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CIGAR LABEL ART: PORTRAITS OF TAMPA'S PAST

by L. Glenn Westfall

A fascinating aspect of historical research is the collection of information from a unique and overlooked source. The history of Tampa, Florida, is recorded in seemingly endless numbers of cigar labels produced as advertisements for the once thriving "clear Havana" industry.¹ Thousands of unused labels stacked on warehouse shelves, stored in attics or filed in cases and forgotten in the basements of lithographic companies represent a wealth of encyclopedic information on personages, cultural scenes and historical events. These windows into the past reveal an era when a Spanish topic or title was a popular and profitable form of advertising for the Florida cigar industry. A Spanish theme associated with the clear Havana industry directly affected both cigar sales and production in the United States from 1870 to the Depression of the 1930s.

The American cigar industry and more refined advertisement printing techniques emerged simultaneously in the nineteenth century. Prior to 1870, America's tobacco market was dominated by products made from tobacco grown in Virginia, Ohio, Connecticut and the Carolinas. Originally plug and snuff products had a significant segment of the tobacco market. Sales were enhanced through advertisements printed on a rather low quality paper, with usually one, perhaps two colors stamped from wood block prints. Promotional labels were placed directly on the product's package or were printed on posters which were placed in drug stores, saloons and country stores across the continent.²

In the nineteenth century, a rival to snuff and plug sales appeared first in Connecticut. Tobacco farmers began to supplement their incomes by rolling cigars at home, giving rise to a popular cottage industry.³ Cigars sold so well that market demands necessitated a change in production techniques from the home to urban factories. Enterprising capitalists shifted production to New York and Philadelphia, hiring newly arrived immigrants who were anxious for employment. By 1870, cigars were so popular that they replaced snuff and plug tobacco sales and consumed most of the domestic leaf market.⁴ Cigar sales were further increased when factory owners adopted new advertising techniques. By the 1870s, lithographers switched from old printing techniques to chromolithography which produced brilliant, multi-colored cigar labels and posters to entice the eyes and win over the tastebuds of smokers.⁵ However, just as the future of cigars seemed assured, the future of American manufacturers was abruptly threatened as a consequence of civil war in Cuba.

The colonial struggle against Spain, known as the Cuban Ten Years' War (1868-1878), introduced new competitors to American tobacco growers and cigar manufacturers. When the war began, thousands of Cubans lined the docks of Havana to flee forced conscription in the Spanish army.⁶ The emigres included cigarworkers and a few manufacturers who were sympathetic to the revolutionary cause. Most fled to nearby Key West or New York, bringing with them their cigarmaking talents.

Cuban cigars had always enjoyed an enviable reputation among connoisseur smokers throughout the world, but they posed no particular threat to the American cigar market since a high tariff on Cuban cigars (but not tobacco leaf) made them too expensive for the average smoker. The Cuban province of Pinar del Rio and a region known as Vuelta Abajo were famous for growing a light colored tobacco leaf, the superb smoking ingredient of the famous clear Havana cigars. After 1868, Cuban tobacco was shipped in large quantities to the United States, where it was hand rolled into cigars by skilled Cuban artisans, revolutionizing the smoking habits and tastes of America.

When the Cuban Civil War began, Florida was almost immediately transformed into the new center for clear Havana production. The state's emerging industry underwent two distinct stages of development. The first occurred in Key West from 1868 to 1885.⁷ The second stage began in 1885 with the birth of Tampa's Ybor City, which remained the clear Havana capital of the world until the Depression.

