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Robert Mugge - Pioneer Tampan

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Robert Mugge, a blond German came to America in 1869 at age 17. He was born Jan. 5, 1852 in Lauterberg, Germany. He looked up some relatives in Terre Haute, Indiana.

He was soon followed by his entire family; his parents, a brother Louis; a sister Bertha, and her husband, Louis Mann.
Robert Mugge was a jeweler by trade. In Indiana he married Alice McCullough, a milliner, and they had three sons. After the death of his father, who is buried in Terre Haute, Robert Mugge, who suffered from asthma, decided to go south to Cuba. The family most probably boarded a schooner in Mobile, which was to take them to Cuba via Tampa, Florida. The ship remained in Tampa for a few days to unload its cargo and since Robert Mugge like the village, he decided to remain. This must have been in 1875.

His folks in Indiana followed shortly thereafter. Louis Mann, his brother-in-law, was a tailor and they decided to go into business together and as a sideline they opened a grocery and general merchandise store. He bought a quarter of a block of land located at the northeast corner of Marion and Jackson streets. According to records in the court house, he paid $50 for it. He erected a two-story wooden building. The store faced Marion Street with rooms for rent on the second floor. The family lived in another two-story building in the rear facing Jackson Street.

YELLOW FEVER STRIKES

In 1876 Mugge took out naturalization papers and became an American citizen. In February 1879, his wife Alice and their three sons died of the yellow fever and were buried in Oaklawn Cemetery. The graves are unmarked since the markers in those days were made of cedar wood.

A few years later, Robert Mugge wished to remarry and corresponded with Caroline Rautenstrauch who lived in Goslar.
Germany. She came to America by boat and landed in Fernandina, Florida, where she and Robert Mugge were married Oct. 12, 1882. Mugge had chartered a schooner owned by Captain George Hansen of Tampa. The schooner traveled around the state of Florida to arrive in Fernandina. They returned to Tampa by the same schooner.

Tom died in September 1898 from typhoid fever and Alice in 1902 a few days after birth. (Some of the children were named after presidents and Nellie was named after Mrs. Adolphus Busch of Anheuser-Busch Company fame. Mr. and Mrs. Busch spent their winters at the Tampa Bay Hotel and the two families were close friends.)

Robert Mugge died Dec. 17, 1915, at age 63, and was buried in a newly acquired family plot in Woodlawn Cemetery. The funeral was reported to be one of the largest ever held in Tampa and was held from the family home on a Sunday morning. Robert Mugge devoted his life to the building of Tampa which he loved so well. He would invest every dollar he made in Tampa thereby giving employment to thousands of breadwinners. He was a law-abiding citizen and would not tolerate any violation of any kind by his employees. He and his estate in later years paid well over $1,000,000 in City and County taxes in addition to a large number of occupational licenses.
In 1922, Caroline Mugge and three of her daughters moved into a new home on Hills Avenue in Hyde Park. The family home and buildings on Marion and Jackson Streets were demolished and a two-story brick building was erected on this property. The building was leased to a Ford Agency for ten years. Presently, 1989, a ground level parking lot is located on this property.

Upon his death, The Tampa Tribune published this eulogy:

A GREAT MAN GONE

Robert Mugge was an old citizen of Tampa but not an old man, and was a remarkable character. A man of intelligence and business acumen. One of the most enterprising of our citizens. A man of energy; he fought the battles for fortune unsurpassed though afflicted physically. This was a "great" man, though few people knew it, nor did he. Greatness does not consist in any one attribute. There are many kinds of greatness. Mugge was great in his defiance of public opinion. Fashion and customs he did not regard. He was great in that he had a courage that the mediocrity do not know.

I am going to say that this man was earnestly honest, and honesty is a virtue. I do not believe that he loved money, but he certainly did like the game of finance. Had he been worth $20,000,000 he would have been the same plain, simple, earnest working man. I knew him, I thought quite well of him, and I know that he was a friend to his friends. Though he was a much hounded and persecuted man, it is a fact that he cared little for the javalins of his enemies - those who did not see things as he did. He was a strong" man, I mean a "great" man.

