1980

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This article was presented in a slightly different form at the First Annual Mayor’s Breakfast on the City of Tampa’s 93rd Birthday Anniversary, July 15, 1980.

WHAT HAPPENED IN TAMPA ON JULY 15, 1887 OR THEREABOUTS

By JOSEPH HIPP

Council Chambers
City of Tampa, Fla.
July 15, 1887

The newly elected council of the city of Tampa convened this afternoon at 3 o’clock whereupon the members were duly qualified by His Honor George B. Sparkman, Mayor. The first business in order being the election of a President. Councilmen Harrison and Biglow were placed in
nomination for that position. A vote was taken, and Councilman Harrison having received a majority of votes cast was declared duly elected. The Council then adjourned until 7:30 o'clock Monday evening, July 18th.¹

Approved July 18th, 1887
H. L. Knight
President pro. tem².

Attest:
(signed) Lamont S. Bailey
City Clerk

The above notice in the City Clerk’s notebook for 1887 attests to the statement that appears on the City seal: "Organized, July 15, 1887. This isolated fact does little to give a picture of life as it was in 1887. What I hope to do here is to introduce you to the "old" Tampa of 1887 and show the similarities that we can see today in 1980. In order to do this I have had to rely heavily upon contemporary newspaper accounts for the flavor, and what was the concern of men and women in this bygone era.

Tampa was buzzing. About this time Tampa was given a new lease on life - the second charter was granted to the City of Tampa and Tampa's new age of prosperity was about to begin.

To set the record straight, the bill that granted Tampa a new charter was approved by the Governor on June 2, 1887.³ Section 5 of the charter provided for a city-wide election, for the Mayor, 11 Councilmen and the other City officials, and it was to be held on the second

TAMPA A SLEEPY HORSE-AND-BUGGY TOWN IN THE 1880s
- from HAMPTON DUNN COLLECTION
Tuesday in July (July 12, 1887). The new charter also greatly expanded the corporate limits of the city. Tampa now took in North Tampa, Ybor City and even some land on the west side of the Hillsborough River.4

**Other Efforts**

There have been at least two other efforts made to organize the city, but they did not succeed in giving the city a continuous form of government. The town was first organized
in 1855, but that effort ended in bankruptcy for the city. Another effort at organization was recorded on a seal that Theodore Lesley found among his grandfather’s papers. This was the second organization dated August 11, 1878. I have not been able to find any record of this attempt, so I am calling the date July 15, 1887 the second charter date for Tampa.

Tampa had 895 registered voters in 1887 and the *Tampa Journal* reported that only 575 of these men exercised their opinion - only 64%! The *Journal* reported on the election as follows:

As a public servant, the *Journal* would be derelict in its duty if it passed over some of the irregularities and disgraceful occurrences of Tuesday’s election without calling attention to them. It was such an election as we hope never again to see in Tampa. For two or three days before the election, whiskey was dispensed free by some of the saloons. On election day the streets were lined with drunken men; the most obscene, vulgar and profane language could be heard, not only in the streets, but in the room in which the election was held. Frequent rows and fights occurred, and during the entire day and night a drunken and riotous mob held possession of the town. Such a state of affairs are a disgrace to an intelligent and civilized community, and the *Journal* desires to place itself on record as being opposed to any such proceedings. We denounce the buying of votes by any man, either with money or whiskey; we do not
believe in coercion or intimidation, and we call upon the respectable, law-abiding and intelligent citizens of Tampa to see to it that the like does not happen again.5

Mr. Sparkman was elected as the new Mayor by 14 votes. So much for the election. The new Mayor did not need to concern himself with a job description. The Journal did this for him and for his officers as well.

