981:

> Needless to say, it does not look very good for any of you getting VISTAs next year. The new guidelines for VISTAs state that they don't want VISTAs organizing 'angry people' (maybe you want to try polite people for a change). Two issues they mention for VISTAs to work on next year are youth and energy (meaning training people to actually weatherize their homes, not fighting rate increases).

One delusion shared by both funders and funded was the notion that organizing should become self-sufficient. Organizing was not like opening up a muffler
shop. A national leader of neighborhood activism, Monsignor Geno Baroni, never believed that neighborhood organizing could become self-sufficient. Even Alinsky always had his hand out. However, little dissent from the officially stated goal of self-sufficiency was heard.

From the start, fundraising was on the agenda of the neighborhood groups. It was not a concern that appeared suddenly in the early 1980s as the foundations were backing out of the organizing scene.

On December 20, 1978, Jim Lipscomb, director of the Gund Foundation, wrote Fagan to announce the award of a second-year grant for the Training & Technical Assistance (T&TA) program. Lipscomb was especially interested in the financial future of the program and its attainment of self-sufficiency. The 1979 copies of the proposal belonging to the Gund Foundation were heavily marked in the section dealing with fundraising and financing, demonstrating concern on the part of the foundation about the future financial viability of the movement. The foundation also was concerned about the move of the groups to a statewide organizing center, the Ohio Training Center. If funding self-sufficiency was daunting on the neighborhood level, how much more difficult would it be on the state level?

The most important withdrawal in funding, financially and symbolically, was made by the Gund Foundation. It was then, and still is, a prime arbiter of the direction non-profits take in Cleveland. Hank Doll, former program officer for the Gund Foundation, described the foundation's reasons for its pull-back from funding the organizing groups:

Most projects that you put money into, [you do it] four or five years at the most, then you're done. The theory behind that is those organizations are going to finance themselves from other sources. They will have demonstrated their value by then, and other sources will be underwriting their activity or it will have made its contribution. That's been the practice of foundations for a long time, not just Gund. So in our case, being with some of these things for nine years was a really long commitment.

It was not only time that was running out for the groups. They were becoming a problem for the funders. What the foundations were looking for clashed with what the groups were interested in.

It is undeniable that the funding organizations of Cleveland preferred the well-behaved development groups to the often-outrageous community organizations. It is also clear that institutions such as foundations have long sought a form of democracy that will not inconvenience business. The history of citizen participation schemes shows how such institutions crave the legitimacy of grassroots organizations and find the transmission of information that they gain from the relationship useful, but they are not interested in losing control of the ability to frame and define issues.
before the public or of finding their interests challenged, both of which happen frequently when grassroots organizations begin to develop. They also had lost faith not only in the groups, but also in the quality of organizing advice and strategy that people were receiving from the Ohio Training Center, as was evident in the fallout from the SOHIO controversy. Gannon, who was watching the events from the sidelines at the commission, commented:

> You can defend good organizing because good organizing wins and good organizing makes sense and good organizing empowers people. Bad organizing doesn't always do that, and you can't defend that organizing. Therefore, when push comes to shove, if you don't believe in the product that you're funding, and you see some of the problems with it, you are certainly not going to take the heat for it.  

A common complaint was that the funding came too easily, was too dependent on just a few sources, and created a situation in which the constituencies of the organizations were passive recipients of services provided by the organizations. The rank-and-file were not expected to make an effort to fund the organizations from such sources as membership dues. Gannon cited his experience with the United Farm Workers. Caesar Chavez insisted that all members pay dues. When they paid dues, they invested in the union and showed their support. They had a crucial link with the organization. The communities of Cleveland were not affluent, but were not as poor as the farm workers of Delano, California. Yet the community organizations never expected from their members what any other organization does: dues regularly paid.

Bill Callahan, an organizer for Citizen Action, felt that the blame for the financial vulnerability of the groups had to be laid at the feet of Fagan.

> Whatever role Harry may have played that was negative was the willingness to be Big Daddy in fundraising terms to organizations that were far more dependent on outside resources than they should have been. Harry raised the money. It probably looked like a terrific thing to do at the time he was doing it. They were so driven by outside considerations, whether it was what we can raise this year, or letting Chicago play such a big role in the agendas, everybody was dependent on an outside funder. Some of that can be traced back to Harry's over-willingness to be the good guy for everybody.

