The Tampa Florida Brewery, Inc. Florida's First Brewery

Clifford C. Sharpe
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By CLIFFORD C. (KIP) SHARPE

The Florida Brewing Company, organized in 1896, was the natural outgrowth of an industrial boom in the Tampa area. Prior to that time Tampa was “a sleepy little settlement and life was in strict accord with the waves of the... bay.” The population in 1890 was a mere 5,532. Part of the boom came with the establishment of the first railroad to Tampa in 1883 and the erection in 1891 of Henry B. Plant’s ultra-luxurious Tampa Bay Hotel. During this period Florida was becoming the winter playground of the wealthy. The real impetus for growth was the migration of the tobacco industry to the area in 1885. The move was led by Vicente Martinez Ybor, a pioneer cigar manufacturer initially operating plants in Havana, Cuba and later in Key West. Civil unrest in Cuba in the 1870’s caused an increase in the already heavy concentration of the cigar factories in Key West. When half of Key West was destroyed by fire in 1886 and labor disputes arose thereafter, the industry quickly followed Mr. Ybor to his namesake, Ybor City (now a suburb of Tampa). This Latin flavored community, only two miles square and located east of Tampa, soon became “one of the leading cigar manufacturing cities of the world”. The need for a major brewery became evident.

In 1896 several cigar industrialists incorporated the Florida Brewing Company with stated capital stock of $200,000. The two acre site chosen, at 5th Avenue and 13th Street in Ybor City, was adjacent to Government Spring. It was so named because it supplied water to government forces as far back as 1824. At this site, Indians had performed sacred rituals, generals had planned strategies for the Seminole Indian War, men were hanged and it even served as a swimming and health resort one year. The pure spring water was a major influence in the purported excellent taste of the brewery's product. The site was also important in that it was next to the railroad which provided excellent shipping capabilities.

The organizers were Edward Manrara,
The construction of Florida’s first brewery was no easy task. The extreme summer temperatures were conquered by the use of then relatively new inventions, De La Verne refrigerating machines. These devices maintained the cellars at a constant thirty-two degrees. Climate control was vital to brewing lager beer, America’s favorite malt beverage. Also of new design, the Pfauder Vacuum fermentation system filtered the air to insure that bacteria did not have access to the fermenting brew. The brewery was designed after the Castle Brewery in Johannesburg, South Africa. It was said that "the latest and most successful machinery for beer-making and refrigerating has been placed in operation, regardless of expense" so as to make the product "second to none in the United States, or probably in the world;" "It is a model of comfort, convenience, and attractiveness." As can be seen from the drawing herein, the towering six floor brick and steel structure was deserving of this high praise. Typical of the period, the brewery employed a gravity system. The brewing process begins on the top floor and as the mixture passes to each lower level it is weighed, cleaned, refined, and cooked before finally reaching the bottom floor to be aged. The capacity of the brewery was 25,000 barrels (31 gallons each) a year although it only produced between 10 to 12 thousand barrels those first few years. In addition to the brewery, the plant contained stables, an elegant office across the street, a bottling works for its beer, soda and mineral waters, and an ice factory. The latter facility, probably a remnant of Tampa’s first ice plant constructed at the springs in 1886, was destroyed by a fire during the first year of the brewery’s existence. It was replaced with a modern fireproof plant capable of producing 40 tons of ice per day.