July 14: Many things have been promised by the newly elected Mayor - and many reforms are hoped for. There are two or three things to which the Journal desires to direct His Honor’s special attention. One is the closing of the saloons of Sundays - back and side doors as well as the front doors. There can be no disproving the assertion that the law has been shamefully violated in this matter. All that is necessary to close these places effectually on Sunday is for the policemen to do their duty.6

Incidentally - the Journal also had an extra part-time job for the city’s 10 policemen. Since the crime rate wasn’t very high - the policemen could also serve as sanitary inspectors. The Litter Bug Patrol if you will. But to get back to the Mayor’s job. The Journal as continued:

Another important matter that demands prompt and aggressive attention to the city’s officials is the houses of ill-fame and their occupants. There are several of these vile dens within the corporate limits of the city; that they are exerting a most demoralizing and pernicious influence on the community, there can be no question; young men - often mere boys, are being enticed from the path of virtue and started on the downward road to shame, disgrace, disease and hell; their very life-blood is being sapped by these degraded and fallen creatures. The boldness and brazen effrontery exhibited by these women is already notorious and shameful. Almost any hour of the day or night they can be seen either walking or driving through the streets, visiting the saloons and making themselves generally conspicuous. Something must be done to check this growing evil for the sake of the boys as well as the girls.7

Mayor Sparkman had many problems to contend with. The ones mentioned above are minor to some others that are apparent in reading in-between-the-lines of the Journal editorials. Tampa had a very strong Women’s Christian Temperance Union, a periodic yellow-fever watch and a crusading editor of the Journal, who thought of himself as being just a notch below the Deity in importance. Let us look at each persuasive element separately.

WCTU Well Organized

The WCTU was well organized in Tampa. These ladies even had a chapter in Ybor City!

They did all sorts of good things for the city of Tampa - like providing a lending library with a reading room for the citizens. They also sponsored theatrical programs at Branch’s Opera House. On June 9th, they put on the play, TEN NIGHTS IN A BAR ROOM. I am sure it had the desired effect on the audience.

Their presence was also felt east of town. A new recreation area for Tampans was being built one and one-half miles east of Ybor City. To quote the Journal:
Just now, Spanish Park, located on Gavino Gutierrez's place, on Tampa Bay is attracting the attention of pleasure lovers of both Tampa and Ybor City. It is described as the most beautiful place and promises to become a popular resort ... The park contains over 160 acres, and it is the intention of Mr. Gutierrez to establish a zoological garden; salt water baths, a carousel, swings, race tracks, and a dancing pavilion is also on the program – and everything will be completed by next fall. The Spanish Park Casino has already been organized - and a club house will soon be erected for the reception of visitors; also a boat house. A first-class restaurant will soon be in operation from which refreshments - ice cream, fruits, temperance drinks, etc. will be sold.

Friends we now have Hawaiian Punch at Busch Gardens. Race tracks and gambling casinos are O.K. - but don't corrupt our citizens with hard liquor!

**Yellow Fever 'Season'**

Yellow fever, as I mentioned, was on everybody's mind during the "season" - which lasted from March to October of each year. During the warm months - any outbreak of yellow fever in Key West, Havana or Tampa's neighboring port cities was a real threat to Tampa. A notice in the June 9th Journal reads as follows:

The Board of Health has established quarantine camps on Ballast Point where all passengers from Key West, Havana, or other infected ports will be held for 15 days. The Plant Investment Company furnished the tents, cots, etc., and will establish telephone connections with the station and Tampa. Should cases of fever break out a physician will go there and remain until all is well again.

All the comforts of home - cots - tents - mosquitos -The National Guard never had it so good - but these were business people and tourists!

Originally the Board of Health wanted to make Tampa off-limits to Key West and Havana for six months of the year - but fortunately this unwieldy restraint of trade was not acceptable to the business community of Tampa.

**Fearless Editor**

Yellow fever was a real threat - and one notice in the journal will put the panic of the people in the right perspective. June 16:

Only one death in Tampa since Lord only knows when, and that occurred last Sunday. It was a mule. It should be dangerous for Jacksonville to lift their quarantine against Tampa yet awhile.

We have seen some evidence of the last problem mentioned - the editorials of the Tampa Journal under the editorship of Mr. H. J. Cooper. Mr. Cooper was a fearless advocate of law and order, the WCTU and clean streets. According to him Tampa was sinking in the muck and mire of its own garbage - and it was the drunken litter bugs that were to blame. March 2nd: "Sanitary Work". We read:

The town at present is not in proper condition. Many privies and backyards are disgraceful to say the least - Why is it? Simply because those whose duty it is to look after this matter have neglected their work - and no official has the nerve to compel the work to be
done. The Scavenger is not diligent and is unreliable.

