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Louis Fritz

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Recalling Tampa In World War II

By LOUIS FRITZ

Many members of the Tampa Historical Society were in service or too young to remember Tampa during the World War II years. I lived in St. Petersburg at the time, but commuted often to Tampa from 1942 to 1945 to ship out in the Merchant Marine. In recalling those days, just out of the depression, Tampa had changed little for many years. I shall try to recall Tampa and its activities as I remember it at that time.

Tampa always had some shipbuilding as far back as World War I. In 1942, and even before that, new ships were being built for freight which became transportation for war supplies under the War Shipping Administration. New shipyards were being built or old ones renovated for mine sweepers, submarine tenders and concrete ships. The yards were also busy repairing ships and fixing up for war service. This brought a big influx of workers who had to have housing and transportation to their jobs. There was little new housing in construction, for all effort was devoted to war service.
Large truck trailers were used to carry workers from downtown to the shipyards and they loaded on the west side of Tampa and Tyler Streets. There were some small stores and a two-story house on the corner, now a parking lot. Hotels such as the DeSoto, Tampa Terrace and the Bayview were filled and have since been torn down.

On the east side of the Hillsborough River from Lafayette Street (now Kennedy Boulevard) to Cass Street were meat packing houses supplied by freight cars. At Cass Street was the Jackson Grain Co.

The Tampa Electric Company had the streetcar franchise in the city, and the fare was a nickel. Some streetcars had four wheels which tended to jerk the passengers when turns were made. The larger ones had the usual eight wheels. One line ran down to the Luckenbach docks at the foot of Franklin St. The nice long ride was the Port Tampa line which ran down Interbay Boulevard to Ballast Point and then along the Bayshore to Rome Avenue on its way downtown.

The Newberry store at Cass and Franklin was the finest "five and ten" in the State of Florida. After the war it was the spot to go for inexpensive meals, with two dining counters, one in the basement. The manager paid out of his pocket to keep excellent cooks on top of their salaries.

The waterfront was a busy place. United Fruit Co. ships came in with their loads of bananas and smaller ships with fruit from the Central American countries. There were always plenty of tankers bringing in gasoline and fuel oil and foreign flag ships coming in for cargoes overseas.

Concrete ships were built where the American Shipbuilding Company is now located. Concrete ships were built in World War I to save lumber and steel. New designs called for supposedly lighter concrete, using Fuller’s earth, but at least six mesh of
reinforcing rods made them heavier than steel ships. According to what I was told, one concrete ship took two torpedoes without effect.

I was on one of the first four to be released from the shipyard. Plywood was used for the upper aft housing. Since the normal five-pound guns would have broken away from their foundations, an 1898 Coast Guard one-pound rifle was its armament. The ordinary speed of these ships was 7 knots, and only when we got into the Gulf Stream did we make 10 knots.

It took us 21 days to get to New York, stopping in Jacksonville for repairs. When we got to New York, the ship had to be overhauled in the engine room, as the inexperienced workers at Tampa had made many errors. In fairness to most shipyard workers, they soon learned their jobs. Actually, the ships in the war were better built than those made today under the Maritime Commission.

We were loaded with concrete for England, as we learned later. Those first four ships were slated to be sunk as breakwaters for D-Day (in the invasion of Normandy). Many of those concrete ships saw plenty of service, and one sailed around the world. When the contract was finished, the newer ships of that design were made out of steel but their comparatively small size was uneconomical.

There was plenty of wartime train traffic, both freight and passenger, the latter always filled up. Steam locomotives were used. The Silver Meteor of the Seaboard Air Line Railroad boasted less than 24 hours from Tampa, to New York. The Atlantic Coast Line had its Champion. I never had trouble getting a seat as a merchant mariner, with priority in transportation. However, other servicemen came first in the dining cars, and well deserved the priority.

Time marches on, and many changes have come to Tampa. However, those war days were exciting. Franklin Street beyond Cass was filled with stores and restaurants. The State Theater on Franklin Street near Cass has just been torn down. Another theater, The Rialto, featured burlesque shows. After the war, fine foreign films from France were shown featuring Louis Jouvet and Simone Signoret, and despite the lurid sex advertising were not so at all.

The fine old theater in Ybor City behind the Centro Espanol showed fine Mexican classic films such as the "Count of Monte Cristo" with Arturo de Cordova, who also acted in many American films. The house was so packed that we had to sit on the stairs. Another fine picture was a Mexican setting of De Maupassant's "Ball of Fat." The Centro Asturiano featured Mexican and Spanish stage entertainment.

We cannot turn back time, but we can recall interesting events of the past.