The decline of secure funding sources created a dynamic that undermined the groups. Increasingly, emphasis was given to whatever fundraising schemes seemed even remotely promising.
Organizations began to raise funds with local businesses for neighborhood Yellow Pages directories. There was an attempt to launch a canvassing operation along the lines of Citizen Action. Organizations started to contract to provide services for city programs. On the Near West Side this involved a program to install smoke detectors in private homes.

Foundation grants for such programs were so tightly written that providing these services was all that was allowed. Organizing was explicitly forbidden. With the staff single-mindedly focused on scratching together financial survival, little time remained for the work of nurturing block clubs, developing leadership, and issues, and keeping in contact with peers in other parts of the city. Not only couldn’t they sustain critical funding, but the desperate efforts to seek new sources of funding derailed their ability to maintain their very reason for existence, the organization and development of the people of the neighborhood.17

Burnout

It was such an intense period in my life. There was no way I could continue that pace for any longer than I did, actually. That’s another problem with it: Nobody figured out how to maintain those original people or [find] the new ones to replace them. Maybe it was too intense. We put incredible burdens on ourselves.  

Marita Kavalec, Union Miles Community Coalition

Community organizing in Cleveland depended on a particular cadre of organizers, leaders, and activists. When they began to leave the scene, few, if any replacements came to take their places. By the early to mid-1980s, staffing had reached a critical point and added to all the other problems bearing down on the groups.

Being a community organizer during the heyday of the groups could be an exhilarating way of life for a young idealist. You weren’t just reading about the crucial issues of the day, you were dealing with them, personally, every day. You weren’t just studying history in a college seminar, you were making history on the streets and in the communities of Cleveland.

The downside to this was miserable pay, grueling hours, and endless meetings, to say nothing of the drudgery of “door knocking”. Enforcing these conditions was a movement ethos of self-sacrifice, where complaints about conditions elicited a response that questioned your dedication and commitment. Judy Opalach, an organizer for St. Clair Superior Coalition and Citizens to Bring Broadway Back, recalled the shocked reaction she received to her refusal to go to an event because she had made other plans. To this day, former leaders of these groups, comment on their sense of amazement at the dedication of the staff, at their willingness to soldier on with long hours and low pay, and how they would never wish that fate on others.
Community organizers were not the only ones used up by the process in Cleveland. So were community leaders. The great failure of the organizations of this era was that they did not develop new leaders to take over when older leaders pulled back or quit. It was easier to call on the old reliables than to find new leaders.

A process developed wherein people who were developed as leaders on one particular issue soon were tapped to be on the board of the organization on a personnel or finance committee or leading another issue committee. It was always a challenge to balance these duties with the normal demands and responsibilities of everyday life. People tired of the extra demands placed on them by the organization and either pulled back or dropped out altogether.

Barb Pertz described the process of burnout at BWCC:

I was fortunate that I didn’t have to contend with a husband who said, ‘You’re going to another meeting?’ or children holding on to your skirt saying, ‘Mommy, stay home tonight!’ People were dedicated. They could start to see that things were changing. They wanted to be a part of that change. In Buckeye Woodland...people who were around in the beginning weren’t at the end. Just like the organizers, they got burned out.¹⁹

It wasn’t just a matter of burnout for the leaders. Everyday life was becoming more difficult in the 1980s. The earlier groups still operated in a world where many neighborhood housewives did not have to work outside the home or where many people were retired or were living on pensions. They had time to participate in community activities, and those activities were underwritten by Cleveland’s traditional manufacturing sector.

The massive deindustrialization that hit Cleveland in the 1970s and 1980s saw the loss of more than 60,000 manufacturing jobs in Cuyahoga County from 1979 to 1983, a twenty six per cent decline in manufacturing jobs.²⁰

These losses hit the areas organized by the groups and drastically changed family dynamics. In order to maintain their standard of living, many families had to have both adults working. Groups were forced to rely on fewer of their founding activists to volunteer for activities.²¹ Many became single mothers, either from divorce or through the death of a spouse. Retired volunteers died or became incapacitated. Barb Pertz commented that a blow to BWCC was the dying off of all the little old Hungarian ladies who used to turn out for meetings and actions.