"Come and Celebrate" the brewery’s grand opening to be held February 15, 1897 was an invitation carried on the front page of the local newspaper. "White or black, rich or poor" were encouraged to enjoy a "day of merry making" with food, music, and home brewed beer. A large "cosmopolitan" crowd of "many different nationalities and stations in life" gathered for the festivities. Music, speeches, 20 carcasses of barbequed beef, barrels of pickles, tropical weather and an estimated 400 barrels of lager beer insured a good time. On the large eating tables were placed "two large huge alligators ... set upright holding in their paws a platter of pure Bavarian hops and the best mault [sic]. Each had a bottle stuck in his mouth ... [and one table contained] a life size Seminole Indian chief with a crown of Florida moss on his head and the trade mark of the company in his hand." Although the beer was hearty, the brewmaster, Anton Blrbaum, said "it will not make a man drunk." Despite this claim, the celebration was marred when a Cuban cigar worker and an ice plant employee reached for the same
LABELS: (1) pre-pro gold and black on white (2) pre-pro "Export" 3.35% alcohol (3) 2% alcohol, probably an early prohibition type beer (4) "copyright 1936", rumor says there may be a label for "ALA" (5) "copyright 1936", neck label says "FLA 6", primarily red in color; there is a foil variation with some differences in appearance (6) permit number F-U-502 dates it to between 1933-36, "4% alcohol by volume", notice "Taste Tells" slogan (7) permit number, "Muenchener Type" (?), all of the "La Tropical" labels refer to the "1933 copyright" date (8) variation (9) note that this "ale" label corresponds to the "beer" label but does not have a permit number (10) variation (11) IRTP, brewery dropped the "La"; one source says "La Tropical" was for the Cuban market while "Tropical" was for the U.S. market (12) ale (13) non-IRTP; there is also a La Tropical Bock IRTP (14) "All Grain Golden Premium Beer" (15) "Lager Premium Beer" (16) "Extra Fine Ale".
CANS (references are to The Class Book of U.S. Beer Cans (Class), 1982 Jeffrey C. Cameron, and Beer Cans Unlimited (BCU), 1980, Art and Pete Russell) (1) BCU 35/32, there is an IRTP and a non-IRTP, "Internal Revenue Tax Paid" was required to be printed on all cans and labels prior to 1950 (2) BCU 36/1 is the matching "beer" also in IRTP and non-IRTP (3) BCU 35/30 with "Ale" written in red; BCU 35/31 (not shown) has a gold "Ale" (4) Class 24/3 (5) BCU 123/22 "ale" (6) Class 45/6 (7) BCU 123/23 "ale" in gold, it came in a flat, soft, and zip top (8) BCU 123/26 "Premium Lager Beer" flat top (9) BCU 123/27 "All Grain Golden Beer" flat top - the "beer" cans were generally red and the "ale" cans green.
glass of beer. Cursing and shoving led the
ice plant employee to strike the head of the
other gentleman with a beer mug causing his
death. This notwithstanding, the
celebration was a huge success.

Testimonials from scientific journals
declared "physicians must agree that [the
beer] is eminently wholesome, nutritious
and invigorating ... The most searching
chemical tests fall to discover the slightest
trace of adulteration. " Laymen declared it
"a perfect article of the very finest flavor."

The mysterious sinking of the battleship
"Maine" in Cuba brought America into the
1898 war with Spain over Cuba's
independence. Production at the brewery
increased to supply the demands of the
30,000 troops that departed Cuba from the
large port of Tampa. During this period
Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders reportedly
"rode through the brewery on their horses,
helping themselves to liquid refreshment."
It was also during the war that soldiers
attempted to crack the safe at the brewery. A
brewery worker confronted the would-be
robbers who dropped their guns and tools
before fleeing. This was fortunate since the
brewery had failed to make bank deposits
for the preceding week and the vault was
overloaded with silver dollars. The war
was over the same year it started. This
escalated the brewery's expanding export
business to Cuba. By 1900 it was estimated
that the Florida Brewing Company was
shipping more beer to Cuba than any other
American brewery. This is no wonder
considering the excellent port facilities in Tampa and the Cuban tobacco roots of the brewery’s founders. A vast railroad export business had already been established throughout Florida and southern Georgia. Due to the tripling of Tampa’s population in ten years (16,000 by 1900) and the expansion of its export business, the brewery made extensive improvements to keep pace. To show its appreciation, the brewery entered a large barrel-shaped float (holding over 3,000 gallons of beer) in the Labor Day Parade of 1900. The horse drawn float rambled down the street dispensing free beer to thirsty spectators. "By the time the parade was over there wasn’t enough lager left in the barrel to intoxicate a mosquito."

1902 saw management changes: A.S. Arias, president, had replaced Mr. Manrara in 1900; E.W. Codington and A.C. Moore retired. They were succeeded by General Garcia Velez, president and general manager; S.V.M. Ybor, Jr. (son of the founder of Ybor City), vice-president and secretary; and Hugo Schwab, treasurer; The brewmasters also changed, i.e. Frank Scofield (1898), E.A. Engler (1901), J.G. Broomfield (1904), Fred Momburg (1906) and George Schwemmer (1911). In 1905 the capital stock was increased to $250,000 and once again the corporate officers were reorganized. Ignacio P. Castaneda became president; Enrique Pendas, vice-president and treasurer; and B.M. Balbonith, general manager. Mr. Ybor remained with the company. Mr. Balbonith, a large wholesale liquor dealer was enlisted to expand the small liquor business associated with the

Factory scene mug

BOTTLES: (1) 6 112” aqua Hutchinson style bottle, "F.B.Co." on bottom; for soda or mineral water; variation is dark green with embossed alligator in middle (2) 9” (exclusive of top) etched selzer; Not shown; clear embossed crown top.
brewery. The addition of The Tampa Wholesale Liquor & Wine Company (including mail order service), along with the brewery's wholesale ice business (Ybor City Ice Works with a then capacity of 80 tons daily), and the mineral water manufacturing facility, made this a most complete and diversified operation. Forty men were employed to maintain these businesses along with the then 30,000 annual barrel capacity brewery.

