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YOUR FRIENDLY DIME CAB DRIVER
Robert E. Sims poses on the fender of his Economy Cab No. 20, a 1938 Chevrolet, on the day after his wedding.

FROM TROLLEYS TO BUSES
AND IN BETWEEN

By ROBERT E. SIMS
Six years prior to the demise of Tampa’s streetcar system in 1946, transit buses were plying the streets of the city and its suburbs in direct competition with the trolleys. How and why this bus became to be a part of the Tampa scene, the forces behind its organization and a rather unique form of public transportation that existed just prior to the inception of the buses are the foundations for this chronicle.

Tampa’s initial attempt to establish a functional public transportation system came about in 1886 when Vincente Martinez Ybor and Edward Manrara built the Tampa Street Railway Company. It consisted of a single track laid from Ybor City to West Tampa and a small wood-burning locomotive pulling two open passenger cars. The line was electrified in 1893, however its trackage was not extended. The utility was used mainly by cigar factory workers traveling to and from their homes and work places.1

Between 1892 and 1911 several traction companies served Tampa and outlying areas such as Ballast Point, Sulphur Springs and Palmetto Beach. But by 1911 all had been either bought out or consolidated with Tampa Electric Company who became the sole provider of electrical energy and public transportation within the area.2 At the outbreak of World War I, Tampa Electric Company was operating sixty-seven trolley cars over forty-seven miles of track and charging a fare of 50. Thirty years later at the close of World War II when the company ceased its trolley operation, the fare remained 50. Over one hundred trolley cars had been added to the fleet, but the trackage had increased only six miles.1 Tampa was stretching out but its transportation was not.

Picture, if you will ... It is 7:30 a.m., of a work-day and you are due at your downtown Tampa office in one half hour. Outside the day has dawned ugly and gray; a hard rain is pelting down. You step to your telephone, dial, and
presently are answered by a cheery "Economy Cab, good morning." Your order for a cab to drive you downtown is taken and within five minutes a late model Chevrolet taxi pulls into your driveway as close to your front door as possible so that you may encounter no more rain than necessary. Two passengers are in the rear seat, you take the front. The driver heads downtown and two more passengers are picked up. Fifteen minutes after leaving your home the cab stops in front of your office building. The rain has stopped; it's going to be a nice day after all. You hand the driver a DIME, and he cheerfully thanks you.


A.B. "Tony" Grandoff was a man with a problem that led to an inspiration. In 1933, the very midst of the nation's worst depression, he found himself unemployed with a wife and a daughter to support. At age sixteen he had been a bicycle messenger boy for the "Speed-Up Messenger Service". The company's primary source of income came from the delivery of packages for Tampa's downtown merchants. Now seven years later he was manager of the business, but because of "tight" money, the merchants had decided not to offer package delivery service to their customers. Speed-Up Messenger Service was out of business; young Grandoff was out of a job.3
Looking back upon those lean days, Grandoff relates:

"We shut down the messenger service, the idea came to me. If we could deliver packages for ten cents, why couldn’t we deliver people for ten cents - if we could get them in bunches of five. Five to a car is fifty cents and fifty cents in 1933 was a lot of money. So I opened this company in competition with the Dime Cab Company that had opened about three months before I did. An attorney from Plant City named Martin owned the outfit and Ralph Manning managed it for him. They changed the name to Economy a little later on.4

Starting with a used 1933 Chevrolet sedan, Grandoff named his outfit "Speed-Up Cab". At first he was the only driver while his wife managed the clerical work and answered the telephone. Inasmuch as his City license placed no limits on the number of cabs he could place in service, he allowed other owner-drivers to operate under his name and use his telephone service. They paid a daily fee of $3.00 for the privilege. At the end of the first year the fleet had grown to fifty-five cars and Tony Grandoff no longer drove.4

In the beginning, Speed-Up and Economy cabs hauled people to Beach Park, the Interbay area, Seminole Heights, Sulphur Springs, Davis Islands and Ybor City for ten cents. The cars would cruise Franklin Street with a sign in the windshield announcing their destinations. They would be hailed down and patrons would be delivered to their doors for only a dime.