Key West, only ninety miles from Cuba, was the new home for thousands of Cubans after 1868. They literally transformed the sleepy island village into a bustling, bilingual city. Conditions were excellent in Key West for a cigar-based economic revolution. The island's population had hundreds of skilled, but unemployed cigarmakers, and quantities of Cuban tobacco leaf were only hours away. The warm, humid climate, much the same as Cuba's, was a prerequisite for good cigarmaking since it maintained a pliable tobacco leaf. The key to success was manufacturers to finance the new enterprise, and the war in Cuba gave businessmen an incentive to relocate. Don Vicente Martinez Ybor, a native-born Spaniard who operated a cigar factory in Cuba, had to flee the island for his life when Spanish agents discovered he was supporting revolutionaries. Ybor arrived in Key West and opened a cigar factory in 1869.⁸ He was not the first manufacturer to open a factory there, however. Joseph Seidenberg of New York City had started a factory in 1868, when only a few small cigar shops operated in Key West.⁹ Eduardo Hidalgo Gato, who had fled Cuba and accumulated capital in New York, moved to Key West in 1874.¹⁰ By then the rush was on, as Northern manufacturers opened branch factories, hiring almost 8,000 cigar workers.¹¹ The respected trade publication, *Tobacco Leaf*, praised the new industry which produced genuine Havana cigars "equal in every respect to the finest imported from Havana," but sold at much cheaper prices.¹²

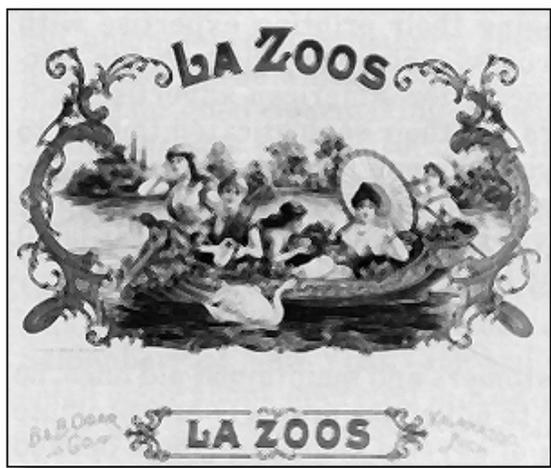
By 1885, Key West had grown into the thirteenth largest port in the United States as a consequence of the heavy trade with Cuba and Northern cities.¹³ This prosperity was not easily achieved, and it resulted in some extremely serious problems. Soon after immigrants arrived animosity arose between the conchs (natives of Key West) and the foreign-born cigarworkers. Immigrants, numbering in the thousands, included labor organizers who created increasingly serious disruptions in production. By 1885, labor-management conflicts exploded in a disastrous six-month strike.¹⁴ Ybor, disgusted with what he considered outrageous labor demands, decided to look for a new factory location. His New York manufacturing friend, Ignacio Haya, also upset with labor unrest, joined Ybor in a search for a new location to produce cigars, preferably in the South. The two industrialists finally purchased land two miles northeast of Tampa in 1885, initiating the formation of a planned industrial community known as Ybor City. The Tampa Board of Trade enthusiastically endorsed the new industry, guaranteeing a strike-free atmosphere with assurances that any labor agitators would be immediately deported. Then, Ybor and Haya

offered free ten-year leases on buildings to owners choosing to open a factory in their city.¹⁵ Factory owners responded immediately. By 1887, Tampa had annexed Ybor City for obvious tax advantages. The cigar city had an extremely large Cuban population from Havana, and others left Key West after a disastrous fire in 1886 which destroyed several factories. By 1900, Tampa led the world in the production of domestic clear Havanas. An impressive roster of Spanish, American and Cuban capitalists owned Tampa factories, in addition to their main offices in New York and leaf distribution warehouses or other factories in Havana.¹⁶

While the Ybor City boom was underway, the printing industry was also undergoing an expansion of techniques and dramatic changes in advertisement processes. The unification of Germany in 1871 led to serious economic problems and political unrest. Numerous skilled lithographers immigrated to the United States for a more stable life, bringing their printing expertise with them.¹⁷ The chromolithographic printing process which had originated in Germany was transformed into a full-scale process for American advertisement art by the mid-1870s. German lithographers put their sophisticated talents to work by printing some of the finest advertisement art, some works comparable to, if not surpassing, professional art lithographic prints. Indeed, professional lithographers from Currier and Ives sometimes produced cigar label art which became anonymous contributions to the advertising world.¹⁸

