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Hidden Treasures of Tampa History in Tobacco Journals and Cigar Label Art

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Tampa’s modern day glass and steel skyline has replaced an historical horizon once silhouetted with imposing brick clock towers and multi-story edifices, homes of the once famous clear Havana cigar industry.\textsuperscript{1} When the PerfectoGarcia factory closed its doors June 11, 1982, the cigar industry had already become only a reflection of its former grandeur, almost forgotten by the general public. Fortunately, it has been revitalized and sustained by the scholarly study of historians researching Tampa’s past from local, state, national and international perspectives.

Few persons are cognizant of the fact that Tampa’s incredible surge of prosperity was the consequence of enterprising Cuban and Spanish born entrepreneurs. By 1886, they transformed the sleepy coastal community into a major 1900 industrial center. Consumers avidly purchased clear Havana
cigars, convinced through eye appealing advertisements that they were superior to cigars made of domestic tobacco. The intricately detailed advertisement art, perfected by German lithographers, was as important to cigar sales as was the quality of tobacco. During Otto Von Bismark’s unification of Germany in 1870’s, numerous skilled lithographers immigrated to the United States pursuing a more stable economic and political climate. They soon stimulated the lithographic industry with their talented skills, directed into advertisement art in which the cigar industry was a major customer. In a veritable renaissance of pre-Wall Street advertisement sales promotion, printers created cigar posters and labels in fantastic quality and detail which lured customers into buying a particular brand. By the late 1870’s, brilliant multi-colored chromolithographic prints were extremely popular as an advertisement art form. Chromolithography came into prominence as an advertisement medium approximately the same time Cubans immigrated to the United States, producing and popularizing domestic clear Havana’s to the delight of American cigar smokers.

The George Schlegel Lithographic Company, a leading firm since 1841, was particularly popular in Tampa manufacturing circles because it specialized in clear Havana advertisements. The company printed some of the nation's most popular labels, hiring the best available lithographers to compete with print competitors.

Cuban cigars had already attained an international reputation for their quality before they were produced in the United States. Prior to 1868, they were prohibitively expensive because of a high import tax placed on them, for the benefit of American manufacturers. This situation drastically changed when the Cuban Ten Years War (1868-1879) forced Cubans to emigrate by the thousands to the United States. Key West, only ninety miles from Cuba, was transformed from a tiny village into a cigar manufacturing center where refugees were employed as cigar makers. Since there was no tax on Cuban tobacco leaf, it was imported in large quantities, and domestic clear Havanas became the most highly sought after cigar in America. Northern firms producing cigars from domestic tobacco
responded quickly to this sales threat by opening branch factories in Key West, joining in the clear Havana bonanza. Key West was suddenly a boom town. By 1885, it was classified as the thirteenth largest port in the United States. The prosperity and sudden growth did not come without some serious consequences, however. By far, the most serious problem were disruptions in production created by labor agitators who were among the thousands of new arriving workers. From the evolution of the Key West industry to its growth in the 1870s and 1880s, agitators caused more numerous hostile shutdowns, strikes and boycotts, culminating in a catastrophic 1885 six month strike. Its consequence was so serious that a leading manufacturer, Vicente Martinez Ybor, decided to leave the island. His departure was followed by an even more disastrous fire in 1886 forcing other firms to rebuild or leave the island city.

A native Spaniard, born in 1818, Ybor emigrated to Cuba in his youth, becoming one of the early founders of the clear Havana industry. In 1869, Spanish agents were informed of his assistance to Cuban revolutionaries, and they threatened his life with a planned assassination. Upon hearing of their plan, Ybor fled immediately to Key West, in 1869, opened new production facilities, and prospered until the 1885 strike convinced him to move elsewhere. His frustration with labor agitation was shared by a friend and fellow manufacturer from New York, Ignacio Haya. Together, they searched for a new location, eventually choosing land two miles northeast of Tampa. Their new industrial community, called Ybor City, was founded in 1885. It was an immediate success with other manufacturers because of two district advantages. Ybor and Haya offered enticing free ten-year leases on buildings to manufacturers. In addition, the Tampa Board of Trade agreed to expel any labor agitators immediately. The response was tremendous. Ybor City growth was so rapid it was incorporated by Tampa in 1887 for obvious tax advantages. Its unprecedented success convinced a local Tampan, Hugh Macfarlane, to establish Tampa’s second industrial community, West Tampa in 1894, on the west side of the Hillsborough River. Both commercial centers maintained the Key West tradition of producing domestic clear Havanas. Northern manufacturers who were not impressed with Key West now realized the potential Tampa had to offer, and the rush was on.

