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REMINISCENCES OF A LECTOR: CUBAN CIGAR WORKERS IN TAMPA*

by Louis A. Pérez, Jr.

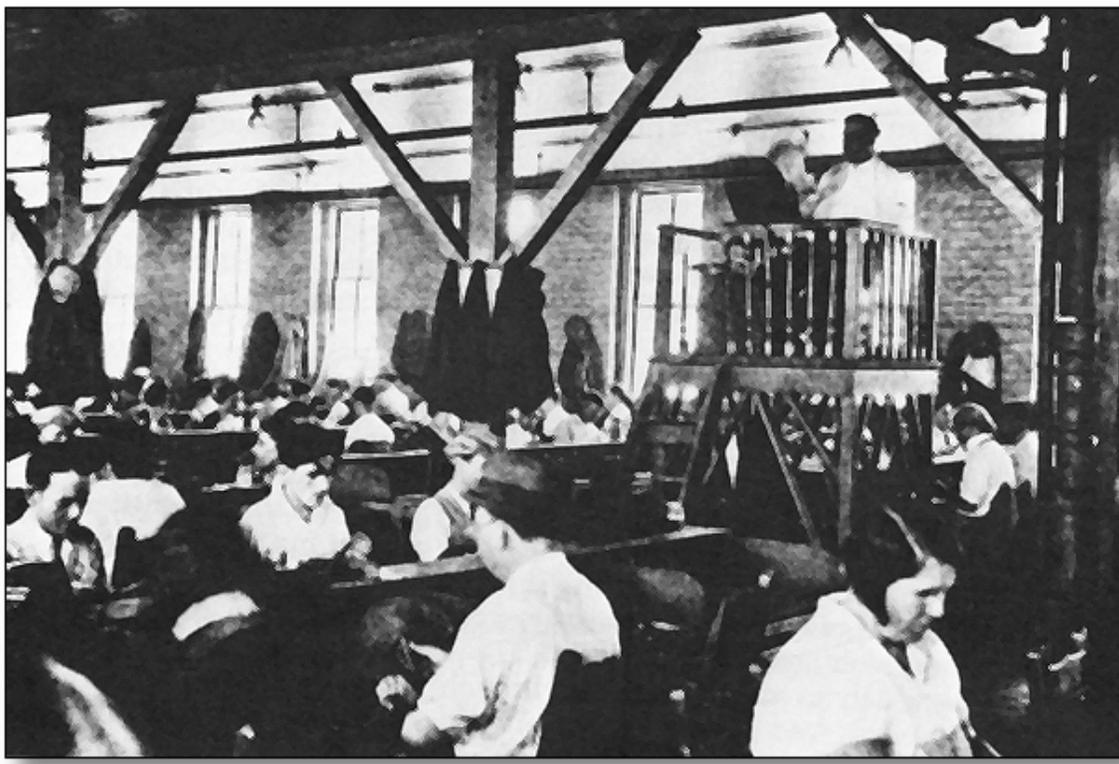
In the latter half of the nineteenth century, increased tobacco imports revived the historico-economic nexus between Cuba and Florida. In Key West, Tampa, Ocala, and Jacksonville cigar factories opened to process Havana tobacco. Thousands of Cubans arrived in Florida to work and most of them established themselves permanently.

The labor milieu from which cigar workers emerged defined the essential quality of the Cuban community in Florida. A highly developed proletarian consciousness and a long tradition of trade union militancy accompanied the Cuban tobacco workers to the United States.¹ In Florida that tradition flourished. In the 1890s, cigar makers provided the crucial margin of support for Cuba's independence struggle.² During the early decades of the twentieth century, Tampa workers embraced a variety of radical ideologies, including communism, anarchism and syndicalism. The Cuban proletarian community existed precariously in an adversary relationship with its host society. Strikes, walk-outs, lock-outs, and, inevitably, violence characterized labor-management relations in the Tampa cigar industry.³

