

# Tremont History Project remembers the Thanksgiving Day High School Football Classic



*By the Tremont History Project*

This story is a history lesson for those too young to remember, and is a fond memory for those old enough to know of those years. It includes tales of a powerful Lincoln High School football team that dominated for a few years during the early days of World War II.

'The Charity Game', as it was called, was designed as a one-time-only event in 1931 to raise money to bring some much needed holiday joy and basic necessities to the poor and the needy struggling during the Great Depression. The organizers realized that first game was a huge hit and it's ability to raise money for charity was limitless. It started a Thanksgiving tradition in Cleveland that would become the single biggest sporting event in the city's history.

From 1931 to the final game in 1968, more than 1.3 million high school football fans would begin their Thanksgiving holiday by taking in one of the best high school football games of the season. The Charity Game set every attendance record for high school football in the state of Ohio, and in 1946 hosted the second largest crowd ever to watch a high school football game in the U. S. Hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised for the needy.

From the start of the "The Senate" League and the city of Cleveland league around 1905, the East Side teams dominated area high school football. WWI and the 1918 flu epidemic took its toll on high school football.

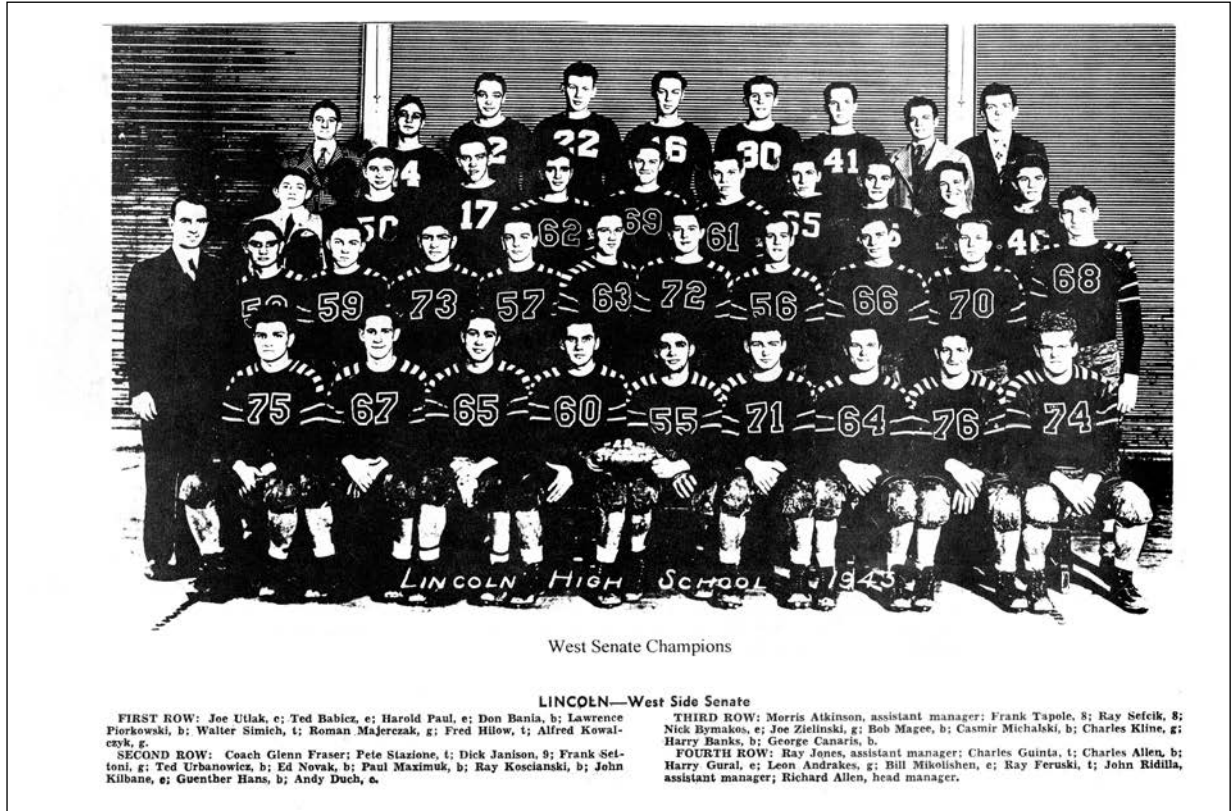
The first Charity Game was held on Saturday, Nov. 28, 1931, was sponsored by The Plain Dealer and benefitted its Give-a-Christmas Fund, and was played by the two leading teams from the various high school football leagues around the Cleveland area. The first two teams to play were Central High School from the Senate League and Cathedral Latin from the Catholic League. Latin won the game by a score of 18 - 0. In the process Latin won the Cleveland interscholastic football championship of 1931. Net revenues from the game came to \$8,220.25 which went to charity.

In 1933 ANY team in Cuyahoga County would be eligible to play in the Charity Game. The East Side teams also dominated the Charity Game whether they were the Catholic League or the Senate League or other. In the early 1930's there were ties when two trophies had to be given. In 1937 the Senate was divided into East Side and West Side League plus the four Catholic High Schools joined the Senate League along with Rhodes, John Marshall and John Hay. The game would be played on the Saturday after Thanksgiving for the next 15 years. Cathedral Latin in 1938 had won their third Charity Game and third outright city championship in the last eight years.

1940 marked the 10-year anniversary of the Charity Game. As mentioned earlier, the East Side teams dominated mainly because most of the people in the city lived there so the teams had more students from which to draw, and they tended to have better coaches.

Lincoln High School, a competitive team since the middle 1930's was knocking on the door. In 1941, coach Glen Fraser's Lincoln team did not have a regular gridiron to practice on so practiced on a field under the Clark Avenue bridge. The team had to clear the field of rocks, tin cans, broken glass and had to cut what grass there was in order to give themselves a decent place to practice.

Lincoln High made it to the Charity game against a tough Collinwood team. It was reported to be a very exciting game, but ended in a 12 - 12 tie, leaving both Lincoln and Collinwood as Cleveland's co-champions. A West Side school still had yet to reign alone as the city's top team. In 1942 the Lincoln Presidents would again assert their dominance and take the next big step. The 1942 Charity Game would be a rematch of the 1941 city title game. Both were undefeated. The game ended with a 26 - 0 Lincoln victory. This time they were all alone at the top. They were the first west side team to win a Charity Game in the 12-year history of the event. Collinwood was held to only 22 net yards of offense (all-time low in the 39-year history of the Charity Game) and they completed only three of 18 pass attempts. Its 11 net yards rushing was also an all-time Charity Game low.



In 1943 Lincoln's opponent in the Charity Game was Cathedral Latin. Lincoln's 29 straight games without a loss broke the old Cleveland record of 27 in a row set by the East High teams of 1905-1909. Cathedral Latin's amazing record in the city championship games remained in tact. They won over Lincoln by 18 - 12. The Cathedral Latin 1944 team was even more dominant as they met a tremendous and excellent Lincoln team again in the Charity Game. This year Latin won by 33 - 0.

Lincoln High continued to dominate the West Side League. The Charity Games were held on Thanksgiving Day, the changing times of the 1960's and the downtown area, the drop in attendance, viewing on TV of college games, move to the suburbs and out of Cleveland schools, combining of schools (Lincoln and West High, etc.), and various additional reasons caused the end of the Charity Game.