LAZY BUZZARDS?¹¹

He goes on:

The police whose duty it is to look after violations and report the same to the proper officials simply do nothing. You can find the whole work force lounging along the saloon block at any time half asleep.¹²

I did not read of any murders or burglaries or holdups at that time. The people must have been too busy littering.'

All the town’s business was the Journal’s business. Mr. Plant was getting ready to build his new hotel - and we read on May 12th:

Our citizens will be pleased to know that the big hotel project is making progress. However, the active work is being done by the people on the west side of the river and the present indications are that the building will be erected on the Hayden site. The main reason why the hotel cannot be built on this side of the river is because the land is too valuable to waste in such a manner. The idea of giving up two blocks and covering them with a $150,000 hotel is simply absurd to the minds of some people. It is considered better to let them stand vacant and grow luxuriant crops of dog-fennel, sweet potatoes, etc. The Journal congratulates the people of the west side on their public spirit as well as their prospects. In benefitting themselves so greatly - Tampa proper cannot fail to reap largely from the enterprise, and it is our duty to assist in every possible way in securing the great tourist hotel, even across the river.¹³

The real estate in Tampa proper was far too valuable for any enterprise such as a grand hotel and the surrounding landscaped grounds. Nothing backward about us. Next month the mountain came to Mohammed - courtesy of the State Legislature - because the hotel site became part of the city!

Mr. Cooper also took on small foes. July 14th:

OBITUARY NOTICE-Died July 14th, 1887-Tampa Brass Band of a sudden attack of great expectations. It was consigned to oblivion amid the groans of the populace. "No need for iron or tablet here - to say to us thou wert too dear."¹⁴

Obviously, Tampa was not just a parade of militant WCTU ladies, crackpot editors and policemen who lounged in front of the saloons. Incidentally there was a fire on "Rotten Row," where the saloons were, in August, and some 30 businesses and residences went up in smoke - including four of the five saloons. Perhaps we had some early urban renewal by design.¹⁵

Fantastic Growth

Tampa, between the years 1880 and 1890 increased in size from 720 to 5,532 souls - a fantastic 668%. Tampa could boast of a philharmonic society, and orchestra, an opera house, two bands, several benevolent societies, a convent, five different white protestant churches, three black churches, a Catholic church, two (or seven) newspapers and a Board of Trade.

The blacks in the community were in evidence in the paper. They had a literary society that...
met every Monday night - their own skating rink - and they were making plans to celebrate their own holiday - Emancipation Day, May 20th, complete with bands and floats.16

The tone of the day was optimism - and we can see this reflected in what we are doing today. The inflationary times are hitting many cities but Tampa has people with foresight and a new city is rising out of the construction dust of the old. And that is the lesson we have learned when Tampa received her charter 93 years ago.

And that - ladies and gentlemen was the way it was on July 15, 1887.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TAMPA!

SOURCES

Laws of Florida 1887 - Chapter 3779

U. S. Census 1960 Florida Table 5.

Webb’s Tampa Directory 1886

The Sunland Tribune, Vol. 11, No. 1, October 1975

Tampa Weekly Journal - May 25, 1887

June 9, 1887

June 16, 1887

July 14, 1887

August 4, 1887

NOTES

1 Reel 5, Minutes of Council 1857-1895.


3 LAWS OF FLORIDA, 1887 ch. 3779 - (no. 99).

4 The 1887 annexation shading on the map will give you an idea of how Tampa had almost quadrupled in size from the 1853 townsite. The Tampa Weekly Journal, July 14, 1887, p. 1.


6 Ibid

7 Ibid

8 Tampa Weekly Journal, May 12, 1887.

9 Tampa Weekly Journal, June 9, 1887.

10 Tampa Weekly Journal, June 16, 1887.

11 I have since found out that the “scavenger” was a paid employee of the city, a refuse collector.

12 Tampa Weekly Journal, March 2, 1887.

13 Tampa Weekly Journal, May 12, 1887.

14 Tampa Weekly Journal, July 14, 1887.

15 Tampa Weekly Journal, August 4, 1887.