The reader or lector in the cigar factories often served as a disseminator of the proletarian tradition. The idea of reading (*lectura*) to illiterates or to workers busily engaged in their activities had existed in the early nineteenth century primarily among prisoners in Cuban jails. By mid-century, the *lectura* had begun to appear in the Cuban cigar factories.⁴ Under the auspices of the cigar workers, the *lectura* expanded its scope to include the reading of the proletarian press, translation of foreign novels, and, in general, the promotion of labor causes. Almost immediately, management became suspicious and hostile, and controversy surrounded the institution.⁵

The *lectura* arrived in Florida without any significant modification in function. Readers continued to disseminate news from a variety of labor presses, they translated the local English-language daily and entertained the workers with weekly installments of current novels.⁶ By the 1890s, however, the *lector* began to emerge as a powerful voice of Cuban independence sentiment. In addition to their other responsibilities, the *lectores* assumed the task of spreading separatist propaganda, appealing for funds, and calling for volunteers to take up arms in the cause of Cuban independence. Since the *lectores* were the major readers and interpreters of news they were in a position to influence and mold the attitudes and thinking of the workers in the factories. Even after the war and with Cuban independence a fact, the *lectores* continued in their influential role. By the early 1900s, labor militancy began to find expression in the *lectores'* reading materials. As the radical press and social protest novels increased in popularity among the workers, management in Tampa singled out the *lectura* as the major source of labor agitation. Between the early 1900s and the 1920s, the fate of the *lectura* remained contingent on the

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From his elevated platform the *lector* both entertained and educated by reading material selected by the cigarworkers who paid for the service.

Photograph from *National Geographic Magazine*, January, 1930.

outcome of periodic confrontations between labor and management.⁷ Finally, in December 1931, after several weeks of strife, the cigar manufacturers, supported by city and county authorities and vigilante groups, announced the decision to abolish the *lectura*: “Heretofore the manufacturers have, through agreement with the workers, permitted the reading of matters of general news value, educational or instructive, but the abuse of this privilege through the reading of anarchistic propaganda has caused the manufacturers to immediately withdraw the privilege of reading any matter whatsoever.”⁸ A strike of cigar workers as a result of the manufacturers’ edict received the support of virtually every business in Ybor City and West Tampa. The general strike of 1931, however, did not weaken the resolve of management. They realized the dangers of unchecked lectores and they stood resolute. When the factories reopened in early December 1931 the *lectura* had been abolished.

Abelardo Gutiérrez Díaz was one of the thousands of young men who had emigrated from Spain to America at the turn of the century to avoid military service in the Spanish colonial wars in Africa. After residing several years in Cuba, Sr. Gutiérrez Díaz arrived in Tampa to earn a living as a *lector*, a trade he had acquired in Havana. By the late 1920s, Don Abelardo’s reading skills enabled him to join what was to be the last generation of Tampa *lectores*. Sr. Gutiérrez Díaz’s reminiscences result from an oral history interview taped in Tampa on February 19, 1974.

Shortly after the Spanish transcription, Abelardo Gutiérrez Díaz passed away at the age of eighty-one. The following has been edited and translated from the original Spanish copy.⁹

I served as a *lector* during the late 1920s and early 1930s. We continued in Tampa the system that had accompanied the cigar industry from Cuba. Most *lectores* came from the ranks of the cigar workers themselves. Periodically try-outs were scheduled to recruit new *lectores*. I went to one such trial, in 1926 I believe, at the urging of my wife. I passed and I was accepted. From that time on, I worked in several of the cigar factories as a *lector*. Almost all the *lectores* were Cuban or Spanish; I myself am Spanish. The cigar workers had an enormous potential for education, even when they could not read. The *lectura* was itself a veritable system of education dealing with a variety of subjects, including politics, labor, literature, and international relations.

We had four daily shifts (*turnos*). One was used to read national news stories. Another was devoted to international political developments. The third concerned itself entirely with news from the proletariat press. And, lastly, the novel.