Since cigar labels both attracted new customers and maintained old ones, no expense was considered too great in order to advertise properly and promote sales. The chromolithographic application of several colors to labels opened new vistas in appealing advertisements. From six to as many as twenty-two colors were placed on one label.¹⁹ Embossment added an even more refined touch with a three dimensional effect. This involved placing the label on a mold of the desired design, then applying thirty to forty tons of pressure to the paper with huge presses.²⁰ An even more exquisite touch was produced on finely detailed illustrations of coins, medals or titles by sprinkling silver, gold or bronze dust over carefully applied shellac on the areas where a metallic look was desired. The production of a cigar label was expensive, ranging from \$2,000 to \$6,000 for each new label.²¹

Lithographic companies received specific descriptions of the labels they were to produce, and often sent artists to the factory owner to discuss the details. Numerous pre-1900 labels were printed in Germany or Cuba, but after the turn of the century, several firms based in New York, such as Consolidated Lithographic Company, American Lithographic Company and the popular firm of George Schlegel, Lithography, hired German lithographers and produced a majority of the labels used by Tampa's clear Havana manufacturers.²² Factory owners often contracted production of several labels in order to lure the general smoking public to their brand. Poor sales resulted from either poor quality tobacco or unappealing labels. The trial and error process to find a popular label led to thousands of different designs and topics. Successful labels were used for decades. Sometimes manufacturers sold popular brands with a legal title similar to that of a real estate document; the more popular the label, the higher the price.²³



LA ZOOS



EL CUBANOS

The domestic clear Havana industry used popular Spanish themes or topics in cigar label advertisement. Indeed, smokers came to associate any subject even vaguely Spanish in character with famous clear Havana cigars. Some companies used Spanish-sounding brand names even though their cigars were produced entirely from domestic tobacco.

Advertisers' exploitation of the Spanish theme resulted in some unusual and amusing labels. For example, a Kalamazoo, Michigan, cigar company attempted to tap the profitable clear Havana trade by producing a label with the Spanish-sounding name, *La Zoos*. This became a leading brand for the company, even though the cigars were made from domestic tobacco.

The Tampa Toedtman Cigar Company enticed clear Havana smokers with a romantic, turn-of-the-century label portraying a Spanish guitarist, Flamenco dancer and the title *El Cubanos*. The improper use of the singular "el," instead of the grammatically correct plural "los," was of little concern to the manufacturer, as long as smokers associated good taste, though not good Spanish grammar, with their cigar. Another Toedtman label, entitled *Tampa Rica*, illustrated the Tampa-Cuba connection in a spectacular colored print portraying Havana's El Moro light house, a ship and cigar factory, all surrounding a Spanish maiden. She held a shield with the symbols of Castile and Aragon in her right hand, assuring the smoker that this Spanish connection assured an excellent smoke.

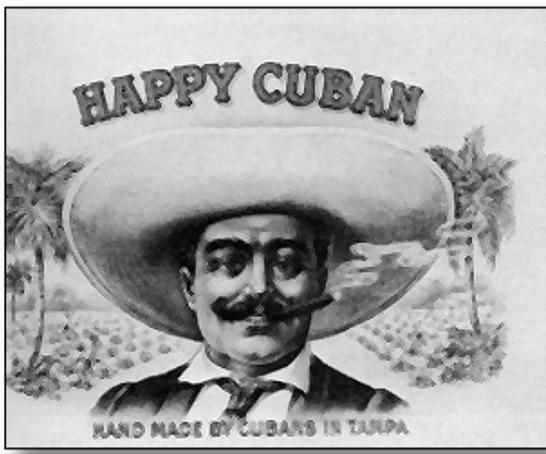
Advertisement gimmicks also appealed to elitism and snobbery, favorite ways to lure smokers to buy a particular brand. Imported Havana cigars were, of course, associated with a luxury since fine quality cigars were too expensive for the average smoker until they were produced in the United States. In the early 1900s the label for Fernandez and Company's brand *Do-U-No* portrayed that, regardless of an individual's class, a good quality cigar was affordable. Cigars, as levelers of society, were seen with an impoverished, poorly dressed paperboy (whose newspaper