Let the Bay View Hotel be his memory. Are we not proud of it?

Following his death, The Tribune wrote:

GOODBYE, BAY VIEW!
‘Implosion’ Wrecks Tampa landmark, Feb. 24, 1980

--Photo by HAMPTON DUNN, Copyright 1980
CHRISTMAS IN FEBRUARY

"It is told that Mr. Mugge operated the only store here which dealt in Christmas toys and such articles... one holiday season he had ordered his usual shipment from Mobile, which was to come forward by schooner. The Christmas ship was caught in a storm and was damaged so badly that it was necessary for it to go into dry dock for several weeks, missing its trip to Tampa.

As Christmas approached and no consignment of toys had been received, nor any possibility for receiving them was held out, it was decided to postpone Christmas.

Many native Tampans or old time residents of the city remember the postponed Christmas. The ship finally arrived along in February, according to Sheriff W. C. Spencer, who was a child at the time and upon whose mind the delayed celebration was greatly impressed.

With the receipt of Christmas goods by Mugge's store, arrangements were made for an unseasonal visit of Santa Claus, and Christmas went off just as if the ship had been on time and Santa had made his usual rounds on December 25.

Robert Mugge first attracted attention in December 1884 when he put up the first street lights in town in front of his Marion Street home and Bottling Plant. Said The Tampa Tribune: "Mugge’s example is one that many other good citizens would do well to follow."

CHANGES BUSINESS INTERESTS

In the early nineties the first floor of the building in which the grocery and general store was located was transformed into living quarters for the family. The building in the back was used for storage purposes. Robert Mugge abandoned the grocery, general store and jewelry business.

He became the sole owner of the following enterprises:

BOTTLING PLANT. It must have been in the early 90s when Robert Mugge erected the Bottling Plant adjoining his home on Marion Street with Caroline Mugge’s garden in between the plant and their home. In the rear of the Bottling Shop was a huge wooden tank into which water was pumped daily from a well. In the shop itself, in one
corner was the boiler room and in another the syrup room where Robert Mugge concocted the various syrups which were used in the manufacture of lemon, strawberry, sarsparilla, and soda water. Old time machinery, the bottles were individually filled by a machine operated by the bottler, Robert Mugge. In another corner were the vats where the bottles were washed.

MORE ABOUT THE BOTTLES . . .

In the fall of 1988, during excavation of Marion Street in preparation for the construction of the Hartline Bus Mall which will provide a central public transportation hub for Tampans, many broken bottles were dug up in the area of Jackson and Marion streets.

Ironically, Lee R. Cullens, Jr. of Clearwater, superintendent of Nelson Construction Company, who is very distantly related to the Mugge family by marriage and who knew nothing of the family history of earlier days, brought a bottle home with the name "Robert Mugge" on it. When Lee Cullens’ nieces saw the bottle they knew immediately that the bottle belonged to their great, great grandfather. The bottle had been buried in the ground for over a century. The unused, broken bottles had been used as a border for the paths in Caroline Mugge’s garden. Recent correspondence and pictures from granddaughter, Marie Mugge Diegelmann of Germany, confirms the bottles were indeed used in Caroline Mugge’s garden. Marie was born in Tampa and lived on Pierce Street during her childhood and remembers well the gardens of her grandmother.

ELECTRIC LIGHT PLANT. In the latter part of the 80s he built an Electric Light Plant on his property on Central Avenue. It would start to operate at six in the evening and close down at midnight. Often the lights were very dim and often there were breakdowns. The boilers were at first fed with wood hauled from his acreage at Bloomingdale where the trees were felled and hauled in dummy engines and in teams to the factory. Later two huge tanks were sunk into the ground filled with oil which supplied the boilers. The plant never was a financial success. Mugge was instrumental in the building of an Electric Light Plant In Port Tampa City, selling, in 1891, the machinery and equipment adequate for a plant of sufficient power to serve the town including 25 miles of wire at one-half of what it would have cost from the manufacturer. There is a letter in existence dated July 15, 1891 to Captain J. W. Fitzgerald, general superintendent of the P. & O., in which he made the offer to sell. The plant was in operation for many years.
ICE MANUFACTURING PLANT. It was imperative that Mugge build this Plant, since he had secured the agency of the Anheuser-Busch Brewing Company of St. Louis, brewers of Budweiser and other beers, draft and bottle. He eventually went into the wholesale and retail liquor business and had saloons in all sections of Tampa, St. Petersburg, Port Tampa City and Plant City. The wholesale establishment was located on Franklin Street in the 300 block, adjoining the city hall.

