1994

Tony Pizzo 1912 - 1994

Leland M. Hawes Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/sunlandtribune

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sunland Tribune by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact scholarcommons@usf.edu.
Nobody remembers the exact date, but a small group got together in Tony Pizzo's home one day in the spring of 1971 to talk about forming the Tampa Historical Society.

Nonita Cuesta Henson recalls that the initial gathering of a few organizers took place in Tony's Florida room, overlooking his beloved garden. It was there that her late husband, William E. Henson, offered to draw up incorporation papers for the new society.

In a later recollection, Tony wrote: "The formation of the Tampa Historical Society emerges as a strange episode in our cultural progress. It took 89 years to formally organize a society.

He was referring to the fact that the initial call for such a group had come back in 1882, when Judge J. G. Knapp urged its formation. He wrote in the weekly Sunland Tribune: "Tampa should have a historical society."

When it finally did happen, it was entirely appropriate that Tony Pizzo should become the first president of the long-overdue society.

For Tony Pizzo provided the spark that ignited the torch of history carried on today by his successors. And all of us agree that his passing in January 1994 dealt a sharp loss to the Tampa Historical Society.

For the exuberant enthusiasm of the proud native of Ybor City for Tampa history was evident almost until his last breath. "There is still so much more to do," he told those who gathered around his bedside at Memorial Hospital.

Tony had in mind another book -- an illustrated album depicting life in Ybor City, based on the hundreds of photographs he had collected over the years. The pictures were assembled, but Tony hadn't been able to squeeze in the time to write the captions.

His own generosity of spirit and willingness to help others intruded on his time to such an extent that the Ybor book became an unfinished project. With his papers and pictures going to the University of South...
Florida Library, it will fall to other researchers to give the photographs new life.

But they face a formidable task. For only Tony knew the significance, the background and the nuances of many of the scenes he saved in his files. Tony's lifetime aptitude of assimilating sights, sounds and memories was incomparable.

Born in 1912, the son of Rosalia Pizzolato and Paolo Pizzo, he grew up on Eighth Avenue in a section almost exclusively Italian. He explained his family background in an interview with Tom McEwen: "My paternal grandfather, Anthony Pizzo, came to New Orleans first from Sicily by what was called the Lemon Route, coming on board a sailing vessel that was then bringing lemons.

"My father was born in New Orleans in 1889 and came to Ybor City in 1901, instead of going back to Sicily with my grandfather. My father was married to Rosalia Pizzolato, and, by the way, she lives today.

"My mother's father was Peter Pizzolato. He opened a grocery store at Eighth Avenue and 18th Street in Ybor City. It was called Pizzolato Market, then Pizzo Grocery [then Castellano and Pizzo]. The Little Sicily Market is located on that corner today.

"It's in our blood. When we owned the store in Ybor City, my mother worked right alongside my dad, and they specialized in Cuban, Italian and Spanish food. My father was a learned man. He was an impresario at the clubs of Ybor City, and he formed the Sons of Italy Club here."

Pictures preserve some of Tony's own childhood of discovery: selling newspapers on the streets and in the clubs of Ybor City; watching patriotic parades in World War I;
gulping spaghetti on a Boy Scout camping trip.

"I've always had a spirit of adventure," he said. "I just wanted to discover my environment. I'd go to the railroad tracks and walk as far as Six Mile Creek. It was all wilderness in those days."

He added: "I was very gregarious. I played in the streets a lot."

Tony related with relish the story of his Lindbergh-era enthusiasm for aviation. As a teenager he rushed to Tampa's just-developing Drew Field to greet some French fliers who landed. No one else was there to greet them -- so Tony took them home to have dinner with his family.

Tony attended Philip Shore Elementary School in Ybor City, then went on to George Washington junior High and Hillsborough High School. As a high schooler, he joined the debate team, the Italian Club and the all-male cheer-leading squad.

"I was having more fun," he remembered. "I really wasn't a good Student -- C's and B's, once in a while an "A" would fall in. But I took all the history courses I could find in high school."

And he acted in student plays.

At Hillsborough he met his future wife, Josephine Acosta. "We were in the same class," he said. "We started going together, off and on. In those days, you had to go out with chaperones.

"A big event was the club dances. You'd wear white linen suits. The girls would dress up so gorgeously."

But marriage would come later (in 1941), for both Tony and Josephine had college in mind. She attended Florida State College for Women -- today's Florida State University --
in Tallahassee, and he wanted to attend Stetson University in DeLand.