In the morning the day's reading started with national news, usually Spanish translations of the English-language press. Responsibility for these translations rested on one man, most commonly a senior *lector* with facility in English. He would then make copies and distribute them among the *lectores*. After reading the Spanish translation of national news, we read news from Cuban dailies, such as *Diario de la Marina*.¹⁰ Cuban newspapers arrived in Tampa regularly throughout this period.

International labor news was drawn from a variety of sources. Proletariat newspapers, however, came largely from Spain and Italy. These were partisan newspapers; some were anarchist, others were communist. All were read. There really was not much radicalism among the workers during the time I served as a *lector*. To be honest, I frankly did not like to read anarchist and communist publications. I did not fully understand these systems and cared less for the ideas expounded. The workers, however, asked that they be read. And, of course, regardless of the *lector's* personal feeling, one simply could not read what he wanted. One was paid to read materials demanded by the cigar workers, not judge them.

And then the novel. The novel was also chosen by the cigar workers. There was a vote. Four or five novels by different authors would be submitted to a vote; the novel winning the largest number of votes determined the book selected for the *lectura*. The novel was read in installments, some twenty or thirty minutes per daily session. Every day a section would be read until the novel was completed. At that time, another election would determine the next novel.

Almost all the novels chosen were by Spanish authors like Armando Palacio Valdés¹¹ and Pérez Galdós.¹² Zola also enjoyed enormous popularity among the workers. At the beginning, almost all the novels involved serious themes, usually labor-related subjects—that was a time when the factories were made up almost entirely of men. Afterwards, during the late 1920s, women entered the factories in increasing numbers. And through the very force of the women's vote, we began to read more romantic novels and material treating the dashing adventurers.



Staff of *La Traducción*, one of Ybor City's Spanish-language newspapers.

Photograph courtesy of Florida State Archives.

There were at least as many *lectores* as there were factories. No, usually more, for some served as substitutes to cover for those who were taken ill or for some other reason failed to appear at his factory. I had two factories in which to read. One was very large. I could not cover all the periods and thus read only the translations. At the other one, a smaller factory, I read the news and the novel.

The *lector* during the period in which I read did not have the benefit of a loud-speaker system. It was all through the strength of one's voice (*fuerso de grito*). In one factory, such as the Martínez Ybor factory which contained some 300 cigar workers, one had to read loud enough to be heard by everyone. It was an enormous effort. One enterprising *lector*, seeking to improve the system and thereby make his life easier, introduced into the factory a loudspeaker. But the lector's voice through the megaphone annoyed the majority of workers; it was too metallic, they complained, In deference to the workers' protest, the lector abandoned the loudspeaker.

The cigar workers paid the lector a quota. Invariably, it amounted to approximately twenty-five cents weekly. That's all. Our weekly wage depended on the number of cigar workers. Usually



Men and women cigarmakers in Tampa during the 1920s.

our pay ranged somewhere between \$35.00 to \$45.00 a week. Almost all the cigar workers paid regularly without incident. Obviously a situation in which a 300-man factory had only twelve paying workers would have been intolerable. The president of the *lectura*, charged with distributing the *lectores* and selecting the materials for the day, was entrusted with the responsibility of keeping order and making certain everyone paid his weekly allowance. Not everyone was obliged to contribute. Everyone who understood Spanish, however, was asked to pay. It once happened that an old man in one of the factories in which I read refused to pay. I approached the president and informed him of the problem. “Look,” I said, “so and so does not want to pay, What do you want to do?” The president interviewed the old man and learned that it all stemmed from the Cuban war for independence. Apparently the Spanish had mistreated him during the 1890s; since that time, he had a hatred of all Spaniards. And since I was a Spaniard, he vowed he would not pay to hear a Spaniard read the news. And there it rested. Because of his advanced age nothing was ever done, in spite of pressure to dismiss him from the factory. Otherwise, all workers paid us regularly without problems,

Since one of the requirements necessary to become a *lector* involved literary skills, almost all *lectores* had received some form of formal education. But perhaps as important, one had to read with feeling (*leer con sentido*). More than anything else, one had to act out his material. Take the

novel, for example. One had to interpret. The *lector* had to be something of an actor. He had to breathe life into his protagonists. The old lady—the old man: when they argued, when they yelled. All that. You know, it was not all that easy.

