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Arsenio M. Sanchez

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TAMPA EARLY LIGHTING AND TRANSPORTATION

By ARSENIO M. SANCHEZ

An early Tampa Electric Company (not the present Co.) was organized on January 29, 1887.

About three months later the company brought the first Electric lights to the city of Tampa. A small Westinghouse generator was brought in and two arc lights were erected, one at the corner of Franklin and Washington Streets; and one in front of the brand new "Dry Goods Palace."

Tampa's first "light show" took place Monday, April 28, 1887. Word got around and people came from all parts of town to witness the event.

The Tampa Journal recorded the occasion by saying, "The amazed throng could hardly believe that the stygian darkness could be dispelled so miraculously by current coming through a wire.

Dazzling bright though these arc lights were, they were at best a qualified success, sputtering, crackling and hissing, they went out with dismaying frequency.

FIRST LIGHTING CONTRACT

Judging from what they saw, the City fathers on Sept. 13, 1887 met with the City Council and awarded the fledgling company a ten-year contract to provide street lighting. Twelve arc lights at 60 cents a night to be provided.

After signing the contract the electric company became expansion-minded. More powerful generators were needed; and to obtain money to buy them, the company was reorganized, becoming Tampa Light & Power Company, with Solon B. Turman as President.

Tampa had to wait for its lights, however. An epidemic of yellow fever struck the city, bringing progress to a halt; and the new electric light system was not installed until May of 1888. A power plant was built at the corner of Tampa and Cass Streets.

Poles were erected and arc lights were put at major Tampa and Ybor City intersections.

Still in its infancy, the corporation had plenty of woes -financial and mechanical. It had the street light contract, of course, but few people wanted their homes or offices wired for electric lighting. Electricity was feared as dangerous. Besides, it was unreliable. Oil lanterns were safe and dependable.

Even though Thomas Edison's invention of the incandescent light astounded the world on December 21, 1879, commercial use of the electric light was not utilized until later on.

NEW COMPANY FOUNDED
Revenues were far below expectations. To make matters worse, the company's generators kept breaking down. Finally, in March, 1890 the company's local backers threw in the sponge and sold out to a syndicate headed by J. Rush Ritter, Philadelphia. Thus was formed the Florida Electric Company, incorporated at $50,000. The new company hadn't been in business long before it got into a rate squabble with the city. The city felt the 60-cents per night rate was too high, even though the old company had lost money.

Ultimately, the two came to an agreement. Signed December 8, 1890, a three-year contract called for the company to provide twelve, 2,000-candle-power arcs at $11 a month each and 193 32-candlepower incandescent lamps at $2 a month.

Railroad magnate Henry Plant believed the city was destined to become a winter resort and built the extravagantly ornate Tampa Bay Hotel on the Hillsborough River. The $3 million minaret-topped structure opened in 1891 and still stands today - as University of Tampa.

When Sydney L. Carter of Alachua county nominated Henry Mitchell for Governor of Florida at the convention in Tampa, June 1, 1892, the electric lights flickered and went out. This was a common happening in those early days, and it caused no great surprise.1

Tampa’s prospects looked so bright in the spring of 1892 that investors began fighting among themselves to gain the right to provide electric light and power for the town and also electric street railway.
BEGINNING OF ELECTRIC STREET RAILWAY

The battle began in April, 1892, when the Tampa Suburban Company, a street railway company was organized by W.H. Kendrick, E.S. Douglas and Peter O. Knight, with the financial backing of Mr. & Mrs. CW. Chapin, wealthy residents from New York. The company stated it intended to build an electric street railway from Ybor City through Tampa and down the west side of the Hillsborough River to Ballast Point.

The Tampa Street Railway Company established by Eduardo Manrara, and Vicente Martinez Ybor which began operating the steam locomotive line to Ybor City in 1886, insisted their franchise covered all parts of the city and that the Tampa Suburban had no right to build. Going to the courts, they succeeded in getting an injunction which restrained the Tampa Suburban from proceeding.

Tampa Suburban appealed, taking the case all the way to the Supreme Court, where it eventually was victorious. The litigation, of course, was quite time-consuming.

To get around this injunction, the backers of the Tampa Suburban organized a new company called the Consumers’ Electric Light & Street Railway Company. It secured a franchise to sell electric service as well as

In the unhurried days, before the age of the automobile, one of the most popular forms of amusement for Tampans was taking the trolley out to DeSoto Park or to Ballast Point for outings. Some chose to ride the open trolley to Macfarlane Park to watch a baseball game.

