1981

Ybor City Historian Emilio Del Rio Dies

Dick Burdette

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

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol7/iss1/15
YBOR CITY HISTORIAN
EMILIO DEL RIO DIES

HE DIDN’T DIE UNTIL YBOR
CITY’S HISTORY WAS SECURE

Reprinted From
ORLANDO SENTINEL-STAR
Aug. 16, 1981

By DICK BURDETT

TAMPA - I wish I could have been there. I wish I could have seen the look on the old man’s face.

Not that he could have seen anything. The old man was blind and pushing 90 and so frail and in such poor health, sometimes they just didn’t know how he kept going.

Perhaps it was the dream that made him cling so tenaciously to life. Perhaps that’s why, shortly after he attended the long-awaited opening of the State-operated Ybor City historical museum, Emilio Del Rio died.

20-YEAR PASSION

For more than 20 years, it was Emilio Del Rio’s passion, this idea of preserving a portion of Ybor City’s colorful past in the form of a museum.

A couple of years ago, on a hot, muggy weekday afternoon, Emilio Del Rio sat in his cool, neat, modest bungalow on this city’s east side, near the Republica de Cuba, and talked about relics and keepsakes and mementos of days gone by.

Like thousands of people who live, or once lived, in this historic Cuban-Spanish-Italian settlement, Emilio Del Rio was proud of Ybor City - and not without good reason. It was Emilio Del Rio’s father, Antonio Del Rio, who along with Jose Martinez Ybor
and Jose Santo, founded Ybor City in 1886.

**A DEED OF 1886**

And if anybody doubted it, hanging on the wall of Emilio Del Rio’s living room was an original deed - page 11, book no. 1 and dated Dec. 16, 1886.

It wasn’t, by any stretch of the imagination, the only relic adorning Emilio Del Rio’s home. On another wall hung a "Graham Bell" - one of the first-ever telephones in town. In another room was an upright Edison phonograph, and a bunch of cylinder-shaped records.

The place was a storehouse of photographs - irreplaceable photographs of Ybor City landmarks, personalities. Of Gasparilla parades, vintage 1910. Of the first car ever built in Tampa. Old cigar factories.

**YBOR’S OWN CARNIVAL**

And there was good reason it was Emilio Del Rio who spent so much time searching out and preserving remnants of Ybor City’s past. Emilio Del Rio, see, was Ybor City’s very first-ever mechanic. And bicycle repairman; its first locksmith and phonograph repairman and typewriter repairman and gunsmith and watchmaker.

And if you got past his modesty, Emilio Del Rio would own up to being a juggler and a ventriloquist and a magician back in the days when Ybor City residents flocked to their very own carnival.

Before his sight failed him, Emilio Del Rio also wrote a history of Ybor City - one version in Spanish, one in English.
And even after he was forced to live in a world of shadows, Emilio Del Rio refused to give up on the idea that someday, people would be able to walk into a museum and read much of the history he not only lived, but wrote and saved.

Even though, if you want to know the truth, Emilio Del Rio was not convinced that anyone shared his passion for Ybor City’s past.

“THEY ARE GOING TO...”

So many people say they are going to do something," Emilio Del Rio said that afternoon a couple of years ago. "They come and they borrow my things and lose them or steal them or destroy them . . ."

Which was why, back in 1979, even when the city of Tampa and the state of Florida began clearing the rats and the debris and winos out of the old F. Ferlita Bakery Building, within view of Seventh Avenue, Ybor City’s main drag, and announced plans to restore and preserve the old bakery building as a state-run museum, Emilio Del Rio politely said he would wait and see.

So many had promised so much so often....

But this time it wasn’t just talk.

The museum is open, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., seven days a week, and in it are relics and photographs, some of them the ones Emilio Del Rio saved when nobody else seemed to care.

Yeah, I wish I had been there the day it opened.

I wish I could have seen the smile on the old man’s face....