And quite naturally, there were favorite *lectores*. Some *lectores* were sought after more than others. There was often competition among factories to secure the service of a particularly gifted *lector*. Those who had the theatrical flair, who portrayed the protagonists with style and drama—these men were typically the most popular. There was one case of a *lector* who did not have a powerful voice, but who was a tremendous performer. He was an artist - today he would have been a film star.

And there were difficulties and bad times. Because we read and disseminated the labor press, we incurred the hostility of the factory owners. We were accused of making communist propaganda. That simply was not true. The cigar worker paid, and one had to read precisely what the cigar workers wanted. Management did not approve of this system. It was at the height of one of these controversies that they abolished the *lectura*. They removed the platform on which we sat. At this point, the workers took to the streets. The mayor personally inquired into the nature of the problem. We informed him we wanted the *lectura* restored. We were informed that management would reinstate the *lectura* only if the material read to the workers was approved beforehand by the owners. And naturally, since it was not the factory owners who paid out wages— it was the factory—we could not accept; similarly, the workers rejected a system in which management selected the materials presented.¹³ The *lectura* ended in 1931. After the strike, many *lectores* returned to the factories as cigar workers. And I, with a compatriot, opened up a little café in Ybor.

¹ For the Cuban antecedents see Garpar M. Jorge García Galló, *El tabaquero cubano* (Havana, 1936).

² John C. Appel, “The Unionization of Florida Cigar-makers and the Coming of the War With Spain,” *Hispanic American Historical Review*, XXXVI (February 1956), 38-49.

³ Evelio Tellería Toca, “Los Tabaqueros Cubanos y sus Luchas en Coyo Hueso y Tampa,” *Bohemia*, April 28, 1967, 18-23, 113; Martín Duarte Hurtado, “La lucha de tabaqueros en Tampa y Cayo Hueso,” *Granma*, January 2, 1967. 2.

⁴ José Rivero Muñiz, “La lectura en las tabaquerías,” *Revista de la Biblioteca Nacional*, II (October-December 1951), 102-22. See also “La lectura en las tabaquerías,” *Hoy*, May 1, 1943, 78.

⁵ Ramiro Guerra y Sánchez *et al.*, *Historio de la nación cubana*, 10 vols. (Havana, 1952), VII, 249-52.

⁶ José Rivero Muñiz, “Los cubanos en Tampa,” *Revista Bimestre Cubana*, LXXIV (Primer Semestre 1958), 40-42.

⁷ Ramón Tapia, “Diary of a Tampa Man in a Cigar Factory,” unpublished manuscript, photocopy, Florida Collection, University of South Florida Library, Tampa.

⁸ *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 27, 1931.

⁹ A special acknowledgement is extended to Ms. Sarah Cipollone whose assistance with transcriptions between 1973 and 1974 contributed to the progress of the University of South Florida Oral History Project.

¹⁰ *Diario de la Marina* was a Havana daily, particularly popular with the Spanish expatriate community in Cuba.

¹¹ Armando Palacio Valdés (1853-1938) was an author of no particular world view who excelled in a literature of light entertainment.

¹² Benito Pérez Galdós (1843-1920) wrote some eighty books recreating life in nineteenth-century Spain and analyzing many of the social problems of the period.

¹³ Sr. Gutiérrez may have been referring to a speech given to the strikers by former Mayor Perry G. Wall: “Now, I have no doubt the question of permitting you to have men read to you in the factories may be adjusted. I think it is a splendid thing to have someone to read to you while you work, but I do think the literature should be passed on by a competent authority. The shows we see in theaters have to be approved. The books we read must be approved. It is part of the duty of the government to teach, in schools and after the people have left the schools.” See the *Tampa Morning Tribune*, November 30, 1931.