"I wanted to go to college," he said. "Don't know what possessed me, but I wanted to. Not many kids went in those days."

But the tuition at Stetson was $600 a semester, too steep for him at the time. He decided instead to go to the University of Florida, with much lower tuition. And he landed a part-time job at the Black Cat, a restaurant that catered to students.

After two years on the Gainesville campus, Tony hitchhiked to DeLand and asked for an appointment with the president of Stetson. "It took some gumption," he said, because "it was a Baptist school and I'm a Catholic boy."

But the president saw him - and was impressed with Tony’s eagerness to become a student there. He arranged a working scholarship for him, with Tony working as a busboy in the cafeteria and managing a dormitory.

Tutoring students in Spanish was another sideline for the young Tampan of Italian descent (he had been fluent in three languages since childhood -- Italian, Spanish and English). At Gainesville, he had tutored future U.S. Sen. George Smathers.

At Stetson, Pizzo was asked to tutor a young student with poor eyesight named Grafton Pyne, who happened to be a cousin of Franklin D. Roosevelt, then president of the United States.

That contact brought him $25 a month ("big money" for that time) and a trip to Europe in 1939 with Pyne and a Stetson professor. "It was a real education," he said. "The first morning I had breakfast in Berlin, I had eggs with a swastika stamped on the shells."

In that interval just before the outbreak of World War II, Tony even saw Adolph Hitler while he was in Munich. Following his return, he gave talks to Tampa civic clubs on his experiences.

By then, he had a bachelor's degree from Stetson in education, with four majors: English, history, sociology and Spanish.

He had given up his earlier ambition to become a lawyer, after seeing too many Depression-era attorneys idle on street corners. Although he had been offered a job overseas with Pan-American Airways, he wanted to work in Tampa.

Tony started a general insurance business as the war clouds gathered. Not drafted after
Pearl Harbor took the country into the war, he volunteered for the Army and was assigned to the Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland.

After a year, he was discharged because of a bout with undulant fever. Returning to Tampa, Tony decided to sell beer and wine, not insurance. He started his own firm, International Brands.

In that post-war period, Pizzo's personality -- and plenty of hard work -- helped establish the business. But he felt it was an uphill struggle as an independent. "I couldn't get a name brand," he said.

Yet he was making a name in the community. In 1948, when the Tampa Rotary Club launched its first new Rotary unit -- in Ybor City, Tony Pizzo was tapped as its first president.

The young go-getter had a knack for making friends and Pushing the Ybor City Rotary Club into progressive projects that attracted news stories. *Tampa Morning Tribune* managing editor V. M. "Red" Newton offered full support to change Ybor's then-tainted image as a haven of illegal gambling and political corruption.

Tony Pizzo and Ybor Rotary became identified with civic improvement.

One day in 1950, Joe Midulla of Tampa Wholesale Liquor walked into Tony's business and asked, "Why don't you work with me?" Tony, took his nine employees and "the few good lines I had - Manischewitz and Lancer's" to Midulla and became manager of the wine department.

Within two years, Tony was managing the whole sales force for liquor and wines. And he spent the rest of his business career working for Midulla, in 1973 leading a new venture in the company, Fruit Wines of Florida, Inc.

Fortunately, his association with the wine and liquor wholesaler gave film a latitude he probably never would have achieved as an independent businessman. He found it possible to work in the civic ventures that led to his becoming a preeminent figure in preserving Tampa's history.

A trip to Havana in 1950 on a Pan-American Commission good-will trip set off the fuse for Tony Pizzo. A chance conversation with a government official made him realize anew Ybor City's importance as "the cradle of Cuban independence."

And a chance conversation with an aged man in Ybor City confirmed that connection -- with the identification of the house where Paulina and Ruperto Pedroso had sheltered the "George Washington of Cuba" -- Jose Marti.

From then on, Tony became a zealot in learning as much as he could about Tampa's colorful past. The decades of the Fifties and Sixties began the solidification of Tony Pizzo, the historian. He started interviewing and collecting.

Through his Rotary connections, he was able to ensure the saving of the Marti house property, today the site of the memorial to the Cuban liberator.

And he began interviewing Ybor City old-timers and collecting pictures.

Most importantly for that period, Tony began the first concentrated efforts to place historical markers on the sites of significant events. Initially, the Ybor City Rotary Club lent its sponsorship.
And sometime in the early '60s, he realized the importance of preserving facts in printed form in addition to the green plaques that he planted around town. He decided to write a book.