TAMPA RICA



DO-U-NO



HAPPY CUBAN

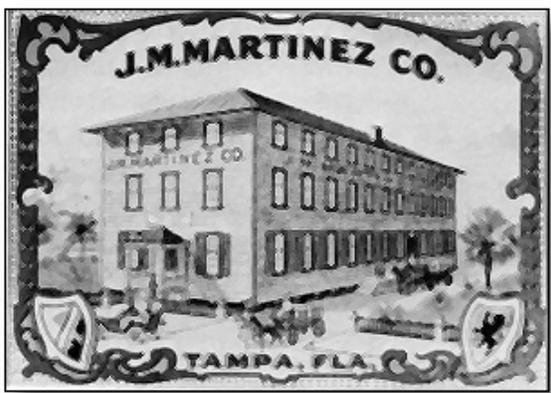


TAMPA FAD

assured smokers his was a genuine clear Havana). He was sharing a smoke with an individual of obvious wealth; their bond of commonality, what else, but a Tampa-made clear Havana?

Manufacturers took pride in the craftsmanship of hand-rolled cigars made in Tampa by Cubans. Northern factory owners increasingly relied on molds or machines for mass produced cigars, but Tampa's cigars were works of art. The personal touch of a Cuban cigarmaker was, therefore, a natural subject matter for an appealing label, such as the one that featured the smiling face of a *Happy Cuban*. Another Tampa label showed a cock smoking a cigar, in apparent reference to cockfighting which was popularly associated with Cubans. The Fernandez Hermanos label also assured buyers, in Spanish, that the cigar was made from guaranteed Havana leaf.

Local events and personalities often provided subjects for Tampa cigar labels. The J. M. Martinez factory first opened in 1897, and the company's success soon resulted in the construction of a larger factory. The 1904 grand opening was commemorated by placing the new factory on a cigar label. Martinez had another label printed which immortalized Norma, "his



J.M. MARTINEZ CO.



NORMA MARTINEZ



TAMPA ROYAL



LA EVA

intelligent-looking and interesting grand-daughter.”²⁴ The symbols of Castile and Aragon appeared discreetly in the corners of the Martinez labels to emphasize their Spanish connection.

Beautiful young women were prominently featured on labels. The *Tampa Royal* label, first owned by the José Silva Company and later sold to the Pedro Castro Company, showed a well-dressed Spanish senorita, who reflected both aristocracy and beauty. A touch of discreet pornographic art caught the eyes of smokers choosing the A. A. Amo label, *La Eva*. Below her bare breasts was a treasure chest from which imps were fleeing into the horizon. This was an early form of subliminal advertisement, suggesting something evil, but at the same time erotic in the cigar.

The most popular cigar brands were frequently plagued with piracy. Copyright laws were difficult to enforce in the early years of industry. *Tobacco Leaf* and *United States Tobacco*



LA FLOR de SANCHEZ y HAYA



LA BELLE CREOLE

Journal, leading trade journals, attempted to curb the unethical copyright violations by listing the new brands of manufacturers and condemning firms which pirated brand names or topics. Stricter codes were enforced when *The Trademark: The Cyclopedia of Law and Procedure* was published by the American Law Book Company in the late 1890s. This weekly publication listed brands approved by the copyright office and those brands refused registrations. The publication also attempted to control international piracy of label topics, but was somewhat less successful in this endeavor. Clear Havana brands were most popular in Europe, and therefore, the most susceptible to thievery. The famous *Flor de Sanchez y Haya* label, first printed in 1878, portrayed a popular New York actress, Fannie Davenport. It remained the firm's leading clear Havana brand after the company moved from New York to Tampa. In early 1920 there suddenly appeared a questionable label on the European cigar market. It had pirated a popular American cigar label name, *La Belle Creole*, and used the same Fannie portrait popularized by Sanchez Y Haya. This undoubtedly cut into the foreign sales of both American firms, but little could be done to the thieving European company other than sending letters of protest and appeals to cease and desist use of the bogus brand.²⁵

The theme of labels, as with other fads, inevitably changed with the times. Although the Spanish theme long dominated cigar advertisements, other subjects arose reflecting new political or social trends. During World War I, the Tampa Cuba Company changed its traditionally Spanish labels to the patriotic label, *Little Sammies*, which portrayed Uncle Sam and a representation of liberty.

