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Fortune Bosco

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## **TONY PIZZO NAMED OFFICIAL HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY HISTORIAN**

**(Editor's Note: In May, 1982, Tony Pizzo was named official Hillsborough County Historian by the Board of County Commissioners. Thus, he follows in the steps of D. B. McKay and Theodore Lesley, the two previous Tampan to hold this position. Following is a personality sketch on Pizzo that appeared in The Tampa Times on May 15, 1982. It was written by special correspondent Fortune Bosco).**

**By FORTUNE BOSCO  
Tampa Times Correspondent**

Besides being known as the historian par excellence of Tampa, Tony Pizzo has a green thumb. He has transformed his Davis Islands backyard into a botanical paradise, adorned with an Ybor City-style lamppost and fountain and a statue of Apollo of Belvedere.

"This is my favorite corner. I come here to think and relax," said Pizzo, who recently was named Hillsborough County Historian. "This is my little piece of heaven."

There, amid the crotons, mimosas, guava trees and grapevines, he reminisced about growing up and living in Tampa.

The son of Pauo and Rosalia Pizzo was born in 1912 and raised during the boom times of the cigar industry and the Latin Quarter.

### **HIGH SCHOOL SWEETHEART**

"I attended Philip Shore Elementary," said Pizzo, whose father helped found the Italian Club. "Later on in my life I became a great admirer of Mr. Shore, whose real name was Costa. He had been a Neapolitan sea captain who was instrumental in the development of the shipping activities in Tampa and Florida. I also attended George Washington Junior High and Hillsborough High, where I met and fell in love with my wife, Josephine Acosta."

Pizzo attended the University of Florida and Stetson University. To pay for tuition, he waited on tables, sold shoes and tutored students in Spanish.

"George Smathers, who later became a U.S. senator, was one of my pupils. I also tutored Grafton Pyne, who was a cousin of President Franklin Roosevelt.

"To show me his gratitude, Grafton took me on an all-expense-paid tour of Europe," said Pizzo.

### **'DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH'**

"I witnessed Germany's preparation for war, comparing this to the light spirit of France, totally unprepared for what would happen later in World War II."

Returning to the states, Pizzo went into the insurance business.

He became friends with Tampa Tribune reporter Bill Abbott, "who truly loved Ybor City and the Latin culture."

Bill told me one day that Ybor City was a diamond in the rough and that we should do something to immortalize the glory of the past and the efforts of its people.

"Mayor Curtis Hixon understood the meaning of Ybor ... He appointed me to a committee for the restoration of Ybor City.

"I received support from the Rotary Club and went to Havana in search of Ybor City's roots. I was lucky to meet Fifi Brock, son of a tobacco magnate, who promised financial backing for the research," he said.

### **MARTI SLEPT HERE**

"I was encouraged by this promise and upon returning to Tampa, I sat for many hours with old residents of Ybor. I listened to their stories and I began cataloging the events of a great past."

Pizzo continued: "The turning point in my historical research came one day when an old black man, whose name I don't remember, told me that the house where he presently lived was once occupied by Ruperto and Paulina Pedroso. It was the place where Jose Marti had lived during his stay in Tampa. Ruperto Pedroso had been Marti's bodyguard in the turbulent days that preceded the Cuban revolution."

Pizzo and other Tampans obtained the house and formed a committee to preserve it. But the house proved to be too decrepit, so it had to be razed.

### **GIFT FROM BATISTA**

He traveled to Cuba, where he obtained historical verification regarding Marti's stay at the house. Pizzo also received \$18,000

from then-Cuban President Fulgencia Batista to develop a park on the site.

Today the Jose Marti Park marks the historic spot at Eighth Avenue and 13th Street.

"We began placing historical markers throughout Ybor City and Tampa," said Pizzo. "They were expensive and I was fortunate to receive financial support from the Rotary Club, local banks and The Tampa Tribune. "

Inspired by Tribune editor Leland Hawes, then a reporter, Pizzo wrote a book, "Tampa's Latin Heritage."

Tampa publisher Harris Mullen sent Pizzo, s manuscript to Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, a historian and publisher from Miami.

"I waited for weeks with trepidation and hope. Finally I received her letter, which in a terse and meaningful sentence told me that I had 'a creditable manuscript and I want to publish it.' "

"The book's title became 'Tampa Town - The Cracker Village With a Latin Accent. ' "

Pizzo, who is an executive with Fruit Wines of Florida Inc., is preparing another book on Ybor and its people.