The Cigar That Sparked A Revolution

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By TONY PIZZO

CIGAR OF LIBERTY

The “Cigar of Liberty” made in Tampa carried the “Message to Gomez” that sparked the flames of revolution. For years, this cigar stood as the symbol of friendship and goodwill between Tampa and Cuba.

- Sketch by Rodolpho Pena Mora

Millions of Tampa cigars have gone out into the world as ambassadors-of-good-will to be smoked into puffs of fantasies, but the most famous cigar ever rolled in Tampa went out, not as a Corona or a Queen, but as a liberator to spark the Cuban Revolution of 1895. This cigar cost thousands of lives, but won independence for Cuba.

American school children, when studying the Spanish-American War, learn about "A Message to Garcia," but the school children of Cuba, when studying the history of the Cuban Insurrection of 1895, are taught of a more important message: "A Message to Gomez."

FEBRUARY 24, 1895, the date picked by the Cuban conspirators in Havana to launch the "War Cry - Viva Cuba Libre." The date coincided with the traditional carnival celebrations, and the Spanish authorities certainly would be caught off guard.
The story of the cigar that went to war starts Jan. 29, 1895, at the residence of Gonzalo De Quesada, secretary of the Cuban Revolutionary Party in New York City. Jose Marti, the leader of the Cuban crusade for freedom, called a secret meeting of the revolutionary *junta* at the Quesada home. Present were General Jose Maria (Mayia) Rodriguez, representing Generalisimo Maximo Gomez, and General Enrique Collazo, representing the Revolutionary Junta of Havana. Among the Cuban patriots taking part in the historic *junta* was Emilio Cordero, who in later years would become a prominent leader in the cigar industry of America marketing his popular brand-Mi *Hogar*. Cordero was late arriving at the meeting, and found the *junta* was stalemated on the decision of whether or not to launch a revolt on the...
island. Cordero was faced with the most serious decision of his life. After much soul searching he broke the tie vote by voting for war and gained immortality.

**UPRISING ORDERED**

"In view of the propitious situation and the clamoring of the islanders to take the field," Marti, Rodriguez and Collazo signed the long awaited order for the uprising. With the momentous decision made, the dangerous mission of delivering the order to the Cuban leaders was the next task at hand.

The historic document was written in longhand on a single piece of white paper. Quesada, with the message in his pocket, booked passage on the first train for Ybor City, the center of Cuban revolutionary activities. On the train, Quesada met Horatio Rubens, an American attorney serving as advisor to the Cuban Revolutionary Party, and he confided: "I am sleeping on dynamite! I have the orders for the uprising! They will go by messenger to Havana."

At the Ybor city railroad station, Quesada was met by Fernando Figueredo, the chief of the *partido* (party) in Ybor City, Theodore Perez, Martin Herrera, the brothers Blas and Estanislao O'Halloran and other Cuban patriots.

**NEST OF INSURGENTS**

Ybor City, the new and promising cigar center, had become a nest of insurgents. These
cigarmakers were red hot rebels ardently supporting the cause of Cuban independence. Each week they contributed one day’s pay Dia de La Patria for the purchase of war material. Many guerilla-fighters were out-fitted and sneaked into Cuba from here.

Quesada conferred with local leaders on means of smuggling the message into Cuba. Someone suggested concealing it in a cigar. Late one night, a few members of the local revolutionary junta met at the O'Halloran Cigar Factory and Blas O'Halloran rolled five Panetela cigars—all identical. The one concealing the message, the historic "Cigar of Liberty," was distinguishable by two tiny yellow specks on the tobacco wrapper.

Juan Gualberto Gomez was a mulatto intellectual, educated in Paris, and a fervent Cuban patriot. Gomez received the memorable message, and spearheaded the Cuban uprising of 1895.

Blas O'Halloran was the Tampan who made the historic cigar that concealed the famous "Message to Gomez."

Juan Gualberto Gomez

Blas O'Halloran

THIS CHAVETA, often called a tobacco knife or Cuban blade, was used in making the cigar which concealed the message which sparked the Cuban Revolution of 1895. The revolver was given to Jose Marti by Generalismo Maximo Gomez for protection in the event he was attacked. Marti disliked carrying firearms, and gave the gun, as well as a diamond ring and pocketknife to his close friend in Tampa, Atanislao Fernandez O'Halloran.

-Courtesy of SORIANO FAMILY
The tobacco-knife, also known as a Cuban-blade, (Chaveta) used in making the cigar was owned by a cigarmaker named Jose Contada. The chaveta is now in the possession of Mrs. Rosario O'Halloran Soriano, the daughter of Estanislao O'Halloran. She also has in her possession a pistol and a ring Marti had given to her father.

**MOONLIGHT NIGHT**

A few days later, Quesada, with the five Panetelas well concealed on his person, sailed for Key West. There he was met by Miguel Angel Duque De Estrada, the man chosen to deliver the message to Juan Gualberto Gomez, the insurgent chief of the island of Cuba. On the moonlit night of February 21, 1895, Estrada, with the cigars in his coat pocket, boarded the Mascotte for the seething island. Arriving at the port of Havana, the courier calmly proceeded through routine customs inspection and passed out four cigars to authorities of the port. Estrada, holding the "loaded cigar" in his mouth, pretended to light it. He puffed several times, but the cigar refused to stay lit. Then he picked up his luggage and walked away into history.

Soon, the very valuable cigar was safely delivered to Gomez in Habana. He loses no time in his role in the conspiracy, and called a meeting at the residence of Antonio Lopez Coloma, 74 Trocadero in Havana. The order for the uprising called for a date to be set not earlier than the second fortnight in February. Gomez and his fellow conspirators, which included Lopez Coloma, Dr. Pedro Betancourt, Julio Sanguily, and Jose Maria Aguirre, agree on February 24th as the date for the uprising-el grito de Guerra! This date fell on a Sunday, and was the beginning of the traditional carnival celebrations. During this time of fiesta, the Spanish authorities would be engaged in high revelry. Gomez sent a wire to Gonzalo de Quesada in New York saying, "Draft accepted," and signed "Arturo," signifying that all was ready to start la lucha (the struggle).

On the morning of February 24, 1895, the rebel war-cry "Viva la, Independencia!" "Viva Cuba Libre!" electrified the island, and the Cuban people embarked on their final struggle against Spanish domination. The five "gritos" were heard at Ibarra, Jaguey Grande, Bayate, Guantanamo and Baire. The uprising at Ibarra was lead by Juan Gualberto Gomez and Antonio Lopez Coloma.

The Ibarra revolt failed and Gomez and Coloma were captured by the Spanish. Gomez was banished to Ceuta, the Spanish penal colony in Africa, and Coloma, facing death with valor, was executed before a firing squad at the Fortaleza de la Cabana. A few months later, Jose Marti, the soul of the revolution, was killed at Dos Rios. General Antonio Maceo, the dashing mulatto chieftain, died before the gates of Havana. The revolution continued. Cuba was aflame.

**REMEMBER THE MAINE!**

In 1898 the battleship Maine exploded while anchored in the harbor of Havana, and the United States declared war on Spain. "Teddy" Roosevelt, his Rough Riders, and General Maximo Gomez, with his gallant Mambises went on to victory and immortality. The Cubans finally attained their Cuba Libre.

For many years, until Fidel Castro suspended the festivities, the Cubans continued to celebrate Los Carnavales on February 24th, recalling the Tampa cigar which broke the chain of oppression, while the sentimental smokers of Ybor City, with a penchant for the sobriquet, called for "A Message to Gomez" when purchasing a cigar, honoring the cigar of liberty.