**Product Over Process: The Rise of Development**

The few groups that remain from the ones that existed originally exist more as service providers now than as organizing groups. It would be very difficult to sell to any of the foundations or to city government the concept of grassroots
organizing. It is a failed concept. But, yes, the groups that do exist either exist as appendages of council people, and are often very supportive of the individual council people, or as appendages of the housing or development corporations that they once set up and controlled. 22

Mike O'Brien, Near West Neighbors in Action

The community organizations of Cleveland gave birth to development corporations, that consolidated and ran programs that came from the mother organization's victories. With time, these development arms either replaced the parent organization or the parent organization transformed itself to fit the new development agenda.

A whole generation of community development non-profits, particularly housing corporations, was formed in the early 1980s. The Cleveland Housing Network was organized in 1981. The Near West Housing Corporation, a spinoff of Near West Neighbors in Action was begun in 1980. Union Miles Development Corporation, formed in 1981 as a subsidiary of Union Miles Community Coalition, absorbed its parent group in 1985. The Broadway Area Housing Coalition was formed in 1981 out of an earlier effort, called North Broadway Housing for Neighbors and Citizens to Bring Broadway Back. The St. Clair Superior Coalition helped found a housing group, COHAB, at about this time. In the Buckeye area, veterans of Buckeye Woodland Community Congress started Bank on Buckeye (BOB) and the Buckeye Evaluation and Training Institute (BETI), which served as a weatherization and housing rehab consulting organization.

National organizations, such as the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Enterprise Foundation, began to build relationships with the new development groups. Finally, Norm Krumholz began the Center for Neighborhood Development (CND) at Cleveland State University to continue the advocacy planning that he had pioneered at the Cleveland City Planning Commission. As the infrastructure for organizing was collapsing, the infrastructure for development was burgeoning.

The development corporations rose to prominence, displacing the old community organizations for several reasons. They were product-oriented. If they succeeded with a program, there was something solid to show for the effort, usually a rehabbed house, salvaged apartment building, or a renewed shopping strip. This proved irresistible to funding sources. Brick-and-mortar accomplishments could be displayed in annual reports. Ribbon-cuttings could provide publicity and psychological strokes for bank representatives, politicians, and other public figures whose goodwill was invaluable. Such accomplishments also were nice to have on your resume if you were an up-and-coming director of a nonprofit.

Empowerment could not be photographed. Democracy could not be charted. How the process of working with a community organization helped a neighborhood person gain self-confidence, learn skills, change her life for the better, or broaden
her view of the world could not be described statistically on a spreadsheet or boiled down to the bottom line.

A key to low-income housing development in Cleveland, as used by the non-profits, was tax-credit financing, in which private investors sheltered their income from taxation by investing in low-income housing ventures. The impact was not only financial, but also political: It sealed the alliance between the development corporations and the corporate community.23

The development corporations were safe entities to fund. Investors could be pretty sure that a local non-profit would be the last organization to disrupt a stockholders meeting, "roast" a bureaucrat or politician alive, or defeat a plan for a downtown development scheme. The development corporations fit ideally into the consensus-obsessed, don't-rock-the boat atmosphere of post-Kucinich Cleveland.

Development corporations put a premium on professionalism and the acquisition of technical expertise to carry the day. Their emphasis was not on developing the skills of neighborhood people or subjecting development plans to the slow, patient process of grassroots democratic decision making. Time was money. Negotiations could not be carried out in public. Deadlines had to be reached. Funders and investors would not wait. The grassroots became a passive cheering section for the technical virtuosity of the professionalized staff.

The Model Collapses

One of the most significant signs of a movement in decline was the collapse of Buckeye Woodland Community Congress, the organization that was a prototype of how to put together a community organization in Cleveland.

The organizations of the era did not just die on a precise date. The end most often came as the result of a long, painful illness. In the case of BWCC, the decline was from 1983 until it formally disbanded on December 29, 1987. During much of this time, it really did not exist as a viable organization. Those members who remained loyal were like the last residents of an abandoned city.

