1989

Another Time - And Another Tampa

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Recommended Citation
Groff, Dana M. Jr. (1989) "Another Time - And Another Tampa," Sunland Tribune: Vol. 15 , Article 5. Available at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune/vol15/iss1/5

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If you’ve called this city your home for the last 15 or 20 years, you should certainly have a time frame to draw a comparison to change. Tampa is no longer the Cracker Town it once was. But if you were living in this town, say 50 years ago or so, you’ve seen a metamorphosis unparalleled to anything in nature.

As a native of 39 years, this writer grew up knowing another Tampa (South Tampa); a smaller slower place where folks were fewer and sometimes friendlier. Crime was on a smaller scale with bootlegged whisky and
Bolita. Drugs back then were aspirin and Pepto Bismol. Of course, Tampa had its share of crime in government, with an occasional politician or sheriff turning his head for a payoff, but for the most part, we were 'small time' with the only crime being unorganized.

We had fewer roads, fewer cars and no Interstate system then. There was no Brandon, no Carrollwood, or a university called South Florida. Odessa and Lutz were about the size of this column, and Dale Mabry was running through rural pastures long before it reached the infamous Waters Avenue intersection of today. Beach Park was still a wilderness, with dusty roads leading to the Bay, and plenty of good fishing on the grass flats beyond. Britton Plaza was Tampa's first forerunner to a modern mall, and downtown Tampa was still the heart of the town for merchants such as Maas Brothers and Wolf Brothers.

I recall being with a group of chums in the Tampa Theater once, and almost being evicted because we were laughing too loudly at a 'B' movie. There were only two high schools back then: H.B. Plant and Hillsborough. Obviously, their rivalry exists today because of their heritage. The Colonnade restaurant then catered as a hangout to Plant students (for two generations), serving Cokes with olives at car windows. Palma Ceia and Old Hyde Park were more easily defined, and "Beer Can Beach" was a good place to go parking on Davis Island. MacDill AFB was isolated by palmettos that harbored plenty of rattlesnakes, and there was a swampy area between south Himes and Dale Mabry at Gandy, with a good size gator in it. I remember radio stations like WFLA and WDAE and, later, rock music emerging on the dial from WLCY and WALT. Back then, mosquito trucks fogged the streets on summer nights, and fire ants were just migrating into the area along with the growing flux of seasonal tourists. Tampa's mild climate was a secret no more, with Busch Gardens opening its gates without an admission fee.

I grew up knowing sunburn and sandspurs, and recall climbing a Cherry Guava tree in our backyard, and eating the fruit until I was ill. In 1960, I remember standing with my father on Bayshore Boulevard, looking out onto a dried up Hillsborough Bay during Hurricane Donna. Tampa Bay was a bit cleaner then, breeding healthy oysters that you could eat, and enough good fishing to keep anglers busy within sight of land.

Times sure have changed, for the best and otherwise. Today, Tampa is a sprawling metropolitan city with its fair share of people, pollution, crime, drainage problems and zoning disputes. Older neighborhoods have changed with new generations, and some are threatened with multi-family and commercial development. The city, in many cases, has hardly kept pace with its many problems. Did we not see it all coming? Maybe and maybe not, but it's nice to think of another time-and another Tampa.