A fire causing $1,000 in damages in 1906 turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Later that year the Florida Supreme Court affirmed a $25,000 judgment against the Tampa Water Works Company when it was proved that the damage to the plant resulted from lack of water pressure. With the management structure stabilized (the officers remained relatively the same until Prohibition), the brewery prospered. Despite a fire in 1909 destroying 20% of the plant ($155,000 paid by insurance), the brewery added a distilling system (for liquor), spent another 30,000 on various improvements, rebuilt its bottling works and doubled its brewing capacity. An article in the April 1914 edition of the "Pan American Review" paints a glowing picture of the business: 26,000 barrels of beer were made in 1913, 200 barrels were produced per day (100 of which were bottled), there was a wholesale liquor business "where Whiskeys are mixed, fine cordials and gins are made," the ice factory had daily capacity of 110 tons and "of the 110 bars in the territory, this factory dominates 80% of the market, many of which are owned by the company."

Indeed the future looked bright. But effective October 1, 1915, with the passage of the Davis Package Bill, no draft beer could be sold in Florida. Only bottled beer and liquor by the whole bottle could be purchased. Tampa answered by passing a special ordinance permitting clubs paying a special license to disregard the law. This was of little help for effective November 27, 1918, total Prohibition gripped the state. The brewery president, Mr. Castaneda, returned to Havana leaving Mr. Ybor to run the ice works and an alleged soft drink and cereal beverage line of drinks. Despite Prohibition and a 1921 hurricane causing in excess of $2,000,000 in damage to the city, the brewery clandestinely continued to brew beer during the dizzying real estate boom years of the 1920's.

In 1927 the brewery was raided by federal agents who seized 12,600 gallons of beer ranging from .041 to .035% of alcohol (a little stronger than your average lite beer of today). Although the federal judge acknowledged that Mr. Ybor had "been made the "goat" in transactions between the brewery and the federal agents," he was fined $100 and sentenced to six months in jail. The brewery was closed. The appellate court in New Orleans reversed the decision.

With the end of the "noble experiment" in 1933, the "Tampa Florida Brewery, Inc.," successor to the Florida Brewing Company, readied itself for business. At the same time other breweries in Tampa were opening: DeSoto Brewing Co. (1202 N. Howard Ave., 1934-35), Fette Brewing Co. (1013 32nd Ave. - no federal permit was issued so it probably never brewed beer), and the Southern Brewing Co. (Zack and Pierce Sts., 1934-1957, later part of International Breweries, Inc., 1957-1963). Sixty thousand dollars was poured into the old brewery to modernize it by Henderson Warren, president; W.D. Busch, vice-president and Thomas D. Delaney, secretary and treasurer. The pre-Prohibition officers had no more involvement. The following men guided the
brewery through the remainder of its history: Curren E. Webb, Jr., president (1937-1944); Wilbur W. Leavine (manager 1937, chairman of the board 1937-1961); Robert W. Leavine (bottling superintendent 1937-1961); Albert M. Morris (vice-president and general manager 1938-1943; president and general manager 1944-1956); and Karl Schweiberger (brewmaster 1936-1955; vice-president and general manager 1956-1960). Mr. Schweiberger was a fourth generation brewer having gained his experience at his family brewery (in operation for over 200 years) in Landshut, Bavaria.29

From the early 1930's until 1941, annual sales averaged about 24,000 barrels per year. Ninety percent of the product was packaged in bottles; this steadily increased until the brewery almost phased out of the draft beer business. In 1942 sales jumped to 48,000 barrels. For reasons unclear to the author, sales soared between 1944 and 1947 (averaging 80,000 barrels per year). Sales slowly declined thereafter until the brewery went out of business in 1961. The brewery attempted to hold lagging sales in the late 1940's with the addition of a cone top canning line. In 1953 flat top cans appeared. The brewery's flagship brand until about 1949 was "La Tropical" (ale, beer, and bock) although it also used, for a short time, "Fla." (later "Fla.6" to advertise its alcoholic content) and for an even shorter time, "GA." After 1949, the "Tropical" brand (ale, beer, and bock) was used exclusively.30