DISTILLERY. Robert Mugge became the owner of the first legalized distillery in the state of Florida. This was located in a wooden structure at the corner of Cass Street and Central Avenue.

NEW ORLEANS-TAMPA TRANSPORTATION LINE. This was created in 1900. The Eva L Shenton, a three-master, which brought as its cargo, not only his goods, but was utilized by other merchants in Tampa. He chartered another ship that ran to Havana and Honduras. This ship sank during a terrific storm between Honduras and New Orleans. The storm in 1901 destroyed Galveston and the venture was abandoned. Robert Mugge owned some property along the waterfront. This was sold in 1925 to clear the right-of-way for the Platt Street Bridge.

SUNLIGHT MANUFACTURING COMPANY. In 1906 he became interested in this company. It produced individual operated gas installations for small towns where there were no gas accommodations. He became a stock holder and erected a two-story brick structure at the corner of Cass and Central Avenue in which the machine shop was housed. Later the firm went bankrupt and Robert Mugge took it over. It never was a paying investment and it was liquidated in 1921.

ROBERT MUGGE-THE BUILDER

AMUSEMENT PARK. In 1896 in partnership with B.M. Balbontin, a Spaniard, he operated an amusement park. It was located outside the city limits in the eastern part of Tampa and was known as Palmetto Beach or DeSoto Park. A dancing pavilion was built on the property in connection with a bar. The Forpaugh Family, trapeze artists, gave open air performances, with a balloon ascension in the afternoon. The balloon would ascend after having been filled with smoke and a parachute attached to it. The balloonist would perform all kinds of stunts before the parachute was detached. The balloon would fall to the ground or at times in the bay or in a tree. Bowling alleys were installed and a bath house was built. Great crowds came, mostly of the Cuban population. The old pavilion stood for many years even after the park had become city property.

During 1900 and 1913, he built a number of brick buildings and houses in all sections of Tampa. Some of them are:

One-story brick building at the corner of Scott and Central.

Two-story brick building at the corner of Central and Harrison.

Two-story brick building at the corner of Cass and Central.

Two-story building opposite Union Station.

Two-story building at the corner of 7th Ave. and 22nd St.
There were other brick buildings in West Tampa.

In 1906 Mugge leased a vacant lot at the northwest corner of Cass and Franklin Streets for 20 years and proceeded to erect a two-story brick building. Before it was completed, the second floor, which was to be occupied by an Armory was destroyed by fire.

**BAY VIEW HOTEL.** In 1912 he built a ten-story warehouse on Jackson Street between Franklin and Tampa Streets. It was a very unsuitable location with no railroad track or wharfage. The building was built of reinforced concrete. After its completion, he planned to change it into a hotel at an enormous expense. On each floor there was a large, ornately decorated lounge. Said Mugge "The way I've got it figured out this hotel is a cross between a YMCA and a ten-story bar room." The finished hotel was completed in January 1915 and was called the Bay View. The formal opening took place on Jan. 16, 1915. The hotel was demolished in 1980 to make way for the Paragon Building.

Before converting the warehouse into a hotel, he erected a three-story brick building at the corner of Central Avenue and Harrison Street which was intended as a hotel for the black population. The Central Hotel was completed in late spring of 1914.

Robert Mugge never employed an architect. He had a foreman by the name of B. H. Davidson. He would inform him of his plans and gave him a free hand. Robert Mugge's son, August B. Mugge, returned from his schooling in Germany with a degree in engineering and architecture and in 1914 supervised the completion of the Bay View Hotel with Mr. Davidson as foreman.