A. B. (TONY) GRANDOFF, SR.
...Tampa’s Dime Cab King

Grandoff recognized the need to expand and later to specialize. First he bought out Economy Cab Company and discontinued the name "Speed-Up". During the next few years other "dime" cab companies operating in the same manner as Economy sprung up on Tampa’s streets (in 1934 there were thirteen cab companies operating) and one by one Grandoff bought them out - all except one - Diamond Cab Company owned and operated by Ralph T. and Zetta Powery.

At first, Diamond’s base was on south Howard Avenue and later on, Grand Central Avenue (Kennedy Blvd.), near Albany Avenue. This company, s fleet
served primarily the south and west sides of the city (Hyde Park, Palma Ceia, Davis Islands, West Tampa). Their paint job was distinctive: cream upper body parts and black below. All "dime" cabs were equipped with two small forward-facing lights mounted on the center of the cowl ahead of the windshield. Diamond’s lights were white and white, while Economy’s were green and white. Lights were turned on when the cab had room to load passengers and were turned off when the cab was loaded. They also enabled prospective passengers standing at the curb after dark to distinguish cabs from other cars on the street.

Grandoff and the Powerys came to a mutual agreement that Economy would operate in the north and east sections of the city, while Diamond would serve the west and south. The City of Tampa would reserve two loading zones in the downtown area for each company. If a northside based cab (Economy) should load a passenger in its territory who wished to travel to the south or west part of the city, the passenger would be transferred to a southside cab (Diamond) at one of its downtown loading zones. Telephone call boxes were established for each company along Florida Avenue, Nebraska Avenue, Howard Avenue and Grand Central. The top of the boxes were equipped with a bright signal light. A driver whose cab had space for more passengers could either call the dispatcher from these boxes or upon noticing the signal light had been turned on, could stop and receive orders for passenger pickup in the area.

We must remember this was at a time when there were no outlying shopping malls, no industrial parks or branch banks. Ninety percent of all doctors’, lawyers’ and accountants’ offices were in the downtown area. Sears Roebuck, J.C. Penney, O. Falk’s and Maas Brothers were the city’s department stores and they were all located within a four-block area in the heart of the city. Sharing this same area were the Kress, Woolworth and Grant stores and the city’s only large drug store, Walgreen’s.

**DRIVERS WERE FLORIDIANS**

Ten cents bought a lot more than it does today and the "dime" cabs provided a rather large and desirable service for a reasonable return. Consider walking several blocks in the rain to wait for and to board a street car as compared to a cab called to your home and delivering you to the door of your destination.

Drivers even specialized within their respective areas or zones. Some Economy Cabs operated solely within Ybor City or between downtown Tampa and Ybor City. Diamond had its Davis Islands cab. Islands homes, hotels and Tampa Municipal Hospital were served by no public transportation other than private metered taxicabs or "dime cabs".

"Dime cab" drivers were for the most part native Floridians who, had times been prosperous, would have been members of the blue collar work force. At a time when working wives were the exception rather than the rule, some drivers were the sole supporters of rather large families. The men who owned their own cabs were in reality small-business men with capital investment. Some owned several vehicles and rented them out to other drivers.
"FEES" AND "GAS"

The amount of money required of a driver to rent a cab for a twelve-hour shift was commonly called "fees". All gasoline and oil was purchased at the cab company's pumps and this sum was known as "gas". A driver could fairly well ascertain how much take-home pay he would realize by how early in his shift he took in "fees" and "gas". The standard rate for all cab companies' "fees" was $3 or $3.10 if the cab was equipped with a radio (not to be confused with the two way radio-telephone used by the 1980s' taxis). Gasoline and oil were sold for the same price as charged by area filling stations.

Driver-owners were charged $3 per day to use the company's name and telephone service and were required to buy their fuel and oil at company pumps. They could "single shift" their cars or split the twenty-four-hour shift with another driver and could rent the unit to other driver or drivers for the entire shift. The amount of "fees" charged was up to the owner.

