

Blue Island, IL Back in the Day ...

Frank Kasten – Blue Island's 8th Mayor

From The Keyboard Of Joe Gatrell

On this day in history - January 13, 1878 - Frank Kasten was born in Riverdale. Mr. Kasten would live in Blue Island for 66 of his 68 years, serve as president of a national labor union, and become the eighth mayor in city history.

Louis and Caroline Gese Kasten moved to Blue Island during 1880. Frank Kasten grew up here, and he dropped out of school at the age of 14 to go to work for the Illinois Brick Company. Mr. Kasten reportedly was a hardworking and popular man, certainly a good speaker. By 1907, he had been elected president of Local 3 of the Brick and Clay Makers of America.

Larry Ricchio ~ don't ring a bell, where he lived, at that time the union was a necessity a honest days work for an honest days pay, like they say absolute power corrupts the Unions were born in Chicago a City synonymous w/ Corruption

JG ~ During 1907, Frank Kasten purchased the house at 2359 DesPlaines Street, where he lived the rest of his life. In 1914, he married Margaret Morford. In 1917, he was elected president of the Brick and Clay Makers of America.

Larry Ricchio ~ My grandfather worked there in that era, interested in knowing the correlation to the haymarket riots and Pullman timewise

JG ~ Until the Great Depression, the Brick and Clay Makers of America had a large membership. According to the Sun-Standard, 600 BCMA lived in the Blue Island area. Besides Illinois Brick, other brick makers included Purington, Tuthill, and the Frank Alsip yard.

JG ~ If you grew up in Blue Island from the 1940s until the 1970s, you remember the clay holes at 123rd Street. Together they were known as Yard 22. Oldtimers remember the huge clayhole at 119th Street that was open from Wood Street to Ashland and almost to 123rd Street to the south. It was Yard 17. In one of the worst deals in Blue Island city/political history, during 1941 Illinois Brick was allowed to begin filling Yard 17 with garbage.

Darlene Zick ~ Saller My great uncle operated a steamshovel in the clayhole in BI and my father worked and retired from (BI) Illinois Brick. He was a boiler engineers.

JG ~ While Frank Kasten was not a career politician, he was a blue collar man of the people. He was a man everyone seemed to identify with. Because of his position and personality, he went from the brick yard to the top of the slate of the Greater Blue Island Party. Frank Kasten narrowly defeated Millard A. Rauhauf in what the Sun-Standard referred to as "the dirtiest election in Blue Island history" in April, 1929.

JG ~ Mayor Kasten may have served during the worst era of Blue Island. Almost immediately, he was confronted by the controversy known as "the Negro Invasion" when a realtor named John Robinson threatened to sell a large tract of land to an African American unless his demand of rezoning was met. The controversy dragged on for months.

JG ~ Just six months into his first term, America was thrown into the Great Depression. The city's bank balances were in the plus at that point, but they were not flush. By the time Mayor Kasten left office in 1935, the city would be over \$100,000 in debt. That may not seem like much now, but at that time it was a huge sum and an embarrassment for a community that prided itself on paying its bills.

JG ~ The previous two issues were made worse by the group of aldermen who served under Mayor Kasten. They were not decision makers. Instead they argued, waived on issues, and failed to provide solutions to problems, especially money problems. Perhaps the aldermen were spoiled by the previous mayor, Paul T. Klenk, who was a dynamic authority. Mayor Klenk provided ideas and solutions and led the city council. Mayor Kasten was not a strong leader. He shared authority and decision making with his aldermen. This turned out to be a failed initiative.

JG ~ Frank Kasten was elected mayor twice more, in 1931 and 1933. This may have been because the electorate was fearful of change during a desperate era. Ultimately, problems with the police force, not finance, did in Mayor Kasten. He was defeated in 1935 by another very popular man, Fred Rice, a career postal service employee who was known as "the whistling mailman."

JG ~ Frank Kasten never again sought public office. He continued to serve as a union leader. In his final years, he was plagued by heart problems. Mr. Kasten died of a massive heart attack on December 12, 1946 at his home on Des Plaines Street. He was listening to the radio in his bedroom in the upstairs of his home. His daughter Gertrude heard a thud, rushed upstairs, and found Frank Kasten on the floor. Death was instantaneous. Frank Kasten's final earthly resting place is Mount Greenwood Cemetery.

David Steinhart ~ Another great post thanks for the history

Dick Isler ~ My mother's maiden name was Kasten, born and raised in Midlothian. The old house at 145th and Crawford is long gone. My maternal grandfather was Fred Kasten, I am not aware of any relation, I will have my daughter check it out on ancestry.com. On a side note, there is a Kasten street in Mendocino CA. I asked a local storeowner what the story was and she said it was named AFTER "the old German" who came ashore in the 1980's and settled in.

Dick Isler ~ Correction, I meant to write 1880's, possibly earlier.

George Lamore ~ Once again Joe great story about Blue Islands history

JG ~ Frank Kasten Jr., who grew up in Blue Island, served in the military and became a detective with the police department in Palm Beach. During the early 1960s, he foiled a plot to assassinate JFK there.

Larry Ricchio Now that rings a bell!!

JG ~ In 1969, Frank Kasten Jr. succeeded Art Schaller as police chief of Blue Island. Her served in that capacity until 1972, when Mayor Withers appointed Harry Harczak to the position.

JG ~ Mr. Kasten Jr. always was known as a gun enthusiast. As a young man, he frequented the target range that was on the second floor of City Hall, where the American Legion also had its headquarters. During one memorable visit when Frank Kasten Jr. was using a Spanish revolver, the gun blew up in his hand. Fortunately, no one was injured by the flying shrapnel.

JG ~ After he left BIPD, Mr. Kasten Jr. worked for Frank Neldon at the Blue Island Gun Shop.

Bob Neldon I knew that....lol, and so did his son.