Regardless of the quality of a cigar, it could not be widely sold unless there was excellent promotion. When the clear Havana trade entered competition with the American
domestic cigar market, the buying public had to be convinced of clear Havana qualities over domestic cigars. Advertisement art served this purpose. The advertisement art printed on posters and labels for Tampa firms was the most successful method of reaching customers. Havanas dominated cigar sales from the early 1880’s until the mid 1930’s. Smokers associated any brand with a Spanish-sounding name as synonymous to a quality cigar. This association was used by several unscrupulous manufacturers who placed Spanish titles to cigars made from domestic tobacco leaf. Buyer appeal was also enhanced by relating brands to labels which portrayed famous personages or landmarks.

A pandora’s box of data on manufacturers, new labels and factories was promulgated in numerous tobacco publications, the three most respected being Tobacco, The Tobacco Leaf, and The United States Tobacco Journal. They contained invaluable biographical sketches, social columns as well as detailed information on new factory construction. These publications were encyclopedic source of information on the early development of the Tampa I s clear Havana industry and its leading entrepreneurs.

One such famous man of commerce, Salvador Rodriguez, was born in Asturias, Spain, in 1846. He moved to Cuba when he was fifteen, where he entered the Cigar industry. The Cuban Ten Years War forced him to emigrate once more, this time to New York in 1871. There he slowly accumulated
-From Photographic Collection of Dr. L. Glenn Westfall

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capital to form his own factory." In 1891, he contracted the printing of a label, "Charles the Great," the only leading clear Havana cigar without a Spanish name. It portrayed the Emperor Charlemagne, "Flanked on one side with the Pope crowning him at Rome in the Christmas of 800 A.D.... and on the other side a battle scene."  

Sr. Rodriguez joined the exodus to Tampa in the late 1890's, opening a wooden factory on Livingston Avenue in East Tampa. The 50' by 101' structure "stood on a corner, and the new well-kept fences and newly built sidewalks together with the large outside electric lights which illuminate the corner at night present an attractive appearance even to the casual passerby." The attractively situated building soon outgrew production needs, in part, because of the conscientious efforts and enviable reputation of its founder. "Of all the cigar manufacturers who occupy prominent positions in the trade circles of this country, here is no more conspicuous and picturesque a figure than Salvador Rodriguez... he stands in point of experience almost equal without peer." 

A new factory, completed in 1903, reflected the excellent reputation of its owner. It was "centrally located between Ybor City and Palmetto Beach, Tampa, Florida, upon the highest point of the Clarkson subdivision... a departure from the stereotyped style of factory in the manner in which the tobacco will be handled. An underground vault or humidor has been constructed entirely separate from the factory, entry to which is made by means of a short vestibule from the basement... built entirely of steel and
concrete... and entirely fireproof." The vault allowed immediate access to tobacco leaf, an advantage over other factories which had to rely on transporting leaf from distribution warehouses nearby. In addition to the unique humidor the structure contained "a cupola, where a birdseye view can be obtained of Tampa, Ybor City and the surrounding sheets of water. This view cannot be surpassed in the city and is well worth a visit to the factory."14

Another New York firm transplanted to Tampa was that of Spanish-born Antonio Santaella. He opened a New York factory in 1889, a Key West factory a few years later and in 1905 constructed a tremendous three story structure in West Tampa, surrounded by a white picket fence on the southernmost side of the building. His firm had a wide distribution for their cigars in Chicago, the Mississippi Valley, the West, and made a great fanfare in advertising a carload of their cigars which were shipped to Nome, Alaska. The firm's leading label was "Optimo" meaning, the very best. It was the topic of discussion in a Tobacco Leaf article which said, "In the great struggle for supremacy which has characterized the manufacture of
domestic clear Havana cigars within the past few years, it must have been noted by even the most superficial observer that while the battle of quality and publicity was in progress, the matter of fitting titles has received but scant consideration. It seems to us, however, that the house of A. Santaella & Co. of Tampa, have struck the keynote of the situation in their Optimo brand." The label portrayed Sr. A. Santaella, and remained their most popular selling brand for decades.

Notable personages were another favorite subject for cigar label advertisements. The Tampa-Cuba Cigar Company received permission to portray a famous actress, June Mathis, on one of their labels. The Company, organized in 1912, was owned and operated by the Wholesale Druggists Association of the United States. The non-Spanish owners used their vast chain of stores across the country to distribute their own generic cigar brands.

The Fernandez Y Hermanos Y Ca. was another company receiving permission to use a famous portrait, that of a Vanderbilt. The Fastidio label, a portrait of a handsome young millionaire, had obvious sales appeal to smokers who undoubtedly felt that a cigar good enough for a Vanderbilt was certainly good enough for them.

