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Nick Geraci Tampa’s First Italian Produce King

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In the early years of this century there were countless numbers of Italian fruit and vegetable street vendors in Tampa making rounds with their horses and wagons, from house to house, through the various neighborhoods of the city. The loud ringing of their hand bells summoned housewives to the artistically fruit decorated wagons at the curb.

These street merchants gathered every morning before daybreak at Seminole Corner, 7th Avenue and 22nd Street (formerly known as Livingston Avenue) where they purchased their produce from farmers who would bring their vegetables from the farming areas east and south of Ybor City. After replenishing their wagons they started their rounds through the residential areas. This marketing tradition had its beginnings with the arrival of the Italians in the 1880's.

Seminole Corner is the forerunner of today's farmers market. The site derived its name from Seminole Saloon, a notorious watering hole from the days of the Spanish-American War. The Duggan brothers were the owners. On one occasion a Rough Rider galloped into the saloon and demanded a mug of beer and a bucketful for his horse. The cavalryman, three sheets to the wind, was promptly arrested and fined $5.00. The Times reported that Seminole Saloon "served stuff that would make a rabbit spit in a bulldog's face."
WINNING PERSONALITY

Nick Geraci emerged from this group of street merchants as one of Tampa's prominent fruit and produce dealers. His formidable achievements are one of the most interesting business romances in the history of Tampa.

Geraci, a native of Contessa Entellina, a village in western Sicily, started as a solitary fruit vender in 1910, calling on homes in Hyde Park. For years he was remembered pleasantly by customers for his winning personality and a reputation of always having superior products to offer. The Tampa Times reported, "Nick's friends in those days knew that deep down in this smiling, never wearing, courageous man, was the ambition and ability to become a dealer in fruits in a large way."

In 1912, Geraci opened a small produce store on 7th Avenue and 23rd Street, one block east of Seminole Corner, the hub of the vegetable trading center. His business prospered rapidly, and Geraci was forced to expand several times. In 1921, he took a bold step and erected the largest cold storage plant in the south.

The building which is still standing, but no longer used by the company, is located on 6th Avenue on the north side of the Seaboard Coast Line Railroad tracks between 23rd and 24th streets. The building measured 340 x 105 feet and had a storage capacity of 50 carloads of fruit and produce. Ten carloads of produce could be unloaded at the same time. The building was provided with 16 cold storage rooms. The fleet of 20 delivery trucks left every morning loaded with fresh produce to the trade throughout Tampa and south Florida.

Geraci also attended to the needs of Tampa's Latin population. For the Spanish and Italian communities he imported a variety of dried fruits and nuts. Adorning Ybor City grocery stores were strings of dried figs, trays of dried apricots, peaches, cherries, and plums as well as sacks and barrels chuck full of filberts, almonds, pistachios, and chestnuts.

From the Caribbean Basin, Geraci brought strange and wondrous fruits. The eye-catching, tantalizing, and fragrant fruits from the tropics were the delight of the Cubans in particular, and most Tampans in general. Yborcitenos were especially fond of the tropical fruit juices whipped up in creamy and foamy milk shakes and sherbets. The joy of going to Los Helados Cafe for the exquisite sherbets of mamey, tamarindo, coconut, bananas, anon, and cherimoya lingers as a cherished memory of Ole Ybor.

To complement his line of produce, Geraci also handled butter, cheese, and eggs. Geraci holds the distinction of bringing the first chicken incubator to Tampa.

The company continued to prosper through the years. By 1941, the firm had reached a pinnacle beyond the founder's fondest hopes when destiny took Geraci from the scene. The man with a vision, ingenuity, honesty, and ethical principles was gone. Tampa had lost a valued citizen. Nick Geraci is an exemplary figure of Italian heritage in the history of the Tampa community.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Nick Geraci, Jr. succeeded his father as president of the company at the age of 27 with the assistance of Tony Valenti, vice president, and Bennie Lazzara, secretary-treasury. Young Nick also became head of the American Fruit and Steamship
Co., a subsidiary for importing tropical fruit. The trim fleet of cargo vessels consisted of the Bison, Berlanger, Curlew, and Louis Geraci.

In 1954, Nick Geraci, Jr., with the foresight of his father, took a second signal step forward. Leading the fortunes of one of the leading produce firms in the south, he established an ultramodern, a million-dollar plant at Hillsborough Avenue and 26th Street. The new facility, Nick stated, was a monument to his father who laid the foundation of the business on fair dealings with customers, competitors and shippers.

The new, and third building in the history of the company, is one of the most modern and functional plants in the country. The building is equipped with 125 cars of refrigeration space, loading platforms for trucks on three sides, modern conveyor systems and more than five acres of parking space.

**FREE ENTERPRISE**

The building contains 40,000 square feet and has a railroad siding that can handle 16 cars of fresh produce. Two loading docks can service 32 trucks at the same time. The executive and general offices are located on the second floor.

Nick Geraci, Jr. passed away in 1972, leaving the fortunes of the company in the hands of his two sons, Nick III and Peter, with the capable assistance of Joe Mangione, the general manager, who has been with the family business for 36 years.

The Nick Geraci Co. today is one of the largest produce dealers and banana processors in the state.