Even though times were hard and money was tight during the depression years of the '30s, Tampa's night life flourished. Legalized betting was offered at the Sulphur Springs Dog Track during the winter and early spring. But before there was television, performing arts centers and central air-conditioning, there were wide open gambling and prostitution houses in Ybor City and on north Franklin Street. There were bawdy bars adjacent to the city's downtown waterfront catering to visiting seamen, and then there were the jook joints. Most of these establishments were located outside the northern city limits of Tampa. The two largest and best known were "Ma Williams" and "The Happy Hollow". Both were on north Florida Avenue between Waters Avenue and what is now Busch Boulevard (I remember the railroad tracks ran beside Happy Hollow). These pleasure palaces operated twenty-four hours, seven days each week, but they hit their true stride between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. They were single-story frame buildings approximately sixty-five to seventy feet square, unfinished inside except for built-in rough wooden table and bench booths around the perimeter of the room. Against one wall stood a sturdy wooden bar - it had to be sturdy to stand up under the wear and tear inflicted upon it by countless fun seekers.

The center of the room boasted of a well-waxed dance floor that caused many an inebriated patron to fall flat and to be hauled away by the ever-present bouncers. Dance (?) music was furnished by a coin-operated "jook box", or record player whose volume made casual conversation in the room impossible. All this plus ten cent bottled beer and pretty dance hall hostesses were offered by the management to its clientele, many of whom were delivered to their doors by "dime cabs".

'ON THE TOWN'FARES

Drivers who either owned or rented their cabs could cruise at will or park for hire at any place of their choice. Metered cab drivers were not allowed this practice. Many "dime cab" drivers worked only after the evening supper hour until the sun rose the next morning. Some would work the dog track; that is, wait in the
cab loading zone of the Sulphur Springs Dog Track in hopes of being hired by an individual or party of winners who wished the rest of the night "on the town". The cab could be chartered on an hourly basis for $1.50 per hour.

Some drivers worked the "jook joints" while others cruised or parked near the waterfront bars or north Franklin Street or Ybor City night spots. These night drivers were a breed all their own who knew, liked and understood "night people". They were different from the average daytime driver who was a family man with children to feed and clothe. They were almost without exception unmarried with no responsibilities other than their own livelihood. They were a clannish group who associated with day drivers only when absolutely necessary. At a time when a cup of coffee cost .05 and a hamburger, all the way, cost .10, the night drivers considered themselves extremely fortunate if their nightly earnings amounted to $5 after expenses.

Day drivers very rarely fell heir to the windfall profits as enjoyed by their after-dark counterparts. Their income was more of steady flow. Many had "regulars"; passengers who were picked up at their doors at the same time each day. These insured fares generated the funds to pay "fees and gas". Additional fares during the day were profits allowing the driver to take home two to four dollars each day. A work week was seven days, allowing a driver who was a steady worker to earn between eighteen and twenty-five dollars per week. This, at a time when the national unemployment rate was at 25%, was not at all a bad job.

A DRIVER RECALLS

Carl Cunningham, a longtime resident of Tampa, owned and operated an Economy Cab and reflects back upon the times:

"I bought a used cab from Tony (Grandoff) and put it into service. I don't remember how much it cost me, but they took it out of each day's earnings.

"If we made enough to eat we figured we were doing pretty good. A full meal at that time, meat, vegetable, bread and drink, was 25c.

"When we had a bad day - when we couldn't make fees and gas before the shift was half over, we would run down Central Avenue or Nebraska Avenue ahead of the street car and carry people downtown for 5c.

"I remember W. E. Hamner. He used to sit down there at the Sulphur Springs loop (Economy's call box stand at Van Dyke Place and Nebraska Avenue) on a box and talk to the boys. He owned all the property where University Square Mall is now. He would tell us he was having a hard time paying the taxes and he would try to sell us some of the property. He would say, 'Just give me $10 down and $5 per month.' But we didn't have the money. We couldn't buy it - he couldn't pay the taxes - he was struggling."

TEN CENT CABS OUTLAWED

Dime cabs were operating upon Tampa's streets at the outbreak of World War II. However wartime tire and gasoline rationing severely hampered their
operations. By 1944 all but a few had passed from the scene. The final act came September 27, 1946 when City of Tampa Ordinance 1019-A was passed. This was the "taxicab ordinance" that set strict guidelines for the operation of Tampa's taxicabs, outlawed dime cabs and instituted a Cab Commission to oversee the industry.