Following World War I, cigar advertisements appealed to the tastes of the Roaring Twenties. The necessity of finding different, more appealing topics was influenced by the inroad of



LITTLE SAMMIES



THE RADIO QUEEN

cigarettes into the cigar market. In addition, machine-made cigars such as those of the American, not Spanish, owned Hav-A-Tampa Company were marketed by new techniques with simpler, more direct advertising to reach customers.²⁶ The contemporary theme was evidenced in the *Radio Queen* label, a snappy art-deco design, portraying a modern woman and her magnificent new radio. While it retained the words “Havana Cigars,” other contemporary labels completely dropped any reference to a Spanish theme or use of Cuban tobacco.

With the advent of the Depression, the artistic talents of both cigarmakers and lithographers suddenly became too expensive to compete profitably with cigarettes or machine-made cigars. Tampa was still known as a cigar city, but its output was made mostly by machines, not by hand. Moreover, label titles, such as *Think, Call Again*, *Tampa Elite*, and *The City of Tampa*, were increasingly printed by a less expensive photolithographic process.²⁷ In March, 1933, at the depth of the Depression, *Fortune* magazine noted the demise of the hand-rolled cigar industry and its elaborate use of romantic and noble Spanish topics. “A maker no longer wants the loveliest bosom in Old Castile,” *Fortune* observed. “He wants a snappy emblem and a name no hick can forget. And it’s a different business.”²⁸

It was, as the article stated, “a different business.” Above all, it displaced hand craftsmen. Tampa cigarmakers either found employment in other Tampa businesses or moved to the North, where some were hired by cigar companies using machines, if employment was available. By the mid-1930s, Tampa could no longer claim the title as the clear Havana capital of the world. However, a record of the city's achievement remains in the cigar label art which illustrates the significance of Spanish culture in Tampa, the State of Florida, and the entire cigar industry of the United States.

EDITORS’ NOTE: The author wishes to express his gratitude to Mr. Thomas Vance for the use of his labels which are portrayed in this article. Mr. Vance has one of the world’s largest collections of cigar label art. He specifically requests that none of the labels pictured in this article be photographed without his written permission.

¹ The term "Clear Havanas" refers to cigars produced specifically from Cuban tobacco, also referred to as genuine Havanas. Although the tobacco was grown in the western part of the island, the name "Havanna" was associated with all Cuban cigars since it was in the city that the first Cuban cigar factories emerged. "Domestic clear Havanas" refers to those cigars equal to those made in Cuba, the location of their production (the United States) being the only difference.

² Renate V. Shaw, "19th Century Tobacco Label Art," *The Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress*, 2 (1971): 76-102. In this article, Ms. Shaw explains the advancement of printing tobacco advertisements with numerous illustrations. She mentions that the chromolithographic printing process began its demise in the 1890s and while this may have been true for plug tobacco advertisements, it was not true with regard to cigar label art, which retained the chromolithographic process until after World War I.

³ Francis McDonald Adrian, "The History of Tobacco Production in Connecticut," *Leaflet III, Tercentenary Commission of the State of Connecticut*, 1926, p. 6.

⁴ *The United States Tobacco Journal*, March 14, 1871.

⁵ Manley Banister, *Lithographic Prints from Stone and Plate* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 1962), pp. 22-41. The process of chromolithography is quite time-consuming for colored prints. For every color used, an artist draws the designated design in wax or grease pen on a limestone surface. Then acid is brushed over the surface, eating away a very thin layer of the stone, except in the sketched area. The stone is cleansed, the etched area coated with a material which repels ink, and thus, when ink is applied to the stone, it adheres only to the now elevated sketched area. For every color used in a print, this process is repeated on a separate stone. The paper is applied to each stone until the final multi-colored effect is attained. Both the precision required in placing the paper on the stones and in the sketching process explains why this is considered a very detailed and complicated printing technique.

⁶ *Florida Union*, September 11, 1869.