Publisher Harris Mullen urged him to go ahead. And the book took a twist few could have forecast. For *Tampa Town* deals with the Latin's who came to Tampa before the founding of Ybor City.

Because of Tony's roots in the cigar-oriented community, the assumption would have been that he'd write about the Ybor City he grew up in. But he performed a valuable historical service by telling of the numerous citizens of Hispanic and Italian descent who made a mark in the community between 1824 and 1886.

His sub-title, "Cracker Village With a Latin Accent," spelled out the theme.

Meanwhile, he started collecting material in earnest to fill in the gaps on Ybor City and Tampa history generally. He solicited and copied rare family photographs as well as scenes of significance from the past.

Tony pursued information from the Library of Congress and the National Archives in this country. In Spain he researched early Spanish activities in Florida at the Archives of the Indies in Seville and at the Navy Museum in Madrid. It was there he discovered the Celli map of Tampa Bay -- the earliest, and had prints made. And in Sicily he learned more about the families who left in the 1880s to settle in Ybor City.

*Tampa Town* met popular acclaim in 1968. It proved to be a prelude to Tony's next big project -- forming the Tampa Historical Society in 1971.

His year as president started the momentum rolling, with regular speakers and an annual banquet -- the first at the University of Tampa's Fletcher Lounge with Dr. James M. Ingram giving a paper on Dr. John P Wall.

In 1980, when WUSF, the University of South Florida's educational TV channel, pondered a local history series, it turned to Tony. "Tony Pizzo's Tampa" ran in 10 parts, providing a colorful look at the past, with Tony as narrator.

This was a natural lead-in to his next big venture: coauthoring *Tampa: The Treasure City* with Dr. Gary Mormino of the University of South Florida in 1983. Tony's extensive files of pictures and background on almost every phase of Tampa's history, added to his own personal knowledge accumulated over the years, made him the perfect collaborator.

A "popular history," beautifully illustrated, the book filled a long-overdue niche in telling the city's story in an appealing way. Now, with copies no longer available in bookstores, it is difficult to find.

As early as 1952, Tony Pizzo was gaining accolades for his efforts in history and preservation. That year, he received the Order of Carlos Manuel de Cespedes in Havana for his efforts in promoting Cuban history.

That was followed in 1956 by the prestigious Tampa Civitan award as "Tampa's Outstanding Citizen."

In 1974 the Italian government recognized his "lifelong contributions" in preserving Italian tradition in Tampa with its Knight Officer of the Order of Merit.
Also that year, the *Tampa Tribune* singled him out for its "People Plus" award as "Mr. Ybor City -- giving more of himself to his native city than could be expected of a successful businessman."

In 1980, the Tampa Historical Society recognized its founder by conferring upon him the D. B. McKay Award for his contributions to local and state history.

And in 1990, the Hillsborough County Bar Association awarded him its Liberty Bell Award on Law Day.

The curious youngster from Ybor City had come a long way in history as well, serving as chairman of the Hillsborough County Historical Commission from 1968 to 1980.

Then he was appointed County Historian by the Hillsborough Board of County Commissioners, serving for the rest of his life in that capacity.

In his "retirement" years, Tony found himself unable to slow down. He became a virtual consultant on questions of Tampa history, answering questions by telephone and in person from media reporters and university students.

He never tired of proposing new historical markers for events, places and people, then following up by finding the sponsors and financial backers to make them reality. He had a hand in seeing that more than 80 markers were placed around the city and county, usually with the Historical Society as sponsor. And Tony made speeches -- delightful, often humorous, always well-prepared -- for groups ranging from garden clubs to "junior lawyers" seeking background on Tampa.

He went into real anguish ("I didn't get any sleep last night thinking about it") when vandals wrecked memorials in Oaklawn Cemetery. And he badgered officials to try to stop the damage.

And he kept writing. *Sunland Tribune* editors could usually count on an annual essay from Tony, and the Italian-American Golf Association relied upon his pictorial features for its annual fund-raising golf tournament program.

In the midst of all this, Tony never neglected his family. He and Josephine brought up two successful sons Paul, a Tampa attorney who married Sharon Smith; and Tony, a plastic surgeon who married Julie Flom.

"Life's been busy and life's been good, but there is more to do," he told Tom McEwen several months before his passing. It frustrated him that time to complete the photographic history of Ybor City kept eluding him.

But Tony Pizzo's passing hasn't brought an end to Tony Pizzo's recognition. For all the organizations with which he was affiliated -- and both the city and county governments -- have sought special ways to honor him.

He will be remembered.