1977

The Jose Gasparilla and Pirates: Tampa's Own Buccaneer

Evanell K. Powell

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol3/iss1/3

This Research Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunland Tribune by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
Was Jose Gaspar, a real person of history or is he only a legend? This question can garner lively discussions among the natives. A history\(^1\) states that a diary of Gaspar’s first 12 years as a pirate of the high seas resides in archives in Madrid, Spain—making this another first and only—a diary written by a pirate. Mr. Lambright quotes liberally from the written exploits. Yet one account\(^2\) (obviously fictitious) makes reference to the hanging of Gaspar from an oak tree in the downtown streets of Tampa.

Fact or fiction? Regardless, the legend lives and is briefly told on a historical marker near the boat slip that houses the modern
day ship complete to busty figurehead at the Tarpon docks on Bayshore Drive.

The June 1969 Popular Science magazine shows a map listing the only sunken treasure vessel between Cedar Key and the lower Keys as the frigate Gasparillo 2nd sunk in 1821 on reefs 4 miles off the south tip of Soldier’s Key in 12 fathoms of water. There is reputedly $1,000,000 aboard seized by the hijacking pirate. Under Florida law any recoveries of artifacts or money must be reported and a 25% share belongs to the state. Is this the legendary Gaspar’s vessel sunk by the USS Enterprise with Lt. L. Kearney in command? And did Gaspar jump overboard with a chain around his waist to weight him as reported by the other pirates who were taken prisoner and brought to trial for their misdeeds?
Only Working Pirate Ship

Nonetheless today, the only working pirate ship in the world resides at its dockside Tampa berth year round except for the towaway period prior to the yearly invasion by the pirate band of modern day followers of Jose Gaspar which are in reality prominent social and civic leaders of the area.

In 1904 a May festival was inaugurated which was the forerunner of the modern day Gasparilla parade. They captured the town on horseback with the king riding in a carriage dressed in rich colorful robes and masked to conceal his identity. At that first parade an imposter, George Fuchs, chosen by the king himself, rode in the parade as King Edward of the house of Gunby, with few the wiser as to the deception. The rightful ruler did not appear personally until the Royal Ball the following night.

The first ball and parade was an instant success. Captain George Hardee and his Krewe worked hard. The first change was to move the festivities from May to coincide with the Florida State Fair then held in November. The second parade saw the first automation with three cars participating, however it was 1913 before the entire parade was mechanized. Still today the parade captains ride horses.

The First Invasion

The Gasparilla event has been continuous except for 1907, 08 and 09, and the World War years. 1911 witnessed the first invasion by boat. However it was not until 1953 that...
the Krewe had built their own flagship, a replica of a West Indianman such as was used by the 18th century pirates, making it the only ship ever built in modern times for exclusively piratical purposes.

Today's parade and events of the swashbuckling renegades is a gigantic extravaganza. The parade winds through the downtown area, around Bayshore Drive with floats, bands, pirates shooting their guns -with blanks but noisy nonetheless -plus a cannon atop one of the pirates own floats. The local festivities begin with the hoisting of the Jolly Roger over City Hall and demanding the city's surrender by the Mayor to Gaspar and his men.

The Ybor City Navy next invades and captures the U.S. Navy vessels in port to prevent their defense of Tampa Bay. This additional event of over two decades is now joined by the Ybor City Army and Air Force. A nine star admiral leads his group from the SS Ybor and brandishes loaves of Cuban bread hoists the colors of the Ybor City Alcaldessa aboard the captured ships while also awarding their prey the gifts of cigars and black beans, Cuban bread and Italian wine.

Three years ago, after completion of the Cross-town Expressway the pirate vessel
could no longer go under the bridge, so nowadays a royal float transports the guests and royalty to the river side of Curtis Hixon Hall. An honor guard stands at attention while they debark and receive the keys to Tampa from the mayor.

**Ybor City Night Parade**

The public events culminate with the night Ybor City parade which is preceded by an afternoon of feasting on 1500 gallons Spanish bean soup along with cafe con leche and 125 yards of Cuban bread all prepared the day before the free street treat for the Pirate Fiesta Day in Tampa’s Latin Quarter. The parade, marking its 31st year in-1978, is dazzling with its lighted floats. The night parade has been headed by the Sant Yago Krewe since its formation in 1971 thereby adding more balls and festivities to the busy week. The Sant Yago King and Queen float is joined by the Gasparilla parade floats, and is the first time the newly crowned rulers make their appearance. 1965 saw the last pirate band depart amid fireworks and fanfare aboard the pirate ship. Nowadays the last public appearance is the Saturday night parade followed later by a private closing ball.

**Gasparilla Royalty**

Election to the court of Gasparilla has always been a highly regarded social honor of time. The balloting is secret. The young ladies of the court are selected from the list of Gasparilla, debutantes while the courtiers are elected from a list compiled of young bachelors of the Krewe. The king is selected from a nominated group of prominent businessmen of the Krewe. This honor replaced the King’s election from among the younger Krewe members. Aside from the honor, the king also is a visiting emissary from Tampa to varied festivals throughout the, country, and it was found that many younger men establishing their careers could neither take time away from their jobs to make the trip nor had the income to afford the many functions etc., for which the king is host.

The Queen’s election has altered less. From 1932 until the resumption of the festival after the war, the queen was elected from the four maids of the prior year except in 1935 when all four maids married prior to the election date hence disqualifying themselves.

The balls are lavish employing varied themes throughout the years. It was not until 1923 that the first imported orchestra came for the coronation ball which in subsequent years Rudy Vallee, Paul Whiteman, Eddie Duchin, Peter Duchin, Xavier Cugat, and other big names have played for the dancing and enjoyment of the buccaneers and their ladies.

**The Lost Crown**

The Queens’ crowns are now the gift of the Krewe for the Queen. Many of them are loaned every year so they may, be, viewed at the Historical Commission exhibit (Court House) of Gasparilla memorabilia. The crown of Mary Lee Douglas (Mrs. W. L. Ligat), the first Queen of the Krewe, was handmade by George Hardee and Georgia Towmey, Sr. It was of cardboard covered with gold paper, pearls appearing at the top were in reality hatpins. It is said that the two men sat up all night assembling this creation.

The only other untoward event was the loss of the 1941 Queen’s crown by Ruth Binnicker Swann (now Mrs. Jack Eckerd) as she started on the float for the parade—which at that time formed near old Memorial
Highway. A search in the grass did not turn up the missing headpiece. It was not until 1952 that the lost crown reappeared and was returned to the Krewe.

The rogue himself is enshrined in death as never in life. Aside from the festival and Krewe bearing his name -along with their pirate ship -he also has a statue erected to him at Guernsey City on the shores of Tampa Bay. This was the first, if not only, city to have such a monument.

At Winter Park, Rollins College Walk of Fame has a Gasparilla pirate stone from Boca Grande which was one of the chain of islands near Captiva and Sanibel where Gaspar and other pirates held their captives.

So, who’s the Jose Gaspar that gave Gasparilla its name? Is he Fact or Fiction? In truth the F stands for fun and frolic for Tampans as well as promoting Tampa to tourists. See you there Monday Feb. 13, 1978.

1  Gasparilla-Last of the Buccaneers, Edwin Lambright, 1936

2  South Florida: Its Builders and Its Industries, 1924 published by The Tampa Daily Times