In 1913, of the 67 trolleys operated by the Tampa Electric Company, 63 were of the open type.
transportation. Stock was sold to local people and a generator was installed in a small sawmill near Morgan and Cass Sts. Among the stockholders of the Consumers’ were Vicente Martinez Ybor, his son Edward and Eduardo Manrara. Trolley lines were built to Ybor City and Ballast Point, late in 1892.2

When the favorable court ruling was handed down, Consumers’ leased the property of the Suburban Company.

In order to develop West Tampa as Hillsborough county’s second cigar industrial area, it was essential to provide vital transportation to Tampa and Ybor City.

An agreement was entered into on November 19, 1892 between the construction firm of Jones, Copper and Skinner and the Consumers’ Electric Light & Street Railway Company to build the Iron Fortune Street drawbridge across the Hillsborough River, close to the Ellinger cigar factory. The agreement with the construction company read that the bridge would be completed and ready for travel (use) on or before February 1, 1893. This enabled workers living east of the river to commute (as well as to help downtown merchants). Hugh Macfarlane and his associates helped finance a streetcar route from downtown Tampa into West Tampa, as part of the Consumers’ Electric Light & Street Railway Company system.

The electric street-car began running to West Tampa and Pino City, a suburb of West Tampa, in August 1893.3
Franklin Street (looking north) where several forms of transportation can be seen in use.

The Tampa Railway stopped in front of the Centro Espanol’s first clubhouse built in 1892 on 7th Avenue and 16th Street in Ybor City.
The electric streetcars that operated over the lines were the first in Florida. The car barn was at the intersection of Knight and Hills Avenue on Bayshore. There were no tracks on the river bridge at that time, and there were no paved streets. The tracks were laid with ties, like a railroad.

Meanwhile, Consumers’ competitors had not been idle. The Tampa Street Railway converted its old steam locomotives to electric and put trolley cars into operation on May 16, 1893.

With the two companies operating competing lines to Ybor City, a rate war ensued. Consumers’ reduced the fare to two cents and kept it there, bringing the older company to the brink of financial ruin. Finally, its promoters gave up. The company went into receivership and was purchased by Consumers’ on June 18, 1894.

Thus in 1894 Consumers’ had almost complete control of Tampa’s electric
On February 21, 1911, the first air meet in the Tampa area, took place at the Old Race Track, located north of Tampa Bay Blvd., in the area of the Tampa Bay Mall, in West Tampa. Crowds of curious and excited onlookers gathered to watch the historic event.
A West Tampa streetcar in front of the barn in 1916. Similar open streetcars transported many baseball fans to the games in Macfarlane Park on Sundays.

Photo courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System
THE WEST TAMPA-YBOR CITY STREET CAR
In August 1906 the Tampa Electric Company opened a direct line between West Tampa and Ybor City. Thomas M. Steuart, motorman, standing on steps and James White, Conductor standing on street. Photo taken circa 1913 at the corner of Albany Ave. and Main St., West Tampa, FL.
Tampa Electric streetcar in front of El Pasaje Restaurant. Note: street has not been paved, 1910.
Tampa Suburban Streetcar, a Double-decker, returns to Ballast Point after a trip to Tampa and Ybor City. 1892. Photo courtesy of Tampa-Hillsborough County Public Library System.
transportation and all the lighting business, having absorbed the Tampa Street Railway and Power Company.

In 1890 the Tampa and Palmetto Beach Railway Company had built an electric line from Seventh Avenue and 22nd Street to DeSoto Park. This line also was subsequently purchased by Consumers'.

**A GROWING CITY**

During the next few years Tampa grew and prospered. The demand for more streetlights increased and the use of electricity in the peoples' homes slowly increased. Streetcar lines were extended. More cigar factories continued to be built.

Tampa's growth brought many community improvements. By 1900, sand streets in the business district were becoming a thing of the past. Many streets had hard-surfaced, and concrete sidewalks were added.

Paving with Vitrified brick followed in the early 1900's made for free movement of vehicles.

Tampa's population tripled between 1890 and 1900, from 5,000 to 15,000.

On Tuesday night, December 13, 1898 the dam used by the Consumers’ to generate electricity on the Hillsborough River was blown up with dynamite, by the cattle barons, who felt the dam infringed on their God-given right to graze their cows anywhere the creatures cared to roam.

Financially weakened by the sabotage, the Consumers’ Company sold its franchise and properties on October 2, 1899 to the Tampa Electric Company, a new corporation of eastern investors headed by Stone & Webster, of Boston. George J. Balwin, of Savannah, Georgia was named President; Peter O. Knight, Vice-president; Elliot Wadsworth, Secretary; C.A. Stone, Treasurer, and Henry G. Bradlee, Manager.

