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REQUIEM FOR A READER

By DR. GARY R. MORMINO

One week in August, 1982, two ninety-year old giants died in Tampa. The demise of the Tampa Times was well publicized, since the obituary count of afternoon dailies has become ghoulfully chic (sixteen have failed in 1982). Not so publicized was the death of Victoriano Manteiga, the legendary founder and editor of La Gaceta.

Tampa will not see the likes of Victoriano Manteiga again. His status as an emigrant was not so unusual, considering that not-so-long ago places like Tampa and Chicago brimmed with foreign tongues and exotic enclaves. Manteiga left his beloved Cuba in 1913. The Tampa he discovered seemed more like a little Havana, for Manteiga’s new love was a sprawling Cuban, Spanish, and Italian community called Ybor City. Outsiders called it "little Havana," and worse.

Manteiga's tote bag included two white linen suits and a ten-dollar bill. Whereas most of his contemporaries found work at Ybor City's two-hundred cigar factories, Manteiga brought skills that literally raised him above the workers. He was hired as el lector (the reader) and his job was to climb to the elevated seat and read to the Latin craftsmen and women. Yes, read.

THE CLASSIC MODE

Steeped in a pre-industrial, old world culture, the reader followed the emigrants from Spain and Cuba. Cigar rolling, a quiet task, permitted workers to hire a reader to inform and entertain. Manteiga fit the classic mode of el lector: he possessed a voice that could soothe and strain, solicit and scold; he exhibited a keen intellect, devouring literary classics and political tracts.

On the cutting edge of social and political conflict, Manteiga’s career embodied change: he articulated an ethos as champion of the underdog when he founded La Gaceta in 1922, a logical extension of his heralded tenure as reader.
In a city where labor wars were waged with passion, the reader stood a bastion of democracy. The workers (men, women, white and black) not only elected the readers, but paid their salaries, and selected the manuscripts. Today, elderly cigar makers who never learned to read and write, can recite with Latin fervor lengthy passages of Don Quixote and Les Miserables. Today, many ex-cigarmakers weep with the passing of Manteiga, for now his fraternity numbers only one or two. The voice has grown silent. 

**NO REPLACEMENT**

In 1931, city fathers and cigar owners sought to censor the voice. Workers struck, as they had in 1899, 1901, 1910, and 1921. And lost. But when was the last time the Teamsters struck for culture? The reader was replaced by the radio, and soon machines displaced the workers.

In a poignant parallel, the radio’s replacement of the reader bears witness to television’s conquest of the afternoon newspaper. Other media will take the place of the Tampa Times. The same cannot be said for Victoriano Manteiga

The death of Manteiga and the Times will not slacken the frenzied pace of Tampa’s development. In May, the city christened a new downtown, strictly uptown Hyatt Regency, and unveiled plans for a $50-million arts center. Glass panels and stainless steel mirror the urban renaissance, an architectural boom that has made Tampa indistinguishable from any other post-war town.

The Ybor City which Manteiga leaves behind stands as a wrought-iron oasis, albeit an urban renewed oasis. Latins constructed lavish mutual aid societies with touches of Havana, Madrid, and Palermo splashed across palmetto scrubland. Long abandoned by the economic sector, Ybor City lives in the past while the new Tampa rushes into the future.

At the Centro Asturiano and Circulo Cubano, the dominos skid across the table with a tempo more adagio than allegro. How sad that soon few will remember Victorio Manteiga and the men and women who built the factories that made the cigars, that made Tampa famous.
THE TAMPA TIMES DIES AT AGE 90

Saturday, Aug. 14, 1982, was a sad day in Tampa journalism. For that was the day The Tampa Times, nee The Tampa Daily Times, was extinguished and put to death by The Tribune Company. It was in its 90th Year of publication. The old independent The Tampa Daily Times was swallowed by The Tribune on June 1, 1958. It was revamped, the staff beefed up, and it was published for 24 years, but finally, according to Richard "Red" Pittman, the newspaper was folding because of the economy and changing life styles.

This was the front page of the farewell edition. The newspaper's "obituary" was written by Assistant Managing Editor Bob Turner, who had started his outstanding journalistic career Writing "obits" on the old Times.