Economy, Diamond and other dime cab companies had provided a necessary service to the people of the Tampa area. The city was growing. A modern public transportation system was a must. Clanking, unreliable streetcars were not the answer. Fleets of five-passenger sedans adding to traffic congestion upon the streets could not be tolerated. Most progressive American cities used transit buses to solve their transportation problems - why not Tampa? The answer come from A. B. "Tony" Grandoff:

"I'll tell you what made me enter the bus business. The cab business was doing all right, but it dawned on me that Tampa was growing out into the suburbs; but Tampa Electric had not laid one foot of new track so that their cars could go on out and serve the expanding suburban area. I just decided it was high time. Jacksonville had buses; they had gotten rid of their streetcars. It was the trend - it was Tampa's turn."

ENTER TRANSIT BUSES

In January 1940, Grandoff entered into an agreement with the owners of the Jacksonville Transit Company to lease four small buses on a mileage basis. His newly organized company was to be known as Tampa Transit Lines, Inc. At first all four buses operated on a route stretching through downtown Tampa from north Jackson Heights to south Palma Ceia.

Grandoff chose his bus drivers from the ranks of his Economy Cab drivers. Carl Cunningham was one of the first, and he tells us how it was in the beginning:

"Tony started Tampa Transit with four little buses. He put me and Johnny Segalis and J.C. Brown driving from Palma Ceia to Jackson Heights. All the maids would go from Jackson Heights to Palma Ceia and back. There were no streetcars running that way. We were working sixteen to eighteen hours each day and we were making .18 per hour. After a while we got a raise to .20. The people who were driving - I was doing pretty good at the time. I was driving a pretty good car."

A one-route bus line was not Grandoff's idea of a modern transit system. He wanted to branch out, to operate his buses on Florida Avenue between Waters Avenue and downtown. A city permit to operate the original route between Jackson Heights and Palma Ceia was secured with little or no opposition. But now Tampa Electric Company began to "see the handwriting on the wall' and, as Grandoff puts it, began to exercise their "City Hall clout".

STAMPEDING CITY HALL

In his autobiography titled Tony, Grandoff tells of his problems surrounding the expansion of his bus system:

"My first application was for a permit to operate a 50 bus system on Florida Avenue from downtown to Waters
Avenue, a distance of about five miles. There were no trolleys on Florida Avenue as they ran up Tampa Street to Buffalo and across Buffalo to Central Avenue and then north on Central Avenue to Broad Street and east to Nebraska Avenue, then north to Sulphur Springs pool.

"With Tampa Electric's clout, I was turned down when I applied for the Florida Avenue permit. We already had the buses for the run in Tampa, so I ran an ad in the Tribune about the turnover of the application and asked the citizens of Florida Avenue and three to five blocks east and west of Florida Avenue to accept a free bus ride to City Hall the next time the City Council met. They flooded the Council Chambers, but to no avail; we were turned down again. At the following Council meeting we packed the Council Chamber with the same result of another turnover. The Council figured we would give up, but by that time the daily papers had picked up this interesting controversy. The following Council meeting the number of people attending was larger than the prior two meetings and their anger began to show in their statements to the City Council. This preserverance paid off as they granted our first permit. We secured permits to operate on different streets and routes without any more need to pack the City Council Chambers with clamoring citizens.3

HERE COMES HARTLINE

And so this was the beginning of what is now known as "HARTLINE"; Hillsborough Area Rapid Transit. Grandoff owned and operated Tampa Transit Lines from January 1940 until September 1941 when he was bought out by National City Lines. This Chicago-based organization ran the system for the next thirty years. But toward the end they had permitted the quality of the service to the public and the condition of the equipment to deteriorate to the point that revenue was not supporting the operating costs. Finally in February 1971 the Company failed to sign an agreement with the union representing the drivers and a general strike was called February 28. On April 12, 1971, one and one-half months later, the City of Tampa took over the operation and again buses rolled on the streets of Tampa.

As Hillsborough County grew, the need for public transportation serving the outlying areas became apparent. The logical solution to the problem was for the County to take over the operation of the City's bus system and expand its service into the County. So during the early '80s the transition was made and today all of Hillsborough County has a modern transportation system that its citizens may be proud of. But let us not forget it all started through the imagination and foresight of a former bicycle messenger boy.

NOTES


2 Mormino, Gary and Pizzo, Anthony; Tampa, the Treasure City. Tulsa, Oklahoma; Heritage Press Inc., 1983.

for family and friends; copy presented to author 1987.


5 Taped interview with Carl Cunningham, October 19, 1987.