When the Tampa Electric assumed control, the city's trolley system consisted of 211/2 miles of track. Main lines extended to Ybor City, West Tampa, one to DeSoto Park, completed Oct. 18, 1894, and the other to the Company dam, five miles north, completed in 1897.

This also extended Tampa's own growth northward along Franklin Street and Florida Avenue. Transportation and communication between West Tampa and downtown Tampa was quite extensive by 1900, and there was mutual cooperation as well as competition between the areas for new factories and facilities.

**COOKING WITH GAS**

Another form of lighting and heat was gas. In 1895 the Tampa Gas Company was organized by Eduardo Manrara, Tampa cigar manufacturer, advancing most of the money, and two men from Minneapolis, AJ. Boardman and Frank Bruen. A small gas plant and a 30,000 cubic foot storage tank were constructed.

A contract from the City of Tampa for 250 gas streetlights in 1898 kept the company from going broke. But few persons wanted the expense of piping gas into their homes. In 1900 the Company had only 363 customers and of those, only 109 had cook stoves.

By 1910 the number of customers had increased to 1,160 and annual sales totaled 35,000 cubic feet.
In the growing community of West Tampa the West Tampa Gas Co., a concern operated by the Tampa Gas Company placed in 1914, street lamps in each corner on Main Street from North Boulevard to North Albany. Later in January, 1916 gas lamps were placed on Main Street between Howard and Albany Avenues.

Many persons still remember the old lamplighter of long, long ago, the man that lit the street lamps late in the evening and put them out early in the morning.

In April 1916 new extensions were made in all parts of the city. The Gas Company had been operating in West Tampa since 1913. At the completion of the extensions there were fifteen (15) miles of mains in West Tampa alone. There were 200 gas street lamps, including the lights around Macfarlane and Peregrino Rey Parks.

NEW TROLLEY LINE

The Tampa & Sulphur Springs Traction Company, which had built a line to Sulphur Springs in 1907, had thereafter established other lines in the city and competed with the Tampa Electric Company.

The company was running streetcars into West Tampa, forming a direct route from the cosmopolitan cities of Ybor City and West Tampa by January 1909. This was accomplished by building the Garcia Avenue Bridge across the Hillsborough River on which the tracks were laid. Steel was laid on concrete piers to form a strong foundation for the new bridge. The structure was put together by the Virginia Bridge & Iron Company. A satisfactory agreement was reached between the traction company and the City of Tampa whereby the city paid a part of the cost and in return would have free use of the bridge for pedestrians, providing a sidewalk for their use.

The Bridge was not provided with an electric apparatus for opening the draw, like the one at the Lafayette (Kennedy) Street Bridge. The draw was opened by hand power, but this did not cause delay. The traffic in this part of the river was not heavy, and the bridge was not open often.

The City of Tampa could not support two systems and in 1911 the younger concern, headed by John P Martin, went into the hands of the receiver. Two years later (1913) it was purchased at receiver sale by Tampa Electric Company, and the systems were consolidated. The Company then had 47 miles of track and was operating 67 trolley cars, 63 of which were open.

Early motorists took delight in proving their autos were faster than the streetcars. Bayshore Boulevard was paved with oyster shell, and motorists would drive along just ahead of one of the Company's cars on the Port Tampa run, causing the motorman to "eat dust" all the way from Ballast Point to the Tampa city limits. After such a run the motorman's neat blue uniform was white.

By 1916, Tampa's population had jumped to 65,000. It was truly the "Cigar City," with 196 cigar factories. That year 300 million cigars were rolled out and 12,000 men and women made their living in the thriving industry.

Development of the Tampa Electric Company streetcar system reached its peak during the Florida "boom" days. There were 53 miles of track and overhead trolley lines, serving all downtown Tampa, Ybor City, West Tampa, (as far as Macfarlane Park), Palma Ceia, Tampa Heights, Jackson...
Heights, Sulphur Springs, and south to Port Tampa.

The company continued to operate its trolley system in Tampa until a year after World War II ended (August 1946), when the system was abandoned. At that time the system comprised of 53 miles of track and 168 trolley cars were in operation.

On August, 1946, bus transportation was provided by the Tampa Transit Line, a subsidiary of the National City Lines of Chicago.8

ENDNOTES


2 The History of Tampa Electric (from the files of the Tampa Electric Co.)

3 Tobacco Leaf, Aug. 23, 1893

4 The Sunland Tribune, (Nov. 1982) Tampa Pastimes - Hampton Dunn

5 Tampa Morning Tribune, April 7, 1916

6 Tampa Morning Tribune, June 19, 1908

7 Tampa Morning Tribune, Oct. 13, 1908

8 The History of Tampa Electric (from the files of the Tampa Electric Co.)