The Corral Wodiska Company purchased the "Julia Marlowe" label, named after the famous Shakespearian actress. Edward Wodiska, colorful entrepreneur of the firm was reputedly friends with Miss Marlowe. The label was copyrighted by the Tobacco Leaf Publishing Company in 1900 to the original owners, the M. Lorente Company. On the back of the certification were a list of other firms controlling the label before it became the property of Corral Wodiska. Label resales were quite common. When a brand was no longer popular, it was usually discarded, but sometimes was transformed into the symbol for other-than-cigar items. "Sun Maid" of raisin fame, "Camel" cigars and "Dutch Maid" were all originally cigar labels.

The Alvarez Valdex Company associated a Spanish title to a famous inventor in their 1903 -"El Poder de Edison" label. The company at first questioned the association of Edison to a cigar, but "second thoughts are always best, and a little subsequent reflection convinced one the great name Edison denoted something which combines strength and magnetism-two mighty useful qualities in a cigar label."

Other Florida firms capitalized on Tampa's name, relating their cigars to the city's famous cigar reputation. The Tarpon Springs Edwards Cigar Company printed a label with spongers and stated in bold letters that they were only 26 miles from Tampa, Florida.

The St. Augustine C. Meitin Company appealed to Tampa's fame by naming their brand of cigars, "El Mascotte de Tampa."

Other appealing label subjects were buildings or personages of historical significance, especially if they could be related in any way to the Tampa Bay area. The V. Martinez Ybor & Sons Co., had their name emblazoned in lightning over a stormy Tampa Bay, with the sumptuous Tampa Bay Hotel to the right side. The label illustrated was from a proof-set, and the ten colors used for its printing were listed below the pictoral scene.

During the Spanish American War, Theodore Roosevelt and his Rough Riders came to Tampa on the way to Cuba, and left an indelible impression on the city ever since. What better topic could be chosen for
a cigar label than the Rough Riders and Teddy?

These fascinating views of Tampa’s past in tobacco journals and label art are but a sample of the materials awaiting research and publication on Tampa’s clear Havana past. It is through these sources we can begin to appreciate the tremendous role in which the clear Havana industry had in making Tampa the great city it is today.

**NOTES**

1 The term "clear Havana" refers to cigars made from Cuban tobacco. The region of Vuelta Abajo was especially noted for its fine quality tobacco, and this name was often placed on the cigar advertisement to assure smokers of an exceptional cigar. Clear Havanas produced in Cuba soon lost out to domestic clear Havanas produced in the United States. Only the location of their production differed; the quality remained the same.

2 Collectors of cigar labels have classified labels into two approximate size classifications. The 6” x 9”s refer to labels placed inside the cigar box lids. 5” x 5”s refer to a square label usually used to seal the box, containing a miniature of the topic or the 6 x 9 label.

3 David Richard Quinter, Nico, A Selection of Original Painted Designs for Cigar Box Labels (1895-1920) From the Collection of the Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, Canada, 1982. This informative publication not only discusses the private collection of the Gallery but also gives an excellent overview of the printing process of chromolithography.

4 The photographs of cigar labels used in this article are a part of the private collection of Mr. Thomas Vance, great grandson of the famous Ignacio Haya, who owned the first factory to produce cigars in Tampa, known as Factory Number 1. The generous use of his labels for this article is greatly appreciated.

5 Jacksonville, Florida Union, September 16, 1869

6 New York, Tobacco Leaf, January 17, 1885

7 For a more detailed account of the formative years of the Key West tobacco industry, see L. Glenn Westfall, Don Vicente Martinez Ybor, the Man and his Empire; Development of the Clear Havana Industry in Cuba and Florida in the Nineteenth Century, Doctoral Dissertation for the University of Florida, 1977, Chapter 2.

8 A background of the format on of West Tampa may be found in L. Glenn Westfall's article, "Hugh Macfarlane: West Tampa Pioneer", The Sunland Tribune, Vol. V, No.1, November, 1979.

9 New York, Tobacco Leaf, July 18, 1900, also, December 7, 1902

10 New York, Tobacco, August 7, 1901

11 New York, Tobacco Leaf, February 17, 1899.

12 New York, Tobacco Leaf, December 7, 1902.


14 Ibid.

15 New York, Tobacco Leaf, January 16, 1901.

16 New York, The United States Tobacco Journal, January 20, 1912

17 Certification of Registration, Corral Wodiska Factory Fides, Tampa, Florida.

18 New York, Tobacco Leaf April 8, 1903

Note: Mr. Thomas Vance, whose photographs of labels appear in this article, respectfully requests that his written permission be requested before any of these photo, of, label, are duplicated.