Buckeye began to come apart from financial pressures. A funding history of the organization showed a slow, relentless drying up of one financial well after another. The early years saw foundation funding from the Campaign for Human Development and the Cleveland Foundation. Important funding sources, such as VISTA, ended with the advent of the Reagan administration.

The financial burden then fell exclusively on private foundations. This effort faltered by early 1984. For the rest of the time, BWCC won one or two grants, but otherwise subsisted on handouts from its spinoff development corporations, Bank on Buckeye (BOB) and the Buckeye Evaluation and Training Institute (BETI), and increasingly desperate and improbable fundraising schemes.

Buckeye not only succumbed to the usual funding woes that plagued the rest of the groups; it also was racked by internal disputes that became more vicious under the pressure cooker of financial need.
Ironically, one of Buckeye’s major accomplishments proved to be one of the flash points in its war with itself. In 1981, BWCC helped found a consortium of banks that would help fund housing rebad in the neighborhood. Called Bank on Buckeye (BOB), it and its sister group, BETI, soon began to eclipse the parent organization in funding and staff, sparking organizational and individual jealousy among those still active in BWCC.

The targets of the jealousy were Sharon Bryant and Pat Kinney, who had begun working for BOB. BOB and BETI not only had financing that BWCC lacked, they also had on their boards many former leaders of the BWCC. There was a dispute over office space. Buckeye could no longer afford its old office, and BOB offered it office space in the back of its offices. The leadership of BWCC was insulted. The acrimony went so far that a faction of BWCC actually picketed a BOB-sponsored neighborhood tour for a national economic development conference.

A good indicator of the health of an organization can be found in the minutes of its executive or governing boards. In the case of BWCC’s executive board, the contrast between the minutes taken in the first five years of its existence and those of the middle 1980s is striking.

Minutes from the years between 1975 and 1980 are meticulous and comprehensive. The board disciplined itself; members were required to attend or to be excused; otherwise, they were asked to resign. BWCC’s executive board was a working board, discussing committee reports and setting the direction of the congress on major issues.

By 1983, board minutes became fragmentary and, in many cases, are missing. The board no longer discussed issues on the agenda, but was increasingly obsessed with minute details of event planning and fundraising that, in an earlier time, would have been handled in subcommittees. Minutes no longer were typed, and were reduced from two to three single-spaced pages to one page. From 1985 until it disbanded at the end of 1987, the executive board of BWCC was the organization, with nothing under it to lead.

All of this coincided with the retirement or falling back of the old leadership: Diane Yambor, Sharon Bryant, Agnes Jackson, and Barbara Pertz. They were replaced by people who had always been active in BWCC, but who had only recently become interested in leadership. Leola Criswell, Jenette Terrill, Alma Cooper, and Lottie Person were among those who joined the board. George Barany, former BWCC organizer and executive director, came on board, as well. His tenure was brief, and he left totally exasperated by the experience. Executive director Sandra Kluk assessed the new board:

They felt they should just control the organization, period. They didn’t like the organizing of the congress. They didn’t like the confrontational attitude. They didn’t like white staff. They didn’t like some of the black leaders.24
Kluk also was concerned about their failure to do the basic work needed to maintain the group. She described it:

I tried to tell the leaders we haven't been organizing as much on the street because leaders used to go to street club meetings. People don't know you, and there were a lot of new people out there who haven't been to hits and actions. [We said,] 'They're going to be at the convention, and so you want to get out there and campaign.'

One of the greatest sources of conflict was the new board president, Lottie Person, who assumed the office in 1984. The board minutes of June 21, 1984, contain the following:

Earl Jefferson charged misconduct by Mrs. Person as president. [He] said [she] had not followed protocol and procedures, ignored sentiments of the other board members, and did not let the vice president know what was going on, thus undercutting his ability to perform if needed. He made a motion to ask her to resign. The motion [was] approved twenty to eight.

