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El Gallego

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When casinos began to appear, in Paris a few years after the French Revolution, one of the games conducted in these gaming houses was a type of lottery in which 100 small wooden balls were held in a leather pouch. The croupier held the leather receptacle above his head and, after shaking it vigorously, allowed only one ball to emerge. This little numbered ball was the winner, and the game which became known as Bolita had its origin.

The game spread to Spain where lotteries had been popular since 1763, during the reign of King Carlos III. The Spaniards christened the game Bolita. In time the game appeared in Cuba where gambling was a traditional pasttime. The Captain General of Cuba, Jose Gutierrez de la Concha, once remarked that, "with a game of chance, fighting roosters, and singing senoritas, the Cubans could be led anywhere."

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Soon after the 1868 outbreak of the Ten Year War in Cuba, a large group of refugees moved to Key West. Vicente Martinez Ybor, sympathetic to the cause of Cuban liberty moved his cigar factory to the Key. Bolita operators followed the exodus.

In 1886, Mr. Ybor, to get away from labor problems and political strife on the Key, decided to move his operation. His attention was drawn to the village of Tampa, where he built his company town and christened it Ybor City. Soon, other cigar manufacturers followed suit, and the Cuban community began to grow.

Some of the unscrupulous bolita bankers tried to cheat the public by using "loaded balls." Shown above is a good example of the cheater-balls which concealed four round pieces of lead. A conspirator in the crowd would grab the bag at the bottom where the loaded balls would likely be located. The scheme increased the odds in favor of the house.

An enterprising Spaniard, Manuel Saurez., better known as El Gallego (The Galician), assessing the rosy future for Ybor City, closed his saloon on the Rock Road in Key West. With his bolita balls, he moved to Ybor City and introduced Bolita to Tampa. Reams of stories have been written about this game of chance, but the name of
Tampa’s first bolitero faded with the passing of his contemporaries.

El Gallego made an indelible impact on the history of Tampa. He would affect the lives of thousands for more than sixty years - a fact that was beyond his wildest imagination. His little Bolita game, at first accepted by the general populace as an innocent recreational activity, evolved into an industry second only to the fabulous business of making cigars, itself a multi-million dollar operation. Bolita writers were everywhere. No one looked down on them. They visited the workshop and the office and haunted the streets. They’d take your bet any time, anywhere. Bolita brought pleasure to many and despair to countless others. Throughout the thirties and forties, the Bloody Years, Tampa experienced political upheavals and civil turmoil. More than forty Tampans met violent death partially as a result of the Bolita-instigated racket which had appeared on the scene.

In the early 1890’s El Gallego opened a saloon in the Sevilla Building on the northeast corner of Fourteenth Street and Eighth avenue. Here he introduced the friendly, sociable game of chance known as Bolita, or ‘little ball’. He instantly became very popular throughout Ybor City, and Bolita became a way of life in Tampa.

Bolita was ‘played’ by the selling of chances on numbers ranging from one to one hundred. Little wooden balls bearing the numbers were placed in a bag which was tossed around a circle of men. A member of the crowd would reach for the bag when it was tossed into the air, and seize one of the balls. This ball was cut from the bag with scissors, and declared the winning number. Those holding the winning number were paid at the rate of 8 to 1. Bets started at 50 and up to a limit set by the house. Bolita was ‘thrown’ every night at 9 o’clock and twice on Sundays.

In the early days Bolita was considered a popular and inoffensive recreational activity. The Tampa Tribune naively reported that "the new game of chance was causing many of the wash-women in the Scrub area to complain that their husbands were taking their Octagon soaps and selling them for a nickel to play Bolita," and that "the Ybor City cigarmakers were blowing their money on Bolita with the vivacity of an untamed cyclone."

El Gallego prospered and became a local celebrity. In time he passed from the scene. New Bolita bankers emerged in the persons of Pote, Serafin and Rafael Reina, owner of the famous El Dorado Cafe. These were the Bolita barons with a reputation for reliability in pay-offs. They did a roaring business in the Roaring Twenties. Protecting them by possessing undisputed political power was Charlie Wall, the King of Tampa Bolita.

In 1927 the vicinity boasted the presence of approximately 300 Bolita "Joints". More than 1,200 peddlers made the rounds of the city, covering cigar factories, homes, office and government buildings. Almost everyone in Tampa played Bolita. The nickel and dime game established by El Gallego had become a social monster - a multi-million dollar dragon.

Bolita evolved into what became known less colorfully as If the numbers racket". As Tampa’s second export, after cigars, Bolita rapidly spread throughout the nation.

After the repeal of Prohibition the control of the Bolita racket was coveted by former bootleggers. Bitter rivalries emerged. Murder and violence became as common as the ebb and flow of the tides of Tampa Bay.
The 1960's crusade against the Bolita racket by hardhitting Virgil M. "Red" Newton, Managing Editor of The Tampa Morning Tribune, brought an end to Bolita in Tampa.

Manual Suarez, El Gallego, introduced Bolita to Tampa as a friendly, sociable game of chance. It is certain the thought never crossed his mind that this innocent little game would become part of the rackets and the inevitable resulting violence.