In 1961 Wilbur Leavine sold the brewery to Samuel Greenberg, owner of Brewers and Bottlers Equipment Company. Mr. Greenberg in turn sold the "Tropical" trademark to International Breweries, Inc. which had purchased all of the assets of the Southern Brewing Company (Tampa) in 1957.31 International hoped that the acquisition of Southern's brewery and the combination of its "Silver Bar" brand with the Tropical name, in addition to its breweries in Detroit, Buffalo and Covington, would help it gain a major share of the national market. The effort failed and the southern division of International closed in 1963.

When Mr. Greenberg acquired the brewery, it still had thousands of barrels of beer in the storage tanks. Being a frugal man he hired some of the brewery's crew, bottled it and sold the same. The brewing equipment was reconditioned and then sold. The advertising, having no apparent value, was discarded. He still retains the old bottling and ice plant. In an ironic twist, the cypress storage tanks were dismantled and used to panel the VIP room at the Anheuser-Busch facility in Tampa.32 The opening of the latter modern plant in 1959 was a major force in the closing of "Florida's first brewery". Another probable factor was the closing of all U.S. businesses in Cuba in 1959 when Castro came to power.

The building, in a state of disrepair, still stands. The art of brewing in Tampa is faithfully carried on by a new breed, the Tampa Bay Brewing Company, a combination restaurant and brewery.

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ENDNOTES


3 Grismer, Tampa, p. 205. To back up this claim the author cites that between 1886 and 1896, 11 Key West factories moved to Tampa, 13 came from New York, 5 from Chicago and 2 from Havana. By 1894, almost 3,000 workers were employed by the local industry which had an annual payroll of nearly $2,000,000. Sales of 88,000,000 cigars grossed in excess of $5,000,000.

4 Mr. Pizzo, in the book referenced in note 1, states that Alfonso DeLauney, Tampa's second mayor, brewed the first beer in the area -- Spruce Beer "a delicious and healthful drink." p. 76.

5 Tampa Florida: Its Industries And Advantages, 1905, compiled under the endorsement of the Board of Trade.

6 "Government Spring - Tampa's Remaining Link to Fort Brooke," The Tampa Tribune, October 21, 1977, Section D, part IV; "Owner Seeks Help To Renovate Spring," The Tampa Tribune, April 8, 1987. The swimming pool, operating in 1895, was called the Natatorium.

7 Ibid. The Brewers Journal, Vol. 20, p. 323, May 1896. The brewery was incorporated as the Ybor City Brewing Company but the name was changed prior to opening.

8 "Plant and Business of the Florida Brewing Company", Times Union and Citizen, Dec. 1897.

9 The Brewers Handbook for 1898.

10 "Come and Celebrate, Is the Invitation Issued by the Brewing Company", Tampa Tribune, February 13, 1897.

11 "Barbeque And Beer" Tampa Tribune, February 16, 1897.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 "The Florida Brewing Company" by George Carrasco, Jr. A 1983 college paper maintained at FSU.

15 "Tampa's Pride - The Only Brewery in Florida", Tampa Tribune, Midwinter Edition, 1900. The author of the article quotes two physicians who published articles; one in the "American Journal of Health".

16 Ibid.


19 See footnote 15.


21 Dan Arias, a relative(?), was the president of the De Soto Brewing Co. (1934-1935) in Tampa.

22 One Hundred Years of Brewing, 1903, H.S. Rich & Co. The 1903 City directory says that Mr. Ybor was the general manager.

23 See footnote 5.


25 The arithmetic does not seem to work. If the brewery was producing 20,000 barrels annually and making 200 barrels a day, it would only be brewing 10 days a year. The article is written in Spanish and directed at soliciting tin export buyers. It appears that the author added a little embellishment.

26 The 1915 Year Book of the U.S, Brewers' Association.

27 See footnote 20.

28 "Tampa Illustrado," March 1928, a Spanish publication. Noted historian Tony Pizzo says that the jail time was reversed on appeal.

29 American Brewer, November 1952, p. 80.

30 These dates conflict with the 1978 book, Who's Who in Brew. The dates used herein are from various years of "The Brewers Digest" which lists brands used for each year.

32 See note 14. Mr. Carrasco interviewed Mr. Greenberg and Ted Schoenlein, a former brewmaster at the subject brewery.