**BEACH HOUSE.** In 1912 he built a summer home for the family in Anna Maria Key. The entire family took turns in visiting the island every summer. Robert Mugge never saw the house. The house stands to this day and is owned by Fernando and Gladys Torres of Tampa.

**ROBERT MUGGE-THE MAN**

Clad only with an undershirt, trousers, shoes and coat, Mugge would conduct his business. He wore bluish linen clothes, winter and summer the same and he was spotlessly clean. He was endowed with boundless energy, going full speed an average of 18 hours out of 24. He never employed a bookkeeper, nor owned a typewriter or adding machine. His office was a small space in the center of the wholesale establishment on Franklin Street where you could see a high desk with a stool and in the back of this, a small table and arm-chair. He transferred by hand from the order book to the bills which had to be collected on Monday morning. All letters were written by hand, no receipts kept, he had a remarkable memory and could give you an answer at a moment's notice. He could talk with you while he was writing letters or listening over the phone. At this time he would converse with Mr. Davidson, his plumbers or electricians in reference to a building under construction. He would read the daily papers while he was eating.

In 1901 he became a member of the Board of Public Works. He aided many worthy causes, among them the Children's Home located on Washington and Marion Streets. His name appeared on the list of the month as one of the highest contributors.

In 1908 he wrote a book, in conjunction with Captain John R. Jones of Anna Maria Key, entitled "Practical Humanity." The book was published.
THE SPANISH-AMERICAN WAR

In 1898, during the Spanish-American War, American troops were brought to Tampa by rail and they marched down Franklin Street to the northern part of the city where they were encamped. The camp was in the neighborhood of Michigan Avenue (now Columbus Drive). The soldiers were mostly volunteers from the west and were commanded by General Shafter, who had his headquarters in the Tampa Bay Hotel. Robert Mugge built a large saloon in an orange grove near the camp. The contractor had to build the entire structure in one day, including fixtures. The counter had a length of 80 feet and the soldiers were served by eight bartenders. It was open at all times and was known as the "Noah's Ark." When Tampa was first mentioned as an embarkation for the troops, Robert Mugge wired Anheuser-Busch for a trainload of beer. The company wired back: "There will not be a war and we do not sell beer by the trainload." But there was a war and he got beer by the trainload. The "Green Goose Saloon" in Port Tampa also was supplied. The soldiers embarked from Port Tampa for Cuba, in all about 50,000 men. On the day the treaty was signed in August, the Noah's Ark was destroyed by fire.

THE OIL PAINTING

There is a story attached to the picture of Robert Mugge taken in 1915. At the time the Bay View Hotel was completed, Robert Mugge installed bowling alleys and pool tables on his property on Franklin Street. On a Sunday morning, a photographer appeared and wished to take a picture of the alleys. On the finished picture, in the left-hand corner of a long roll, appeared the picture of Robert Mugge reading the newspaper. This being the only picture of Mr. Mugge in existence the photographer enlarged the picture and shaded in the background dark. A few years following Mr. Mugge's death in December 1915, his son August Mugge observed some paintings of former Tampa mayors on the walls of various council chambers. He secured the name of the artist from former Mayor D.B. McKay. A German artist, Wilhelm Teschner, was given permission to paint, in oil, this enlarged picture at a cost of $25. The artist had gotten small advances on the promised $25 and when the picture was finished the family was so well pleased they gave him an additional $75. A few months later the artist's body was found in an attic in Ybor City, with a brush and palette in his hands. He must have died of a heart attack. Since there were no relatives, the City of Tampa provided a lot in Woodlawn Cemetery and friends got up a 11 purse" to pay for funeral expenses. A Methodist minister officiated.

(Editor's Note: Margaret Regener Hurner is the granddaughter of Robert Mugge.)

SOURCES

Information taken from: "Memoirs " a biography of Robert Mugge, authored by his son, August B. Mugge.

Also from the book "Tampa" by Karl H. Grismer, and various newspaper clippings over the years.