The motion did not have any teeth. The next executive board meeting, held on July 19, 1984, included an entry that Mrs. Person announced that she intended to stay as president and that everyone should just try to get along. Getting along was not likely, given two areas of conflict on the board. The first was the entrance of local politics into board decisions. Many new board members were politically connected and began using the board to push the agenda of their particular party. Sharon Bryant described the entrance of politics into the board:

We had the people from the 21st District Caucus (Louis Stokes's political organization). We had the Nagys from the Republican party. How can I benefit my party? What am I going to get out of it?

The second flash point was racial. A failure of community organizing in Cleveland was its inability to recruit and keep African-American organizers and staff. With the exception of such organizers as Wess Wells, Larry Allen, and Greg Groves, the list of African-American organizers was very short. Within the increasingly vitriolic world of BWCC in its decline, this failure became a political football within the organization. Just as pressure was building from the board to hire African-American organizers, the ability of the organization to keep any staff at all was more in doubt each day. To make matters worse, prospective organizers who were hired often served the dual purpose of not only being organizers, but of being the eyes and ears of one or another faction on the board.
Another source of friction was the closed-door method of governing BOB and BETI. There was a deep suspicion of corruption and favoritism based on the funding of the new development groups.

Alma Cooper, one of the new leaders, did agree with Bryant on the character of board disputes. They were not about policy differences; they were battles based on personalities and factions. The battles were being fought against a backdrop of dwindling board participation. Cooper also blamed the old leadership for becoming too insular. She blamed the old leadership under Sharon Bryant for the unwillingness to work with the new board or to give up control of the organization. When they went over to the new development arms, they took their expertise and experience with them. No mechanism existed in the organization to maintain access to that expertise and experience. It was the personal property of those who possessed it and traveled with them, in many cases, to better things.

The news of Buckeye's problems became official with two articles in the Plain Dealer. The first appeared on June 25, 1984; the second, on September 30, 1985. The 1984 article reflected Buckeye's demise from a seven-person staff and a $100,000 budget to director Sandra Kluk facing laying off herself and her last organizer just to pay the rent for the office. The invisibility and extinction of BWCC was guaranteed. As Sharon Bryant said in the Plain Dealer:

'We need the staff so we can develop our projects full time.' said Bryant. 'Time is the villain, because most of us in the organization work, and all we can really devote is evening time... If you don't organize, then you're not visible in the community, and people just don't know you're out there.'

Lottie Person disappears from the archives after 1984, replaced by Leola Criswell. Criswell was a vice president of BWCC who had become active with the congress late in its life. Her main experience had been organizing block watches in her neighborhood.

Criswell was a controversial figure who was blamed by some of the old timers for helping sink the organization; however, the archives show that she was largely responsible for organizing the attempt to bring BWCC back in 1985. She took the helm of the organization and tried to keep it functioning, and was responsible for BWCC to the end.

The second article covered the effort to raise Buckeye from the dead. BWCC recalled a leader from better days, Ken Kovach, now a consultant on non-profit organizations, who was widely respected, regardless of faction. Kovach led a series of meetings and workshops to salvage BWCC.

The problems he found revolved around the quality of leadership and conflict between leaders wedded to the old days and leaders with limited knowledge of community organization, as well as staff becoming involved in internecine battles and money pressures. Kovach described the situation:
Some of the new leadership lacked the kinds of skills and a real orientation to what the organization was really about. They got plugged in through one little piece, and maybe never really saw a big picture. There was also tension among some of the old leaders who still lived there and who still wanted to be active and some of the new leadership who didn’t like their style. I think a third point is that now there was money [with BOB and BETI] to do some things.30

At public meetings Kovach tried to rally the troops with appeals to the old spirit and the voluntary efforts that helped start Project Interface and BWCC. But appeals would not bring back the old days.

The end was a tragicomedy, with leaders stealing Rolodexes and records and changing locks on the office door while the landlord prepared to begin eviction proceedings for non-payment of rent.

Leola Criswell closed the office after the December 1987 board decision to formally disband. Whatever faults she may have had as a leader, she had a sense of the historical importance of BWCC and donated the organization’s records to the Western Reserve Historical Society. So ended the Buckeye Woodland Community Congress.