⁷ Little written information exists on the Key West cigar industry. Jefferson Browne in *Key West, The Old and the New*, Chapter 20, discusses its formation briefly. A more detailed history of the formative years of the industry from 1869 to 1885 may be found in *Don Vicente Martinez Ybor, The Man and His Empire: Development of the Clear Havana Industry in Havana and the United States*, a Doctoral dissertation by L. Glenn Westfall, University of Florida, 1977, Chapter 3, hereafter cited as *Ybor, the Man and His Empire*.

⁸ Westfall, *Ybor, the Man and His Empire*.

⁹ *The Key West Daily Equator-Democrat, Trade Edition*, March 1889, p. 9. Seidenberg produced a brand, "La Rosa Espanola" (sometimes misspelled in older publications as "La Rosa Spainola"), his popular brand in Key West, and in his factory later opened in Tampa.

¹⁰ *The United States Tobacco Journal*, September 1889, p. 15. When Gato opened his first factory in New York, he called his brand "Gato-71," a popular brand name he brought to Key West. Other popular Gato brands were "La Cressida," "The Key Wester," and "La Flor de Eduardo Hidalgo Gato."

¹¹ *New York Times*, May 13, 1873.

¹² *Tobacco Leaf*, April 12, 1879.

¹³ *Ibid.*, January 7, 1885.

¹⁴ Westfall, *Ybor, The Man and His Empire*, pp. 38-46.

¹⁵ Steward Campbell and W. Porter McLendon, *The Cigar Industry of Tampa, Florida* (Gainesville, 1939), p. 44.

¹⁶ Figures for the Tampa cigar industry include factories from both Ybor City and West Tampa. West Tampa was formed in 1894, but not incorporated into Tampa proper until 1924. Often sources will list Ybor City as a separate entity from Tampa, yet it was incorporated in 1887.

¹⁷ Oral interview with George Schlegel III of Stamford, Connecticut, June 28, 1980. Mr. Schlegel is a third generation printer whose family began their business in 1841. They were one of the most popular printers of Tampa's cigar labels.

¹⁸ *Wall Street Journal*, September 1978. See also David Richard Quinter's *Nico: A Selection of Original Painter Designs for Cigar Box Labels, 1895-1920*, Collection of the Art Gallery of Windsor, Ontario, 1982. The *Nico* publication is an extremely informative source, discussing a collection of the original art paintings used by the lithographer before making the lithographic stones. It is a very well written source, explaining the process and themes of cigar label art in detail.

¹⁹ *Wall Street Journal*, September 1978.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; Schlegel interview.

²¹ *Wall Street Journal*, September 1978.

²² Schlegel interview.

²³ Very few of these label titles remain. One owned by the Corral factory in Tampa lists the various owners of a label entitled *Julia Marlow*, one of the firm's most popular brands.

²⁴ *Tobacco Leaf*, March 3, 1904. New labels for manufacturers were frequently illustrated and discussed on the front page of the *Tobacco Leaf*.

²⁵ Oral interview with Thomas Vance of Tampa, Florida, April 12, 1982. Mr. Vance, the great-grandson of Ignacio Haya, explained that their "Flor de Sanchez Y Haya" brand was extremely popular in Europe. Since the firm was Number 1 in Tampa, it often faced piracy of its brand by competitors at home and abroad.

²⁶ Earl Brown, Jr., *A History of the Name Hav-A-Tampa* (1980). This informative booklet lists chronologically the major events of the company and its list of brands. This corporation succeeded where the older Tampa companies failed by adapting to new printing techniques, using new machines to produce cigars, and hiring primarily Anglo, not Cuban or Spanish laborers. Tampa's problems, as pointed out in Campbell and McLendon's *Cigar Industry of Tampa, Florida*, were all problems of Latin, not American-operated factories.

²⁷ The simple and direct four-color separation in photolithographic prints were much less expensive and did not have to rely on skilled artisans for label advertisements. The process of photolithography is amply explained in David J. MacDonald and George Hart's book, *Survey of Lithography: Basic Texts for Apprentices in Lithography* (New York: The Lithographic Technical Foundation, Inc., 1945).

²⁸ "Atlas and the Nudes," *Fortune Magazine*, March, 1933, pp. 66-71. This special issue of *Fortune* included an insert of original lithographic prints of labels popular in the early 1930s.