In Search of the Smoking Gun

In human folklore, there are creation myths and end-of-the world myths. The community organizing movement in Cleveland was no exception. The most popular end of the world myth, among veterans of the movement, is that the movement had become a threat to the status quo. The powers that be responded by orchestrating a funding cut off that lead to the demise of the groups. This is a myth that plays into the rough-and-tough machismo of this time and flatters veterans of organizing into thinking that they had more power and were more threatening to the status quo than they ever were. It neatly absolves the groups, their organizers, and their leaders from responsibility for their own downfall.

Three factors make it difficult to confirm the case for an elite conspiracy against the groups. The first is the way that power is exercised. The process is a slowly rolling consensus reached in meetings without notes, in conversations at lunch or in a hallway, and in the myriad small signals that coalesce to establish new sets of rules and new lists of those who are in and those who are out of favor.

Lance Buhl, head of corporate giving for SOHIO, said that it would be hard to crack down on the groups and still fund neighborhood efforts because often the same people were involved. Buhl commented on the impact of the Hunt Club in Diana Tittle’s history of the Cleveland Foundation, Rebuilding Cleveland. In his view, the hit put a permanent end to funding advocacy organizing, but not to the funding of neighborhood development.31
The second reason the smoking gun won't be found is that there is to this day, no consensus on what led to the end. Many veterans focus on the funding, others believe that a more complex set of reasons led to the decline of organizing.

The third reason is that, in the aftermath of the Hunt Club hit, many groups faltered and died; some did not. BWCC folded in 1987; UMCC closed in 1985. NWNIA finally went out of business around 1990 after a series of near-death experiences. CBBC was dissolved in 1993. St. Clair Superior Coalition was the last to give up its old organizational name and identity in 2001.

The names of those who remained may have been the same, but they could not resist the pull of the development agenda. Instead of being organizations that built campaigns based on issues coming from the grassroots, they became organizations that mobilized communities in support of development. They lived on in a world they helped create, but no longer recognized, understood, or influenced.

While the myth of an elite crackdown has its merits, it grossly oversimplifies the organizations' problems. The truth would include not only elite disfavor, but also many internal and external factors that, combined with elite reaction and shrinking social and political space for organizing, created a lethal environment for community organizations in Cleveland.

Tom Andrezjewski, neighborhood reporter for the Plain Dealer, explored the pressures coming down on the groups in two articles written in 1982 and 1985. In the first, titled Budget Cut to Tone Down Activism Here? Andrezewski puts forth the issue:

Activist community groups face the prospect of toning down their agenda for social and economic change and sticking to more prosaic projects, such as providing attic insulation or house paint in city neighborhoods.

Cuts in federal programs, ranging from anti-crime dollars to housing programs, are forcing neighborhood groups to rely more on banks, corporations, and foundations for money. At least indirectly, and often directly, those are the targets of their protests.

So far, no direct evidence exists that any organizations, even the ones which have participated in activities such as the lunchtime disruption at the Chagrin Valley Hunt Club last September, have been excluded from local philanthropy.

But the people in charge of granting money to civic groups stress that funds are for constructive projects and not for organizing demonstrations for so-called systemic change.32

In the 1985 piece, Andrezewski eulogizes the era he was instrumental in covering, touching on the issues of funds drying up, burnout, and competition from development corporations. He ends with this lament:
The problems remain. But how long will Cleveland’s banks keep full-time ‘neighborhoods’ executives around, now that there is less and less pressure on them? How long will they respect the concept of inner city reinvestment?

And how long will it be before insurance companies once again start offering only partial coverage at high rates for homeowners in the city?

How long will it be before the mayor and councilmen do nothing but obtain city services and neighborhood improvements only for their cronies and political front groups? And no longer join community groups fighting powerful institutions that trample neighborhoods and neighborhood people?

One reason Cleveland declined so horrendously in the early 1970s was because of the very apathy that apparently has reappeared. Beginning in the 1960s, few cared about neighborhoods or the welfare of neighborhood people, not even they themselves. Our city almost fell apart from decay, racial tension and the Ralph Perk/George Forbes years at city hall.

Unless people in the city once again push hard to make themselves and their issues noticed, we’ll all be headed for the same despair.